

# Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council of NSW

## Position Statement: Aboriginal Community Panels




**AH&MRC**  
Aboriginal Health & Medical  
Research Council of NSW

**Office address:**  
Gadigal Country  
Level 4, 280 Pitt Street,  
Sydney NSW 2000

**Postal address:**  
PO Box 193  
Matraville NSW 2036

**T** +61 2 9212 4777  
**E** [ahmrc@ahmrc.org.au](mailto:ahmrc@ahmrc.org.au)  
**W** [www.ahmrc.org.au](http://www.ahmrc.org.au)



Community panels provide valuable insights into local priorities and lived experiences, but they are not a substitute for an Aboriginal Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC).

- Scope of a community panel depends upon the organisational membership
- Aboriginal reference groups and governance groups are not the same as a community panel
- Aboriginal Human Research Ethics Committees are NHMRC-registered bodies. Approval from a community reference panel is not required before lodging an ethics application.

### **Scope of a community.**

The scope of a community panel depends on the organisational membership of that panel. A community panel can be used within the service area of the Aboriginal community organisations that are members of the panel. In relation to health ethics, researchers should consult with the local Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Service. Government departments and universities cannot approve projects on the health of Aboriginal people. Only Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations are in a position to approve research on behalf of their respective communities. In terms of Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs), also known as Aboriginal Medical Services, no ACCHO can approve a project to be conducted in the service area of another ACCHO. Only the AH&MRC, as the peak body for ACCHOs in NSW, can approve research as suitable to be conducted on a statewide basis. Researchers are therefore advised to be aware of which ACCHOs are members of a community panel and to ensure that the membership aligns with the area in which the research project is to be conducted.

It is always recommended that research consultants a local ACCHO on their health research projects, however, some projects may not require support from the local ACCHO for an ethics application and researchers should seek advice from the AH&MRC Ethics Secretariat.

Organisational membership of a community panel is an independent decision of the perspective organisation/s. An organisation should be fully aware of the terms of reference of the community panel before a decision is made. It is suggested that organisations may want to stipulate that any changes to the terms of reference for a community panel need to agree upon by all organisations prior to any change coming into effect.



### **Aboriginal reference groups and governance groups.**

An Aboriginal reference group or governance group is involved in a research project on an ongoing basis. A community panel could act as such a group; however, this would need to be explicitly stated, and the number of project meetings over the life of the project would need to be specified. Furthermore, researchers should note that during an ethics review, an Aboriginal Human Research Ethics Committee will assess whether the reference group or governance group has the specific skills and expertise relevant to the research project. For example, a project on nutritional health would need to demonstrate that the group has the necessary expertise, either as community members with lived experience or through professional expertise in that subject area.

### **Aboriginal Human Research Ethics Committee.**

Aboriginal HRECs are formally constituted bodies registered with the NHMRC. They have specific expertise in the ethical review of research involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and are guided by national ethical standards, such as the NHMRC National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research. These committees are empowered to assess research for cultural safety, community benefit, and alignment with Indigenous values and protocols.

All research involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples must be reviewed by a recognised Aboriginal HREC to ensure it meets both ethical and cultural standards. Community panels can play a complementary role in the review process, but they must not replace the formal ethical review undertaken by an Aboriginal HREC.