

# **SNAICC – SECTOR TRANSFORMATION**

PRINCIPLES FRAMEWORK

## Contents

SNAICC Transformation: A Vision for Self-Determined, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-Led Child and Family Services .....	3
Introduction .....	4
Strategic Context.....	4
Objective.....	5
Core Transformation Principles .....	5
Core Transformation Principal translation to Practice.....	7
Service Design and Funding Alignment.....	8
Transition .....	10
Guiding Principles from the ALTF.....	10
Supporting Community-Led Transitions to ACCO Leadership.....	11
Why Genuine Partnerships Matter for ACCOs and the Community.....	11
Core Transition Principles .....	12
Indigenous Data Sovereignty .....	12
Alignment with Transformation Principles .....	13
Family Matters .....	13
Principle Statements .....	13

# **SNAICC Transformation: A Vision for Self-Determined, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-Led Child and Family Services**

*Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031, its associated First Action Plan 2023-2026, together with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, establish a clear and shared commitment to achieving parity in wellbeing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.*

These frameworks provide the right foundation and intent. However, the current trajectory of implementation is not yet delivering the outcomes required. This is not a reflection of flawed policy direction, but rather of inconsistent implementation of what governments have already agreed to under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

Achieving meaningful and sustained change requires full realisation of these commitments; particularly those relating to shared decision-making, strengthening the Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO) sector and embedding culture within structural decision-making across government and the broader service system. When implemented as intended, these frameworks provide a pathway to transformational change grounded in self-determination and cultural authority,

SNAICC's Transformation approach places Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination at the centre of policy and system design, decision-making, implementation, monitoring, evaluation and oversight by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap, including the Priority Reforms, highlights the need to transform government institutions and strengthen the ACCO sector, with self-determination at the centre of this transformation. Consistent with this, SNAICC recognises self-determination as a key benchmark for how sector transformation is defined, measured and realised. This elevates the importance of organisations controlled by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples having a central role in improving and reimagining the quality of services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

SNAICC's Transformation agenda is a bold, systemic shift toward Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) leading culture-centred child and family services. Rooted in self-determination, cultural responsiveness and community empowerment, this transformation agenda seeks to dismantle the legacy of mainstream-dominated service delivery; recognising that for decades, culturally unsafe systems have contributed to harm experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. The aim is to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities design, govern and control the services that impact their children and families.

## Introduction

SNAICC champions the principles of community control and self-determination as the means for sustained improvements for children and families, which is at the heart of SNAICC's work. Our work to strengthen community-control involves working with ACCOs and governments to share decision-making around policy and service delivery, and to increase government funding to strengthen the ACCO sector.

We also work with non-Indigenous services to transition services and funding focused on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families to ACCOs. This is the focus of the Sector Transformation Principles Framework.

SNAICC has been instrumental in leading the structured, scalable and community-led transition of services from mainstream providers to ACCOs.

Through our collaborative approach with ACCOs, mainstream organisations and government, SNAICC is deeply engaged in service transition processes. Applying culturally safe and culturally responsive approaches aimed at developing a well-resourced ACCO sector, early success has been achieved through organisation-to-organisation capacity transfer between ACCOs and mainstream organisations.

To be transformative, this transition needs to be effective and sustainable. This means supporting ACCOs with capacity-building, governance strengthening, workforce development, and strategic advocacy, aligning with Closing the Gap Priority Reforms. SNAICC is asking governments to provide ACCOs with sustainable funding and has developed proposed funding models for ACCOs delivering child and family services, which would ensure they had the resources needed to support families. Part of this support must also come from non-Indigenous services as part of the transition.

Transformation also requires assurance that the principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty (IDS) are upheld. IDS ensures that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples hold the authority to define, own and use data about their lives, communities and children (KUKUTAI, T., & TAYLOR, J. (Eds.). (2016). *Indigenous Data Sovereignty: Toward an agenda* (Vol. 38). ANU Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1q1crgf>). Operationalising IDS within SNAICC's Transformation Principles means embedding cultural governance, ethical protocols and data capability into every transition, ensuring data becomes a tool for empowerment, truth-telling and generational healing.

## Strategic Context

SNAICC's sector transformation agenda supports structural and systems change by strengthening ACCO capability and aligning government policy and investment with the commitments under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. This agenda is situated within a broader national reform

ecosystem, including Early Childhood Care and Development Sector Strengthening Plan, Early Childhood Care and Development Policy and Priorities, and Safe and Supported.

Safe and Supported represents a significant shift as the first national child and family framework developed, governed and implemented through shared decision-making between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership Group and Australian, State and Territory Governments. It commits to progressive systems transformation with self-determination at its centre; including building the ACCO sector to deliver services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan outlines key actions to achieve this, including Action 2 and the development of a National Child and Family Investment Strategy.

Working in close collaboration with governments, NGOs and philanthropy, SNAICC's transformation objective goes beyond policy reform. It is a deliberate shift toward justice, accountability and sustained investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led solutions – ensuring that children, families and communities are supported through culturally grounded and community-controlled systems of care.

## **Objective**

SNAICC's Transformation objective is aimed at driving structural change by transitioning services, strengthening ACCO capacity and aligning government policies with the Closing the Gap commitments that elevate community-controlled decision making in Genuine Partnership. This Transformation is guided by Principles that ground our work through a generational rights-based legacy.<sup>1</sup>

## **Core Transformation Principles**

SNAICC's Transformation agenda and Core Transformation Principles represents a fundamental shift in how systems are designed, governed and delivered for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. Grounded in self-determination, cultural authority and community control, this agenda moves beyond reforming existing systems toward enabling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led solutions that reflect community priorities, strengths and ways of knowing, being and doing.

Central to this transformation is a clear departure from the legacy of mainstream dominated service delivery. Transformation is not about “lifting and shifting” existing non-Aboriginal services models into ACCOs. Instead, it is about creating the conditions for ACCOs and communities to

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<sup>1</sup> The Core Transformation Principles align closely with the seven principles that underpin the National Child and Family Investment Strategy (forthcoming, Australian Government and SNAICC 2026), which aims to achieve a twofold shift in child and family services investment: from tertiary child protection systems to earlier and more targeted supports, and from non-Indigenous NGOs to ACCOs. The Investment Strategy principles are: Cultural identity and connection to culture; Self-determination; Shared decision-making; Sustainability; Culturally responsive integrated services and systems; Evidence-informed investment and innovation; Rights-based investment.

determine what services are needed, how they are designed; and further how they are delivered, thus ensuring that systems are built from community up, not retrofitted from mainstream approaches.

This work aligns with the national reform commitments under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, Safe and Supported and broader sector strengthening efforts. It reflects a shared responsibility across governments, mainstream organisations and the ACCO sector to transition power, resources and decision-making to ACCOs and to embed accountability for delivering on these commitments over the long term.

At its core, transformation is a movement toward justice; it recognises the strength, leadership and authority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and ensures that children and families are supported through culturally grounded, community-controlled systems of care.

- **Commitment to self-determination:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples must lead and control the design, delivery and oversight of services that affect their communities. This principle is central to policy and structural reform that advances indigenous data sovereignty, system design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.
- **Community control:** Government and the NGO sector must elevate the role of ACCOs so they are positioned as primary agents for change, replacing mainstream-dominated service models.
- **Cultural safety and responsiveness:** Services must be culturally safe, meaning they respect and embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, values and worldviews. Culture is not peripheral; it is structural and must inform decision-making at every level.
- **Structural reform:** Calls for a systemic shift away from mainstream service delivery toward Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led solutions. This means not 'lifting and shifting' the existing service system. It includes community-led design, transitioning services, building ACCO capacity and aligning government policies with Closing the Gap commitments.
- **Justice and accountability:**  
Transformation is framed as a rights-based movement, not merely a policy adjustment. It is grounded in the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)*, which affirms the right of Indigenous peoples to self-determination, which includes autonomy of self-government in matters relating to their internal and local affairs; and the means to finance these functions (Article 4). In this context, transformation requires sustained investment, alongside transparency and accountability to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, to ensure these rights are realised in practice over time.
- **Collaborative partnerships:** SNAICC promotes collaboration between ACCOs, government, mainstream NGOs and philanthropy. These partnerships must be equitable, with power and resources shifting toward community-controlled organisations.
- **Capacity building:** Models of government and mainstream funding must focus on strengthening ACCOs through:
  - Governance development

- Workforce training
- Strategic advocacy
- Transformation deliverables that are cultural centric, scalable, effective and enduring.

Core Transformation Principles: translation to Practice

	<b>Core Transformation Principle</b>	<b>Application and Practice</b>
	<p><b>Commitment to Self-Determination</b> Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples must lead and control the design, delivery and oversight of services that affect their communities.</p>	<p>Knowing self-determination means recognising Aboriginal knowledge systems as valid, sovereign and essential to system design. It reflects an understanding that communities hold the expertise and authority to define what success, safety and wellbeing mean. Policy, data and evaluation must begin with Indigenous worldviews and community defined indicators.</p>
	<p><b>Community Control</b> Governments and sectors must elevate ACCOs as the primary agents of change.</p>	<p>Doing community control involves embedding ACCOs in every stage of service design, governance and delivery. This means implementing funding models that allow for flexibility, relationship-building and long-term engagement, ensuring actions reflect cultural authority rather than mainstream compliance.</p>
	<p><b>Cultural Safety and Responsiveness</b> Services must be culturally safe, meaning they respect and embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, values and worldviews.</p>	<p>Being culturally responsive means living cultural values in daily practice. Services must embody respect, truth-telling and relational accountability. Cultural protocols, connection to Country and community leadership must shape identity and practice at every level of service.</p>

	<p><b>Structural Reform</b> Calls for a systemic shift away from mainstream service delivery toward Aboriginal-led solutions.</p>	<p>Knowing that structural reform is a process of truth-telling and system redesign rooted in Aboriginal knowledge. It recognises that transformation must dismantle colonial frameworks and embed cultural governance into policy, procurement and accountability systems.</p>
	<p><b>Justice and Accountability</b> Transformation is framed as a rights-based movement demanding transparency and long-term investment.</p>	<p>Doing justice means taking sustained action to redress inequities. Accountability becomes practical through IDS – communities control what is measured, how it is reported and how learning informs change.</p>
	<p><b>Collaborative Partnerships</b> Partnerships must be equitable, with power and resources shifting to ACCOs.</p>	<p>Being collaborative means centring relationality – trust, reciprocity and respect. It requires shared power and mutual accountability, guided by cultural protocols and enduring relationships between ACCOs, governments and NGOs.</p>
	<p><b>Capacity Building</b> Strengthening ACCOs through governance, workforce development and advocacy.</p>	<p>Knowing draws from community wisdom and leadership; Doing invests in capability, learning and peer networks. Being sustains a collective purpose of cultural continuity and generational wellbeing. Capacity building becomes cyclical, reinforcing community self-determination, knowledge sharing and resilience.</p>

## Service Design and Funding Alignment

As SNAICC has previously highlighted many times,<sup>2</sup> current funding and service design models are largely constructed within Western administrative logic that does not reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing. These models often impose linear, short-term frameworks and timelines that fragment community knowledge, limit flexibility and measure success through deficit-based indicators.

A culturally grounded approach to transformation demands a redesign of funding and service systems so that they reflect relational, cyclical and place-based worldviews. This includes embedding cultural governance, community-led design and long-term investment cycles that align with kinship structures and intergenerational responsibilities.

Service design must therefore move beyond transactional program delivery to systems of care designed, led and governed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Funding frameworks should enable time for deep listening, relationship building and collective decision-making; recognising that strong outcomes flow from cultural integrity and community-defined priorities, not compliance metrics.

Operationally, this requires:

- Co-designing funding models with ACCOs and communities to embed flexibility and cultural accountability.
- Shifting from outputs to culturally defined outcomes relevant for community innovation.
- Embedding IDS principles so that communities determine how success is measured and reported.
- Adopting long-term, place-based funding cycles that support continuity of relationships and cultural governance rather than short-term contracts.

Australian, State and Territory Governments have all committed to implementing these changes in a range of national policy reform environments, including through the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, Early Childhood Care and Development Sector Strengthening Plan, and/or the National Child and Family Investment Strategy. These changes are also progressed in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives through the Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership.

While governments' reform planning and implementation processes take shape, non-Indigenous NGOs and philanthropic funders will play a critical role in demonstrating how service design and funding models (including partnerships, sub-contracting arrangements and grants) can shift towards a greater focus on self-determination and community leadership. The ability to make this

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<sup>2</sup> SNAICC 2023. *Stronger ACCOs, Stronger Families*. <https://www.snaicc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/SNAICC-Stronger-ACCOs-Stronger-Families-report-2022.pdf>; Australian Government and SNAICC (forthcoming) 2026. *National Child and Family Investment Strategy*, pp. 33–37; SNAICC 2024, *Funding Model Options for ACCOs delivering Integrated Early Years Services Final Report*. <https://www.snaicc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/240507-ACCO-Funding-Report.pdf>

pivot with greater speed and agility outside of government settings means that NGO and philanthropic allies can set an example at the local, grassroots level for broader-scale government reform.

## Transition

As the national peak body representing the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, SNAICC plays a key role in supporting the transition of child wellbeing services to ACCOs – which includes [but not limited to] the HIPPY Program, Connected Beginnings and Out-of-Home Care. SNAICC has been instrumental in leading the structured, scalable and community-led transition of several highly significant services from mainstream providers to ACCOs. By operationalising the Aboriginal Leadership Transition Framework (ALTF), SNAICC and its partner allies ensure that transitions occur in a culturally safe, well-resourced and sustainable manner.

### Guiding Principles from the ALTF

The ALTF is shaped by culturally strong principles, including:

- **Kids come first** – children’s rights and wellbeing are at the centre of all decisions.
- **Aboriginal ways of knowing, doing and being** – cultural authority and knowledge are embedded in leadership and governance.
- **Accountability to community** – true accountability lies with families, Elders and community leaders.
- **Cultural safety** – transition processes must be safe, respectful and grounded in deep listening and two-way learning.
- **Restorative and respectful partnerships** – building trust, healing from past harms and sharing power.
- **Resourcing ACCOs to thrive** – ensuring the cultural, human and financial capital is in place to support long-term sustainability.

SNAICC’s role in transition includes:

- Facilitating **genuine partnerships** between communities, ACCOs, government and mainstream providers.
- Providing **guidance, tools and frameworks** that support culturally responsive and strengths-based transition processes.
- Supporting **capacity-building** of ACCOs to ensure sustainable and successful service delivery.
- Ensuring the **voice of community** leads every step of the transition journey to strengthen sustainability in outcomes.

Ultimately, SNAICC’s role in transition is about building sustainable systems of Aboriginal Community Control that endure beyond program cycles or funding terms. Sustainability in this

context is cultural, structural and relational. It ensures that transitions are not temporary shifts in delivery but long-term movements toward Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led systems that are self-determined, resilient and adaptive.

Sustainability is achieved through:

- **Cultural sustainability:** embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing within service design, governance and practice so cultural integrity is maintained across generations.
- **Organisational sustainability:** supporting ACCOs to strengthen governance, workforce, financial systems and digital/data capability so they can lead and sustain high-quality, community-led services over time.
- **Systemic sustainability:** influencing government policy and funding models to provide long-term, flexible and equitable investment in ACCOs, ensuring transitions are not one-off events but part of enduring structural and transformational change.
- **Relational sustainability:** maintaining trusted partnerships grounded in respect reciprocity and accountability; relationships that uphold the principles that transformation is a shared and ongoing responsibility.

### Supporting Community-Led Transitions to ACCO Leadership

A genuine partnerships approach is critical to the success of Transformation. SNAICC's genuine partnership approach is developed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to support strong, respectful and culturally safe partnerships – especially during the transition of services from mainstream organisations to ACCOs.

SNAICC's Genuine Partnership Framework is rooted in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, doing and being, and places self-determination, cultural authority and community voice at the centre. It reflects our strengths, our relationships and the knowledge held by our Elders, families and community leaders.

In addition to using the genuine partnerships approach, it may be appropriate to explore shared decision-making. SNAICC's [Shared Decision-Making Guidance](#) provides practical tools for establishing and maintaining shared decision-making arrangements between ACCOs and governments, but may also be helpful for non-government partners.

### Why Genuine Partnerships Matter for ACCOs and the Community

- **Centres culture and community control:** respects that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are the experts in their own lives, families and communities.
- **Elevates what's already strong:** focuses on the existing leadership, systems and cultural knowledge within ACCOs.
- **Supports sovereign decision-making ensures** that transition processes are not imposed but walked together with community leadership.

- **Builds real partnerships:** moves beyond consultation to genuine collaboration based on trust, healing and reciprocity.
- **Upholds community strengths and readiness:** recognises that transitions must occur at the pace of community, not according to external timelines.

### Core Transition Elements

- **Commitment to self-determination:** the transition of services to ACCOs is a key priority in ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have control over child services, in alignment with self-determination principles.
- **Government and sector alignment:** the National Transition Framework, currently being developed by SNAICC, requires a dedicated unit to coordinate, oversee and support implementation across jurisdictions.
- **Capacity strengthening opportunity:** investing in governance, workforce and infrastructure development enables ACCOs to sustainably lead and deliver transitioning services. This includes targeted, long-term support and practical mechanisms; such as dedicated capacity-building/strengthening functions to make certain ACCOs are well resourced to exercise leadership and deliver ACCO outcomes. :
- **Data-Driven Accountability:** SNAICC will ensure accountability and transparency by tracking transition progress, identifying barriers and ensuring best-practice models are shared.

Transformation and Transition principles together challenge the status quo and offer a reimaged system that:

- Centres culture and community;
- Restores control to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; and
- Builds a future where children and families thrive through services they trust and shape themselves.

SNAICC's Transition impact has demonstrated that when the principles of transformation are upheld, the Closing the Gap Priority Reforms are achievable and progress against the socioeconomic targets can accelerate.

### **Indigenous Data Sovereignty**

IDS is not only about data ownership, it is a practice of cultural authority and self-determination. From a strengths-based perspective, IDS recognises that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have always collected, interpreted and safeguarded knowledge in ways that sustain community wellbeing, kinship systems and Country. The intent is to restore control over how data is defined, collected, stored, interpreted and shared, so that it strengthens rather than extracts from communities (KUKUTAI, T., & TAYLOR, J. (Eds.). (2016). *Indigenous Data Sovereignty: Toward an agenda* (Vol. 38). ANU Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1q1crgf>).

## Alignment with Transformation Principles

IDS directly operationalises several existing Transformation Principles:

<b>Transformation Principle</b>	<b>IDS Connection</b>
Community-led Decision Making	Communities determine what data matters, how it is interpreted and how it informs decisions.
Partnership with Accountability	Shared data agreements are co-designed and ensure transparent reporting to communities.
Evidence and Impact Through and Aboriginal lens	Indicators are culturally defined – measuring belonging, connection and healing as legitimate outcomes.
Sustainable Capacity Building	ACCOs are resourced to develop their own data systems, analytics capacity and dashboards.
Policy and Systems Reform	Governments embed IDS principles in procurement, evaluation and accountability frameworks.

## **Family Matters Building Blocks**

Since 2016, the Family Matters report has given voice to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and their experiences of child protection systems across Australia, their anguish at the ongoing disproportionate rate of representation and the associated harms experienced by children, families and communities underlying these numbers, and their hopes for change (Family Matters Report 2024).

The Family Matters report contributes to changing the narrative through truth-telling supported by data: outlining the challenges, assessing progress with evidence-based solutions and showcasing effective policies and practices. To challenge and transform those structures and systems contributing to the disproportionate representation of our children and families, governments and the NGO sector need to consider how the Family Matters Building Blocks and all associated principles inform their approach to working with ACCOs. The Family Matters Roadmap identifies the four interrelated building blocks, underpinned by evidence, ethics and human rights:

1. All families enjoy access to quality, culturally safe, universal and targeted services necessary for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to thrive.
2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations participate in and have control over decisions that affect their children.
3. Law, policy and practice in child and family welfare are culturally safe and responsive.
4. Governments and services are accountable to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

## **Principle Statements**

The SNAICC Transformation Principles provide practical guidelines for structural and systems decisions making, shifting Australia's child and family service systems so that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples lead and control the decisions that shape their children's lives. Each principle is grounded in cultural authority, community voice, the rights affirmed in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle (ATSICPP), the Family Matters Building Blocks, Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031 and its associated action plans.

These principles translate the call for self-determination and cultural responsiveness into actionable steps by supporting service transitions, equitable partnerships, strong governance and workforce development and system reform. They are designed to help communities, governments, mainstream organisations and philanthropy to move beyond consultation to genuine power-sharing and long-term investment.

By applying these principles, Transformation moves from policy ambition to lived change: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children remain connected to family, community and culture; ACCOs grow in strength and sustainability; governments are held accountable to Closing the Gap Priority Reforms and intergenerational justice.



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