

Closing The Gap Toolkit for Local Government



Acknowledgment of Country

Local Government NSW acknowledges and pays respect to the Traditional Owners of the lands on which we work, and the lands we travel through. We pay our respects to Elders past and present.

We also extend this respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who contribute to the work of local government and the strengthening of communities across NSW. We recognise the decades of tireless work and advocacy by local Aboriginal communities and peak organisations working towards meaningful outcomes for their peoples and communities.

Contributors:

This toolkit was developed in partnership between NSW Coalition of Aboriginal Peak Organisations (NSW CAPO), Aboriginal Affairs NSW (AANSW) and Local Government NSW (LGNSW) to bring the NSW Partnership Agreement to life for councils. Funding support from the NSW Government has made this project a reality with the ongoing support of both AANSW and NSW CAPO.

Consultant Cox Inall Ridgeway was engaged to support the toolkit development and stakeholder engagement.

We extend our thanks to all the contributors who committed their time to speak to us and share insights for the development of this Toolkit, including the following organisations:

- Barang Regional Alliance;
- The NSW CAPO Partnerships Team;
- Yarpa Hub;
- Tamworth Coalition of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations
- Orange Local Aboriginal Land Council;
- Orange Aboriginal Medical Centre;
- Sykes Peer Review; and
- Maari Ma.

We thank the following councils and their representatives for their time, knowledge and input into the Toolkit:

The Council Working Group members:



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About the artwork and artist:

JASMINE CRACIUN

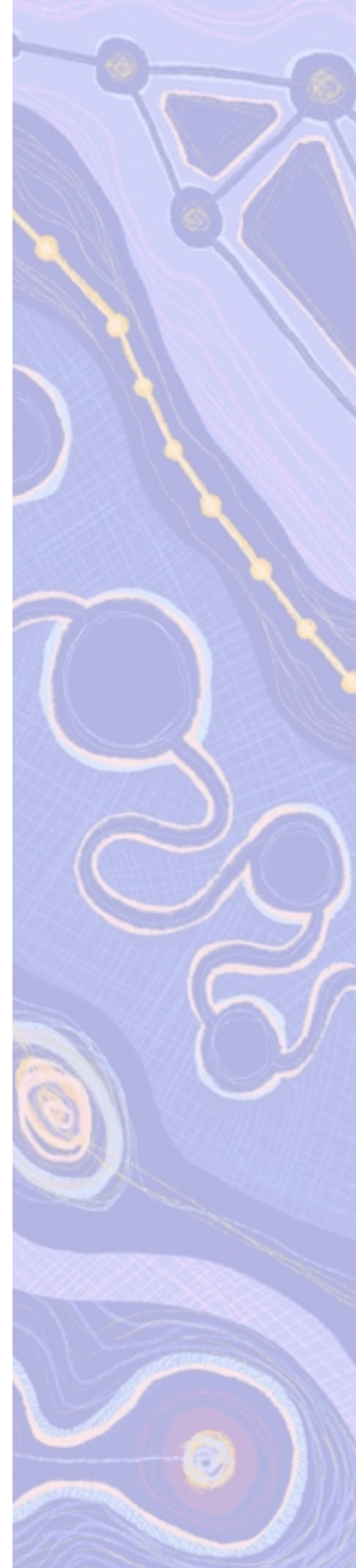
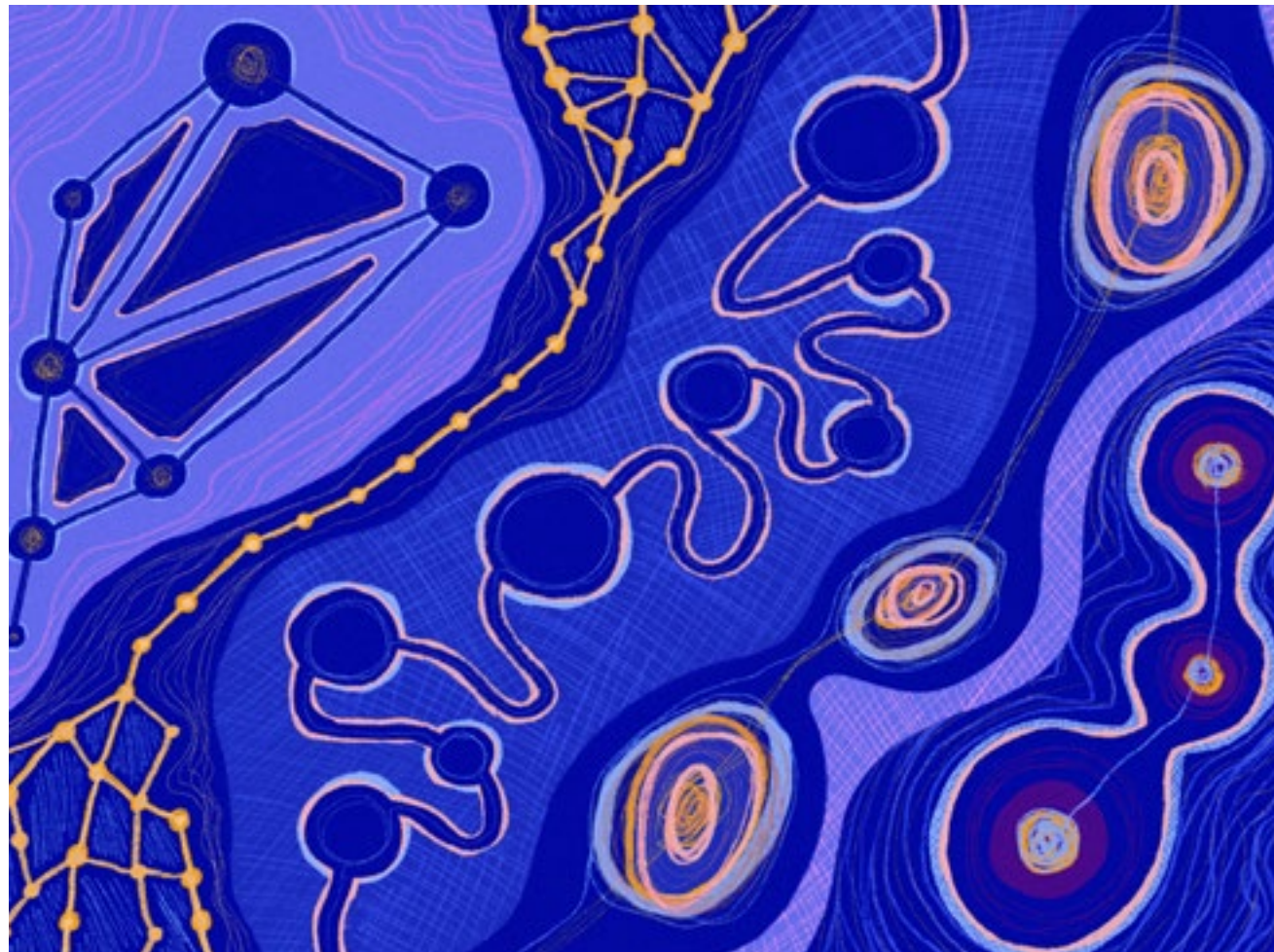
Jasmine Craciun is a Barkindji and Malyangapa artist living on Gadigal land. She is a multi-media artist and graphic designer. Her art-making process is informed by her diverse familial background and celebrating the strength of those who came before her. A sense of place and home are important themes in Jasmine's work.

Story of the artwork from the artist:

This artwork has been made up of 5 main elements to reflect the 4 Priority Reform areas of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, and a 5th Priority Reform area that is specific to NSW.



Image: jasminecraciun.com



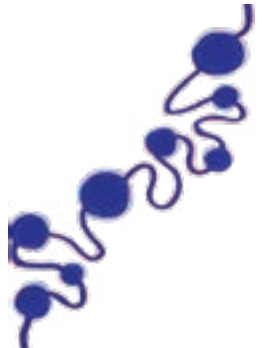
Priority Reform 1: Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision-Making

I wanted this element to mimic an original "small" thought or idea being shared with others, and growing and changing to create the final decision. The links between each circle are also about connected partnerships and relationships.



Priority Reform 2: Building the Community-Controlled Sector

This element is about the many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their communities that make up the community controlled sector. The path connecting the circles is about the relationships between the community members and the importance of their continued connections and contributions.



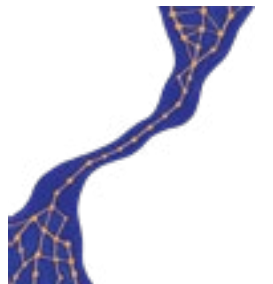
Priority Reform 3: Transforming Government Organisations

This element keeps a lot of the base layer clear to signify the continued transformation that is taking place and the layers of lines that are yet to fill the element. The circles have layers of circles overlapping each other slowly building up to a transformed element.



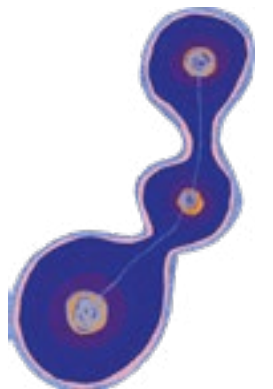
Priority Reform 4: Shared Access to Data and Information at a Regional Level

I wanted this element to feel reminiscent of the digital world, referencing data and information coding. The two ends of the element are connected by a 'road' to signify the distance of regional areas but the continued access to data and information.



Priority Reform 5: Employment, Business Growth and Economic Prosperity (NSW)

The three main parts to this element represent the three parts to this priority reform area. I wanted to reflect the positive aspirations of 'growth' and 'prosperity' through radiating shapes and colours around the circles. This element is the smallest of all the elements representative of it being NSW specific.



Message from the Council Working Group

The Council Working Group is proud to present this **Closing the Gap Toolkit for local government in NSW**. This resource has been developed to support councils in building stronger, more respectful relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and to guide local action towards genuine change.

Across NSW, First Nations peoples have faced generations of challenges and adversity stemming from colonisation, dispossession, and systemic inequality. Yet, through it all, our peoples have shown remarkable strength, resilience, and cultural continuity. Our communities hold deep knowledge, connection, and leadership that continue to sustain Country and community today.

Central to Closing the Gap is the recognition of the inherent rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to self-determination, the right to make decisions about our own lives, our lands, and our futures. First Nations communities have the ability, expertise, and experience to design, lead, and achieve meaningful outcomes for their people. What is needed is not direction, but partnership where local governments listen, resource, and walk alongside communities in shared purpose.

Local government has a unique and powerful role in this journey. As the level of government closest to grassroots communities, councils are well placed to create change that reflects local voices and local priorities. In committing to long-term, respectful relationships with Aboriginal communities, councils can help build the foundations for trust, collaboration, and self-determined progress.

The **NSW Closing the Gap** framework sets out five priority reform areas that guide this work:

- **Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision Making** – ensuring Aboriginal people are genuine partners in decisions that affect them.
- **Building the Aboriginal Community - Controlled Sector** – strengthening Aboriginal-led organisations to deliver services that reflect community needs.
- **Transforming Government Organisations** – creating culturally safe, responsive, and accountable institutions.
- **Shared Access to Data and Information at a Regional Level** – supporting Aboriginal data sovereignty and enabling informed, community-led planning.
- **Employment, Business Growth and Economic Prosperity** – empowering sustainable Aboriginal employment and enterprise development.

These reforms provide a clear direction, but their success depends on how we work together. Councils must commit to resourcing, partnering, learning, and growing with Aboriginal communities, not just working for them. Meaningful progress comes through relationships built on respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility.

We invite all councils to approach this toolkit not as a checklist, but as an opportunity to listen deeply, to act with integrity, and to stand alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in shaping a more equitable, self-determined future for all.

Council Working Group
Closing the Gap Toolkit for local government in NSW

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About this Toolkit:

This Toolkit aims to provide councils with information, ideas, and examples of what services and functions they provide that align with the aims and objectives of Closing the Gap, contained in the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* (National Agreement) and the Priority Reform areas. The Toolkit offers practical examples, tools, templates and self-assessment tools for councils to measure to what extent they align with Closing the Gap and where they might like to evolve.

The Toolkit is primarily aimed at mayors, councillors and local government staff (including executive leaders, senior leaders, team leaders and officers/frontline staff) directly working in key focus areas related to the *National Agreement*. This broadly includes areas such as Aboriginal programs, strategic planning, governance and partnerships, community engagement, land use planning and management, customer and community services delivery, employment, procurement, and economic development/prosperity.

Mayors, councillors and executive leaders may find the Toolkit useful for guiding strategic decisions, council priorities and statutory plans to reflect Closing the Gap commitments. Operational staff can use the Toolkit to translate these commitments into everyday practice through planning, service delivery, and community engagement activities.

The Toolkit may also be helpful for additional audiences, including all other council staff, volunteers, trainees and partners, Aboriginal organisations working with councils, other government and non-government agencies.

The Toolkit provides the following:

- Tailored information about the history of Closing the Gap, the National Agreement and the Priority Reform areas;
- A breakdown of key elements from each of the Priority Reform areas with examples of aligned local government initiatives;
- Key opportunities for councils to consider when planning and implementing these initiatives;
- Case studies demonstrating some of the ways councils and Aboriginal organisations are already undertaking this work across NSW;
- A range of tools and templates to use for brainstorming or planning, and/or be adapted to a council's local context;
- A list of further resources provided per Priority Reform area; and
- A simple self-assessment tool to measure councils' alignment with each Priority Reform area, and identify areas of strength and for improvement.

Every council and the communities they service are different, which means there is no 'one size fits all' solution for how to design and implement initiatives aligned with Closing the Gap. These mechanisms and outcomes will only be as good as the relationships underpinning them. Working in a respectful, collaborative way with Aboriginal communities is fundamental to this work and advice is provided throughout the Toolkit on how to build, maintain, and strengthen collaboration with Aboriginal communities.

Councils operate across a wide spectrum of circumstances, shaped by differences in resources, financial sustainability, workforce depth, and organisational capacity. For this reason, the Toolkit has been designed to offer scalable and flexible ways of approaching Closing the Gap-aligned work across a range of circumstances, including highlighting opportunities to utilise existing funding streams where possible.

The Toolkit can be used by councils:

- As an evidence-base to support the approval, development, and implementation of new policies, projects or programs;
- To integrate Closing the Gap-aligned initiatives into councils' key strategic planning documents;
- To upskill and raise internal awareness about what Closing the Gap and the Priority Reform areas are, and councils' role in progressing this work in partnership with Aboriginal communities;
- To understand key considerations, success metrics, and principle-based advice for progressing key mechanisms and initiatives; and
- To self-assess how current Council operations are aligning with the Priority Reform areas and identify key areas which require improvement.

The Toolkit is not:

- A comprehensive best-practice guide to every type of issue related to Aboriginal communities for local government;
- A set of tools that can be adapted without the necessary groundwork, and ongoing relationships with Aboriginal communities;
- A substitute for meaningful and ongoing engagement with a broad range of Aboriginal stakeholders within LGAs.
- A mandatory way of working. Councils must plan and co-design with their communities in consideration of available resourcing and capacity.

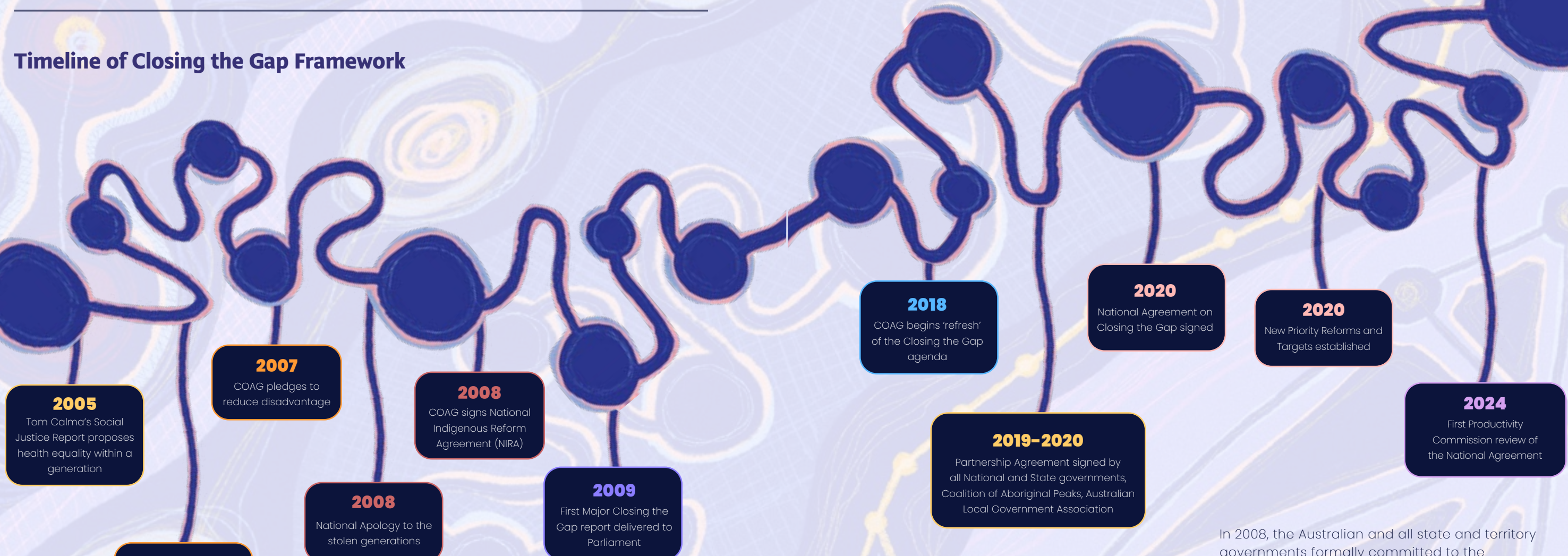
The Toolkit is an extension of previous bodies of work, including:

- [*Collaborate NSW: Local government and Aboriginal communities working together resource kit for local government* \(2017\)](#) (LGNSW and the Office of Local Government);
- Closing the Gap factsheet for local government developed by the Office of Local Government; and
- NSW 2022 Partnership Stocktake developed by Aboriginal Affairs NSW.

Closing the Gap

When we talk about Closing the Gap, we are referring to a policy framework that has been enacted in various ways since 2008. The framework is essential to achieve the shared goal to close the gap in life outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. This timeline shows key developments in the history of Closing the Gap:

Timeline of Closing the Gap Framework



Closing the Gap was created through years of Aboriginal advocacy and public pressure to address glaring discrepancies in life outcomes between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians across health, education and employment. In 2005, the then Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Professor Tom Calma AO, released the *Social Justice Report 2005* urging Australian governments to commit to achieving equality in health and life expectancy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

In 2008, the Australian and all state and territory governments formally committed to the original Closing the Gap framework through the National Indigenous Reform Agreement, setting measurable targets across areas including health, education and employment in order to address disadvantage. After 10 years, the original Closing the Gap framework showed limited success. Advocacy from the recently formed Coalition of Peaks led to a major change in approach that recognised Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) as shared decision-makers in the design, implementation and monitoring, rather than just stakeholders.

This was formalised in 2019–2020 with the signing of the *Partnership Agreement on Closing the Gap 2019–2029* which provides the framework of shared decision-making and the new National Agreement on Closing the Gap signed on 27 July 2020 which sets the strategic goals and targets for improving the lives of Aboriginal peoples. This was the first time the Coalition of Peaks, the Australian and all state and territory governments, and the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) became formal partners to share decisions in the design and delivery of national policy; marking a shift towards endorsing principles of empowerment, self-determination, and community-led, strengths-based strategies. *The National Agreement* is considered as the foundation of Closing the Gap.

Closing the Gap governance is based around:

- Four national Priority Reform areas;
- One additional NSW-specific Priority Reform area (Priority Reform 5);
- 17 socio-economic targets;
- Implementation Plans and annual progress reporting; and
- Independent reviews by the Productivity Commission every 3 years.

The socio-economic targets in the *National Agreement* are 17 measurable goals set to improve life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. They cover key areas such as health, education, employment, housing, justice, safety, languages, digital inclusion, and land/water rights, and some of these indicators are tracked nationally to monitor progress and accountability.

The socio-economic targets also recognise a wide variety of groups of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including women, young people, Elders, LGBTQIASB+ people, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with a disability.

The Priority Reform areas are the structural changes required to shift how governments work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in order to achieve the targets set through the socio-economic targets. The Priority Reform areas are foundational to implementing the *National Agreement*.

Key principles underpinning the new *National Agreement*

- Empowerment
- Self-determination
- Community-led
- Strengths-based

NSW response to Closing the Gap

In NSW, the National Agreement is put into effect through the *NSW Partnership Agreement*, to which the NSW Government, NSW CAPO and LGNSW became signatories in February 2024. The Partnership Agreement requires signatories to co-develop NSW Implementation Plans for Closing the Gap. This graph illustrates the NSW response into the National governance structure of Closing the Gap:

The NSW Partnership Agreement has opened up opportunities for deeper engagement with local government in NSW and is leading to greater understanding of how the sector is aligned with the overall governance and reporting on Closing the Gap.

How Local Government NSW feeds into the Closing the Gap governance structure in NSW



Local Government's legislative framework

The *Local Government Act 1993* (NSW) sets out the guiding principles for councils to engage with diverse communities, including Aboriginal communities. These principles guide councils to:

- Provide strong and effective representation, leadership, planning, and decision-making (section 8A(1)(a));
- Recognise diverse local community needs and interests (8A(2)(a));
- Consider social justice principles of access, equity, participation, diversity and rights (8A(2)(b)); and
- Actively engage with their local communities through the use of the Integrated Planning and Reporting Framework (IP&R) and other measures (8A(3)).

The Integrated Planning & Reporting (IP&R) framework includes a range of requirements to support councils to plan for and service communities. The IP&R framework involves the development of minimum of 10-year Community Strategic Plans (CSP), four-year Delivery Programs and annual Operational Plans. The implementation of the CSP is also supported through the Resourcing Strategy, which includes a long-term financial plan, workforce management plan and asset management plan. This framework allows councils to put community priorities at the centre of planning and to operate with accountability.

Councils work across a wide ranging and often complex legislative framework, with responsibilities under around 67 different Acts and direct working relationships with more than 20 state and federal government agencies¹.

Some of the policy frameworks that apply to councils in NSW which shape and encourage best practice engagement with Aboriginal communities include:

- *The Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983* (NSW): Creates Local Aboriginal Land Councils (LALCs) as statutory bodies corporate that councils should engage with in land use planning and community development;

- *The Native Title Act 1993* (Cth): Councils must engage with registered native title holders and Prescribed Bodies Corporate (PBCs) when their decisions may affect native title land or waters, and are encouraged to develop Indigenous Land Use Agreements (ILUAs) to formalise partnerships;
- *The Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979* (NSW): Requires consideration of Aboriginal cultural heritage and values in planning processes;
- *Heritage Act 1977* (NSW) and the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974* (NSW): Councils must consult with Aboriginal communities and cultural knowledge holders when developments may affect cultural heritage; and
- *The National Agreement and the NSW Partnership Agreement*, dealt with in more [detail above](#).

The following policies and frameworks also influence local government operations indirectly:

- NSW Government policies and frameworks in NSW, including OCHRE – *Opportunity, Choice, Healing, Responsibility, Empowerment* – which encourages place-based engagement and partnerships with Aboriginal organisations; and
- The *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP): Articles 18 and 19 refer to the right of Indigenous peoples to participate in decision-making in matters affecting them, as well as the requirement of governments to consult with Indigenous peoples before adopting measures that affect them.

Local Government's role in Closing the Gap

[When ALGA signed the National Partnership Agreement in 2019](#), it was the first time that local government was formally recognised as a partner in the national Closing the Gap agenda (alongside federal, state and territory governments and the Coalition of Peaks), recognising the important role that local governments play in helping to Close the Gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Councils are in a unique position to implement initiatives aligned with the Priority Reform areas, given they:

- Deliver or fund services in areas relevant to Closing the Gap, such as housing, youth services, early childhood education, community development, community infrastructure, procurement, local employment and land management;
- Are the closest level of government engaging with Aboriginal communities, particularly in regional and remote areas; and
- In many cases, have shared interests with their Aboriginal communities based on the shared local context of their geographic areas.

There is an enormous opportunity for local governments to make positive impacts on the lives of Aboriginal communities. Shared interests exist between councils, Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) as they all live and work in the same areas and are driven by the desire to improve their local communities.

The Toolkit is structured around the five Priority Reform areas of the NSW Closing the Gap governance structure to highlight where and how councils can embed relevant actions into their services and functions. The examples provided in this Toolkit reflect the existing services and functions currently being delivered by councils in NSW.

Further resources and information are available at:

- [Closing the Gap official website](#)
- [National Agreement](#)
- [Coalition of Peaks website](#)
- [NSW CAPO website](#)
- [NSW Closing the Gap 2022-24 Implementation Plan](#)
- [Office of Local Government NSW Closing the Gap Factsheet for Local Councils](#)
- Press Release from Prime Minister's Office on the [signing of the Partnership Agreement](#)
- [Office of Local Government NSW Integrated Planning and Reporting](#)

¹ [Integrated Planning and Reporting Handbook for Local Councils in NSW](#)

Opportunities for alignment between councils and Closing the Gap

PRIORITY REFORM 1:

Partnerships and shared decision making



- Partnerships and formal agreements between local government and Aboriginal organisations, including placed-based partnerships established under Priority Reform 1
- Aboriginal Advisory Groups, where processes support shared decision making
- Interagencies
- Input from Aboriginal communities and organisations into IP&R processes, documents and/or land use planning processes
- Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs)
- Engagement and collaboration with placed-based partnerships established under Priority Reform 1, where these exist in locally

PRIORITY REFORM 2:

Building Community Controlled Sector



- Community grants programs
- Development of Cultural Centres, sports clubs and other services/ facilities in partnership with ACCOs
- Providing support and facilities for community events e.g. NAIDOC
- Early childhood education and care programs for Aboriginal children
- Transition applicable/relevant programs and services to be led by ACCwOs (who are supported with adequate resourcing to take up those programs and services)

PRIORITY REFORM 3:

Transforming Government Organisations



- Anti-racism strategies, training and frameworks
- Supporting Aboriginal participation in council processes including as elected representatives
- Building internal competencies on cultural protocols and engagement with Aboriginal communities
- Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs) or First Nations Strategies
- CSPs which include Aboriginal stakeholder aspirations and priorities
- HR strategies that support Aboriginal employment and retention
- Approaches to support greater transparency and accountability, including ways to reflect and measure councils' progress in aligning with and contributing to Closing the Gap

PRIORITY REFORM 4:

Shared access to data



- Community data projects and initiatives which facilitate data access and data sharing with local Aboriginal organisations and communities to help build the capacity of the local ACCOs.
- Efforts and initiatives to increase knowledge, understanding and recognition of Aboriginal Data Sovereignty and Governance, including councils' role in enabling and supporting these through their partnerships and operation
- Using and collecting data to inform co-design and delivery of services and programs for Aboriginal community members
- Reforming data-related practices in line with Aboriginal communities' needs and priorities
- Develop Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property protocols in partnership with Aboriginal stakeholders

PRIORITY REFORM 5:

Employment, business growth & economic prosperity



- Aboriginal procurement policies and processes
- Economic development strategies and capacity building which support Aboriginal businesses and enterprises
- Initiatives/targets to increase Aboriginal employment and procurement (such as through Aboriginal Employment Strategies)
- Strategies to address cultural safety and cultural load (i.e. Aboriginal employee retention and support)
- Supporting Aboriginal-led tourism through destination marketing

PRIORITY REFORM 1²

Formal Partnerships & Shared Decision-Making



Overview

Priority Reform 1 (PR1) commits governments to embed shared decision-making with Aboriginal people as equal partners, ensuring their leadership in policy design, service delivery, and evaluation. As a foundational element of the National Agreement, it seeks to shift power by embedding Aboriginal self-determination at the centre of government systems, recognising that meaningful progress on Closing the Gap requires structural reform in how governments engage with communities.

Key features:

- Shared decision-making
- Formalised, structured partnerships
- Aboriginal-led representation
- Transparency and accountability
- Respect for self-determination and local decision-making structures

Outcome:

Aboriginal people are supported to exercise shared decision-making with governments through formal partnerships.

Why it matters:

This reform responds to long-standing calls from Aboriginal communities for:

- Greater control over decisions that directly impact their lives and communities
- Recognition of Aboriginal-led solutions; and
- A break from top-down policy making that historically ignored or excluded Aboriginal voices.
- Aboriginal peak bodies have emphasised that without this shift, government efforts will continue to be ineffective and disconnected from the needs of community.

The Strong Partnership Elements³:

These are helpful indicators to use when considering whether a partnership or governance mechanism aligns with the foundational principles of the *National Agreement*:

- Partnerships are accountable and representative;
- Partnerships having a written formal agreement;
- Decision making is shared; and
- Adequate funding for partnership arrangements to support Closing the Gap between Aboriginal people and governments.

Aboriginal peak bodies have emphasised that without this shift, government efforts will continue to be ineffective and disconnected from the needs of community.

How councils can align with PR1

There are a range of mechanisms that local governments can use to align their work with the principles underpinning PR1, for example:

- **Place-based partnerships**, such as through the NSW CAPO Partnership Project;
- **Aboriginal Advisory Groups** that provide ongoing input into council's strategic planning;
- Working with existing Aboriginal representative governance organisations through established place-based models, such as Barang Regional Alliance's [Regional Alliance \(Local Decision-Making\) model](#) under Empowered Communities;
- Memorandum of Understandings and other agreements, such as [City of Sydney and Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council's Principles of Co-operation](#);
- **Interagencies** that support collaboration with local and regional Aboriginal organisations; and
- Established agreements and ways of **working with Native Title holders** in an ongoing way.

These mechanisms can be adapted to suit the unique needs, resources and context of each council and their Aboriginal communities. To be consistent with the *National Agreement* they must embody the principles of PR1, including ongoing commitment, the genuine sharing of decision-making power and meeting the strong partnership elements in Clause 32 of the National Agreement. For example, mechanisms that provide only an advisory capacity with no power to participate in decision-making are not truly aligned with PR1. Therefore, existing engagement mechanisms with Aboriginal communities may need restructuring to achieve the strong partnership elements.

In NSW, place-based partnerships are being developed by the NSW Government and NSW CAPO as a best practice example of how PR1 can be operationalised by levels of government. Place-based

partnerships are built on years of existing collaboration and relationship-building between the council and Aboriginal communities/organisations in the area. It is recommended that place-based partnerships be considered by councils that already have a solid foundation of internal cultural competency and established relationships with Aboriginal organisations. It is also crucial to consider the views of local Aboriginal organisations as to whether a formal partnership is something they aspire to.

Councils who are in the early stages of identifying and forming relationships with Aboriginal communities and organisations in their area can refer to the *Discussion guide for initial conversations with Aboriginal organisations* and *Stakeholder mapping template for Aboriginal community engagement*. We recommend also reading through the section below on [Engagement Frameworks](#).

² Council of Australian Governments & Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations. (2020). *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*. Canberra: Australian Government, clauses 32 to 37.

³ *Ibid*, clauses 32 and 33.

Tools and templates



- *Checklist: Embedding Strong Partnership Elements in your Aboriginal Advisory Committee*
- *Aboriginal Advisory Committee ToR examples from Coffs Harbour City Council, Central Coast Council, Inner West Council and City of Sydney*
- *Template: Aboriginal Community Engagement (stakeholder mapping)*
- *Discussion Guide: For initial conversations with Aboriginal Organisation*
- *Self-assessment tool (with section on PRI)*

Place-based partnerships

Place-based partnerships are a key mechanism through which the NSW Government and NSW CAPO are implementing the *NSW Partnership Agreement*. Place-based partnerships are collaborative governance arrangements between government agencies and Aboriginal community-controlled representatives at a local or regional level. They are a formal partnership mechanism structured to embody the principles of PRI, such as shared decision-making and planning based on locally-defined priorities. By nature, place-based partnerships embed self-determination for Aboriginal communities.

The NSW CAPO Supporting Local Partnerships Project is currently trialling the development of place-based partnerships throughout NSW. Sites at Tamworth, Orange and Greater Western Sydney have all seen developments between ACCO peak bodies' local constituents and the council/s in their area, with the first formal Closing the Gap partnership agreement at a local government level signed in Tamworth – the *Mara Ngali Partnership Agreement*. The Greater Western Sydney Ngaliya project and the Orange Aboriginal Place-Based Partnership Plan are also progressing towards being formalised with their respective councils.

These partnerships are tailored to local contexts, reflecting the place-based approach that different communities have different needs, capacities, and aspirations. While there is no 'one size fits all' approach to developing a partnership, NSW CAPO support each site through established processes including:

- An MOU to support parties to work together in good faith;
- A Community Development Plan (CDP) process for place-based partnerships to survey and determine local community priorities and translate these into key actions; and
- An easy to implement monitoring and evaluation template that provides monthly progress updates.

Funding for place-based partnership trial sites is currently provided through Aboriginal Affairs NSW, as well as in-kind contributions from the councils and Aboriginal organisations.

Place-based partnerships can be used as the foundation for council to integrate an Aboriginal community's (and ACCOs') local Closing the Gap aspirations across areas such as housing, health, and education into key IP&R documents. Provided below are case studies which demonstrate how the communities at Tamworth and Orange are approaching this from an ACCO and council leadership perspective.

Who to partner with?

Place-based or formal partnerships could also be formed with other existing Aboriginal-led governance structures. The important factor is that the structure holds community legitimacy.

Before considering a partnership, councils require an existing relationship with the key Aboriginal organisations and stakeholders within the LGA and an understanding of what their needs and priorities are. It is also critical to consider whether the Aboriginal organisation wants to work towards a partnership and whether there are any alternatives they prefer.

CASE STUDY:

Tamworth Mara Ngali Partnership Agreement



Place-Based Partnership Trial Site under NSW CAPO Supporting Local Partnerships Project

Launched in 2022 on Gomerai Country in the New England region, Tamworth is the first formal place-based Closing the Gap partnership identified in NSW under the National Agreement – Priority Reform 1. This led to the formation of the Tamworth Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (TACCO) who signed a formal MOU in July 2024 stating that they would advocate and work together to identify needs and aspiration of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and paved the way for the development of the Mara Ngali Partnership Agreement between TACCO and Tamworth Regional Council.

TACCO is a coalition of five local ACCOs committed to advocating for the social, economic and cultural wellbeing of Tamworth's Aboriginal community. Members include Birreelee Multifunctional Aboriginal

Children's Service (MACS) Aboriginal Corporation, Tamworth LALC, Burrun Dalai AC, Tamworth Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) and Tamworth Aboriginal Medical Service Aboriginal Corporation (TAMS-AC). These organisations combined have a decades-long history of advocacy and community intergenerational leadership in the area.

The Agreement sets in motion the co-development of a Closing the Gap implementation plan for Council, structured around the five Priority Reform areas and embedding the 17 socio-economic targets into local strategies across health, education, employment, housing, legal services, and youth and Elder wellbeing. Resourcing for implementation, as well as joint annual reporting and monitoring, are core parts of the agreement.

The signing of the *Mara Ngali Partnership Agreement* commits Council and TACCO to work together under the *National Agreement*. The name “Mara Ngali” is Gomeri for “our two hands” and is representative of a foundation for an equal partnership that will deliver on-the-ground outcomes for community:

From an ACCO perspective, strong governance and existing long-term relationships with council representatives are important factors which made working towards a partnership possible, along with:

- Significant Aboriginal population in the area;
- Clearly defining what a strong, formal partnership looks like;
- Collaborative working relationships between ACCOs in the area;
- Demonstrated genuine intent and commitment from Tamworth Regional Council; and
- The process and funding provided through the NSW CAPO Supporting Local Partnerships Project enabling a space for community leaders to come together and have transparent, robust discussions.

What are your hands for? Well, they're for making and for doing things and so hopefully it sets the foundation saying, well, one's not better than the other. We've got to deliver something.

- Councillor Marc Sutherland, Tamworth Regional Council



TACCO developed its Community Development Plan (CDP) through a series of surveys and workshops with the Aboriginal community. This foundational document provides an evidence-base for the Aboriginal community's priorities and sets clear actions:

The purpose of the Plan is to identify and set clear ACTIONS that aim to improve the overall health and wellbeing of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living and working in the Tamworth LGA, providing opportunities for equal access to services and foundations that encourage and support cultural identity.

We can't do this alone. For real change to happen, governments at every level must commit to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and be held accountable for their promises. Everyone needs to work together to make this change a reality.

- TACCO CDP, page 11.



The CDP is an iterative process with continuous feedback loops to the community, and provides a foundation of information for Tamworth Regional Council, State and Commonwealth Government and any other business or organisation on the needs and priorities of the local Aboriginal community. Council intends to create a local implementation plan which aligns to the CDP.

Consideration is being given to Council's IP&R framework to ensure accountability through joint monitoring and evaluation, as well as exploring how to align the *Mara Ngali Partnership Agreement* to State and Commonwealth Closing the Gap priorities.

Tamworth Regional Council sees the partnership as an important step towards meaningful action on Closing the Gap:

This partnership will not only guide Council's actions, but also stand as a clear and public demonstration of our resolve to contribute meaningfully to Closing the Gap locally. We understand that this needs to be more than words, it is about taking real, measurable steps to ensure equity, opportunity, and respect for Indigenous Australians.

- Mayor Russell Web, Tamworth Regional Council

TACCO emphasises a few caveats to their work with Council: that the *Mara Ngali Partnership Agreement* is not a vehicle to solve every Indigenous-related issue in the community, nor are TACCO the sole source of cultural authority for the area. Other considerations that will need to be worked through moving forward by both parties include:

- What do the Aboriginal priorities evidenced through the CDP look like in action?
- What is the resourcing commitment from all parties?
- How will the partnership operate moving forward?

While it is still early in the process, both Tamworth Regional Council and TACCO see enormous potential for the *Mara Ngali Partnership Agreement* going forward:

When you start talking in the realm of what can you do for local government and you look at the remit of what local government does and some of the changes that can be made in that space, it's almost endless.

- Jocelyn Cookbain, TACCO Place-Based Partnership Co-Ordinator

There's the potential for that to deliver some really good outcomes, like ... not only just program or service delivery, but organisational transformation, like ending racism in council

- Mayor Russell Web, Tamworth Regional Council

CASE STUDY:

Orange Aboriginal Place-Based Partnership

Place-Based Partnership Trial Site under NSW CAPO Partnership Program

On Wiradjuri Country in the Central West, the Orange Coalition of Aboriginal Peak Organisations (Orange CAPO) have been developing the *Orange Aboriginal Place-Based Plan 2024-2034* (OAPBP). This Plan is Aboriginal-led, funded by CAPO and locally governed with member ACCOs, including the Orange Local Aboriginal Land Council (OLALC), the Orange Aboriginal Medical Service (OAMS), and the Orange Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (OAECCG), with the active involvement of other community stakeholders.

The OAPBP began as a review of the Orange City Council-driven *Aboriginal Social Development Plan 2014-2024* fashioning a truly community-led framework. It builds on the significant history of ACCO leadership and strong governance in Orange, with established ACCOs coming together to take ownership of long-term priorities across health, education, housing, culture, and governance.

Local government plays a supporting role. Orange City Council partners in the process by embedding Aboriginal priorities into Council's statutory IP&R framework. However, the ownership and accountability for the OAPBP rests with Aboriginal community leadership.

As Jamie Newman, Chair of the Orange CAPO, stated: **"Whilst community are aligning with Orange City Council on their plan, community are in control of our ... key deliverables under the OAPBP."**

This partnership model ensures that the OAPBP reflects genuine community control. The delivery of the OAPBP is further supported by the Orange ACCOs adopting IP&R-style frameworks of their own, which mirror local government structures. This alignment facilitates seamless embedding of Aboriginal priorities into Council's 10-year CSP, 4-year Delivery Program and annual Operational Plan. Importantly, this approach resolves a long-standing problem: plans without resources or accountability. By tying community priorities into a funded and reportable framework, the OAPBP ensures delivery for community both via Orange ACCOs and Orange City Council.

Data collection and engagement have been central to the OAPBP: place-based planning workshops, cultural mapping, service access reviews, strengths-based yarning circles, and digital tools to engage young people. Feedback loops with the community ensure the Plan remains responsive, adaptive, and genuinely grounded in community voice.

Going forward, the monitoring and evaluation framework will be led by CAPO, with Council providing technical alignment into its IP&R system. This ensures that Aboriginal-led priorities in education, housing, health, culture, and governance are delivered in a way that is community-controlled, culturally safe, and transparently reported.

Functions of Aboriginal Advisory Groups can be tailored to the needs and context of local government, however generally include:

- Advice on policies, partnerships, projects, and services related to the Aboriginal community/ies of an area;
- Guide the development of local governments' core strategic documents including First Nations Strategies or RAPs;
- Contribute to community consultation and co-design processes;
- Support cultural events and recognition initiatives (e.g. NAIDOC Week, Welcome to Countries); and
- Offer a forum for Aboriginal voices to inform council decision-making and core business.

Councils can also use Aboriginal Advisory Committees as an effective way to bolster other PRI-aligned initiatives in their local areas, supporting the stated governance preference of Aboriginal communities. Operationalised in this way, an Aboriginal Advisory Committee will align with and progress existing council and community collaboration (such as a developing place-based partnership) rather than operating in isolation. In doing so, these committees can contribute to embedding long-term partnership approaches across council functions.

The table below provides guidance on key factors for councils to consider in designing and operating a successful Aboriginal Advisory Committee:

Key Factor	Description
1. Strong and Genuine Relationships	Trust must be built over time through consistent, respectful engagement. Councils should prioritise cultural protocols and relationship-first approaches, not just issue-based consultation.
2. Clear Purpose and Scope	The group should have a co-designed ToR that clearly outlines its roles, authority, and how its input influences council decisions.
3. Representative Membership	Members should include Traditional Owners, Elders, Aboriginal community members, and representatives of local Aboriginal organisations. The group should reflect diversity in age, gender, and perspectives.
4. Resourcing and Support	Councils should provide appropriate funding, pay members for their time, and offer administrative/logistical support.
5. Integration into Decision-Making	The Advisory Group's advice must be embedded into council planning and decision-making processes (e.g. policies, IP&R framework, RAP), with clear reporting and feedback loops.

See also:

- [Checklist for embedding Strong Partnership Elements in your Aboriginal Advisory Committee](#); and
- [Aboriginal Advisory Committee ToR examples from Coffs Harbour City Council, Central Coast Council, Inner West Council and City of Sydney](#)

Aboriginal Advisory Committees

Establishing committees, including Aboriginal Advisory Committees, to support council decision-making is supported under section 355 of the *Local Government Act 1993* (NSW). Aboriginal Advisory Committees act as a mechanism for ongoing engagement and are one way for councils to embed principles of shared decision-making, provided they are structured in a way that aligns with the principles of PRI. That is, they must go beyond consultation and instead reflect a structured and accountable partnership between a council and Aboriginal community representatives.

Interagencies

Interagencies are local or regional networks that bring together Aboriginal community members, organisations, service providers, and representatives from local government and other government agencies. Their aim is to facilitate collaboration, information sharing, and culturally responsive service delivery at the local level.

They serve as platforms for collaboration to:

- Share updates and identify gaps in local service delivery for Aboriginal communities;
- Promote cultural safety and Aboriginal community leadership in local decision-making;
- Facilitate coordinated responses to social, cultural, health, education, justice, housing, and economic issues;
- Strengthen partnerships between councils and Aboriginal organisations, Elders, and community members; and
- Provide a forum for councils to consult on policy, programs, and community planning in a culturally respectful and inclusive way.

Councils may:

- Host or co-chair the interagency (potentially in partnership with a local Aboriginal organisation);
- Attend as a stakeholder to provide updates, seek input, and build relationships;
- Use the interagency as a consultation mechanism for working towards formal partnerships, Closing the Gap strategies, RAPs, or other matters; and
- Support or resource the interagency through administrative support, venues, or funding contributions.

Interagencies can be a key mechanism for councils to pursue outcomes related to Closing the Gap, provided they are structured in a way that aligns with PRI principles. In some cases, collaboration from interagencies can form a foundation on which formalised partnerships can evolve.

Key success factors for interagencies include:

Key Factor	Why It Matters
Aboriginal-led and culturally safe	Ensures self-determination and trust.
Broad, representative membership	Reflects the diversity of local Aboriginal voices and organisations.
Regular, consistent meetings	Builds trust, relationships, and follow-through.
Clear purpose and Terms of Reference	Helps establish ways of working and ensures clear scope, shared understanding and transparency.
Action-oriented outcomes	Aims for meaningful, on-the-ground outcomes which benefit community.



PRIORITY REFORM 2⁴

Supporting the Aboriginal Community-Controlled Sector



Overview

Priority Reform 2 (PR2) focuses on strengthening the ACCO sector by recognising its role in delivering culturally safe, effective services that often outperform mainstream options. It seeks to improve service delivery through genuine partnerships, long-term investment in community-led solutions, and accountability measures that elevate Aboriginal leadership and build sector capacity.

Key features:

- Aboriginal Community-Controlled Services
- Culturally-safe and effective service delivery
- Long-term investment in the ACCO sector

Outcome:

It elevates Aboriginal leadership, promotes long-term investment in community-led solutions, and embeds accountability through targets for strengthening the sector.

Why it matters:

PR2 aims to strengthen the governance and service delivery systems preferred by Aboriginal communities, and through doing so:

- Promotes self-determination, cultural safety, and investment in Aboriginal-led solutions;
- Delivers more effective and culturally appropriate services for Aboriginal communities; and
- Builds the sustainability and resilience of the ACCO sector.

How councils can align with PR2

Councils manage a wide range of budgets for community programs, service delivery, and grant administration and can support the principles of PR2 through existing resourcing by prioritising the capacity building of local ACCOs within these grant streams through:

- Commissioning ACCOs through existing grant programs or service contracts, ensuring that Aboriginal-led organisations have access to opportunities;
- Partnering with ACCOs in service delivery, by reallocating or co-designing portions of existing community services budgets to be led by Aboriginal organisations;
- Providing in-kind support (training, venues, equipment, communications channels, staff time) to ACCOs to reduce their operational burden; and
- Prioritising procurement from ACCOs within councils' existing procurement and supplier diversity frameworks.

Examples that demonstrate existing work of councils include:

- **Grants hubs:** Such as the City of Sydney's [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Collaboration Fund](#), which provide programs and grants to Aboriginal community organisations;
- **Development of cultural, youth or sports centres:** Such as the [Baaka Cultural and Art Centre](#) supported by Central Darling Shire Council, the youth centre being developed by La Perouse Aboriginal Land Council and Randwick Council or the Orange United Sports Club;
- Councils **providing in-kind resourcing and venue support available** to Aboriginal organisations for community events including NAIDOC; and
- **Operating early childhood education and care or playschool programs** for First Nations children, such as the [Platypus Group](#) run by Queanbeyan-Palerang Regional Council with Munjuwa Aboriginal Corporation.

Tools and Templates

- Example template: MOU by the Northern Community Support Alliance
- Example of guidelines for an Aboriginal small grants program
- Self-assessment tool (with section on PR2)



CASE STUDY:

Orange Sports Club as a vehicle for ACCO collaboration and socio-economic outcomes



In Wiradjuri Country in the Central West, Orange United Sports Club (Orange United) has been operating since 2014, originally evolving out of a Designing the Futures project being run by Orange City Council aimed at bringing Aboriginal young people from low socio-economic homes into mainstream sporting programs. The program also aligned with Orange Local Aboriginal Land Council's (OLALC) *Social Action Plan*, enabling the start of ongoing and long-term collaboration between the council, the LALC and other ACCOs in the area including Orange AMS.

We had over 50 children and young people attend, and I realised we need to give these kids a formal structure based out of a local association. So instead of running programs in housing estates, we should be bringing our young people, children and families into mainstream so that they're starting to build social capital skills and they feel connected to community.

– Katrina Hausia, Orange City Council and Chairperson of Orange United

Through their 10+ years of operating, Orange United has served as a vehicle for local collaboration to support youth fitness, social capital skills, mental health, and cultural confidence. In 2023, Orange United won the Good Sports 2023 National Club of the Year award for their impact in educating young people in areas such as alcohol, illicit drugs, smoking, mental health, and safe transport.

Orange United explicitly aims to support low-income Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families and youth by increasing access to mainstream sports across six sporting codes: rugby league, netball, basketball, touch football, soccer and hockey. Orange United provides an alcohol-free environment for home games, as well as free transport for all members. After fatigue was identified as a risk (with some players driving more than 2 hours to attend games), OLALC offered to supply their buses after games. Providing transport for young people to get to and from the club has increased uptake as part of their strategy to **“remove every barrier to access.”** Provision of transport also reduces the risk of any accidents related to consumption of alcohol.



Orange United fosters a culturally safe and affirming environment through integration of cultural events, such as Indigenous rounds in netball and events aligned with Reconciliation and NAIDOC weeks with matching uniforms and displays.

Orange United transitioned from being Council-established to being an incorporated association managed via an independent Board, with some areas of the club being financially self-sufficient through sponsorship. Orange City Council has continued to support the club through providing administration, transport, in-kind support and fee relief for young people. Staff members at Orange City Council can also coach a sport through the club and have this counted towards their working hours.

The governance of the club includes representatives from local Aboriginal organisations and services in the fields of education and health, along with local parents from the community. The club is now moving towards formalising Aboriginal governance by having an arm of the club that is formally 100% Aboriginal-run. Orange United has also been supported by Office of Sport, the NSW Government agency for sport and recreation that develops locally-informed models of addressing disadvantage through sport. Sponsorship by Orange AMS has meant that services offered to players include health checks, moulded mouthguards, and access to secondary services such as physiotherapy.

Most importantly, Katrina reflects on the impact that the club has had on Aboriginal children and young people:

Orange United provides an example of how councils can lead and support the development of collaborations that build on existing Council and ACCO resources. This model links sport, health, education, and cultural resilience, demonstrating how councils can pursue integrated approaches that align with PR2's whole-of-community service vision.

With all our programs we find that for Aboriginal young people, children and families, sport is the go-to and the 101. It has a heap of health benefits, but it also comes with the social capital skills and all the things related to feeling connected to community. It's really important – sport is a catalyst for so much.

– Katrina Hausia, Orange City Council and Chairperson of Orange United

PRIORITY REFORM 3⁵

Transforming Government Organisations

Overview



Priority Reform 3 (PR3) commits governments to systemic transformation by addressing structural racism, embedding cultural safety, and ensuring services are co-designed and delivered in genuine partnership with Aboriginal communities.

The Transformation Elements (clause 59 of the *National Agreement*) include eliminating institutional bias, fostering culturally safe workplaces, strengthening accountability through transparent funding and reporting, supporting truth-telling and cultural recognition, and improving engagement practices.

Key features:

- Systemic and structural transformation of institutions driven by the needs of Aboriginal people
- Eliminate systemic racism and discrimination
- Meaningful cultural safety and cultural responsiveness
- Cultural capability
- Increasing Aboriginal representation
- Improve engagement practices
- Accountability and transparency via public reporting, monitoring and Aboriginal led - evaluation

Outcome:

Government institutions are strengthened to become culturally safe, accountable, and responsive to the needs of Aboriginal people, and are accountable for targets under Closing the Gap⁶.

Why it matters

Government transformation underpins the success of all other Priority Reforms. If government organisations remain inflexible or culturally unsafe, progress in areas like partnership building (PR1), Aboriginal-led service delivery (PR2), data access and sharing (PR4), and employment and economic prosperity (PR5) will stall.

How councils can align with PR3

The examples below highlight the range of local government initiatives that can help to align a council's work with the principles of PR3. There is a significant overlap with and relationship between key elements of PR3 and PR1, with shared decision-making and formal partnerships likely to lead to organisational transformation outcomes. However, PR1 focuses more on the creation of formal governance and partnership structures, while PR3 focuses more on how government organisations operate internally and improving these systems, processes, and capabilities.

Specific examples of ways that councils can align with PR3 include through:

- Supporting **participation and leadership of Aboriginal people in councils and as councillors:** for example, OLG's approach through the [Stand for Your Community – Diversity Counts](#) campaign (2021);
- Building **internal competencies** on cultural safety and protocols, engagement with Aboriginal communities, land use planning and management and management of Aboriginal cultural heritage (**ACH**);
- **Embedding Closing the Gap actions into their IP&R;**
- **Statements of Commitment** or similar policy mechanisms that embed truth-telling and a commitment to organisational transformation, such as [Blue Mountains City Councils' Statement of Recognition and Commitment](#);
- **Anti-Racism** Frameworks, training, and strategies such as Inner West Council's *Anti Racism Strategy*;
- **Aboriginal-led evaluation;**
- **RAPs** or **First Nations Strategies**, such as the [City of Newcastle Reconciliation Action Plan 2021-2024](#), or [Parramatta City Council's First Nations Strategy 2024-2029](#); and
- **Joining relevant communities of practice** that assist in sharing information of good practice (such as the Aboriginal Affairs Local Government Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Community of Practice).

Tools and Templates

- Funding for Aboriginal employment and leadership in local government
- Checklist: Cultural Awareness Training – best practice
- Guide to Aboriginal-led evaluation for local government
- Checklist: Strategic planning, guiding questions checklist, for engaging with Aboriginal communities
- Embedding Closing the Gap into IP&R
- Self-assessment tool (with section on PR3)



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Supporting Aboriginal leadership in councils and as councillors

Aboriginal representation and leadership can bring important cultural and community knowledge and lived experience to these positions, contributing to councils becoming more culturally safe, accountable, and responsive to the needs of Aboriginal people. The importance of supporting Aboriginal leadership in councils and as councillors has been highlighted through campaigns such as OLG's [Stand for Your Community – Diversity Counts](#).

In 2025 on Barkandji Country, Central Darling Shire Council came out of administration, holding elections for the first time in over 10 years under a new rural/remote council model established by the *Local Government Amendment (Rural and Remote Councils) Act 2024* (NSW). In line with the Act, the Minister directly appoints three councillors and must, as far as reasonably practicable, ensure the council has councillors who collectively have a range of attributes, including the ability to represent the interests of the Aboriginal population in the Shire. During the lead up to the election, Central Darling Shire Council partnered with Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly to hold [candidate information sessions](#) tailored to the Aboriginal communities in the region.

Some ways that councils can support Aboriginal participation and leadership in councils and as councillors include:

- Offering employment and development pathways including traineeships, internships, work experience, mentorship and career development plans;
- Encouraging Aboriginal candidates to stand for election, such as through partnering with local Aboriginal organisations to hold tailored community information sessions;
- Develop a culturally safe environment through cultural awareness training, embedding cultural protocols in council practices such as Acknowledgment of Country, and ensuring workplace policies support respect and inclusivity; and
- Increase visibility and recognition through public celebration of Aboriginal culture (e.g. NAIDOC week, signage) and public acknowledgement of Aboriginal leadership (e.g. council communications, recognition at events, awards).

There are also a number of grants and programs which could be leveraged by councils to support Aboriginal leadership: please see guidance on [Funding for Aboriginal employment and leadership in councils](#). For more information on how councils can support and retain Aboriginal employees, please see [section below](#).

Engagement frameworks and practices

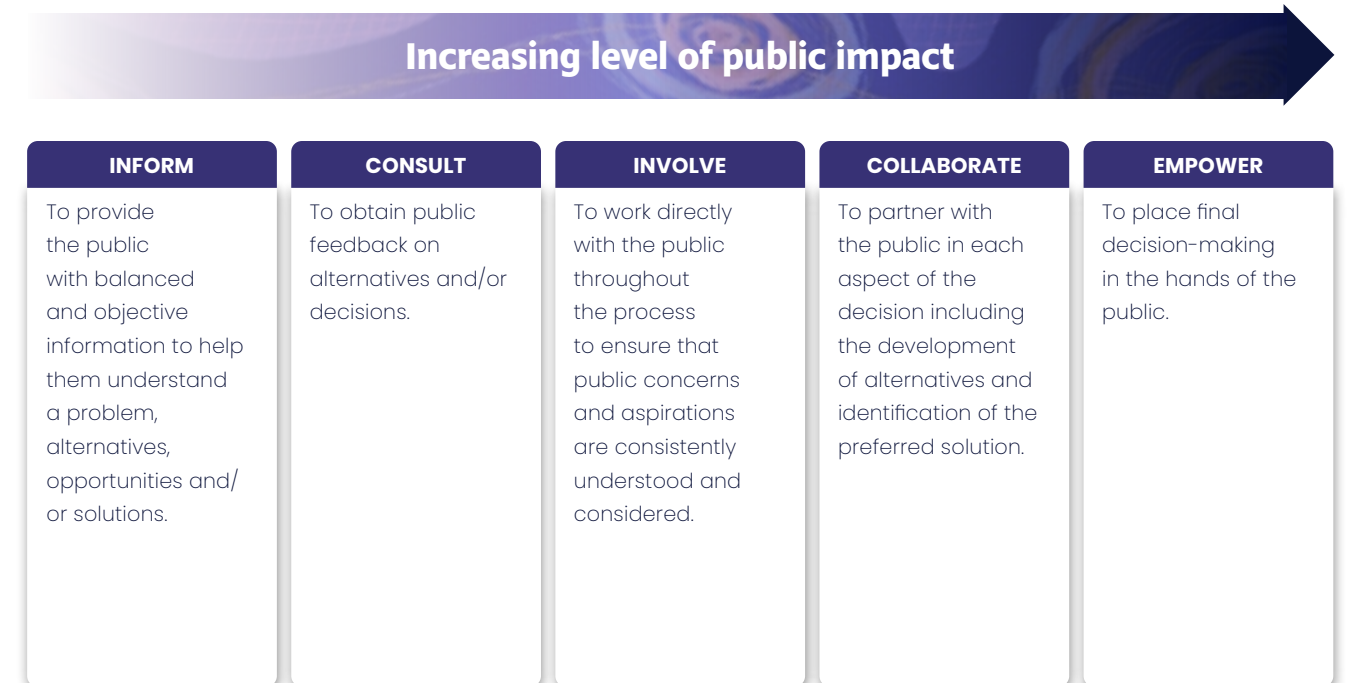
Councils have the opportunity to adapt their engagement approaches in ways that reflect their context and resources, and that work well with Aboriginal communities. This section provides information on ways of working and effective engagement with Aboriginal communities and organisations.

Councils are encouraged to engage broadly with the range of Aboriginal stakeholders in an LGA, as they are likely to have distinct priorities and goals (for example: ACCOs, Traditional Owners, LALCs,

community members etc) and to build engagement outcomes which reflect the goals of Aboriginal communities into IP&R.

The *Local Government Act 1993* (NSW) and the IP&R framework provide the underpinning legislative basis and requirements for community consultation for council decision-making in NSW. Community Engagement Strategies focus on collaborating with the community on decision-making including the development of alternatives and the preferred solution. A further participation goal would be to empower community members to make decisions.

Public Participation Goal



[Public participation goals, OLG Community Engagement Strategy.](#)

Engagement frameworks and practices

Effective engagement with Aboriginal communities is grounded in the understanding of cultural, historical, and governance contexts that shape those relationships. A foundational knowledge of colonisation, self-determination, consultation fatigue, as well as basic cultural protocols (e.g. starting meetings with an Acknowledgement of Country) is essential for contextualising engagement approaches. Cultural awareness training can be helpful in this regard ([see section below](#)).

Councils can adapt engagement approaches with Aboriginal communities according to their context and resources, while being guided by the following key principles:

- **Early and ongoing engagement:** Connect before a project is scoped, not after decisions are made.
- **Engage broadly through representative Aboriginal organisations and community members, such as:**
 - ◊ LALCs
 - ◊ Native title applicants and/or prescribed bodies corporate (PBCs)
 - ◊ ACCOs
 - ◊ Regional or local Aboriginal organisations, such as Elders groups
 - ◊ Councils' established structures such as Aboriginal Advisory Committees
 - ◊ Community members
- **Diverse voices:** Avoiding over reliance on a single contact is encouraged, and it's OK for there to be differences in opinion between Aboriginal stakeholders.
- **Build relationships and trust:** Invest in building relationships and learning about the communities' priorities and needs.
- **Resource participation:** Payment for Aboriginal community members' time and knowledge is best practice, recognising their contribution of specialist cultural knowledge and lived experience as equal to other professional expertise councils routinely pay for. Councils can plan for this by embedding participation costs into project budgets and scaling payments to the context. A clear Aboriginal Remuneration Policy provides consistency and ensures engagement is equitable.
- **Two-way learning:** Ongoing engagement creates opportunities for council to learn about Aboriginal communities' protocols and priorities, and teaches Aboriginal organisations how councils operate and key levers for change.

In some areas, there may be existing Aboriginal organisations with strategies based on extensive and ongoing consultation with their communities (such as the [place-based partnership](#) examples, or Regional Alliances through the Local Decision-Making Program). In these cases, councils can benefit by drawing on this existing expertise and building on it, rather than duplicating efforts.

Councils may consider basing engagement frameworks on existing guidelines and policy frameworks, such as the IAP2 Principles adapted for Aboriginal contexts. Over time, councils may wish to co-develop their own framework with local Aboriginal partners. These projects benefit by reflecting local preferences around cultural ownership, cultural protocols, terminology, engagement preferences and processes for cultural heritage, and land and planning issues. Examples include Coffs Harbour City Council's [Yandarraa – Shifting Camp Together: A Guide for Aboriginal Cultural Awareness and Engagement](#) (2019), a cultural protocols guide produced in partnership with local Aboriginal stakeholders, including Gumbaynggirr Elders and LALC members for the area, and [Wollongong City Council's Aboriginal Engagement Framework](#).

Councils with limited resources can focus on building relationships, which may develop into more formalised input or engagement structures later. Ideas and suggestions for councils, depending on their level of resources, may include:

- Hiring an **Aboriginal Engagement Officer** based in and with ties to the local Aboriginal community;
- Doing letter-box drops inviting your local community to a **Town Hall yarning session** with council staff;
- **Partnering with existing networks** such as neighbouring councils, Joint Organisations, Regional Organisation of Councils, LALCs and local Aboriginal organisations to share engagement costs and host joint engagement sessions or cultural events;
- Allocate Aboriginal representation on council **youth advisory panels**; and
- **Sponsored leadership programs** to encourage Aboriginal representation at council.

Councils can also consider doing a stakeholder mapping exercise to create a list of local Aboriginal organisations within the LGA and prepare for introductory meetings to understand their work, needs and priorities. See also *Strategic Planning Checklist for Engaging with Aboriginal Communities*, advice on how to start engaging with Aboriginal communities in the [section above](#), as well as [tools and templates provided in the PRI section of this Toolkit](#).

PR3 emphasises the importance of organisational transformation to achieving Closing the Gap outcomes. Integrating Closing the Gap actions and commitments into a council's IP&R framework is a practical way to embed this work into councils' core business, helping it to be visible, resourced and connected to your local community's long-term priorities. This works well in connection with partnership approaches with Aboriginal organisation and communities, such as those described in the section on PRI.

When Aboriginal partnership priorities are reflected in councils' CSP, Delivery Program and Operational Plan, they become part of councils' core business. This helps create stronger accountability, clearer pathways for collaboration with Aboriginal partners, and continuity across council terms.

Embedding these actions also makes it easier to:

- Track progress over time through existing reporting cycles;
- Align resources and staff responsibilities with agreed outcomes; and
- Show your community how local efforts contribute to broader state and national Closing the Gap goals.

Bringing Closing the Gap into the IP&R framework helps councils turn commitments into everyday practice – ensuring that partnerships, programs and local decisions are supported by the same strategic foundations that guide all of council's work.

We have provided guidance on Embedding Closing the Gap into IP&R to provide ideas and guidance for how councils could progress this work.

Aboriginal cultural and intellectual property

Aboriginal Cultural and Intellectual Property (ACIP) also referred to as Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) provides definition to the rights Aboriginal and Indigenous peoples have over their cultural heritage, knowledge, and creative expressions based on their right to self-determination.

It encompasses all the following cultural practices and knowledge forms

- **Traditional knowledge** including Aboriginal knowledge about science, farming, horticulture, technology, ecology, kinship and rituals.
- **Modern knowledge** including the more recent knowledge developed by Aboriginal people that is rooted in their history and culture.
- **Cultural expressions** such as stories, songs, symbols, designs, language, and literature.
- Performances such as ceremonies, dances, songs, and other cultural performances.
- **Cultural objects** including artworks, crafts, jewellery, tools, weapons, textiles, and photographs.

- **Human remains and tissue** and the rights relating to Aboriginal ancestors and their physical remains.
- **Sacred and Secret Materials** including sacred sites, burial grounds, and confidential cultural knowledge.
- **Recorded Heritage** and any documentation of Aboriginal culture by others, such as books, films, photos, reports, and digital media

In the absence of strong legal protections for ACIP/ICIP in Australia, councils can follow established principles and protocols to reduce the risk of cultural exploitation. It is important to consider and agree upon the ACIP rights when working with Aboriginal peoples and places. Seeking guidance and advice from local elders, and traditional owners wherever possible, is recommended.

Further resources and information are available at:

- ↓ ICIP – Terri Janke
- ↓ Factsheet: Respecting and Protecting ICIP – Reconciliation Australia
- ↓ Aboriginal-Cultural-and-Intellectual-Property-ICIP-Protocol – AANSW

Councils intersect with Aboriginal Cultural Heritage (ACH) through their roles as consent authorities in planning, land management, and community governance, which means they consider, protect, and integrate cultural heritage under state legislation and local planning instruments (including under the *Local Government Act 1993* (NSW) and the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979* (NSW)). It is worth noting that Aboriginal peak bodies and communities have been advocating for reform to NSW ACH legislation for decades⁷; with a key issue being how to recognise and protect intangible cultural heritage.

Councils are encouraged to take a strategic approach to ACH in partnership with their Aboriginal communities, including the use of cultural mapping as a foundational tool. The cultural mapping process in partnership with Aboriginal communities takes a long-term view of how to protect ACH at a strategic planning stage, rather than managing harm at an application stage.

Engage Aboriginal communities as early as possible in the process, allowing sufficient time for feedback to be incorporated appropriately. Consider the question: **“How can Aboriginal cultural heritage be protected and celebrated, and Aboriginal people’s cultural connections and wellbeing be supported now and into the future?”**

Engaging broadly with a range of Aboriginal stakeholders for input into cultural mapping is strongly encouraged. These may include, for example:

- Native title holders or claimants;
- Registered *Aboriginal Owners under the Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983* (NSW);
- Elders groups;
- Aboriginal community groups;
- Cultural centres;
- Family and cultural groups and corporations;
- Individual cultural knowledge holders; and
- Aboriginal landowners, including LALCs.

Examples of councils that are taking strategic approaches to the management of ACH in partnership with Aboriginal communities include:

- [Tweed Shire Council's](#) launch of the [Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Management Plan \(2018\)](#), which provides a framework to assess cultural heritage in development applications within mapped locations, developed in partnership with Tweed/Byron LALC. This plan led to the establishment of a Cultural Heritage Unit and ongoing engagement processes that embed community wishes and cultural considerations into planning.
- Wollongong City Council, Shellharbour City Council and Kiama Municipal Council work with Illawarra LALC to prepare [Cultural Values Mapping](#) along the coastline as part of the Coastal Management Program process.

Tools that may be helpful for councils undertaking this work include:

- The [Cultural Knowledge Standards Framework](#) seeks to improve engagement with Aboriginal communities and strengthen the protection of Aboriginal Cultural Intellectual Property (ACIP)
- AHIMS: [Aboriginal Heritage Information Management System | Heritage | Environment and Heritage](#)
- ASDST: [Aboriginal sites decision support tool | Our science and research | Environment and Heritage](#)
- [SEED Portal](#) includes information on Aboriginal Cultural Heritage assessments

Further resources and information are available at:

- [Local Aboriginal Land Councils and Local Strategic Planning Statements – Fact sheet](#), Department of Planning and Environment
- [Connecting with Country](#), NSW Government Architect
- [Planning with Country](#), Planning Institute Australia

Natural Resource Management that takes a “whole of Country” approach:

- [Banbai Rangers on-Country pilot](#)
- [Natural Resources Commission fact sheet](#)
- [NSWALC submissions and advocacy on ACH reform](#)

Land use planning and management

Improving land use planning and management practices can contribute to outcomes under the *National Agreement*. Land use planning plays a critical role in shaping how land, water and resources are managed, developed and protected, and therefore directly intersects with the rights, interests and aspirations of Aboriginal peoples. It influences access to housing, opportunities for economic development, the protection of cultural heritage and landscapes, and the stewardship of Country for future generations.

Local Strategic Planning Statements (LSPS) set out a 20-year vision for land use in each LGA, defining place values and sites, charting strategic priorities, and signalling future changes to zoning, development controls and infrastructure in line with regional, district and state plans as well as community aspirations. Local Environmental Plans (LEPs) then give statutory effect to these directions by regulating land use, zoning, permitted activities and built form, making them the key legal instruments that translate strategic intent into on-the-ground outcomes. Used together, LSPS and LEPs provide councils with the opportunity to embed mechanisms for genuine Aboriginal participation, reflect cultural priorities and connections to Country, adjust land use zones to support Aboriginal-led housing and enterprise, and strengthen the protection of cultural landscapes and heritage.

Public domain design provides councils with a powerful opportunity to embed Aboriginal culture, heritage and connection to Country into the everyday urban environment. Streetscapes, parks,

plazas and waterfronts are not only civic assets, but living cultural landscapes where Aboriginal identity can be celebrated and made visible. By applying frameworks such as the [Government Architect NSW's Connecting with Country Framework \(2023\)](#), councils can work with Traditional Custodians, LALCs and Aboriginal communities to ensure that public domain projects incorporate cultural narratives, Aboriginal languages, art, materials and ecological knowledge. Cultural Values Assessments are another useful tool that councils can use in consultation with Aboriginal communities which can be used in conjunction with Designing with Country strategies and processes.

Plans of Management, required under the *Local Government Act 1993* (NSW) for all public land classified as community land, also provide a structured mechanism for councils to engage Aboriginal communities in place management, ensuring that cultural values, priorities and connections to Country are reflected in how public spaces are cared for and used.

These approaches support outcomes under the *National Agreement* by promoting truth-telling, strengthening cultural identity, enhancing liveability, and creating inclusive places that reflect shared histories and aspirations. Some examples include [City of Sydney's For a Journey: Recognition in the public domain program](#) and [Sutherland Shire Council adopting the Connecting with Country framework for the Kurnell Planning Proposal](#).

Understanding the difference between Land Rights and Native Title

Land rights and Native Title are two distinct legal frameworks for recognising Aboriginal peoples' relationship to land. Best practice engagement involves respecting and involving both structures. Councils can consider how to engage so that LALCs' statutory role is balanced with the voices and authority of Traditional Owners; ensuring that decisions about Country reflect both legal ownership and cultural custodianship.

Feature	Land Rights	Native Title
Legal basis	Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983 (NSW)	Native Title Act 1993 (Cth)
Who holds rights	LALCs – corporate bodies with elected members	Traditional Owners recognised through connection to Country under traditional law & custom, and the parameters of the legislation
Membership / Authority	Membership does not require cultural or ancestral connection to specific Country; based on self-identification as Aboriginal and residence	Authority comes from demonstrating ongoing cultural, spiritual and ancestral connection to the land or waters
Nature of rights	LALCs may own freehold title to land; can pursue economic, housing, social and cultural use	Native Title recognises traditional rights to land and waters (e.g. hunting, ceremonies, decision-making over Country)
Decision-making	Determined through LALC governance structures (board and membership)	Determined by Traditional Owners and their cultural authority

Who speaks for Country?

- **“Country” is a multi-faceted term involving physical, relational and spiritual elements.** It refers to the totality of life and spirit of a particular area of land, sea and sky inhabited by traditional custodians and their ancestors since time immemorial.
- **Traditional Owners**, most often represented by **Native Title groups**, have cultural authority as the traditional custodians of Country, and are best placed to speak on decisions related to Country and other local cultural protocols.
- However, it is important to recognise that other **local Aboriginal community members may have resided in areas for generations** due to displacement or relocation to find work or community. It is recommended that councils include these perspectives during consultations to recognise their long-standing community presence and lived experience, while noting that only Traditional Owners hold cultural authority to speak for Country.

Further resources and information are available at:

- [NSWALC](#), the peak body for LALCs in NSW
- [Map of NSW LALC boundaries](#)
- [NTSCORP](#) the NSW Native Title service provider
- [Maps of Native Title claims and determinations](#)
- [The National Native Title Tribunal](#)
- [NSWALC: Land Rights and Native Title In NSW – A Guide for the Community \(2014\)](#)
- [AIATSIS: Welcome to Country – What is Country?](#)

LALCs: development aspirations and planning issues

The *Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983* (NSW) was born from decades of Aboriginal activism, including the 1970s land rights movement which sought restitution of land to address the historic dispossession of Aboriginal communities. It provides a system through which LALCs can be vested freehold title to land or obtained through land claims, purchase, or bequest. The *Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983* (NSW) establishes LALCs as autonomous bodies that are fundamental in achieving Aboriginal autonomy and self-determination, tasked with the responsibility of economic, social, cultural and environmental land management.

The planning and development of land is a source of potential income for LALCs making residential and commercial development key aspirations of these bodies. It is important that local governments work with LALCs to understand their future land use aspirations, and help fulfil their *Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983* (NSW) responsibility to encourage economic and social independence of local Aboriginal communities.

Residential developments can be important for the social well-being of an Aboriginal community. Service enterprises, such as childcare centres, medical centres, and education and training facilities service both local Aboriginal peoples and the broader community, and contribute to outcomes under the *National Agreement*. They provide opportunities for Aboriginal employment and can result in a steady stream of income for Aboriginal peoples, as well as a reliable source of revenue for LALCs that enables investment in social and cultural community benefit schemes.

Local governments' land use and planning decisions can significantly influence the success of residential and commercial developments initiated by a LALC. To support positive outcomes, genuine and meaningful engagement with Aboriginal peoples and peak Aboriginal organisations is vital in shaping future plans and strategies regarding Aboriginal peoples' economic development. Encouraging early engagement and fostering long-term, respectful relationships between councils and LALCs can help unlock shared opportunities and deliver outcomes that benefit communities more broadly.

Engaging with LALCs prior to drafting planning instruments presents a valuable opportunity for councils to strengthen strategic planning and community outcomes. Through early collaboration, councils can:

- Access up-to-date information regarding determined and pending land claims; and
- Gain an understanding of the LALCs' community land and business plan which provides a view to the aspirations of local Aboriginal communities for the development of their lands.

It is important for councils to be aware of the unique planning and development considerations that may affect LALCs. These include:

- The need to move beyond assumptions that LALC land-use interests are limited to cultural or environmental purposes, and to recognise their role as active contributors to regional economic development;
- The impact of land-ownership-based zoning, which can result in resource-intensive rezoning processes and delays for LALCs, along with additional costs associated with assessments, consultancies, and legal proceedings; and
- The heightened scrutiny often applied to LALC development applications, which may lead to extended approval timelines and increased documentation requirements, ultimately raising the cost and risk of investment compared to other developers.

By understanding these dynamics, councils can help create a more equitable and efficient planning environment that supports the aspirations of Aboriginal communities.

Further resources and information are available at:

- [*University of Sydney, 'The Effect of Land Use Planning Decisions on the Landholdings and Viability of NSW Local Aboriginal Land Councils,' \(2018\)*](#)
- [*UNSW and NSWALC, 'Aboriginal land and environmental enterprises: a survey of LALC activity and future possibilities' \(2024\)*](#)
- [*NSWALC policy submissions to planning legislation reforms \(2012\)*](#)

CASE STUDY:

Blue Mountains City Council's ongoing work with Traditional Owners

On Dharug and Gundungurra Country in the Blue Mountains, Blue Mountains City Council (BMCC) has been working with Traditional Owners. Recognition and respect for the rights of Traditional Owners has seen the establishment of several Aboriginal Advisory Committees that have integrated consultation as business-as-usual for the Council.

In 2014, the Gundungurra People entered into a formal ILUA under the *Native Title Act 1993* (Cth). The agreement, registered with the National Native Title Tribunal in 2015, covers a large area extending from Lithgow in the north to Goulburn in the south. This area includes significant parts of the Blue Mountains LGA. Becoming a party to this ILUA, BMCC became the first Council to sign an ILUA under the Native Title Act 1993 (Cth). The ILUA includes land managed by the Crown, including Crown-nominated conservation reserves, as well as Council-managed Crown land (voluntarily included into the agreement by BMCC).

Despite the absence of a formally recognised agreement or native title determination, BMCC also recognises the Dharug peoples' connection to Country and custodial rights over parts of the LGA through the same processes and mechanisms as the Gundungurra peoples. Matthew Chambers, Manager Environmental Services, explains that a native title claim not being recognised **"is not a reflection of what the truth is, and the City of the Blue Mountains recognising this to be the traditional lands of both the Dharug and Gundungurra"** and that BMCC and Dharug Traditional Owners are investigating options to improve co-management opportunities with the Dharug.

In practice, BMCC have an obligation to consult with the Gundungurra and Dharug peoples when undertaking any activity that has the potential to affect their interests in lands and waters within the defined boundaries. Quarterly meetings take place with the established Gundungurra Indigenous Land Use Agreement and Dharug Ngurrabirang Committees for this purpose. BMCC take a flexible and collaborative approach

through these Committees, recognising the limitation of boundaries being defined through western frameworks:

Having a dedicated First Nations team within Council has helped to provide a **"bridge between two worlds"** and facilitate two-way learning and exchange between Council and Traditional Owners, according to Chambers. Council's ongoing commitment to working with Traditional Owners, as well as truth-telling and organisational transformation, is outlined in their Statement of Recognition and Commitment which has been formally endorsed by the elected Council.

BMCC have also had an established Aboriginal Advisory Council (AAC) for matters relating to Council's general operations since the mid-90s. There are 2 positions for Gundungurra and Dharug custodian representatives, with the remaining positions for Aboriginal community representatives. The AAC provides input to all core elements of Council's business not related to land management, as well as general matters related to Aboriginal residents of the area and presents to the elected council. The longevity of the AAC has helped to embed its use and respect across all areas of BMCC's operations.

BMCC's work with Traditional Owners also includes a dedicated remuneration policy for any types of engagement and advice provided by Aboriginal people to the Council, in recognition of the significant value provided by cultural advice.

Boundaries are very much the strict European approach to land tenure. Cultural association with Country often transcends those boundaries so co-management frameworks need to be flexible enough to navigate issues with a degree of nuance. Recognising this Council frequently engages both Dharug and Gundungurra on matters of shared cultural importance

- Matthew Chambers

CASE STUDY:

Illawarra Shoalhaven Regional Plan 2041

[The Illawarra Shoalhaven Regional Plan 2041 \(ISRP 2041\)](#) applies to the Kiama, Shellharbour, Shoalhaven and Wollongong LGAs, on the traditional lands of the Dharawal and Wodi Wodi peoples, and the Yuin nation. It provides a framework for strategic policy, planning and decision-making to guide the sustainable growth and development of the region over the next 20 years. The plan is shaped by proactive consultation and collaboration with local Aboriginal communities, ensuring that Aboriginal aspirations are embedded within the region's planning system.

Objective 8 of ISRP 2041 commits to strengthening the economic self-determination of Aboriginal communities by building capacity for shared knowledge between LALCs, councils, and state agencies. Recognising that LALCs have varying levels of knowledge about the NSW planning system, and that government agencies similarly hold different levels of understanding about LALCs' land ownership and aspirations, the Plan seeks to create more effective and informed partnerships.

The Plan highlights the *State Environmental Planning Policy (Aboriginal Land) 2019* (Aboriginal Land SEPP), which provides LALCs with greater certainty in developing their landholdings. Through this policy and related planning pathways, LALCs can access alternative rezoning processes and create Development Delivery Plans to strategically activate priority lands.

Strategies under Objective 8 include:

- Supporting and partnering with Aboriginal communities to identify opportunities to activate land, including through the biodiversity offset market, to drive economic prosperity, training, and employment;
- Continuing to offer strategic assessments of LALC landholdings to identify development opportunities;
- Prioritising the resolution of outstanding Aboriginal Land Claims on Crown land to reduce uncertainty and unlock development potential; and
- Providing opportunities for LALCs to actively interact with and utilise the planning system to progress their aspirations.

These approaches build on the NSW Government's OCHRE policy framework, which emphasises genuine partnership with Aboriginal communities to support strong outcomes in education, economic development, and culture. Local governments are recognised as key partners in this work, facilitating constructive relationships with LALCs, and supporting their role as land managers and community representatives.

Objective 23 of ISRP 2041 reinforces the importance of celebrating, conserving, and reusing cultural heritage as the region continues to grow. The Illawarra Shoalhaven is rich in Aboriginal cultural heritage, with strong connections to Country across the escarpment, coast, and waterways. The Plan requires Aboriginal cultural heritage values to be considered early in the planning process, ensuring that significant values are protected and incorporated into the design and development of places.

Strategies under Objective 23 include:

- Engaging Traditional Owners and communities early in planning processes to understand and respect heritage values;
- Undertaking heritage studies early to inform conservation and cultural tourism opportunities;
- Applying adaptive reuse and heritage interpretation to create distinctive places; and
- Managing the cumulative impact of development on heritage values and character.

The ISRP 2041 demonstrates how strategic planning can support Aboriginal self-determination and cultural heritage while guiding sustainable regional growth.

Cultural awareness training

Cultural awareness training can be an effective way for councils to upskill staff and councillors and improve understanding of Aboriginal histories, cultural protocols, connection to Country, and local community services and aspirations. Cultural awareness training can be incorporated into council processes through:

- Councillor induction training under the *Local Government (General) Regulation 2021*, part 1 cl 232 (NSW);
- Code of Conduct or Workforce Development policies, as part of broader support for ethical behaviour and anti-discrimination and equity; and
- As part of a commitment under a RAP, or formal agreement with Aboriginal organisations.

Providing cultural awareness training may also benefit a council when seeking funding through specific grant streams, given that State or Commonwealth Aboriginal-focused funding programs can require evidence of cultural competence. It also helps to complement engagement approaches with Aboriginal communities by reducing engagement risks, such as culturally unsafe engagement which could damage relationships.

Cultural awareness training can be designed to focus on several key topic areas, including:

◆ Foundational knowledge:

- History of Aboriginal peoples pre-colonisation
- Colonisation, dispossession, and its ongoing impacts
- Key policies and events (e.g. Frontier Wars, Stolen Generations, 1967 Referendum, Mabo decision, Uluru Statement from the Heart)
- Cultural diversity of Aboriginal nations, languages, and kinship systems

◆ Country, Culture, and Identity

- Importance of Country, land, and waterways to cultural identity
- Kinship structures, family, and community roles
- Cultural protocols (e.g. Welcome to Country vs. Acknowledgement of Country)
- Significance of Elders, Traditional Owners, and community leadership

◆ Contemporary Contexts

- Aboriginal rights and governance frameworks (e.g. land rights and Native Title)
- Closing the Gap: Priority Reforms and socio-economic targets
- ACCOs and their role

◆ Practical Cultural Safety in Organisations

- Understanding issues including cultural safety and cultural load and its impact on Aboriginal staff
- Communication styles and culturally safe engagement practices
- Building trust and sustaining long-term relationships with Aboriginal communities

◆ Local context, learning and relationships

- Local Aboriginal history and Traditional Owners in the council/region area
- Local Aboriginal organisations and services
- Local sites of cultural significance and appropriate ways of acknowledging them

◆ Anti-Racism and Allyship

- Understanding racism and systemic bias in government and services
- Unconscious bias and its effects on decision-making
- Practical steps for allyship and reconciliation in daily work
- Strategies for addressing racism in the workplace and community

The strongest training programs usually combine core content (history, cultural protocols, systemic impacts) with local, place-based learning (local language groups, organisations, Elders), so staff gain both broad awareness and practical knowledge for their own area. While online modules can be effective at providing information on the more general topics above, the most effective and impactful cultural awareness training will be designed and delivered in partnership with local Aboriginal organisation/s. This allows the training to be tailored to local context and Country, incorporating information on local cultural protocols and supporting relationship building. Structuring training as ongoing, rather than once-off, can also be best practice as it allows for continuous staff development and a breadth of content to be covered.

Cultural Awareness Training Cont.

Some examples of effective, cultural awareness training by councils include:

- Central Coast Council's cultural immersion training run by Barang Regional Alliance, as the Empowered Communities and Local Decision-Making structure on Darkinung Country which collectively represents the ACCOs of the region. Following council elections, Barang provided incoming councillors and executives with a Darkinung Community Immersion, which included introductions to the seven ACCOs, a cultural component (delivered by the Darkinjung Land Council), and a leadership dialogue;
- Orange City Council's cultural awareness training delivered by their Elders Group, which features the use of an oral history video *Bundi*

GiiLang ("sharing futures" in Wiradjuri) created from the far west tour undertaken by Elders and youth; and

- Blue Mountains City Council's cultural immersion for Executive, senior leadership and council teams which facilitates a day on-Country with a Traditional Owner.

Councils can also structure cultural awareness training in a flexible and ongoing way, either to progress through different modules or incorporate aspects of face-to-face/on-Country learning. Ongoing training structures may also provide an allocation of hours for council staff to volunteer at local ACCOs, supporting relationship building with key organisations. Please refer also to the *Cultural awareness training: best practice checklist*.

Anti-Racism initiatives

Addressing racism and systemic bias is a critical element of work aligned with PR3, with the Transformation Elements at clause 59 of the National Agreement referring to the need for government organisations to **"identify and eliminate racism in policies, programs and service delivery."**

Addressing institutional racism is foundational for achieving outcomes under Closing the Gap. For example, shared decision-making initiatives under PR1 are designed to address entrenched power dynamics which continue to disadvantage Aboriginal peoples. These initiatives are unlikely to succeed without meaningful efforts to address organisational racism.

Examples of anti-racism initiatives that could be undertaken by councils include:

- Policy audits: Reviewing service policies to remove systemic barriers and discriminatory clauses;
- Cultural safety training: Mandatory, ongoing training for all staff and councillors with measurable learning outcomes;
- Representative engagement and workforce diversity: Increasing numbers of Aboriginal councillors and senior leadership at council;
- Reporting systems: Mechanisms for community members and staff to safely report racism.
- Cultural safety policies and complaint pathways;
- Anti-racism strategies/frameworks and action plans (see case study below); and
- Embedding anti-racism objectives into CSPs.

Councils may also refer to the [Anti-Racism Guide](#) for workplaces in the NSW public sector developed by the NSW Premier's Department.

CASE STUDY:

Inner West Council's Anti-Racism Strategy

On the lands of the Gadigal and Wangal people of the Sydney Basin, Inner West Council launched its [Anti-Racism Strategy 2024-2026](#) (Strategy) officially on 3 September 2024, making it the first local government in NSW to adopt a formal anti-racism framework. The Strategy is both internal and external facing, addressing a range of initiatives both within the Council and for community members.

Council noted that the **"heart of the strategy is responding locally to the needs being expressed,"** stating that the strategy centres on reflecting the lived experiences of three main demographics:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples;
- Culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities; and
- Other racialised or negatively racialised groups in the Inner West.

The Strategy purposefully considered the experience of Aboriginal people and CALD communities in a way that recognises the unique historic origins of racism and its links to dispossession and colonisation. Remedies are tailored according to these separate demographics and their lived experiences.

The core components of the Strategy include:

- Access to the five-module Cultural Competency Tool developed by the National Centre for Cultural Competency at the University of Sydney. Inner West Council will work with the Centre to provide small social learning groups after the training for participants to come together and reflect on their anti-racism practice and to support innovation.
- Partnering with Western Sydney University, to redevelop and deliver their Anti-Racism Bystander Training. The training program will be piloted with council staff and local residents, providing 400 free places to take place in this training.
- Employment measures to increase the participation and professional development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in council roles.

Additionally, the Strategy also includes a cultural connections program (small grant program for ethnic community organisations to build community connections), the installation of three Aboriginal Survival Memorials across the Inner West, and supporting allyship programs (including The Call It Out First Nations Racism Register and International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination). The Strategy contains a formal action plan to embed accountability via regular monitoring and reporting to the Council.

Aboriginal-led evaluation

Evaluation plays a critical role in the *National Agreement* and aligns with the PR3 principles of transparency and accountability. Evaluation that is Aboriginal-led strengthens policies and programs, ensuring they continue to align with community needs and aspirations. Co-designing evaluation methodologies with Aboriginal organisations builds in accountability mechanisms that are referenced to the priorities and values of affected Aboriginal communities.

Aboriginal-led evaluation can be a core function of formal Aboriginal governance structures or mechanisms established and regularly utilised by councils, such as a formal partnership agreement or Aboriginal Advisory Group.

There are a number of national and NSW-based frameworks and models which have demonstrated Aboriginal-led evaluation methodologies (links provided below). These resources emphasise the need for local Aboriginal communities to lead culturally responsive and strengths-based approaches to assessing programs and policies impacting their communities. This emphasis promotes self-determination and Aboriginal leadership in decision-making, which aligns with UNDRIP Article 18: the right of Indigenous peoples to participate in decision-making in matters affecting their rights.

These frameworks support the principles of the Priority Reform areas and embed approaches that shift away from top-down evaluation models towards Aboriginal-led, participatory, and long-term evaluation processes that centre cultural knowledge, lived experience, and self-determination.

Please refer to *Guide to Aboriginal-led evaluation for local government* for practical guidance on how to design and implement an Aboriginal-led evaluation.

Further resources and information are available at:

- [Office of Local Government, Integrated Planning and Reporting Guidelines](#)
- [Office of Local Government, Integrated Planning and Reporting Handbook for Local Councils](#)
- National Centre for Cultural [Competence](#)
- [Western Sydney University – Bystander Anti-Racism Training](#)
- [Racial Dignity Framework](#)
- [Reconciliation NSW, Anti-Racism Fact Sheets](#)
- [Cultural safety tools - Lowitja Institute](#)
- [Cultural Knowledge Standards, AANSW](#)

Evaluation:

- [Ngaa-Bi-Nya Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Program Evaluation Framework](#)
- [Indigenous Evaluation Strategy](#)
- [Australian Evaluation Society, First Nations Cultural Safety Framework](#)



PRIORITY REFORM 4

Shared access to data



Overview

Priority Reform 4 (PR4) is about ensuring Aboriginal people, communities, and organisations have equal access to data that relates to them, recognising data sovereignty as central to self-determination. It commits governments to provide timely, transparent, and disaggregated data, uphold Indigenous ownership and control of data, build community capacity to use it effectively, and share information that enables communities to monitor Closing the Gap outcomes and hold governments accountable.

Key features:

- Shared and transparent access to data
- Aboriginal Data Sovereignty
- Capacity-building
- Accountability

Outcomes:

Aboriginal people are supported to access and use locally-relevant data and information, enabling them to shape priorities, track progress on Closing the Gap, and lead their own development⁸.

Why it matters:

Accessible and meaningful data enables Aboriginal people to participate fully in decisions that affect their lives, addressing historic government control and lack of transparency. PR4 supports all other Priority Reforms by underpinning community-led solutions, self-determination, accountability, and the power of data as knowledge.

How councils can align with PR4

Data sharing processes and mechanisms between councils and Aboriginal organisations and communities are currently under development. However, councils may wish to start considering the way they collect, interpret, use and hold data in relation to Aboriginal communities. In the future, it is likely that councils will have clear responsibilities in relation to shared data access with Aboriginal communities.

Specific examples of ways that councils can align with PR4 include through:

- **Community data projects** and initiatives which facilitate shared data access and data sharing with local Aboriginal organisations and communities, such as the *Blacktown Community Data Pilot Project*, or partnering with Aboriginal organisations to design shared data projects;
- Efforts and initiatives to increase knowledge, understanding and formal recognition of **Aboriginal Data Sovereignty** and governance, including councils' role in enabling and supporting these through their partnerships and operation;
- Upskilling and the development of **guidelines for the use of Aboriginal data**;
- Use of the **Data Connector Service** and data sharing with Aboriginal services;
- Using data to **inform co-design and delivery of services** and programs for Aboriginal demographics; and
- Reforming data-related practices in line with Aboriginal communities' needs and priorities.

Tools and templates

- Guidelines for the use of Aboriginal population data for local government
- Self-assessment tool (with section on PR4)



PR4 initiatives may overlap with initiatives under the other Priority Reform areas, for example a council may develop a process in partnership with the Aboriginal community to share local data relevant to Closing the Gap as part of a PR1 partnership agreement, or cultural capability training undertaken under PR3 may include a session that focuses on Aboriginal Data Sovereignty.

Aboriginal Data Sovereignty

Aboriginal Data Sovereignty means that Aboriginal people have the right to exercise ownership and governance over data about themselves, including how it is collected, stored, shared and used. This is essential for self-determination and for achieving the *National Agreement*, which commits to Aboriginal people being at the centre of decisions that affect their lives.

Historically, most data has been created and controlled through Western systems, often excluding Aboriginal knowledge and priorities. This has led to information being used in ways that have harmed or disempowered communities. For example, health systems may collect statistics about Aboriginal patients but don't share the information with communities, or present it only in ways that highlight poor health outcomes. However, with a data sovereignty approach, Aboriginal-controlled health services decide what data to collect (e.g. strengths-based measures like connection to culture), how it's reported, and who can access it. Data sovereignty shifts the power so Aboriginal communities decide what data matters and how it is interpreted.

A local government example might be if an early childhood centre with Aboriginal children enrolled wants data not just on attendance, but also on children's connection to culture, language use, and family involvement. Under a data sovereignty approach, the centre works with families and community leaders to define what to measure, who owns the data, and decides how it is reported. This ensures the data reflects community values and can be used to strengthen programs in ways that matter locally.

The *Maiam nayri Wingara Indigenous Data Sovereignty Principles*⁹ set out that Aboriginal people have the right to:

- Control the whole data process, from collection to use.
- Access data that is relevant, local and empowering.
- Ensure data respects cultural values and protects community interests.

In short, Aboriginal Data Sovereignty is about moving from "data being done to communities" to "data being led by communities." In NSW, a significant body of work is occurring to define how Aboriginal Data Sovereignty is operationalised by governments, through the joint partnership between the NSW Government and NSW CAPO.

Councils may find value in circulating the following resources and guidance on Aboriginal data and Aboriginal Data Sovereignty to relevant staff, or using these as a foundation for future training developed in partnership with Aboriginal organisations:

- [Resources by NSW CAPO](#), including links to a digital resource kit, e-learning module, factsheets and Discussion Paper on Aboriginal Data Sovereignty in NSW.
- *Guidelines for the use of Aboriginal data for local government*. These guidelines support ethical and informed use of Aboriginal population data, encouraging approaches that are critical, respectful, and aligned with Aboriginal Data Sovereignty principles. The content has been developed with input from the Reform and Innovation Unit at Aboriginal Affairs NSW.

Further resources and information are available at:

- [NSW CAPO resources on Aboriginal Data Sovereignty](#) and [information about PR4](#)
- [Barang Regional Alliance short form content on Aboriginal Data Sovereignty](#)
- [Maiam nayri Wingara Collective](#) and [Principles](#)
- [Discussion Paper by the Lowitja Institute on Aboriginal Data Sovereignty and Governance](#)
- Smith, Linda Tuhiwai, (2021). *Decolonizing methodologies: research and Indigenous peoples* (Third edition). Zed Books.

Data Connector Service

The Data Connector Service is a NSW Government-led program which meets commitments under the *National Agreement* in relation to PR4 by increasing access to government-held data by Aboriginal communities and organisations.

The Data Connector Service creates a single point of contact for requests to government-held data, in order to enable Aboriginal organisations and communities to better access data that is about or relevant to them. Councils who are working with or partnering with Aboriginal organisations are able to make requests to the Data Connector Service (as long as this is led by the Aboriginal organisation, in order to support the principles of Aboriginal Data Sovereignty). The Data Connector Service provides an avenue for councils and Aboriginal organisations to work together in the shared interests of their community.

For example, a council preparing its CSP could work with a local Aboriginal organisation and the Data Connector Service to access local-level Aboriginal population, health, education or employment data. The council could then jointly interpret the data to identify community priorities that inform the CSP.

The Data Connector Service assists with requests for both open and closed/restricted data.

Open data refers to information that is freely available for anyone to use. This type of data is often published on government websites, and the Data Connector Service can help you locate it and answer questions. Examples provided on the Data Connector Service website include:

- **Data.NSW** – a central site linking to datasets from across the NSW Government.
- **HealthStats** – a portal with health data and insights.
- **BOCSAR Crime Mapping Tool** – interactive maps, graphs, and data on crime, victims, and offenders.
- **Aboriginal-led Data Sharing Dashboard** – child protection and out-of-home care statistics for Aboriginal children and young people.
- **SEED Portal** – environmental data covering land, water, skies, and wildlife.

Closed or restricted data is not publicly available and requires a formal application to access, which takes longer to process. Before sharing restricted data, Data Connectors will discuss whether the information is available, how it will be used, and whether it can be shared safely, in order to ensure privacy and responsible use. Data Connectors will also provide advice on alternative pathways, such as through the *Government Information (Public Access) Act 2009* (NSW) where applicable.

Further resources and information are available at:

- [NSW Data Connector Service](#), or email NSWDataConnectors@customerservice.nsw.gov.au
- [Aboriginal Affairs NSW: Aboriginal population projections by region](#).

⁹ *Maiam nayri Wingara Indigenous Data Sovereignty Principles*, page 2.

PRIORITY REFORM 5

Employment, business growth and economic prosperity



Overview

Priority Reform 5 (PR5) is a NSW-specific reform established through the *NSW Partnership Agreement* between the NSW Government and NSW CAPO, focused on advancing economic prosperity for Aboriginal people, families, communities, and businesses. It recognises that sustainable employment and strong Aboriginal-led businesses are essential to self-determination, wellbeing, and intergenerational outcomes.

PR5 centres on creating secure and culturally safe employment and retention pathways (with targets and support to address barriers such as discrimination and cultural load), strengthening Aboriginal business growth and procurement opportunities (through partnerships, mentoring, and capacity building), and promoting broader economic prosperity (including financial wellbeing, home ownership, asset building, and the role of land rights and cultural assets in wealth creation).

Key features:

- Economic prosperity and development
- Employment pathways
- Business growth and procurement

Outcome:

Aboriginal businesses in NSW grow and thrive, while Aboriginal people are empowered to pursue education and training pathways that lead to jobs reflecting their aspirations¹⁰.

Why it matters:

PR5 directly addresses inequities in NSW where Aboriginal people face lower rates of employment, income, and business ownership compared to the general population.

Increasing Aboriginal-led economic growth through employment and business ownership will drive self-determination and reduce intergenerational poverty.

How councils can align with PR5

There are significant opportunities for local governments to align their activities in ways that promote PR5 outcomes, chiefly in employment, procurement, and supporting economic development. These actions benefit councils and residents as well as Aboriginal communities.

Examples of ways that councils can align with PR5 include:

- **Increasing Aboriginal procurement and supporting Aboriginal businesses;**
- **Economic development strategies** such as City of Sydney's *Fora Journey. Economic Development Plan* and *Economic Development Plan 2025-2035*, and embedding Aboriginal economic development into IP&R documents;
- Increasing **Aboriginal employment, retention** and **career progression;**
- **RAPs** which include structured targets for Aboriginal employment and procurement;

- Strategies which support employee retention, **addressing cultural safety and cultural load;** and
- Supporting **Aboriginal cultural tourism** through endorsing and promoting Aboriginal-led operators and experiences in destination marketing channels.

PR5 initiatives overlap with other Priority Reform areas, for example shared-decision making or partnership models under PRI will likely include goals that support Aboriginal economic participation within LGAs. PR3 also overlaps with PR5 with regard to increasing culturally safe employment in councils and improving processes for land use planning and management in consultation with LALCs, with leads to economic development for Aboriginal communities.

Tools and templates

- Checklist: Increasing Aboriginal employment in local government
- Checklist: Increasing procurement from local Aboriginal businesses
- Guidance for Aboriginal staff and councillors – managing cultural load and unconscious bias
- Self-assessment tool (with section on PR5)



Procurement

Procurement is a direct and measurable way councils can align with PR5, directing spending in a way that supports local Aboriginal businesses and promotes economic development. By directing council contracts toward Aboriginal-owned businesses, councils help grow the Aboriginal business sector, create local jobs, and support intergenerational wealth-building.

The policy basis for Aboriginal procurement is the [Tendering Guidelines for NSW Local Government](#)¹¹ which interprets the application of the *Local Government Act 1993* (NSW) and the *Local Government (General) Regulation 2021* (NSW). Councils are encouraged to support positive social, environmental and economic outcomes for communities through their procurement strategies. The NSW Government sets targets through the *Aboriginal Procurement Policy* (2021). Local government is not bound by this policy, but could set similar targets voluntarily.

Key elements of a council's approach to improving Aboriginal procurement could include:

Embedding through council strategies:

- Developing a council-specific Aboriginal procurement policy or strategy with established targets.
- Align procurement goals with other strategic frameworks, such as a RAP, First Nations Strategy, Closing the Gap strategy and key IP&R documents.

Supplier engagement and capacity-building:

- Hosting "meet the buyer" forums or networking events to connect council staff with Aboriginal businesses, and to inform the businesses of council's procurement processes.
- Building capacity of local Aboriginal businesses to help them meet tendering requirements, such as through upskilling workshops on grant writing, procurement processes, and compliance.

Internal training and practices:

- Creating a directory of local Aboriginal businesses and socialise this with procurement officers.
- Train procurement and finance staff on the value of Aboriginal procurement and engaging with Aboriginal businesses in a culturally safe way. Staff could be incentivised to include Aboriginal businesses in supplier panels and quotation processes.

These key elements are demonstrated through two pilot projects happening in NSW to improve Aboriginal procurement within local government. On the Northern Rivers, the NSW Indigenous Chamber of Commerce has partnered with Byron Shire Council to run the [Buying on Country: Supplying Local Government](#) project. In Western Sydney, Yarpa Hub and Campbelltown City Council are in the early stages

of the [Deliver Better Outcomes](#) project. Yarpa Hub was established in 2018 as a partnership between NSWALC and the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA). It is a "one stop shop" for Aboriginal businesses, industry and community – connecting Aboriginal people to business and employment opportunities across NSW – [see case study below](#).

Local Government Procurement's [First Nations Procurement Scheme](#) is aimed at enhancing economic inclusion and fostering partnerships between local government and Aboriginal businesses. This scheme simplifies the procurement process, enabling councils to engage with pre-qualified Aboriginal enterprises, promoting reconciliation and cultural diversity. Key features include:

- Pre-qualified business list: A curated list of Aboriginal businesses that have undergone high-level due diligence, ensuring valid business credentials and insurances.
- Engagement cap: An engagement limit of \$249,999 (including GST) is set, requiring councils to adhere to their procurement policies and authority delegations.
- Certified participation: Businesses involved are certified either by Supply Nation or the NSW Indigenous Chamber of Commerce.
- VendorPanel integration: Approved businesses are accessible via LGP's VendorPanel, ready to receive Request for Quotations from councils.
- Revenue reinvestment: All management fee revenues generated through the scheme are reinvested into selected Aboriginal community programs.

Aboriginal employment

Local governments are significant employers of Aboriginal people within their communities. Aboriginal employment benefits Aboriginal communities and councils alike, bringing in diverse skills sets and lived experience. Tools and strategies that councils can use to increase Aboriginal employment include:

- Targeted employment strategies, identified positions, and community-based recruitment through promoting jobs at Aboriginal networks, interagencies and local organisations;
- Career development pathways such as traineeship or cadetships that offer entry pathways for young people and school or university graduates; and
- Partnerships with local ACCOs or employment organisations to find suitable candidates.

Grants to hire Aboriginal employees are also provided under the [NSW Government's Elsa Dixon Aboriginal Employment Grant](#). The [Pat Dixon Memorial Scholarship](#) provides for Aboriginal councillors and council staff members in NSW to undertake further study, professional development or research.

¹¹ These guidelines are [under review](#) as at the time of this Toolkit's finalisation.

Supporting and retaining Aboriginal employees:

Cultural load and cultural safety

Local government can strengthen the retention of Aboriginal employees by proactively addressing key factors that contribute to culturally safe and supportive workplaces. Evidence shows that employers struggle to retain Aboriginal staff at the same rate as non-Indigenous employees and often focus more on recruitment than retention and development. Research¹² highlights several effective strategies¹³:

- **Fostering culturally safe environments** by recognising and addressing subtle and systemic forms of racism, which can otherwise create unsafe conditions for First Nations staff;
- **Embedding accountability into employment targets**, such as linking measurable KPIs to leadership performance, which has been shown to improve outcomes for Aboriginal employees;
- Adopting a **whole-of-employment lifecycle** approach, ensuring equal focus on retention, career development, leadership pathways, and cultural safety;
- **Increasing First Nations representation in leadership**, which supports attraction, retention, and progression by providing visible role models and pathways. Research indicates that many employees reported they could not name a First Nations leader within their workplace, which undermines attraction, retention, and progression;
- **Recognising and mitigating cultural load**, including the additional responsibilities often carried by Aboriginal employees, through appropriate compensation and acknowledgement; and
- **Prioritising cultural safety and responsiveness**, which has a strong correlation with long-term retention of Aboriginal staff.

Creating an inclusive workplace culture that celebrates diversity is key to creating a culturally safe environment for Aboriginal staff. By taking these steps, councils can build inclusive workplaces that support the aspirations and wellbeing of Aboriginal employees while strengthening organisational capability.

¹² See links and resources provided for this section at the time of this Toolkit's finalisation.

¹³ See Murawin, Social Research Centre, & National Indigenous Employment and Training Alliance (2025), *First Nations Employment Index 2025*, Minderoo Foundation. (2022). *Woort Koorliny: Australian Indigenous Employment Index 2022*. Generation One, Minderoo Foundation. and NSW Public Service Commission. (n.d.). *Recognition and retention. In Cultural capability guide*, and Diversity Council Australia. (2020). Gari Yala (Speak the Truth) *Synopsis Report*. Diversity Council Australia.

Cultural safety is defined by the Coalition of Peaks in the National Agreement as:

Cultural safety is about overcoming the power imbalances of places, people and policies that occur between the majority non-Indigenous position and the minority Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person so that there is no assault, challenge or denial of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person's identity, of who they are and what they need. Cultural safety is met through actions from the majority position which recognise, respect, and nurture the unique cultural identity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Only the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person who is recipient of a service or interaction can determine whether it is culturally safe.

- Pt 12, definitions

Cultural load is defined by the Diversity Council Australia¹⁴ as:

Cultural load is the often invisible additional load borne by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at work, where they are the only Indigenous person, or one of a small group, and are expected to become representatives of the Indigenous experience. This includes extra Indigenous related work demands that non Indigenous colleagues do not have, expectations to educate non Indigenous colleagues about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and racism, and expectations to talk on behalf of all Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people.

A council can leverage existing partnerships with Aboriginal organisations or their Aboriginal Advisory Group for input into the best way to address and implement cultural safety and cultural load in their workplace.

Ways that councils can address cultural safety in their workplaces include:

- Ongoing and mandatory **cultural awareness** and anti-racism training provided to councillors, senior leaders and all staff, with modules that focus on cultural safety in the workplace ([see also section in PR3](#));
- **Reviewing internal policies and procedures** and embedding concepts and practices of cultural safety throughout, including through the Code of Conduct, Workplace Health and Safety Regulations, and Equity frameworks¹⁵;
- Undertaking a **structured cultural safety workplace audit**;
- **Link targets** for Aboriginal employment to retention and cultural safety;
- Provide for **culturally safe recruitment pathways**, including having Aboriginal representation on the interview panel and offering flexible criteria that recognises lived experience and community knowledge as genuine and valuable qualifications;

¹⁴ Diversity Council Australia. (2020). Gari Yala (Speak the Truth) *Synopsis Report*. Diversity Council Australia.

¹⁵ NB: Under the Work Health and Safety Act 2011 (NSW), ensuring a culturally safe workplace can be interpreted as part of the duty to eliminate psychosocial hazards.

- Providing for **cultural mentorship** within the organisation, especially for new recruits;
- Establishing an internal Aboriginal **staff networking/peer support group**; and
- **Monitoring and evaluation** via staff feedback surveys, retention data, and/or independent reviews.

Ways that council can manage cultural load for their employees include:

- Training leaders and staff to be **aware of the concept** of cultural load;
- Acknowledging that Aboriginal staff may **face extra expectations** (such as cultural advising, community liaison);
- Where possible, **redistribute cultural knowledge tasks** across the workforce instead of relying on Aboriginal employees alone;
- Where Aboriginal employees contribute to cultural duties (including community engagement, mentoring, organising NAIDOC and other events), **build this into role descriptions, workloads, and remuneration**; and
- **Flexible cultural leave policies**, to accommodate employees participating in cultural and community obligations.

Aboriginal staff and councillors working in local government experience cultural load due to the dual responsibility they carry: fulfilling their professional roles while also representing and advocating for Aboriginal communities, perspectives and cultural knowledge. Cultural load in this situation refers to the emotional and cultural labour that is required to navigate the expectations of their workplaces and communities, often without formal recognition or resources. Combined with experiences of unconscious bias within council structures, this can impact on employee wellbeing, retention and leadership development.

We have provided Checklist: *increasing Aboriginal employment in local government, Guidance for Aboriginal staff and councillors – managing cultural load and unconscious bias* and a self-assessment tool for PR5 to assist in identifying key areas of improvement for supporting and retaining Aboriginal employees within councils. Other helpful tools include the First Nations Employment Index (2025)'s *Employer Roadmap*, and the Gari Yala report's indicators for culturally safe workplaces and *10 Truths Framework*. Training to support Aboriginal staff and councillors is also available by a number of providers.

Further resources and information are available at:

- [Yarpa Hub](#)
- [Building Better Outcomes Project Page](#)
- [Byron Shire Council partnering with NSW Indigenous Chamber of Commerce](#)
- Local Government Procurement: [First Nations Procurement Scheme](#)
- Murawin, Social Research Centre, & National Indigenous Employment and Training Alliance (2025), [First Nations Employment Index 2025](#)
- Diversity Council Australia. (2020). [Gari Yala \(Speak the Truth\) Synopsis Report](#). Diversity Council Australia.
- [Connecting to Culture Toolkit – Quality Tourism Australia](#)
- [Aboriginal tourism experiences boom in NSW, with tourists spending \\$3b a year – ABC News](#)

CASE STUDY:

Deliver Better Outcomes – Yarpa Hub/CampbelltownCity Council procurement project

On Dharawal Country in South West Sydney, Campbelltown City Council and [Yarpa Hub](#) have partnered together to support Aboriginal businesses and Aboriginal business procurement within the LGA, as part of the Deliver Better Outcomes Program funded by the NSW Government. The project came about after feedback through the [NSW Aboriginal Business Roundtable](#) identified local government procurement as a significant opportunity that has been underutilised to date.

The project aims to address PR3 and PR5 of the National Agreement through the key aim of **“increasing the number of Aboriginal businesses providing goods and services to Campbelltown City Council.”** The project will achieve this through transforming Campbelltown City Council’s

Aboriginal procurement practices while strengthening the capability, capacity, and competitiveness of Aboriginal businesses that operate within the LGA. The importance of the project was noted as:

It’s not just about meeting targets, it’s actually about influencing and advocating for the value of First Nations businesses in supply chains and why it’s good for business.

– Shannon Mallison, A/Director, Yarpa Hub

Mallison noted three critical factors for success:

1. Council is committed and motivated at the leadership level. In describing Yarpa Hub’s initial meeting with Campbelltown City Council, Mallison observed:
2. A pool of existing Aboriginal businesses operate in the area. Aboriginal population rates above national and state average can help to indicate this, which was part of research undertaken by Yarpa Hub in the early project stages.
3. Opportunities exist within the council contracts and spend, such as the pipeline of urban development projects scheduled in south-west Sydney over the next 10 years.

Campbelltown sent their CEO, executive general manager corporate services, and head of procurement – everyone that had decision-making authority. That sent a really strong message to us that Campbelltown was committed to this project.

– Shannon Mallison, A/Director, Yarpa Hub

The project aims to create an effective and scalable model that can be applied to other councils. In doing so, the project outcomes focus on transforming internal council processes such as procurement processes, as well as supporting local Aboriginal businesses through a ‘tender ready’ program. As part of supporting local businesses, an Aboriginal Business Network group has been established which meets regularly to build relationships, and share insights and opportunities for local businesses; meetings have been well attended since kicking off.

Key project outcomes include:

- Campbelltown City Council will be a culturally safe organisation that operates with a high degree of cultural competency.
- Improved procurement policies and practices that address the barrier to participation and foster opportunities.
- Strengthened relationships between Campbelltown City Council and the local Aboriginal business sector and broader Aboriginal community.
- Aboriginal businesses are celebrated for the contribution they make to the local economy.
- An increase in the number of Local Aboriginal people employed by Local Aboriginal Businesses.
- Local Aboriginal businesses are successful and sustainable.

Key deliverables of the project include:

- Model for effective Aboriginal procurement.
- Functioning Aboriginal business network that fosters collaboration and partnerships.
- Local database of Aboriginal businesses to support efficient and effective connections.
- Tender Ready program that builds capability and capacity.
- Networking events that facilitate connections.
- Promotional campaign to raise profile of local Aboriginal businesses.
- Updated policies and procedures to guide procurement practices.

The project will finish in June 2026 and councils are encouraged to keep up to date with the learnings from the project.



Glossary

Table of terms:

Term	Definition
Aboriginal	Given the NSW context of this Toolkit, we primarily use the term 'Aboriginal' to be inclusive of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The terms 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander,' 'First Nations' or 'Indigenous' may be used when they originate directly from source material.
Aboriginal community/communities	Hunt, J (2013) Engaging with Indigenous Australia - exploring the conditions for effective relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities <i>"Most Indigenous 'communities' - whether they are discrete settlements or dispersed communities of interest or identity - are complex mixes of residents with different cultural and historical ties. Different families, clans, nations, language and ceremonial groups live within most geographically discrete Indigenous communities. Some of these groups have an historical attachment to the place; others have custodial land rights in that location."</i>
Aboriginal Cultural Heritage	Aboriginal Cultural Heritage (ACH) is culture, Country and community for the past, present and the future. ACH is a living collection of elements and encompasses many aspects related to the people, plants, animals, lands, waters, and skies of the Country of Aboriginal people (including the associated environment, landscapes, places, cultural material and ancestral remains) that those Aboriginal people recognise as intrinsic to their cultural heritage, well-being, and identity. These cultural components that make up ACH include but are not limited to the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traditional and historical maintenance; • Representations; • Expressions; • Beliefs, • Knowledge, • Skills, • Languages, and • Lore, and customs.
Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation	Defined in clause 44 of the National Agreement as an organisation that "delivers services, including land and resource management, that builds the strength and empowerment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and people." Has the following criteria: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorporated under relevant legislation and operating as not-for-profit; • Controlled and operated by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people; • Connected to the community or communities where it delivers services; and • Governed by a majority Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander governing body.
Aboriginal Data Sovereignty	Right of Aboriginal peoples to own and govern data about them, including creation, access, use and stewardship. Delegates at Australia's 2018 Indigenous Data Sovereignty Summit endorsed the following foundational statement: <i>"Indigenous Data Sovereignty refers to the right of Indigenous people to exercise ownership over Indigenous Data. Ownership of data can be expressed through the creation, collection, access, analysis, interpretation, management, dissemination and reuse of Indigenous Data." In NSW, we refer to this as Aboriginal Data Sovereignty.</i>
Aboriginal organisation	Defined in the National Agreement as: <i>"A business, charity, not-for-profit organisation, incorporated under Commonwealth, state or territory legislation, that has at least 51% Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander ownership and/or directorship and is operated for the benefit of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities."</i>
Coalition of Peaks	Representative body made up of more than 80 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled peak organisations that work on a federal level with Australian governments to implement the National Agreement.

Glossary

Table of terms:

Term	Definition
Cultural safety	Defined by the Coalition of Peaks in the National Agreement, Part 12, as: <i>"Cultural safety is about overcoming the power imbalances ... so that there is no assault, challenge or denial of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person's identity, of who they are and what they need. Cultural safety is met through actions from the majority position which recognise, respect, and nurture the unique cultural identity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people."</i>
Cultural load	Defined by the Diversity Council Australia as: <i>"Cultural load is the often invisible additional load borne by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at work, where they ... are expected to become representatives of the Indigenous experience. This includes extra Indigenous related work demands that non Indigenous colleagues do not have."</i>
Harm and cultural loss (in the context of Aboriginal Cultural Heritage)	Harm to ACH can have the significant consequence of "cultural loss" for Aboriginal people, which has been known to affect health and wellbeing. Harm could be the result of a development activity where insufficient care is taken to avoid actual or potential ACH values. An action is likely to have a significant impact on the cultural heritage values of an ACH site "if there is a real chance or possibility" that it will, for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Restrict or inhibit the existing use as a cultural or ceremonial site, causing its values to notably diminish over time; • Remove, damage, or substantially disturb cultural artefacts, or ceremonial objects; and • Permanently damage or obscure rock art or other cultural or ceremonial features (see also Aboriginal cultural landscape). Social impact assessment defines cultural loss as "loss or diminution of traditional attachment to the land or connection to Country, and associated cultural obligations to care for Country, or loss of rights to gain spiritual sustenance from the land," (see: Social Impact Assessment Planning Portal - Department of Planning and Environment (nsw.gov.au)).
IAP2 Principles	Embodied in the IAP2 Core Values and Public Participation Spectrum and a key tool that can be adapted to engagement with Aboriginal communities. Emphasise that those affected by decisions should have a say in the process; public participation should include their input in defining how decisions are made; participants should be provided with the information they need; their contributions must genuinely influence outcomes; and the process should build mutual respect, trust, and transparency between decision-makers and the community.
Indigenous Intellectual Cultural Property	Rights of Aboriginal peoples over cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, beyond standard intellectual property frameworks.
Local Aboriginal Land Councils	There is a network of approximately 120 Aboriginal Land Councils in NSW. They are Aboriginal community-based organisations established under the Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1973 (NSW) to manage land for various purposes for the benefit of Aboriginal people. The NSW Aboriginal Land Council is their peak body.
Native Title	Established under the Native Title Act 1993 (Cth), Native Title is the legal recognition of the traditional rights and interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to land and waters, based on their traditional laws and customs.
National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2020)	The National Agreement is a partnership agreement between the Joint Council of all Australian Governments and Aboriginal peaks. It includes four national Priority Reforms (and one NSW-specific area) to change the way governments work with Indigenous people, new government accountability measures, and shared monitoring and implementation arrangements.

Glossary

Table of terms:

Term	Definition
NSW Coalition of Aboriginal Peak Organisations	NSW state-level coalition of Aboriginal community-controlled peak bodies working to implement the National Agreement.
Partnership Agreement on Closing the Gap (2019)	Signed by the Commonwealth Government, state and territory governments, the Australian Local Government Association and the Coalition of Peaks in 2019, committing all Australian governments to work in genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives to design, implement, and monitor the refreshed Closing the Gap framework.
Place-based partnership	Formal mechanism under Priority Reform 1 of the National Agreement that aim to establish shared-decision making structures that address established local community priorities.
Priority Reform areas	Established by the National Agreement, there are four national areas and one NSW-specific area that aim to address structural, system-level changes necessary for better outcomes across all the Closing the Gap socio-economic targets.
Socio-economic targets	The socio-economic targets are measurable goals set under the National Agreement that track improvements in life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across areas like health, education, housing, justice, safety, employment, and cultural wellbeing.
Traditional Owner	An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person or group with ongoing cultural, spiritual, and custodial responsibilities for Country, based on their descent and cultural ties to the land and waters.

Table of Acronyms:

Acronym	Definition
ACCO	Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation
ALGA	Australian Local Government Association
CALD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
Closing the Gap	The overarching policy framework originating from 2007 that commits the Australian Government to reducing the disparity in living conditions between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous peoples.
COAG	The Council of Australian Government was the peak intergovernmental forum in Australia from 1992 – 2020. It was made up of the Prime Minister, state and territory first ministers and the President of the Australian Local Government Association to manage matters of national significance. It was disbanded in 2020 and replaced by the National Cabinet which does not have ALGA representation on it.
Coalition of Peaks	Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations
Collaborate NSW	The Collaborate NSW: Local government and Aboriginal communities working together resource kit for local government (2017)
CSP	Community Strategic Plan

Glossary

Table of Acronyms:

Acronym	Definition
CDP	Community Development Plan
ICIP	Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property
ILUA	Indigenous Land Use Agreement
IP&R	Integrate Planning and Reporting framework for local government
LALC	Local Aboriginal Land Council
LEP	Local Environmental Plan
LGA	Local Government Area
LGBTQIASB+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, Sistergirl, Brotherboy +
LGNSW	Local Government NSW
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
National Agreement	National Agreement on Closing the Gap
NSW Partnership Agreement	NSW Closing the Gap Implementation Plan (2020)
NIAA	National Indigenous Australians Agency
NSW CAPO	NSW Coalition of Aboriginal Peak Organisations
NSWALC	NSW Aboriginal Land Council
OLG	Office of Local Government NSW
Partnership Agreement	Partnership Agreement on Closing the Gap (2019)
PBC	Prescribed Body Corporate
PRI-5	Priority Reform areas 1 – 5
RAP	Reconciliation Action Plan
ToR	Terms of Reference
UNDRIP	The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples