

Creating Structural Change Through Shared Decision-Making: Guidance for Government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Organisations

November 2025

Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and recognise their continuing connection to land, waters, and community.

We pay our respects to the Traditional Custodians, their cultures, and to elders both past and present. We acknowledge the important contribution that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have made to the development of this guidance.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be aware that this document may contain images of deceased persons in photographs.

Note from the Authors

This guidance has been developed by Coolamon Advisors, in partnership with SNAICC – National Voice for our Children. Coolamon Advisors is an Indigenous majority owned and managed company, committed to meaningful contributions to Indigenous development, participation and outcome equity. SNAICC is the national peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, advocating for their right to grow up healthy, strong and self-determined and connected to culture and community.

The guidance is informed by input from governments and the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, whose wisdom and lived experience has shaped the final version of this document. We thank all people involved in this project for generously offering their time, knowledge and expertise.

The Shared Decision-Making Guidance is a practical toolkit. It aims to provide succinct, easy to follow, adaptable advice for ACCOs and governments. It is suitable for organisations and partnerships of all maturity levels interested in pathways toward sustainable, effective and equal shared decision-making. For ACCOs, it provides information to participate in shared decision-making with government from a strong, knowledgeable position, grounded in self-determination. For governments, it offers reflections on what it means to share decision-making with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. For all parties, it provides the tools and rubric necessary to create a shared understanding of shared decision-making and put this into practice.

This guidance is most effective when utilised in addition to other existing tools and resources, some of which this document outlines in more detail. The guidance is not an exhaustive document with all the answers. It provides possible solutions to what are specific, context and place-based challenges. We invite users to consider how the guidance can be tailored to their specific situations.

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1. Introduction

1.1 What is shared decision-making?

Through Priority Reform One (PR1) of the National Agreement on [Closing the Gap](#), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and Australian Governments have committed to work together as equal partners when making decisions that affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. This is referred to as shared decision-making.

It is about sharing power and responsibilities so that policies, programs and services reflect the knowledge, priorities and needs of the people they impact. Closing the Gap is underpinned by the belief that when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are included and have a genuine say in the design and delivery of services, policies and programs that affect them, better life outcomes are achieved.

This approach recognises the expertise of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in their own communities and ensures they are actively involved in shaping solutions from the start, not just consulted at the end.

Shared decision-making is also closely connected to Priority Reform Three (PR3), which commits governments to transform their own organisations to enable these partnerships.

This includes eliminating racism, embedding cultural safety, delivering services in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, increasing funding transparency, supporting truth-telling, and improving how governments engage. These transformation elements provide the foundation for governments to work differently and ensure shared decision-making is meaningful and sustainable.

1.2 Shared decision-making pathway

Shared decision-making can be understood through five key milestones or a pathway that represents the essential phases of building and sustaining strong partnerships.

Whilst it is not a strict linear process (partnerships may move back and forth between phases or revisit steps), this view provides a practical way to understand what is required at different points in the journey.

Each milestone highlights the actions and considerations needed to strengthen cultural authority¹, build trust, and support effective decision-making.

¹ Cultural authority is the recognised legitimacy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to speak for Country, culture, and community, grounded in Indigenous law, lore, and tradition.

It underpins governance and decision-making and should not be confused with 'Elders', as authority is defined by community recognition and cultural protocols. Adapted from Treaty Authority 2023.

1. **Suitability of Approach:** Confirm that shared decision-making is the right approach and that it reflects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander priorities and leadership.
2. **Commitment to Shared Decision-Making:** Agree on the purpose, scope and a genuine commitment to working in partnership.
3. **Formalise Partnership:** Put formal agreements in place, supported by culturally safe governance and clear protocols and funding to deliver on the Partnership's commitments.
4. **Engage in Shared Decision-Making:** Ensure all partners are empowered, informed, and equipped to take part in decision-making.
5. **Sustain and Improve:** Maintain the partnership through continuous improvement and accountability to the community.

1.3 Purpose of this document

This guidance is a step-by-step resource for implementing shared decision-making between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and communities, and government bodies.

This document aims to:

- ensure decisions are consistently shaped by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices
- ground processes in cultural authority
- deliver solutions that address the real challenges faced by communities.

Shared decision-making is central to achieving the Closing the Gap targets. By ensuring decisions are shaped by

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices from the outset, policies, programs, and services are more likely to reflect community priorities, address systemic barriers, and deliver better outcomes on the ground.

Without this approach, there is a risk that efforts may not lead to sustained change, and that opportunities to strengthen engagement and improve service delivery could be missed.

The guidance also highlights common barriers to shared decision-making, practical examples and case studies of shared decision-making in practice and advice for governments on operating more effectively in these environments.

The guidance in this document is primarily intended for the Early Childhood, Care and Development (ECCD) sector; however, many of the following principles can also be leveraged across other relevant sectors. The guidance is also intended to be an iterative document, able to be updated and refined in consultation with the ECCD sector over time.

All guidance within this document is in alignment with the [Australian Public Service Commission's \(APSC\) First Nations Partnership Playbook](#), which provides the APS with practical best-practice examples on working in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This guidance was also developed to reflect findings from the [Australia and New Zealand School of Government \(ANZSOG\)](#) regarding Priority Reform One (PR1) of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

SNAICC's Partnership Training Manual also shares many of the same principles regarding the establishment of a partnership, though it focuses on

partnerships between community organisations and not governments.

The manual is useful for those seeking further ACCO-specific information, such as guidance on finances, governance and capacity building for ACCOs.

1.4 How to use the guidance

The document starts by explaining the shared decision-making process and considers how ready a partnership is to work together. This readiness can range from early, informal collaboration to formal partnership agreements.

The following sections then deep dive into each step, including suggested actions and advice on what to do if they cannot be

met. Chapters also include examples of shared decision making in practice to support practical application, as well as common challenges to look out for. Relevant supporting templates for each phase are also available in the [Annex](#) for practical use.

It is also important to recognise that government decision-making operates within legislative, policy and procedural frameworks, which can create both opportunities and limits for how shared decision-making is applied in practice.

This guidance is intended to sit alongside these requirements and highlight ways to strengthen collaboration within them.

Table 1: Who can use this document?

Relevant audience
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders (including ACCOs) can use this document to plan and strengthen their engagement with government. It will also support reflections on internal readiness for shared decision-making, including governance structures, cultural leadership, and capacity to participate.
Governments (including agencies and policymakers) can use it to align their processes with shared decision-making principles when engaging with ACCOs and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. This document will help gauge the readiness to understand where extra resources, capacity building or support may be required.
Non-Indigenous Community stakeholders (including non-Indigenous service providers, peak bodies, advocacy groups) can use it to ensure their role supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and their priorities.

1.5 Government enablers for effective partnerships

Successful shared decision-making depends on governments creating the right conditions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation as equal partners. Key enablers listed below are directly tied to the commitments under Priority Reform 3, focusing on the necessary internal transformation required to support genuine partnership and shared decision-making. Government should aim to embed:

Authority & Commitment

- Ensure government representatives have clear delegations and authority to engage in shared decision-making.
- Involve the right departments and agencies from the outset.
- Embed Priority Reform One across all relevant policies, programs and funding.

Cultural Safety

- Mandate cultural safety training for non-Indigenous staff.
- Follow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander protocols and ways of working.
- Uphold Indigenous Data Sovereignty in data collection, storage and use.

Power-Sharing

- Be willing to cede control and embed shared decision-making.
- Replace transactional contracts with co-designed agreements.
- Use protocols that respect cultural leadership and prevent dominance by one partner.

Governance & Accountability

- Establish clear shared governance structures (e.g. joint steering committees, co-chairs), including dispute resolution pathways.
- Embed accountability mechanisms (KPIs, regular reporting to community, independent reviews).

Resourcing

- Provide stable and flexible funding and resourcing to support ACCOs' participation.
- Allocate budgets for fair remuneration of knowledge and expertise and leadership contributions.
- Invest in capacity-building for both government and ACCOs.

Sustainability

- Integrate shared decision-making into long-term policy frameworks, budget cycles and agency operating models.
- Build systems for ongoing review, feedback and improvement (e.g. partnership health checks).

2. Shared Decision-Making Pathway

(a) Pathway for ACCOs

The following figure outlines a shared decision-making pathway for ACCOs, with suggested considerations for organisations at early, developing, and established partnership stages (see [Annex H – Organisation Maturity Assessment](#)). This is intended as guidance and not an exhaustive list.

Figure 1: Shared Decision-Making Pathway for ACCOs

	1 Is shared decision-making a suitable approach for the initiative?	2 Is there a commitment to shared decision-making?	3 Are formal agreements in place to support the partnership?
	a) Are the outcomes of this initiative clearly defined, and do they align with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap? b) Do we have the right Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, authority and wisdom guiding this initiative? c) Do the government representatives at the table hold the right level of decision-making authority and accountability?	d) Is cultural leadership and authority valued and appropriately remunerated? e) Have all partners agreed on a shared problem statement, defined goals and scope for the initiative f) Do all members agree and commit time, resources and accountability measures?	g) Do governance structures clearly define roles, responsibilities, funding and ways of working? h) Do decision-making processes reflect community governance and cultural practices and ensure community priorities are embedded? i) Are agreements, decisions, and records documented in ways that reflect community practices and stored in culturally safe and accessible ways?
Early Partnerships: Engagement built on trust and limited formal structures.	☐ Community priorities and outcomes are clarified in the local forum. ☐ The right cultural leaders identified by community. ☐ Government presence confirmed, but authority may be limited.	☐ Agree on shared principles for collaboration. ☐ Ensure knowledge & expertise, time and leadership are valued and remunerated from the outset. ☐ Discuss resourcing needs, even if commitments are ad hoc.	☐ Define roles and expectations through trust and relationship. ☐ Keep notes or a simple record of decisions. ☐ Use ad hoc agreements or statements of intent.
Some Partnership Experience: Growing experience in shared decision-making with some formal structures.	☐ Outcomes and scope jointly defined in scoping workshops. ☐ Cultural leadership validated through community networks or peaks. ☐ Government agencies and/or departments at the table, though authority may vary.	☐ Develop TORs or an MOU with partners. ☐ Co-create goals and a clear scope for the initiative. ☐ Agree on time and accountability commitments with government.	☐ Establish a steering group or governance forum with co-chairing arrangements. ☐ Agree on clear decision-making protocols. ☐ Sign and maintain TORs or MOUs.
Well Established Partnerships: Leads decision-making processes, resourced with formal agreements, shared governance and long-term sustainability.	☐ Map initiative objectives explicitly to PR1 clauses. ☐ Embed cultural leadership in governance structures. ☐ Hold government accountable for ensuring delegates with authority and resources attend.	☐ Negotiate and sign a detailed partnership agreement (with clear scope, goals and resourcing). ☐ Secure stable funding that enables equal participation.	☐ Lead or co-lead governance bodies with government. ☐ Ensure protocols embed cultural leadership and Indigenous Data Sovereignty. ☐ Maintain formal resources. ☐ Regularly review governance arrangements.

(a) Pathway for ACCOs (continued)

The following figure outlines a shared decision-making pathway for ACCOs, with suggested considerations for organisations at early, developing, and established partnership stages (see [Annex H – Organisation Maturity Assessment](#)). This is intended as guidance and not an exhaustive list.

	4 Are all partners empowered and equipped to participate in shared decision-making?	5 Is there a shared commitment to sustain and improve the partnership?
	a) Do agreed governance structures and cultural protocols reflect community authority and priorities? b) Are community priorities and cultural practices embedded in decisions? c) Is information received in formats that are culturally appropriate, accessible, and useful? d) Are accountability processes responsive to community priorities and do they demonstrate shared ownership of outcomes?	e) Is the partnership's effectiveness regularly reviewed to support ongoing learning and improvement?? f) Is there a shared commitment to long-term governance, conflict resolution, and collaboration renewals, refreshes, or recommitments? g) Is community feedback on the partnership actively sought and used to adapt or improve processes? h) Is progress regularly celebrated, and trust actively maintained?
Early Partnerships: Engagement built on trust and limited formal structures.	☐ Participate in meetings and decisions by consensus. ☐ Apply basic cultural protocols. ☐ Request information in simple or verbal formats. ☐ Hold partners to account informally.	☐ Maintain relationships through ongoing dialogue and trust. ☐ Reflect on lessons informally with partners. ☐ Celebration of achievements in community.
Some Partnership Experience: Growing experience in shared decision-making with some formal structures.	☐ Participate in structured governance processes. ☐ Ensure cultural protocols are consistently applied in meeting. ☐ Request documents and data in accessible, plain-language formats. ☐ Document shared accountability.	☐ Conduct regular partnership reviews. ☐ Engage community feedback, e.g. forums, surveys or yarning circles. ☐ Track risks in a simple register. ☐ Recognise achievements jointly with government.
Well Established Partnerships: Leads decision-making processes, resourced with formal agreements, shared governance and long-term sustainability.	☐ Actively shape decisions in formal governance forums. ☐ Ensure cultural safety is resourced. ☐ Oversee transparent sharing of budgets, data and reports. ☐ Co-develop and deliver accountability reports to community.	☐ Lead health checks and independent reviews with partners. ☐ Embed continuous improvement into agreements and governance. ☐ Celebrate achievements publicly and transparently.

(b) Pathway for Government

The following figure outlines the shared decision-making pathway and considerations for *Governments* (see [Annex H – Organisation Maturity Assessment](#)). Note: this is not an exhaustive list but suggested guidance.

Figure 2: Shared Decision-Making Pathway for Governments

1. Is shared decision-making a suitable approach for the initiative?	2. Is there a commitment to shared decision-making?	3. Are there formal agreements in place to support the partnership?
a) Policy Reform Alignment Does the initiative align to PR1 to provide genuine opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership? Yes? Move to question 1b. No? Consider the action below. ☐ Adapt to provide a genuine opportunity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership to shape outcomes.	a) Value and remunerate knowledge & expertise Is a meaningful and ongoing proportion of funding /remuneration allocated to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations participation? Yes? Move to question 2b. No? Consider the action below. ☐ The ongoing involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait members must be ensured through fair remuneration and by actively incorporating their insights into the project.	a) Shared governance structures Are formal governance structures in place that support shared leadership, clarity of responsibilities, and accountability mechanisms? Yes? Move to question 3b. No? Consider the action below. ☐ Review/develop a formal Partnership Agreement as a replacement for traditional service-provider contracts.
b) Right cultural & community leadership Have we engaged with the appropriate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural and community leaders, Elders, or knowledge holders? Yes? Move to question 1c. No? Consider the action below. ☐ Engage with community networks to identify the appropriate cultural and community leaders, Elders, or knowledge holders for the initiative.	b) Shared purpose, goals and scope Have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders been involved to jointly design goals and scope to ensure alignment, clarity and collective ownership? Yes? Move to question 2c. No? Consider the action below. ☐ Jointly design and agree on goals, scope, and intended outcomes with community to ensure alignment, clarity, and collective ownership.	b) Protocols for decision-making Are decision-making protocols clear, consistently applied and supported with resources that uphold cultural safety and agreed governance structures? Yes? Move to question 3c. No? Consider the action below. ☐ Work with partners to establish cultural safety and clarity on approvals and escalation processes. Consistently maintain agreed protocols to build trust and accountability.
c) Government authority Have we ensured representatives have the appropriate delegations and authority to make decisions? Yes? Move to question 2. No? Consider the action below. ☐ Ensure the right people are involved in the initiative and decisions made by shared decision-making are enacted.	c) Commit time, resources, and accountability Are the capacity and service demand of community-controlled organisations considered and reported when determining timeframes and resources? Yes? Move to question 3. No? Consider the action below. ☐ Develop a shared budget and project plan allocating time, funding, and resources for all partners to participate equally. Determine the best means of accurately reporting back.	c) Documented agreements and records Are agreements and records consistent and accessible in culturally appropriate and user-friendly formats? Yes? Move to question 4. No? Consider the action below. ☐ Establish formal record-keeping practices that capture decisions and ensure records respect Indigenous Data Sovereignty.

(b) Pathway for Government (continued)

The following figure outlines the shared decision-making pathway and considerations for Governments (see [Annex H – Organisation Maturity Assessment](#)). Note: this is not an exhaustive list but suggested guidance.

Figure 2: Shared Decision-Making Pathway for Governments

4. Are all partners empowered and equipped to participate in shared decision-making?	5. Is there a shared commitment to sustain and improve the partnership?
a) Shared decision-making in practice Are agreed governance structures being used and processes not reverting to standard government practices? Yes? Move to question 4b. No? Consider the action below. ☐ Ensure consistent use of structures and adjust where they limit decisions.	a) Continuous improvement Does government provide resources, data, and opportunities for joint reflection, so reviews are meaningful and lead to real improvements? Yes? Move to question 5b. No? Consider the action below ☐ Initiate a formal review of the collaboration's effectiveness and function.
b) Ensure culturally safe engagement Is cultural safety meaningfully embedded and have government members/partners to the agreement undergone cultural competency training? Yes? Move to question 4c. No? Consider the action below. ☐ Mandate cultural safety training, embed departmental expectations in processes, and act on partner reviews.	b) Long-term governance Has government committed to embedding the partnership in long-term policy and funding cycles, rather than relying on short-term programs or pilots? Yes? Move to question 5c. No? Consider the action below ☐ Commit to embedding partnership principles in policy frameworks and funding cycles to protect continuity.
c) Share information openly Are all information, resources, and budgets shared openly and in plain language, ensuring transparency and enabling partners to participate on equal footing? Yes? Move to question 4d. No? Consider the action below. ☐ Share information in plain language, use shared workspaces, and update protocols to respect Indigenous Data Sovereignty.	c) Feedback loops Does government ensure feedback mechanisms are accessible, respond transparently to community input, and adapt systems or policies where required? Yes? Move to question 5d. No? Consider the action below ☐ Establish feedback mechanisms to ensure community and partnership feedback is regularly sought and incorporated.
d) Maintain shared accountability Is there shared access to key data to monitor the progress against agreed targets and efforts to close the gap? Yes? Move to question 5. No? Consider the action below. ☐ Establish mechanisms to track progress, embed feedback loops, and report openly on resource use.	d) Recognise progress, build trust Does government publicly report on outcomes, celebrate shared achievements, and demonstrate accountability back to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities? No? Consider the action below ☐ Document and share successful practices with other departments and teams for wider implementation.

3. Step (1) Suitability of Approach

3.1 Introduction

Before engaging in shared decision-making, it is important to confirm that the right conditions have been ensured so that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will be empowered to effectively engage in shared decision-making with governments. If any gaps are identified, they should be addressed before moving to the next step.

To support this reflection, a [maturity assessment tool is provided in the Annex](#). This tool enables both ACCOs and governments to assess their readiness, governance structures, cultural authority, and capacity to participate. The assessment can also be revisited throughout the pathway to track progress and inform capacity-building priorities.

This means ensuring:

- The initiative's purpose and outcomes align with the National Agreement and are grounded in community priorities.
- Cultural and community leaders are identified by their communities and not assumed by government.
- Government representatives hold genuine authority to commit resources and influence policy.

In some instances, shared decision-making may not be suitable. In situations where decisions belong solely to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, engaging in shared decision-making could infringe on the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to exercise self-determination. The partnership's approach should first

seek to align the initiative to Priority Reform One and agree on methods of approach if unsuitable.

3.2 Sub-Actions and Considerations

(a) Priority Reform One Alignment

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap sets our clear expectations for shared decision-making. Clause 28 requires governments to 'build and strengthen structures that empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to share decision-making authority'. Clause 32 defines strong partnerships to have accountability, formal agreements and genuine shared decision-making. When checking suitability, partners should confirm that the initiative:

- **Aligns with Priority Reform One:** Does a formal partnership exist in this area, and if not, is a new formal partnership appropriate?
- **Partnerships can be policy-based** (e.g. health, education, housing), **place-based** (e.g. focused on a region) and established at different scales with both small and large organisations.
- **Reflects key reviews:** Are outcomes consistent with the findings and recommendations of the [Productivity Commission Review](#) and the [Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Review](#)?
- **Has clear outcomes and priorities:** Are they well defined and grounded in community priorities?
- **Meet Clause 32 standards:** Accountability to the community, a

formal written agreement and genuine shared decision-making.

- **Builds on existing structures:** If forums already exist, do they reflect Priority Reform One standards, or require strengthening?
- This tool can be used to **adopt shared decision-making at the national, state/territory, or local level**, noting some changes may be needed to adapt to local contexts.

(b) Right Cultural and Community Leadership

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities must decide who speaks on their behalf, with the ability to change that over time. In line with the National Agreement, this also includes ensuring diverse representation (including Elders, women, young people, people with disability and other knowledge holders), so decisions reflect the full breadth of community voices. When assessing suitability, partners should check whether the initiative:

- **Engages the right leaders:** Guidance sought from community networks, ACCOs and/or peak bodies to validate who holds appropriate cultural authority (refer [Annex A – Stakeholder Map](#))
- **Provides resourcing:** Leadership roles are valued and funded without negative impact on the overall organisation's bottom line through their participation (e.g. sitting fees, travel, resourcing of time and expertise).
- **Supports early engagement:** An engagement plan sets out how the initiative will be introduced, opportunities for input, and how feedback will be used. Refer to [Annex B – Community Engagement Plan](#)

- **Clarifies roles and expectations:** Involvement, responsibilities, and decision-making contributions are agreed upon upfront and embedded in later governance structures.

(c) Government Authority

Without clear delegations to make decisions, commit resources, and influence policy, the process risks stalling or losing credibility. It is also essential that the right agencies and departments are engaged from the outset to avoid delays and ensure coordination.

When assessing suitability, partners should check whether the initiative:

- **Has the right decision-makers at the table:** Representatives have delegations to authorise funding, resources, or policy changes.
- **Includes the right agencies:** All relevant departments are involved from the start, not added later through lengthy consultations.
- **Clarifies roles and responsibilities:** Expectations of government representatives are defined, including their accountability to the process.
- **Commits to shared decision-making principles:** Government representatives understand and apply the principles of shared decision-making.
- **Prepares for formalisation:** These commitments are intended to be embedded in formal partnership agreements at Step 3.

3.3 Common barriers and challenges

Common challenges to look out for as part of this step:

- **Misalignment with the National Agreement:** projects shaped by

government priorities rather than community-led outcomes

- **Tokenistic leadership:** engaging representatives who do not hold cultural authority or leadership
- **Limited Government Authority:** engaging representatives who lack delegation to commit resources
- **Lack of Cultural Capacity and Safety:** Gaps in capacity demonstrate a failure to achieve the systemic transformation required under Priority Reform 3, causing a breakdown in trust and effective practice
- **Low trust from past experiences:** clear commitments that are resourced and followed through are a must.

Note: Solutions to these barriers can be found throughout this document in each of the pathway chapters.

3.4 Case Studies & Examples

The following case studies have been included to demonstrate what suitability looks like in practice:

- **HALT Collective (Queensland):** Elders and community organisations were engaged early in redesigning the child protection intake process. The initiative demonstrated strong cultural leadership and shared accountability, though government retention of final authority shows the importance of ensuring real power-sharing.
- **National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan (NATSIHP) 2021–2031:** This national plan was co-designed from the outset, with non-negotiables set by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health leaders. Cultural safety, co-chairing

arrangements, and sector-led policy writing made it a benchmark example of when SDM is highly suitable.

- **Parramatta River “Our Living River” Project (NSW):** Aboriginal custodial knowledge shaped biodiversity and waterway management, demonstrating how environmental policy can embed cultural authority when Indigenous leadership is prioritised.
- **Indigenous Data Governance Framework (NIAA):** A national process that sought to embed Indigenous Data Sovereignty. Suitability was clear, but lack of clarity in roles and limited cultural competency among some government staff reduced effectiveness.

3.5 Enablers and Supporting Tools

Templates to assist in assessing suitability and building readiness for shared decision-making include:

Supporting Tools

Annex A – Stakeholder Map

A stakeholder map is a visual tool that helps you identify and categorise all individuals and groups involved in a project based on their influence and interest.

Annex B – Community Engagement Plan

A community engagement plan is a documented strategy that outlines how a project will engage with the community. It details the purpose, objectives, methods, and communication channels to be used.

4. Step (2) Commitment to Shared Decision-Making

4.1 Introduction

Once suitability has been confirmed, the next stage is to establish a shared commitment to decision-making. This step ensures all partners are aligned on the purpose of shared decision-making and dedicate the time and resources needed to support effective collaboration. Without clear commitments, shared decision-making risks being symbolic, fragmented or under-resourced.

This means ensuring:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander expertise and experience are recognised and appropriately remunerated.
- The partnership has a clearly defined purpose, goals, and scope, jointly agreed upon by all partners.
- Governments commit the necessary time, resources, and accountability to sustain the partnership.

4.2 Sub-Actions and Considerations

(a) Value and Remunerate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Expertise

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations bring a breadth of expertise that includes cultural knowledge, community leadership, service delivery, policy, and practice. These forms of knowledge are deeply interconnected and must all be recognised as critical to effective shared decision-making.

When confirming commitments, partners should ensure the initiative:

- **Provides fair and culturally appropriate remuneration** (sitting fees, travel, resourcing of time and expertise).
- **Has agreed payment terms** and builds costs into budgets.
- **Create space for cultural leaders** to guide discussion, e.g. including specific standing agenda items.
- **Follows cultural protocols**, e.g. Acknowledgment of Country, using appropriate language and respecting significant events. Refer to and respect local cultural protocols in the first instance; otherwise, utilise guides such as the [Australia and New Zealand School of Government Learning and Action Protocol](#) (ANZSOG).
- **Formally recognises contributions**, both cultural and practice/service expertise, within agreements and documents in the next step.

(b) Right Cultural and Community Leadership

Agreeing on a shared purpose and scope is essential to prevent misalignment and ensure decisions reflect community priorities. When confirming commitments, partners should ensure the initiative:

- **Shares relevant background information** (e.g. community profiles, historical context, existing strategies or agreements).
- **Engages all partners in, and jointly agree and document** key agreements and outcomes (refer to [Annex C – Foundation Workshop Template](#)).
- **Defines a clear problem statement** (what challenges are being solved?).
- **Develops shared SMART** (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and

time-bound) **goals** with clear assumptions and constraints.

- **Defines the boundaries of the partnership**, i.e., clarifying what is in/out of scope.
- **Records and shares the above information** as a “North Star” for all partners.
- **Builds understanding of expectations and responsibilities** across all stakeholders.

(c) **Time, Resources, and Accountability**

Shared decision-making requires long-term investment, not short-term project funding. Without resources and accountability, community engagement can be tokenistic. When confirming commitments, partners should ensure the initiative:

- Defines realistic time commitments, respecting the capacity of ACCOs.
- Secures stable funding, separate from service delivery contracts, to enable equal participation by all partners from day 1 of the partnership.
- Agrees on roles, responsibilities and accountability mechanisms to community.
- Acknowledges that shared decision-making can still progress when budget decisions haven’t been made, e.g. collaborating on new policy proposals, shared input to budget processes, collaborating on advice to Ministers, embedding shared decision-making in investment frameworks and agreements, and creating shared funding pools.
- Recognises these commitments as foundations for Step 3 (formalisation).

4.3 Common barriers and challenges

Common challenges to look out for at this step include:

- **Unremunerated cultural leadership:** unpaid or under-recognised contributions leading to disengagement.
- **Misaligned goals:** unclear or competing expectations between partners.
- **Short-term or insecure funding:** limiting continuity and equal participation.
- **Weak accountability:** government or partner commitments not followed through.
- **Overburdening ACCOs:** unrealistic time demands without resourcing or government commitment to shared decision-making.

4.4 Case Studies & Examples

The following case studies have been included to illustrate how clear commitments strengthen shared decision-making:

- **HALT Collective (Queensland):** Elders and ACCOs partnered with government to redesign the child protection intake process. Elders’ advice shaped how decisions were made, including slowing the process to reflect family circumstances and embedding cultural protocols in meetings. Government and community organisations shared accountability for decisions, showing clear commitment to valuing cultural authority and resourcing participation.
- **NATSIHP 2021–2031:** The Health Plan was co-designed from the outset, with Aboriginal leaders setting non-negotiables and co-chairing with

government. Aboriginal experts drafted policy content, and government resourced sector participation through remuneration and logistical support. This demonstrated commitment to shared purpose, scope, and resourcing, setting a benchmark for genuine partnership.

- **Early Indigenous Response Collective (Queensland):** An ACCO and Child Protection Service Centre co-designed a collective to review Indigenous child protection cases and provide cultural recommendations. The model built cultural capability among government staff and strengthened trust with families by embedding Aboriginal authority in decisions. However, members were not remunerated and government retained final authority, highlighting the need for stronger commitments to resources and accountability.

4.5 Enablers and Supporting Tools

Templates to assist in assessing suitability and building readiness for shared decision-making include:

Supporting Tools

Australia and New Zealand School of Government Learning and Action Protocol

A protocol guidance developed to ensure that all Australian and New Zealand school of government practices respect Māori, Australian Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander individuals and communities.

Annex C – Foundation Workshop Template

A Foundational Workshop Template is a simple agenda for an initial meeting. It helps collaborators discuss and agree on a shared purpose, goals, and scope before any formal work begins.

5. Step (3) Formalise Partnership

5.1 Introduction

Once a genuine commitment to shared decision-making has been established, the next step is to embed this commitment into formal structures that will guide how decisions are made, recorded and upheld.

This means ensuring:

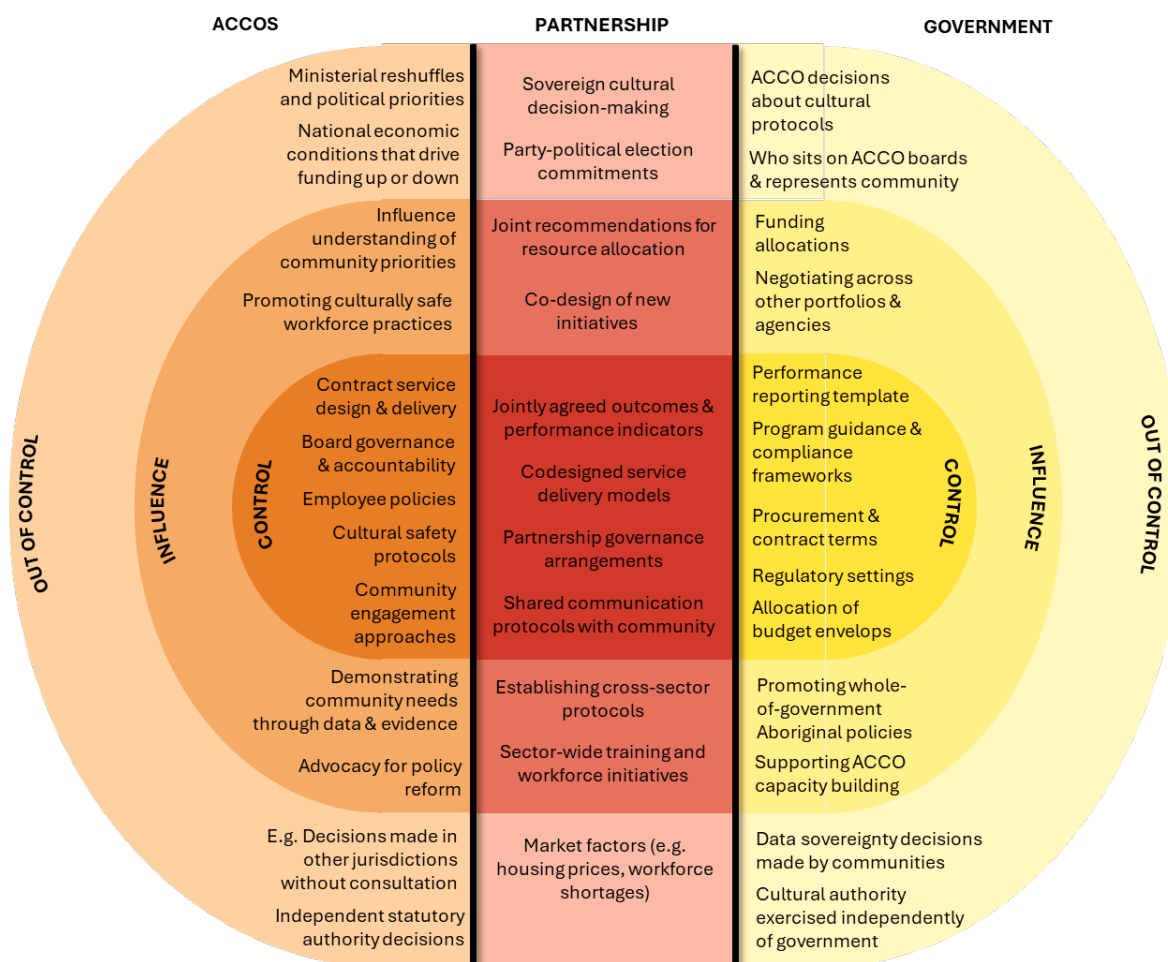
- Governance structures clearly set out roles, responsibilities, and authority.
- Protocols guide how decisions are made, disputes are resolved, and cultural authority is respected.
- Agreements and records provide continuity, accountability, and protection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights and interests.

Figure 1: Influence Model

The figure below illustrates the areas where ACCOs and governments hold direct decision-making power, where they can exert influence, and where issues are outside of their control.

Partnerships can add activities, commitments, or governance elements to the diagram as they work through the pathway.

This makes it a practical tool for mapping where shared decision-making applies, identifying opportunities to expand influence, and clarifying which issues are beyond scope.



5.2 Sub-Actions and Considerations

(a) Governance Structures

Governance sets out how partners make decisions, share responsibilities and remain accountable. When formalising partnerships, partners should confirm that:

- The right governance document is in place (Terms of Reference, MOU or Partnership Agreement, depending on maturity).
- Roles and responsibilities are clearly defined, supported by Secretariat resourcing and with consideration to the size and resourcing of ACCOs.
- Leadership arrangements are balanced (this could include co-chairs or rotating chairs, with equal voice).
- Meeting frequency, format and milestones are realistic, agreed and documented.
- Accountability mechanisms are established, dependent on the nature of the partnerships and resources available (e.g. KPIs, joint monitoring, reviews, public reporting).

(b) Decision-making protocols

Protocols ensure clarity on approvals, disputes, and respect for cultural authority. When formalising partnerships, partners should confirm that:

- Under the National Agreement (Clause 32.c.i), consensus-based is the preferred decision-making process. If another process is used (e.g. majority vote), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and government must carry equal weight.
- Cultural safety protocols are embedded (e.g. Acknowledgement/Welcome, respectful language, consent requirements).

- Dispute resolution pathways are defined (e.g. internal escalation → senior leaders → mediation → arbitration).
- Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles are upheld (collection, storage, use, sharing and ownership).

(c) Agreements and Records

Written agreements and good record-keeping provide continuity, accountability, and protection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices. When formalising partnerships, partners should confirm that:

- Agreements are signed and endorsed by all partners.
- A shared decision log tracks actions, responsibilities, and due dates.
- Meeting minutes are consistently captured and circulated.
- Records are securely stored in line with Data Sovereignty principles.
- Governance documents are reviewed and updated regularly.
- Outcomes are tracked against agreed accountability mechanisms and reported back to communities.

5.3 Common barriers and challenges

Common challenges to look out for at this step include:

- **Government dominance:** chairing roles, agendas, or veto powers controlled by government often limit equal voice.
- **One-way accountability:** reporting is often to government funders only, with little accountability back to community.
- **Unfunded governance roles:** Secretariat and representative functions left to ACCOs without resourcing.

- **Rigid bureaucracy:** government processes override cultural protocols and slow down decisions.
- **Weak records:** poor documentation of decisions leads to disputes and loss of continuity when staff change.
- **Unrealistic expectations:** government not taking into consideration the availability of individuals and/or timing expectations amidst community priorities and funding challenges.

5.4 Case Studies & Examples

The following examples show how formal agreements can either enable or constrain shared decision-making in practice:

- **The Indigenous Data Governance Framework (NIAA)** was developed through a co-design process with Indigenous and APS co-chairs. The framework sought to embed Indigenous Data Sovereignty and cultural safety in national policy. It strengthened trust and accountability, but challenges with equal representation, clarity of roles and inconsistent participation highlighted the importance of robust agreements and well-defined protocols.
- **The Early Indigenous Response Collective (EIRC)** was co-designed by Refocus (an ACCO) and Child Safety Services to enhance Aboriginal involvement in child safety decisions. Guided by terms of reference and a shared practice framework, the model used consensus-based decision-making and documented governance processes. It improved cultural capability among Child Safety officers

and enabled more community-driven decisions. However, underfunded participation and limited formalisation of processes constrained sustainability and consistency.

5.5 Enablers and Supporting Tools

Templates to assist in assessing suitability and building readiness for shared decision-making include:

Supporting Tools²

Annex D – Terms of Reference

Outlines the purpose of the partnership, who is involved, and what their roles and responsibilities are.

Annex E – Memorandum of Understanding

A more detailed agreement that formalises the partnership's structure, governance and objectives.

Annex F – Partnership Agreement

A formal contract for longer-term, extensive partnerships.

Delivering Indigenous Data Sovereignty | AIATSIS corporate website

AIATSIS principles for Data Sovereignty, including collection, management and use of data.

Annex I – Influence Model

A tool for mapping where decision-making power sits, where influence can be applied, and what remains outside the partnership's control.

² Note: Use of the TORs, MOU and Partnership Agreement (outlined in Annex D, E and F, respectively) will depend on the maturity of the partnership.

6. Step (4) Engage in Shared Decision-Making

6.1 Introduction

With agreements and governance structures in place, the next step is to bring shared decision-making to life. This involves applying agreed protocols, ensuring cultural safety, sharing information openly and maintaining mutual accountability.

This means ensuring:

- Decisions follow agreed governance structures and protocols.
- All partners can participate fully and equally.
- Cultural safety and reciprocity are embedded in every interaction.
- Information and resources are shared transparently.
- Accountability mechanisms are jointly maintained.

6.2 Sub-Actions and Considerations

(a) Shared Decision-Making in Practice

- Apply the protocols and governance structures established in Step 3 to guide each decision.
- Use inclusive methods (e.g. yarning circles) to ensure all voices are heard.
- Confirm all partners contribute before decisions are finalised.
- Document outcomes in a transparent record to support accountability.
- Pause and address issues early if decisions drift outside agreed structures.

(b) Ensure culturally safe engagement and capacity building

- Embed cultural protocols in all engagements.
- Resource contributions fairly, ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander expertise is properly remunerated.
- Require cultural awareness training for non-Indigenous partners (with input from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives on what is required).
- Invest in capability building (e.g. mentoring, secondments) so all parties can engage confidently.

(c) Share Information Openly

- Provide accessible information in plain language and culturally appropriate formats.
- Establish a shared workspace as the single source of truth for documents.
- Develop transparent processes for managing and reporting budgets.
- Uphold Indigenous Data Sovereignty, i.e. communities must govern the collection, ownership and use of their data.

(d) Maintain Shared Accountability

- Review responsibilities regularly and adjust supports as needed.
- Co-develop reporting that is clear, accessible and tailored for both community and government audiences.
- Ensure equal weight is given to accountability back to communities as well as between partners.

6.3 Common barriers and challenges

Common challenges to look out for at this step include:

- **Unequal participation:** meetings dominated by a few voices while quieter or less resourced partners are unable to contribute fully.
- **Facilitation gaps:** lack of inclusive techniques (e.g. yarning circles, consensus methods) leading to decisions that don't reflect all perspectives.
- **Inconsistent cultural safety in practice:** protocols agreed on paper are not consistently followed in meetings or decision forums.
- **Capacity pressures:** smaller ACCOs stretched to keep up with ongoing demands, without sustained support for participation.
- **Breakdown in transparency:** delays in recording or communicating decisions, creating uncertainty about outcomes.
- **Accountability fatigue:** reporting processes that are overly bureaucratic, misaligned with community priorities, or fail to show how outcomes are being acted on.
- **Government timelines:** decisions and implementation slowed by government approval processes and timelines, which often do not align with community needs or consultation timeframes

6.4 Case Studies & Examples

The following examples demonstrate shared decision-making in practice:

- **COVID-19 Response Framework:** During the pandemic, ACCOs partnered with governments to deliver a culturally

responsive, trauma-informed emergency framework. Shared access to data, funding, and decision-making enabled communities to rapidly implement protective measures. This demonstrated the value of governments ceding authority to ACCOs in crisis.

- **Indi Kindi Early Childhood Program (NT):** Community-driven early learning and health services integrated cultural practices and local authority into program delivery. Shared decision-making ensured initiatives were place-based, culturally appropriate, and responsive to families' needs. The program achieved significant improvements in developmental outcomes, showing how engaging community governance in everyday practice leads to lasting impact.¹
- **Child Health Check Initiative (NT):** Developed with Aboriginal health organisations, this initiative embedded cultural safety and community input into early childhood health services. Decisions were shaped through local governance structures, improving access and reducing preventable hospitalisations for Aboriginal children.

6.5 Enablers and Supporting Tools

Refer to templates in the [Annex](#) as required.

7. Step (5) Sustain and Improve

7.1 Introduction

Shared decision-making does not conclude once agreements are signed or decisions made. For partnerships to remain effective, they must be regularly reviewed and adapted as priorities evolve.

This means ensuring:

- Regular reflection to strengthen outcomes and relationships.
- Long-term governance arrangements that provide stability, succession and sustainable resourcing.
- Feedback that informs decisions and demonstrates accountability.
- Recognition of progress and challenges to build trust and prevent consultation fatigue.
- A clear approach to embedding shared decision-making into policy, funding and institutional systems to ensure it endures beyond individuals or projects.

7.2 Sub-Actions and Considerations

(a) Continuous Improvement

Partnerships must commit to ongoing reflection and adaptation.

Suggested actions include:

- Schedule regular health checks on governance, cultural safety, risks and outcomes.
- Use independent oversight where appropriate for objective review.
- Capture lessons learned and update protocols, agreements and practices.

(b) Long-term Governance

Strong partnerships need stability and succession to remain effective.

Suggested actions include:

- Review governance structures for long-term sustainability and accountability to communities.
- Establish clear succession and transition plans, including mentoring to build capability within ACCOs.
- Embed partnership principles in government policy frameworks, funding cycles and operating models so they become business-as-usual.
- Agree on processes for renewal, recommitment or respectful wind-down of partnerships.

(c) Feedback Loops

Partnerships are only strong if they remain accountable and responsive.

- Establish culturally safe mechanisms for continuous feedback, such as yarning circles, community forums, surveys and evaluations.
- Seek anonymous partner feedback to strengthen transparency.
- Adapt processes based on input, ensuring data and insights are analysed and acted upon.
- Close the loop by reporting back to communities on how feedback has shaped decisions. This practice helps prevent consultation fatigue, where stakeholders feel they are asked to repeat the same messages without seeing action.

(d) Recognise Progress and Build Trust

Trust grows when progress is visible, and commitments are honoured:

- Celebrate milestones and achievements with communities.
- Publicly acknowledge contributions of all partners.
- Be transparent about challenges and how they are being addressed.

7.3 Common barriers and challenges

Common challenges to look out for at this step include:

- Reviews being ad-hoc or compliance-driven, rather than embedded as genuine learning.
- Governance that relies too heavily on individuals, creating vulnerability during leadership change.
- Feedback sought but not acted on, leading to community frustration or consultation fatigue.
- Achievements not shared, resulting in a lack of visibility of progress or reduced trust.
- Government embedding partnership principles inconsistently, leaving partnerships exposed to policy or funding changes.

7.4 Case Studies & Examples

The following examples show how sustained governance, continued reflection, feedback and visible recognition have been embedded in practice:

- **National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan (NATSIHP) 2021–2031:** Demonstrates long-term governance, co-leadership, and embedding Indigenous leadership in policy systems.
- **Parramatta River “Our Living River”:** Highlights recognition of progress, visible outcomes (swimmable river by 2025), and trust built through Indigenous custodianship and leadership.
- **Indigenous Data Governance Framework (NIAA):** Shows how feedback loops and Indigenous authority in data governance can sustain accountability and trust.
- **Early Indigenous Response Collective (EIRC, QLD):** Demonstrates sustaining partnerships in child protection by embedding consensus decision-making and improving relationships between Child Safety and communities.

7.5 Enablers and Supporting Tools

Templates to assist in assessing suitability and building readiness for shared decision-making include:

Supporting Tools

Annex G – Partnership Health Check

A tool to periodically assess the overall health of a collaboration.

8. Annex

ITEM	Resource name	Step
A	<u>Stakeholder Map</u>	1 – Suitability of Approach
B	<u>Community Engagement Plan</u>	1 – Suitability of Approach
C	<u>Foundation Workshop Template</u>	2 – Commitment to Shared Decision-Making
D	<u>Terms of Reference</u>	3 – Formalise Partnership
E	<u>Memorandum of Understanding</u>	3 – Formalise Partnership
F	<u>Partnership Agreement</u>	3 – Formalise Partnership
G	<u>Partnership Health Check</u>	5 – Sustain and Improve
H	<u>Organisation Maturity Assessment</u>	1 – Suitability of Approach
I	<u>Influence Model</u>	5 – Sustain and Improve

Notes for use of templates:

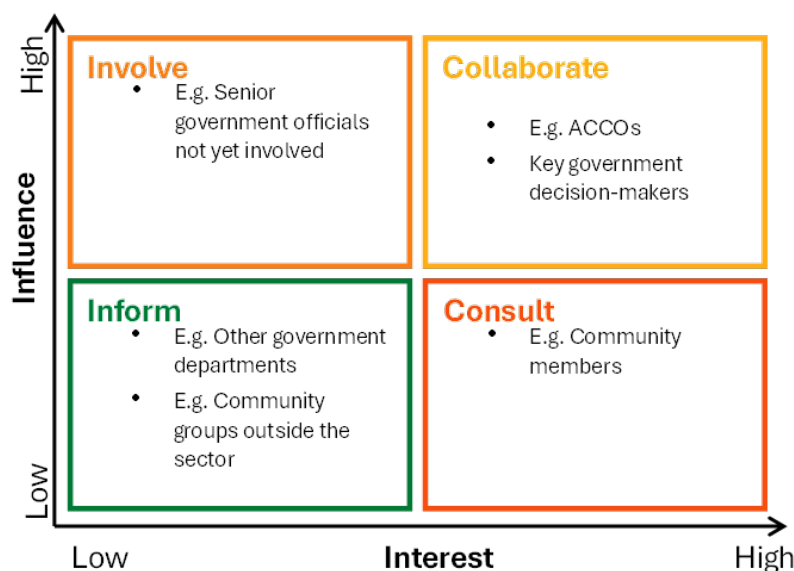
- Templates are guides only – they should be adapted to suit the specific partnership context, cultural protocols, and governance maturity.
- Language, format, and level of detail should be co-designed and agreed by all partners before use.
- Templates should be updated regularly to reflect current decisions, evolving roles, and changing priorities.
- Where possible, templates should be kept accessible and culturally appropriate, ensuring they can be understood and used by all partners and communities.
- Records should be stored securely and in line with agreed cultural safety and Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles.
- Use of a template does not replace the need for ongoing dialogue, trust-building, and relationship management within the partnership.

Annex A: Stakeholder Map

A stakeholder map template can be used as part of **Step 1: Suitability of Approach and community engagement**.

It is a visual tool that helps you identify and categorise who should be involved on a project, what their interests are and their level of influence.

Fill out the map by plotting each stakeholder's position based on their level of influence and interest in the project. This helps you identify the appropriate engagement strategy for each group.



Low Interest / Low Influence (Inform): These are stakeholders who are not directly impacted by the project and have limited power to influence it. Inform them with regular, simple updates (e.g., newsletters or public reports). The goal is to keep them aware without overburdening them.

High Interest / Low Influence (Consult and Inform): These are stakeholders who are very interested in the project but have limited power to make decisions. Actively consult with them to get their input and feedback. Keep them well-informed and show them how their feedback is being used.

Low Interest / High Influence (Involve and Increase Interest): These are powerful stakeholders who are not currently engaged with the project. Work to actively involve them and increase their interest in the collaboration. You can do this by highlighting the benefits of the project for their specific interests.

High Interest / High Influence (Collaborate/Co-create): These are the key collaborators who are essential for the success of the project. This is where true shared decision-making happens. Co-create every aspect of the project with these stakeholders, from defining the scope to implementing decisions.

Annex B: Community Engagement Plan (for Government)

The community engagement plan template supports **Step 1: Suitability of Approach**.

It helps you formalise your initial engagement with a community, ensuring your approach is culturally safe, respectful, and transparent from the very beginning.

1. Project/Partnership Overview

Project/Partnership Name: [Insert Name]

Overall Goal of Project/Partnership: [Briefly state the overarching goal]

Purpose of this Engagement Plan: [e.g., To establish initial trust, to co-design a specific policy, to report back on outcomes]

2. Engagement Purpose & Objectives

Clearly define *why* engagement is happening and what specific outcomes it aims to achieve.

- **Primary Engagement Purpose:**
- **Specific Engagement Objectives:**
 - [Objective 1: e.g., To understand community priorities regarding X]
 - [Objective 2: e.g., To jointly develop solutions for Y]
 - [Objective 3: e.g., To gather feedback on draft Z]

3. Stakeholder Identification & Cultural Leadership

Identify all relevant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders and understand their authority.

- **Key Stakeholder Groups:**
 - [e.g., Traditional Owners, Elders, ACCOs, Peak Bodies, Community Members, Youth, Women's Groups]
- **Identifying Community & Cultural Authority:**
 - **Guidance:** Always proactively and respectfully identify who holds community and cultural authority to speak on behalf of specific communities or Country. This is crucial for authentic engagement.
 - **Methods:**
 - Consult **Local Land Councils/Native Title Bodies** for Traditional Owners.
 - Engage **Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) & Peak Bodies** as community-led representatives.
 - Seek guidance from **Elders** identified by the community (status earned, not age).
 - Respect **self-identification** and community acceptance of identity.

- Always **ask respectfully** if individuals are able and willing to perform specific cultural roles; never assume or demand.
- If uncertain, **ask community representatives** for guidance on terminology, protocols, and appropriate engagement.

4. Engagement Methods, Channels & Protocols

Select culturally appropriate methods and establish clear rules for interaction.

- **Proposed Engagement Methods:**
 - [e.g., Yarning Circles, Community Meetings, Co-design Workshops, Online Forums, One-on-one Interviews, Presentations at existing forums]
- **Engagement Channels**
 - [E.g. face-to-face, virtual meetings via Teams/Zoom, webinars, newsletters, representative bodies (ACCOs, peak bodies, Elders councils, youth councils, local working groups]
- **Cultural Protocols to Observe:**
 - [e.g., Welcome to Country / Acknowledgement of Country (always), Yarning Circle protocols, respecting gender-specific roles, appropriate terminology, avoiding photography without explicit permission]
 - *(Refer to Indigenous Protocol guidance for detailed information.)*
- **General Engagement Protocols:**
 - [e.g., Clear ground rules for discussions, respectful listening, transparent feedback loops]

5. Cultural Safety Self-Assessment

This checklist ensures cultural safety is embedded throughout all engagement activities.

- ☐ Have we identified and engaged appropriate Traditional Owners/Elders and community leaders for the Country we are engaging on?
- ☐ Have we ensured that the representation reflects the diversity of the community as it relates to the partnership?
- ☐ Have we sought guidance on local cultural protocols and incorporated them into our plan?
- ☐ Is the engagement environment physically and emotionally safe for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants?
- ☐ Are all engagement facilitators/staff actively and regularly receiving feedback from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partners regarding their cultural safety, awareness and conduct?
- ☐ Is the language used in all materials and discussions clear, respectful, and free from jargon or deficit-based framing?
- ☐ Are there mechanisms for participants to raise concerns about cultural safety during the engagement?
- ☐ Is there genuine intent to listen and be influenced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives?
- ☐ Have we allocated sufficient time for relationship building and culturally appropriate processes (e.g., yarning)?
- ☐ Is remuneration/support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants fair and culturally appropriate?

6. Communication Strategy

Develop clear, accessible, and culturally appropriate communication channels.

- **Key Messages:** [What do we want to communicate?]
- **Communication Channels:** [e.g., Community newsletters, social media, radio, direct mail, community events]
- **Material Formats:** [e.g., Plain English documents, visual aids, videos, oral presentations]
- **Language Considerations:** [e.g., Use of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages where appropriate, avoiding jargon]

7. Resourcing for Genuine Engagement

Ensure adequate and flexible resources are allocated.

- **Budget Allocation:** [Detail financial resources for venue, facilitators, cultural advisors, participant support, remuneration]
- **Personnel:** [Identify team members responsible for engagement, their roles, and cultural competency training needs]
- **Timeframes:** [Realistic timelines that allow for relationship building and iterative feedback]
- **Logistical Support:** [e.g., Transport, childcare, accessible venues]

8. Monitoring & Evaluation

Establish regular internal and external reviews to assess effectiveness and alignment with the required outcomes of the shared decision-making pathway.

- **Success Measures:** [How will we know if engagement was successful? e.g., Participant satisfaction, diversity of voices, influence on outcomes]
- **Feedback Mechanisms:** [e.g., Post-engagement surveys, debriefs, continuous informal feedback]
- **Reporting:** [How and when will engagement outcomes be reported back to partners and communities?]

Annex C: Foundation Workshop Template

This template supports **Step 2: committing to shared decision-making**.

It can be used to capture the key outcomes of an initial meeting to agree on shared goals and foundational elements of the partnership.

1. Date of meeting/workshop

[Insert Date]

2. Attendees

[Insert Attendee Names, including facilitators]

3. Agreed shared purpose:

- **Problem statement:** [A clear, jointly agreed-upon statement of the problem. E.g., the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the child protection system.]
- **Our Shared Vision:** [A high-level statement of what success looks like for all partners. E.g., All Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children grow up safe and cared for in family, community, and culture.]

4. Co-Developed Goals and Outcomes

- **Goal 1:** [Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound (SMART) Goal. E.g., To reduce the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children entering out-of-home care by 10% within three years.]
- **Key Outcome(s):** [List of specific, tangible results that will show this goal was achieved. E.g., A reduction in the number of children removed from their homes, an increase in referrals to family support services, and a co-designed family support program.]
- **Goal 2:** [SMART Goal. E.g., To increase community-led service provision by 25% within the next four years.]
- **Key Outcome(s):** [List of specific, tangible results. E.g., An increase in the number of community-controlled organisations delivering services, and a transparent joint funding model is in place.]

5. Defined Scope and Boundaries

- **In-Scope:** [What is explicitly included in the collaboration's work? E.g., the co-design of a new policy, the joint oversight of a specific program's budget.]
- **Out-of-Scope:** [What is explicitly excluded from the collaboration's work? E.g., Changing existing legislation, making decisions on other departmental budgets.]

6. Next Steps

- **Action 1:** [Specific action to take after the workshop. E.g., Draft a Memorandum of Understanding based on the agreed-upon purpose and goals.]
 - **Responsible:** [Name, Organisation]
 - **Deadline:** [Date]
- **Action 2:** [Specific action to take after the workshop. E.g., Organise the next meeting with key stakeholders to review.]
 - **Responsible:** [Name, Organisation]
 - **Deadline:** [Date]

Annex D: Terms of Reference

The terms of reference template is another part of **Step 3: Formalise Partnership**.

It outlines the purpose, roles, responsibilities and operational guidelines for a Shared Decision-Making partnership or specific working group within a partnership.

1. Partnership/Group Name

[Insert Name of Partnership or Working Group]

2. Purpose

To [State the specific purpose of the partnership/group, e.g., provide joint advice on X policy, oversee implementation of Y program], in alignment with the principles of Shared Decision-Making and Priority Reform One.

3. Objectives

- [Objective 1: e.g., To collaboratively develop policy options for X]
- [Objective 2: e.g., To monitor progress of Y initiative]
- [Objective 3: e.g., To facilitate communication between partners and community]

4. Scope

Outline what is in and out of scope.

Example In Scope: Activities that directly relate to [policy area], including joint policy development and implementation planning.

Example Out of Scope: Matters outside the agreed objectives or unrelated to [policy area].

5. Membership

The partnership/group will comprise members who embody the principles of Shared Decision-Making, ensuring authentic representation and cultural authority.

- [Name/Role 1 - Representing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community/Organisation]
- [Name/Role 2 - Representing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community/Organisation]
- [Name/Role 3 - Representing Government Agency/Department]
- [Name/Role 4 - Representing Government Agency/Department]
- *(Note: Aim for at least half of all members to be Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander to ensure authentic representation and shared power.)*

6. Roles & Responsibilities

- **All Members:**
 - Act in accordance with Shared Decision-Making Principles.
 - Contribute actively to discussions and decision-making.
 - Represent their respective communities/organisations authentically.

- **Co-Chairs:** [Identify roles, e.g. co-chairs]
 - Facilitate meetings and ensure equitable participation.
 - Guide consensus-based decision-making.
 - Ensure adherence to ToR and principles.
- **Secretariat Support:** [Identify who provides administrative support and how this will be resourced]

7. Decision-Making Authority & Process

Decisions will be made collaboratively, striving for consensus.

- **Authority Level:** [e.g., To provide joint recommendations to X authority, To make final decisions on Y]
- **Decision-Making Process:** Decisions will be made through consensus-based Shared Decision-Making processes, as outlined in the Partnership's agreed Decision Tree (refer to relevant section in main guidance).
- **Dispute Resolution/Escalation:** [Briefly outline initial steps, e.g., Discussions to resolve disagreements, escalate to Co-Chairs if needed. Refer to Partnership Agreement for formal escalation pathways.]

8. Meetings

- **Frequency:** [e.g., Monthly, Quarterly]
- **Duration:** [e.g., 2 hours]
- **Location:** [e.g., Rotating between partner locations, culturally significant venues, virtual]
- **Agenda:** [Process for developing and distributing agendas]
- **Minutes:** [Process for recording and circulating minutes]

9. Review & Amendment

This ToR will be reviewed [e.g., Annually, Bi-annually] or as required by the members. Any amendments require consensus.

Signed:

[Signatures of Co-Chairs/Key Representatives]

Annex E: Memorandum of Understanding

This memorandum of understanding (MOU) template supports **Step 3: Formalise Partnership**.

It outlines a more formal agreement than the terms of reference between partners, detailing shared goals, high-level responsibilities, and the intent to collaborate under shared decision-making principles.

This Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) is made between:

[Full Name of Government Agency/Department] (Hereinafter referred to as "the Government Partner")

AND

[Full Name of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community/Organisation/Group] (Hereinafter referred to as "the Community Partner")

(Collectively referred to as "the Partners" and individually as "Partner")

1. Purpose of this MOU

This MOU establishes a framework for collaboration and cooperation between the Government Partner and the Community Partner, to achieve shared objectives through genuine Shared Decision-Making, in alignment with Priority Reform One of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

2. Background

- [Briefly state the context leading to this partnership, e.g., shared commitment to improving X outcomes, response to Y community need]

3. Principles of Engagement

This partnership will operate under the principles of Shared Decision-Making, including:

- Self-Determination
- Power-Sharing & Joint Decision-Making
- Cultural Safety & Ways of Knowing, Being, and Doing
- Reciprocity and Trust
- Accountability to Community
- Transparency and Data Sovereignty

4. Shared Goals & Objectives

The partners agree to work collaboratively towards the following shared goals and objectives:

- **Goal 1:** [e.g., To co-design a culturally appropriate X program]
 - **Objective 1.1:** [Specific objective]
- **Goal 2:** [e.g., To establish joint governance structures for Y initiative]
 - **Objective 2.1:** [Specific objective]

5. Roles & Responsibilities

Each partner commits to the following high-level responsibilities:

- **Government Partner:** [e.g., Provide funding and policy expertise, ensure bureaucratic support, commit to power-sharing]
- **Community Partner:** [e.g., Provide cultural expertise and community leadership, ensure community voice, oversee implementation from a community perspective]
- **Joint Responsibilities:** [e.g., Jointly plan initiatives, co-facilitate meetings, ensure transparent communication]

6. Governance & Decision-Making

- **Joint Steering Committee/Working Group:** [Describe the primary joint body, e.g., A Joint Steering Committee will be established, co-chaired by representatives from both partners.]
- **Decision-Making Process:** Decisions will be made through consensus-based Shared Decision-Making processes, as outlined in the Partnership's agreed Decision Tree (refer to relevant section in main guidance).
- **Dispute Resolution:** Any disagreements will be addressed through open dialogue and negotiation. If unresolved, matters may be escalated to [e.g., senior leadership of both partners].

7. Resources & Support

Partners commit to ensuring adequate resources are allocated to enable genuine participation and shared decision-making.

- [e.g., Commitment to equitable sharing of financial resources, provision of in-kind support, access to data/information]
- [Consider remuneration for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partners' time and expertise]

8. Review & Duration

- This MOU will be reviewed [e.g., Annually] to assess its effectiveness and relevance.
- This MOU is effective from [Start Date] and will remain in effect until [End Date] or until superseded by a more formal agreement, or terminated by mutual consent.

9. Signatures

Signed for and on behalf of [Government Agency/Department]

[Name] [Title] [Date]

Signed for and on behalf of [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community/Organisation/Group]

[Name] [Title] [Date]

Annex F: Partnership Agreement

For more established partnerships, a formal partnership agreement is a suitable document to support **Step 3: Formalise Partnership**.

This template covers governance, escalation pathways, dispute resolution and remuneration.

PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT

This Partnership Agreement ("Agreement") is made effective as of [Date]

BETWEEN:

[Full Legal Name of Government Agency/Department] ([ABN/ACN]) (Hereinafter referred to as "the Government Partner")

AND

[Full Legal Name of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community/Organisation/Group] ([ABN/ACN]) (Hereinafter referred to as "the Community Partner")

(Collectively referred to as "the Partners" and individually as "Partner")

1. Preamble & Background

- This Agreement formalises the commitment of the Partners to work collaboratively as equals, embodying the principles of Shared Decision-Making as outlined in Priority Reform One of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.
- [Briefly state the shared vision and history of the partnership, e.g., "Building on the successful collaboration initiated through the X project, the Partners seek to establish enduring shared governance for Y outcomes."]

2. Principles of Shared Decision-Making

This partnership is fundamentally guided by the following principles:

- **Self-Determination:** Upholding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' right to lead decisions affecting their lives.
- **Power-Sharing & Joint Decision-Making:** Active redistribution of authority, ensuring joint planning and consensus decision-making.
- **Cultural Safety & Ways of Knowing, Being, and Doing:** Embedding culturally safe processes and valuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge.
- **Reciprocity and Trust:** Relational and reciprocal engagement based on mutual respect.
- **Accountability to Community:** Mutual accountability to each other and to the communities served.
- **Transparency and Data Sovereignty:** Decisions based on shared, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-governed data.

3. Purpose & Scope of the Partnership

3.1 Purpose: To [State the overarching purpose, e.g., drive systemic change in X sector, achieve specific Closing the Gap targets, co-govern Y program].

3.2 Goals & Objectives:

- **Goal 1:** [Specific, measurable goal]
 - [Objective 1.1]
- **Goal 2:** [Specific, measurable goal]
 - [Objective 2.1]

3.3 Scope: This Agreement applies to [Clearly define the boundaries of the partnership's activities, e.g., "all policy, program, and funding decisions related to early childhood care in the X region"].

- **In-Scope:** [List specific areas]
- **Out-of-Scope:** [List specific areas]

4. Governance Structure & Roles

The partnership will be governed by a joint body to ensure shared authority and decision-making.

4.1 Joint Governance Body: [e.g., Joint Steering Committee, Partnership Council]

- **Composition:** [Specify number of members from each partner, ensuring at least half are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives with cultural authority.]
- **Co-Chairs:** [e.g., One Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Co-Chair, One Government Co-Chair]
 - **Roles:** Facilitating meetings, ensuring equitable participation, guiding consensus, representing the partnership externally.
- **Membership Roles:** [General responsibilities of all members]
- **Secretariat Support:** [Describe who provides administrative support and their responsibilities]

5. Resources & Remuneration

Partners commit to equitable resource allocation and fair remuneration to enable genuine participation.

5.1 Financial Resources: [Detail how funding will be jointly managed, allocated, and reported on. e.g., "Joint oversight of a dedicated budget for X initiatives."]

5.2 In-Kind Contributions: [e.g., Provision of office space, administrative support, data access, expertise from both partners.]

5.3 Remuneration for Community Partner Representatives:

- The Government Partner acknowledges the significant time, expertise, and cultural load borne by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives.
- [Detail specific remuneration, e.g., "Sitting fees of \$X per meeting for Community Partner representatives," "Reimbursement for travel and accommodation costs," "Compensation for preparation time and advice."]
- [Specify payment frequency and process.]

5.4 Capacity Building: [Commitment to jointly identify and address capacity needs for effective participation.]

6. Communication & Reporting

6.1 Internal Communication: [How partners will communicate regularly]

6.2 External Communication: [How the partnership will communicate with broader stakeholders and the public, respecting cultural protocols and data sovereignty.]

6.3 Reporting: [Detail reporting requirements for both partners, including frequency and recipients. Emphasise mutual accountability and reporting back to the community.]

7. Intellectual Property & Data Sovereignty

7.1 Intellectual Property (IP): [Detail ownership and use of IP generated by the partnership. e.g., "IP jointly owned, or specific arrangements for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander IP."]

7.2 Indigenous Data Sovereignty: All data related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples within this partnership will be governed by Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles. [Detail specific mechanisms, e.g., "Joint data governance committee," "Data sharing agreements with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander data custodians."]

8. Dispute Resolution & Escalation Pathways

Partners commit to resolving disagreements constructively and respectfully.

8.1 Informal Resolution: [e.g., Open dialogue, facilitated discussion, seeking consensus.]

8.2 Escalation Pathway: If a dispute cannot be resolved informally, it will be escalated to:

1. **Co-Chairs:** [Co-Chairs will attempt to mediate and resolve the dispute.]

2. **Senior Leadership:** If unresolved by Co-Chairs, the matter will be referred to [e.g., Agency Head and CEO of Community Partner Organisation] for resolution.

3. **Independent Mediation:** If still unresolved, the Partners may agree to engage an independent, culturally competent mediator.

8.3 Tie-Break Mechanism: For critical decisions where consensus cannot be reached after exhausting all resolution steps, the pre-agreed tie-break mechanism is [Specify, e.g., "Referral to an agreed independent arbiter whose decision is binding," or "A shared veto power requiring renegotiation of the proposal."]

9. Review, Amendment & Termination

9.1 Review: This Agreement will be formally reviewed [e.g., Annually, Bi-annually] to ensure its continued relevance and effectiveness.

9.2 Amendment: Any amendments to this Agreement must be made in writing and agreed upon by consensus of both Partners.

9.3 Termination: This Agreement may be terminated by mutual written consent of both Partners, or by either Partner providing [Number] months' written notice. [Include clauses on post-termination responsibilities, e.g., data handover, reporting.]

10. Signatures

Signed for and on behalf of [Government Agency/Department]

[Name] [Title] [Date]

Signed for and on behalf of [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community/Organisation/Group]

[Name] [Title] [Date]

Annex G: Partnership Health Check

This partnership health check tool is for **Step 5: Sustain and Improve**.

It provides a framework for periodically assessing the health and effectiveness of a Shared Decision-Making partnership.

Partnership Health Check: [Partnership Name]

Date of Assessment: [Date] **Completed By:** [Name/Role of Assessor(s)]

1. Overall Partnership Health

1.1 Overall Health Rating (1-5, 5=Excellent): []

1.2 Key Strengths of the Partnership: [What is working well?]

1.3 Key Areas for Improvement: [What needs attention?]

2. Shared Decision-Making Principles in Practice

Rate the partnership's performance on each principle (1=Poor, 5=Excellent). Provide comments.

2.1 Self-Determination:

- Rating: []
- Comments: [How well are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partners leading decisions affecting their lives?]

2.2 Power-Sharing & Joint Decision-Making:

- Rating: []
- Comments: [Is power actively redistributed? Are decisions made by consensus? Is joint planning effective?]

2.3 Cultural Safety & Ways of Knowing, Being, and Doing:

- Rating: []
- Comments: [Are processes culturally safe? Are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander worldviews valued and integrated?]

2.4 Reciprocity and Trust:

- Rating: []
- Comments: [Is there mutual exchange and benefit? Is trust evident between partners?]

2.5 Accountability to Community:

- Rating: []
- Comments: [Are both partners accountable to the community? Are commitments honoured?]

2.6 Transparency and Data Sovereignty:

- Rating: []
- Comments: [Are decisions transparent? Is data shared and governed appropriately by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples?]

3. Partnership Operations

3.1 Governance Structure Effectiveness: [e.g., Are meetings productive? Are roles clear? Is co-chairing effective?]

3.2 Communication Effectiveness: [Is communication open, timely, and accessible? Is feedback sought and acted upon?]

3.3 Resource Adequacy & Management: [Are resources sufficient and managed equitably? Is remuneration fair?]

3.4 Dispute Resolution Process: [Are disagreements resolved effectively? Is the escalation pathway clear and used appropriately?]

3.5 Progress Towards Shared Goals: [Is the partnership achieving its agreed objectives? Are outcomes tangible?]

4. Feedback & Next Steps

4.1 Key Feedback Received (from partners/community): [Summarize feedback]

4.2 Actions for Improvement: [Specific steps to address areas for improvement]

- [Action 1: Responsible Party, Due Date]
- [Action 2: Responsible Party, Due Date]

4.3 Next Health Check Date: [Date]

Annex H: Organisation Maturity Assessment

Purpose:

Before engaging in shared decision-making, it is important to understand the partnership's current level of readiness. The following self-assessment (Figure 3) highlights strengths, areas for improvement, and an organisation's maturity level. It is not a test, but a tool to make sure the right foundations are in place to achieve the best outcomes for the partnership.

- **The maturity assessment can support ACCOs:** to reflect on governance, cultural authority, and capacity, identify strengths, and plan actions to address gaps before formal processes.
- **The maturity assessment can support Government agencies and policymakers** to assess partner readiness, identify support needs, and design culturally safe, realistic engagement processes.

Instructions: For each question, select the answer that best describes the ACCO–government partnership. Both parties can complete the tool, which analyses results by group. Three maturity levels are outlined below.

Response	What it means and how to progress?
Early Partnerships: Engagement built on trust and limited formal structures	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations Governance structures and decision-making authority are still forming, with progress slowed by systemic barriers. Organisations are building time, skills, and resources to engage. Government Engagement is mostly transactional, with unclear roles, rigid processes, and limited capacity for shared decision-making.
Some Partnership Experience: Growing experience in shared decision-making with some formal structures	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations Actively engage in co-design, identify community priorities, and use systems to monitor agreements, though consistency varies. Government Engagement includes some co-design, with partial sharing of power, priorities, and accountability
Well Established Partnerships: Leads decision-making processes, resourced with formal agreements, shared governance and long-term sustainability	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations Lead in governance, drive policy and agenda-setting, mentor peers, and align with community aspirations. Government Fully embed shared governance, co-lead policy and program delivery, mentor, and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and self-determination.

Figure 3: Organisation Maturity Assessment

KEY QUESTIONS		MATURITY		
		Early Partnerships	Some Partnership Experience	Well Established Partnerships
Level of Engagement	ACCOS: What is the organisation's current level of formal engagement with government?	Little to no formal engagement with government. Would like to have more.	Formal engagement through government-led contracts for service delivery.	Formal agreements that were co-developed with government and include shared decision-making terms.
	Government: What mechanisms does your agency currently use to engage with ACCOs?	Engagement mainly through compliance, reporting or one-off consultation.	Some mechanisms are in place, e.g. consultative forums, joint workshops, but processes are still largely government-led.	Shared decision-making forums and governance structures are established and embedded, and community-selected ACCOs help set priorities and outcomes.
Confidence and Capability in Negotiation	ACCOS: How confident is the organisation in negotiating with government?	Cautious and worried about jeopardising our position or funding.	Moderately confident. Some experience but would benefit from a clearer framework and stronger negotiation skills.	Highly confident. Extensive experience and actively lead negotiations and the shared decision-making agenda.
	Government: What actions is your agency taking to build capability for shared decision-making with ACCOs?	Staff have little to no training in cultural safety or negotiation, engagement is led by senior levels only, and no resources are dedicated to co-design.	Staff receive some training in cultural safety and engagement, limited authority is delegated, and some resourcing, but not consistent.	Staff are trained and supported, authority is delegated to negotiate and co-decide, resourcing for co-design and partnerships are embedded as core practice.
Formal Arrangements	ACCOS: Does the organisation have formal arrangements with the government that outline your work?	Informal or ad-hoc engagements, but no formal contracts.	Contracts for specific service delivery, but they are government-led and do not include shared decision-making terms from the outset.	Formal contracts or agreements that were co-developed and include terms for shared governance and mutual accountability.
	Government: Does your agency have formal arrangements that explicitly include power-sharing, accountability, and mutual decision-making with ACCOs?	Arrangements focus on service delivery contracts without shared governance, accountability, or decision-making terms.	Agreements include limited shared elements (e.g. KPIs, joint review processes) but power remains largely with government, with a line of accountability back to community.	Agreements explicitly redistribute power, embed shared governance and include accountability to ACCOs and communities. Also reviewed regularly to ensure reciprocity.

Annex I: Influence Model

Purpose:

This blank Influence Model is provided as a practical tool for partnerships to map where decision-making power sits, where influence can be exercised, and which issues are outside of their control.

Partnerships are encouraged to:

- **Populate the model** with key activities, commitments, and governance elements relevant to their context
- **Use it to clarify decision-making** by showing where shared decision-making applies and where influence can be expanded
- **Record areas outside scope or control** to manage expectations and ensure transparency

The model can be revisited and updated as the partnership evolves, making it a living tool that supports alignment, accountability, and clarity.

