

THRIVING KIDS POLICY PAPER

Reforming early childhood support systems through self-determination, cultural strength and community-led delivery

This policy paper outlines SNAICC's views on how the Thriving Kids Initiative (Thriving Kids) can make the most difference for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. For Thriving Kids to succeed for *our* kids, it must be designed and delivered in genuine partnership with Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCOs). This approach is not only critical to achieving better outcomes for children, but it is also consistent with the commitments all governments have made under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, and essential to governments realising self-determination in implementing this significant initiative. Our organisations and communities must not be seen as stakeholders, we must be recognised partners.

The announcement of Thriving Kids signals a momentous shift in how Australia supports children aged 0–8 with developmental delay or disability. Thriving Kids aims to identify developmental support needs earlier in children's lives and to connect them and their families with coordinated services in community-based settings. If implemented well, it should substantially boost the availability of early supports for children in need. It has the potential to mitigate crisis-driven responses, missed opportunities, and experiences of cultural unsafety that characterise our children's interactions with early childhood development systems and services.

However, the announcement and subsequent lack of clarity about how the program will be designed and delivered has created significant concern. The announcement of Thriving Kids has coincided with broader reforms and funding cuts to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), and the Australian Government has not yet clarified how the systems will work together to ensure no child is left without the supports they need. This will be critical during transition between systems and in the long-term. It is also unclear to what extent this funding represents genuine new investment versus a reallocation, or potential divestment, from existing early childhood disability supports.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, communities, and organisations are concerned that Thriving Kids risks replicating existing problems and entrenched inequities in the early childhood development service system. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children experience disproportionate rates of developmental vulnerability and disability (AEDC, 2025). However, in the NDIS and the service system more broadly, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people face huge and often unmanageable barriers to accessing support, including limited service availability and culturally unsafe service environments. This means they have the most to gain if Thriving Kids succeeds, and the most at stake if it does not.

Thriving Kids presents both opportunities and risks for equity. If implemented well, with appropriate supports made available early and locally, it could improve access for children and families who have historically faced barriers to engaging with disability and developmental support systems. However, there is a risk that uneven sector readiness, a lack of government coordination and communication, and variation in service availability across regions could lead to inconsistent outcomes, and harm to children.

Investment in Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO)–led early childhood education and care (ECEC) and integrated early years services is the most effective way to achieve the vision of Thriving Kids for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. ACCO integrated early years services reflect thousands of years of child rearing strengths embedded in our cultures, families and communities. They provide the gold standard in comprehensive supports for children’s education, development and wellbeing early in life. Developmental vulnerability among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is strongly linked to socioeconomic disadvantage (AEDC, 2025), underscoring the need for early years systems that can both respond to universal need and deliver targeted, culturally responsive support.

Universal early years services must therefore be designed and resourced to address developmental vulnerability in a deliberate and equitable way. When services are integrated, educators and providers are better equipped. They are able to effectively support children’s learning and development, deliver holistic and culturally safe care, build trusted relationships with families, and connect children to essential wrap-around supports such as allied health and culturally responsive family services.

ECEC settings are central to this approach. As safe and trusted environments for nurturing children’s early learning and development, they are a critical platform for the early identification of developmental needs and the delivery of timely, coordinated support. When backed by needs-based funding that prioritises integrated early years services they can address disproportionately higher levels of disadvantage and drive more equitable outcomes. This approach is essential to ensuring that the Thriving Kids vision is realised where it is needed most, and by the children who need it most.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: The Australian Government, in partnership with State and Territory governments, embeds shared decision-making across the design, commissioning, implementation, and evaluation of Thriving Kids.

Recommendation 2: All governments use Thriving Kids commissioning and system design to position ACCOs as providers of first choice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and to prioritise ACCO-led delivery and self-determination through long-term, place-based investment.

Recommendation 3: Thriving Kids funding is delivered as a component of implementing a broader needs-based and sustainable funding model for ACCO integrated early years services, based on the funding model developed through the Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership.¹

Recommendation 4: All governments invest in strengthening the ECEC sector and workforce as a critical environment in which Thriving Kids will be delivered. This includes providing adequate and recurrent funding for:

- (a) sector strengthening programs like SNAICC's Early Years Support,
- (b) community-based ECEC workforce development initiatives,
- (c) expansion of Connected Beginnings, and
- (d) delivering the Early Childhood Care and Development Sector Strengthening Plan.

Recommendation 5: All governments commit sufficient funding across both foundational supports, through Thriving Kids, and specialist disability supports, through the NDIS, to ensure that children access appropriate and needs-based supports where they live and can move between levels of support without disruption or reduced access. This could be enabled by:

- Allocating adequate funding for the expansion of *both* foundational supports and specialist services in geographies with unmet need;
- Creating clear eligibility guidance between Thriving Kids and the NDIS, and clear pathways for children to access and escalate support if needed; and
- Maintaining access to culturally safe diagnoses, therapy and multidisciplinary advice.

Recommendation 5: State and Territory governments, supported by the Australian Government, embed coordinated referral, navigation and early support pathways within Thriving

¹ SNAICC. (2024a). *Funding model options for ACCO Integrated Early Years Services: Final Report*. SNAICC. <https://www.snaicc.org.au/resources/funding-model-options-for-acco-integrated-early-years-services-final-report/>

Kids implementation arrangements to ensure that services work together across early childhood, health, disability, education including ECEC, and statutory systems.

Recommendation 6: All governments embed cultural safety as a non-negotiable requirement across all Thriving Kids pathways through sustained investment in ACCO-led delivery, workforce capability, culturally-grounded service models, and requiring mainstream services to build culturally responsive practice.

Recommendation 7: The Australian Government, in partnership with State and Territory governments, invests in culturally-responsive early identification and screening tools, including funding for training, workforce support and implementation across both ACCOs and mainstream services.

Recommendation 8: All governments commit to sustained investment in the recruitment, training and retention of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood and developmental support workforce, including strengthening ACCO workforce capacity.

Recommendation 9: All governments ensure that all data collection, monitoring and evaluation under Thriving Kids aligns with Indigenous Data Sovereignty Principles.

Thriving Kids must redress inequities in supports and services

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children experience disproportionately high rates of developmental vulnerability and disability. The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey (2024) found that approximately one in five Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged under 18 live with disability, compared to one in 12 children in the general population. In 2024, 42.5 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were assessed as vulnerable on one or more of the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) domains, and 26.5 per cent were assessed as vulnerable on two or more (AEDC, 2025). This represents a continued failure to deliver on Target 4 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (National Agreement) – to increase the proportion of children developmentally on track in all five domains.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families experience persistent barriers to accessing disability assessment and support. Access to services is constrained by workforce shortages and limited availability, challenges that are most acute in rural and remote areas, where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are more likely to live (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Disability services are rarely community-led or place-based and typically lack the mobile and outreach models essential for remote communities. Families can face long delays in accessing assessments, excessive travel requirements to access support, and limited choice of services (AIHW, 2025; Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, 2023).

Even when services exist, they are often culturally unsafe. Cultural safety is an environment where people feel safe to be themselves, where their identity is recognised, respected and nurtured, and where services do not challenge or deny who they are (Milroy et al., 2025). Experiences of racism, ableism and culturally unsafe practice within mainstream systems have contributed to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' mistrust and avoidance of services, particularly where families anticipate discrimination or feel that services do not reflect their needs or values (Avery, 2018).

There has been limited work to define 'thriving' from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives. However, there is strong and consistent evidence about what supports children to grow up safe and well. Relationships which foster identity, belonging, pride and spiritual support, and underpin children's learning, development and wellbeing across the life course are essential. In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, family, kin and community are central to children's development, providing care, protection and passing down cultural knowledge across generations. Alongside this understanding of wellbeing, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages do not have a direct equivalent for the term 'disability' (Ariotti, 1999; Avery, 2018; Griffis, 2019).

This perspective differs from broader patterns in Western policy and research, where systems have more often measured children against externally defined benchmarks rather than asked communities to define wellbeing on their own terms. The NDIS, while providing essential support for many children, is based on a deficit-based and medicalised Western understanding of disability that ties access to support to formal diagnosis and eligibility thresholds. Policy development that omits, deprioritises or subordinates the relationships critical to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children’s development, preferring isolated clinical approaches to measuring and addressing developmental needs, is inappropriate and ineffective.

Cultural safety also depends on whether families can access supports without needing to navigate overly convoluted systems, retell their stories, or bear the burden of self-advocacy. Where services are not designed in partnership with community or ACCOs, families are more likely to experience fragmented pathways and reduced continuity of care. While the NDIS has provided support for many children, it has also created a clinical, diagnostic-first gateway into developmental support. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, this can foster shame, stigma, late identification, and avoidance of services altogether because families are asked to navigate clinical assessments before trust and understanding have been built. These barriers are far too common for our families, and serve to systematically limit access, drive disengagement, and reinforce mistrust of ‘mainstream’ systems, which is reflected in delayed access and reduced participation in services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

When services fail to meet their needs, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children experience significant harm. This is particularly evident in the disproportionate rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, particularly children with disabilities or developmental challenges, in the child protection and youth justice systems (AIHW, 2019, 2026; Harrap et al., 2024; SNAICC, 2025b; UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 2026). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children often enter these systems due to poverty, housing insecurity, intergenerational trauma and systemic racism, which are recast not as consequences of colonisation but as indicators of parent or community failure to seek support and access services. Current systems are focused on crisis response, responding after harm is caused.

Early supports for positive development offer an opportunity to stop Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from entering the child protection and youth justice systems in the first place. In a concerning study from Western Australia, many children only received their first comprehensive developmental assessment after entering the justice system or after placement in out-of-home care (Bower et al., 2018). In the Northern Territory, an audit of the youth justice system found that 77 per cent of children in detention under 14 years of age had unmet mental health, cognitive disability, and poor health needs (Office of the Children’s Commissioner, Northern Territory, 2024). Evidence from national inquiries and youth justice reporting has consistently identified unmet developmental needs, disability and experiences of trauma and re-traumatisation among

children entering statutory and justice systems (AIHW, 2024; Royal Commission, 2017). This reflects a broader systemic failure to identify and respond to children’s needs earlier and to ensure continuity of support once governments assume parental responsibility.

To achieve its potential, Thriving Kids must uphold self-determination, embed cultural safety, and advance community control

Thriving Kids presents an opportunity to redress systemic inequalities and failures, but only if it is designed and delivered in partnership with ACCOs. Governments have committed to formal shared decision-making under Priority Reform One of the National Agreement. Under this commitment, decisions affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must occur through community-led structures and reform must incorporate the voices of ACCOs. Shared decision-making with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and leaders is essential to ensuring Thriving Kids avoids replicating the harm caused by existing systems and instead meets the needs of our children.

Shared decision-making can ensure cultural safety is embedded into system-wide design. Cultural safety cannot be addressed at the level of service delivery alone. It is also shaped by the system itself: through assessment frameworks, diagnostic tools, and service models that currently reflect Western, largely deficit-based understandings of development and disability. Achieving cultural safety in the disability sector requires mainstream systems to engage with, and learn from, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and practice, rather than expecting families to adapt to existing models. Building Thriving Kids as a culturally safe system could look like implementing trauma-informed and relationship-based practices that move at the pace of families, and reforming assessment frameworks and diagnostic tools to prioritise culturally-grounded and strengths-based approaches (SNAICC, 2025c). SNAICC's [Shared Decision-Making Guidance](#), which provides practical tools to support government bodies and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to embed shared decision-making principles into practice, is a valuable resource to guide this work.

Governments must deliver on their National Agreement commitment to strengthen the community-controlled sector. Thriving Kids must strengthen, rather than replace, the existing integrated ACCO early years and ECEC systems. To date, investment in ACCOs has been insufficient, inconsistent, and inflexible despite government commitment to support the community-controlled sector to be strong, sustainable, and delivering high-quality services that meet community needs (SNAICC, 2024a & forthcoming). This underinvestment reduces the availability of place-based and trusted services that are best placed to identify emerging children's developmental support needs and respond in ways that are holistic, culturally safe, and strengths-based (SNAICC, 2024a & forthcoming).

What are ACCO-led integrated early years services?

ACCO-led integrated early years services are services that provide childcare, early learning and pre-school services alongside integrated child and family health, wellbeing, development and social supports. They are led by and delivered for the benefit of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, integrating culture, language and community connection across their operations and practice. These services are focused on supporting culturally-grounded education and development for children aged 0 to 5, bringing them up strong in their identity and ready to succeed in education and thrive throughout life. For many decades ACCOs across the country have led the way, providing the gold standard in culturally strong, comprehensive early development and education supports that nurture children and strengthen families.

The success of Thriving Kids for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is contingent on the ACCO sector being resourced as providers of first choice. ACCOs hold the cultural authority, community trust and place-based expertise necessary to deliver culturally responsive, holistic and strengths-based supports to children and families. Integrated early years responses led by ACCOs have been operating in communities for decades and continue to demonstrate how children's developmental, social and cultural needs can be addressed together rather than through separate service systems (SNAICC, 2024b). However, in disability service systems such as the NDIS, access to supports is frequently dependent on formal diagnostic pathways that are unevenly available across regions and rarely delivered through culturally safe assessment processes (Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, 2023). Beyond assessment, NDIS-funded early childhood supports are not consistently delivered through trusted ACCO providers, which limits the opportunities for children and families to engage with services in culturally safe and relational settings. It is critical that Thriving Kids positions and resources ACCO delivering ECEC and integrated early years services as providers of first choice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to support equitable outcomes under the reform.

Thriving Kids must be designed as part of a connected, accessible early childhood system, rather than as separate or specialist programs. ACCO-led ECEC and integrated early years services offer the most effective platform for this approach, embedding supports within trusted, community-controlled settings that bring together early learning, maternal and child health, family services, outreach and navigation models, and pathways into schooling, rather than delivered through fragmented and clunky referral-based systems. In doing this, children can be assessed, supported and nurtured over prolonged periods under the eyes of trusted practitioners and professionals. Through these models, support should be delivered, and services should be funded, using a proportionate approach, ensuring all families can access assistance within their communities, with intensity scaled to need, in culturally safe service environments.

Critically, ACCOs enable place-based, community-led responses where educators, allied health professionals, and family services work together around the child in their everyday settings, supporting early identification and delivering timely, coordinated support within communities. Realising this vision requires sustained investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce capability, shared practice frameworks informed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander approaches to child development, and strong coordination across systems to ensure continuity of care and seamless transitions across services. Centering ACCOs in this way is essential to building a system that is integrated, equitable, underpinned by the essential right for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to deliver culturally responsive foundational supports which enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to be culturally and developmentally strong.

Programs such as Connected Beginnings demonstrate what is possible when ACCOs are appropriately resourced to lead place-based, integrated responses. Connected Beginnings brings together ECEC, primary health services, family support and community leadership in a coordinated approach around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, strengthening engagement with services and supporting earlier identification of developmental needs (Inside Policy, 2023). The program has also contributed to the strengthening of the community-controlled sector itself (Inside Policy, 2023). Importantly, the program builds the foundations established by long-standing ACCO early years services and provides a mechanism to scale integrated community-controlled approaches across additional communities.

Government must revise commissioning and funding models to adequately resource ACCOs under Thriving Kids. Thriving Kids must commit sustainable funding to ensure that reform does not shift responsibility without strengthening local service capacity to meet community needs. Current funding models have historically advantaged non-Indigenous providers and created difficulty and insecurity for ACCOs trying to sustain a strong sector and provide essential supports (SNAICC, 2024a & forthcoming).

New investment must be fit for context and build upon Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community leadership. SNAICC's forthcoming *Doing Things Differently* report highlights that ACCOs are disproportionately dependent on government funding and especially on short-term funding arrangements delivered through competitive and output-based commissioning processes. These processes disadvantage ACCOs, undermine service continuity, and weaken children and families' right to access culturally safe services.

Evidence shows that workforce stability, capability, and the continuity of relationships are key drivers of service quality in early childhood settings. If Thriving Kids is to deliver meaningful change for our children and communities, funding models must support long-term workforce investment, continuity of care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, and the sustained delivery of services within communities. (The Front Project, 2026). Commissioning

for Thriving Kids must align with the National Agreement Priority Reforms by supporting shared decision-making, long-term investment in the community-controlled sector, and measurement against outcomes defined by communities.

A dedicated, needs-based funding model for ACCO integrated early years services is essential to ensuring Thriving Kids delivers on its promise to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and communities.

Embedding the Thriving Kids commissioning and funding approach in an integrated, coordinated funding model such as that which SNAICC outlines in *Funding Model Options for ACCO Integrated Early Years Services* (SNAICC, 2024a), would recognise ACCOs not just as service providers, but as leaders in the design and delivery of integrated early years services. It directly addresses the long-standing and systemic under-resourcing of ACCO services compared to non-Indigenous providers, and acknowledges the distinct role they play.

Critically, the model reflects the realities of ACCO service delivery. It accounts for the workforce pressures unique to community-controlled organisations, the comprehensive and culturally grounded supports they provide, and the need for strong organisational planning and long-term sustainability. It is designed not only to fund services, but to strengthen the community-controlled sector as a whole. The proposed funding model structure, which combines base funding, flexible funding, and needs-based loadings, ensures that services can respond to local context and the specific needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. This approach to funding the ACCO sector must be underpinned by coordinated, cross-government investment from the Australian, state and territory governments.

Thriving Kids funding should form a central pillar of this model, sitting alongside and aligning with other funding streams across early childhood education and care, early childhood developmental services, health, disability and inclusion supports, and family supports. Without this alignment, fragmentation will persist, parents will continue to feel frustration and hopelessness, the service system will continue to be characterised by its missed opportunities for early identification and support for our children, and the outcomes which Thriving Kids hopes for will be limited. The evidence is clear. Children and families thrive when community-controlled services are strong and properly resourced. To achieve the intent of Thriving Kids, commissioning arrangements must shift decisively towards sustained, supply-side investment in ACCO-led delivery. Anything less risks perpetuating inequity and undermining the very outcomes this reform seeks to achieve.

Delivering Thriving Kids will require sustained investment in strengthening the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood workforce. A stable, capable workforce is a critical enabler of effective early identification pathways. Continuity of educators and practitioners in early years settings supports strong, trusting relationships with children and

families, and enables consistent observation of children’s development and emerging needs in their everyday environments (The Front Project, 2026).

To realise this, ACCOs must be equipped to recruit, retain and develop the workforce needed to deliver Thriving Kids in practice. Building and strengthening pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into ECEC, allied health and developmental support roles will be essential to the success of then Thriving Kids reform. At the same time, all early years professionals must be supported to build shared, contemporary knowledge, language and skills. This includes the capability to work in culturally responsive ways with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, regardless of early years discipline or service setting.

Investment in traineeships, supported qualification pathways, and locally based employment opportunities will be key to building a sustainable workforce over time, rather than relying on short-term responses to workforce shortages. Expanding culturally responsive workforce capacity across both universal and targeted services will also enable families to engage earlier and more consistently, strengthening the reach and impact of Thriving Kids.

To deliver on Thriving Kids, early identification must be matched by seamless transitions to the specialist supports children need. While the initiative rightly focuses on early identification and foundational supports, it will inevitably identify children who require culturally responsive diagnosis and access to more specialised services. Diagnoses remain critical for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, they enable access to supports, help families navigate complex systems, and build shared understanding of a child’s developmental needs.

However, the current system places a heavy burden on families. Accessing specialist and holistic supports often requires navigating fragmented, complex administrative processes, such as the NDIS, that are not designed around the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families (Moore et al., 2025). Families are too often left to advocate alone, increasing the risk that children miss out on the support they need. Thriving Kids must take a different approach. Services should be organised around children and families; they must be connected, responsive, and easy to navigate. This requires aligning eligibility, referral, and access pathways so that services work together seamlessly and no child falls through the gaps.

Avoiding a two-tiered system is critical. Without deliberate system design, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children risk being disproportionately excluded from specialist supports. To prevent this, Thriving Kids should prioritise system-level mechanisms that strengthen coordination across sectors and with families. This includes culturally safe diagnostic and referral pathways, shared and consistent approaches to developmental monitoring, and models that ensure continuity of care over time. Delivering this vision will require targeted investment in: multidisciplinary outreach models, stronger and culturally safe diagnostic and referral pathways between universal and

targeted services, and funding arrangements that enable therapeutic practitioners to work within community-controlled and integrated early years settings, rather than relying solely on clinic-based models.

Navigation supports must also be embedded within Thriving Kids itself. The Thriving Kids Advisory Group Final Report (2026) recommended that, when children and families need access to multiple supports or have more complex needs, they should be connected with a professional who works as their ‘key worker’. The key worker would be responsible for providing families with information, direct support, and guidance, as well as coordinating a team around the child and family to deliver multiple supports (Thriving Kids Advisory Group, 2026). It is critical that Thriving Kids invests in workforce development to ensure these key workers are able to provide appropriate and tailored support to children with different needs, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families.

Culturally responsive screening tools are critical to improving early identification of developmental needs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. The Ages and Stages Questionnaire–Talking about Raising Aboriginal Kids (ASQ-TRAK) is a key example of these tools. Developed in collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and validated for use in this context, the ASQ-TRAK supports strengths-based, culturally safe engagement with families and enables earlier and more accurate identification of support needs. It provides a practical mechanism for shifting away from deficit-based models toward approaches that understand children’s development within culture, family and community.

National best practice frameworks can help translate the intent of Thriving Kids into practice. The recently released *National Best Practice Framework for Early Childhood Intervention* (the Framework) sets out clear principles for delivering high-quality, evidence-informed early supports for children with developmental concerns, delays, or disabilities in everyday settings. While Thriving Kids identifies the building blocks of a national early supports ecosystem for children with low to moderate developmental needs, the Framework helps describe how those supports can be delivered consistently across health, education and community settings.

Embedding the Framework could also help to address emerging sector concerns about continuity of support for children with moderate developmental needs during the transition to foundational supports. Importantly, the Framework identifies considerations that are critical to achieving equitable outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, including recognising the intersecting rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children as children, as children with disability and as members of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities; centring cultural safety in service provision; and supporting the development of tools and approaches that reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture.

Thriving Kids offers an opportunity for Australia to deliver on our child rights obligations. The positions set out in this paper, including investment in culturally safe models, co-designing policy and programs with children, families and communities, and equitable access to services, are essential to Australian governments upholding their international human rights obligations. Despite these obligations, children's rights are not consistently protected in Australia in our legislation, service systems or funding approaches (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2019).

These avoidable failures and inequities are most visible for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, who experience ongoing impact of colonisation, structural inequities in service systems, and poorer outcomes across health, education and wellbeing as a result. For children with disability or developmental delay, these inequities are compounded by ableism, stigma and barriers within mainstream systems. Taking a rights-based approach to Thriving Kids requires addressing these structural conditions by embedding children's rights in policy design, funding models, service delivery and accountability mechanisms, and how success is defined and measured. International human rights frameworks provide a clear benchmark for the minimum standards Australia must meet, and a foundation for holding governments accountable. However, stronger domestic protections are essential. SNAICC will continue to advocate for meaningful legislative reform, including the introduction of a Human Rights Act, to ensure children's rights are not only recognised, but enforceable.

Thriving Kids must deliver on Closing the Gap through genuine power-sharing, accountable governance and coordinated implementation

Robust governance is critical to ensure Thriving Kids is implemented effectively. This governance must create a coherent and connected system that has national consistency while remaining flexible to adapt to local contexts and reflect community needs. Shared decision-making with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and leaders is essential to ensuring this happens.

A national governance mechanism that engages in shared decision-making will enable consistency in the delivery of Thriving Kids across Australia. As responsibility for Thriving Kids implementation is distributed across different lead agencies in each jurisdiction, including ECEC, disability, communities and child and family portfolios, it is critical that governance and shared decision-making is anchored through a national mechanism rather than located within individual agency structures. This mechanism must engage in shared decision-making with relevant peaks such as NACCHO, SNAICC and FPDN. Jurisdictional agencies responsible for stewarding

state-wide implementation should work with ACCOs across their states and territories to jointly make decisions about how foundational supports and services are implemented with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. This approach will support national consistency on critical issues while still enabling local flexibility in implementation plans, and help to ensure that the implementation of Thriving Kids meets the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families.

The Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership (the Partnership) should also be engaged regularly as a key shared decision-making forum to inform Thriving Kids. The Partnership brings together Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders – including Coalition of Peaks members and independent experts – and government representatives to guide national reform to improve early childhood outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. The membership structure of the Partnership enables it to give community-led expert advice on Thriving Kids *and* to coordinate across government. The Partnership thus serves as a mechanism for establishing consensus across jurisdictions and shared commitment to reform, which will be critical in the ongoing delivery of Thriving Kids.

States and territories must also build effective governance in each jurisdiction. The advice from the national governance mechanism should not preclude the lead agencies in each jurisdiction from engaging with state and territory Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak bodies as part of their core business. Implementation plans for each state and territory must be developed in line with the National Agreement, with clear accountability for delivering outcomes, not just announcing commitments.

Thriving Kids needs to measure what matters: self-determination, cultural strength, and thriving communities

Monitoring and evaluation are essential to ensure that Thriving Kids is meeting the needs of our children. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families are systemically disadvantaged by current systems, and there is significant concern that this will be replicated within Thriving Kids. Measuring the success of Thriving Kids for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children requires approaches to monitoring and evaluation that reflect community priorities, support local decision-making, and recognise the importance of self-determination. It should move beyond program-level performance monitoring to assess how systems themselves are changing to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. This includes measuring whether ACCOs are exercising decision-making authority, whether services are culturally safe and accessible, and whether governments are strengthening the ACCO sector (ANZSOG, 2023). It must capture what ‘thriving’ means to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

people, situating children’s development within their relationships and culture, instead of applying a Western and individualised lens that fails to acknowledge the strengths of these children.

Governments must deliver on their commitments to improving and sharing access to data and information under Priority Reform 4 of the National Agreement.

Governments must ensure that all data collection, monitoring and evaluation under Thriving Kids aligns with Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles. This includes ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have control over how data is collected, used and interpreted, and that measures of success reflect community-defined understandings of children’s wellbeing and development.

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