

# **SNAICC 2026-27 PRE-BUDGET SUBMISSION TO THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT**

JANUARY 2026

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## **Acknowledgement**

SNAICC respectfully acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and their continuing connections to land, waters and communities. SNAICC head office is located on the lands of the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation, and SNAICC operates nationally. SNAICC acknowledges Traditional Owners of all lands and waters across this continent, and pays respects to Elders past and present. We acknowledge and respect their continued connection to Country, care for community and practice of culture for generations uncounted.

## **About SNAICC**

SNAICC is the national peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. We work for the fulfilment of the rights of our children, to ensure their safety, development, and well-being.

SNAICC has an active membership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-based child care agencies, Multi-functional Aboriginal Children's Services, crèches, long day care child care services, pre-schools, early childhood education services, early childhood support organisations, family support services, foster care agencies, family reunification services, family group homes, services for young people at risk, community groups and voluntary associations, government agencies and individual supporters.

Since 1981, SNAICC has been a passionate national voice representing the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. SNAICC champions the principles of community control and self-determination as the means for sustained improvements for children and families, which has been at the heart of SNAICC's work, whether on child protection and wellbeing or early childhood education and development. Our work comprises policy, advocacy, and sector development. We also work with non-Indigenous services alongside Australian, State and Territory Governments to improve how agencies design and deliver supports and services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

As the national peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, SNAICC consults with and is informed by its member organisations and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders to ensure the experiences, needs and aspirations of our leaders, our sector and ultimately, our children and families are the foundation for our submissions and recommendations.

## Executive Summary

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have cared for children for thousands of generations, grounded in cultural knowledge and strengths essential for wellbeing. Despite these strengths, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children remain disproportionately affected by vulnerability, as shown by overrepresentation in child protection and youth justice systems and persistent gaps in health and education outcomes.

These inequities stem from the ongoing impacts of colonisation, which compound across social determinants of health and wellbeing. Protecting and promoting the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is critical for sustaining the world's oldest living cultures and building a fair and just society where all children have the opportunity to thrive.

While governments have committed to change through the National Agreement on Closing the Gap and Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children, progress remains slow. The Productivity Commission's review confirms that governments are not delivering the systemic reforms needed to achieve meaningful outcomes (Productivity Commission, 2024).

SNAICC calls on the Australian Government to accelerate action by investing in policy reform, programs, and structural change that enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families to thrive. These proposals also help alleviate cost-of-living pressures by increasing access to services, reducing childcare costs, and creating employment opportunities in education and social services.

SNAICC is calling for the Australian Government to invest in the following initiatives in its upcoming Budget:

### 1. Safety and Wellbeing:

- 1.1 Resourcing and implementing *Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children*
- 1.2 National ACCO prevention and early support program funding

### 2. Early Years:

- 2.1 Implementation of a dedicated funding model for ACCO integrated early years services
- 2.2 National expansion of SNAICC's Early Years Support (EYS) program
- 2.3 Expansion of the Connected Beginnings program
- 2.4 Development of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early years workforce
- 2.5 Strengthened access to quality early learning through Building Early Education Fund (BEEF)
- 2.6 Implementing a Nest and Nurture model to expand the number of ACCO early years services
- 2.7 Funding a national expansion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander playgroups

# 1. Safety and Wellbeing

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children remain significantly over-represented in child protection systems. Despite national commitments to reduce this disparity, recent national data shows concerning trends that demand urgent and targeted investment.

In 2023–24, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were:

- 4.9 times more likely than non-Indigenous children to be reported to child protection authorities (i.e. subject to a notification)
- 5.5 times more likely to have notifications investigated
- 9.8 times more likely to be subject to a care and protection order
- 9.6 times more likely to be in out-of-home care (OOHC) and on third party parental responsibility orders (SNAICC, 2025).

Further, as of June 2024, only 63.1% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care were placed with family members or other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander caregivers, a steady decline from previous years. At the same time, residential care placements increased from 9.0% to 10.5%, indicating a shift towards more expensive institutional care (which is less effective at supporting children's wellbeing) rather than family-based care or solutions (SNAICC 2025, p.41).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kinship systems are built on collective responsibility and cultural continuity in child-rearing. When these practices are not recognised in child protection systems, children experience harm and cultural disconnection that can have lifelong adverse effects and significant social and economic costs.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled organisations (ACCOs) are essential to delivering culturally safe and effective early intervention and prevention services, with strong evidence showing that ACCO led programs strengthen families, reduce child protection involvement and improve wellbeing outcomes. Despite their proven impact, ACCOs remain underfunded relative to their role and the demand placed upon them, limiting their ability to expand services, retain skilled staff and meet the needs of vulnerable families (SNAICC 2025, pp. 42-43). Further, prevention and early intervention supports as a whole are underfunded relative to tertiary child protection systems.<sup>1</sup> This results in major gaps in the availability of early support services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families throughout the country.

As a party to the Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership and *Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031*, the Australian Government has committed to working in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities and organisations to drive the system-wide reforms required to address longstanding disparities in children's safety and wellbeing. The following initiatives – including workforce expansion, sustainable funding for ACCOs, investment in early supports and strengthened mechanisms for monitoring and accountability – will demonstrate sustained action on those commitments.

<sup>1</sup> Nationally in 2022-23, only 15.6% of recurrent child protection expenditure went to family support services (including intensive supports), while the remainder was directed to funding statutory interventions and out-of-home care services. See SNAICC (2025), [Family Matters Report 2025: Strong, loved and full of potential](#), pp. 35–37.

## 1.1 Resourcing for Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children (Safe and Supported)

### Proposal

SNAICC seeks **\$135.99 million over four years** in recurrent funding from the Australian Government to underpin the expanded and accelerated implementation of *Safe and Supported*.

*Safe and Supported* is the key strategy supporting national efforts to make progress under [Target 12 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap](#) (to reduce the rate of over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care by 45% by 2031).

Increased funding is needed to deliver Australian Government commitments under the *Safe and Supported* [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan](#). Priorities for funding include:

- Building the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and ACCO child and family services workforce (Action 4), including:
  - Direct support payments and subsidies for ACCOs in regional and remote areas to attract and retain staff, including subsidies for accommodation and relocation.
  - A Remote and Regional Workforce Development Fund to resource ACCOs in building their workforces to the scale and capabilities that will be required to support the transition of funding and service delivery in line with the National Child and Family Investment Strategy (see 2.2, below). This should include new approaches to using funding for ACCOs to:
    - bridge the gap when service delivery responsibilities are being transitioned to them from mainstream services, particularly in terms of recruiting staff *before* the transition of funding occurs to enable immediate and effective service responses for clients.
    - invest in staff obtaining formal qualifications and training.
  - Funding to develop a national ACCO child and family services workforce strategy, and
  - Supporting capacity uplift for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations to deliver cultural responsiveness training to mainstream services.
- Funding to develop and implement the mechanisms and infrastructure to support data sovereignty for ACCOs.
- Increased funding to provide policy and governance support for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership Group to engage in policy development and shared decision-making in line with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.
- Increased investment in ACCO early and targeted support programs to prevent unnecessary removal of children into out-of-home care (see 2.2, below)

### Rationale

- Increased investment is essential to reverse worsening trends in over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care.
- Implementation of *Safe and Supported* has so far been slow, largely due to inadequate resourcing and fragmented delivery. Investment to support the Leadership Group to partner



with governments would enable faster development of community-led policy solutions and deliver more immediate and positive impacts for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in, or at risk of being in, out of home care.

- ACCO child and family services workforce development has been identified as a critical enabler to addressing Target 12 by the Joint Council on Closing the Gap, and these initiatives would deliver improved recruitment, retention, and a more culturally responsive workforce supporting children to remain safely with their families.
- Investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations will support economic empowerment and employment opportunities in regional and remote areas. This is further supported by investing in data sovereignty and empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations to make more informed, evidence-based decisions.
- Building the capability of the mainstream sector to work in culturally responsive, trauma-informed ways is critical to delivering better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. Evaluation of Waterways cultural responsiveness training delivered by ACCOs has demonstrated a significant increase in this capability based on initial implementation<sup>2</sup>; further investment is required to continue and build capacity to deliver these benefits to services across Australia.
- Without urgent investment, Australia risks failing to meet its obligations under the Closing the Gap targets as well as international human rights commitments.

## Budget Requests

**Workforce strengthening:** SNAICC’s costings indicate that the following investment would make a substantial difference to ACCOs’ ability to attract and retain child and family services staff, particularly in regional and remote areas, through the introduction of direct, ongoing support payments and subsidies. This would sit alongside investment in a fund to support ACCOs in building capable and sustainable workforces to support the transition of investment for them to deliver services to their communities. This latter component includes time-limited funding for the recommended Fund; development of a national workforce strategy; and funding to support the workforce needed to improve mainstream service system cultural responsiveness.

2026-27 FY	2027-28 FY	2028-29 FY	2029-30 FY
\$ 26,366,000	\$ 25,783,000	\$ 18,833,000	\$ 16,349,000

**Safe and Supported policy and governance support:** The following investment would enable self-determined, community-informed and evidence-based policy development across the breadth of work under Safe and Supported, supporting the engagement of the Leadership Group (note: this is *in addition* to existing Commonwealth funding for Secretariat support). This would primarily fund

<sup>2</sup> [Waterways | Cultural Responsiveness Training | SNAICC](#) - Waterways is trauma-informed cultural responsiveness training developed and delivered by a partnership of ACCOs and ACCO peaks, funded by the Department of Social Services. Waterways has recently been formally evaluated, with findings to be distributed shortly.

jurisdictional and individual member support in each jurisdiction, with a small amount of uplift to support central coordination.

2026-27 FY	2027-28 FY	2028-29 FY	2029-30 FY
\$ 1,455,000	\$ 1,496,000	\$ 1,538,000	\$ 1,581,000

**Data sovereignty:** Finally, the following investment would enable significant development and implementation of community-controlled mechanisms and infrastructure to build data sovereignty, including investing in both local and national capability and capacity building. This would include directly funding services to build data capability and systems at a local level, as well as funding national community-controlled data system development, governance, and strategy development.

2026-27 FY	2027-28 FY	2028-29 FY	2029-30 FY
\$10,000,000	\$ 10,280,000	\$ 11,000,000	\$ 11,308,000



## 1.2 National ACCO prevention and early support program funding

### Proposal

SNAICC seeks **\$801.12 million over four years** in recurrent funding from the Australian Government to support the expanded delivery of early and targeted (preventative) supports to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families by ACCOs.

Under Action 2 of the *Safe and Supported [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan](#)* (2023-2026), all governments have committed to increasing their investment in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled child and family sector. The aim is to shift towards adequate and coordinated funding of early, targeted and culturally safe supports for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

Prevention and early support initiatives delivered by ACCOs are proven to reduce child protection involvement and improve wellbeing outcomes. The *National Child and Family Investment Strategy* (Investment Strategy), which delivers Action 2(a) of the *Safe and Supported Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan* and was recently endorsed by the Australian Government through the Shared Decision-Making Committee, provides a roadmap to redirect investment towards earlier supports provided by ACCOs.

The Strategy provides a set of principles, system elements and example best-practice activities to help guide each government's approach to shifting investment to earlier supports delivered by ACCOs. There is now significant momentum to deliver on other activities under Action 2, and the Australian Government has a key role to play in funding these activities – alongside state and territory governments – or there is a real risk of action stalling and commitments under *Safe and Supported* not being delivered upon.

Accordingly, following on from the launch of the Innovation Fund in 2025, the Australian Government must continue to demonstrate national leadership in delivering on its commitments under the Investment Strategy, namely by:

- investing directly in ACCOs to strengthen and significantly expand the prevention and early support services they deliver to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, through a new national ACCO early support program with co-contribution from the Australian, State and Territory Governments;<sup>3</sup>
- renewing the Children and Families Intensive Support (CaFIS) funding mechanism to support the delivery of intensive family support services in the Northern Territory and Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands;
- recommitting funding to, and extending the scope of, the Improving Multidisciplinary Responses (IMR) program, which is due to finish over the course of the next 2 years. This program supports ACCOs to design and embed sustainable, community led multidisciplinary models

<sup>3</sup> SNAICC is currently undertaking a project commissioned by the Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership, via the Department of Education, to scope a new funding model for ACCOs delivering child and family services. While there is insufficient time for the Australian Government to implement this model prior to the delivery of the 2026-27 Budget, over the longer term this model should provide a guiding framework for recurrent funding.

that reduce fragmentation, improve access to supports, and contribute to better long term child and family wellbeing outcomes in line with Closing the Gap priorities. Ongoing funding and an expanded scope, whereby this program could directly fund service delivery, would support much-needed services delivered by ACCOs that have already built capacity to do so in a sustainable way;

- creating a dedicated funding stream to establish multi-functional Family Relationship Services hubs operated by ACCOs, in line with recommendation 8 of the 2024 review of family relationship services led by Andrew Metcalfe AO. Establishing these hubs would provide a range of critical supports to separated and separating families that have interactions across family law, child protection, and family violence service systems. It would respond to the review's findings that Family Relationship Services are currently under-utilised by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, and present significant barriers to their engagement and support, linked to deficiencies in cultural safety and self-determined programs and services (Metcalfe, 2024).
- commencing the transition of funding for prevention and early support services that reach significant proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, such that delivery by non-Indigenous NGOs shifts substantially over the forward estimates towards delivery by ACCOs in line with Priority Reform 2 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (including via the Families and Children activity, as flagged by the Department of Social Services in the October 2025 consultation paper *A new approach to programs for families and children*); and
  - establishing a separate, corresponding fund to underwrite capacity uplift among ACCOs on the receiving end of funding transitions.

## Rationale

- Evidence-based, prevention-focused early intervention supports that strengthen families and kinship networks holistically are proven to increase the number of children remaining with their families rather than entering out-of-home care and improve wellbeing outcomes, including by diverting children and young people from damaging and expensive systems such as youth justice. In the long term (including intergenerationally), this reduces the cost of interventions by health and welfare systems for which the Australian Government has significant responsibility (O'Connell 2025).
- ACCO-led delivery ensures that services are delivered in culturally safe ways that wrap around children and families' holistic needs, best supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to grow up connected to their family, community, culture and Country. ACCO child and family service providers typically have a wide range of connected expertise across child protection, health, child development, and early education. There are significant opportunities to build on capacity already existing in these sectors to deliver the support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families need to care for their children.
- Currently, funding to prevention and early supports is highly variable between jurisdictions, which results in an inequitable national system that sees many families unable to access essential supports based on where they live. A significantly bolstered ACCO-led child and family services sector, in which ACCOs embed long-term capacity enhancements and improved

economies of scale, would ensure that far more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families could access the supports needed to address challenges to their safety and wellbeing.

- SNAICC estimates that approximately 130 ACCO providers (including regional offices of larger providers) are required to deliver quality family supports and begin to turn the tide on removals to out-of-home care.
- While states and territories are responsible for statutory child protection systems, all governments are responsible for the safety, rights and wellbeing of children and families. This fact underpins the need and justification for a co-contribution model delivered in partnership between the Australian, State and Territory Governments to boost the availability of early and targeted supports (noting again that many of the downstream cost savings will accrue to the Australian Government).
- Coordinated prevention and early support funding would also help address administrative complexity and reporting burden for services relying on funding streams from more than one government (e.g., both Australian and State/Territory funding, or funding from multiple State/Territory Governments in cross-border regions), allowing services to focus more effort on supporting families. At the same time, less duplication of government administration would result in significant efficiencies.
- SNAICC's Budget Requests align to broader views across the child and family sector on what is needed in early support investment, as reflected in the Families Australia pre-budget submission (which specifically calls for 44% of new investment to be quarantined for ACCOs).
- Without adequate resourcing, all governments risk failing to meet Closing the Gap Target 12 and perpetuating systemic harm, in contravention of international human rights obligations.

## Budget Requests

*Investing directly in ACCOs to strengthen and significantly expand the prevention and early support services they deliver to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families through a new, restricted (ACCO-only) funding mechanism delivered in collaborative partnership between the Australian, State and Territory Governments:*

Below SNAICC has estimated adequate annual Australian Government funding for child and family programs delivered by ACCOs. While increased Australian Government investment would have a positive impact in its own right, to meet the required growth of the sector to respond to family needs, these funds would need to be matched by increases in state and territory funding for early support programs relative to population, need and current jurisdictional investment. This would **not** displace the need to continue existing ACCO-specific funding programs administered by the Australian Government, such as Improving Multidisciplinary Responses program; however, nor would these estimates all represent new investment, with the expectation that a significant proportion of existing non-Indigenous-specific child and family services funding would be progressively recommissioned towards ACCOs, as detailed below.

2026-27 FY	2027-28 FY	2028-29 FY	2029-30 FY
\$ 87,400,000	\$ 89,800,000	\$ 92,400,000	\$ 95,000,000

*Renewing the Children and Families Intensive Support (CaFIS) funding mechanism to support the delivery of intensive family support services in the Northern Territory and APY Lands:*

<b>2026-27 FY</b>	<b>2027-28 FY</b>	<b>2028-29 FY</b>	<b>2029-30 FY</b>
<b>\$ 12,567,000</b>	<b>\$ 12,919,000</b>	<b>\$ 13,281,000</b>	<b>\$ 13,653,000</b>

*Extending the scope of the Improving Multidisciplinary Responses (IMR) program to fund service delivery by organisations that have been prepared to do so through the IMR program*

<b>2026-27 FY</b>	<b>2027-28 FY</b>	<b>2028-29 FY</b>	<b>2029-30 FY</b>
<b>\$ 16,000,000</b>	<b>\$ 16,480,000</b>	<b>\$ 16,974,000</b>	<b>\$ 17,483,000</b>

*Creating a dedicated funding stream to establish multi-functional Family Relationship Services hubs delivered by ACCOs, as part of a reformed Family Relationships Services Program aligned to findings of the 2024 Metcalfe review. (Note: costing is based on the recommended scope of additional funding identified in the review and includes establishment costs for 2026-27, with full-program funding in subsequent years. Additional funding should also be provided to ACCOs through the transition of a proportion of existing funding in the Family Relationship Services Program.)*

<b>2026-27 FY</b>	<b>2027-28 FY</b>	<b>2028-29 FY</b>	<b>2029-30 FY</b>
<b>\$ 6,900,000</b>	<b>\$ 34,300,000</b>	<b>\$35,329,000</b>	<b>\$ 36,389,000</b>

*Transitioning/recommissioning funding towards ACCOs for prevention and early support services targeted to, and/or reaching substantial numbers of, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, such that delivery by non-Indigenous NGOs shifts substantially over the forward estimates to delivery by ACCOs (note this is not new investment):*

<b>2026-27 FY</b>	<b>2027-28 FY</b>	<b>2028-29 FY</b>	<b>2029-30 FY</b>
<b>\$ 37,254,000</b>	<b>\$ 38,297,000</b>	<b>\$ 39,370,000</b>	<b>\$ 40,472,000</b>

*Establishing a separate, corresponding fund to underwrite capacity uplift among ACCOs on the receiving end of the above funding transitions, comprising:*

- (a) a grant mechanism to directly fund ACCOs' investment in additional workforce, core/corporate functions and infrastructure (costed at \$9.314 million per annum, indexed to CPI);*
- (b) funding for a national or jurisdictional support function, delivered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations with advanced expertise in the provision of tailored, place-based supports for technical, organisational and regulatory/compliance matters (costed at \$2.400 million per annum, indexed to CPI).*

<b>2026-27 FY</b>	<b>2027-28 FY</b>	<b>2028-29 FY</b>	<b>2029-30 FY</b>
<b>\$ 11,714,000</b>	<b>\$ 12,042,000</b>	<b>\$ 12,379,000</b>	<b>\$ 12,726,000</b>

## 2. Early years

Closing the gap begins with our children. In a child's earliest, formative years the foundations are laid for them to be happy, healthy, strong in their culture and identities, and to learn well throughout their lives.

The early years form the foundation for lifelong learning, wellbeing and development, with children gaining the majority of their brain capacity before the age of five. High quality, inclusive early childhood education and care during these years significantly strengthens children's cognitive, linguistic and social emotional capabilities and improves long term educational and health outcomes (Moore 2017). However, the current early childhood education and care system, shaped by historical policy failures and market driven design, is not meeting the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Many families face persistent barriers to participation including limited service availability, cultural unsafety, workforce shortages and significant complexity in navigating the system (SNAICC 2023).

These structural inequities contribute to higher rates of developmental vulnerability for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. One in three children is developmentally vulnerable on two or more Australian Early Development Census domains, compared with one in five non-Indigenous children. Developmental vulnerability is increasing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, while improving for their non-Indigenous peers (AEDC 2024). This disadvantage is strongly linked to socioeconomic hardship and remoteness. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are more likely to live in areas of persistent poverty and are far more likely to reside in remote and very remote regions, where early years services are scarce or non-existent. As a result, the children who would benefit most from high quality early childhood education often have the least access to it.

This inequality is a predictable outcome of a market driven early childhood education and care system that responds to fee paying demand rather than developmental need. Services are concentrated in wealthier population centres and remain limited in the regional and remote communities where many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families live. Even in metropolitan areas, families often struggle to find culturally safe, responsive early years services. Non-access barriers also persist, including experiences of cultural unsafety, complex subsidy rules, and perceptions that services are only for working families and unaffordable costs (Sydenham 2019).

Furthermore, currently, just four of the 17 Closing the Gap targets essential to the rights, wellbeing and quality of life of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are on track. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been asking to take these Closing the Gap targets in hand, and to be fully empowered to exercise self-determination over them. It is widely recognised that the solutions to these socioeconomic inequities must be structural, systemic and underpinned by the essential right to self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In implementing effective solutions, the role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled organisations (ACCOS) is essential.



The ACCO early years sector is critical to providing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children with the forms of culturally appropriate early education and care proven to set them on positive life trajectories. The evidence that these services truly make a difference for their families is clear. Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to thrive requires holistic and culturally grounded early years services provided by ACCOs. ACCO early years services deliver culturally safe, relationship based and integrated supports that reflect community priorities, embed culture throughout service design and enable children to develop strong identity and wellbeing. These services build trust with families, support children with complex needs and provide a wide range of interconnected supports that go far beyond mainstream early childhood education and care models (SNAICC 2022).

There is a nation-wide, highly skilled, capable and experienced ACCO early years sector delivering early childhood and integrated services across Australia. Despite their effectiveness, coverage remains well below need and existing services face significant funding constraints. For a range of systemic and structural reasons, ACCO early years services are not empowered or enabled to meet the needs of all the children, families and communities that require them. There are vast swathes of Country where there are either no services established, or there are services battling with chronic workforce challenges or financial viability.

Most ACCOs rely on a complex mix of Child Care Subsidy, program grants and fragmented Commonwealth and state funding sources that do not reflect the full cost of delivering integrated cultural and developmental support. ACCOs care for large numbers of children with additional needs linked to disability, trauma and socioeconomic adversity, yet are not funded at levels required to meet these needs or to maintain a skilled and culturally strong workforce. Funding arrangements remain disconnected, uncertain and administratively burdensome (SNAICC 2023).

Everywhere across Australia, there is significant need for the development and support of ACCO early years services. Because far too often this level of need is not matched by a genuine commitment from governments to adequately uphold their commitments to self-determination, it falls to ACCOs and their peaks such as SNAICC to develop strategies to catalyse action. ACCOs have proven that they can move fast on their challenges when they are empowered and resourced to. But far too frequently they are held back by governments' lack of urgency.

The proposals to government which we articulate in this section intend to provide a foundation for accelerating sustainable progress against the Closing the Gap targets through the funding of proven and evidence-based early years interventions and programs.



## 2.1 Implementation of a dedicated funding model for ACCO integrated early years services

### Proposal

To ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families are receiving the early childhood services which truly make a difference, we are urgently calling on the Australian Government to implement a dedicated national funding model for ACCO integrated early years services.

All governments, through the Joint Council on Closing the Gap, have committed to exploring the design and implementation of a national, systemic and sustainable approach to funding ACCO-led integrated early years services. Implementing such an approach will ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families have equitable access to the holistic, culturally safe, wraparound supports that allow them to thrive both in childhood and throughout their lives.

We propose that the Commonwealth Government commits to partnering with states and territories to fully fund a dedicated national funding model for ACCO integrated early years services which:

- Provides **long-term sustainability** for services to keep their doors open and grow their business to meet demand
- Provides ACCOs **control** to decide how to best service their communities
- Uses **block and needs-based funding** to enable a wide range of integrated supports tailored to community needs, including early childhood education, family support, health, and cultural programs.
- Includes **backbone support** for essential functions like business operations, policy, workforce development, and practice improvement, with funding scaled according to population size, remoteness, and vulnerability.
- Allows for national-level and sector-wide **service planning and expansion** to address the gaps in availability of ACCO early years services across the country, building on progress made through the Building Early Education Fund.

The new funding model for ACCO integrated early years services should be funded and delivered through a co-contribution model between Commonwealth, state and territory governments. Clear roles, responsibilities and long-term funding security should be established through a national policy framework, embedded within a national partnership agreement. [SNAICC's report](#) on funding model options for the ACCO integrated early years services sector, published in 2024, recommends an architecture and set of essential design principles for the funding model which we encourage the Australian Government to commit to.

### Rationale

The evidence clearly shows that ACCO-led integrated early years services are best placed to provide the wraparound, holistic supports that ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families can access the high-quality early education and development services they need (dandolopartners 2023). ACCO ECEC services prepare children not only educationally, but culturally

and developmentally, while supporting families and communities to be ready to guide them through childhood and beyond. These services deliver far more than early education, they nurture strong cultural identity and work holistically to meet families’ needs. Children who are supported across these domains are better prepared for every stage of their educational journey.

Despite their proven effectiveness, ACCOs face severe and systemic underfunding. Current funding models are fragmented, inadequate, and fail to reflect the true cost of delivering culturally safe services, leaving many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children without access to quality early learning and supports. The Productivity Commission has highlighted the need for ACCOs to have “a sustainable funding model” that recognises their knowledge and expertise in delivering community-driven ECEC priorities (Productivity Commission 2024).

The demand driven funding model, underpinned by the Child Care Subsidy, limits ACCOs’ ability to plan, invest and retain a stable workforce—activities essential to the viability and growth of their services. This unfit for purpose approach contributes to persistent barriers for children and families seeking culturally responsive early years support. A dedicated funding model for ACCO led integrated early years services is essential to underpin long term reform success, including initiatives such as the Building Early Education Fund (BEEF) and Thriving Kids.

## Budget Request

SNAICC’s indicative costing suggests that full implementation of a dedicated, supply-side funding model for the ACCO integrated early years sector would require up to \$255,000,000 per annum, and it would increase year-on-year with the growth of the sector and inclusion of new ACCO early childhood services in communities with high levels of unmet service need. The funding model may consist of redirected funds from existing ECEC funding streams, such as CCS and CCCFR funds, and contributions from existing funding in integrated service streams (e.g. allied health, disability, foundational support, inclusion support, and family services).

2026-27 FY	2027-28 FY	2028-29 FY	2029-30 FY
\$255,000,000	\$275,000,000	\$296,500,000	\$319,700,000

## 2.2 National expansion of SNAICC's Early Years Support (EYS) program

### Proposal

SNAICC seeks **\$75.25 million over five years** in recurrent funding from the Australian Government to sustain and expand the Early Years Support (EYS) program nationally.

The EYS program currently provides essential backbone support and services to more than 40 ACCO integrated early years services across Western Australia, Victoria and New South Wales. The EYS program comprises a diverse range of sector-strengthening offerings, including the refinement of service design and governance, improving service delivery, ensuring compliance with quality standards and focusing on building capacity within the workforce through development and training. Additionally, EYS offers invaluable assistance in securing sustainable funding, ensuring that these crucial services can continue to thrive and provide supports to their children, families and communities. An independent evaluation of the program delivered by Deloitte Access Economics (2025) concluded that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children benefited from their engagement with EYS.

We are requesting funding from the Australian Government for EYS program to develop into an ongoing, nation-wide core service offering and piece of sector scaffolding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled organisations (ACCOs) in all jurisdictions. Funding will contribute to

- Sustained support for services and their quality and viability in existing jurisdictions. Continued support for ACCO early years services in NSW, Victoria and WA, ensuring stable governance, improved NQS performance, strengthened workforce capability and reduced administrative burden.
- Implementation of a national roll-out over four years, through a dedicated establishment unit which will support SNAICC EYS to establish footprints across all states and territories. We will begin to establish the program in Queensland, South Australia, the Northern Territory, Tasmania and the ACT, ensuring all jurisdictions can access this proven, culturally grounded support model.
- Establishment of a national workforce of 48 FTE will deliver high quality, community tailored supports that reinforce, service quality, cultural responsiveness, strong governance and compliance and workforce recruitment, retention and development. This staffing footprint will include a national unit to continue to provide coordination, leadership, national advocacy and strong two-way local-national information flow across jurisdictions.

Ultimately, this essential investment in our sector will ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children can access culturally safe, high-quality early education and developmental supports, while strengthening the capacity, viability, workforce and governance of ACCO early years services across all jurisdictions.

### Rationale

There are significant benefits of children and families engaging with quality early years services, including improvements in social, developmental, educational and economic outcomes. We know that

ACCOs set the gold standard in these early years services, but they face significant operational challenges in comparison to mainstream providers. Accordingly, there is a clear and pressing need to support and grow the ACCO early years sector to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are able to access the services and supports they need to thrive. These challenges include operating in remote or vulnerable communities, building innovative service models to meet the needs of community, operating under volatile financial circumstances, and operating with acute workforce and resourcing pressures. Despite these challenges, Australian Government efforts to substantially prioritise the ACCO sector in funding and policy are patchy at best, and sector strengthening is not consistently prioritised, limiting the ability and growth of ACCOs to meet demand for high-quality, culturally responsive services

Responding to what we heard consistently that our members require consistent and culturally safe supports to improve the capacity, quality, viability, sustainability and growth of their services, SNAICC’s Early Years Support (EYS) program was designed and implemented to provide regional backbone supports directly to ACCO services on the ground in Victoria, New South Wales and Western Australia. The evaluation of EYS by Deloitte Access Economics indicates that it is having its intended effects, enabling and empowering services to strengthen their organisations’ quality, viability, efficiency, collective voices, and trust with their communities (2024). The evaluation found EYS to be “highly valued and effective,” reducing administrative burden, improving governance, strengthening workforce capability, and contributing to improved National Quality Standard (NQS) ratings across ACCO services.

Despite these outcomes, EYS is currently operating on a short-term 12-month Commonwealth extension to December 2026. For the last 2-years EYS has received a 1-year extension in the final month of its contracted operations through funds allocated in the Mid-Year Economic and Financial Outlook (MYEFO). This has contributed to workforce and service instability and risked erosion of the program’s progress due to potential funding lapses. Long-term, indexed investment is critical to maintain momentum, retain skilled staff, and support communities requesting access.

Demand for EYS continues to grow. Originally implemented in NSW, Victoria and WA, the program is now being actively sought by ACCOs and governments in Queensland, South Australia and the Northern Territory, demonstrating its national relevance and the high levels of unmet need for backbone and sector strengthening supports across Australia. No alternative model offers the same level of community control, cultural capability building and sector wide support.

### Budget Request

SNAICC seeks **\$75,251,308** over **five years** to sustain and expand the Early Years Support program nationally, providing long-term, recurrent funding that secures program continuity, enables national rollout, and supports communities to deliver the culturally safe early years services they prioritise.

FY26-27	FY27-28	FY28-29	FY29-30	FY30-31	Total
\$14,486,400	\$14,920,992	\$14,831,900	\$15,276,855	\$15,735,161	\$75,251,308

## 2.3 Expansion of the Connected Beginnings program

### Proposal

SNAICC requests increased and expanded Commonwealth investment in Connected Beginnings of **\$94,120,176** to extend the program to an additional **50 communities over five years** and to strengthen SNAICC's role as Community Partner to maximise the impact of national early years reforms.

Connected Beginnings, established in 2016, supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to be safe, healthy and ready to thrive at school by age five. The program brings early childhood education, health services, family supports and community leadership into one coordinated approach so that education and health investments reinforce each other. With 50 sites across all states and territories, Connected Beginnings currently supports more than 24,800 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Despite significant achievements and positive evaluation outcomes, the program's reach remains well below need. Significant expansion is required to ensure families in underserved communities can access coordinated, culturally safe support. To meet national commitments to strengthening the ACCO early years sector under Priority Reform Two, the Commonwealth should double the current expansion rate so that at least 50 additional communities are engaged by 2031.

Connected Beginnings has now moved beyond its establishment phase and the evidence clearly demonstrates its essential role in the early childhood service system. Continued investment is needed to extend this proven support model, community by community, until all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities that would benefit from Connected Beginnings have access to the program.

### Rationale

Culture is the first learning environment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. We know that our children's early development flourishes when it builds on this foundation. At the heart of the Connected Beginnings programs is a commitment to ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are not only educationally ready for school and all that comes after but also grounded in and connected to culture before they get to big school.

The introduction of the Thriving Kids agenda and concurrent ECEC reforms represents the most significant reset of Australia's early childhood system in a generation. It is a reset that must deliver outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. The reforms create a narrow but critical window of opportunity to embed culturally led, place-based delivery models into the national early childhood service architecture. Scaling Connected Beginnings now would ensure this reform momentum translates into meaningful outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families by embedding Connected Beginnings in communities with unmet need.

The economic case for expansion is strong. The 2023 Mid-Term Evaluation found that Connected Beginnings delivers a positive return on investment, with cost-benefit analysis indicating returns of



between \$2.12 and \$4.24, for every dollar invested (Inside Policy 2023). This reinforces what is already well known, early investment is not just a ‘nice to have’ but essential to reducing the ever rising and long-term cost burden on government. With governments spending \$22.3 billion per annum on ‘late intervention,’ scaling investment in Connected Beginnings delivers value now by preventing downstream costs across health, education, child protection and other systems (O’Connell 2025).

Further, Connected Beginnings is essential to ensuring the success of the new Thriving Kids Initiative. Thriving Kids is built around integrated and navigable early support pathways, while Connected Beginnings provides the service integration and family support required to deliver on the promise of Thriving Kids- to improve early childhood development and ensure children can access the support they need to thrive.

By aligning the Connected Beginnings and Thriving Kids pathways, the Commonwealth Government has an opportunity to strengthen policy coherence across its early childhood investments. This alignment would reduce duplication while increasing service equity and impact. This is where the Connected Beginnings Community Partner role is pivotal. Strengthening the link between Thriving Kids and Connected Beginnings requires a trusted national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood partner to steward system integration, collaboration and shared learning, while ensuring cultural grounding remains central. SNAICC is currently funded as the community partner for Connected Beginnings and is uniquely positioned to continue to take the lead and support community, drawing together national reform, place-based service delivery and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership.

Consistency, equity and impact across early childhood reform for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, requires appropriate investment. The ask below sets out the funding required to expand Connected Beginnings’ reach, enable SNAICC to ensure the early childhood sector has the capability, resources, relationships and cultural grounding required to maximise the impact of Thriving Kids and other early years education reforms, and ensure all children have access to the connected, child-and-family-centered services proven to make a difference.

### Budget Request

SNAICC is calling for investment of **\$85,072,000 over 5 years** to expand Connected Beginnings to reach another 50 sites by 2031, and for **\$9,048,176 over 5 years** for SNAICC to continue and expand its Community Partner role.

	FY26-27	FY27-28	FY28-29	FY29-30	FY30-31	Total
Connected Beginnings Expansion for 50 additional sites	\$16,360,000	\$16,687,200	\$17,014,400	\$17,341,600	\$17,668,800	\$85,072,000
Continued and expanded SNAICC Community Partner role	\$1,740,034	\$1,774,834	\$1,809,635	\$1,844,436	\$1,879,236	\$9,048,176
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$18,100,034</b>	<b>\$18,462,034</b>	<b>\$18,824,035</b>	<b>\$19,186,036</b>	<b>\$19,548,036</b>	<b>\$94,120,176</b>



## 2.4 Development of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early years workforce

### Proposal

SNAICC is seeking a **\$27 million investment** over **4 years** to scale the Workforce Innovation Fund across 20 ACCO early years services nationally. This investment will address critical workforce constraints that limit the growth and sustainability of culturally safe early childhood education and care.

ACCOs play a central role in delivering culturally safe early childhood services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. However, persistent workforce shortages—particularly in regional, remote and very remote areas—continue to limit service availability and stability.

The Workforce Innovation Fund is an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander–designed, community controlled mechanism that enables ACCOs to tailor workforce solutions to local priorities and conditions. Scaling the Fund will support proven, community led approaches and grow the national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early years workforce.

The Fund would enable ACCOs to invest in qualification pathways, mentoring and supervision, leadership and governance capability and cultural curriculum development. Government investment would enable Funding for more than 20 ACCOs to be allocated based on need, ensuring transparency, equity and responsiveness to community priorities. Funding would also provide for scaled implementation and strengthen approaches that communities are already delivering with limited or no resources.

By investing in ACCOs through the Workforce Innovation Fund, the Australian Government would partner with SNAICC and communities to build a sustainable, community embedded workforce. ACCOs are best placed to identify the pathways, supports and conditions needed to grow and retain a skilled workforce, particularly where mainstream systems do not consistently provide culturally safe or accessible options.

### Rationale

National reviews, including the Productivity Commission and ACCC childcare inquiries, have confirmed that workforce shortages remain a critical barrier to expanding culturally safe ECEC services. They also emphasise the need to strengthen career pathways and training opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Despite significant government investment in training systems such as fee free TAFE, there is no dedicated mechanism to support ACCOs to grow, resource and retain their own workforce pipelines. The Workforce Innovation Fund addresses this gap.

Workforce shortages are driven by structural barriers to entry, progression and retention, including limited access to culturally safe, locally delivered training and the absence of flexible, employer led supports that enable participation and completion. These challenges reinforce the need for place-

based, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led workforce development approaches that build on community capability and leadership.

Each local initiative supported through the Workforce Innovation Fund will be backed by a central SNAICC delivery unit working alongside ACCOs to co-design solutions, broker partnerships and implement rigorous measurement, evaluation and learning. This model will generate practical evidence on what strengthens workforce supply, qualification and leadership pathways, and retention across metropolitan, regional, remote and very remote contexts.

Investment in the early years workforce would result in multiple and compounding benefits over time. A strong, culturally safe ECEC workforce underpins children's development, supports strong families and ensures timely access to appropriate supports. Workforce capability is foundational to broader reforms such as the Thriving Kids Initiative, which depends on trusted practitioners with strong community relationships. By strengthening ACCO workforce capability, the Workforce Innovation Fund supports sustainable career pathways and advances Closing the Gap priorities through improved early childhood outcomes.

Sustained workforce growth also requires strengthened Aboriginal community controlled training pathways and partnerships with local VET providers. Evidence shows Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators achieve the best outcomes when training is flexible, culturally safe and closely partnered with ACCOs. The Workforce Innovation Fund will enable ACCOs to support locally appropriate training solutions, including partnerships with training providers and, where communities prioritise it, exploration of expanded roles in training delivery, including as community controlled RTOs.

The proposed cocontribution model offers government a low risk, scalable reform opportunity. Philanthropic funding has already been secured to support a proof of concept phase, including delivery infrastructure, governance and early implementation. Government investment would extend reach, deepen ACCO led workforce practice, strengthen community controlled capability and generate evidence to inform future workforce policy and funding settings. With national early years reforms underway, investment now enables scaled implementation that supports Closing the Gap priorities and strengthens the evidence base for long term reform.

### **Budget Request**

SNAICC is seeking government investment of \$27 million over four years to scale an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Workforce Innovation Fund across 20 ACCO sites nationally. Eighty per cent of funding will flow directly to ACCOs to design and deliver locally led workforce initiatives, with the remaining 20 per cent supporting SNAICC's national coordination, stewardship, evaluation and enabling functions to maximise impact and shared learning. Funding will be delivered through a relational commissioning model that strengthens ACCO-led workforce development aligned with community priorities and national reform objectives.

While philanthropic funding of \$5.05 million over three years has catalysed establishment, only government investment can deliver the scale required to address workforce shortages and support sustained growth of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early years workforce.

A four-year funding commitment is required to enable genuine co-design, build workforce capability over time and generate learning that can inform sustained reform.

<b>FY26-27</b>	<b>FY27-28</b>	<b>FY28-29</b>	<b>FY29-30</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>\$6,684,319</b>	<b>\$6,700,340</b>	<b>\$6,750,693</b>	<b>\$6,868,834</b>	<b>\$27,004,186</b>

## **2.5 Strengthen access to quality early learning through Building Early Education Foundations (BEEF)**

### **Proposal**

SNAICC proposes that the Department of Education allocate up to 20 per cent, or approximately \$67.5 million of uncommitted funds in the Building Early Education Fund to establish new ACCO integrated early years services. This allocation is designed to reflect a 'meaningful proportion' of new investment aligned to clause 55 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap based on population, need, addressing inequities, and prioritising Closing the Gap outcomes. Early modelling indicates that this level of investment would support the capital development of up to 12 new services, delivered in partnership with communities experiencing high levels of unmet early childhood education and care need.

The story of Australia's ECEC market, for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, is regrettably a story of growing inequality in ECEC service coverage driven by uneven supply across geographies and socioeconomic statuses. Despite the well-known and significant benefits of ECEC provision, far too many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are unable to access these critical services. This growing inequality is undermining the development and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

This ACCO allocation would drive meaningful progress toward Closing the Gap target 4, which is currently worsening and projected to continue declining. Improved access to culturally responsive early years services enables children to thrive, creating lifelong benefits. Independent modelling by PricewaterhouseCoopers and The Front Project indicates that every dollar invested in quality early childhood education generates more than two dollars in return, driven by stronger educational outcomes, improved economic participation, better health and wellbeing and reduced long term expenditure on ineffective justice responses.

Expanding the ACCO service footprint would ensure more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families have access to high quality, culturally responsive early childhood education, strengthening children's development during the most critical years of life, while delivering social and economic returns to government.

### **Rationale**

The ACCO early years sector is essential to providing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children with culturally appropriate early education and care that supports strong development and positive life outcomes. Governed by and accountable to their communities, ACCOs uphold self-determination and play a critical role in improving early childhood outcomes at a population level.

Despite this importance, ACCOs make up only a very small proportion of the national early childhood education and care system, representing approximately 0.05 per cent of the 18,990 approved providers. The current funding model does not meet the needs of families in remote, regional and disadvantaged areas, where market driven service provision has created significant gaps. Operational subsidies remain insufficient for many communities, creating childcare deserts where services are not

viable. The Child Care Subsidy model, which relies on consistent fee paying demand, is fundamentally incompatible with new ACCO services in these locations.

ACCOs also face compounded challenges arising from their distinct operating models, the impacts of historical disadvantage and the absence of systemic support. ACCOs continue to face significant disadvantages in the current funding environment, including limited access to Commonwealth and state or territory grants and a market system that does not reflect the realities of community-controlled service delivery. Many communities lack experienced providers, organisational infrastructure and premises, meaning targeted assistance is essential to ensure sustainable service delivery. ACCOs must also navigate compliance systems that are not designed for culturally grounded practice, while responding to complex community needs shaped by intergenerational trauma. These pressures require significantly greater investment and flexibility than is currently available.

Targeted investment for service establishment and development is essential. Additional operational and strategic assistance is required for ACCOs funded through the Building Early Education Fund. Operational needs must be met through access to appropriate funding streams, while strategic support can be provided by extending existing ACCO support systems, including the Nest and Nurture, Connected Beginnings and Early Years Support programs.

### **Budget Request**

SNAICC is calling for 20% of unallocated BEEF funding to be allocated to new ACCO integrated early years services. This comes to **\$67.5 million**.

## 2.6 Implementing a Nest and Nurture model to expand the number of ACCO early years services

### Proposal

This proposal seeks Commonwealth investment in a first-of-its-kind Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled service offering specifically created to ‘nest’ new ACCO early years services under its umbrella, and ‘nurture’ those services to strength, resilience, and sustained quality. SNAICC has already developed the Nest and Nurture Operator’s concept and operating model underpinned but the available evidence on what is required to address childcare deserts, and conducted an early needs assessment. Similarly, we have written a detailed business case and received early-stage establishment funding from the philanthropic sector. We are calling on the Australian Government to partner with us and the philanthropic sector to leverage off this initial start-up funding to embed the Nest and Nurture Operator as an enduring piece of national sector-strengthening architecture designed to work with and for communities and their leaders to establish new services where there is unmet need.

The Nest and Nurture Operator will take on approved provider status to provide ECEC services, absorbing prohibitive compliance and operational risks, and streamlining registration and regulatory processes which so often deter communities from establishing their own ECEC services. Services will come under the Nest and Nurture Operator and will be intensively supported to develop their capacities delivering culturally strong, high-quality early childhood education and care which responds to community need.

Through embedding community self-determination and leadership, the Nest and Nurture Operator is designed to complement the Australian Government’s Building Early Education Fund and accelerate commitments to developing a universal, accessible and affordable early years system. The Nest and Nurture Operator will accelerate and scaffold sustainable ACCO early years services sector growth, increase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce participation and improve access to high-quality early years services for our children.

SNAICC is seeking the Australian Government’s investment to establish the Nest and Nurture Operator’s footprint into three regions of high need over a **four-year period**. Within those regions, we will aim to work at scale and pace to expand up to **18 new ACCO services**, while supporting up to **22 existing services** which may benefit from the business operations support offered by the Nest and Nurture Operator. SNAICC has secured philanthropic seed funding for feasibility, establishment of business systems and early trailing in a small number of high-need communities.

### Rationale

Less than a quarter of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children currently have access to ACCO-run early childhood education and care (ECEC) services, creating urgent gaps in culturally safe provision. Efforts to establish or expand these services, especially in childcare deserts, are hindered by complexities for ACCOs who must navigate:

- **Complex and burdensome regulatory, compliance and reporting requirements**, which are resource-intensive and delay service setup.



- **Quality frameworks that do not fully reflect the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.**
- **Insufficient capital, infrastructure, and back-office capacity** needed for service establishment and business development.
- **Financial constraints and limited funding options** that undermine the viability and sustainability of ACCO-led ECEC services.

To ensure sustainable, high-quality services and improved early learning outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, there is a need for new and emerging ACCO ECEC services to have access to consistent, expert and culturally responsive tailored spectrum of business and operational supports. This encompasses coaching, mentorship and support to staff, and assistance with continuous improvement and regulatory compliance. This needs to be delivered by a trusted community controlled early years provider.

Previous and existing program funding for ACCO ECEC capacity building has supported small scale growth; however, resources to support long-term sustainability, viability or capacity building has been limited. Extending the reach and impact of the ACCO early years sector to an additional 13 ACCOs over four years, provides the opportunity for a coordinated acceleration of access and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Through other highly successful Commonwealth funded initiatives in backbone support for the ACCO early years sector, such as Early Years Support and Connected Beginnings, SNAICC has established trusted relationships with ACCOs and has proven our expertise and capacity to effectively strengthen and grow the ACCO early years sector and its workforce.

### Budget Request

The Australian Government should invest \$51.5 million over 4 years to pilot a first of its kind model towards establishing and sustaining up to 12 new ACCO early years services in childcare deserts.

Funding requirements outlined below have been modelled within feasibility studies, and do not include fee-for-service revenue that could be generated by the Nest and Nurture Operator within the ECEC market's current demand-driven funding model.

2026-27 FY	2027-28 FY	2028-29 FY	2029-30 FY	Total
\$7,500,000	\$12,000,000	\$16,000,000	\$16,000,000	\$51,500,000

## 2.7 Funding a national expansion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander playgroups

### Proposal

SNAICC requests the Commonwealth Government fund an expansion of the First Nations Playgroup Pilot to **50 sites nationally**, increasing access to culturally safe, community-led early years support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

Investment in ACCO-led playgroups delivers strong social value by creating the foundations children need to thrive in their early years. ACCO-led playgroups do this by introducing educational activities for families within a safe and playful environment. Such activities centre Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing, by incorporating cultural knowledge and language into play. When this is coupled with facilitating wraparound supports, playgroups help identify emerging needs creating a key pathway for children and families to access support early.

### Rationale

Playgroups are a critical element of a strong early childhood system, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. When led by ACCOs, playgroups provide a culturally safe and community-led soft entry point into early childhood support including critical early and wraparound supports (e.g., developmental screening and family engagement). Importantly, support is offered to children and families through an informal and non-judgmental lens, providing a type of care that few other services can replicate.

Further, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led playgroups are an effective way of realising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's right to grow up strong in culture, community and identity. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led playgroups centre community voices and cultural knowledge, with Elders, cultural leaders and families shaping locally driven services that reflect community strengths, priorities and ways of knowing, being and doing. At their heart, playgroups empower parents and carers to lead educational and developmental activities for their children, grounded in cultural child-raising strengths. Their friendly, flexible and relaxed environments build a bridge between community members and the educators, professionals and formal education environments which parents and carers will grow, over time, to trust with their children. Similarly, the relationships and trust built between playgroups and parents and carers provide opportunities for children experiencing developmental challenges to be observed by trained professionals capable of identifying additional developmental support needs. As such, playgroups represent a critical pathway towards earlier, more effective and culturally safe developmental monitoring, screening and referral to timely developmental supports. This approach supports self-determination and recognises that communities are best-placed to support their children's early learning, development and wellbeing.

Investing in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led playgroups, therefore, represent a significant opportunity for the Australian Government to meet its commitments under *Closing the Gap*, drive progress towards achieving target 4, and invest in self-determined solutions designed to strengthen children's developmental trajectories throughout their lives. Since 2022, the Commonwealth

Government has invested in playgroups nationally, including \$2.1 million allocated to the First Nations Playgroup Pilot, supporting 14 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led playgroups across the country. While the Commonwealth Government’s investment has been welcomed, feedback from ACCO-led playgroups consistently highlights that demand far outstrips current funding arrangements. Many services are unable to meet community needs or provide culturally responsive support. Additional investment is needed to reflect the true cost of service delivery and support sustainable increases in service capacity. Expanding the First Nations Playgroups program to **50 sites nationally** would increase reach, strengthen service capacity and ensure that more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families can access culturally safe early years support regardless of where they live.

We are asking the Australian Government to move beyond a limited pilot and invest in scale that reflects both demonstrated value and clear community demand. Scaling the program to additional locations is essential to refine, scale and embed the model across different service environments and settings. This will also strengthen evidence on what works in different settings, support place-based innovations, and ensure investments respond to varying levels of need, access and service availability. Without expansion, the pilot risks benefiting only a small number of communities, despite clear demand and demonstrated value.

### Budget Request

SNAICC is calling for **\$59,270,155 over 5 years** to increase the number and reach of the First Nations Playgroups program to 50 communities, representing an additional 36 playgroups nationally.

<b>FY26-27</b> <i>Total sites 20</i>	<b>FY27-28</b> <i>Total sites 35</i>	<b>FY28-29</b> <i>Total sites 50</i>	<b>FY29-30</b> <i>Total sites 50</i>	<b>FY30-31</b> <i>Total sites 50</i>	<b>Total</b>
<b>\$6,052,322</b>	<b>\$10,252,838</b>	<b>\$14,613,333</b>	<b>\$14,043,346</b>	<b>\$14,308,315</b>	<b>\$59,270,155</b>

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