



“Without access, we can’t heal”

**Stolen Generations  
Records Symposium**

17 November 2025  
National Portrait Gallery, Canberra



## Contents

<b>Acknowledgment</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>About this Symposium</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Symposium Report</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>What We Heard – Overall Themes</b>	<b>6</b>
1. Need for nationally consistent approaches to records	6
2. Leadership and accountability	7
3. Collection management and workforce development	8
4. Access to private records	9
5. Legal and policy priorities	9
6. Sustainability/legacy of Link-Ups	10
7. Recording survivor testimonies	10
8. Truth-telling and awareness	11
9. Decolonisation	11
10. 30th anniversary of Bringing them home	12
Summary of ways forward	12
<b>“Records are the key to healing.” – Session Outcomes</b>	<b>13</b>
Session 1: What would national consistency look like?	13
Session 2: Where are the legal levers to promote access?	14
Session 3: How can we ensure survivor stories are preserved?	15
<b>Ways Forward</b>	<b>16</b>
Monitoring and accountability	16
Records access and management	16
Story recording	17
Sector sustainability	17

## Acknowledgment

The Healing Foundation acknowledges the custodians and community of the lands on which we live and work. We pay our respects to Elders and to Stolen Generations survivors, of the Dreaming and of the here and now. And to the survivors we work for everyday, and those who never made it home.

We also acknowledge the work of Stolen Generations survivors, organisations, and Link-Ups who have advocated and championed across decades for survivor-centred records access. The work of the Symposium participants, and the work that will follow, builds on this, and the goodwill of others who have advocated for survivors, their families, and communities.

## Introduction

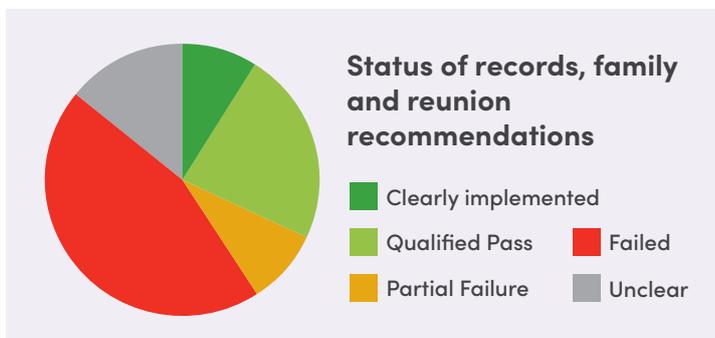
The Healing Foundation, in partnership with the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA), the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), National Archives of Australia (NAA), the National Library of Australia (NLA), hosted a Records Symposium on Monday 17 November 2025 on the lands of the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people in Canberra.

Participants observed a moment of silence to acknowledge the passing of Aunty Beverley Johnson, a proud Quandamooka Elder of the Nunukul people of Minjerribah (North Stradbroke Island) and Link-Up Queensland's first employee, whose funeral was held on the same day.

The Symposium brought together key partners and stakeholders across the records and Link-Up sectors. With the opportunity to share to share knowledge and information, the critical aim was to consider urgent priorities to address the ongoing structural, administrative, legal, and financial barriers that continue to prevent Stolen Generations survivors and their descendants from accessing both historical and contemporary records.

Action to address these barriers is urgent leading towards the 30th anniversary of the 1997 report *Bringing them home: National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families*. Timely and culturally safe access to historical and contemporary records was a critical element of the suite of Bringing them home recommendations. Records play a crucial role in supporting family tracing and reunification with family, community, and Country, helping survivors and their descendants (re)claim their identity.

The 2025 report, *'Are you waiting for us to die?' The unfinished business of Bringing them home*, found that just six percent of the original recommendations made in 1997 have been fully implemented. **Many of the records recommendations remain unmet.** This is despite significant work to address and reduce barriers, with advocacy led by Link-Up researchers and other Stolen Generations Organisations supporting survivors, and ongoing agreements to principles, frameworks, and pathways from the broader records sector.



### Verdict

**Failure to implement nearly half of the recommendations, including to establish the Records Taskforce and fund Indigenous traineeships and scholarships for archivists, genealogists, historical researchers and counsellors and regional Indigenous language, cultural and history centres.**

2025 analysis of records and family reunion recommendations, *'Are you waiting for us to die?' The unfinished business of Bringing them home*, p.19

Critically, the 2022 *Principles for nationally consistent approaches to accessing Stolen Generations records*, released by The Healing Foundation through the Historical Records Taskforce (convened by The Healing Foundation from 2018–2025) have not been implemented. These were endorsed by Information and Privacy commissioners nationally and designed around the right of permissive access – that is the right of people to access information about themselves and to find their families, and which drew on the minimum access standards outlined as a recommendation in *Bringing them home*.

**The need to act is urgent – Stolen Generations survivors are ageing and many are passing away without the opportunity to find their family history information, creating lasting impacts for their descendants and undermining our collective responsibility to truth, justice, and reconciliation.**

## About this Symposium

More than 60 people attended the one-day Records Symposium, to canvas next steps for addressing the outstanding records recommendations of *Bringing them home*. A background paper summarising the key issues, feedback from stakeholders, and outcomes of a legal policy review was circulated prior to the event.

Attendees included representatives from key partners, state and national records holding institutions, and Link-up researchers, who collectively brought strategic leadership expertise and deep technical knowledge about the ongoing issues and opportunities to support better records access. This included:

Link-Up organisations
National Archives of Australia (NAA)
National Library of Australia (NLA)
Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS)
National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA)
Public Records Office Victoria
State Records of South Australia
Queensland State Archives
State Library and Archives of Tasmania
Territory Records Office (ACT)
Museums of History New South Wales
State Records Office of Western Australia
Aboriginal Affairs New South Wales
Find and Connect Web Resource
Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research
Victorian Stolen Generations Reparation Scheme
Private researchers

In addition, Stolen Generations survivors, Ian Hamm and Dr Kath Apma Penangke Travis participated and shared their experiences of navigating access to records, and the impacts that both access and lack of access to records has on individuals and their families.

Discussions on the day were framed around themed sessions designed to draw out pathways forward, building on the evidence from survivors and other records users, particularly Link-Up researchers. Each session included one or more brief addresses, workshop discussions, and a reflection by Associate Professor Kirsten Thorpe (Jumbunna). The sessions focussed on identifying outcomes and priorities around the key issues faced by survivors when accessing records.

- **Advancing the Principles for Nationally Consistent Approaches to Accessing Stolen Generations Records:** This session focused on the persistent barriers and looked to identify successful practice, including pathways for national consistency, implementation, and monitoring options.
- **Legal and Policy Reform for Equitable Access:** This session explored legal and policy levers to improve access to both public and privately held records, considering issues such as Freedom of Information, organisational and institutional gatekeeping, and lessons from redress schemes.
- **Recording Testimonies:** This session highlighted the urgency of preserving survivors' lived experiences, with considerations around data control, informed consent, cultural protocols, and ethical archival practices.

## Symposium Report

This report captures the discussions, key themes, and recommended actions that emerged from the Symposium. The depth and breadth of knowledge shared on the day can be used to inform key calls to action, and continue the push for reforms that are critically needed to ensure survivors and their families can access records.

***“Records are not just words, not just a piece of paper.  
They are part of who we are as people and as a country.”***

## What We Heard – Overall Themes

Through the discussions a range of key barriers, and opportunities to address them, were identified, reinforcing the issues that Link-Ups and other records users have been raising for decades as they advocate for change. The shared belief that change was urgently needed was driven by the recognition that while steps taken, systemic change is taking too long.

Critically, discussion was grounded in the experiences of two Stolen Generations survivors, who reminded attendees that at the end of all the talk about policy, legislation, change, advocacy, and accountability, are people who have survived.

*“I’ll never forget that day, where I was, when I saw my original birth certificate. It transformed me from who I was.”*

Ian Hamm

This grounding is critical to highlight how the process of accessing, or attempting to access, records can be distressing and retraumatizing for survivors. Navigating the complex and different access conditions, the lack of centralised support and information, the various and inconsistent forms and costs, compound the harm and distress.

*“But this is the truth telling. This is what happened to our kids, our families, my mother, me, my sister, my grandmother. We’re tired. We need to have access to those records. Without it we can’t heal. Our kids can’t heal. So I feel angry. I feel sad. And I’m sick of telling this story.”*

Dr Kath Apma Penangke Travis

### 1. Need for nationally consistent approaches to records

National and consistent access conditions for survivors navigating the complex systems are critically needed. The Symposium highlighted that current processes for seeking access to records are fragmented, piecemeal, culturally unsafe, complex, time-consuming, and not aligned with Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles. Access to government-controlled records vary from agency to agency and jurisdiction to jurisdiction. The processes that work often rely on ‘pockets of goodwill’, rather than embedded survivor-focused policy and practice. As a result, many survivors find the systems deeply unfair, and the processes of navigating them retraumatizing.

The lack of legal mechanisms to ensure access to, and protection of, privately held collections, including church records relating to former institutions, further compounds the injustice and trauma. Accessing these records is entirely at the discretion of the record holder.

*“Exorbitant fees ... add trauma to trauma”*

## 2. Leadership and accountability

There has been a lack of monitoring and accountability in relation to the Bringing them home recommendations, and later frameworks and principles that promoted permissive access for Stolen Generations survivors. Despite commitments and agreements from records holders, actions taken to implement changes have not been monitored or measured against outcomes for survivors.

Most recently, the 2022 *Principles for nationally consistent approaches to accessing Stolen Generations records* were endorsed by Australian Information and Privacy Commissioners. However, they have yet to be implemented by records holders, including government archives, Births Deaths and Marriages (BDM) registries, and private records holders. It was noted that both NAA and NLA are currently holding related inquiries.

***“Looking ahead, each of us in this room either holds responsibilities around managing and making records accessible or has resources and expertise that can improve outcomes for Stolen Generations, survivors and descendants. That means that together, we have the capacity and the obligation to drive meaningful change in this space.”***

The need for policy leadership was identified as critical to addressing the lack of monitoring and accountability, and to develop ways to hold the records sector accountable.

Further, it was noted that there are existing structures or mechanisms such as the National Agreement on Closing the Gap’s Priority Reforms to lever jurisdictional change and accountability. All of the priority reform areas are relevant to ensuring consistent access to both public and private records:

1. Formal Partnerships and Share Decision Making
2. Building the Community-Controlled Sector
3. Transforming Government Organisations
4. Shared Access to Data and Information at a Regional Level.

### 3. Collection management and workforce development

The way that collections are managed in different repositories impacts on the ability of survivors to both identify and access records. There are no standard practices for descriptions, indexing, or metadata, nor any central information point to assist survivors in navigating these complex and varying systems.

It was clear that there needs to be investment in cataloguing practices, metadata programs, and indexing and description projects to assist with the quick identification of relevant records.

A national database of records relevant to Stolen Generations family history, including guides and access information would further support a national approach to reducing access barriers and assist with the quick and safe identification of records.

For many Stolen Generations survivors and families, records can contain information that is presented through a deficit discourse, or contain incorrect, offensive, or insensitive information, which further exacerbates the risk of re-traumatisation. Nearly always the records are 'one-sided', presenting the colonial reason and / or excuse for removal, which may involve lies about a family or child, or be simply inaccurate because of "haphazard" record keeping.

Stolen Generations survivors and organisations need to have the 'Right of Reply' to records – the right to update, correct, critique, or enhance Indigenous knowledge that is held in collecting institutions: in short, to "tell an undoctored version of their story".

***"When you (are delivered with) the justification of your being taken and there's your right of reply to say, 'that's nice, but here's the reality'."***

In addition, a lack of cultural safety and a lack of understanding of Stolen Generations history within the records sector workforce remains an ongoing issue, and increases survivors risk of re-traumatisation when attempting to identify and access records. It was identified that staff need to be properly trained, and properly trained staff need to undertake collection management projects and respond to relevant survivor requests, to maximise the opportunities for better outcomes.

***"Collections not adequately catalogued, indexed, described, digitised – making them undiscoverable and inaccessible."***

## 4. Access to private records

There has been little advance over the past 30 years on access to private records, including records held by churches and church groups who ran former institutions. The critical need for legislation to ensure protection, conservation, and access to private collections was noted, as was the need for accountability measures to be put around current access refusal.

Stolen Generations survivor Dr Kath Apma Penangke Travis informed the discussion about ongoing barriers to the files of organisations like the United Aborigines Mission, which operated 19 institutions in South Australia, New South Wales, and Western Australia, and who have claimed their records were damaged, without any recourse for survivors, or accountability for the record holders.

Currently private record holders cannot be compelled to make files available. Many refuse, apparently out of fear that releasing records will lead to legal action against them, and few have taken up many offers over time from state libraries and Link-Ups to help them with indexing and preservation.

The need for a project to identify key records was noted – without knowing what is held in different places, we can't know what is relevant to Stolen Generations survivors.

***“This process failed me, it failed my mum, my sisters, my grandmother, it fails the residents and their descendants.”***

## 5. Legal and policy priorities

Access to records is often restricted due to privacy and confidentiality laws which can limit the availability of certain records or require extensive legal processes to gain access. Many records are returned heavily redacted, and without any explanation as to why.

Some institutions require the consent of individuals who may be identified in a record before the record can be released to an applicant. This can unfairly block access, particularly for survivors who may be trying to identify a family member.

It was noted that important legislative reform will be long-term to achieve, but there are opportunities and benefits that could come from progressing quick administrative fixes now, including fee waivers, broader kinship access, administrative release, while pursuing longer-term legislative change in a strategic, measured way.

“[We need to acknowledge] that legislative change will take a very long time and that is time that many of our people don't have.....so we need to ensure there are some quick wins around the interpretation of legislation. A lot of mob can't wait.”

***“Legislation continues to cause harm; it is not keeping up with the needs of the Stolen Generations.”***

## 6. Sustainability/legacy of Link-Ups

Link-Up organisations their four-year funding renewed, but at the same rate of the previous contract, which does not consider additional costs of providing existing services and meeting the changing needs of Stolen Generations survivors as they age. There are many programs that could be supported – including identifying graves, returning to Country, and story recording – while ensuring survivors remain connected and are supported to heal.

It was raised that the “the floodgates have opened” in the Northern Territory, with enquiries from people who were adopted. For Link-Ups there is “now a different group of survivors to support”.

These increasing demands put additional pressure on staff, where turnover and burnout are already issues given the specialised nature of working in a trauma-informed space, including for people with their own lived experiences of forcible removal.

Link-Ups provide culturally safe places and people to support access to records and record oral testimonies, but they lack the resources and ongoing support and training required. In addition, concerns around the stewardship of client records, testimonies, and other files held by Link-Ups were raised in relation to the potential loss of funding, and the need for flexible funding to meet the changing needs of survivor-led services.

***“If we don’t get funding, what happens to our records, to our expertise?”***

## 7. Recording survivor testimonies

The urgency of preserving survivors’ lived experiences, particularly as they age and their health declines, was a critical discussion. Oral testimonies are important given that written records primarily reflect Western and colonial perspectives and deficit discourses.

It is critical that survivors have an opportunity to tell their stories, whether in national, state, or community contexts, and that community organisations are supported to provide opportunities to record stories on-Country.

Capturing oral histories raises issues of data control, informed consent, cultural protocols, copyright, future access, how to document and store records, and adequate resourcing to digitalise existing recordings. Survivor and community organisations must be supported and empowered to grapple with these complexities.

***“It’s really important to acknowledge there is a cultural knowledge system for our people and to hear voice and know voice is about having connection to Country. I don’t know that I could have my father’s voice been heard on anywhere else except on his Country.”***

## 8. Truth-telling and awareness

Ensuring survivors can tell their story, and access their records, is an important element of truth-telling and healing. But how do we identify who needs to be interviewed as a priority? Where are the gaps? Who are the different audiences to consider?

It was acknowledged that some survivors may want to record testimonies just for their own families, others may want all of Australia to hear them. Participants discussed how best for stories to be used in the school curriculum, as part of the truth telling journey, and to involve universities and local history organisations.

***“My community already know what happened to me, I want the whole of Australia to hear the truth and understand that truth.”***

Participants raised the benefits of having champions to help raise awareness among politicians and the public about the Stolen Generations and their experiences and priorities, and to promote greater societal truth-telling. There is a need to challenge racism and the general lack of understanding from Australian society about the Stolen Generations, as well as to challenge where Indigenous records are perceived as a ‘problem’ by organisations that control them.

***“Acknowledge the physical and emotional effort involved in this work. What are the things that make us turn up for this work again and again? How do we use that to change hearts and minds of people who are decision makers? How do we take this work out to other sectors, to media (where there are good and bad actors), different strategies...”***

## 9. Decolonisation

Participants discussed the need to address the ‘elephant in the room’: that the records were created as part of the colonial project to support the mechanisms of removal. As well as addressing specific issues of records access, this raises the need to redesign existing structures, to break some rules and apply existing solutions such as Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles. It’s not just about embedding these in existing structures – it’s about rebuilding them.

***“We need to think about structures differently and we need to break the rules. We can’t just rely on good intentions, on good people. We have to break it down at the systems level.”***

## 10. 30th anniversary of Bringing them home

The symposium was clear that the upcoming 30th anniversary of the publication of the 1997 Bringing them home report represents a major opportunity to shine a light on the unfinished business for Stolen Generations.

*“The 30th anniversary of the Bringing them home report is in May 2027, 18 months from now. What do we want to have done by that date? Because that date will not go unnoticed, we can make noise. What opportunity does such a national spotlight present? And then, what’s the plan we need to get there?”*

Ian Hamm

*“What’s one thing we can do in the next 18 months? How do we use the 30th anniversary as a spotlight, to celebrate survivors and demand accountability for them and the recommendations of the Bringing them home report?”*

### Summary of ways forward:

National approach streamlining application and release of records, and provision of information and support

Permissive access – implementation of principles and legal reform

Access to private collections

Monitoring and accountability mechanisms

## **“Records are the key to healing.” – Session Outcomes**

The following briefly summarises each of the themed sessions. These were designed around short presentations and workshops, providing the opportunity to identify both high level and detailed issues, constraints, and opportunities.

### **Session 1: What would national consistency look like?**

This session focused on discussions of persistent access barriers and successful practices, looking to ascertain what national consistency means, how it can be implemented, and how we can measure and monitor outcomes.

Participants heard first from Stolen Generations Reference Group chair Ian Hamm (Yorta Yorta) and from Simon Froude, Director-General of National Archives of Australia (NAA).

The session confirmed the need to embed the principles for a nationally consistent approach that were developed by the Historical Records Taskforce, namely that access to Stolen Generations records should be permissive and handled consistently within and across jurisdictions. It should streamline processes, reduce delays, waive fees, and avoid retriggering trauma.

Key features would include a ‘one stop shop’ access point, a standard application form for all repositories, access for third party applications (by all Link-Ups), a nationally agreed definition of what Stolen Generations records are, and trauma-informed, culturally safe wrap around support.

Discussions highlighted the following key areas:

- The need for priority access for elderly survivors
- The rights of survivors over rights of government and / or the public (ie default release of information)
- Intellectual and cultural property rights of survivors
- Right of reply to the records
- Importance of oral records

***“Survivors should have consistent access regardless of state or territory or which department or agency they are applying through, what can apply for and how, and what is received.”***

***“Records are not just words, not just a piece of paper. They are part of who we are as people and as a country.”***

## Session 2: Where are the legal levers to promote access?

This session focused on identifying legal and policy levers to improve access to both public and private records, discussing key areas including Freedom of Information and privacy legislation, ongoing issues of institutional gatekeeping, and lessons from redress schemes. It also noted the lack of monitoring and accountability in relation to access recommendations over many years.

This session included presentations from Dr Kath Apma Penangke Travis, who is a third generation Stolen Generations survivor, Arrernte woman, First Nations historian, genealogist, and author, as well as from Kate Phipps, Branch Manager, Territories Stolen Generations Redress Scheme, National Indigenous Australians Agency.

The discussions acknowledged the need for legislative change across several key areas at the Commonwealth and state and territory levels, including legislative mechanisms to compel the production of records from private repositories. A critical point raised was that legislation is a continuation of colonisation and continues to cause harm, for example through definitions of family focussed on western concepts of a nuclear family. Acknowledging this and rethinking what legislative reform could look like was identified as being central to conceptualising legislative reform.

Participants also acknowledged that legislative change takes time – which many survivors may not have. They highlighted the need for short-term administrative changes that could quickly improve access, such as creating a centralised national database, a single application form and waiving fees. Both processes – short and long term – can be supported by storytelling, and using education through media and social media, to raise awareness.

***“[We need to acknowledge] that legislative change will take a very long time and that is time that many of our people don’t have.....so we need to ensure there are some quick wins around the interpretation of legislation. A lot of mob can’t wait.”***

***“Broaden legislation to include and reflect kinship modelling vs colonial perspectives.”***

### Session 3: How can we ensure survivor stories are preserved?

This session highlighted the urgency of capturing and preserving the experiences of survivors with consideration of issues around data control, informed consent, cultural protocols, and ethical archival practices when it comes to story recording, holding, and access.

It heard from Carlyn Waters (Kamilaroi), Deputy Chief Executive Officer and Chief Operating Officer with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, and Luke Hickey, Assistant Director-General Engagement at the National Library of Australia.

The session discussed strategies for rejuvenating oral history programs and supporting community-led initiatives, for providing culturally safe and on-Country processes and resources for recording stories, and the need for safe storage. Participants emphasised the importance of oral records, given so many written records are from a Western lens and often present a deficit discourse around the experiences of survivors.

*“Understanding the purpose of audience is so important, for both the person who’s sharing their experiences, for the broader [understanding] of ‘who’s it for?’ ‘what’s the purpose?’ ‘who’s going to get access?’”*

*“There is a mistrust of institutions...when these discussions have come up before there is no place that Link Ups feel safe to send and restore and preserve this material. So how are we going to overcome that?”*

## Ways Forward

The following summarises the key priorities that were identified and discussed at the Symposium. These address the identified issues and provide both short- and long-term strategies towards reimagining records access that ensures survivors and their families can locate, access, engage with, and control, their family history information.

It is critical that these ways forward are addressed strategically, noting the interrelated complexities of various specific elements. While some of these recommendations require investment in and a commitment to systemic change, there are pathways for rapid improvements that will have measurable and positive outcomes for survivors.

### Monitoring and accountability

- Address the unfinished business of *Bringing them home*: create a high-level body by May 2026, with the remit of leading and overseeing policy reform, including developing and implementing mechanisms for monitoring and accountability.
- Focus on the 30th anniversary of *Bringing them home* report as a major opportunity to demand action.
- Identify commitments to be met by the 30th anniversary with clear milestones and monitoring indicators.
- Identify pathways to utilise systems already in place under the Closing the Gap Priority Reforms to lever jurisdictional change and accountability.

### Records access and management

- National entry point and standard form: create a single 'front door' for Stolen Generations record requests with a simple, standard application used across jurisdictions.
- Streamline processes: ensure harmonised agreements and processes across government archives and agencies, including permissive access and administrative release wherever possible (fee waivers, expedited timeframes, priority processing for Elders, and discretionary release of information).
- Definition of a 'Stolen Generations record': co-design a national definition with Link-Ups and survivors, making sure it reflects kinship and community.
- Discoverability, indexing, and digitisation: invest in cataloguing, metadata, and a national database so records can be found quickly and safely.
- Private records strategy: resource a dedicated mechanism to build relationships with private records holders, including missions/churches/NGOs, pursue legal reform, and explore levers such as transparency reporting and funding conditions to improve access.

## Legislative reform

- Legal and policy priorities: progress quick administrative fixes now (fee waivers, broader kinship access, administrative release) while pursuing longer-term legislative change.

## Story recording

- Oral histories and testimonies: invest in culturally safe recordings of and storage for survivor stories, with strong consent and Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) protections. Support on Country options and local partners.

## Sector sustainability

- Link-Up sustainability: secure multi-year funding increases for Link-Ups, including training and wellbeing supports for staff. Plan for safe stewardship of Link-Up client records into the future.

# Supporting Stolen Generations survivors and organisations



HealingFoundation

Phone: (02) 6272 7500

Email: [info@healingfoundation.org.au](mailto:info@healingfoundation.org.au)

PO Box 4363, Kingston, ACT, 2604  
(Ngunnawal and Ngambri Country)

[healingfoundation.org.au](http://healingfoundation.org.au)