



Walkabout Barber: Bringing culturally safe care and connection to community

Brian Dowd from the Walkabout Barber and Walkabout Beautiful team, creating connection and confidence while providing a haircut.

Program overview

Walkabout Barber and Walkabout Beautiful mobile service and Trauma and Recovery service is an Aboriginal mobile outreach initiative. Led by proud Gamilaraay man and former NRL player Brian Dowd, it provides free barbering, hairdressing and beauty services, alongside trauma-informed mental health support in culturally safe, community-based settings.

COORDINARE - South Eastern NSW PHN partnered with the mobile service, as well as other local providers, to create supportive spaces where community members could connect. The program visited Bega, Narooma, Mogo, Nowra, and Wollongong in May 2025. Brian combines his barbering skills with qualifications in Indigenous Trauma and Recovery Therapy, embedding care into every interaction.

The need

Aboriginal communities across regional NSW continue to face barriers to accessing culturally safe mental health and wellbeing support, including stigma, limited local services, transport challenges and mistrust of clinical settings. Community members and service providers identified a strong need for Aboriginal-led, trauma-informed, face-to-face outreach that meets people where they are and supports healing through culture and connection.

“It’s about more than a haircut; it’s about restoring dignity, hope, and connection.” – Brian Dowd

Reach and participation

Across the five locations, the program delivered 559 services, including:

- 258 barber services
- 158 beauty services
- 143 hairdressing services.

Between two and 12 local service providers participated at each site, strengthening collaboration and local referral pathways.

What was delivered

Communities benefited from the mobile service and engaging with other local services. Each visit integrated:

- free barbering, hairdressing and beauty services delivered from a mobile bus
- wellbeing check-ins during services
- suicide prevention and trauma recovery workshops
- co-location of Aboriginal organisations, Elders, COORDINARE commissioned mental health, suicide prevention and alcohol and other drug services - enhancing the overall experience for community members
- cultural elements including Welcome to Country, smoking ceremonies, music, weaving and shared food.



Young community members enjoying time at the Walkabout Barber bus visit.

“My son has social anxiety and Brian and team were exceptional with him and had him talking and smiling. I cannot recommend them enough.” – Community member

Outcomes and impact

- Strong participation from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members.
- High engagement from young people, with up to 45% under 15 in some locations.
- Notably high male participation, reaching 72% in Bega.
- 88–100% of respondents at each site reported being “extremely satisfied”.

Participants consistently reported feeling welcomed, understood and culturally safe. Feedback highlighted the value of informal, respectful environments where conversations about mental health could happen naturally during everyday activities.

Service provider experience

All participating service providers reported the initiative was worthwhile. Providers valued:

- the culturally safe environment
- opportunities to connect directly with community
- collaboration with other services.

They also identified an ongoing need for more Aboriginal community-led engagement activities, noting the model's effectiveness in reducing stigma and opening pathways to further care. “Something as simple as a haircut, paired with genuine connection, opened the door for meaningful conversations...” a service provider said.

Why it matters

Walkabout Barber and Walkabout Beautiful demonstrate how culturally grounded, Aboriginal approaches supported by strong partnerships can create meaningful, lasting impact. By meeting people in trusted community spaces, the initiative reduced stigma, strengthened connections, and supported healing in ways traditional service models often cannot. “We delivered suicide prevention and trauma recovery workshops for the broader community and service providers, opening up conversations – with both adults and children – that are too often kept in the dark,” Brian said.

The program also attracted positive regional media coverage, highlighting its role in improving community wellbeing and opening conversations about mental health, particularly for men. These outcomes reinforce the importance of continued investment in Aboriginal-led, trauma-informed outreach that brings together culture, care and community.

Walkabout Barber and Walkabout Beautiful will join COORDINARE's upcoming Health Check Convoy, bringing culturally safe care to communities across Southern NSW from 3–7 August.