

Aged Care Workforce Remote Accord response to Strengthened Aged Care Quality Standards guidance consultation

This submission to the Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission is made by the Aged Care Workforce Remote Accord (the Remote Accord) in response to the draft Strengthened Aged Care Quality Standards guidance consultation. In making this submission the Remote Accord seeks to bring attention to the unique and specific challenges remote service providers face in meeting and maintaining quality standards, and proposes remote-specific resources that would benefit providers, assessors, and remote communities.

The Aged Care Workforce Remote Accord

The Aged Care Workforce Remote Accord (the Remote Accord) is a group of service providers and industry experts delivering aged care services in regional and remote areas of Australia.

The Remote Accord was formed based on the belief that every community—including those in remote and very remote areas of Australia—has an equal right to accessible, high quality aged care services. The Remote Accord saw its genesis in the *'A Matter of Care: Australia's Aged Care Workforce Strategy'* report; Strategic Action 11 recommended that the Government and industry support the establishment of a Remote Accord.

Key Recommendations:

- Remote-specific guidelines are required to ensure that remote service providers are supported to maintain the strengthened Standards in a culturally and contextually appropriate manner
- Remote-specific guidelines should outline the evidence remote service providers can use to demonstrate their adherence to the Standards, which may look quite different to the evidence provided in metropolitan services
- Remote-specific training should be developed for assessors to ensure they are properly prepared to travel to and conduct assessments in remote Australia in a way that is culturally and contextually appropriate, and that fosters a collaborative effort towards a high standard of care between providers and the Commission

The unique challenges of remote service delivery

The aged care sector has been through a prolonged period of intensive change and upheaval since the beginning of 2020, when Covid-19 first impacted the sector. This, in addition to pre-existing workforce shortages and an ongoing period of regulatory reform following the Aged Care Royal Commission, has placed ongoing pressure on the sector which disproportionately affects smaller, less-resourced remote services. While competition might drive quality in metropolitan settings, remote areas require a different approach. Instead of punitive measures for services who may be struggling, there should be a proactive effort to provide support and guidance to service providers who are striving to meet the Standards in a unique service context. This approach is consistent with the Accord's belief that every community—including those in remote and very remote areas of Australia—has an equal right to accessible, high quality aged care services and recognises that this will be a developmental journey.

The Remote Accord welcomes the more collaborative approach to regulation that the draft guidance represents. However, unless *specific* guidance is available to remote service providers, we fear this vulnerable part of the sector will be left behind in the evolving regulatory environment. Remote service providers face the same administrative demands as their metropolitan counterparts, despite having fewer resources at their disposal. This means that the regulatory burden is disproportionately high in remote areas of the country. In addition, guidance that is not culturally or contextually specific may further discourage the engagement of local workforces, who may face challenges related to literacy, numeracy, and access to formal training. A support-oriented regulatory approach acknowledges the unique challenges faced by remote service providers and works towards building their capacity to provide culturally appropriate and sustainable aged care in line with the strengthened Standards. This in turn supports and develops the role of remote providers within their communities and ensures those ageing in remote Australia can continue to access the care they need.

Remote providers require relevant examples of evidence

While remote service providers strive to meet the same strengthened Standards as their metropolitan counterparts, the application of those Standards will inevitably look different in remote facilities. It is vital that remote service providers have guidelines that are relevant to them and that do not require further interpretation. Our networks tell us that their staff need specific examples of evidence to help them understand how they can demonstrate to assessors the high

standard of compliant care that they are striving to achieve in the unique and challenging environments in which they work.

Remote-specific guidelines could be based on the draft guidance offered by the Commission, but should outline key tasks and strategies that remote service providers can adopt to meet the strengthened Standards effectively within their service context. The guidelines could be developed in consultation with remote services and communities, and should provide concrete examples of the kinds of evidence these services can use to demonstrate their compliance. The guidelines could also outline a more nuanced approach to the audit process; for example, interviews with service users who are Indigenous need to occur with the support of trusted people, and recommending assessors spend time working in remote contexts to better understand them before being assigned as an assessment team.

Remote-specific guidelines would also ensure an adequate emphasis on meeting the unique cultural needs of remote communities. These guidelines would recognise the distinct challenges faced by remote communities, including limited access to healthcare resources, geographical isolation, and cultural diversity, and provide advice on what quality care looks like in these environments. By tailoring guidelines to the remote context, remote service providers can be empowered to confidently navigate cultural sensitivities, language barriers, and traditional approaches to care while ensuring the strengthened Standards are maintained. Moreover, these guidelines could facilitate the safe implementation of culturally appropriate healthcare strategies, ensuring that services are accessible, respectful, and effective for all residents. Emphasising cultural competency in remote aged care not only improves health outcomes but also strengthens trust and engagement within the community, fostering a collaborative approach to care delivery that respects and values cultural diversity.

Assessors should be prepared to work in remote environments

It is imperative that assessors heading to remote Australia from metropolitan and regional areas are provided with specific training tailored to the unique cultural and environmental settings of these areas. Remote Australia encompasses a vast array of cultural backgrounds, languages, and traditions, which may differ significantly from urban or mainstream Australian culture. Without adequate preparation, assessors risk experiencing culture shock, which could impact their ability to conduct assessments objectively, effectively, and fairly. Moreover, cultural misunderstandings may

lead to misinterpretations of practices or beliefs, potentially resulting in inaccurate assessments of compliance with quality standards.

Additionally, assessors must undergo training to recognise and mitigate their implicit biases, including biases against First Nations Australians and rural settings. Bias can unconsciously influence assessments, leading to unfair evaluations and undermining the integrity of the process. Training should focus on raising awareness of these biases and providing strategies to counteract them, ensuring that assessments are conducted impartially and without prejudice. By addressing implicit biases, assessors can uphold the principles of equity and cultural sensitivity in their evaluations, thereby promoting trust and confidence within remote communities.

Furthermore, assessors need to understand the logistical challenges faced by remote service providers to conduct assessments in a practical and respectful manner. Remote Australia presents unique logistical hurdles, such as limited infrastructure, vast distances, and harsh environmental conditions. Assessors must be equipped with the knowledge and skills to navigate these challenges effectively, ensuring that assessments are conducted in a way that is feasible for both communities and aged care workers. Training should encompass strategies for adapting assessment methods to remote settings, promoting flexibility and responsiveness to the specific needs and circumstances of each community. By understanding and addressing logistical challenges, assessors can facilitate a smoother assessment process that minimises disruptions for services and people receiving care, and maximises the utility of the outcomes for improving aged care quality in remote Australia.

Specific training tailored to the challenges of remote Australia would empower assessors to competently and confidently undertake assessments in these environments. This training should provide assessors with a comprehensive understanding of the cultural, social, and environmental factors unique to remote communities, allowing them to navigate interactions with sensitivity and respect. By gaining insights into local customs, languages, and traditions, assessors can build rapport and trust with community members, facilitating open communication and collaboration throughout the assessment process. By instilling assessors with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to address the complexities of remote Australia, specific training can enhance the quality and integrity of assessments, ultimately leading to improved aged care outcomes for remote communities.