



SNAICC

National Voice for our Children

NATIONAL ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER EARLY CHILDHOOD STRATEGY CONSULTATION REPORT





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BACKGROUND TO THE STRATEGY

In February 2020, as part of the Closing the Gap Statement to Parliament, the Prime Minister, the Hon Scott Morrison MP, announced the development of a *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy (the Strategy)*.

Families, communities, peak bodies and experts in the early childhood development and care sectors had long called for governments and service providers to adopt a systematic and coordinated approach toward improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Accordingly, the purpose of the Strategy is to lay the pathway for governments, non-government sectors and communities to support all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to grow up healthy, engaged with education, connected to family and community, and strong in culture.

Not long after the Strategy's announcement, the Joint Council on Closing the Gap — Australia's first national Decision-making partnership to include representatives of the Australian, state and territory governments, the Australian Local Government Association, and the Coalition of National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations, pursuant to the historic Partnership Agreement on Closing the Gap — concluded negotiations for a new *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* (the National Agreement). Finalised in July 2020, the National Agreement marks the first time that the Closing the Gap policy platform has been developed in genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities and organisations. Furthermore, it stipulates that all future decisions and actions taken under the Closing the Gap framework must also be arrived at through such partnerships.

The National Agreement sets out four Priority Reforms — systemic changes to the way governments and non-Indigenous organisations operate, which together constitute essential preconditions to the achievement of individual targets under the Socioeconomic Outcome Areas. Priority Reform One commits all signatories to building and strengthening structures that empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to

formally share Decision-making authority with governments to accelerate policy and place-based progress against Closing the Gap.

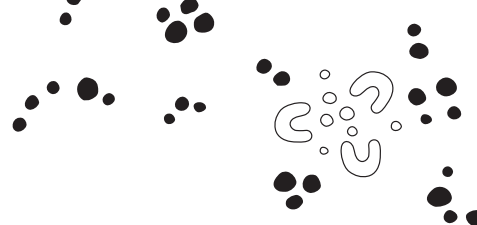
In line with these principles, this Strategy has been developed under a formal partnership between the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) and SNAICC – National Voice for our Children (SNAICC), the national peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's safety, development and wellbeing. This arrangement therefore represents one of the first partnerships formed pursuant to Priority Reform One of the National Agreement. As a Community-controlled organisation responsive to the needs and priorities of its members, SNAICC's key roles in this shared Decision-making process were to lead community consultations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities and organisations across the country, and to ensure that the priorities and concerns heard in those consultations are accurately reflected in the Strategy.

DEVELOPING THE STRATEGY

This Strategy reflects the views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, families, communities and organisations who participated in the national consultation process by sharing their experiences, concerns, and aspirations for the future wellbeing of their children.

In consideration of the impacts of COVID-19 risks and corresponding restrictions on engagement activity, the Strategy was developed in a two-stage process. The first stage saw the development, with advice from an Advisory Group and other recognised sector experts, of an evidence-based Framework to inform the Strategy and support effective community consultation. With the release of the Framework in April 2021, the second stage launched a broad consultation process across Australia, enabling the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations to inform specific priorities and actions for the Strategy. Stakeholders provided input through online surveys, written





submission, virtual workshops and meetings, along with face-to-face workshops, surveys and children's art activities coordinated by SNAICC's partner organisations around Australia.

From June 2021, SNAICC and the NIAA drafted and finalised the Strategy in partnership, analysing and reflecting learnings from the consultation process in order to define the Strategy's key priorities and actions.

OBJECTIVES AND PRINCIPLES OF THE ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

Genuine engagement with a broad range of stakeholders is a crucial determinant of the Strategy's effectiveness and the degree to which it encapsulates the needs and priorities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families, and communities across Australia. Engagement is also necessary to reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's right to self-determination through having a say in the policies and programs that affect their lives, in line with the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP) and the National Agreement.

With this in mind, the primary objectives of the engagement process were:

- to provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families, communities, service providers, representative bodies, academics and other experts with opportunities to have direct input to SNAICC and the NIAA concerning the development of the Strategy.
- to ensure that the engagement approach captured the diverse views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities across Australia.
- to ensure the adoption of a culturally safe and trauma-informed approach to engagement, despite the impact of COVID-19 and an inability to undertake primary engagement in a face-to-face manner.

- to ensure that the valuable perspectives of recognised sector experts – particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders – were captured, while also ensuring that the Strategy was based on robust evidence and leveraged off existing national early childhood development and care efforts.
- to test the stated Vision, Goals and purpose of the Framework, ensuring that the preliminary efforts were aligned to the worldview and lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families across Australia.

SNAICC's approach to engagement was guided by the following principles:

- capturing the voices of children and families
- ensuring cultural safety
- adopting an inclusive approach
- utilising existing networks
- including key decision-makers
- ensuring a tailored approach
- encouraging innovation and locally developed solutions
- adopting a flexible and multi-pronged approach
- providing quality, transparent feedback
- effectively managing expectations
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ownership.





CONSULTATION METHODOLOGY

PHASE 1 — CONSULTATION ON THE FRAMEWORK

Upon commencing the Framework development process, SNAICC undertook a comprehensive stakeholder audit/mapping exercise to identify key stakeholders in all relevant service, advocacy and policy sectors. An Advisory Group was also formed, primarily composed of recognised Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experts from a range of key sectors, including but not limited to: child protection, early years education and care, family and child support services, primary health, mental health and the philanthropic sector. The Advisory Group met regularly in developing the Framework, with their expertise greatly informing the selection of the five Goals and the underpinning Outcomes.

Building on the work of the Advisory Group, individual meetings were held with 11 other early years sector experts to garner their input on the Framework. The members of the SNAICC Council, who are elected from each state and territory to represent the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled child and family sectors, were also consulted. The Framework was released for community consultation in April 2021.

PHASE 2 — CONSULTATION ON THE STRATEGY

Consultation on the Strategy aimed to generate feedback on the Vision, Goals and focus areas put forward in the Framework (so that these could be refined as needed for the final Strategy), and to gather recommendations for specific actions and measures of success under each Goal. To capture the input of a large number of stakeholders from urban, regional and remote areas across Australia, SNAICC developed two targeted surveys, which

stakeholders could complete either online or via face-to-face engagement activities facilitated by partner organisations working in the early years sector. These surveys set out the five Goals individually and prompted respondents to consider the factors that would help achieve each Goal, as well as the factors that presented barriers. The family survey also asked respondents to reflect on their own experiences of caring for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, particularly the quality, adequacy and cultural safety of the services they accessed and/or needed to do so.

Online surveys gathered responses from:

- 390 people involved in an early years service, of whom 67% were involved through professionally and/or voluntarily providing support and assistance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children at an organisation. Almost half of these respondents (46%) work and/or volunteer in early childhood education and care (ECEC); 29% were in the school education sector; 21% were in family support services and a further 21% work and/or volunteer in the health sector. (Respondents were able to list more than one sector for their work and/or volunteer positions.) Just over one third of these respondents (35%) identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.
- 80 families (of whom 60% identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and 68% said that they care for – or previously cared for – an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander child under 5 years old).

Formal partnership arrangements with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community-controlled organisations in various jurisdictions (including urban and regional locations) gathered the perspectives of:

- 61 families (via the same survey offered to families online), of whom 92% identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and 97% said that they care for – or have previously cared for – an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander child under 5 years old.

- more than 35 children (via an art activity, with children encouraged to draw what made them happy; notably, a substantial proportion of children responded by drawing their parents, extended families, or culturally significant activities).

A small group workshop facilitated by one partner organisation captured the perspectives of another three Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, and 14 early childhood professionals, in response to the survey questions.

In total, SNAICC received 531 individual survey responses, with these distributed across the states and territories as follows:

| JURISDICTION | RESPONSES |
|--------------|-----------|
| NSW | 168 |
| Vic | 99 |
| Qld | 93 |
| WA | 63 |
| SA | 31 |
| Tas | 13 |
| ACT | 20 |
| NT | 38 |

Other engagement activities undertaken to test the Vision, Goals and purpose of the Framework included:

- partnering with national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community-controlled peak organisations to engage with their networks and membership bases on the content of the Framework to inform priorities for the Strategy.
- facilitation of two virtual workshops (on Goals 1 and 3 combined, and 2 and 3 combined, respectively), attended by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak organisations, recognised sector experts and other key stakeholders.
- release of the Framework with key questions seeking written submissions from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives, experts and organisations. Nine submissions were received.
- engagement with the SNAICC membership base (including the SNAICC Board and Council), and the SNAICC Early Years Network, to inform priorities for the Strategy.
- holding targeted one-on-one stakeholder meetings with identified sector experts.
- utilising the Coalition of Peaks Forum as a mechanism to seek feedback on and support of the Framework and Strategy.

KEY CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

An important aspect of consultation on the Strategy was to guide input towards specific aspects of the Framework, while still enabling families and early years sector professionals to draw upon their lived experience in providing their answers.

A Consultation Guide, prepared to assist people and organisations in making written submissions, set out the following key focus questions.

- What are the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families to ensure children thrive in their early years?
- How will Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families benefit from the national strategy?
- What does success look like for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in their early years? Does the Framework's Vision describe this?
- Do the current Goals of the Framework support the Vision? Could the Goals be improved? If yes, how? Are there gaps?
- Do the current Outcomes of the Framework support the Goals and Vision? Could the Outcomes be improved? If yes, how? Are there gaps?
- Do the Focus Areas support the Outcomes? Could the Focus Areas be improved? Are there any gaps?
- What are three possible actions for each Goal that will best support the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in their early years?
- If we could achieve one critical success through the national strategy what would it be?
- What does success for the Strategy look like? How would you measure that success?
- How should information on the effectiveness of the Strategy be provided to families, communities, services and organisations?



CONSULTATION CHALLENGES

As noted above, COVID-19 risks and restrictions meant that SNAICC's ability to hold face-to-face consultations around Australia (as would normally be preferred) was limited. The system of formally partnering with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community-controlled early years organisations in each jurisdiction to conduct family surveys helped address this challenge, though COVID-19 restrictions and high demand for services also had an impact on some partner organisations' ability to collect their survey responses in the tight consultation timeframes given. Consequently, survey results from two partner organisations were not able to be fully included in the overall data analysis.

The tight consultation timeframe, and limited stakeholder availability (due to very busy schedules) also affected the scheduling of SNAICC's virtual workshops on each Goal. When a sector workshop on the housing and homelessness aspects of Goal 4 ('Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children grow up in safe nurturing homes, supported by strong families and communities') needed to be postponed due to illnesses, SNAICC was not able to reschedule this event before the final consultation deadline. However, input on housing and homelessness was also captured through surveys, written submissions and SNAICC's previous two workshops and in various consultation with its members.



KEY THEMES EMERGING FROM CONSULTATIONS

OVERARCHING COMMENTS/ STRATEGY-WIDE REQUIREMENTS

In general, stakeholders responded very positively to the Framework's proposed Vision ('Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (0–5 years) are born and remain healthy, nurtured by strong families and enabled to thrive in their early years'). It was recognised that achieving this Vision would require systemic change in the way all governments work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, across a broad range of service sectors:

[Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families will only thrive] when 'the solutions' stop being prescribed ... from a Western perspective. It will require the design, delivery and evaluation of systems to be led by First Nations people – this goes beyond early childhood programs and systems and includes all Western systems that influence all elements of a child's family and community life and development – education, health, economic, housing and social services and systems. ... To achieve the outcomes articulated, it will be important to ensure people in communities (service users) are central to systems design, not only organisations – Children's Ground, written submission.

Several other written submissions, and respondents to the early years sector and family surveys, also stated that culture and identity are central to the development and wellbeing of children and young people and should be embedded across all Goals. A focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce development, including targeted support for training, was also identified as a Strategy-wide priority.

STRATEGY GOALS AND RELATED OUTCOMES

The Strategy focuses on five goals:

1. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are born healthy and remain strong.
2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are supported to thrive in their early years.
3. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are supported to establish and maintain strong connections to culture, Country and language.
4. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children grow up in safe nurturing homes, supported by strong families and communities.
5. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities are active partners in building a better service system.

GOAL 1 – ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CHILDREN ARE BORN AND REMAIN HEALTHY AND STRONG

Themes that relate to the health and wellbeing needs of both children and their families were prominent in answers regarding Goal 1, with primary health, healthy food and nutrition, housing, mental health, and environmental health identified as key focus areas. In particular, pre- and post-natal care and supports were highlighted as services that are crucial to achieving this Goal, yet are not always provided to an adequate level of cultural safety. The Aboriginal Health Council of Western Australia (AHCWA), for example, noted that:

ACCHS are best situated to provide culturally appropriate care, and strong collaboration between ACCHS and tertiary centres improves engagement and maternal and child health outcomes. However, a lack of willingness from some tertiary centres to engage with ACCHS around antenatal and postnatal care has led to a perpetuation of the poor health outcomes which pervade Aboriginal women seeking health care whilst pregnant – AHCWA, written submission

In the early years sector survey, the top three factors that respondents identified as helping Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children be born and remain healthy and strong were:

- culturally safe maternal and child health services (66%)
- culturally safe and trauma-informed family support services (61%)
- having access to high-quality primary and allied healthcare services (43%).

The top three factors identified as presenting barriers to this Goal were:

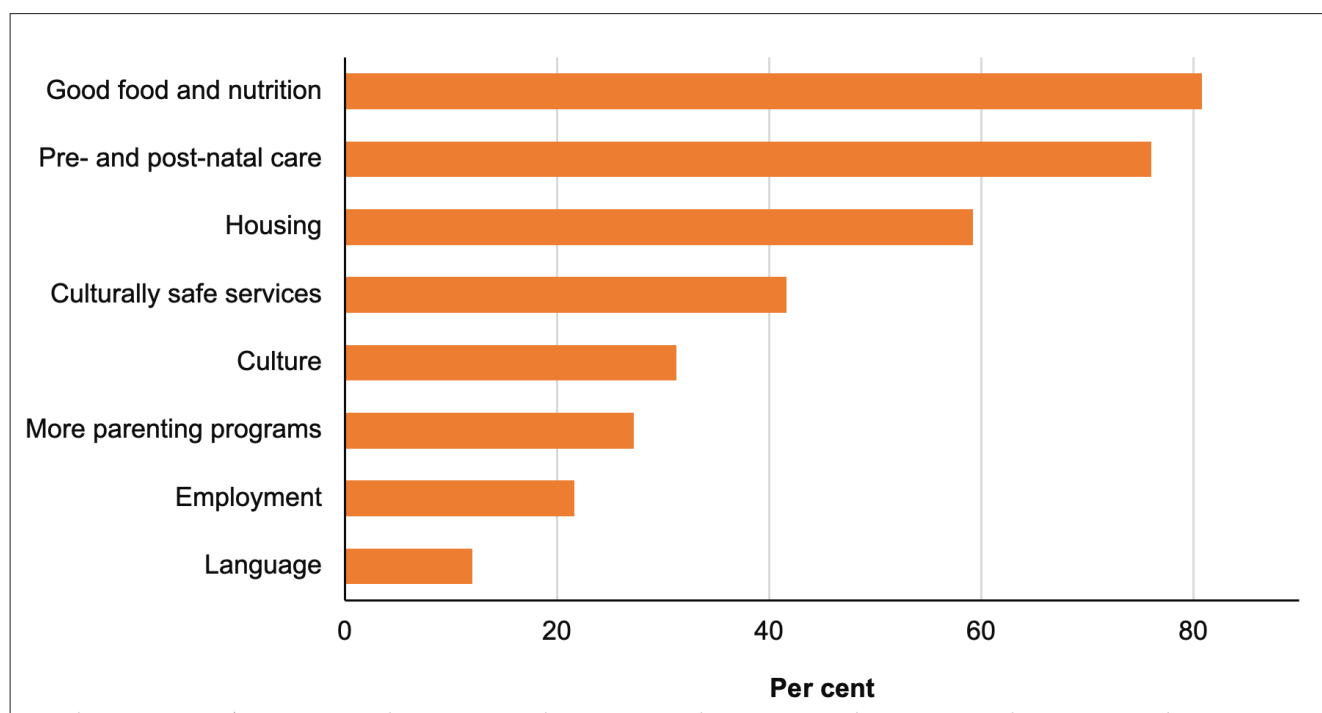
- lack of access to preventative healthcare, including accurate information, nutrient-rich diets, physical healthcare plans, and mental health support systems (54%)
- lack of culturally safe services (45%)
- breakdown/lack of family and community support systems (44%).

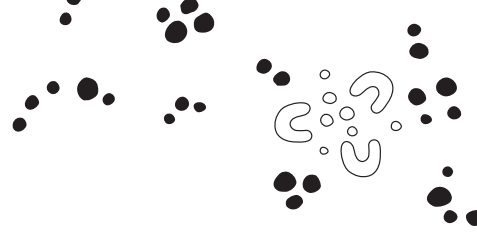
Respondents to the family survey, meanwhile, ranked the top three factors helping children to be born healthy and strong (Figure 1) as:

- good food and nutrition (81%)
- pre- and post-natal health services (76%)
- housing (59%).

FIGURE 1: What helps your children be born healthy and strong?

Family Survey responses





Respondents to the family survey also highlighted supports such as: understanding and education about services available for parents and families of children with disabilities; regularity/continuity of care between health practitioners; and culturally safe services as being important to healthy, strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Actions proposed under this Goal in both surveys and submissions highlighted the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's involvement in designing and delivering health services to women and babies. In their written submission, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner June Oscar and National Children's Commissioner Anne Hollonds suggested several ways this involvement could be increased:

Throughout Wiyi Yani U Thangani, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women spoke of the importance in revitalising traditional birthing and child-rearing practices and called for supports to design and invest in culturally responsive maternal and infant models of care to reduce the gap in health outcomes for mothers and babies. This should include investment in the development of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander maternity workforce; birthing on country programs; the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander birthing practices across services, and maternal and parenting knowledges – Australian Human Rights Commission, written submission

AHCWA also noted the importance of continued investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community-controlled health services:

The Strategy should emphasise that access to high quality, community-driven and culturally secure health services is best provided by ACCHS, and that sustainable funding of ACCHS will be essential to ensuring Aboriginal children receive the comprehensive primary health care they need to have the best start in life. For this reason, AHCWA strongly supports a focus areas for this Goal being to 'continue to invest in Aboriginal Community-controlled Health Organisations' – AHCWA, written submission

Several respondents also called for this Goal to specifically include Outcomes and actions around social and emotional wellbeing as a crucial aspect of overall health, especially where support for parents is concerned.

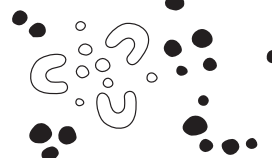
GOAL 2 – ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CHILDREN ARE SUPPORTED TO THRIVE IN THEIR EARLY YEARS

Responses around the early learning and development needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 0–3 highlighted the costs and siloed nature of some services as key issues. In particular, consultations with both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and mainstream early education and care services identified that many aspects of the education and care funding model are not adequately supporting their core purpose to provide holistic early learning and family supports to the most vulnerable children in their communities.

For example, it was argued that the Child Care Subsidy Activity Test (which limits fully subsidised childcare to 12 hours per week for children whose parents/carers do not meet work or study requirements) disproportionately affects some of the most developmentally vulnerable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children by preventing them from accessing quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) services at the frequency they need. Evidence indicates that children experiencing vulnerability benefit strongly from regular attendance, from an early age, in high quality early learning (and may require up to 30 hours per week),¹ but more research is required to better inform the amount of ECEC attendance that would provide the best outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.² Limited ability of some families to access Centrelink in order to register for the Child Care Subsidy (particularly in regional/remote areas) was also cited as a significant barrier to accessing ECEC services.

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- 1 Sims, M., 2011. Early childhood and education services for Indigenous children prior to starting school. Resource sheet no. 7 for the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse. Canberra: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies; Loeb, S., Bridges, M., Bassok, D. et al., 2007. How much is too much? The influence of preschool centres on children's social and cognitive development. *Economics of Education Review*, 26(1), pp. 52–66; Campbell, F. A., Pungello, E. P., Burchinal, M. et al., 2012. Adult outcomes as a function of an early childhood educational program: An Abecedarian Project follow-up. *Developmental Psychology*, 48(4), pp. 1033–1043; Sparling, J., Ramey, C. T. and Ramey, S. L., 2007. The Abecedarian Experience. In E. Young (Ed.), *Early childhood development from measurement to action: A priority for growth and equity* (pp. 81–99). Washington DC: World Bank Group.
 - 2 Hough, B., Jeon, S. and Kalb, G., 2011. The effects of childcare on child development. Report for the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. Melbourne: Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, University of Melbourne.





Stakeholders also posited that the current funding mechanisms, which are predominantly individual child-based subsidies, only fund Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early years organisations for a limited set of ECEC services and do not recognise the importance of the holistic, family-focused and integrated services these organisations actually provide. Reflecting on the way that holistic services support children's long-term social and emotional needs by enabling them to manage stress and trauma, many early years sector professionals were of the view that increased funding is needed to specifically account for greater staff-to-child ratios so that staff could better carry out these functions.

Service providers also argued that there is a need to increase subsidised access to early education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 0–3, and for targeted funding and greater organisational flexibility to support holistic, community-led early years services that address the barriers families face to support their children's early learning and development needs:

For those most in need, service systems are often inaccessible, cannot respond to their multiple needs and these children and families are falling through the gaps of siloed service delivery. ... In many places there is a drive and passion for collaborative service delivery that puts children and families at the centre, rather than services at the centre — and there are pockets of good practice occurring where dedicated practitioners go above and beyond to achieve it. However, without the authorising and enabling environments within their organisations/ services to work in a collaborative way, dedicated practitioners can only achieve so much for so long — Children's Ground, written submission

There remain ... a number of cost and non-cost barriers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children accessing high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC). One simple way of ensuring all Indigenous children can access enough early learning to make a difference is to waive the activity test for all First Nations families. This would provide all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children with up to 100 hours per fortnight of subsidised early learning — Goodstart Early Learning, written submission

Barriers faced by First Nations children accessing early childhood services can exist at a number of levels and must be addressed in supporting children to thrive in their early years.

- *Individual-level barriers can be the number of children in a family, employment, income, discrimination and housing.*
- *Service-level barriers include issues such as service quality and cultural competency.*
- *Social and neighbourhood barriers include community transience, living conditions, and social and geographical isolation.*
- *Cultural barriers, such as a lack of trust in services or difficulty culturally engaging, can also hinder access — Early Childhood Australia, written submission*

In the early years sector survey, the top three factors that respondents identified as supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to thrive in their early years were:

- access to culturally safe early childhood education and care (73%)
- access to high-quality early childhood education and care (57%)
- greater use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages in educational programs and activities (45%).

The top three factors identified as presenting barriers to this Goal (Figure 2) were:

- lack of holistic/wraparound services to address family needs and support access to early education (56%)
- lack of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood education and care workforce (55%)
- cost of childcare (47%).

The family survey indicated that respondents saw the top three factors supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to thrive in their early years as being:

- quality childcare and early learning (65%)
- culturally safe childcare and early learning (59%)
- health services (57%).

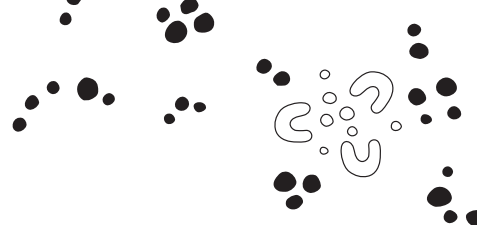
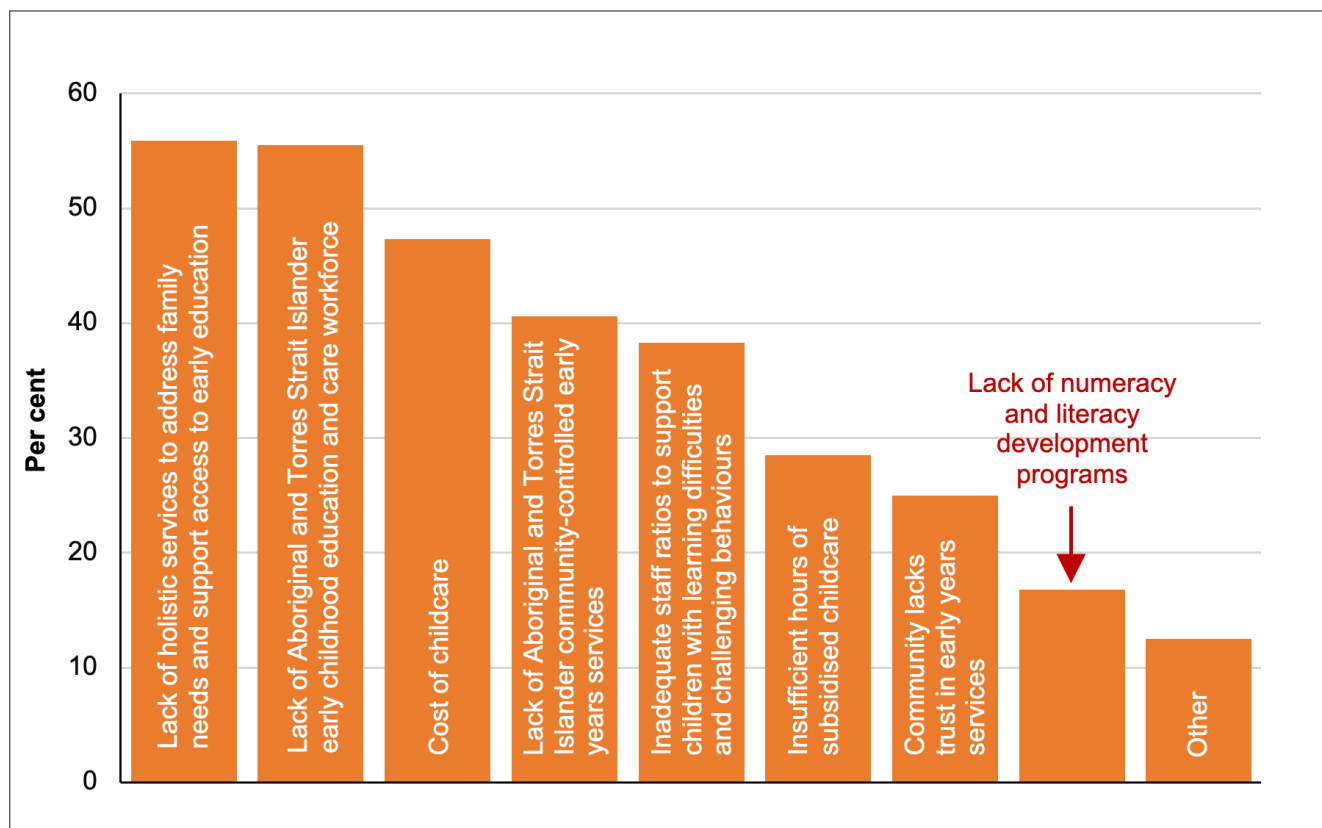


FIGURE 2: What are some of the barriers preventing children from thriving in their early years?


Sector survey responses



Many respondents stated that cost was a major barrier to accessing early learning centres and had especially detrimental impacts on families who were already struggling financially. Some respondents also felt that their local council-run services showed no presence of cultural awareness, support or safety. More positively, a significant majority of respondents (77%) stated that they were able to get support if their children were having challenges with their learning and development; however, given that many of the family surveys were facilitated by Community-controlled early years services who are likely to already be supporting the needs of the children attending, this may not necessarily reflect the overall experience of children and families across the country.

Several actions proposed under this Goal related to funding mechanisms (for both individual families and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community-controlled service providers): for example, removing or amending the Child Care Subsidy Activity Test, and directing additional funding towards community-controlled early

learning services, including services previously funded under the Budget-Based Funding program. Other recommendations centred around actions to grow the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early education and care workforce, improve the cultural safety of the non-Indigenous workforce through professional development, and provide transport options so that families can have easier physical access to ECEC centres.



GOAL 3 – ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CHILDREN ARE SUPPORTED TO ESTABLISH AND MAINTAIN STRONG CONNECTIONS TO CULTURE, COUNTRY, AND LANGUAGE

The importance of culture to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's early development and wellbeing featured strongly throughout all consultation activities. In the family survey, respondents highlighted a range of pathways by which culture helps Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to grow strong, including:

- providing a foundation for children to have pride and sense of belonging, knowing who they are and where they belong
- keeping children informed about the unique role that connects them to lands, waters and traditions
- allowing children to stay connected to their identities, families and communities
- giving children strong purpose, guidance, beliefs, and ethics throughout life.

Culture is life. It is our histories, our present and our futures. It is what has made us so resilient and kept us so strong as peoples. It connects us and should be celebrated. When culture is forgotten, or only one particular culture (White culture) is taught, it creates a divide and disconnects young ones from their education. Taking away culture devalues who we are as individuals. So having the richly diverse and locally focussed cultural inclusions in our education systems helps to build our future generations with confidence and an innate sense of acceptance rather than having to depend on external solutions to help see us as being of value– Response to family survey question: 'How do you think culture helps children grow strong?'

But respondents also identified several specific 'pain points' across the current early years policy and service landscape. For example, in many mainstream services, a lack of education about (and genuine respect for) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural traditions, languages and knowledges means that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service users feel culturally devalued and unsafe, and consequently do not glean the full intended benefits of the service:

Despite good intentions ... First Nations communities are often subject to services and programs which can be foreign in design, language and culture. They are largely delivered by a non-First-Nations workforce, in English and within Western education, health, economic and social practice frameworks. ... For many this has seen children and families systematically excluded from service systems for generations, due to explicit and implicit structural, social, cultural and relational barriers. Non-First Nations staff are often short-term and changeable. Access to basic foundational services in first language are commonplace for many Australian children and families except First Nations children. The distrust of services by many First Nations people is understandable. We cannot expect people to engage in services that are not in their first language, that do not respect their cultural beliefs and that operate within structural parameters that are not understanding of or conducive to their circumstances – Children's Ground, written submission

Service providers, such as childcare and early learning centres, also told us that there was limited support (in terms of both funding and teaching resources) to establish and maintain cultural activities that help children learn about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, Country and languages.

Further, many family and sector survey respondents argued that the importance of children retaining connections to their extended families, and the role of kinship carers in maintaining these connections for children in out-of-home-care, are insufficiently valued by child protection systems. More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children every year are being placed with non-Indigenous carers and in permanent care arrangements that fail to support their cultural and family connections; opportunities for these children to cement a strong sense of cultural identity early on in their lives are thereby lost.

In the early years sector survey, the top three factors that respondents identified as supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to establish and maintain strong connections to culture, Country, and language (Figure 3) were:

- services recognising and prioritising the importance of connection to family, culture and Country (68%)

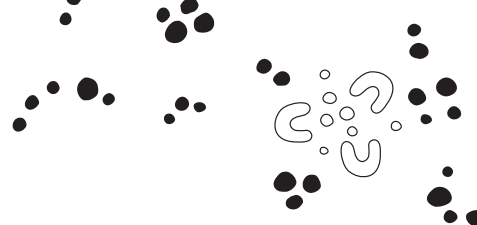
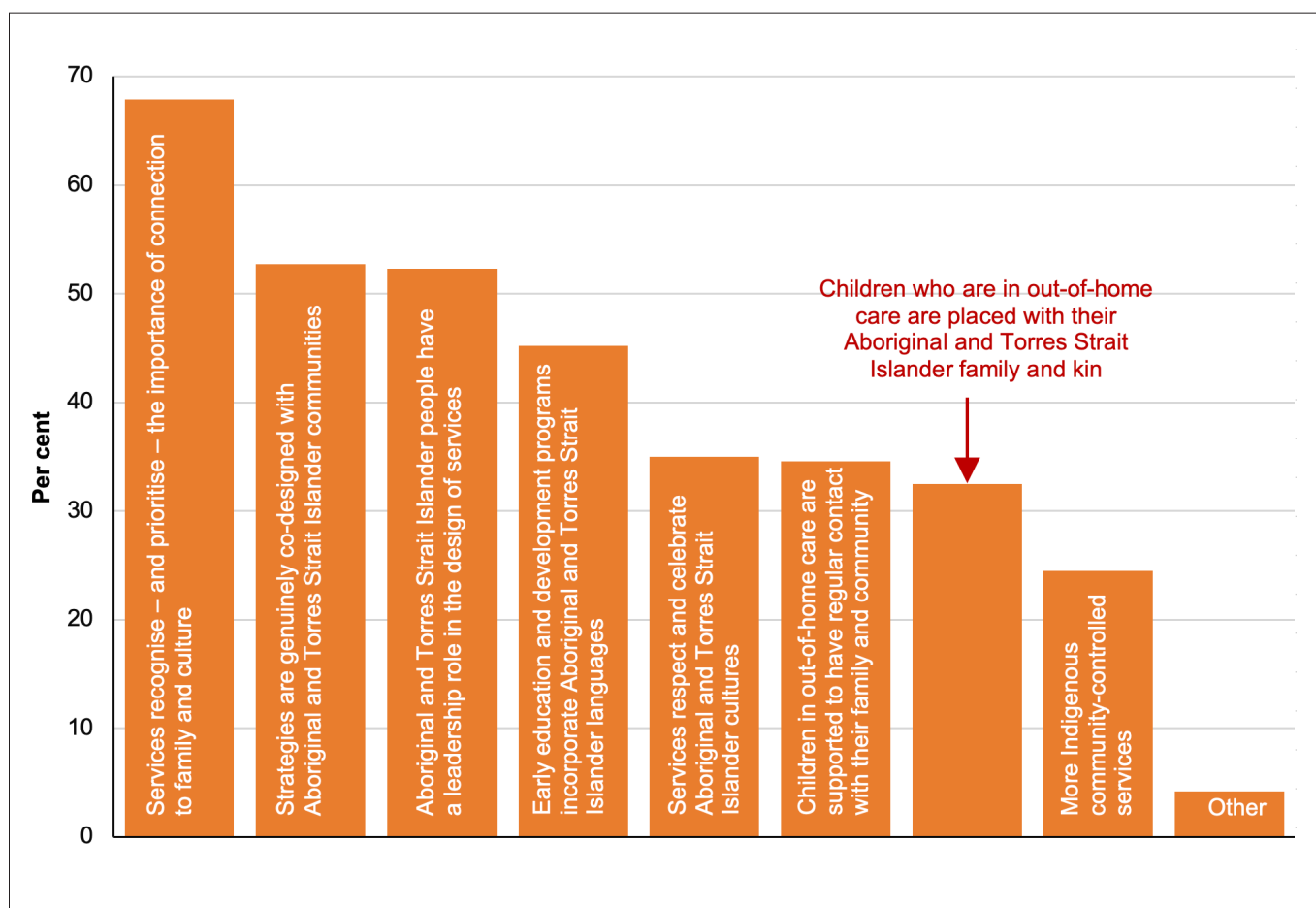


FIGURE 3: What do children and families need for children to be able to establish and maintain strong connections to their culture, Country and language?

Sector survey responses




- government strategies being genuinely co-designed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (53%)
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people having leadership roles in the design of services (52%).

The top three factors identified as presenting barriers to this Goal were:

- failure to meaningfully include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the design of services (58%)
- children already experiencing a lack of connection to their culture, Country, and languages (46%)
- removal of children from communities by child protection services/authorities (43%).

Actions proposed under this Goal highlighted the roles of family groups (helping children learn about cultural knowledge, first languages and connection to Country) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service professionals (delivering services in ways that respect, prioritise and preserve culture and language), and suggested that governments could do more to support these roles by increasing funding opportunities for cultural learning activities, perhaps delivered by partnerships between community groups and ECEC providers. Many stakeholders also suggested that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, and cultural traditions more broadly, should be built into curricula (such as the Early Years Learning Framework) more systematically.



For example, responses to a survey question asking, ‘What are two actions that need to be taken to ensure children are supported to establish and maintain strong connections to culture, Country and language?’ included:

Aboriginal culture needs to be respected and incorporated in service/program design – two ways together — not left as an afterthought or a ‘nice to have’ — sector survey respondent

Specifically customised funding programs for languages are required to ensure that languages become part of early education. Any attempt to ‘cover’ them by linking them with other aspects of culture have failed because language is a cognitive area that must be taught in a structured way – sector survey respondent

[Recommended action] Increase funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language programs in early years programs, including for the support and training of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language teachers through language centres. This should include funding for the recognition and support of non-traditional Indigenous languages (such as Kriol) in the early learning space – sector survey respondent

Other respondents recommended that: the implementation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle (ATSICPP) should be better enforced, such that fewer Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are placed with non-Indigenous or non-family carers; cultural awareness and cultural safety training should be mandatory for all people working in the early years service sector; and all Australians should be better educated about the impacts of colonisation and dispossession on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s life experiences.

GOAL 4 – ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CHILDREN GROW UP IN SAFE NURTURING HOMES, SUPPORTED BY STRONG FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

Responses around Goal 4 highlighted the holistic, multidisciplinary nature of the factors that are needed to help ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children’s homes and families are

safe and nurturing, and to combat the devastating over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in child protection systems. Many of these factors aligned closely with the priorities that SNAICC heard earlier in 2021 during extensive consultations to inform *Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children 2021–2031* (the National Framework), with those consultations also informing SNAICC’s development of Goal 4. *National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children Successor Plan – Consultations Report*³ identifies the following key findings of SNAICC’s consultations:

- Stakeholders were acutely concerned that the child protection system is too punitive — and not supportive enough — to effectively support parents to keep their children or have them reunified. Relatedly, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were concerned about the implementation of the ATSICPP, arguing that the onus should be on child protection agencies to prove that they were making all reasonable efforts to implement all elements of the ATSICPP.
- There were widely-held concerns about child protection systems not reflecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural values, with some stakeholders particularly concerned that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were too often placed with non-Indigenous carers, separating them from their vital cultural and kinship connections.
- There were also widespread concerns about a lack of accountability and transparency — across all levels of government — around child protection issues, including resourcing and investment.
- Finally, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples expressed frustration at continually being consulted to provide advice on long-standing issues, with little action taken to address child protection issues despite the same recommendations being made (including by numerous government inquiries) year after year. Governments were perceived to be lacking the political will to implement the actions needed to rectify child protection over-representation.

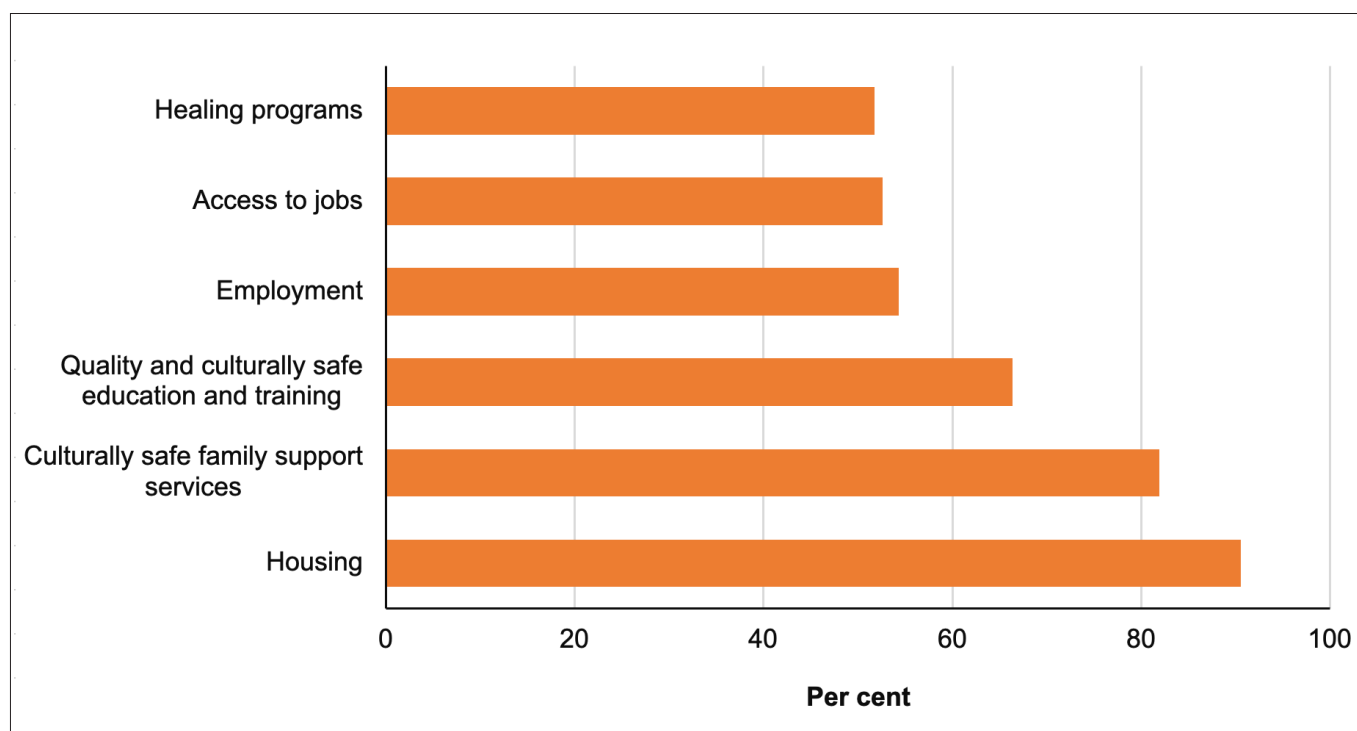
The first finding, in particular, was echoed in consultations for the Strategy, with many stakeholders highlighting a need for child protection systems to undergo a systemic shift (from crisis

3 Krakouer, J., Solomon, N., Hillan, L. and Burton, J. (2021). *National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children Successor Plan – Consultations Report*. Melbourne: SNAICC, pp. 4–5



FIGURE 4: What helps families and communities be safe, loving, and strong for their children?

Family survey responses



mode and punitive responses, to a focus on prevention and early intervention], and several families stating that they remain fearful of seeking help from governments because they view the system as geared towards removing children rather than supporting them to address challenges and meet their children's needs.

Access to, and affordability of, safe and secure housing was also ranked as a critical requirement to support family and community safety. The Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Forum (AHHF), for example, wrote that:

A human right, legislated through a raft of international law, housing and shelter are the bedrock in the human hierarchy of need. But beyond meeting a fundamental material need, housing also provides a platform for physical health and stability, supporting improved access to employment, education and training. For Aboriginal people in particular, culturally appropriate housing enriches our spiritual wellbeing, our mental health and our engagement in core cultural practices. Without solid housing, Aboriginal people, including children in their early years, are set up to fail. The blame does not lie with individuals but with inherited dispossession. Inadequate housing is deeply implicated in system failures and undermines efforts to close the gap – AHHF, written submission

The high priority placed on housing was also reflected in the early years sector survey, where the top three factors identified as being needed for children to grow up in safe nurturing homes, supported by strong families and communities, were:


- appropriate and affordable housing (63%)
- culturally safe early intervention and prevention services (55%)
- culturally responsive, trauma-informed healing programs (46%).

The top three factors identified as presenting barriers to achieving this Goal were:

- intergenerational trauma and lack of healing supports (65%)
- household poverty (42%)
- lack of support services for parental issues (such as mental ill health, family violence, or substance misuse) (35%).

Responses to the family survey placed even greater importance on housing, with the top three support factors for safe and nurturing homes (Figure 4) being ranked as:

- housing (91%)
- culturally safe family support services (82%)
- quality, culturally safe education and training (66%).



While almost 80% of family survey respondents stated that they could get the supports they needed if they were experiencing challenges in caring for children and keeping them safe, respondents to both surveys highlighted several priority actions that were needed to bring about improved outcomes, including: an increase in targeted funding for holistic/wraparound Community-controlled family support services; better cultural safety of disability support services (through, for example, a mechanism for ongoing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander input into NDIS policy design); and child protection systems taking a trauma-informed approach to families experiencing challenges.

GOAL 5 – ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES ARE ACTIVE PARTNERS IN BUILDING A BETTER SERVICE SYSTEM

As seen in many of the responses described above, stakeholders considered it essential that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities and organisations have genuine input into the design and delivery of services affecting children and families. This aligns closely with Priority Reform One of the National Agreement, under which Australian, state and territory, and local governments committed to building and strengthening structures that empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to share decision-making authority with governments to accelerate policy and place-based progress against Closing the Gap (clause 28). But responses were mixed as to whether families and the local community felt like they were part of the local design and delivery of programs and activities (61% of respondents to the family survey stated that they always, or mostly, had a say in the services and supports that were provided to their families).

The continued existence of systemic racism contributes significantly to the lack of Decision-making structures that involve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities and organisations. Less than two thirds of respondents to the family survey (62%) felt that the early childhood services in their community respected and reflected their culture. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner June Oscar and National Children's Commissioner Anne Hollonds highlighted the dangerous consequences of such racism and the need for governments and mainstream service providers to combat its existence, in line with Priority Reform Three of the National Agreement:

While the community-controlled sector is to be prioritised, more must also be done to ensure mainstream services are culturally responsive. Throughout Wiyi Yani U Thangani, many [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander] women spoke of pervasive discrimination as a deterrent from engaging with hospitals or antenatal programs – Australian Human Rights Commission, written submission

In the early years sector survey, respondents identified the three key factors that would enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities to be active partners in building a better service system as:

- community-led design of programs and services for children and families (53%)
- a strong and well-resourced Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce (53%)
- an increase in formal partnerships and shared decision-making with governments (52%).

The top three factors identified as presenting barriers to this Goal (figure 5) were:

- lack of investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce development (46%)
- lack of effective co-design processes (43%)
- lack of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's involvement in defining the outcomes and measures of success for children and families (41%).

In terms of actions proposed under this Goal, many stakeholders highlighted a need to create more opportunities for parents, families and the community to be actively involved in local governance. There was also a call for governments to direct more funding towards expanding and strengthening the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce (particularly in the community-controlled sector), in line with Priority Reform Two of the National Agreement:

Reform in workforce and employment is critical to achieve systems change and is key to services and systems being community-led. Only a local First Nations service delivery workforce can ensure the provision of culturally safe and appropriate services and programs, delivered through the culture and language of those they are seeking to engage and support. Engaging local people as service delivery staff means they are the agents of change and this shifts their relationship with services from one of dependence and need to one of power and self-determination. The focus should be on building a sustainable local workforce which creates empowerment – Children's Ground, written submission

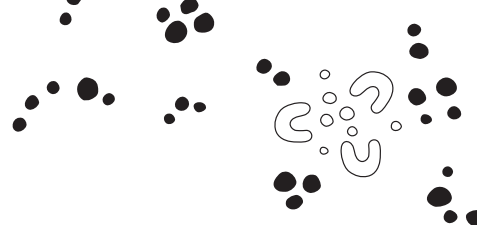
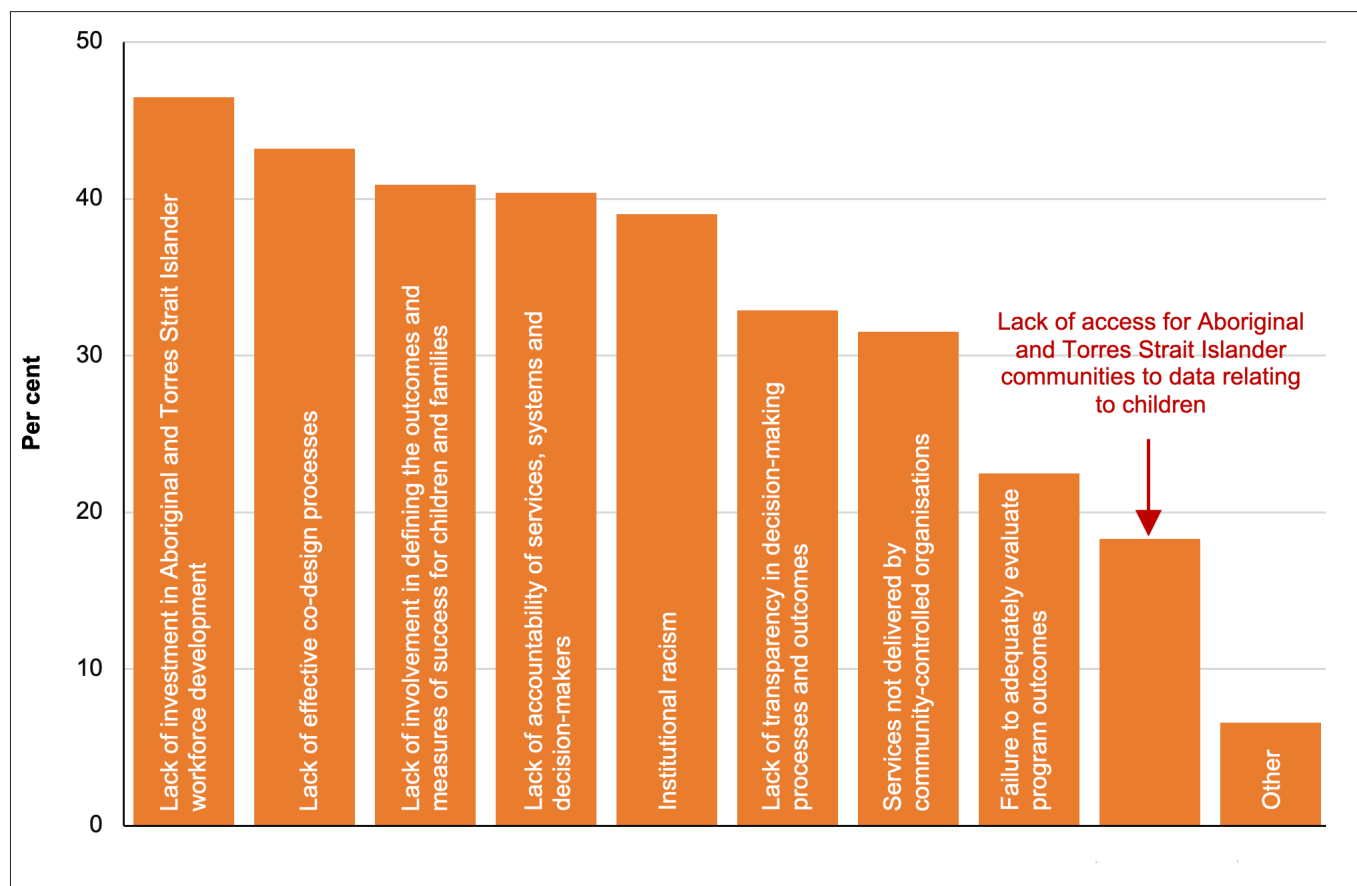


FIGURE 5: What barriers are preventing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities from being active partners in building a better service system?

Sector survey responses





OTHER THEMES

THE NEED FOR IMPLEMENTATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY FRAMEWORKS THAT PRIORITISE ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER WAYS OF MEASURING SUCCESS

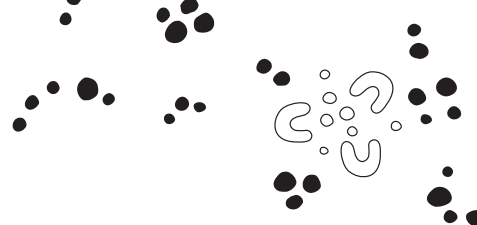
Many respondents to the early years sector survey stated that, to maximise the Strategy's effectiveness, there needs to be a detailed implementation plan that is supported by governments, otherwise the Strategy and its Vision would just become another report. The need for greater accountability by governments, as well as organisations who are delivering services and programs, was also highlighted. Elaborating on this need for accountability, submissions discussed the importance of rigorous monitoring and evaluation systems that are driven by – or, at the very least, developed in partnership with – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, such that measures of success genuinely reflect what is most important to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities:

It is essential that [an accountability framework] is robust, that it specifically identifies the institutions responsible for implementing actions under the Strategy and that there are appropriate mechanisms in place to ensure outcomes are reached. It is also essential that this framework is developed in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and that measurements and targets are relevant, culturally appropriate and agreed to by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people – June Oscar and Anne Hollonds, Australian Human Rights Commission, written submission

There is a scarcity of rigorous evaluation being undertaken in Australia in relation to sustained community-led approaches to improving outcomes for First Nations children and families. This is in part because there are minimal opportunities for longitudinal evaluation of sustained programs due to short-term piecemeal funding. ... We need to invest in generating evidence of local approaches that are led and evidenced by First Nations people and communities. We need to start backing and supporting our First Nations communities to design, deliver and evaluate their own solutions because this will enable the users to hold the child and family service system and funders to account – Children's Ground, written submission

While the importance of monitoring and evaluation was generally raised in a whole-of-Strategy context, this also aligns with two focus areas proposed under Goal 5 in the Framework:

- **Data sovereignty** – Develop and implement partnerships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and governments to guide the design, collection, interpretation and use of data relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and at a regional level. Support implementation of Closing the Gap Priority Reform Four: Shared Access to Data and Information at a Regional Level.
- **Indigenous Evaluation Strategy** – Support across all levels of government to implement the Productivity Commission's recommendations for an Indigenous Evaluation Strategy to improve evaluation outcomes, enabling opportunities to identify and scale up good practice.



THE 'NEXT STEPS' IDENTIFIED BY STAKEHOLDERS AS KEY EARLY OPPORTUNITIES

Feedback raised the importance of kickstarting implementation if the Strategy is to achieve real change in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families across Australia.

Four key 'next steps' were proposed in stakeholder consultations that could help to ensure the Strategy's implementation proceeds in alignment with its objectives and stakeholders' key priorities.

1. STATE AND TERRITORY GOVERNMENTS CONSIDER AND RESPOND TO THE STRATEGY

Given the broad range of human service sectors identified in consultations as priorities for improvement, the need for children and families to be able to access holistic/wraparound services, and the importance of systemic reform to Decision-making structures, state and territory governments have a significant role to play in supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to be born and remain healthy, nurtured by strong families and enabled to thrive in their early years. As a national strategy, all states and territories should also consider and respond to the Strategy, identifying opportunities for implementation in their own jurisdictions.

2. IMPLEMENTATION PLANS FOR CLOSING THE GAP

To maximise the practical impact of this Strategy, the Australian, state and territory governments should also look to formally incorporate the proposed Opportunities for each Goal into their Jurisdictional Implementation Plans for Closing the Gap over the coming years (noting that the

Strategy is a key initiative to achieve Early Childhood Outcomes 3 and 4 of the National Agreement). Under Clause 55 of the National Agreement all governments agreed to implement measures to increase the proportion of services delivered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations across Closing the Gap outcomes, including by:

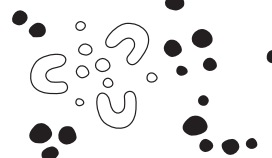
- implementing funding prioritisation policies that require decisions about the provision of services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities to preference Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations
- allocating meaningful proportions of new funding initiatives to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations with relevant expertise (particularly community-controlled organisations), where the new initiatives are intended to service the broader Australian population across socioeconomic outcome areas of the National Agreement.

Many stakeholders emphasised in particular that governments' Jurisdictional Implementation Plans should include funding prioritisation policies, as described above, across the early years sectors.

3. STRENGTHENING THE ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER COMMUNITY-CONTROLLED EARLY YEARS SECTORS

The Coalition of Peaks and governments across Australia have highlighted the importance of strengthening the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community-controlled early sectors to support self-determination, to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a strong voice in determining a positive future for their children, and





to enable more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families to access the culturally safe, locally tailored services that they need. Several relevant initiatives are underway.

EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND DEVELOPMENT SECTOR STRENGTHENING PLAN

Under Priority Reform Two of the National Agreement, government parties committed to building strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community-controlled sectors and organisations (clause 46). Early childhood care and development was identified as one of the first priority sectors for which government and Community-controlled parties would jointly develop national Sector Strengthening Plans in order to progress this commitment. As the national peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's safety, development and wellbeing, SNAICC is partnering, through the Coalition of Peaks, with Australian, state and territory governments in the co-design of the Closing the Gap Early Childhood Care and Development Sector Strengthening Plan. This Plan is due to be endorsed by the end of 2021 and will aim to target the following four key elements of a strong Community-controlled sector (per clause 45 of the National Agreement):

- sustained capacity building and investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations
- a dedicated and identified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce, as part of a labour market in which people working in community-controlled sectors have wage parity
- a sectoral peak body, governed by a majority Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander board and having strong governance and policy development capacity, to represent the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations that deliver common services
- a dedicated, reliable and consistent funding model (designed to suit the types of services required by communities) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations that deliver common services.

These elements align closely with many of the key Outcomes and Opportunities put forward by stakeholders in consultation for the Strategy. As such, Australian, state and territory governments should commit to fully implementing the Early

Childhood Care and Development Sector Strengthening Plan upon its completion.

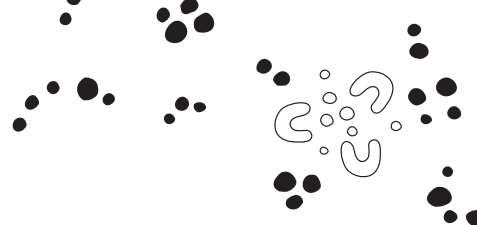
OTHER ONGOING INITIATIVES

SNAICC is also undertaking several other pieces of work to help strengthen the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled early years workforce, including:

- the establishment of a community-controlled Early Years Support Intermediary in New South Wales, and an expansion of these supports into Western Australia and Victoria in 2022, which will provide expertise, representation and support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early years services across the state, enabling participating services to build on their strengths to increase their workforce, impact, quality and voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families in line with their community-defined needs and priorities
- contributing to the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority's development of the *Shaping Our Future — National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy* (2022–31) as part of the National Stakeholder Reference Group.

Much of SNAICC's other work also reflects the importance of building and strengthening the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector. In partnership with the Australian, state and territory governments (via the intergovernmental mechanisms of the Communities Services Ministers' Forum and Children and Families Secretaries' Group), SNAICC has worked to develop *Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031*. SNAICC's work in this process has included a focus on ensuring that the National Framework incorporates priorities for building Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community-controlled organisations in the child and family sector, including to promote and enable the full implementation of the ATSI CPP, and that these priorities are cemented within dedicated implementation plans for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

As the lead organisation of the Family Matters campaign, SNAICC spearheads calls for overarching policy and practice reform — including the prioritisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community-controlled services — in the child and



family wellbeing space, via the four evidence-based Family Matters building blocks (building block 1, for example, requires that: 'All families enjoy access to quality, culturally safe, universal and targeted services necessary for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to thrive').

4. OVERSIGHT, MONITORING AND EVALUATION MECHANISMS

Reflecting the importance that stakeholders placed upon accountability for this Strategy, the Australian Government should support governance and monitoring and evaluation arrangements that reflect partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for overseeing and measuring the success of the Strategy.

Monitoring and evaluation help to systematically strengthen practice to support children to thrive in their early years by providing evidence on measurable impact, enabling continuous improvement, and supporting accountability. As such, robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms for the Strategy, and for the programs and activities that target its Goals and Outcomes, will be important considerations for governments across the country.

Per clauses 30–38 of the National Agreement, an early childhood care and development policy partnership is to convene for the first time in 2022. The purposes of policy partnerships are to pursue a 'joined up approach' to priority policy areas, and to provide enduring mechanisms by which governments can continue to partner with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in co-designing policy (in line with Priority Reform One). These purposes align with the concerns expressed by stakeholders in this engagement process about vulnerable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families falling through the cracks of siloed systems and the need for greater involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the design and delivery of services. The early childhood care and development policy partnership, which is likely to include the Australian state and territory governments, SNAICC, and other relevant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations in the early childhood space, would therefore be well positioned to provide a mechanism to monitor and review Strategy progress at regular intervals.