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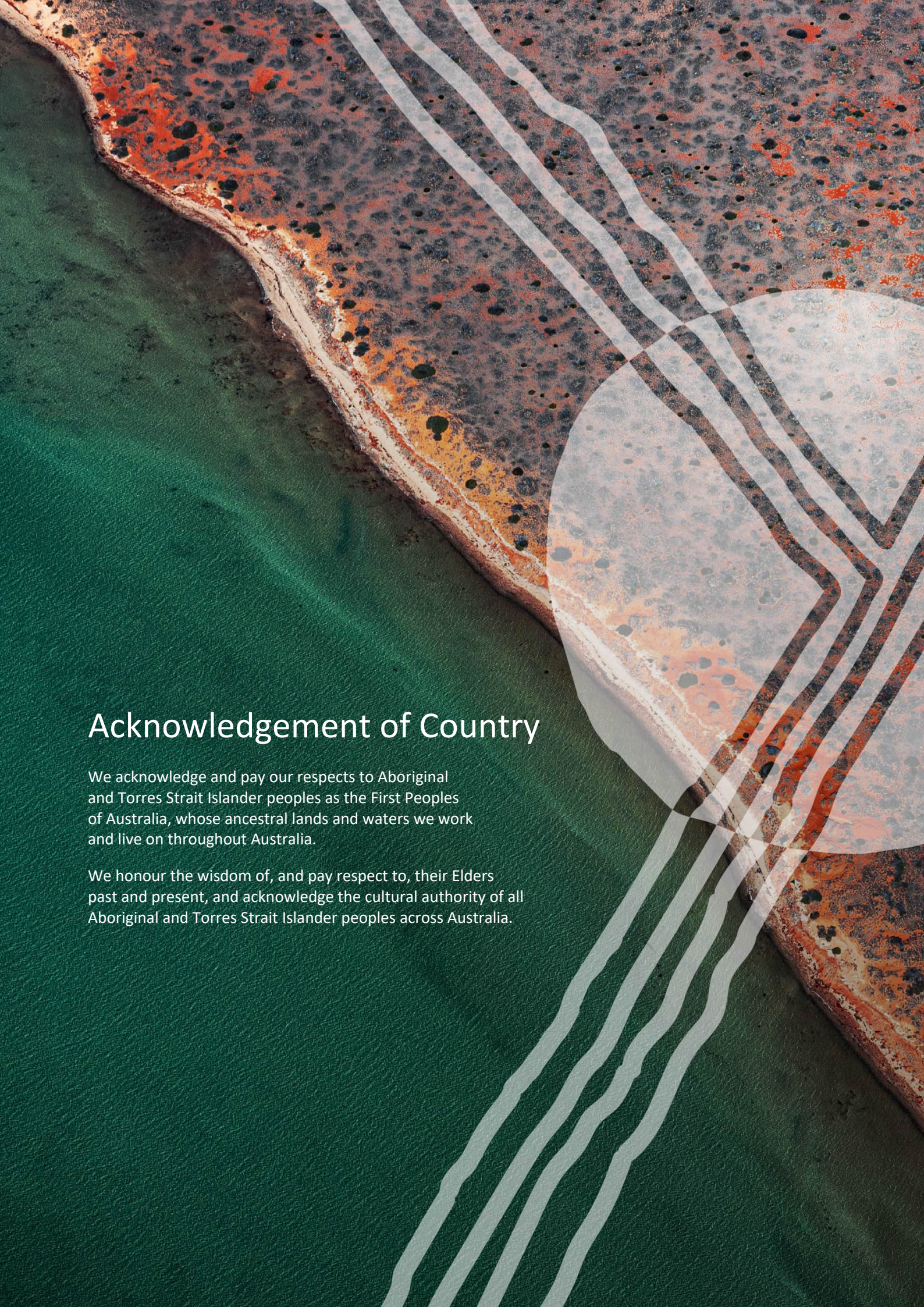


Evaluation Report:

Evaluation of the Early Childhood Care
and Development Policy Partnership

April 2026





Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge and pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Peoples of Australia, whose ancestral lands and waters we work and live on throughout Australia.

We honour the wisdom of, and pay respect to, their Elders past and present, and acknowledge the cultural authority of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across Australia.

Executive Summary

The Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership (the ECCDPP) was established in August 2022 under Priority Reform One of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, which commits governments to formal partnerships and shared decision-making with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It is one of the first five national policy partnerships and the first to focus specifically on the early years.

The ECCDPP provides a shared table where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and government representatives jointly identify priorities, commission research and evidence, and advise all governments through the Joint Council on Closing the Gap. Co-chaired by SNAICC – National Voice for Our Children (SNAICC) and the Australian Government Department of Education (Department of Education), the ECCDPP brings together officials from every jurisdiction alongside a First Nations caucus representing the Coalition of Peaks and other independent members. Its purpose is to improve early childhood outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children by embedding community leadership in national policy.

The ECCDPP operates as a national shared decision-making mechanism across systems that influence early childhood development including child and maternal health, early childhood education, family support, and child protection. Its annual workplans focus on driving the development of reforms under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (the National Agreement) such as Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisation (ACCO) funding models, workforce capability, data sovereignty, and integration across child and family systems.

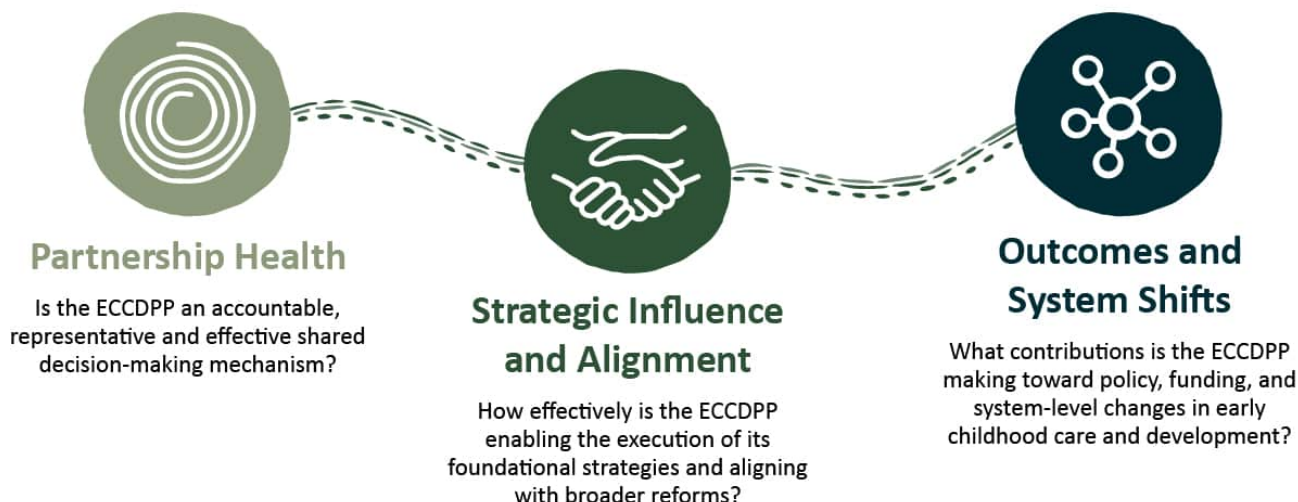
About the evaluation

This evaluation was commissioned by the Department of Education on behalf of the ECCDPP as part of its scheduled three-year review. Its purpose was to assess how effectively the ECCDPP is operating as a shared decision-making mechanism, to identify enabling conditions for success, and to support continuous learning as the partnership matures. The evaluation focused on both visible outputs such as governance structures, decisions, and coordination mechanisms; as well as the relational elements that sustain them, including trust, legitimacy, and reciprocity.

Yamagigu Consulting Pty Ltd (*yamagigu*), an Aboriginal-owned organisation, led the evaluation using a strengths-based, participatory, and learning-oriented approach. Oversight and validation were provided through ongoing engagement with the Co-secretariat and the ECCDPP members and partners.

The evaluation was conducted over three phases between June 2025 and January 2026. Data collection included document review (Meeting One through to Meeting Eleven), observation of the ECCDPP Meeting Ten and Eleven, 36 stakeholder consultations with the ECCDPP members, partners, Co-chairs and the Co-secretariat, and external interviews with sector representatives. Analysis combined inductive and deductive methods, using thematic coding against the Expanded Theory of Change and collaborative sense-making with the ECCDPP members to test emerging findings.

The evaluation explored three domains aligned to the ECCDPP's Expanded Theory of Change and the four Priority Reforms of the National Agreement:



This evaluation captures the ECCDPP at an early and formative point in its lifecycle and therefore prioritises understanding Partnership Health, influence, and enabling conditions over definitive outcome measurement. Its findings should be interpreted as a grounded assessment of early system change and contribution, to be built on through subsequent evaluation as reforms embed and mature.

Key insights

The evaluation found that the ECCDPP has built strong foundations for shared decision-making and relational trust across governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders, representatives and organisations. Members described it as a credible and maturing partnership that has strengthened coordination across national reforms such as Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031 (Safe and Supported). At the same time, the evaluation highlights that the ECCDPP's influence remains shaped by the broader authorising and resourcing environments in which it operates. While shared priorities can be developed at the ECCDPP table, the translation of those priorities into action depends on how advice travels through government systems, budget processes, and ministerial decision-making. Variability in internal coordination, authorisation pathways, and system readiness across jurisdictions continues to affect the pace and consistency of implementation.

The findings show that system pace is shaped not only by bureaucratic process but by political timing. Government systems can move quickly when issues are framed as politically urgent; the ECCDPP's strength lies in how it mobilises, sequences, and defends reform across these shifting conditions. The ECCDPP's influence is not only in the reforms it designs but in the way it positions them such as building evidence, timing proposals, aligning partners, and maintaining legitimacy, so that when political windows open, solutions are ready to move.

The evaluations recommendations focus on strengthening the ECCDPP's relational and structural architecture: embedding shared accountability and data transparency, formalising Partnership Health monitoring, clarifying authorising pathways, and building a federated reasoning framework to sustain reform. Together, these steps would support the ECCDPP as a model of mature, transparent, and enduring shared decision-making, translating the intent of the National Agreement into operational practice.

Summary of findings and recommendations

The key findings, aligned to the three evaluation domains, highlight the insights and trends that emerged throughout the evaluation. The findings are:

Domain	Finding
 Partnership Health	Partnership infrastructure • Early mandate and alignment with national First Nations early childhood strategies gave the ECCDPP early momentum, allowing it to move beyond establishment and begin functioning as a shared decision-making forum. • The members and partners model enables breadth and flexibility but complicates coordination and accountability. • The caucusing model is creating parity and relational integrity. • The ECCDPP is maintaining continuity through structured practice. Relational Integrity • The distinct leadership role of the Co-chairs ensures integrity of the ECCDPP. • The ‘collective brilliance of the First Nations caucus’ is one of the ECCDPP biggest strengths. • Relational culture and the speed of trust has allowed the ECCDPP to mature quickly. Shared authority and decision-making • Shared decision-making exists, but accountability is not yet shared. • The ECCDPP has made progress in equalising voice, though systemic inequities persist. • The ECCDPP as a shared decision-making mechanism has potential for system innovation.
 Strategic Influence and Alignment	The ECCDPP as Scaffolding for Reform • The ECCDPP acts as a structural scaffold for broader reform, legitimising agendas, sequencing priorities, and connecting sectors. • The ECCDPP’s influence extends across multiple policy systems. Influence within Government Systems • The ECCDPP’s influence depends as much on how governments work internally as it does on the strength of the partnership itself. • The ECCDPP’s influence is impacted by jurisdictional variation.
 Outcomes and System Shifts	Early Proof Points and Outputs • The ECCDPP’s influence demonstrates it has informed and contributed to shaping the reform agenda as part of broader policy process. • The ECCDPP’s outputs and research are strengthening the evidence base for reform. Structurally Embedding and Funding • Sustainable funding is essential to structurally embed shared decision-making.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were derived from the evaluation findings and grouped by four Focus Areas:

Focus Area	Recommendation
Focus Area 1: Formalising Partnership Health Monitoring Build a systematic approach to assessing and strengthening the quality of relationships, leadership, and representation within the ECCDPP.	Recommendation 1: Periodic Membership and Representation Review Introduce a light-touch, biennial review of the ECCDPP membership to ensure balanced representation across jurisdictions, portfolios, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sectors. Recommendation 2: Safeguard Caucusing Independence Recognise the First Nations caucus as a formal mechanism of parity, with clear roles, preparation time, and administrative support. Recommendation 3: Leadership Succession and Capability Building Develop a structured succession plan and leadership framework to sustain the ECCDPP's relational culture and tone across future Co-chairs. Recommendation 4: Funded Capacity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Participation Provide dedicated policy and research support to enable the First Nations caucus to engage on equal technical footing with government partners. Recommendation 6: Embed Partnership Health checks and collective learning processes Embed relational indicators, confidential feedback loops, and transparent communication mechanisms in the next Strategic Plan to track partnership quality and internal learning.
Focus Area 2: Clarifying Authorising Pathways and Governance Practice: Clarify how shared decisions move through government systems and ensure the ECCDPP time is used for generative policy work.	Recommendation 5: Intellectual Property and Attribution Protocol Establish a clear protocol for ownership, attribution, and use of Partnership-generated knowledge that respects cultural and intellectual property. Recommendation 8: Strategic Agenda Design for Policy Imagination Design meeting agendas that prioritise generative dialogue and foresight over administrative updates to sustain the ECCDPP's innovative role. Recommendation 9: Sequencing Framework for the ECCDPP Priorities Use a sequencing framework to map where each reform sits on the continuum of influence; enabling, mobilising, or system-shaping and guide next steps.

Focus Area	Recommendation
Focus Area 3: Embedding Shared Accountability and Data Transparency: Strengthen the ECCDPP’s capacity to track, verify, and communicate progress across jurisdictions.	Recommendation 7: Strengthen Joint Accountability and Data Visibility through Monitoring and Evaluation Create shared tracking, decision, and reporting systems to ensure the ECCDPP commitments are visible, actionable, and aligned with Cabinet and budget processes. Recommendation 10: Ongoing Funding for the ECCDPP and Co-secretariat Secure recurrent, long-term funding to maintain institutional memory, stability, and reform continuity across electoral cycles. Recommendation 11: Shared Learning on Jurisdictional and Cross-Portfolio Variation Formalise shared reflection processes to make differences between jurisdictions visible, comparable, and constructive, reinforcing joint accountability through learning rather than compliance. Recommendation 12: Outcomes Evaluation Establish a pathway to a future outcomes evaluation once priorities are embedded and assessable.
Focus Area 4: Building a Federated Reasoning Framework to Sustain Reform.	Recommendation 13: Develop and use a Shared Reasoning Framework to structurally embed the ECCDPP priorities in government decision-making Consider the development of a shared investment logic to align how problems are defined, how investments flow, and how outcomes are measured across governments.

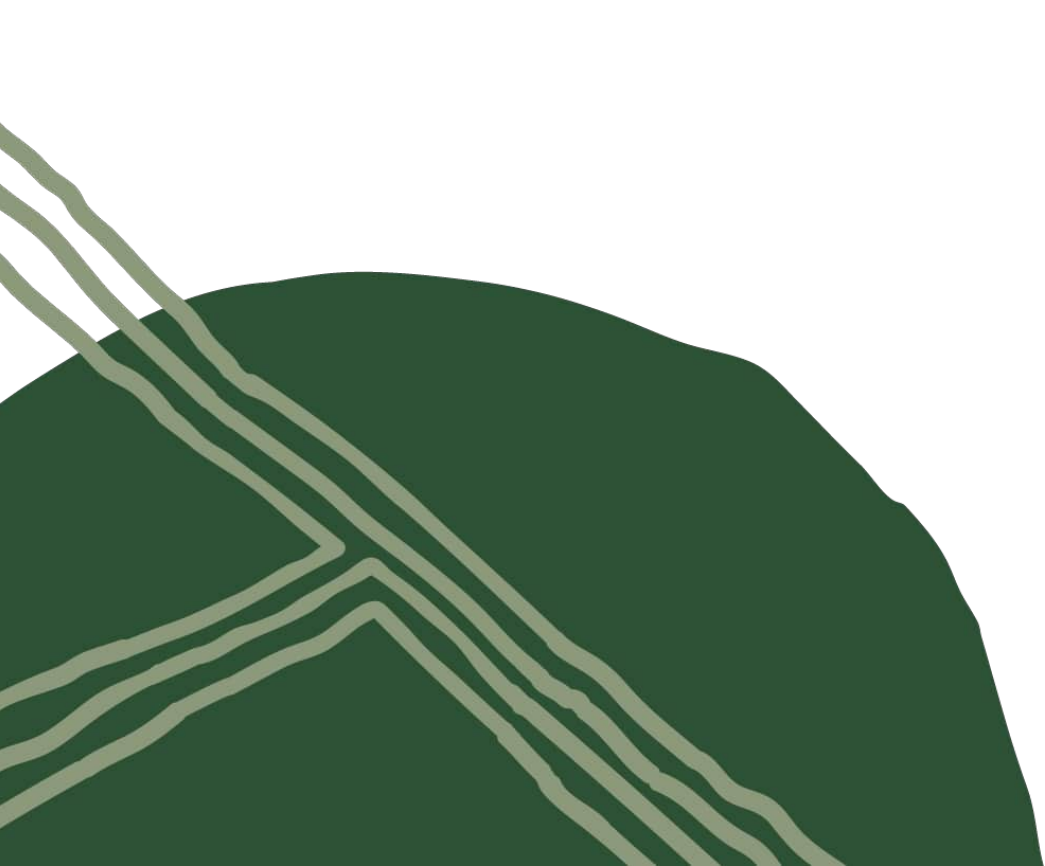


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Glossary of Terms

Term	Definition
ACCO (Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisation)	An organisation that is initiated, governed, and operated by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to deliver services that are culturally safe, community-led, and accountable to community.
Authorising environment	The formal government systems and processes where decisions are approved, and action is authorised. This includes departmental executive processes, Cabinet, budget processes, ministerial approvals, and legislation. While shared decision-making forums can agree priorities and recommendations, action depends on these authorising environments.
Agreement to Implement	The formal agreement that sets out how the ECCDPP operates under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. It defines the ECCDPP's purpose, scope, governance arrangements, roles and responsibilities, decision-making processes, and how recommendations are progressed through Joint Council and government systems.
Caucusing	A structured process that allows Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members to meet separately to discuss issues, form collective positions, and prepare for joint meetings with governments. Caucusing supports cultural safety and informed participation in shared decision-making.
Clause 32 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap	A clause of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap that sets out the principles and requirements for shared decision-making. Clause 32 outlines how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples must be able to participate on an equal footing with governments, including access to information, time to consider issues, consensus-based decisions, and respect for self-determination.
Coalition of Peaks	The Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations. A representative body of more than 80 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled peak organisations that partner with Australian governments under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.
ECCDPP (Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership)	A national Policy Partnership established under Priority Reform One of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. The ECCDPP brings together Commonwealth, state and territory governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives to support shared decision-making on early childhood policy and to make collective recommendations to Joint Council to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 0–5 years.
Legitimate	The recognised authority and credibility of decisions, advice, or processes. In the context of the ECCDPP, legitimacy is built through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, shared decision-making, transparency, evidence, and alignment with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

Term	Definition
ECCDPP members and partners	Members are formally appointed representatives of governments or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations or people who hold decision-making roles within the ECCDPP. Given the broad remit of the ECCDPP, partners are supporting agencies or organisations from relevant organisations or government portfolios. To maintain equal representation in decision-making between governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members, government parties are represented by one vote per jurisdiction.
National Agreement on Closing the Gap	A formal agreement between all Australian governments and the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations, signed in 2020. The Agreement sets out a shared framework for improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It commits governments to structural reform, including shared decision-making, strengthening the Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisation sector, transforming government systems, and shared access to data and information.
Priority Reforms	The four system reforms set out in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap that focus on changing how governments work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
Joint Council on Closing the Gap	The peak decision-making body under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. It is co-chaired by the Minister for Indigenous Australians and a representative of the Coalition of Peaks and brings together all Australian governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak representatives. The Joint Council considers recommendations from Policy Partnerships and oversees national progress on the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.
Theory of Change	A clear explanation of how and why change is expected to occur. It sets out the relationships between activities, mechanisms, and outcomes, showing how actions are intended to lead to short-, medium-, and long-term change. In this evaluation, the Theory of Change is used to understand how shared decision-making and partnership practices contribute to system and policy reform over time.
Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-Led Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap	Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-Led Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2025). An independent review led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that examined how the National Agreement on Closing the Gap has been implemented. The Review assessed progress on shared decision-making, accountability, and system reform, and made recommendations to strengthen implementation and outcomes.

Term	Definition
Shared decision-making	Shared decision-making is defined in Clause 22 of the ECCDPP’s Agreement to Implement (2024), and refers to an approach to decision-making where decisions are made by consensus between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and governments, where the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Parties hold as much weight as governments, where decisions are transparent, and where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives can speak without fear of reprisal or repercussion. Decision-making forums should promote self-determination, be reflective of the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and groups and be informed by shared access to data and information.

Disclaimer

Yamagigu Consulting Pty Limited (*yamagigu*) prepared this report solely for the Department of Education's use and benefit. In doing so, *yamagigu* acted exclusively for the Department of Education and considered no-one else's interests. *yamagigu* accepts no responsibility, duty or liability to anyone other than the Department of Education in connection with this report for the consequences of using or relying on it.

Please note: The Department of Education has entered into a contract with *yamagigu* for the Evaluation of the Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership (the ECCDPP). While the Department of Education holds the contract for this engagement, it is acknowledged that *yamagigu* has been engaged on behalf of the ECCDPP Co-secretariat, which is jointly held by the Department of Education and SNAICC. As such, the evaluation has been designed and undertaken with input and oversight from the Co-secretariat throughout.

Use of language: In this report, we use the term Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to refer to the First Peoples of Australia. This term is used in recognition of the distinct identities, cultures, and histories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

We also use First Nations caucus to describe the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members of the Coalition of Peaks and independent members, reflecting their preferred terminology.

Where other terms such as Indigenous or First Nations appear, these are retained when part of titles, formal names, or direct references. We acknowledge that preferences for terminology vary across individuals and communities, and that no single term captures the full diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identities.

Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI): AI tools were used as internal support tools during the preparation of this report to assist with organising information, testing clarity and coherence of language, and supporting internal drafting processes. AI was not used to generate findings, analyse data, interpret evidence, make evaluative judgements, or determine conclusions or recommendations. All analysis, interpretation, sense-making, and reporting decisions were undertaken by the evaluation team. Where AI-supported text was used, it was treated as a drafting aid only and was reviewed, edited, and verified for accuracy, appropriateness, and alignment with the evidence base prior to inclusion.

Thank you and list of contributors

Thank you to all that contributed to the preparation of this evaluation report through formal meetings, interviews and feedback sessions. The insights and engagement were instrumental in delivering this report.

Contributors engaged thoughtfully and generously, often alongside significant workload and governance responsibilities. Their willingness to reflect on practice, name challenges, and share lessons from across jurisdictions and sectors strengthened both the rigour and relevance of the evaluation. The evaluation team acknowledges the depth of expertise, lived experience, and institutional knowledge that participants brought to this work.

The following organisations and departments are acknowledged:

SNAICC – National Voice for our Children

Aboriginal Family Support Services

Aboriginal Service Development, Children Youth and Families, Health and Community Services Directorate
ACT

AbSec NSW, Child, Family and Community Peak Aboriginal Corporation

CHANGEWISE

Child and Family, NSW Department of Communities and Justice NSW

Child Safety and Youth Justice TAS

Community Services, Department of Communities WA

Coolabaroo

Department for Child Protection SA

Department for Education, Children and Young People TAS

Department of Children and Families Regional Services, Department of Territory, Families, Housing and
Communities NT

Department of Education and Training VIC

Department of Families, Fairness and Housing VIC

Department of Families, Seniors, Disability Services and Child Safety QLD

Early Childhood Group, Department of Education Cth

Early Childhood Outcomes, Department of Education NSW

The following organisations and departments are acknowledged:

Early Childhood, Department of Education QLD

Early Years and School Services NT

Families and Communities, Department of Social Services Cth

First Peoples Disability Network

Indigenous Child Protection Hub, University of Technology Sydney Jumbunna Institute of Indigenous Education and Research

National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO)

Office for Early Childhood Development, SA

Policy and Programs, National Indigenous Australians Agency Cth

Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Protection Peak

REFOCUS

Strategic Policy, Community Services Directorate ACT

Strategy and Policy, Department of Education WA

Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre

Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporate

Wunan

1

Introduction

This chapter outlines policy context for the ECCDPP. It introduces the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, its Priority Reforms, and how the ECCDPP operates within the broader framework of shared decision-making and partnership.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Closing the Gap: Reframing the relationship

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2020) marked a structural shift in how Australia designs and governs policy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It replaced a government-led model with one grounded in partnership, empowerment and self-determination.¹

At the heart of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (National Agreement) is the principle that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must be partners in decisions that affect their lives.² This principle is embedded in Priority Reform One: Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision-Making. Clauses 32 and 33 commit governments to developing and strengthening structures that empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to share decision-making with governments on the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programs that affect them.³

The National Agreement does not only set social and economic targets. It changes the way governments must work. Its four Priority Reforms reshape the systems that drive outcomes:

- **Priority Reform One:** Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision-Making
- **Priority Reform Two:** Building the Community-Controlled Sector
- **Priority Reform Three:** Transforming Government Organisations
- **Priority Reform Four:** Shared Access to Data and Information

Alongside these reforms, the National Agreement includes **17 socioeconomic outcomes** and **19 measurable targets** across areas such as early childhood education, health, justice, employment, and housing. These are not stand-alone goals but part of a broader commitment to system reform and shared accountability.

To put these commitments into practice, the National Agreement established a new **Closing the Gap architecture**. This structure includes:

- the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations (Coalition of Peaks), representing more than 80 community-controlled peak bodies
- the **Joint Council on Closing the Gap (Joint Council)**, co-chaired by the Minister for Indigenous Australians and a representative of the Coalition of Peaks (a partnership between all Australian governments, the Coalition of Peaks and the Australian Local Government Association)
- the **Partnership Working Group to the Joint Council**, which coordinates policy issues across sectors and includes Coalition of Peaks and Indigenous Affairs officials from all governments. This group operates alongside, but separately from, the Joint Working Group on Closing the Gap, which is composed of Australian Government officials, and an equivalent number of Peaks representatives.
- a network of **policy partnerships** and **place-based partnerships**, which bring shared decision-making into specific policy areas and communities.

Together, these structures form the backbone of shared governance under the National Agreement. They operationalise Priority Reform One by giving effect to the partnership commitments set out in clauses 28-38, including the establishment of formal Policy Partnerships, shared priority setting, and mechanisms for

¹ Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations (2025). *Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-Led Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap*. Page 29.

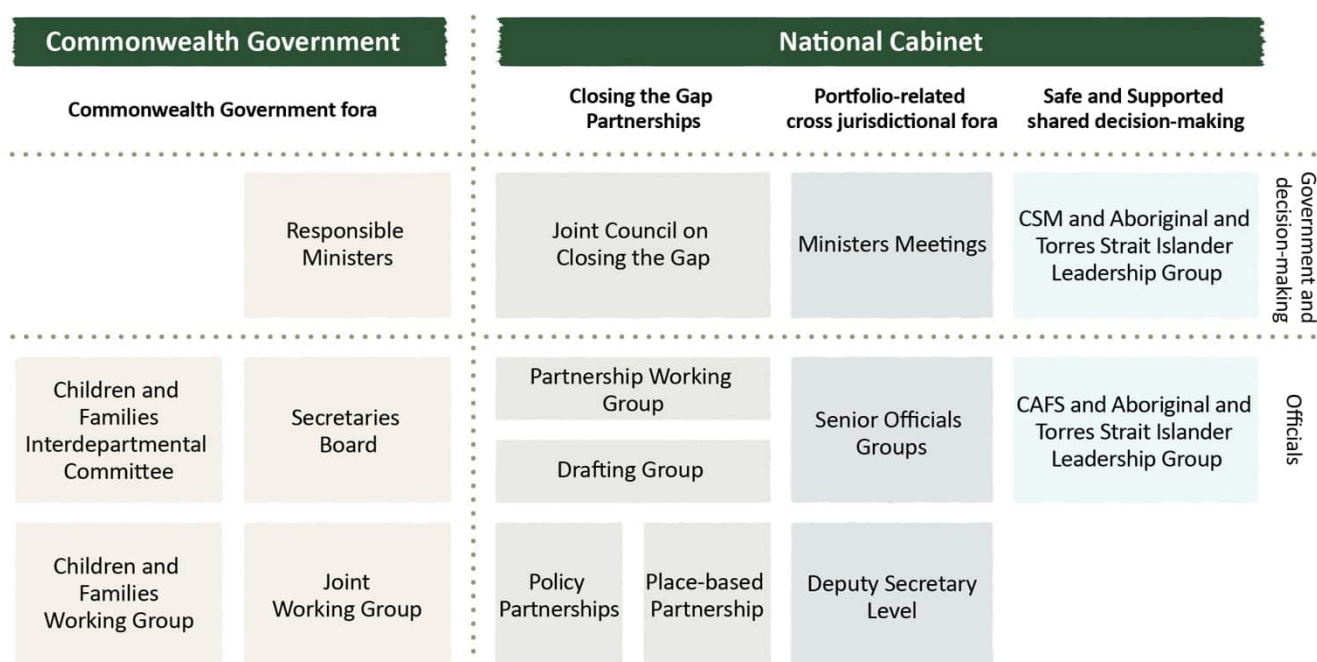
² Australian Government (2023) National Agreement on Closing the Gap: A new approach. Available at: <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/national-agreement-closing-the-gap/4-new-approach>

³ Australian Government (2023) National Agreement on Closing the Gap: 6. Priority Reform One – Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision-Making. Available at: <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/national-agreement-closing-the-gap/6-priority-reform-areas/one>

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to participate in policy design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.

Figure 1 below, adapted from the ECCDPP Agreement to Implement, illustrates how the Closing the Gap architecture operates in practice. It shows the relationships between the Joint Council, responsible ministers, the Coalition of Peaks, and the network of Policy Partnerships, including the ECCDPP, that work together to progress shared priorities across the early childhood care and development portfolio.

Figure 1: Closing the Gap architecture map



Source: Australian Government's Agreement to Implement the Early Childhood Policy Partnership⁴

The Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-Led Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2025) found that this architecture is 'broadly sound but inhibited by inaction'.⁵ It concluded that while the National Agreement represents a genuine breakthrough, progress on shared decision-making remains slow and uneven. Power and resources are still concentrated within governments, and First Nations caucus members and partners continue to carry a disproportionate cultural load. The review called for governments to move from commitment to active transformation, ensuring that shared decision-making is resourced, accountable, and embedded across all systems.

⁴ Department of Education, (2024), 'Agreement to Implement the Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership', Available at: Agreement to Implement the Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership - Department of Education, Australian Government

⁵ Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations (2025). *Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-Led Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. Key Finding 1, p.161*



Why shared decision-making matters in early childhood

Early childhood is one of the most powerful levers for systemic life change. The experiences of children in their first years shape health, early childhood education, identity, and belonging for life. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, these early experiences are inseparable from culture, kinship, and Country. Yet the systems that shape them such as early education, health, and child protection have long been designed and controlled by governments rather than communities.

These systems carry deep colonial legacies. Early childhood and child welfare policy were once instruments of assimilation, used to remove children from family and culture.⁶ The effects of those policies continue through intergenerational trauma, mistrust, and service systems that still too often treat Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families as problems to be fixed, instead of supporting them. Shared decision-making is therefore a form of repair. It acknowledges that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples hold the authority, knowledge, and relationships to keep children safe, strong, and connected.

National data reinforces both the urgency and the unevenness of reform. Data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2023) highlights persistent inequities in early childhood participation, health, and family wellbeing outcomes.⁷ Most Closing the Gap targets remain off track with some outcome areas worsening. One exception is early childhood education enrolment. The Productivity Commission's most recent Closing the Gap Annual Data Compilation Report (July 2025) indicates that Target 3: increasing the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children enrolled in Year Before Full-Time Schooling, is on track to be met by the end of 2025, with enrolment at 94.2 per cent against a target of 95 per cent.⁸

Evidence consistently shows that when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations lead early childhood and family services, outcomes improve and trust in systems grows.⁹ Investing in Aboriginal-led early childhood systems is also preventive. The early years sit upstream of nearly every outcome of the National Agreement. Strong and culturally responsive early childhood systems also reduce the likelihood of later involvement in child protection, poor health, school exclusion, and incarceration. The Family Matters Report (2023) identifies strengthening Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and community-controlled services as the most effective strategy for reducing over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care.¹⁰

In this context, shared decision-making in early childhood is central to the broader reform agenda. It is where self-determination begins, not at the point of crisis, but at the point of possibility.

⁶ Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations (2025). Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-Led Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

⁷ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2023). Children and Families Data Portal. URL: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/child-protection/child-protection-australia-2023-24/contents/child-protection-system-in-australia>

⁸ Productivity Commission (2025) *Closing the Gap dashboard*. Available at: <https://www.pc.gov.au/closing-the-gap-data/dashboard/>

⁹ Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (2021). *Our Children, Our Way: A National Framework for Early Childhood Development*.

¹⁰ Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (2023). *Family Matters Report 2023*

The Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership

The ECCDPP was established in August 2022 as one of the national Policy Partnerships under Priority Reform One of the National Agreement. Together with the Justice, Social and Emotional Wellbeing, Housing, and Languages partnerships, the ECCDPP forms part of the broader Closing the Gap Policy Partnership architecture. The ECCDPP focuses on early childhood policy, bringing together Commonwealth, state and territory governments with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are born healthy, remain strong, are nurtured by strong families, and thrive in their early years.

The ECCDPP focuses on improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people. Its primary function is to make collective recommendations to all governments, through Joint Council.

Closing the Gap socioeconomic targets under the ECCDPP's remit include:

- **Outcome 2:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are born healthy and strong
- **Outcome 3:** Children are engaged in high quality, culturally appropriate early childhood education in their early years
- **Outcome 4:** Children thrive in their early years
- **Outcome 12:** Children are not overrepresented in the child protection system
- **Outcome 13:** Families and households are safe.

A detailed description of the ECCDPP's governance arrangements, membership, objectives, and operating structures is provided in Appendix A.

The national policy context

The ECCDPP's work is informed by a suite of interconnected national frameworks that set direction for early childhood development, family wellbeing, and child safety. These include, but are not limited to, the National Agreement, Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031, the Early Childhood Care and Development Sector Strengthening Plan and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy. Together, they create the policy ecosystem within which the ECCDPP operates, linking outcomes for children and families to broader system reforms across health, early childhood education, and social policy. As highlighted in Figure 2 below, each policy shapes the environment in which the ECCDPP operates. This diagram provides a point-in-time snapshot of the national early childhood policy landscape as it relates to the ECCDPP. It is not exhaustive and reflects the environment in 2025.

See [Appendix E](#) for a detailed description of the policy context.

Figure 2: The ECCDPP policy landscape



2

Methodology

This chapter outlines the evaluations design and methods. It describes how evidence was gathered, analysed and validated.

Chapter 2: About the Evaluation

Why was the ECCDPP evaluated?

This evaluation was commissioned by the Australian Government Department of Education (the Department of Education) on behalf of the ECCDPP as part of its three-year review.

It examines how the ECCDPP has functioned over its initial period of establishment and operation, with a focus on learning from the early implementation of shared decision-making under Priority Reform One of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (National Agreement).

As a system level partnership rather than a service delivery program, the ECCDPP is expected to contribute to outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families indirectly over time, through strengthened shared decision-making, policy influence, and improved system alignment. This evaluation therefore focuses on early signals of impact, contribution to structural reform, and the conditions being established to support future outcomes, rather than measurable population level change.

How was the ECCDPP evaluated?

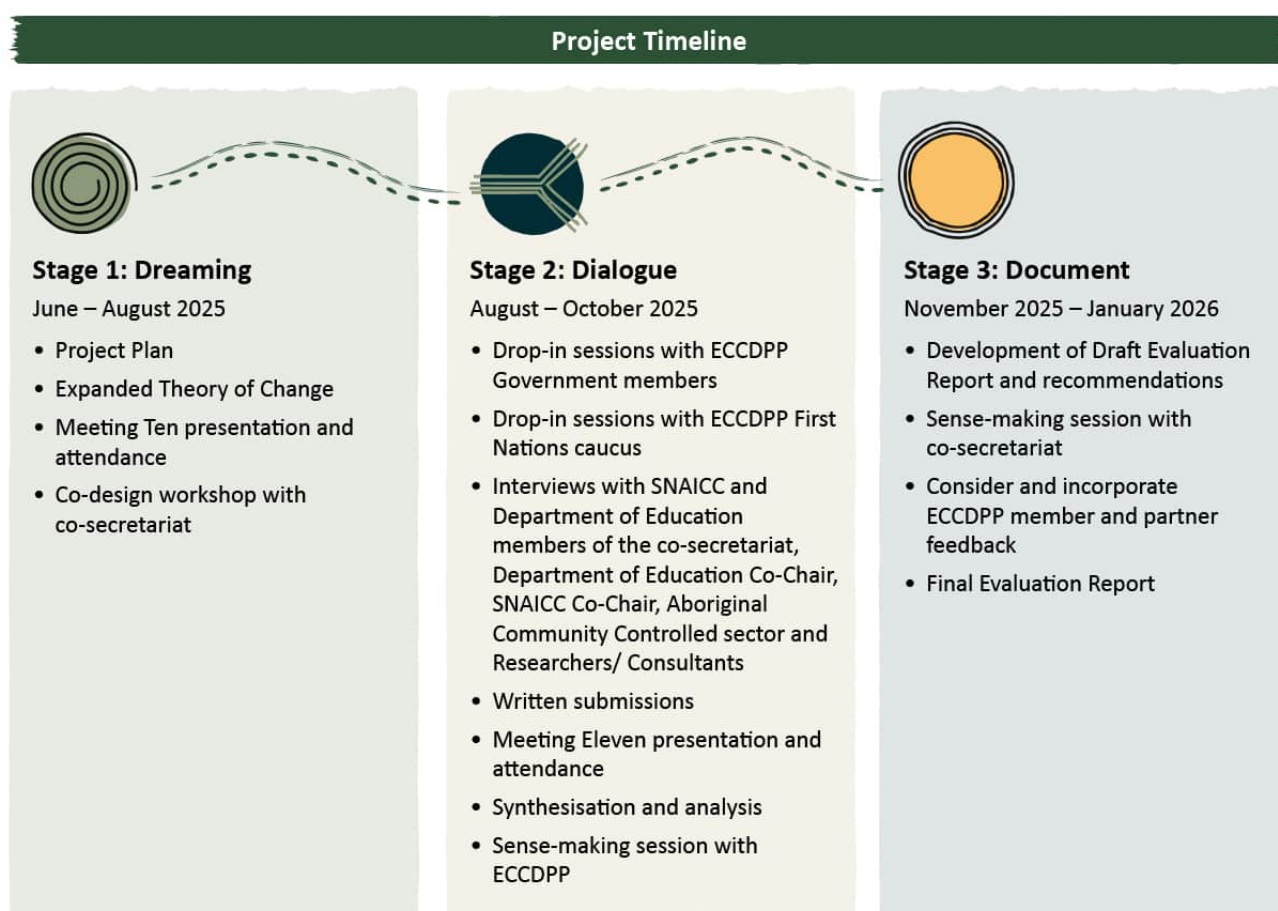
The evaluation used a learning-oriented, strengths-based approach designed to generate reflection, support adaptation, and assess how effectively the ECCDPP is operating as a shared decision-making mechanism. It sought to understand both the visible outputs of the ECCDPP such as recommendations, governance structures, and coordination mechanisms, and the less visible but equally critical elements that sustain its work, including trust, legitimacy, and shared leadership.

The evaluation was conducted by *yamagigu*, an Aboriginal business. *yamagigu*'s evaluation approach was informed by Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing, which means it was guided by principles of participation and relational accountability, and underpinned by Indigenous Data Sovereignty. Multiple qualitative methods were intentionally combined, including yarning-style conversations, mixed-media submissions, structured document review, observation of ECCDPP proceedings, and policy and system mapping. *yamagigu*'s Aboriginal staff led all consultation, analysis and reporting. The Expanded Theory of Change (see Appendix B) provided the analytic framework, supporting both inductive and deductive analysis, with triangulation across methods, stakeholder groups, and documentary sources to strengthen evaluative judgement.

The evaluation was undertaken over three project phases from June to November 2025 (see [Figure 3](#)). The evaluation project stages included the following key milestones:

- Agree to the Project Plan and an Expanded Theory of Change, building upon the existing Theory of Change presented in the ECCDPP's 2023 Strategic Plan.
- Attend Meeting Ten to present and receive feedback on the draft evaluation domains and Expanded Theory of Change.
- Conduct a series of drop-in sessions with the ECCDPP members, partners and others, aligned with the Key Evaluation Questions.
- Attend Meeting Eleven to share and receive feedback on preliminary findings emerging from the document review and consultation.
- Draft a report and receiving verbal feedback from the ECCDPP members and partners at Meeting Twelve.
- Finalise the report, including incorporating feedback from the ECCDPP members and partners.

Figure 3: Project stages and milestones for the ECCDPP evaluation



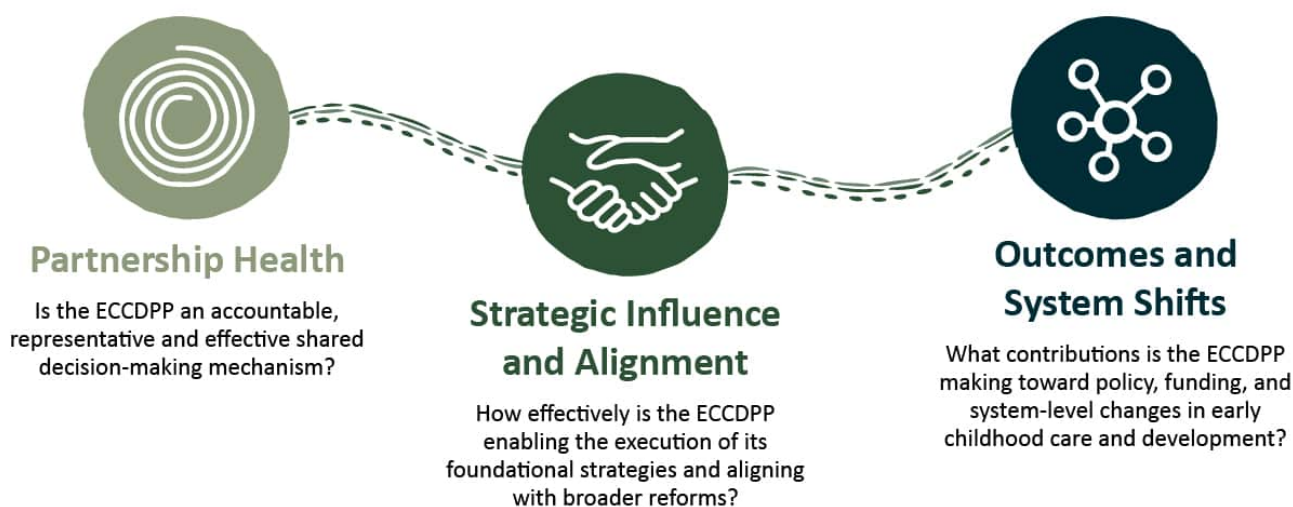
What were the evaluation questions?

The evaluation explored three core domains aligned to the ECCDPP's expanded Theory of Change, Priority Reforms and the elements of shared decision-making set out in Clause 32 of the National Agreement. While Priority Reform One (Clauses 28–38) establishes the purpose, scope, and governance of Policy Partnerships, Clause 32 is particularly relevant to the features of strong partnerships. Clause 32 (a) specifies that strong partnerships should be accountable and representative, and Clause 32 (b) specifies that strong partnerships should be governed by a formal agreement. In the ECCDPP's case, this is the 2024 ECCDPP Agreement to Implement. Clause 32(c) articulates the practical characteristics of strong shared decision-making in operation. For this reason, Clause 32(c) provided the most relevant analytical lens for assessing how the ECCDPP functions as a partnership in practice.

Figure 4 below presents the Key Evaluation Questions that guided the evaluation, organised across three domains to assess both partnership functioning and contribution to long-term systemic reform. The full set of sub-questions used to support analysis within each domain is provided in Appendix C.

The Partnership Health domain examines how well the ECCDPP embodies shared decision-making, including the quality of relationships, leadership balance, and governance processes. The Strategic Influence and Alignment domain considers how the ECCDPP has shaped policy directions, strengthened alignment across jurisdictions, and advanced Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisation (ACCO) priorities. The Outcomes and System Shifts domain looks at the early evidence of systemic change such as how the ECCDPP decisions and policy advice are influencing structures, funding, and accountability mechanisms over time.

Figure 4: Evaluation questions by domain



How was information collected and analysed?

Data was collected through multiple qualitative and documentary sources to build a holistic picture of how the ECCDPP operates and evolves. Using multiple data sources helped strengthen the validity of findings by enabling triangulation and reducing the risk of ‘common method variance’ which can occur when relying on a single type of evidence.

Table 1 shows the primary data sources used to support the evaluation and describes how each contributed to the analysis. Together, these sources provide complementary perspectives on the ECCDPP’s functioning, relationships, and system influence.

Table 1: Data sources

Data Source	Purpose	Description
Document review	Establish baseline understanding and track the ECCDPP evolution	Review of meeting papers, minutes and other policy documents from Meetings One through to Eleven.
Interviews and Drop in sessions	Capture partnership perspectives and lived experience	Conversations with the ECCDPP members and partners (Coalition of Peaks, Independents and government), Co-chairs, Co-secretariat, and other stakeholders.
Observation	Understand partnership dynamics and decision-making in practice	<i>yamagigu</i> observation of the ECCDPP Meeting Ten and Meeting Eleven, with reflective field notes.
Policy and system mapping	Identify alignment and influence	Analysis of how the ECCDPP priorities intersect with national strategies and frameworks.
Reflexive journaling	Support evaluator reflexivity and transparency	Internal reflection by evaluators to track assumptions, learning, and evolving understanding.

Stakeholder consultations

Participants were recruited using a purposive sampling approach to ensure representation across jurisdictions, sectors, and roles within the ECCDPP ecosystem. Recruitment was undertaken in close coordination with the ECCDPP Co-secretariat to ensure cultural protocols were followed and that appropriate authority and relationships were respected. The sample included ECCDPP Co-chairs, First Nations caucus members and partners, government members and partners, Co-secretariat staff, and representatives from ACCOs and regional organisations engaged through the partnership.

A total of 36 stakeholder participated in consultations between August and October 2025. A breakdown of stakeholder interviews is shown in the [Table 2](#) below.

Table 2: Stakeholder consultations

Stakeholder group	Participant numbers
The ECCDPP Co-chairs	2
First Nations caucus members and partners of the ECCDPP	6
Government members and partners of the ECCDPP (all jurisdictions and includes proxies)	16
Co-secretariat (SNAICC – National Voice for our Children (SNAICC) and the Department of Education)	10
ACCO and regional rector representatives (including peaks, providers, and if relevant, cultural authorities actively engaged through those roles)	2

In addition to interviews and yarning with the ECCDPP members, Co-chairs, and Co-secretariat staff, the evaluation included two external stakeholder consultations to gather broader system perspectives. Invitations were also extended to representatives of the Partnership Working Group and other national policy actors; however, due to timing constraints and other factors, these consultations did not proceed.

The evaluation did not aim to conduct large-scale or community-level engagement, as it was undertaken early in the ECCDPP’s establishment and focused on partnership learning rather than program outcomes or impacts. Importantly, the First Nations caucus of the ECCDPP already provides a representative cross-section of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled peaks, bringing extensive policy reach and lived experience across jurisdictions. Their insights were central to this evaluation.

The evaluation also drew on existing and recent bodies of evidence, including the Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-Led Review of Closing the Gap (2025), the Productivity Commission’s Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2024), and related early childhood care and development policy research. These sources provided contextual and corroborating evidence to strengthen interpretation and avoid duplication of previous consultation processes.

Analysis and sense-making

Analysis combined inductive and deductive techniques. The evaluation team conducted thematic coding and synthesis against the evaluation framework and Theory of Change. Patterns were identified in how the ECCDPP’s processes and relationships influence system behaviour, trust, and learning.

Triangulation was undertaken across multiple dimensions to strengthen evaluative judgement. This included triangulation across data types, including interviews and yarning, documentary evidence,

observation, and policy and system mapping. It also included triangulation across stakeholder groups, including ECCDPP members and partners, Co-chairs, and the Co-secretariat.

Sense-making was undertaken collaboratively with the ECCDPP Co-secretariat and at Meeting Eleven where the evaluation team presented and tested emerging findings against the Theory of Change with the ECCDPP members and partners. These discussions supported validating interpretations, refining findings, and identifying opportunities for reflection and adaptation. Divergent and sometimes conflicting perspectives were intentionally retained in analysis rather than resolved, reflecting the complexity, power dynamics, and contested nature of shared decision-making in practice.

Consistent with Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles, analysis and interpretation were shaped through collective sense-making rather than undertaken solely by the evaluation team. Emerging findings were shared with the ECCDPP members for challenge, refinement, and validation prior to finalisation, supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authority over meaning and representation. While the evaluation operated within government commissioning and reporting requirements, these processes were designed to support transparency, shared interpretation, and culturally respectful use of findings, in line with the principles articulated by the Maïam nayri Wingara Indigenous Data Sovereignty Collective.

How did the evaluation ensure culturally safe methods and ethical processes?

This evaluation was undertaken using Aboriginal-led, culturally safe, and ethically grounded approaches, consistent with Priority Reform One of the National Agreement and the intent of the ECCDPP itself. The evaluation was conducted by *yamagigu*, an Aboriginal-owned organisation, with Aboriginal evaluators holding responsibility for design, analysis, and interpretation.

Cultural safety was embedded in how the evaluation was led and carried out. This included who led the work, how decisions were made about what evidence mattered and how power and accountability were handled across the evaluation lifecycle. Ongoing engagement with the ECCDPP Co-secretariat, members and partners, including the First Nations caucus, supported shared oversight of interpretation and findings. The evaluation design was flexible and relational, attending to both formal governance outputs and the less visible but critical foundations such as trust, legitimacy, and shared leadership.

Engagement methods were designed to be flexible and low burden. These including interviews, drop-in sessions, discussion held within existing meetings, and optional written or mixed-media submissions, allowing participants to choose how they contributed. The evaluation did not undertake community-level consultation, recognising the early stage of the ECCDPP and the representative role of the First Nations caucus, and deliberately avoided duplicating existing engagement processes.

Ethical practice was guided by principles of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent and Indigenous Data Sovereignty. Participants were provided with clear information about the purpose and use of the evaluation, with opportunities to review and withdraw their input. Analysis and interpretation were shaped through shared sense-making rather than evaluator-only judgement, supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authority over meaning and representation. Reflective practices were used throughout to surface assumptions and power dynamics, ensuring transparency, humility, and respectful use of knowledge within a government-commissioned evaluation context.

What are the limitations and caveats?

This evaluation has been undertaken at an early stage in the ECCDPP's development and implementation. As such, several limitations and considerations apply:

- **Attribution vs. contribution:** As with many system-level reforms, outcomes arise from the interplay of multiple actors and influences. Rather than seeking to attribute change solely to the ECCDPP, the evaluation explored plausible contribution and influence.
- **Timing:** Some Year Three priorities are still underway or yet to be implemented, which limits the ability to assess long term and downstream impacts. Future evaluations will be better able to assess the longer term impact of the ECCDPP.
- **Consultation depth:** While the evaluation team created multiple consultation opportunities across multiple formats, some stakeholders provided only limited input. These stakeholders were more likely to be Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives, who experience substantial resource constraints to the ECCDPP engagement outside of formal meeting times. While all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives engaged and provided feedback during the ECCDPP meeting times (*yamagigu* attended both Meeting Ten and Meeting Eleven), additional time in an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander only context – had their schedules allowed – may have yielded deeper insights into the strengths and opportunities of the ECCDPP.
- **Consultation breadth:** This evaluation primarily focused on those directly involved in, or closely connected to, the ECCDPP. This scope reflects the purpose of the evaluation, which was to understand how the ECCDPP functions as a shared decision-making mechanism under the National Agreement. It was not designed to assess the full impact of the ECCDPP on communities or to engage in broad-based consultation. This is partly due to the relatively early stage of the ECCDPP's work, as well as the need to minimise duplication with other engagement processes. While culturally safe methods and ethical consultation processes have been used, the depth and breadth of participation was shaped by these boundaries. Findings should be interpreted as indicative of perspectives within the ECCDPP ecosystem, not representative of all stakeholders in early childhood reform or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities more broadly. Future evaluation phases will be better positioned to incorporate a wider range of data sources, including perspectives more removed from the ECCDPP operations, to test and refine early findings over time.
- **Disconfirming and independent evidence:** The evaluation prioritised perspectives from within the ECCDPP ecosystem in order to understand how the partnership functions as a shared decision-making mechanism. This limited the availability of fully independent or external perspectives that might challenge or contradict internal accounts of progress and influence. While the evaluation team actively attended to tensions, inconsistencies, and divergent views within interviews and documentation, the capacity to systematically test findings against disconfirming evidence was constrained by the early stage of the partnership, the limited pool of available stakeholders, and the evaluation's scope. As a result, findings should be read as a reasoned interpretation of available evidence rather than a definitive assessment of impact.

These limitations are common to evaluations of complex, long-term change. They do not diminish the importance of this work but underscore the need for humility in interpreting findings and transparency in naming constraints.

3

Findings

This chapter presents the key findings of the evaluation. It explores how the ECCDPP has progressed in strengthening shared decision-making, influencing policy and building system change under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

The findings are structured around the three evaluation domains: **Partnership Health**, **Strategic Influence and Alignment**, and **Outcomes and Systems Shifts**.

Chapter 3: Findings

Partnership Health findings

Partnership Health measures **how the ECCDPP functions as a shared decision-making body** such as the quality of relationships, trust, participation, and shared authority between governments and the First Nations caucus. Partnership Health is not about efficiency or delivery, but rather about whether the partnership model itself is healthy and legitimate.

Under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (National Agreement), formal Policy Partnerships are subject to annual assessment through Commonwealth Closing the Gap reporting processes, including the Partnership Stocktake led by the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA). Recent Closing the Gap Annual Reports have progressively strengthened the specificity of this reporting. The 2024 Annual Report notes that the ECCDPP met the requirements of Clause 32 of the National Agreement, confirming its status as a formally established partnership mechanism.¹¹ Against this baseline of formal compliance, this evaluation focuses on how shared decision-making is functioning in practice: how authority is exercised, how influence travels through systems, and whether the partnership is supported by the structural conditions required to sustain reform over time.

The findings are structured under three interconnected domains:

- **Partnership infrastructure:** the formal and informal conditions that enable or constrain shared decision-making, such as membership, governance design, authorising environment, and meeting structures.
- **Relational integrity:** the quality and character of relationships across the ECCDPP, including trust, safety, care, and accountability.
- **Shared decision-making and authority:** the practice of partnership itself. How influence is negotiated, how decisions are made, and whose knowledge and legitimacy shape those decisions.

The findings include:

Partnership infrastructure

1. Early mandate and alignment with national First Nations early childhood strategies gave the ECCDPP early momentum, allowing it to move beyond establishment and begin functioning as a shared decision-making forum.
2. The members and partners model enables breadth and flexibility, but complicates coordination and accountability.
3. The Caucusing Model is creating parity and relational integrity.
4. The ECCDPP is maintaining continuity through structured practice.

Relational Integrity

5. The distinct leadership role of the Co-chairs ensures integrity of the ECCDPP.
6. The “collective brilliance of the First Nations caucus” is one of the ECCDPP’s biggest strengths.
7. Relational culture and the speed of trust has allowed the ECCDPP to mature quickly.

Shared authority and decision-making

8. Shared decision-making exists, but accountability is not yet shared.
9. The ECCDPP has made progress in equalising voice however systemic inequities persist.
10. The ECCDPP as a shared decision-making mechanism has potential for system innovation.

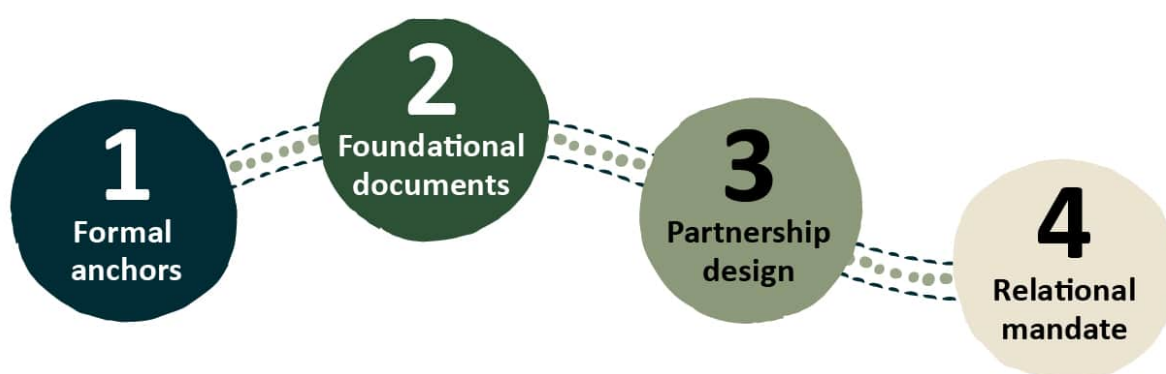
¹¹ National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) (2025) Closing the Gap. Available at: <https://www.niaa.gov.au/our-work/closing-gap#commonwealth-partnership-stocktake>

Partnership infrastructure

This section describes the architecture of the ECCDPP: the membership model, Co-chairing structure, foundational authorising environment, and the operational mechanisms that hold the group together. Partnership infrastructure is what enables the ECCDPP to exist and persist.

Finding 1: Early mandate and alignment with national First Nations early childhood strategies gave the ECCDPP early momentum, allowing it to move beyond establishment and begin functioning as a shared decision-making forum

The ECCDPP operates within a robust foundational authorising environment. Its legitimacy and influence stem from a combination of formal, structural, and relational anchors that position it as a credible mechanism for shared decision-making under the National Agreement. The ECCDPP's authorising environment rests on:



1. Formal anchors

- The National Agreement (especially Priority Reform One on formal partnerships and shared decision-making).
- The Joint Council on Closing the Gap, where the ECCDPP advice can be escalated.
- Ministerial forums which act as ultimate decision-making spaces.

2. Foundational documents

- Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021 to 2031 (Safe and Supported).
- National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy.
- Early Childhood Care and Development Sector Strengthening Plan.
- Other national and sector strategies that the ECCDPP mapped at the outset.

3. Partnership design

- The Co-chair and Co-secretariat model, which ensures decisions are jointly stewarded.
- The caucusing model, giving First Nations members independent space to form positions.

4. Relational mandate

- The reputation and advocacy legacy of SNAICC – National Voice for our Children (SNAICC), National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO), other peaks, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOS) and independent members.
- Existing relationships between First Nations caucus and government portfolios, built before the ECCDPP through joint work.

The ECCDPP's foundational authorising environment was operational from inception. Document review shows that by the time of Meeting One, the ECCDPP was already functioning in a decision-making posture rather than a preparatory one. Principles of Engagement were agreed at Meeting One, providing an initial

framework for shared accountability and ways of working. These principles later informed the development of the Operating Protocols, which were endorsed at Meeting Two and formalised under the Agreement to Implement.¹² The Agreement to Implement serves as the ECCDPP's governing framework under the Joint Council, effectively operating as its Terms of Reference.

Preparation for Meeting One was detailed and deliberate. Multiple artefacts were tabled for review and endorsement to accelerate early momentum. The First Nations caucus had already identified and proposed its priorities, ensuring that early discussions were grounded in community-led direction. The Co-secretariat prepared an early alignment map connecting Closing the Gap outcome targets with relevant strategies across early childhood, child protection, and family wellbeing, signalling an intent to situate the ECCDPP within the broader reform landscape from the very beginning.

“We had 18 months to get ready and had aligned our plans underneath {e.g., Safe and Supported}. Our enabling environment was different. We knew exactly where we were going. We went across all the national plans and strategies because these are the core things people have been working with. We could identify that these are the outcomes being called for, these are where the policy blocks are, these are the current barriers, and then the question becomes how we bring those forward...” — SNAICC Co-chair

Funding reform was also on the table from Meeting One. SNAICC presented a proposal for a research project to design a funding model for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander integrated early services that would be needs-based, responsive, and culturally appropriate. This proposal was adapted from an action identified within the Early Childhood Care and Development Sector Strengthening Plan, which had earlier been co-developed by a Sector Strengthening Working Group, co-chaired by SNAICC and the Australian Government with sector representatives and all Australian governments. Elevating this priority early demonstrated that financial architecture was recognised as a structural condition for reform, not a downstream consideration.

A draft Year One workplan was developed ahead of Meeting One, providing a practical roadmap for sequencing activity and tracking progress. Importantly, all parties formally signed the Agreement to Implement during Meeting One, moving the ECCDPP from commitment to operation.

Taken together, these early actions show that the ECCDPP entered its life cycle with a high degree of readiness and clarity. It did not begin by defining scope or testing relationships; it began by exercising shared authority. This early operational maturity reflects the strength of both the design process and the pre-existing relationships between government and the First Nations caucus. It demonstrates that shared decision-making is not achieved through structure alone but through the preparatory labour of alignment, trust-building, and collective purpose.

Finding 2: The members and partners model enables breadth and flexibility, but complicates coordination and accountability

The ECCDPP's membership and partnership model was deliberately designed to reflect the breadth of early childhood development and the cross-system nature of reform. It brings together senior representatives (including several Deputy Secretaries) from education, child protection, and community services portfolios, alongside a First Nations caucus composed primarily of Coalition of Peaks members and independent representatives, ensuring that both First Nations caucus and governments bring the right expertise to the table. While health, including maternal and child health, is not currently represented in the ECCDPP's membership, it remains within the ECCDPP's scope, and the model allows for engagement with health portfolios where priorities intersect (see Chapter 3 for the ECCDPP membership overview).

¹² Department of Education (Australia) (2022) Agreement to Implement the Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership. Australian Government. Available at: <https://www.education.gov.au/closing-gap/resources/agreement-implement-ecpp>

Design rationale and function:

When established, the ECCDPP first operated with two layers in practice, members and observers. From Meeting Two onwards, the observer role was formalised and observers were recognised as partners. Members comprise the decision-making body of the ECCDPP, while partners provide additional policy and governance linkage across related systems. This design recognises that reform in early childhood cannot be confined to a single portfolio. It requires the coordination of education, social services, and child safety systems, and the capacity to engage with both national and jurisdictional levers.

“The member partner role in my view is a real strength. There’s no way that I could know what’s happening in Department of Social Services or Health in maternal health, or in NIAA. So having them as partners means if there’s an update to be given, they hear it firsthand. They don’t get filtered talking points. There’s more accountability if they can hear it firsthand.” — Department of Education Co-chair

In practice, the model has evolved dynamically. Meeting One used a members and observers structure. The language and role shifted to partners from Meeting Two when the Operating Protocols were endorsed. Jurisdictions had first nominated one government representative to speak for all relevant portfolios. However, this proved impractical given the sector’s breadth.

As one government representative explained, “we started only having education at the table and couldn’t necessarily speak to other remits.” The model was adapted to allow partners to attend alongside members, ensuring that the right expertise could be present depending on the issue under discussion.

For First Nations caucus members, this flexibility has been seen as valuable. It enables Co-chairs to bring the right people to the table and to respond to emerging priorities without lengthy renegotiation. For government, it creates a mechanism for linking across portfolios and coordinating advice. Members noted that this flexibility, combined with a strong Co-secretariat, gives the ECCDPP agility which is reportedly uncommon in intergovernmental structures.

Coordination and accountability challenges with this model:

The Co-secretariat reflected that while this flexibility supports breadth and cross-system engagement, it also creates coordination and accountability challenges that require active management. With multiple senior officials from different portfolios and jurisdictions, the model requires significant behind-the-scenes alignment to ensure shared understanding of roles, authority and decision pathways.

Government members noted the difficulty of coordinating departmental positions before meetings, especially where decision authority differs. Members also highlighted that these challenges are compounded when papers are circulated within short timeframes, limiting the ability of government representatives to consult internally, reconcile cross-portfolio views, and establish a clear jurisdictional position in advance of meetings. This can slow deliberation and, at times, limit the capacity of government representatives to commit to actions in the room.

At the Commonwealth level, these dynamics are shaped by the interaction between the ECCDPP and other governance arrangements, including Safe and Supported. While these forums are designed to coordinate rather than duplicate effort, their different mandates, membership profiles, and authorising levels introduce complexity. For example, Safe and Supported operates with ministerial authority, while the ECCDPP engages Australian Government agencies, including the Department of Social Services, at a senior official level. This creates challenges of clarifying where responsibility sits for progressing decisions, coordinating action, and reporting on outcomes across forums.

As further explored in Finding 8, the diversity of portfolio structures across jurisdictions means the ECCDPP representatives often have advisory rather than authorising roles. This creates an uneven line of sight between shared decisions and the levers that move budgets, legislation, or service agreements.

Members also discussed the distinction between ‘member’ and ‘partner’ is also applied inconsistently. Some jurisdictions treat the roles interchangeably, while others adjust them depending on priority areas. Without a shared process for reviewing representation or clarifying responsibilities, participation risks becoming ad hoc.

Overall, the members-and-partners model is a thoughtful design choice that has allowed the ECCDPP to span multiple systems and perspectives. Its success, however, depends on disciplined coordination within government and periodic review to ensure representation remains fit for purpose. Without these supports, flexibility risks becoming fragmentation, and breadth can dilute rather than deepen shared decision-making (see Recommendation 1).

Role of central agencies:

The ECCDPP’s government membership currently includes line departments, primarily Education, supported by Social/Community Services and Indigenous Affairs but does not include central agencies such as Treasury, Finance, or the Department of Prime Minister/Premier/Chief Minister and Cabinet. Members noted this was an intentional design choice. Central agencies hold the levers of budget and Cabinet processes but are not directly responsible for service design or delivery. Members discussed their absence allows the ECCDPP to focus on policy design, partnership practice, and problem-solving, rather than shifting deliberations prematurely toward resourcing constraints or compliance considerations.

However, the influence of central agencies remains critical to implementation. Their absence from the ECCDPP table heightens the importance of strong internal relay systems within government (such as clear communication, escalation, and feedback loops) to ensure the ECCDPP decisions are carried through to Cabinet, budget, and cross-portfolio processes. Without this internal alignment, the ECCDPP’s decisions risk being contained within education or social services portfolios rather than translated into whole-of-government action.

In practice, this relay function is intended to be enabled through the ECCDPP’s formal authorising pathways, including Joint Council consideration and ministerial briefings and approvals. As discussed later in this report, relational governance within the ECCDPP creates the conditions for agreement, while political authorisation through Joint Council and ministers is required to convert that agreement into system-wide action.

Finding 3: The Caucusing Model is creating parity and relational integrity

The ECCDPP adopts a caucusing model where the First Nations caucus meet before coming together at the joint table. This structure embeds parity at the heart of the ECCDPP’s design, ensuring that each side has the space and preparation needed to contribute on equal footing.

Purpose and value of caucusing:

Caucusing is one of the ECCDPP’s most important design features. The caucusing model gives the First Nations caucus structured time to meet independently, deliberate, and form shared positions before entering joint meetings. In this way, caucusing functions as both a cultural and procedural safeguard. The Co-secretariat recalled that the approach was shaped by guidance from the Coalition of Peaks, who had emphasised the importance of caucusing in their induction materials for Policy Partnership members.

“Part of the induction pack that the Coalition of Peaks gave us was a draft handbook that we relied on pretty heavily for guidance in the establishment of the ECCDPP. There was an emphasis on caucusing, so you had a no surprises approach to meetings.” — Co-secretariat member

For First Nations caucus members, caucusing provides cultural safety and collective strength. It creates a protected environment where members can test ideas, debate priorities, and speak openly without the pressure of performing disagreement in front of government colleagues. This process is seen to transform

potential conflict into productive dialogue. By the time the First Nations caucus enters joint meetings, they have already reached internal clarity on key positions, allowing discussion at the table to be more confident, focused, and less reactive.

The structure also establishes procedural symmetry. Government representatives have long benefited from internal caucusing through departmental briefings, Cabinet processes, and central agency coordination. Creating an equivalent space for First Nations caucus members brings more balance to the deliberative process. It helps ensure both sides arrive equally prepared with time to clarify their positions, check mandates, and coordinate internally. This symmetry reinforces shared authority and strengthens the integrity of joint decision-making.

Government members and partners acknowledged that this model took some adjustment. Early meetings felt unfamiliar for those unaccustomed to the practice of First Nations caucusing and unsure about what occurred during caucus time. Over time, understanding and trust in the process deepened. Government representatives now view caucusing not as a separation but as a stabilising force. When both sides have had time to prepare and align, joint meetings move more efficiently, with greater respect and less defensiveness.

“The First Nations representatives do a lot of caucusing, so when they come into the room they can do so effectively. At first it was confusing because it didn’t feel like a partnership, but I know now that it is important because it helps prepares us {government members} to do the work when we’re in the room.... It’s the scaffolding that gets us to the room so the room can be a partnership, and all the voices can be heard in a safe and tested way.” — Government member

The Co-secretariat has complemented this structure with clearer scaffolding: pre-briefs, transparent agenda sequencing, and well-documented decision processes. Following caucusing, the Co-chairs also meet for a short pre-brief to exchange insights and agree on pathways through key issues ahead of each the ECCDPP meeting. Together, these elements have improved the rhythm and legitimacy of decision-making. Participants described outcomes reached through this structure as *“more genuine and collectively owned,”* noting that decisions feel anchored in shared moral and procedural ground.

Representation within the First Nations caucus:

The First Nations caucus draws primarily from organisations within the Coalition of Peaks, alongside a small number of independent members. This structure reflects the way the National Agreement itself was created, with the Coalition of Peaks forming the foundation of representation and co-design. As a result, the ECCDPP inherited both the strengths and limitations of that model. This composition provides continuity and coherence with the broader Closing the Gap architecture, although not all government jurisdictional members have an equivalent First Nations caucus representative. Government members note that at times, this limits the ability to draw consistent local or regional insight into national deliberations. It also underscores the ongoing importance of strong feedback loops between the ECCDPP and jurisdictional networks.

“We don’t have a First Nations representative on the ECCDPP for our jurisdiction. If we did, we could brief together, share information, share what we are responsible for. It would create accountability and transparency. They could see the whole journey of it...instead of us going back to community and them asking why is government doing this? They could see the whole cycle. It has relevance from the ground to the top; the ECCDPP, to the Partnership Working Group, to Joint Council – it has that full cycle.” — Government partner

Members also reflected that representation within the First Nations caucus carries its own accountability requirements. The legitimacy of the ECCDPP depends on caucus members having clear authorisation from the communities and sectors they represent. Members agreed that it is not government’s role to determine who is representative or diverse, but rather to ensure the ECCDPP provides the space and

mechanisms for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations to define and maintain their own authorising environments. This reinforces that representation must flow from community mandates, not government appointment, aligning with the broader self-determination principles of the National Agreement.

Additionally, this structure creates defined representation boundaries inherent in a national, sector-based partnership model. The Coalition of Peaks provides broad coverage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak bodies, and membership continues to evolve over time. However, as with any standing governance arrangement, there is a risk that some sector-specific, regional, or emerging perspectives may be less visible at different points in time, particularly in complex policy areas such as early childhood education, disability, or family support. The ECCDPP design mitigates this risk through mechanisms such as independent member appointments, partner participation, and targeted engagement processes, which provide opportunities for organisations and leaders outside formal Coalition of Peaks membership to contribute their expertise and perspectives. Ongoing attention to how these pathways operate in practice is important to ensure the ECCDPP continues to draw on a diverse range of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and leadership as priorities evolve.

It is important to note that federated peaks like NACCHO operate as nested systems of representation: national at the top, jurisdictional and local at the base. While the ECCDPP membership might look narrow on paper (restricted to the Coalition of Peaks members and independent members), some of those organisations act as conduits for much broader networks. NACCHO, for instance, represents state and territory affiliates, which in turn represent local Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations. In theory, that creates an extended line of accountability reaching far beyond the immediate ECCDPP table.

However, there is no systematic way to verify how consultation and feedback flow through those federated networks, how consistently affiliates are engaged, or whether their priorities are shaping the ECCDPP positions. The assumption is that those peaks maintain regular dialogue with their members, but it is not explicitly monitored or reported within the ECCDPP. This creates a risk of exclusion by design (not intent). If membership renewal is tied too closely to the Coalition of Peaks membership, the ECCDPP's representational ecosystem may stagnate, with the same organisations bearing advocacy load while others remain peripheral. The ECCDPP formally recognised this limitation at Meeting Seven, when it began developing a Communications and Engagement Strategy to strengthen collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peaks and ACCOs. The strategy includes a standing commitment to 'increase collaboration with peaks and ACCOs to promote the work of the Partnership and encourage involvement in the ECCDPP's work', with an ongoing target of formal engagement from September–October 2024.¹³ This action demonstrates awareness within the ECCDPP that legitimacy must continually be renewed through broader sector engagement, not assumed through formal representation alone.

However, the evaluations document review did not identify evidence of how this commitment is being monitored or reported against. While the strategy articulates clear intentions, there is little visibility over the mechanisms or indicators being used to assess whether broader engagement has been achieved or whether it has led to stronger inclusion of diverse sector voices in the ECCDPP decision-making.

Recognising the value of independence:

The ECCDPP has intentionally embedded independent membership to balance peak representation and protect diversity of voice within the First Nations caucus. This design decision is significant because it moves the ECCDPP beyond a purely Coalition of Peaks-dominated model and formalises independence as a core principle of shared decision-making.

Independent members play a distinct and valuable role within the First Nations caucus. Their participation brings breadth, balance, and critical reflection that strengthens the quality of partnership deliberation.

¹³ July 2024, Communications and Engagement Plan, SNAICC – National Voice for our Children; not publicly available

They are not bound by organisational mandates, allowing them to raise issues others might avoid, name tensions directly, and keep the focus on outcomes rather than representation.

“Independence of members is good because they can hold a neutral space to influence and shepherd. It’s helpful when they put something pointy on the radar and bring it to the table.” — SNAICC Co-chair

Some members also described independent members as “sense-makers”. People who can interpret across perspectives, translate technical discussion into relational meaning, and surface underlying questions of purpose or ethics when debate becomes procedural.

Their involvement broadens the range of relationships and perspectives within the ECCDPP. In a space where large peaks carry formal authority and governments hold structural power, independent members provide a balancing influence. They bring lived experience, professional expertise, and local insight, connecting national policy discussion back to community realities. Members acknowledged that ensuring independent members can participate on equal footing requires dedicated support and resourcing. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander–Led Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2025) similarly found that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and representatives are often under-resourced relative to the responsibilities they carry.

This mix of peaks, partners, and independents in the First Nations caucus is one of the ECCDPP’s design strengths. It balances political representation with open inquiry and keeps the ECCDPP connected to the lived conditions it seeks to influence. This diversity, however, requires ongoing relational care to ensure independence remains a source of insight, not isolation.

Government pre-briefing as parallel practice:

The Co-chairs and Co-secretariat discussed that over time, government members have developed their own form of caucusing through structured pre- and post-brief meetings. While not labelled as such, these sessions serve the same purpose: to create internal alignment and readiness for joint decision-making.

Following early feedback that some government members arrived underprepared, the Department of Education introduced a more formal pre-briefing process from Meeting Two onwards. These sessions, chaired by the Department of Education Co-chair, are designed to “get government’s house in order” consolidating positions across departments, clarifying mandates, and ensuring decisions can be made in the room. Proxies or senior support staff may attend where relevant, though participation is now deliberately kept tight to maintain focus and accountability.

This mirroring of caucus practice has strengthened Partnership Health. When both sides arrive prepared and aligned, the quality of dialogue improves. Meetings can be more strategic, less defensive, and grounded in actionable agreement.

Recommendation 1: Establish a periodic membership and representation review process

Establish a light-touch mechanism (for example, as part of annual workplans and reporting or every two years) to review the composition and function of the ECCDPP membership and partnerships. The review could be jointly stewarded by the ECCDPP Co-chairs and should:

- Test whether representation remains balanced across portfolios, jurisdictions, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sectors.
- Identify gaps or risks in participation diversity, especially for smaller or region-specific organisations.
- Explicitly consider the ongoing role and contribution of independent members as sense-makers, system connectors, and holders of cross-sector perspective, and safeguard this function within the ECCDPP design.

This would operationalise relational accountability in membership, ensuring the table continues to reflect the breadth of the early childhood ecosystem rather than cementing around existing institutions.

Recommendation 2: Safeguard the independence of caucusing processes

Recognise caucusing as a formal mechanism of shared decision-making parity (consistent with Priority Reform One). To protect its integrity and sustainability:

- Provide clear role definitions, onboarding, and administrative support for independent members.
- Ensure parity in preparation time and briefing materials between First Nations caucuses and government caucuses.
- Further establish and consistently enforce agreed minimum timeframes and sequencing for circulation of papers, pre-briefs, and partner input, to enable meaningful review, caucusing, and incorporation of perspectives prior to joint decision-making.
- Document how pre-briefs and caucus outcomes inform joint meetings, so deliberation remains transparent.
- Assign responsibility within the Co-secretariat for maintaining caucusing protocols and process integrity.

This would protect the independence and value of the caucusing model, treating it as a structural element of shared decision-making.

Finding 4: The ECCDPP is maintaining continuity through structured practice

The ECCDPP's formal meeting infrastructure is the mechanism through which relational continuity is maintained between meetings, partners, and policy cycles. The Co-chairs and Co-secretariat sit at the centre of this structure, translating formal responsibility into the daily work of the ECCDPP.

Under the ECCDPP's Agreement to Implement the Co-chairs jointly agree on agendas, chair meetings, and oversee the ECCDPP's work. Each Co-chair supports their respective members; SNAICC with First Nations caucus members and the Australian Government Department of Education (Department of Education) with government portfolios. This arrangement ensures that coordination happens both horizontally (across members) and vertically (through authorising systems such as the Partnership Working Group and Joint Council).

The Co-secretariat provides the connective tissue that holds this machinery together. It centralises and coordinates advice, develops papers, prepares annual workplans and reports to Joint Council, coordinates pre- and post-briefs, maintains an action register between meetings, and manages all logistical and communication functions. These seemingly technical tasks are the operational backbone of shared decision-making which ensure continuity, accountability, and institutional memory.

In addition, input to the work of the ECCDPP and its meetings is supported by partner government agencies and teams within jurisdictions. For example, the Australian Government Department of Social Services (Department of Social Services) teams with responsibility for Target 12 (children in out-of-home care) work with the Co-secretariat in shaping policy content and coordinating across Safe and Supported governance arrangements. Given the broad, cross-portfolio nature of the ECCDPP's scope and program of activity, the Co-secretariat engages in significant coordination and integration, as well as authorship and detailed policy development, bringing together inputs from multiple agencies into a coherent partnership process.

Notably, the Co-secretariat team for the ECCDPP was a finalist in the 2025 Spirit of Service Awards (ACT) in the Collaboration category, recognising its role in turning relational commitment into practical governance. This was the first time a non-government organisation was put forward in a joint nomination.

The Co-secretariat's role extends well beyond administration. Members repeatedly emphasised that much of the ECCDPP's success stems from the way the Co-secretariat anticipates issues, strategises responses, and maintains consistency amid continual membership turnovers. While the title suggests a logistical function, the Co-secretariat operates as the ECCDPP's central management and quality assurance mechanism.

In practice, this means resolving tensions, sequencing priorities, and ensuring that every party arrives informed and accountable. Early meetings revealed challenges such as unequal participation, limited preparation, and frequent membership changes across jurisdictions. In response, the Co-secretariat instituted systematic practices such as pre-briefs, post-briefs, induction materials, and an action register to uphold consistency and shared standards. Both SNAICC and the Department of Education undertake this relational and procedural uplift within their respective networks, ensuring that each member, whether government or community-controlled, enters the room ready to engage as an equal.

In carrying out this role, the Co-secretariat also acts as a key interface between the national partnership and jurisdictional systems, supporting the flow of ECCDPP priorities, decisions, and expectations into government networks through briefings, action registers, and reporting processes. While the evaluation did not assess how these priorities are implemented within individual state and territory governance, members consistently described the Co-secretariat as critical to maintaining coherence and continuity as the ECCDPP work moves across different authorising environments.

Members and Co-chairs acknowledged that the Co-secretariat's behind-the-scenes coordination has become essential to the ECCDPP's credibility. Pre-briefs across jurisdictions now mirror the preparation culture long embedded in Cabinet processes, while SNAICC's work with the First Nations caucus creates

comparable readiness and cohesion. Together, members acknowledge that these practices have elevated the quality of deliberation and reduced the asymmetries that often hinder shared decision-making.

yamagigu observational evidence

yamagigu had the opportunity to observe Meeting Ten and Meeting Eleven of the ECCDPP. The atmosphere resembled a formal Westminster parliament style or ‘UN-style’ forum. Each member was seated behind a placard, with microphones arranged in front of them. Speakers referred to the Co-chairs before taking the floor, and contributions followed a clear rhythm of turn-taking and acknowledgment. The tone was formal but warm, combining procedural discipline with visible mutual respect.

Far from stifling discussion, this formality appeared to anchor it. Members followed established protocols such as opening with cultural acknowledgment, Co-chairs presenting in unison, formal introductions and careful adherence to the agenda and quorum. These features signalled not bureaucracy for its own sake, but structure as an act of respect for process, for each other, and for the weight of decisions being made.

This disciplined environment shaped the tone of dialogue. Even when discussing contested policy issues, members spoke with composure and care. Observers noted how the meeting’s structure seemed to slow down reaction and invite reflection, producing a level of deliberation rarely seen in intergovernmental spaces.

During observation of Meeting Eleven, the Co-chairs assessed whether to proceed in the absence of several representatives, underscoring the group’s commitment to legitimacy and consensus as outlined in the Operating Protocols. This reflexive adherence to process shows that the ECCDPP has internalised its governance principles as shared ethical practice.

yamagigu observed that these formal structures are important in a partnership where authority is shared across historically uneven power lines. The bureaucratic tools of government such as briefs, remits, and authorising frameworks are being repurposed here as instruments of creativity and acceleration. Members described these structures as helping them feel armed to make the most of limited time together.

In contrast to the inertia often associated with intergovernmental forums, the ECCDPP’s meeting architecture generates momentum. It provides both confidence and urgency, giving space for new ideas without sacrificing accountability.

Flexibility emerging:

As relational confidence has deepened, the ECCDPP has developed the ability to flex its own structure. Members described how recent meetings have incorporated small-group workshops and breakout sessions alongside formal agenda items. These adaptations emerged organically rather than by design, reflecting a growing ease within the ECCDPP to shift modes depending on purpose and energy.

“In the most recent meetings, we’ve split off into workshops to get away from the table. The Co-chairs share different items that they lead on. They come united and have done work in the background to represent their issues.” — Government member

“At the last meeting there was a joint workshop and joint recommendations to identify priorities to go to Joint Council with.” — Government partner

This movement between formality and informality shows an advanced level of relational trust. Members reported that stepping away from the microphones and placards enabled more open discussion, creative problem-solving, and shared ownership of outcomes. The formality remains present, but it now serves as a stable backdrop rather than a constraint.

This flexibility allows the ECCDPP to operate in two distinct but complementary registers: formal when authority and accountability are required, informal when collective insight must emerge. It shows that the ECCDPP has matured beyond procedural discipline into adaptive leadership.

Extending structure beyond the meeting room:

The ECCDPP's infrastructure also now extends beyond its formal meetings. At Meeting Three, members agreed to trial time-limited working groups to maintain momentum between sessions and progress specific priorities. The Co-secretariat subsequently developed a *Ways of Working* framework to guide how these groups would operate, ensuring alignment with the ECCDPP's decision-making protocols and relational principles.

Three working groups were established under this framework during Year One:

- **Priority Three Working Group** focused on strengthening the community-controlled early childhood sector.
- **Priority Four Working Group** focused on transforming government organisations and improving coordination across jurisdictions.
- **Priority Reforms in Action Working Group** created to consolidate updates on implementation and track progress toward Closing the Gap Priority Reforms and outcome targets.

In parallel, the ECCDPP Co-chairs and members contributed to external Safe and Supported workshops led by the Department of Social Services relating to the establishment of the National Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People. While not a formal ECCDPP working group, this participation extended the partnership's influence into related national reforms and ensured alignment between workstreams.

The working group model proved useful in Year One for deepening discussion and coordinating action across portfolios. However, the Co-secretariat noted that participation became challenging over 2024 and 2025 due to competing workloads. As a result, the ECCDPP increasingly progressed work out of session through email correspondence and targeted virtual meetings rather than through formal working groups.

In addition to these standing groups, a special virtual meeting was convened in December 2024 to consider two major research reports (Evidence Review on Optimal Hours of Early Childhood Education and Care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Funding Model Options for ACCO Integrated Early Years Services) and to agree on the focus for Meeting Five.

These mechanisms demonstrate the ECCDPP's commitment to maintaining continuity and deepening deliberation between meetings. The working groups and special sessions enable members to engage in detailed analysis, test implementation pathways, and ensure that decisions are not confined to periodic gatherings. They reflect a partnership that understands structure as a living system of coordination and accountability.

“We are told, if you’re not feeling discomfort we’re not doing the work.”

— Government member



Relational integrity

The ECCDPP can be understood as a living system: its strength lies not in programs or outputs, but in the relationships that sustain it. The ECCDPP exists as a web of mutual obligation and shared responsibility, where influence and legitimacy flow through trust.

The Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-Led Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2025) describes this as coming into ‘right relationship’; the ongoing work of building respectful, just, and accountable relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and governments. Right relationship means recognising sovereignty and Indigenous knowledge systems, repairing the harm of historical and continuing injustices, and redistributing power to enable genuine partnership.¹⁴ The review cautioned that accountability within the Closing the Gap architecture must reflect this principle, shifting from transactional reporting and more on relationships. It called for investment in trust, feedback loops, and two-way learning rather than bureaucratic compliance alone (Recommendation 4b).

This aligns with Indigenous Systems Knowledge, which understands that the health of any system is reflected in the health of its relationships. When relationships are balanced, systems can adapt and regenerate; when they are extractive or one-sided, systems fragment. In this view, shared decision-making is not only a governance mechanism but a relational practice, a continual process of renewal, repair, and balance.

Within the ECCDPP, relational integrity becomes the measure of system health. The strength of its decisions, its influence, and its legitimacy all mirror the quality of trust, transparency, and reciprocity among its members.

Finding 5: The distinct leadership role of the Co-chairs ensures integrity of the ECCDPP

Within the ECCDPP, the Co-chairs are the stewards of that integrity. Their leadership is widely recognised by members as the reason the ECCDPP feels cohesive and continues to mature. Members described the Co-chairs as stewards rather than authority figures. They model respect, maintain tone, and mediate tension in ways that anchor dialogue in shared purpose. Their presence ensures that disagreement is contained and turned into learning rather than division. Members repeatedly observed that when discussions became pressured by policy or political timelines, the Co-chairs’ calm, balanced facilitation protected the relational fabric of the group.

“In this partnership, the leadership of both the Co-chairs is such a significant contributing factor.” — Government member

“The stewardship and leadership from [Co-chairs] Catherine and Kylie is just fantastic and to have that continuity of a leadership, we need that in this space.” — Government partner

“The difference is the Commonwealth Co-chair who comes in differently, brings leadership across her staff and sets the pace to at least be uncomfortable. If we were to lose Kylie we’d go back years.” — First Nations caucus member

“We are told, if you're not feeling discomfort we're not doing the work.” — Government member

Their leadership style balances advocacy and diplomacy, holding space for robust Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander advocacy while maintaining open and productive engagement with government. This dual role has been central to the ECCDPP’s relational maturity.

¹⁴ Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-Led Review of Closing the Gap (2025) p.53

Balance of leadership and shared responsibility:

The Co-chair structure itself embodies the principle of balance and creates internal checks that stop either side from dominating. Each chair (Department of Education and SNAICC) holds responsibility for ensuring their side has been consulted before matters are brought to the table.

Co-chairs discussed that they avoid introducing issues that the First Nations caucus has not already been engaged on. This practice has become a quiet safeguard against surprises and an affirmation of respect.

Several participants who also sit on other Policy Partnerships noted that not all partnerships use a co-chairing model. In some, the chairing role is reportedly contracted to an independent facilitator, often resulting in weaker continuity, less ownership, and a more transactional dynamic. By contrast, the ECCDPP's consistent Co-chairing arrangement has provided relational stability and leadership, giving the ECCDPP a clear tone and shared sense of stewardship.

This observation is consistent with findings from the Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-Led Review (2025), which highlighted that strong, well-resourced Co-chairs are essential to driving meaningful progress within Policy Partnerships.¹⁵ The review found that where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak bodies are strong and connected to governance structures and Co-chair arrangements, partnerships operate on a more equal footing and achieve more tangible outcomes. The ECCDPP's model demonstrates this principle in practice, highlighting how balanced leadership and adequate resourcing underpin the integrity of shared decision-making.

Relational labour and everyday care:

Beyond formal leadership, members described how both Co-chairs and the Co-secretariat practice relational care as part of their routine work such as checking in on members between meetings, following up after difficult conversations, and ensuring people feel safe to contribute. The SNAICC Co-chair described it as *"constant and ongoing relationship maintenance"*. This relational labour often happens behind the scenes but has become one of the key mechanisms for maintaining cohesion and trust across sectors.

The SNAICC Co-chair was frequently described as highly intuitive and attuned to the room, able to sense when members were hesitant and gently draw them into the conversation. This sensitivity has been essential to balancing strong advocacy with inclusive dialogue. The Department of Education Co-chair was described as bold and always pushing government members to think differently.

Through their shared leadership, the Co-chairs have gradually reshaped the tone of dialogue within the ECCDPP. Government members and partners reported becoming more attuned to the relational ethics underpinning shared decision-making, learning that progress depends as much on listening and reciprocity as on formal authority. Government members and partners noted that strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, in particular, has been critical in challenging the defensive posture governments often adopt in policy settings and in modelling what accountability looks like in a genuine partnership.

Relational leadership is both the method and the message of the ECCDPP. It shows that partnership maturity is measured not only by policy outcomes but by the integrity of the relationships that make those outcomes possible.

As discussed above, members reflected that this strength is also a vulnerability. Much of the ECCDPP's progress rests on the trust built through these leaders. Sustaining that relational continuity will be essential to protecting the ECCDPP's maturity as personnel and roles change.

¹⁵ Coalition of Peaks (2025) *Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-Led Review of Closing the Gap*, p. 73.

Recommendation 3: Build relational continuity through leadership succession and capacity strengthening

The ECCDPP's effectiveness has been strongly shaped by the moral and relational leadership of its current Co-chairs. To sustain this strength and reduce the reliance on individual people as the primary carriers of alignment, the ECCDPP should invest in structured succession planning and capability development for future Co-chairs, emerging leaders, and key jurisdictional leaders who carry the ECCDPP authority into government systems.

This could include:

- Joint leadership development sessions or shadowing arrangements within the ECCDPP, including opportunities for shared learning between Co-chairs and across Policy Partnerships.
- A documented practice for capturing and transferring relational leadership knowledge, including tone-setting, conflict mediation, cross-partnership coordination, and shared leadership practice.
- Targeted capability strengthening for jurisdictional leads to support two-way governance, including how the ECCDPP intent, decisions, and relational commitments are carried through internal authorising pathways.

Planning for transition will help ensure that the ECCDPP's tone, trust, and collaborative culture are embedded in the system itself.

Finding 6: The “collective brilliance of the First Nations caucus” is one of the ECCDPP's biggest strengths

The evaluation found that the strength of the First Nations caucus lies not only in its expertise, but in the depth of relationships that bind it. The ACCOs, Peaks, and independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives who make up the caucus bring decades of advocacy, policy experience, and cultural authority shaped by working directly with families, children, and systems. One member described it as a “collective of brilliance,” capturing how knowledge is distributed across organisations but amplified when those voices converge.

This relational integrity (trust built over time, shared moral purpose, and a lineage of collective advocacy that predates the ECCDPP) creates a form of intelligence that governments cannot replicate through formal coordination alone. The caucus operates as a system-level sense-maker. It connects policy silos, grounds bureaucratic debate in lived experience, and identifies reform opportunities that might otherwise remain invisible. As one member put it, “We can see how things link, we think holistically beyond silos.”

Membership spans senior leaders from national and jurisdictional peaks such as SNAICC and NACCHO, independent organisations, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics. The presence of Elders such as Aunty Muriel Bamblett (Yorta Yorta, Dja Dja Wurrung, Taungurung, Boon Wurrung Elder, Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency CEO and Chair of SNAICC) adds intergenerational and moral depth, ensuring that decisions are guided by both historical consciousness and cultural responsiveness.

Additionally, the First Nations caucus also brings operational and strategic intelligence grounded in real-world leadership in service delivery, advocacy, and system reform. The ACCO sector, Peaks, and independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives participating in the caucus hold deep domain knowledge about what works (and what does not work) in practice, especially under resource constraints.

This business intelligence amplifies relational authority. The caucus's layered expertise enables it to critique policy proposals not just from values, but from feasibility, implementation risk, and systemic leverage points. It can spot what is 'doable' within a given fiscal or institutional envelope, propose variants, and read emergent threats or unintended consequences. In doing so, it can help government participants see around corners the technocratic system might often miss. That strengthens its authority in shared decision-making, and it helps guard against tokenism because the caucus can push back substantively, not just rhetorically.

Beyond its technical function, the caucus performs relational repair. Many members entered the ECCDPP carrying the fatigue of earlier policy forums marked by mistrust or tokenism. Through deliberate practices of openness, accountability, and generosity, the caucus has helped re-establish the moral ground on which the partnership can stand.

The evaluation observed that this relational intelligence has produced tangible policy influence. The caucus has shaped discussions on integrated service models, sector funding reform, and the establishment of a National Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People. It has done this by bridging insights from local service delivery with national policy design. These examples demonstrate that the strength of the ECCDPP lies in the intersections of cultural knowledge, operational insight, and systemic critique which produce reform ideas that neither government nor sector could generate alone.

Relational safety and labour:

It is important to acknowledge that relational safety within the ECCDPP is unevenly distributed. Members of the First Nations caucus carry the moral and emotional labour of ensuring truth-telling, cultural integrity, and community accountability, often without institutional support or compensation equivalent to government partners. Their labour includes educating, correcting, and bridging across cultural paradigms while managing the expectations of both community and government in addition to responsibility for maintaining engagement, analysis, and accountability.

This was captured in the Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-Led Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2025) as:

“Genuine partnership cannot exist without equitable resourcing. Review participants were clear: even where the structures and language of shared decision-making may be in place, they are undermined when financial resources, and control over those resources, remain firmly in government hands. Without a corresponding shift in the way resources are allocated, partnership risks becoming rhetorical rather than real.” —Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-Led Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2025), p.61.

and:

“A common theme that emerged through this review is the unfair balance of labour being carried by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This imbalance is evident in the Policy Partnerships where participants report that a significant amount of effort goes into educating governments on how to work differently and in ways that align with the principles of genuine partnership and good governance” — Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-Led Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2025), p.76.

Government representatives face a different set of pressures. They are accountable to the general public, departmental processes and ministerial timelines. Their work is shaped by institutional accountability rather than personal or community relationships.

This structural asymmetry means the weight of holding the ECCDPP's moral centre often falls disproportionately on the First Nations caucus. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders described working across multiple levels, juggling roles, and at times feeling overwhelmed. Many are not resourced at

the same level as government colleagues and contribute unpaid or underpaid time. The ECCDPP's relational strength therefore relies on labour that is not equally shared or supported. Recognising and resourcing this work will be essential to sustaining trust and preventing burnout among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders who carry both representation and care responsibilities.

“The size of the supporting bureaucracies is very imbalanced which is quite challenging on how we represent Indigenous people... if we were taking a National Agreement lens then having a First Nations public service is an element of effective policy but that is currently carried by a relatively small group in comparison.” — First Nations caucus member

This concern was raised right from Meeting One, with the record stating that the First Nations caucus require adequate resourcing to underpin the partnership efforts and that the role of the ECCDPP in decisions must be clear and reflect shared risk and responsibility. Some of this has been partially addressed through the ECCDPP Grant to SNAICC, which provides dedicated funding for the First Nations caucus to commission independent research and technical advice to inform their positions, similar to the analytical support available to government. This grant also funds key initiatives such as the Shared Decision-Making Guidance, the Data Lake, and the Youth Voice project.

Recommendation 4: Establish funded capacity to progress the ECCDPP priorities between meetings.

While sitting fees recognise the time commitment of First Nations members, they do not resource the analytical and preparatory work required to engage meaningfully in complex policy deliberations. The ECCDPP should consider dedicated funding for First Nations caucus organisations to assign policy or research officers to support the ECCDPP participation.

These roles could assist members to review meeting materials, prepare positions, and analyse technical papers in advance, ensuring the First Nations caucus can engage on equal policy footing with government counterparts. This investment would strengthen decision-making quality, reduce over-reliance on goodwill, and recognise that shared decision-making requires shared capacity, not just shared attendance.

Intellectual property:

Several members also reflected on the intellectual risks attached to this labour. The First Nations caucus is contributing large amounts of intellectual labour such as analysis, conceptual framing, policy design, systems insight, and relational knowledge. Much of this thinking originates in the ACCO sector but is being channelled through the ECCDPP's formal structures. Once ideas enter that space, they can easily be absorbed into government narratives or partnership-branded outputs without clear attribution.

Over time, this creates a risk that the ECCDPP reproduces extractive dynamics it was intended to disrupt, where government systems gain legitimacy, authority, or funding by drawing on community-held knowledge without proportional recognition or benefit. This risk is heightened in the absence of agreed protocols that clarify ownership, custodianship, and use of knowledge generated through the ECCDPP.

Establishing safeguards to protect intellectual property should be understood as part of building a genuine formal partnership. Clear agreements about how knowledge is created, credited, stored, and shared are foundational to trust, mutual accountability, and power-sharing. This issue directly engages commitments under Priority Reform Four of the National Agreement. Clause 32.c.vii commits governments to shared access to data and information at regional and local levels, recognising that control over information is

central to self-determination. Consistent with the Lowitja Institute’s definition of Indigenous data as information or knowledge in any format that is about or may affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the intellectual contributions generated through the ECCDPP should be treated as Indigenous knowledge requiring appropriate governance.¹⁶ Additionally, the Commonwealth’s commitment to Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property under the Revive: National Cultural Policy, recognises the need to protect, attribute, and appropriately govern First Nations knowledge. The issues raised by First Nations members through the ECCDPP therefore reflect existing policy commitments that require practical application within partnership structures.¹⁷

Clarifying how partnership-generated knowledge is recorded, credited, and used would help ensure that it remains a genuinely shared asset rather than one extracted through partnership structures.

Recommendation 5: Update operating protocols to include intellectual property and attribution protocol for partnership-generated knowledge aligned with existing confidentiality provisions.

Develop a protocol that clarifies how intellectual contributions arising from the ECCDPP (including analysis, frameworks, and policy insights) are acknowledged, credited, and used by both government and community partners.

This protocol should be developed in conversation with the confidentiality and probity clauses outlined in the ECCDPP Operating Protocols, ensuring consistency and clarity around what knowledge can be shared, cited, or published, and with the principles of Priority Reform Four on shared access to data and information.

Key elements could include:

- ownership and custodianship of knowledge generated through the partnership
- processes for attribution and consent when material is used in reports, policy papers, or public communication
- expectations for co-authorship, benefit-sharing, and storage of shared intellectual material
- safeguards to ensure confidential information remains protected while allowing recognition of intellectual labour.

This could strengthen relational accountability by protecting both the privacy of deliberations and the integrity of the knowledge created through them.

¹⁶ Lowitja Institute (2021) Indigenous data governance and sovereignty. Melbourne: Lowitja Institute. Available at: https://www.lowitja.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/328550_data-governance-and-sovereignty.pdf

¹⁷ Australian Government Office for the Arts (2023) National Cultural Policy—Revive: a place for every story, a story for every place. Australian Government, Canberra. Available at: <https://www.arts.gov.au/publications/national-cultural-policy-revive-place-every-story-story-every-place>

Finding 7: Relational Culture and the speed of trust has allowed the ECCDPP to mature quickly

The ECCDPP's relational culture is part of its operating logic. It is underpinned by legitimacy, safety, and mutual influence. Members consistently observed that the trust-building phase felt slow at first, but necessary. The speed of trust determines how fast everything else can move and relational culture is the precondition for progress. Without trust, shared decision-making becomes procedural. With it, it becomes possible.

Through yarning, introductions, and acts of vulnerability, members have learned to take relational risks and find a collective voice as a partnership. What began as formal exchanges has evolved into genuine connection, including emotional openness from senior leaders.

"We've gotten comfortable being vulnerable with each other. There have been tears in the room, these are passionate individuals on both sides. You're hearing horrendous things... and that's hard to hear. But it's also a privilege for us to have the First Nations members coming and telling the story for the 60th time. Our job is to be uncomfortable. If we're not uncomfortable, we're not doing it right. It should feel a bit icky. I deliberately remind people that's what we are there to do. If we're not doing that, we're letting down future generations." — Department of Education Co-chair

"There's the level of vulnerability which means you can move forward and finding a way to make it happen. I would attribute that to the First Nations members being generous with their vulnerability. They bring the stories." — Government member

The design of the ECCDPP meetings reinforces this culture. Meetings are typically held over two days to allow both formal deliberation and informal connection. Cultural activities are embedded throughout the program including Welcomes to Country, cultural performances and activities, meetings hosted at local ACCOs, and shared dinners. These rituals build familiarity and respect, creating a rhythm that balances governance with ceremony. Each hosting jurisdiction opens proceedings with an update on its local context, grounding national dialogue in place-based realities. Members described these moments as critical for maintaining perspective and reminding the group that their work has lived consequences for families and communities.

"It is very relational. You hear tough stuff, and we can take that on board. We've seen new members come on board, but there's something about the relationships...being face to face is really important. The relationships that are built over tea, and dinner at night, and the hosting state demonstrates commitment to the partnership." — Government member

"Real trust of people in the room and people are candid because of that trust. Strengths – trust – continuity of relationships adds to that. I think the face-to-face element adds to the strength. Having the dinners together and being able to talk things outside of the partnership." — Government member

yamagigu observational evidence

During *yamagigu*'s observation of Meeting Ten and Meeting Eleven, moments of emotional vulnerability were visible. Co-chairs and members grew visibly moved when reflecting on the lived realities behind policy discussions; children, families, and communities who sit at the centre of their work.

The Co-chairs modelled how to hold these moments with care, allowing silence, empathy, and reflection before returning to formal discussion. This demonstrated that emotional truth has a legitimate place in governance; it does not weaken professionalism, it deepens it. The act of witnessing one another's emotion without discomfort or defensiveness reflected a mature partnership capable of integrating both rigour and humanity.

These moments of shared emotion also signal repair. Many members enter the ECCDPP with memories of extractive or performative consultations, where governments listened but did not act, and where the burden of 'partnership' fell unequally on ACCOs. Within the ECCDPP, those patterns are being actively undone. Government members are now sitting in genuine dialogue with sector leaders, often acknowledging harm, uncertainty, or institutional constraint; gestures that may have been previously unthinkable in bureaucratic settings.

The Co-chairs described the ECCDPP's identity as deeply shaped by the ethos of SNAICC: kindness, collaboration, and cultural safety balanced with staunchness and resolve. These values shape how members speak to each other, how conflict is handled, and how advocacy is expressed. Strength-based language, humour, and collective accountability are treated as essential because they sustain safety and power-sharing in equal measure. Members noted that this relational ethos has begun to ripple outward, influencing how departments engage with ACCOs in their jurisdictions.

However, members also cautioned that the ECCDPP's relational strength still sits mainly at the interpersonal level. It was raised early from Meeting One where First Nations caucus members reflected that on their prior experiences working with governments and stated ongoing support to rebuild trust would be required to the ECCDPP to succeed on its purpose. First Nations caucus members highlighted that while there has been progress, the goodwill and trust among individuals have not yet fully translated into institutional reliability. Progress can depend heavily on who is in the room rather than the strength of the organisations or systems behind them.

As one First Nations caucus member reflected:

"There is a distinction between the conversation and the relationship that we have in the room. But also, then the institutions they represent; the second part has not been as strong or as impactful as our communities want or need it to be." — First Nations caucus member

This distinction between people and institutions is now one of the key frontiers of reform. The ECCDPP has shown that individuals can work relationally across power lines. The challenge ahead is embedding that relational culture into the machinery of government itself.

Monitoring relational health:

Relational culture is one of the ECCDPP's most significant innovations. It has been built faster than expected and is now the foundation for moving toward shared decision-making. The ECCDPP has demonstrated that values such as trust, respect, and accountability form the invisible infrastructure through which shared authority becomes real.

The next challenge is to translate this relational culture from people to institutions, ensuring that the moral partnerships formed in the room are sustained through the systems those people represent. This requires an ongoing practice of reflection and recalibration; a way of monitoring not just performance, but relational health.

At Meeting Five, the ECCDPP conducted its first Partnership Health Check; a reflective process led by the Co-chairs to assess the strength of shared decision-making, cultural safety, and ways of working. The intent was to create a feedback loop that could surface relational and procedural issues before they calcified. Members also discussed the potential development of a member survey tool to systematically monitor Partnership Health over time.

During the Health Check, the First Nations caucus expressed frustration at the pace of reform, a theme discussed openly at the following meeting and documented in the ECCDPP's 2023 Annual Report. In response, the Co-chairs and Co-secretariat took this feedback forward by pursuing more ambitious priorities and adjusting the operation of the ECCDPP throughout 2024.

The Health Check therefore served its purpose by allowing space for surfacing tensions and prompting adaptive change. However, there is currently no structured mechanism for documenting, analysing, or tracking the outcomes of these reflections over time. The ECCDPP plans to continue the annual Health Check, though not in 2025 due to the concurrent evaluation and the Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. While a separate monitoring process for the Health Check may not be required, the ECCDPP could benefit from a broader framework for tracking and learning from its relational practice.



Recommendation 6: Embed Partnership Health checks and collective learning processes

The ECCDPP should build regular Partnership Health Checks and collective learning processes into its core governance arrangements and embed these in the next Three-Year Strategic Plan. This would support the partnership to reflect on how shared decision-making is working in practice as the ECCDPP grows and takes on more complex work.

The focus is not on monitoring outcomes or system performance, but on understanding the quality of relationships, how power is being shared, and whether the conditions for trust, safety, and legitimacy are being maintained over time.

The system could include:

- a light-touch, confidential member check-in (for example, after each meeting or biannually) co-designed by both caucuses, to track Partnership Health
- agreed relational indicators drawn from Clause 32 (c) — for example, trust, safety, reciprocity, accountability, and transparency
- integration of results into the Co-secretariat's continuous improvement cycle, annual reporting, and the new Communication, Learning and Accountability Strategy
- public-facing communication loops or reporting mechanisms (for example, plain-language summaries, updates through ACCO networks, or community briefings) so that communities can see how the ECCDPP priorities and decisions are progressing over time
- protocols for communication and knowledge use that respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander intellectual and cultural property (see Recommendation 7).

By embedding Partnership Health and learning as standing infrastructure, this recommendation protects the relational conditions that make shared decision-making possible and would make the quality of partnership work visible alongside policy achievements. It ensures that trust, safety, and collective responsibility are actively tended, rather than assumed, as the ECCDPP takes on more complex and system-facing work.

Shared decision-making and authority

The Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-Led Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2025) found that shared decision-making remains one of the most challenging and transformative of the Priority Reforms. While the National Agreement has created new partnership structures, the review noted that power imbalances persist across all levels of implementation. The review concluded that “without a deliberate commitment to address power imbalances, the promise of partnership remains hollow.” It called for structural changes that embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authority into the design and delivery of government systems.¹⁸

Within this context, the ECCDPP represents one of the most advanced tests of shared decision-making under the National Agreement. The ECCDPP is more than a consultative body; it is a shared governance mechanism where governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives work together to define priorities, shape advice to the Joint Council, and influence national policy.

Shared decision-making within the ECCDPP is not just about process. It is about how decisions gain legitimacy — who gets to define what counts as truth, evidence, and value when government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems come together. The ECCDPP makes this visible. It shows that partnership is both about power and about knowledge: sharing authority over decisions while recognising different ways of knowing as equally important.

Finding 8: Shared decision-making exists, but accountability is not yet shared

The ECCDPP was established to model shared decision-making under Priority Reform One of the National Agreement, with a primary function to develop joined-up advice and make recommendations to improve early childhood outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (Outcomes 2, 3, 4, 12 and 13).

The ECCDPP’s Agreement to Implement requires decisions to be made by consensus and outlines joint responsibilities for setting priorities, commissioning research, tracking progress, and referring matters beyond scope. In practice, the ECCDPP priorities are generated and put forward by the First Nations caucus, drawing on community feedback and sector priorities identified through initiatives such as the Early Childhood Care and Development Sector Strengthening Plan and Safe and Supported. Through this mechanism, the First Nations caucus lead the initial framing of the ECCDPP’s agenda, which is then refined and endorsed jointly with government members (see Finding 11 on Strategic Influence and Alignment).

In principle, and when tested against Clause 32(c) of the National Agreement, the ECCDPP meets most of the formal requirements of shared decision-making: equal representation, cultural safety, and inclusive participation. Where it falls short is in the conditions that make shared authority real such as transparency, follow-through, and access to data.

Despite structural compliance, members consistently expressed that the ECCDPP has not yet reached genuine shared decision-making across the full spectrum of the policy cycle:

“Governments are hearing us but what we do with that is determined by governments.” — First Nations caucus member

¹⁸ Coalition of Peaks (2025) Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-Led Review of Closing the Gap, p. 61.

“We have to share power and be willing to let people contribute to what the decision is going to be. I don’t think we’re fully there yet. Those pieces of work are going to Joint Council, and we share that decision-making, but governments have to separately consider whether they’re going to implement them. So it’s not shared decision-making all the way through to implementation – it’s shared in identifying problems and solutions, but it doesn’t take the role of government away.” — Government member

“We haven’t nailed what a shared decision-making space looks like – the terms of those decision are set by governments and not Aboriginal representatives.” — First Nations caucus member

Building shared decision-making architecture:

The ECCDPP has recognised this tension and invested deliberately in building shared decision-making infrastructure. Across its first three years, members have clarified how shared authority should operate in practice:

- **Meeting One:** Endorsed Principles of Partnership and Shared Decision-Making to define a new standard of negotiation, consensus-building, and accountability.
- **Meeting Five:** Commissioned a Probity Framework and Review, confirming there are no legal or ethical barriers to governments sharing decision-making authority with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- **Meeting Five:** Developed a Decision-Making Flow Chart mapping how items move from proposal to Joint Council endorsement.
- **Meeting Ten:** Commissioned Shared Decision-Making Guidance to operationalise these principles and create a consistent standard for future partnerships.

The Probity Framework made a critical distinction: all members hold overlapping mandates as both advocates and system actors. The ECCDPP’s strength lies in managing (not eliminating) these dual roles through transparency and shared purpose. It is not about purifying power but managing it relationally, in a ‘both-and’ model where members are accountable *both* to their institutions *and* to the collective partnership.¹⁹

The Probity Framework concluded that shared decision-making within the ECCDPP is legitimate, lawful, and ethically sound and does not breach public-sector probity principles. The challenge is not whether governments *can* share power, but *how* they do so transparently.

Clause 32(c): the floor, not the ceiling:

This ongoing investment reflects how unresolved shared decision-making remains in the broader Closing the Gap architecture. Clause 32(c) sets the minimum procedural conditions but not the structural conditions for power-sharing.

The ECCDPP’s Agreement to Implement reinforces this distinction. Item 15 describes ‘joint responsibility’ for designing priorities and preparing recommendations, but Item 16 reasserts that governments alone are responsible for implementation. The text’s phrasing ‘governments will consider how recommendations can be implemented’ is advisory and non-binding, declaring implementation remains at the discretion of governments.

The Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Led Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2025) and the Productivity Commission Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2024)

¹⁹ Note: In developing and applying the Probity Framework, the ECCDPP had regard to Clause 144 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, which relates to transparency, integrity, and appropriate management of decision-making processes within partnership arrangements.

both identified this same limitation: shared decision-making mechanisms have strengthened representation but have not redistributed power.

Clause 32(c) therefore provides the floor for collaboration, not the ceiling for authority. The ECCDPP can agree, recommend, and track progress, but it cannot implement. Governments can meet every procedural requirement and still retain ultimate control over policy, funding, and delivery.

How shared decision-making operates in practice:

Under Australia's Westminster system, public servants rarely hold final decision-making power, they can advise, but ministers decide. Authority is hierarchical by design. Shared decision-making forums like the ECCDPP therefore work within, not outside of this structure.

When government representatives sit in the ECCDPP, they are not making binding decisions. They are:

- **Negotiating advice** that will later travel up through departmental and ministerial channels.
- **Shaping what becomes thinkable** such as the concepts, evidence, and narratives that ministers later act on.
- **Building relationships and legitimacy** for reforms so that when political or fiscal windows open, they can move quickly.

That means shared decision-making at the ECCDPP level is symbolically equal but structurally uneven. Public servants bring access to the machinery of government but not final power. The decisions they agree on in principle must still pass through the formal authorising environment: Cabinet, budget processes, legislation, interdepartmental coordination.

In governance terms, the ECCDPP is a site of shared influence, not shared sovereignty. It makes collective recommendations; it does not issue binding directives. The ECCDPP's power lies in persuasion, coordination, and legitimacy but not in formal control of budgets or legislation. The people who hold those levers such as line ministers, departmental secretaries or budget committees are often not in the room. From this perspective, the tension isn't a design flaw but a governance fact: reform requires both legitimacy (through partnership) and authority (through government systems). Shared decision-making works best when these two systems are deliberately linked, for instance, when the ECCDPP recommendations are translated into budget submissions, Cabinet papers, or intergovernmental agreements that carry executive weight.

This creates what members described as a 'relay system': the ECCDPP recommendations must travel through internal government processes before they reach decision-makers. If Treasury or central agencies are not present, departments like Education or Social Services must carry the message forward, otherwise the First Nations caucus end up negotiating twice; once at the ECCDPP table, then again in government corridors when proposals are taken 'back to Treasury' and potentially diluted.

Public servants, meanwhile, are caught between two accountabilities: to the ECCDPP as partners and to ministers as advisers. Clause 32 does not reconcile these dual duties. Ministers remain ultimate decision-makers, and their priorities shift with political cycles. Shared decisions often lose traction once they leave the ECCDPP space. As one First Nations caucus member put it:

"It is just not how governments are set up. Their structures are not built for shared decision-making. Their structures are there for exercising authority so it's really difficult to have conversations about how we share decision-making because it's uncomfortable for them structurally." — First Nations caucus member

This shows why governance alone cannot offset structural asymmetry without mechanisms that lock in follow-through (e.g., transparent reporting, funding conditions, or Cabinet obligations). The test of shared

decision-making is not whether consensus can be reached, but whether it can survive the relay through bureaucratic process.

Members repeatedly noted that even if governments cannot share every decision, transparency about where authority begins and ends would strengthen trust. Clearer visibility into which decisions are genuinely shared and how they are enacted, would allow accountability to be relational, not rhetorical.

“We constantly share our house. If we understood how each other’s house works, that’s the best way to develop policy and ultimately land policy.” — First Nations caucus member

Accountability:

Currently, the ECCDPP lacks a coherent accountability mechanism to track whether decisions and priorities are acted on. Progress depends too heavily on other agencies’ willingness and capacity to lead. Members cannot easily verify whether agreed actions have been implemented or access consistent evidence about outcomes or investments. Embedding this balance in practice will require stronger systems of visibility and joint accountability so that transparency becomes the mechanism that sustains shared authority.

Additionally, the absence of shared data baselines was cited as one of the most significant constraints on accountability. Members repeatedly raised that without visibility into data such as funding flows to ACCOs, workforce distribution, and service reach, it is impossible to assess whether the ECCDPP’s recommendations are shifting investment or outcomes. Members described this as a gap that undermines both legitimacy and learning. Without shared baselines, the ECCDPP cannot track system change, demonstrate influence, or identify what is working and what needs adjustment.

The ECCDPP has trialled mechanisms to improve accountability such as jurisdictional reporting templates and categorising priorities as government-led, collaborative, or joint, but implementation remains uneven. Standardised reporting was attempted early on but inconsistently adopted. In recent meetings, the ECCDPP appears to have reached a more consistent rhythm. Government members are increasingly using the reporting templates and aligning updates to agreed priorities.

The ECCDPP has also begun to influence how governments think about investment. Recent work on developing shared funding principles has prompted jurisdictions to reflect on how their existing programs align with ACCO priorities. One example is the implementation of the Funding Model Options for ACCO Integrated Early Years Services, which provides direction on how governments can strengthen and expand funding to the ACCO sector.

This maturity in process shows progress toward shared accountability. However, these updates have tended to focus on how governments are embedding the Funding Model Options for ACCO Integrated Early Years Services through existing programs and initiatives, rather than addressing the underlying problem of missing baseline data. While the reporting is descriptive, it is not diagnostic. Without shared visibility into where investment currently flows or what outcomes it is shifting, progress risks being measured through activity rather than impact. This reflects a broader system issue within the National Agreement: governments report what they are doing, but not yet whether it is changing the conditions that produce inequity.

Closing the Gap accountability more broadly:

This pattern within the ECCDPP mirrors a broader problem across the Closing the Gap architecture. Governments routinely report on outputs and headline outcomes (e.g. kindergarten enrolments, AEDC data) through the Productivity Commission, but there is no measuring of causal logic or system change.

Across jurisdictions, there is no shared program logic linking interventions to outcomes and no coordinated monitoring and evaluation framework that tracks how reforms are expected to move the dial. The result is that:

- most reporting is activity-based ('what we did'), not outcome-based ('what changed')
- Priority Reforms do not have measurable indicators
- jurisdictions run different implementation plans with little aggregation or collective reflection mechanism
- formal accountability flows upwards to Cabinet, rather than outwards to communities or across to other governments.

While the Productivity Commission's reviews and data compilation reports track progress on the 19 national socio-economic targets (e.g. early childhood education, health) and the associated outcomes, they also note that implementation plans often lack a clear Theory of Change; that is, they do not sufficiently connect what actions are being taken to how outcomes will shift.²⁰

Additionally, one of the key findings of the Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Led Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2025) is that *multi-jurisdictional independent accountability mechanisms are urgently needed* for oversight of government efforts under National Agreement. The review laments that there is often a disconnect between commitments and visible change in communities in part because governments are not consistently reporting in ways that communities can see or verify.²¹

This makes it difficult to know whether collective actions are improving outcomes, creating duplication, or reinforcing the status quo. It helps to explain why the ECCDPP was described by members as stalling at 'agreement in principle'. Governments do not have a shared architecture for reflection, measurement, or causal reasoning across the National Agreement. The Productivity Commission tracks outcomes, but not mechanisms.

There are signs that the system is beginning to respond. The Productivity Commission underscores that data capability, data sharing and Indigenous Data Sovereignty are essential to making the National Agreement work. It proposes a Bureau of Indigenous Data to institutionalise that shared data architecture.²² In the Joint Council's response, the Parties acknowledge insufficient progress on data development and commit to exploring a Data Policy Partnership.²³

Now established in June 2025, the Data Policy Partnership could potentially play a vital enabling role creating the architecture for data sovereignty, shared baselines, and consistent reporting across all Policy Partnerships. For the ECCDPP, such a development could transform its accountability landscape by giving the First Nations caucus direct access to the evidence needed to assess progress and influence future investment.

²⁰ Productivity Commission 2024, Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap: Study report – Volume 1, p.9

²¹ Coalition of Peaks (2025) Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-Led Review of Closing the Gap, recommendation 7, p.9

²² Productivity Commission 2024, Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, Recommendation 2, P.8. Available at: <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries-and-research/closing-the-gap-review/report/>

²³ Joint Council on Closing the Gap 2024, Joint Council Response to the 2024 Productivity Commission Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, Australian Government, Canberra. Available at: [Joint-Council-Response-to-the-2024-Productivity-Commission-Review.pdf](#)

Recommendation 7: Strengthen joint accountability and data visibility through establishing a monitoring and evaluation framework.

To support joint accountability in practice, the ECCDPP should establish a fit-for-purpose monitoring and evaluation framework. This framework would underpin accountability cycles, enable consistent tracking of progress against agreed baselines, and support shared interpretation of outcomes over time.

The framework should:

- Define agreed baseline measures and indicators aligned to the Expanded Theory of Change, enabling the partnership to track movement over time.
- Establish regular accountability cycles where governments and the First Nations caucus review progress against agreed commitments, identify barriers, and adjust course collectively.
- Include joint decision and action logs that document agreed positions, responsible parties, timelines, and follow-up status.
- Support a shared monitoring platform or dashboard that provides periodic visibility of progress across jurisdictions, drawing on and synthesising existing reporting sources where possible to minimise duplication.
- Make authorising pathways visible by clarifying where decisions sit, what approvals are required, and where responsibility transfers across systems.
- Embed Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles so First Nations members and partners have equal access to, and authority over, data used to assess progress.
- Integrate relational health indicators to test whether shared decision-making is translating into action, accountability, and system change over time (see Recommendation 6).

This recommendation positions monitoring and evaluation as enabling infrastructure for shared decision-making. It would support accountability as an iterative, collective process, strengthen transparency without prescribing control, and provide a foundation for future outcomes evaluation as the ECCDPP priorities become more embedded.

Finding 9: The ECCDPP has made progress in equalising voice however systemic inequities persist

Members discussed that shared decision-making cannot be understood without acknowledging the power relations that shape it. While the ECCDPP presents as a space of collaboration, the evaluation found that structural dependency continues to shape how the ECCDPP operates. Governments occupy a dual role: as both funder and policy partner and as the First Nations caucus highlighted, most ACCOs rely on government contracts to deliver essential services in health, early childhood education, child protection, and disability. This dependency creates an uneven playing field. Governments can absorb critique without material consequence; ACCOs cannot. If funding streams contract, the effects ripple directly through to the community. This was recognised in the Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-Led Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2025) stating:

“Despite Clause 32 (c) (iii) of the National Agreement outlining that shared decision-making is where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives can speak freely without fear of reprisals or repercussions, participants also raised concerns about the personal and political consequences of speaking up.” — Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-Led Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2025), p. 63.

This dynamic produces what First Nations caucus members described as the ‘biting the hand that feeds us’ effect. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders must speak truth to power, yet the very institutions they challenge also control their funding. Critique carries risk. Participants explained that being ‘too blunt’ in questioning government decisions can jeopardise relationships that sustain organisational survival. The result is a careful calibration of dissent. Leaders remain courageous and persistent, but critique must be delivered within limits the relationship can bear.

As one participant reflected, “We measure every word because our communities pay the price if funding stops.” Governments, by contrast, do not face the same exposure. They are funded by taxpayers, supported by thousands of staff, and insulated by hierarchy. The stakes of participating in this forum are therefore unequal.

The Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-Led Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2025) observed the same dynamic across partnerships in general: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are at the table, yet governments retain control of the timelines, funding, and authorising systems that determine what can change. The ECCDPP reflects this broader pattern. Governments emphasise inclusion and goodwill but still hold the decisive levers.

“We’re sitting at the table, but then when the real decision-making (happens), we’re locked out. So it’s at the very basic level that there needs to be a strong awareness and appetite for a relationship that means actually addressing the power dynamic in place... If they’re really wanting to do that.” — Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-Led Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2025) [Depth interview] p. 60

This was also described by First Nations caucus members as creating a double bind for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders. To communities, they appear complicit in slow reform. To governments, they must remain diplomatic to preserve trust and funding. The consequence is a cautious stance that limits the possibility of genuine power-sharing. Governments can appear to share power while retaining control over the means of implementation.

The Productivity Commission’s 2024 report similarly noted that, “governments were compelled to work in genuine partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations to meet an essential need, but often this would not result in changes to the ways governments operate more broadly.” It cautioned that without redistributing decision-making authority and resourcing, Policy Partnerships risk replicating dependency within consultative structures.²⁴

²⁴ Productivity Commission (2024) Closing the Gap review: Study report. Commonwealth of Australia. Available at: <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries-and-research/closing-the-gap-review/report/>

“In such a position, power is wielded, not shared. It is a fundamentally unequal starting point...”

— Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap



Operating within violent systems

First Nations caucus members also situated this dependency within what they identified as ‘violent systems’. Child protection, justice, and disability policies were described as ongoing forms of structural violence that continue to harm Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families. The language of apparent care, such as ‘protecting children’, ‘ensuring fairness’ and ‘providing support’ often masks this violence. In practice, removal, policing, and exclusion persist. This was also discussed within the Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-Led Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2025):

“Coupled with this are the colonial assumptions upon which the Australian settler state was founded. The legal fiction of terra nullius and the absence of Treaty have rendered Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people either invisible to government, or too visible, in ways that have caused great harm. Racist assumptions have positioned First Nations people as problems to be surveilled and controlled - leading to over policing, the disproportionate removal of children, punitive welfare measures, and burdensome scrutiny of community organisations. The cumulative effect has been to cast Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as problems to be managed, rather than partners to be respected. Throughout Australian history, they have been treated as subjects of the state, rather than sovereign polities to negotiate with. In such a position, power is wielded, not shared. It is a fundamentally unequal starting point - one that expects compliance rather than negotiation and collaboration – and runs counter to the very premise of shared decision-making.” — Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-Led Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, p. 51.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders spoke of the emotional toll of repeatedly pleading for recognition of their people’s humanity in systems that continue to cause harm. Participation in these structures risks perceived complicity: to sit at the table is to be associated with the system’s outcomes, even when resisting them.

“In partnership [the ECCDPP and other partnership more broadly] we are being made complicit in these structures and our communities are coming to us asking why things are not changing – why there are no changes on the ground.” — First Nations caucus member

The term ‘colonial benevolence’, used by the First Nations caucus, describes how governments justify authority through the language of care. Benevolence replaces hostility, but the effect can be similar: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are invited into processes designed and controlled by government. Funding flows in ways that preserve dependency. Consultation occurs, but decision-making power often remains elsewhere. Participants described this as a broader systemic pattern that risks reappearing in partnerships like the ECCDPP if structural shifts do not occur. When governments retain control over timelines, funding, and authorising systems, partnership can take on the appearance of power-sharing while continuing to operate within colonial boundaries. This benevolent framing allows governments to appear progressive while maintaining the relationship of giver and receiver.

In the broader Closing the Gap context, this has meant that partnerships can look collaborative but still depend on government discretion for action, resourcing, and accountability. The ECCDPP’s relational strength helps counter this risk, but as reviews like the Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-Led Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2025) and Productivity Commission’s Review on Closing the Gap (2024) highlighted throughout, without structural reform, particularly to funding and data control, the conditions that enable colonial benevolence to persist beneath the surface.

“Without a deliberate commitment to address power imbalances, the promise of partnership remains hollow. This requires governments to critically reflect on how they hold power and what structural changes are needed to enable more equitable relationships.” — Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-Led Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, p. 61.

Implications for reform

When Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders critique violent systems, they are not only naming harm but also exposing the paternalistic logic that sustains it. True reform means dismantling that logic, not just softening its language. As the First Nations caucus concluded, “*Governments must move from benevolence to accountability.*” Shared decision-making cannot fully coexist with dependency. It requires structural independence, equitable resourcing, and authority that is not contingent on government goodwill. As the Productivity Commission’s 2024 review states²⁵:

“A focus on shared decision-making that does not include self-determination as the ultimate objective, perpetuates the power imbalance between governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This is because a focus on sharing decision-making implies that the power to make decisions is held by government institutions, and it is theirs to share as desired and in the circumstances they assess as appropriate. This hinders both progress to meaningful shared decision-making and self-determination.” — Productivity Commission Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2024) p.45

Until Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations can participate without fear of financial reprisal, the conditions for genuine power-sharing will remain incomplete. The ECCDPP demonstrates progress in relational culture and dialogue, but the structural asymmetry between funder and funded continues to define the limits of critique, urgency and ambition.

Emerging shifts

Despite these asymmetries, power is not static. Members described gradual shifts on the government side: more openness to relational accountability, greater comfort with being challenged, and a growing understanding of cultural legitimacy as a system strength rather than a risk. These changes reflect what the Productivity Commission referred to as governments adopting a ‘relational approach’.²⁶ They are early signs of Priority Reform Three in practice, where transformation occurs not through new structures but through changed habits of engagement.

Community visibility and the risk of misrecognition

As discussed above, First Nations caucus members reflected that the ECCDPP could be at risk of appearing invisible to communities if its work is not communicated clearly. While much progress has occurred through advocacy, relationship repair, and system influence, these forms of progress are often subtle and occur behind the scenes. Without clear communication of these efforts, there is a risk that community members could question what the ECCDPP has achieved or perceive Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives as complicit in government inaction.

This concern connects to the idea of colonial benevolence raised by the First Nations caucus. When governments control the public narrative and highlight visible policy announcements, the quieter relational and strategic work of First Nations partners can disappear from view. Governments may appear to be the drivers of reform, while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership remains invisible, despite being central to progress.

This concern is reflected in the ECCDPP’s Strategic Plan, which identifies visibility and accountability as one of its key goals:²⁷

²⁵ Productivity Commission (2024) *Closing the Gap review: Study report*. Commonwealth of Australia. Available at: <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries-and-research/closing-the-gap-review/report/>

²⁶ Productivity Commission 2024, Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap: Study report – Volume 1, p.9

²⁷ Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership (2023). *Three-year Strategic Plan, October 2023*, p. 7.

“The Partnership is visible and accountable to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and the community-controlled sector, and their views are informing decisions taken by the Partnership.”

Under this goal, one of the Year Two objectives was to ‘build on strong community feedback loops and to develop a strategic communications strategy’. This resulted in a Communication and Engagement Strategy, developed by SNAICC around Meeting Seven, and was intended to:

- support community and ACCO engagement with the ECCDPP
- ensure the ECCDPP decisions reflect community voices and needs
- increase understanding of the ECCDPP and the National Agreement across the child and family sectors.

This represented a shift in focus from consultation to transparency: moving from listening to community to also speaking back to them about what is being done. It reflects the ECCDPP’s recognition that shared decision-making is not only inward-facing deliberation but also outward-facing communication, a form of relational work to the people the ECCDPP represents.

Since the strategy’s development, both SNAICC and the Department of Education have referenced the ECCDPP and the National Agreement in public communications and media. This has included a dedicated the ECCDPP session at SNAICC’s annual conference and ongoing plans for broader public engagement, such as a webinar and a proposed Joint Council communiqué highlighting the ECCDPP milestones. These actions signal progress toward making the ECCDPP’s work more visible to the sector and to communities.

The evaluation did not, however, identify evidence of a structured monitoring process to assess how effectively these communications reach community audiences or strengthen relationships.

Co-chairs and members also acknowledged communication as a shared priority. They emphasised that while much of the ECCDPP’s influence occurs between meetings through ministerial engagement, advocacy, and technical input, these actions are rarely visible to the wider sector.

“We have identified that there is no clear way to articulate policy on the ground...community see it as we fought and now we got it but not the huge amount of policy work behind it. We know there is a communications piece that needs to happen. It would be great to show communities the policy linkages- what impact would this have? Does it increase the relational trust between communities and policy environment? Does it bring community voice to the fore front?” — SNAICC Co-chair

“We are working with people who don’t have a voice and making processes for them. How do we articulate it from a top-down/bottom-up that is acceptable and where people can be seen in that process.” — Government partner

Participants highlighted that relational work should be recognised as real work. Many of the ECCDPP’s achievements lie in changing how governments listen, coordinate, and act, rather than in discrete program announcements. Communicating those shifts is essential to maintaining credibility and ensuring First Nations caucus members are not left carrying the moral burden of explaining why system change takes time.

Finding 10: The ECCDPP as a shared decision-making mechanism has potential for system innovation

Members observed that this partnership model tests whether Australia’s public policy system can accommodate multiple forms of authority. The ECCDPP brings Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance and knowledge into the centre of policy dialogue; areas historically excluded from decision-making. In doing so, it challenges long-standing habits of bureaucracy that privilege process, risk management, and procedural neutrality over relationship and reciprocity.

“We’re trying to do, and in many ways is the point of the National Agreement [National Agreement on Closing the Gap] and the Priority Reforms in a holistic way, is remaking the foundations of our democracy and correcting the methodology of terra nullius. That’s really hard work but it’s work that is necessary if we were really going to make a difference” — First Nations caucus member

Members described this as ‘remaking democracy in practice’. Shared decision-making within the ECCDPP shows that decolonisation is not an abstract theory but a method of governance; one that makes relationality, care, and accountability central to how systems decide and act.

Members noted, when time pressure, funding cycles, or political shifts reassert bureaucratic control, the imaginative capacity of the ECCDPP contracts. Members emphasised that the political system itself often works against sustained ambition for reform, observing that ‘the political forces are always against mob’. Participants warned that genuine partnership can be sidelined when governments revert to risk management, short-term cycles, or reactive politics.

The challenge for the next phase of the ECCDPP is to preserve the conditions that allow this democratic experiment to thrive: time for deep deliberation, relational safety, an authorising environment that tolerates complexity, and trust in relational intelligence as a legitimate source of policy insight.

“We can get stuck on the lowest common denominator at policy level that everyone agrees on instead of what is the most expansive level of thinking that we’re all capable of and what brings this idea of change and policy approach.” — First Nations caucus member

“Really turn things in their head a bit. Otherwise, we lean into what is possible in an existing structure while we all admire the problem. It’s an opportunity to be a bit more courageous – we’re talking about how to better serve kids and families. I would love to be more courageous in how we do that.” — First Nations caucus member

Several members expressed concern that, at times, the ECCDPP and similar structures risk becoming *presentation forums* rather than spaces of co-creation. The table can become absorbed in process or circular debate, with members frustrated at the slow translation of dialogue into tangible reform.

Meeting agendas often include progress tracking, updates, and presentations from government members or external experts providing project updates or relevant knowledge sharing. As discussed in earlier findings, the ECCDPP has adapted over time to include more flexible structures such as themed agendas, deep-dive sessions, and working groups. These adaptations have helped balance accountability with more generative dialogue. Members noted, however, that when agendas become crowded with reporting, the space for open deliberation and policy imagination narrows. The design and sequencing of agenda items therefore remain important levers for shaping how shared decision-making operates in practice.

With so many actors at the table, members emphasised that decisions can ‘fall to the lowest common denominator; the minimal thing everyone can agree on’. This dynamic echoes Finding 1 of the Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-Led Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, which urged all parties to embrace bolder and more expansive thinking. This is not simply bureaucratic caution; it is structural behaviour shaped by risk aversion, ministerial accountability, and a culture of consensus that values harmony over progress. When translated into shared decision-making, it can lead to safe but shallow outcomes or agreements that are technically tidy. Members noted that in moments of tension or uncertainty, governments tend to revert to familiar positions rather than take collective risks. This reflects what several participants called the ‘default position of government’: prioritising manageability over ambition. In these moments, the ECCDPP’s role as an innovative and courageous forum is tested.

Co-chairs and Co-secretariat staff have been deliberate in pushing against this inertia. They model expansive thinking, encourage difficult conversations, and hold the ECCDPP to a higher standard than simple consensus. Their leadership helps keep the table oriented toward solutions that reflect both moral

and technical legitimacy. Members credited this stewardship with helping the ECCDPP maintain focus on systems change rather than procedural agreement.

Members stressed that the ECCDPP carries a rare responsibility: it is one of the few places where governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders sit together as equals. That gives it the potential to model what good public policy debate looks like such as rigorous, honest, and morally anchored. Shared decision-making is not only corrective justice; it is an opportunity to innovate for the entire system.

This is also where the ECCDPP meets its hardest edge. The gap between the principle of shared authority and the practice of retained control remains unresolved. It is not a failure of intent, but a reflection of how deeply colonial governance is structured into the machinery of the state. As members put it, this is ‘remaking democracy itself’ undoing the legacy of terra nullius that excluded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices from authority in the first place.

“They express a clear understanding that partnership is not just about inviting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to the table. It is about transforming the table itself: rebalancing power, establishing shared authority, and shifting from consultation to negotiation.” — Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-Led Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, p.53.

Recommendation 8: Embed strategic agenda design to sustain policy imagination

The ECCDPP should strengthen its agenda design and planning processes to maintain a focus on strategic, forward-looking dialogue rather than reactive reporting. Members and Co-chairs have noted that when agendas are crowded with updates or short-term operational matters, the table risks becoming a presentation forum rather than a space for system innovation.

A more deliberate approach to agenda design would help sustain the ECCDPP’s role as a forum for policy imagination and shared authority. This could include:

- co-designing meeting agendas with both caucuses to ensure balance between government priorities and community-led reform agendas
- establishing a standing ‘strategic foresight’ or ‘system learning’ session in each meeting, dedicated to long-term and cross-sector issues
- mapping discussion topics to the ECCDPP’s Theory of Change, so the conversation stays anchored to the ECCDPP’s broader reform logic rather than short-term cycles
- sequencing agenda items to allow deep deliberation before decision points, ensuring moral and technical expertise are integrated rather than rushed.

Embedding these practices would align with Priority Reform One by strengthening shared decision-making processes, and with Priority Reform Three by transforming how governments engage in strategic, relational dialogue.

Strategic agenda setting is not procedural housekeeping. It is a mechanism for protecting the ECCDPP’s imaginative capacity, the space where moral authority and technical expertise meet to co-create policy innovation. It is a mechanism for protecting the ECCDPP’s imaginative capacity, the space where moral authority and technical expertise meet to co-create policy innovation.

Strategic Influence and Alignment findings

This chapter examines how the ECCDPP creates influence. Influence here is not defined by visibility or speed, but by how decisions travel: how ideas move through bureaucracies, how priorities align across portfolios, and how shared commitments survive beyond individual relationships or political cycles.

The purpose of this chapter is to test the mechanics of influence. It recognises that the ECCDPP operates in a complex policy environment where outcomes depend as much on alignment and authorisation as on agreement.

The findings are structured under two interconnected domains:

- **The ECCDPP as Scaffolding for Reform** (What the ECCDPP enables in the system)
- **Influence Within Government Systems** (How influence travels inside the bureaucracy)

The findings include:

The ECCDPP as Scaffolding for Reform

11. The ECCDPP acts as a structural scaffold for broader reform, legitimising agendas, sequencing priorities, and connecting sectors.
12. The ECCDPP's influence extends across multiple policy systems.

Influence within Government Systems

13. The ECCDPP's influence depends as much on how governments work internally as it does on the strength of the partnership itself.
14. The ECCDPP's influence is impacted by jurisdictional variation.

The ECCDPP as scaffolding for reform

This finding tells the story of how the ECCDPP builds and exerts influence through timing, scaffolding, and strategic leverage.

Finding 11: The ECCDPP acts as a structural scaffold for broader reform, legitimising agendas, sequencing priorities, and connecting sectors

From its establishment, the ECCDPP positioned itself as both a governance body and an engine room for reform. Its purpose was not only to deliver policy advice but to coordinate the early childhood reform landscape under Priority Reform One of the National Agreement. In practice, it has become scaffolding for the system itself; a relational structure that identifies, legitimises, and sequences reforms across national and jurisdictional settings.

“Policy Partnerships are the engine room for the National Agreement, and it is the Partnership’s responsibility to get policy reform moving consistently across jurisdictions to accelerate progress towards the Closing the Gap targets.” — SNAICC Co-chair

Through this role, the ECCDPP is giving practical effect to the purpose of Policy Partnerships set out in Clause 31 of the National Agreement. In particular, it is operating as a forum that brings governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives to the collective task of reform, enables negotiation and coordination across jurisdictions, and supports community-led priorities to be translated into policy action.

A Strategic Context Paper presented at Meeting One set the foundation for how the ECCDPP would work. The ECCDPP’s role was not to duplicate existing jurisdictional efforts but to strengthen alignment and coherence across them. It was designed as a connector, ensuring national consistency while grounding all reform in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander priorities. The ECCDPP’s early priorities were also informed by the Early Childhood Care and Development Sector Strengthening Plan, which was developed through a shared decision-making working group Co-chaired by SNAICC and the Australian Government, with participation from all states and territories. The Early Childhood Care and Development Sector Strengthening Plan was agreed in principle by governments and endorsed through Joint Council governance arrangements. While the ECCDPP does not hold accountability for delivery of the Early Childhood Care and Development Sector Strengthening Plan, its priorities and workplan have been shaped by the plan’s reform directions, particularly in relation to workforce, funding, and strengthening ACCO early childhood services.²⁸

Purpose of setting priorities:

Establishing shared priorities was the ECCDPP’s first act of governance, the point where its role shifted from concept to coordinated reform. The process of defining priorities gave the ECCDPP its initial structure and direction. It allowed members to articulate what mattered most for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and to anchor those aspirations within a practical framework for joint work.

These early priorities became the foundation for the ECCDPP’s operating rhythm. They guided the development of the first annual workplan, which translated each priority into actions, deliverables, and points of collaboration across governments and community. Over time, this process created a consistent cycle: the ECCDPP set priorities, embedded them in the workplan, monitored progress, and used that progress to generate advice and evidence for national reform.

²⁸ Note: Joint Council, through the Partnership Working Group, is the governance mechanism for the Early Childhood Care and Development Sector Strengthening Plan, consistent with Footnote 1 and Clause 5 of the ECCDPP Agreement to Implement.

This cycle culminated in the ECCDPP's first set of formal recommendations to Joint Council in July 2024 marking a key milestone in the ECCDPP's evolution to a functioning policy advisory and reform body capable of shaping national decisions (see Appendix D for Joint Council recommendations).

Developing and refining priorities:

The ECCDPP's approach to setting priorities evolved through iterative and relational practice, shaped by shared decision-making between the First Nations caucus and government members:

- At **Meeting One**, The First Nations caucus proposed an initial set of 19 reform priorities, reflecting community-led aspirations across child, family, and early years systems. These were supported by an Early Opportunities Paper, which outlined six initial reform areas for potential joint focus. Members agreed to the six early opportunities in principle, establishing the ECCDPP's first shared reform agenda.
- At **Meeting Two**, Government members responded to the Early Opportunities Paper, using a traffic-light system to assess alignment and feasibility. This process established a method of 'sense-making through mapping' testing where efforts should converge or diverge. The First Nations caucus also provided additional information on the 'why' against the six reform priorities strengthening their legitimacy and clarity of purpose.
- **Workplan formation:** Following these discussions, the ECCDPP developed its first Annual Workplan, consolidating the six agreed priorities into a coordinated program of action. The workplan set clear deliverables, timelines, and collaboration points, establishing a shared rhythm for progress tracking and accountability.

The Year One priorities were:

- **Priority 1:** Progress a research project on funding model options for Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) that deliver ECEC, including integrated early years services.
- **Priority 2:** Increasing the base entitlement of 30 hours per week of subsidised ECEC for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 0–5.
- **Priority 3:** Commission research and evidence development on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led models of family support.
- **Priority 4:** A cross-sector project to identify collaborative efforts required to break down siloes and address social determinants of tertiary systems intervention for children and families.
- **Priority 5:** Establishment of a fully empowered and legislated National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Commissioner.
- **Priority 6:** Oversee and require regular reports on progress to implement the outcomes and recommendations of the Stronger ACCOs, Stronger Families review completed by Department of Social Services and SNAICC.

The First Nations caucus' initial priorities provided a comprehensive blueprint for reform across the child, family, and early years system. It defined five life-course goals, stretching from health in pregnancy to systemic governance. It showed the Commonwealth and jurisdictions the totality of what 'early childhood reform' meant when led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The subsequent 'early-win' priorities represented a tactical narrowing, designed to demonstrate progress and secure confidence from government partners.

By **Meeting Six**, building on Year One progress and the groundwork established through the first Workplan, members agreed to refresh the ECCDPP's focus with a new set of 16 priorities grouped across six themes:

- ACCO funding for ECEC and child and family safety services
- Workforce reform and development pathways
- Research, evidence, and guidance frameworks
- Strengthening connections across Closing the Gap governance
- Family wellbeing, prevention, and healing
- Data, measurement, and accountability.

These priorities were led by the First Nations caucus, ensuring community leadership in the ECCDPP's future direction. Meeting minutes reflected that members valued the clarity the priorities brought forward but emphasised the need to refine language and scope for focus.

To support this, priorities were categorised by locus of action:

- **Government and community led**, led by government members in their own jurisdictions in partnership with Peaks and ACCOs, both within and outside of the Partnership
- **Partnership led**, led by Co-chairs and the Co-secretariat
- **Collaborative**, where leadership is shared with another forum and facilitated by the Co-secretariat.

This categorisation made accountability visible and clarified the locus of action for each reform area. With some later refinement, the priorities were endorsed by all members and form the basis of the current the ECCDPP Workplan, which will guide implementation and reporting going forward.

The refreshed (and current) priorities include:²⁹

Theme	Finding	Government and Community led priority	Partnership priority	Collaboration priority
1: Child and family services funding and workforce reform	1A: Increase the proportion of child and family services funding to ACCOs with consideration to the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children involved in child protection systems, across Commonwealth and jurisdictions in line with the recommendations of the Stronger ACCOs, Stronger Families Report (SAFS) and Family Matters Report.	Yes	No	No
1: Child and family services funding and workforce reform	1B: Develop models for adequate and co-ordinated funding of ACCOs that deliver child and family services, in consideration of the real cost of service delivery, including core functions, capital infrastructure, wage parity and other workforce costs.	No	Yes	No
1: Child and family services funding and workforce reform	1C: Monitor and engage with reform agendas that are central to responding to the needs and priorities of the ACCO early years and child family services workforce, including particularly: (A) the National Skills Agreement (NSA) (B) The Australian Government's response to the Australian Universities Accord Final Report.	No	Yes	No
1: Child and family services funding and workforce reform	1D: Collaborate with Safe and Supported and other Policy Partnerships on delivering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-led, place-based commissioning models in each jurisdiction to address child and family needs.	No	No	Yes

²⁹ the ECCDPP, (2024), 'Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership Annual Report 2024', Available at: [Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership 2024 Annual Report - Department of Education, Australian Government](#)

Theme	Finding	Government and Community led priority	Partnership priority	Collaboration priority
2: Early years funding reform	2A: Co-ordinate and guide the development, in partnership with peaks, ACCO sector and communities, of jurisdictional and cross-jurisdictional implementation advice in relation to a dedicated, needs-based, sustainable funding model for ACCOs delivering early years services, including integrated early years services, in response to the findings of the ECCDPP Year One Priority research project.	Yes	No	No
2: Early years funding reform	2B: Co-ordinate and guide the development of jurisdictional implementation advice in relation to increasing the hours of free early childhood education and care available for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, in response to the findings of the ECCDPP Year One Priority research project.	Yes	No	No
Theme 3: Strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and accountability for governments	3A: Support and resource communities and ACCO sector to establish and operate peak bodies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood education, care and development, and child safety sectors across each jurisdiction, noting the design of the peak would vary depending on community needs and priorities in each jurisdiction.	Yes	No	No
Theme 3: Strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and accountability for governments	3B: Support and provide advice on the establishment and process for the appointment of a legislated, independent, and empowered National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Commissioner, in line with the principles of shared decision-making, and in collaboration with Safe and Supported governance.	No	No	Yes

Theme	Finding	Government and Community led priority	Partnership priority	Collaboration priority
4: Breaking down government silos to deliver integrated support for families	4A: The ECCDPP, building on the existing workstreams of the Housing Policy Partnership (HPP) where possible, will identify initiatives relevant to supporting the provision and prioritisation of stable and appropriate housing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families where children are at risk of or are in contact with child protection. This is a part of broader work by the ECCDPP to break down silos to address the social and economic determinants of child protection involvement and provide holistic support for families.	No	No	Yes
4: Breaking down government silos to deliver integrated support for families	4B: Oversee and support joined-up responses to reviews and inquiries relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families with disability in partnership with community, relevant peaks and the sector, in line with the Partnership's cross-cutting remit and with reference to the Disability Sector Strengthening Plan. This work should have a focus on capable and culturally driven services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children with developmental delay and disability, and their families, including integrated health and allied health assessments and evidence-based supports.	No	No	Yes
4: Breaking down government silos to deliver integrated support for families	4C: Identify, promote, and research options to expand existing successful Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-led therapeutic models of care to support the perinatal health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander babies and parents and prevent infant removals by child protection authorities.	No	No	Yes

Theme	Finding	Government and Community led priority	Partnership priority	Collaboration priority
4: Breaking down government silos to deliver integrated support for families	4D: Work with the proposed governance mechanism for the Our Ways – Stronger Ways – Our Voices: National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Plan to End Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence (Our Ways – Stronger Ways – Our Voices) and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership Group of Safe and Supported to progress priorities and actions of Our Ways – Stronger Ways – Our Voices that align with the remit of the Partnership. This work will leverage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led evidence of ‘best practice’ to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children experiencing family, domestic and sexual violence to engage in early learning and work alongside families to prevent contact with the child protection system and entry into out-of-home care. *	No	No	Yes
5: Commission research and evidence development on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led models of family support to prevent entry into out-of-home care	5A: Commission research that is grounded in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge, practice wisdoms and theoretical frameworks to develop an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led Evidence Guidance Framework to build a shared understanding between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led services, communities and governments on what is understood as ‘evidence’ in the context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led child and family services. Once the Framework is complete, ensure that it is used to promote a better understanding of the value of community-led approaches to child and family support, to support government decision-making, and implement the Framework across jurisdictions.	No	Yes	No

Theme	Finding	Government and Community led priority	Partnership priority	Collaboration priority
5: Commission research and evidence development on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led models of family support to prevent entry into out-of-home care	5B: Collaborate with Safe and Supported on any shared opportunities to progress research priorities, working with the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Support once it is established.	No	No	Yes
6: Connection and Collaboration	6A: Work with the Justice Policy Partnership (JPP) and Safe and Supported governance to identify opportunities to increase the capacity of specialist ACCO legal services to provide support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in contact with both the justice and child protection systems. This will include consideration of any findings from the SNAICC and National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (NATSILS) ACCO Legal Supports Scoping Study and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Family Safety Plan.	No	No	Yes
6: Connection and Collaboration	6B: Work with the Languages Policy Partnership (LPP) to develop a shared Priority to identify opportunities to promote traditional and local languages in early years education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (0-5 years), including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander non-verbal languages.	No	No	Yes

Influence through strategic sequencing:

The ECCDPP's influence has often unfolded through sequencing rather than singular achievements. Early priorities around data, workforce, and access, built the foundations for later reforms on funding models and governance. This sequencing approach showed maturity in strategy by securing early wins to build credibility and trust as well as tackling more structural issues.

Consultations reflected that one of the ECCDPP's distinctive roles is not to be a brainstorming forum but a driver of reform. Its influence is described to work through four complementary functions:

- **Mobilising** existing priorities already active in sector advocacy or long-term reform agendas.
- **Sequencing** those reforms through the machinery of government so they reach Joint Council, Cabinet, or ministerial tables at the right time.
- **Defending** agreed priorities against political headwinds and short electoral cycles.
- **Legitimising** reforms by wrapping them in the authority of a shared, representative partnership rather than a single organisation.

The SNAICC Co-chair described this relational leverage as the ECCDPP's 'hook'. Its ability to create points of connection that other reforms can attach to for momentum. In this way, the ECCDPP acts as scaffolding: linking evidence, relationships and authorising environments so reforms can move together rather than in isolation.

This influence is dynamic. As the SNAICC Co-chair described, the ECCDPP operates in a constant state of 'storming and reforming'. Tension and recalibration are features of its design, not faults. They show a partnership capable of holding disagreement while still advancing shared purpose.

Through this evolution, the ECCDPP's priorities have evolved from a workplan into instruments of strategic influence. Tools that shape which reforms gain legitimacy, attract investment, and redefine how progress is measured within the Closing the Gap architecture.

Making the sequencing visible:

Members reflected on the scale and complexity of reform, particularly in managing 16 active national priorities across nine jurisdictions. Government members in particular noted the difficulty of communicating the breadth of the ECCDPP priorities to their departments and ministers, each operating within different policy contexts, funding cycles, and governance structures. Some members highlighted that progress on early years and child protection targets can feel slow, but this reflects necessary political and policy tensions.

The 2024 Annual Report acknowledges these challenges explicitly, recognising that shared decision-making across nine governments creates both opportunity and constraint. (This is explored further in the next finding on influence within government).

Even though the refreshed priorities include defined ownership categories (government and community led, partnership-led, and collaborative), several members suggested that strategic sequencing could help bring greater clarity and alignment. Such a framework could support governments to translate the ECCDPP's collective priorities into staged, context-specific implementation pathways, improving communication and uptake across jurisdictions.

When the priorities were reviewed for this evaluation, analysis found that sequencing is already occurring organically (see [Table 3](#)). It can be described through the ECCDPP's existing influence framework:

- **Policy-enabling priorities** that build legitimacy and evidence (e.g., research, modelling, guidance frameworks).
- **Policy-mobilising priorities** that activate reform within government systems (e.g., Safe and Supported alignment, National Commissioner).
- **System-shaping priorities** that embed shared decision-making, data sovereignty, and governance structures.

Table 3: The ECCDPP priorities sequencing

Priority Theme	Enabling (Evidence & Legitimacy)	Mobilising (Implementation & Alignment)	System Shaping (Embedding Reform)
Early Years & Child and Family Systems	1B – Develop funding models for ACCOs 5A – Evidence Guidance Framework	1A – Increase ACCO funding share 2A/2B – Translate Year One research into jurisdictional reform	3A – Establish jurisdictional peak bodies
Health & Wellbeing	4C – Research community-led perinatal models 4B – Disability inclusion and developmental supports	<i>Not Applicable</i>	<i>Not Applicable</i>
Child Protection & Family Support	1C – Monitor reform agendas (NSA, Universities Accord)	1D – Place-based commissioning with Safe and Supported 5B – Joint research with Safe and Supported	3B – National Commissioner for Children
Housing & Social Determinants	<i>Not Applicable</i>	4A – Cross-sector initiatives on housing for families	<i>Not Applicable</i>
Justice & Legal Systems	<i>Not Applicable</i>	<i>Not Applicable</i>	6A – Integrated legal supports for families
Culture & Language	<i>Not Applicable</i>	<i>Not Applicable</i>	6B – Early-years language revitalisation
Governance & Data Systems	<i>Not Applicable</i>	<i>Not Applicable</i>	3A – Support and resource communities and ACCO sector to establish and operate peak bodies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood education, care and development, and child safety sectors across each jurisdiction

This suggests that sequencing is already part of the ECCDPP's practice, but it is not yet an explicit shared tool.

It is important to note that sequencing within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander reform movements does not follow linear or hierarchical logics. Research on community organising and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social movements, including the 1967 Referendum (1967), the Wave Hill Walk-Off (1966), and the Uluru Statement of the Heart (2017), shows that influence builds through relationship sequencing—a process of connection, mobilisation, and reflection that compounds over generations.³⁰ The Uluru Statement, for example, sequences 'Voice, Treaty, Truth' in logical order but not by level of importance; each depends on and enables the others.³¹

This perspective reinforces that the ECCDPP's approach to sequencing should not be interpreted as a bureaucratic staging of reforms but as a relational rhythm that aligns evidence, timing, and partnerships to create political readiness for change. This rhythm reflects a maturing system learning to work through shared decision-making. The time it takes to align legislation, funding, and governance across jurisdictions is a feature of that maturation, not a failure of momentum. Making this rhythm explicit through a shared sequencing framework would not impose order but simply describe the organic interdependence already shaping the ECCDPP's influence.

This non-linear logic is also reflected in the National Agreement itself. The Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-Led Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2025) emphasised that the four Priority Reforms must be implemented together and in full for structural transformation to occur; partial or sequential implementation undermines their collective impact.³²

Similarly, the ECCDPP's priorities are interdependent. Each builds the relational and policy conditions that allow others to take hold. Sequencing, in this sense, is not about ordering tasks but about strengthening the web of interconnections that makes reform durable.

³⁰ Christens, B.D. and P.W., Speer (2015) 'Community Organizing: Practice, Research and Policy Implications', *Social Issues and Policy Review* 9(1): 193 – 222.

³¹ Appleby, G. and M. Davis (2018) 'The Uluru Statement and the promises of truth', *Australian Historical Studies* 49(4): 501 – 509.

³² Coalition of Peaks (2025) Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-Led Review of Closing the Gap, key finding 3, p.8

Recommendation 9: Expanding priorities through a sequencing framework

The ECCDPP could strengthen its approach by developing a priorities sequencing framework to make visible where each priority currently sits along the continuum of influence — *enabling, mobilising, system-shaping* — so governments can see how reforms evolve, connect, and depend on one another.

The sequencing framework should function as a sense-making and alignment tool, rather than a directive mechanism and should explicitly recognise:

- existing Aboriginal-led partnerships, governance arrangements, and place-based reforms within states and territories
- jurisdictional variation in readiness, authority, and reform pathways
- the ECCDPP's role as enabling, amplifying, and connecting reform efforts, rather than prescribing uniform approaches

Used in this way, the framework could help both government and community partners:

- understand *where* each reform sits in its maturity cycle
- identify what is needed next to move it forward
- align timing and accountability across jurisdictions and the Commonwealth.

By mapping priorities in this way, the ECCDPP could make visible how influence builds over time and how reforms interconnect and evolve rather than conclude. This visibility could help governments better engage with the non-linear and relational nature of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led reform.

Finding 12: The ECCDPP's influence extends across multiple policy systems

The ECCDPP's influence extends across multiple policy systems, not through direct authority but through relational leverage; connecting reforms, people, and institutions in ways that build coherence. To understand how this influence operates, the evaluation mapped the ECCDPP's current reform activity across sectors, jurisdictions, and partnerships in [Figure 5](#) below.

The network of influence map provides a point-in-time snapshot of the ECCDPP's operating environment as it relates to system influence. It is not exhaustive and reflects the policy and governance landscape as it stood in 2025. Additionally, the network of influence map is not intended to represent a hierarchy of authority or decision-making. The placement of elements reflects different types of authorising anchors and connections, rather than relative power or formal seniority. All formal anchors shown play distinct and complementary roles in enabling the ECCDPP's influence across the system.

The influence map illustrates that the ECCDPP's work is networked rather than hierarchical. Its priorities interact across early childhood education, health, disability, family services, justice, and housing portfolios, as well as through other national governance forums such as Safe and Supported, the Justice Policy Partnership, and the Languages Policy Partnership.

Rather than viewing influence as a linear chain of decisions, the mapping highlights density and direction of relationships, where the ECCDPP has strong horizontal connections with other reforms, and central agencies such as Treasury and Premier/Prime Minister and Cabinet.

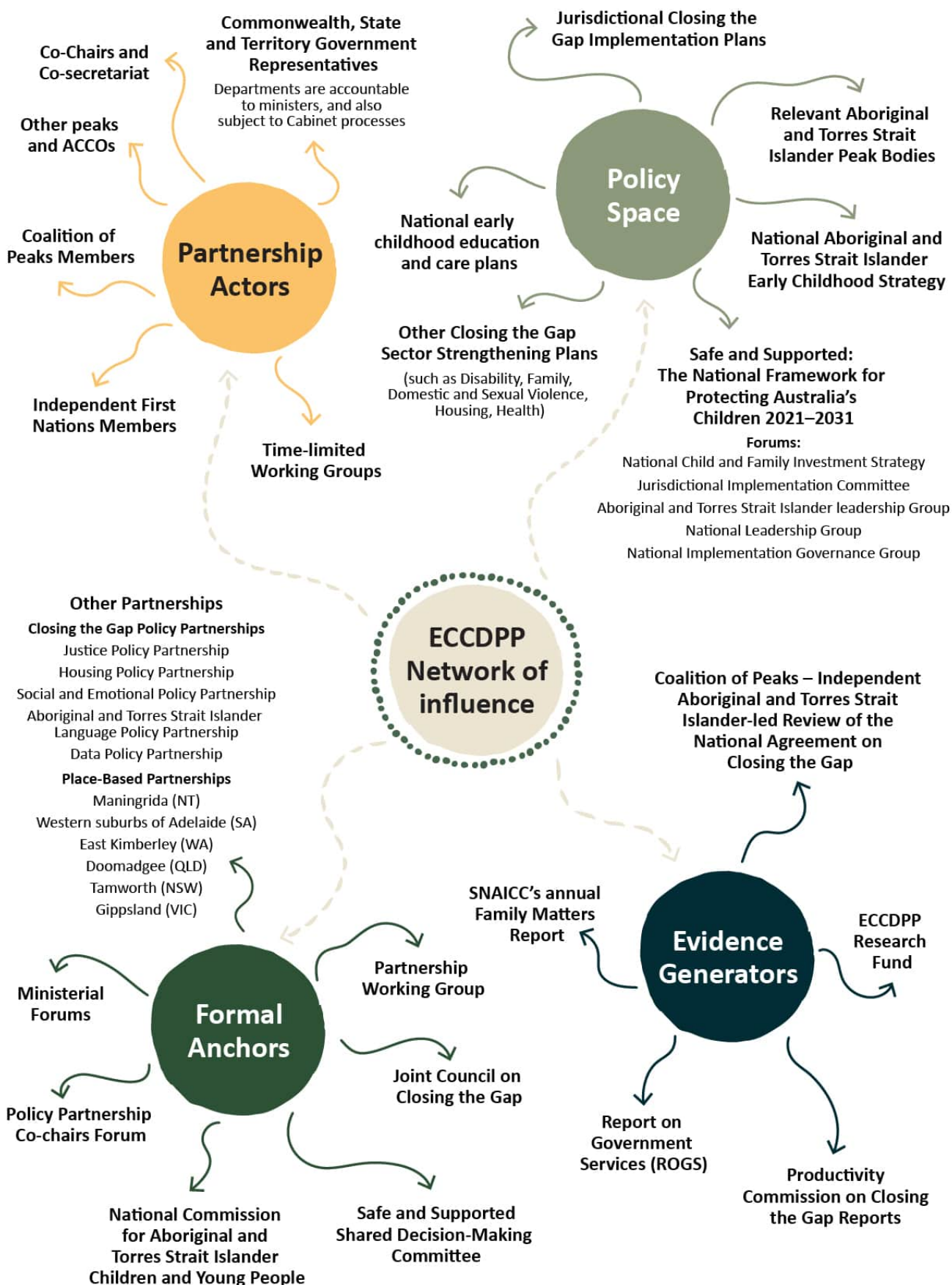
Explanation of categories:

The ECCDPP Influence Map organises the key enablers of system change into four categories that show how influence flows across the ECCDPP:

- **Partnership Actors:** the people or groups who actively shape decision through participation, negotiations, and shared leadership
- **Formal Anchors:** the authorising structures that give the ECCDPP legitimacy and accountability
- **Policy Space:** the arenas where the ECCDPP advice, evidence and influence connects with broader reform agendas
- **Evidence Generators:** the research, data and analysis relevant to the ECCDPP that strengthens policy advice and informs national decisions.

Together, these categories show how the ECCDPP operates as a system of influence such as linking people, structures, policy processes and evidence to drive shared reform. These categories are presented to illustrate different functions within the system of influence, not levels of authority or decision-making power.

Figure 5: The ECCDPP network of influence



Scope and cross-sectoral nature of the ECCDPP influence:

Current Policy Partnerships under the National Agreement are generally organised around discrete policy areas, many of which align to portfolios, though some have cross-sector scopes³³ This structure mirrors the machinery of government: each domain has its own department, minister, and funding line. It creates administrative depth and clear accountability, however it also can fragment responsibility for outcomes that are relational and cross-sectoral.

Members discussed that child wellbeing, for instance, is shaped simultaneously by education, health, housing, and family policy, yet these sit in different governance spaces. This structural separation limits the ability of any one partnership to pursue genuinely joined-up reform.

The First Nations caucus discussed how it views systems as interwoven ecologies of care, not as discrete policy silos. The ECCDPP's challenge is that it must operate relationally inside a bureaucratic structure that was not designed for relational work. This tension explains both the strength and strain of the ECCDPP's scope: it can bridge what bureaucratic process has separated, but doing so requires constant effort to hold coherence across bureaucratic divides.

“What has been a challenge is government understanding our challenges in early childhood education because so much of what we do and how we think is a holistic response. We see it differently.” — First Nations caucus

“The challenge has been when we encourage different ways of thinking about things, we run into an institutional thinking.... we don't think of children and families the same way.” — First Nations caucus

This is reflected in the ECCDPP's objectives within the Three-Year Strategic Plan, stating:

“The Partnership works across government silos to reflect how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities experience holistic, integrated service delivery in their communities”.

This need for a holistic response was also echoed in the Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-Led Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2025):

“This fundamental shift is required to gain a more holistic approach that emphasises the importance of living well across all stages of life. Greater interconnectedness and workable structures, particularly of those ‘cross-cutting’ areas, are urgently needed to guarantee the functioning of the Agreement reflects the lived experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.” — Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-Led Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, p.171.

The ECCDPP acknowledges these scope challenges explicitly in its priorities-setting processes, affirming that it ‘acknowledges, celebrates and respects the interconnected and holistic context that encompasses early childhood care and development for children and their families’.³⁴

³³ Note: Several newer Policy Partnerships are being developed with a cross-cutting focus, including those on VET and Skills Reform, Data, and First Nations Economic Partnership. These emerging models may provide useful points of comparison for how the ECCDPP's cross-sectoral influence continues to evolve within the broader Closing the Gap architecture.

³⁴ Meeting Six meeting minutes, not publicly available

The ECCDPP has consistently tested the edges of sector design. As discussed in Finding 11, through relational rather than bureaucratic means the ECCDPP has sought to act as connective tissue between policy areas:

- Establishing joint work with Department of Social Services through Safe and Supported.
- Engaging with the Department of Health, Disability and Ageing on ACCO funding models and workforce reform across early childhood and family support systems.
- Consulting with secretariats of other Policy Partnerships.
- Efforts to align with place-based policy partnership such as East Kimberley.

More recently, the ECCDPP contributed to cross-partnership alignment through the Policy Partnership Co-chairs Forum held in August 2025, where Co-chairs from the ECCDPP and the Justice Policy Partnership discussed shared priorities and opportunities for coordination over the following six months. This engagement supported alignment across partnerships, without duplicating governance or decision-making processes.

Additionally, the ECCDPP's membership and partnership model was intentionally designed to reflect this cross-sectoral mandate. Each jurisdiction nominates government representatives, while the First Nations caucus is coordinated through the Coalition of Peaks. The Coalition of Peaks manages member appointments, with input from SNAICC and oversees the selection of both Peaks members and independent representatives. Independent members are appointed through a public expression-of-interest process managed by the Coalition of Peaks, with the First Nations caucus providing input on final selection. In practice, this selection process involves balancing a range of considerations, including supporting diverse representation across jurisdictions, sector expertise, cultural authority, and coverage across the early childhood care and development continuum, rather than ensuring one-to-one representation for each state or territory. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members are therefore appointed as sector representatives, bringing collective perspectives from ACCOs, communities, and networks, rather than representing individual jurisdictions.

National peak bodies and independent members bring system-wide expertise across health, education, disability, housing, and family services. This structure means the ECCDPP's decision-making already spans multiple portfolios, creating a built-in platform across the Commonwealth, states and territories, and the ACCO sector. Where jurisdictions do not have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members with direct local experience, the partnership relies on caucus processes, Coalition of Peaks engagement mechanisms, and broader sector consultation to inform deliberations, rather than placing responsibility on government members to speak on behalf of community.

In practice, this model enables members to test ideas, align reforms, and carry insights between jurisdictions and sectors. These arrangements reflect deliberate efforts to work across the structural boundaries that shape government systems, while maintaining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authority through collective representation rather than jurisdictional delegation.

Broadening consultation and aligning across systems:

During Year One, the ECCDPP began to test its influence beyond its immediate membership. Priorities 3–6 involved active consultation with the Department of Social Services, which served as lead implementation agency for these areas, and with the Safe and Supported Shared Decision-Making Committee, which was developing national minimum standards for state and territory Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Commissioners or similar roles (see case study below). This engagement demonstrated how the ECCDPP could function as a mobilising structure for reform by coordinating multiple agencies and policy settings under a shared frame.

By Year Two, this outward orientation had matured into a deliberate collaboration strategy. The ECCDPP Co-secretariat engaged with the Department of Health, Disability and Ageing, the secretariats of the

Language, Justice and Housing Policy Partnerships, as well as with NACCHO and Safe and Supported (also co-chaired by SNAICC), to align overlapping reform agendas and clarify shared priorities.

Feedback from these discussions led to refinements in the wording of several priorities, including Priority 4A, to ensure alignment with relevant Housing Policy Partnership work and to clarify that broader reform on the social determinants of child protection involvement would remain led by the ECCDPP.

In addition, Priority 4D was developed through targeted consultation between the SNAICC Co-secretariat and the Family Safety Plan team within SNAICC, showing how the ECCDPP leveraged sectoral expertise to deepen reform design. Members agreed that formal engagement with Co-chairs and members of these other Policy Partnerships would follow endorsement of the ECCDPP's priorities, marking a deliberate step toward structural integration across the Closing the Gap ecosystem.

These Year One–Two consultations illustrate how the ECCDPP's influence matured from agenda-setting to system alignment, positioning the ECCDPP as a relational broker across the system. Rather than working in isolation, the ECCDPP began actively connecting its priorities to adjacent reform platforms an early example of what might be called 'braided influence' across Policy Partnerships.

Yet there is no systematic mechanism for this kind of cross-partnership alignment. It happens because of people, not architecture. The strength lies in the calibre of its Co-chairs and members, the relational work of the Co-secretariat who link informally with other secretariats between meetings, and the presence of First Nations caucus members who sit across multiple partnerships and carry knowledge between them. These relational bridges substitute for formal process of shared influence across the National Agreement's policy structures.

Managing scope and focus:

At the same time, this same flexibility has created practical and conceptual risks. The further the ECCDPP extends into related policy areas (such as child safety, health or housing) the greater the chance of duplication, role confusion, or over-extension. Members noted that the risk of overburdening staff across governments and organisations who participate in multiple national and jurisdictional forums. Without clear parameters, the ECCDPP could easily drift from a focused decision-making body into a general consultation forum, where its strategic focus becomes diluted or overlaps with existing governance structures already endorsed by governments.

Recognising this risk, the ECCDPP has been deliberate in maintaining structural discipline. Two mechanisms were introduced to manage this balance:

- **The Engagement Workflow Assessment**, developed to triage collaboration requests and determine whether engagement aligns with the ECCDPP's mandate or should be referred elsewhere.
- **The refinement of priority categories**, separating work into government-led, collaborative, and Partnership-specific priorities. This framework helped clarify who is responsible for what, ensuring that the ECCDPP's influence remains strategic rather than diffuse.

These internal governance tools demonstrate a maturing practice of scope management. The ECCDPP's challenge now is not to retreat from relational expansion, but to sustain it within clear boundaries, ensuring that its connective function strengthens coherence rather than stretching capacity.

The ECCDPP's scope within Australia's early childhood ecosystem:

The ECCDPP operates across the service systems that shape early childhood development and family wellbeing such as early learning, health, parenting support, and ACCO-led community programs. These are areas where the Commonwealth and jurisdictions both invest and have shared responsibility.

Within this ecosystem, the ECCDPP's role is to inform and align early childhood and early education policy connecting national priorities with community-led evidence and practice. It provides a space for governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives to jointly shape strategies, strengthen coordination across portfolios, and identify system-level reforms needed to improve access, quality, and cultural integrity in the early years.

By contrast, child protection systems are statutory: they are established under state and territory legislation and involve legal powers of investigation, intervention, and care orders. The Commonwealth cannot direct or fund these systems directly, as authority rests with jurisdictions.

However, through the advocacy of the First Nations caucus, the ECCDPP's work is deeply connected to child protection outcomes. The service systems within its scope are the front line of prevention and early intervention. The ECCDPP is already positioned around the first five years of life where prevention and family support matter most. This is where families are visible to universal services like maternal health, early learning, and family programs. When these systems are culturally safe, coordinated, and community-led, they reduce the need for statutory intervention.³⁵ The ECCDPP acts as an entry point for long-term child protection reform by providing advice on shifting funding, capability, and accountability toward prevention rather than statutory response. This aligns with Safe and Supported, which provides the national mandate for strengthening early intervention and family support systems. Through this alignment, the ECCDPP contributes to the broader prevention agenda while maintaining its focus on early childhood care and development.

Therefore, while the ECCDPP does not have a mandate over child protection law or statutory responses, it plays an enabling role in shifting the balance of investment from crisis response to prevention and wellbeing. In this sense, the ECCDPP's influence lies in reforming the service system architecture that surrounds families, building the conditions that make statutory intervention less necessary.

One of the clearest examples of this bridging work is the evolving relationship between the ECCDPP and the Safe and Supported governance, Co-chaired by the federal Minister for Social Services and SNAICC. Both the ECCDPP and Safe and Supported are national shared decision-making structures focused on improving outcomes for children and families. The ECCDPP is anchored in the National Agreement and directly connected to Joint Council. One of the primary aims of Safe and Supported is to achieve Target 12 under Closing the Gap. The Safe and Supported Shared Decision Making Committee is led by the federal Minister for Social Services in partnership with Community Services Ministers and the Safe and Supported Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership Group. Each operates with its own mandate and governance pathway, though there is overlap in areas such as early intervention and child protection, particularly through Target 12 under Closing the Gap.

The ECCDPP provides a bridge between the two reform systems. While Safe and Supported connects through Community Services Ministers, the ECCDPP connects directly through Joint Council. The ECCDPP reports to Joint Council as set out in its Agreement to Implement, allowing advice and recommendations agreed by the ECCDPP to inform decisions under the National Agreement. This creates an opportunity for priorities identified through Safe and Supported to reach the broader Closing the Gap governance structure, ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership is embedded throughout. When the two

³⁵ SNAICC – National Voice for Our Children. (2023). Family Matters Report 2023: Building our children's futures with strong families, communities and culture. SNAICC, Melbourne.

forums align, reform efforts gain traction and accountability across portfolios, strengthening both frameworks.

The growing collaboration between Safe and Supported governance and the ECCDPP demonstrates how partnerships can build coherence across complex policy systems. Rather than competing, the two frameworks are increasingly to become complementary – Safe and Supported providing depth in child protection and family safety, and the ECCDPP providing reach into other portfolios through its Closing the Gap mandate.

National Commissioner case study

The establishment of the National Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People represents a significant structural reform in the landscape of Indigenous child welfare in Australia. This role was created in response to decades of sustained advocacy from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and organisations and calls for systemic accountability. It also responds to the growing recognition of the failings of mainstream systems to provide culturally safe and equitable care for Indigenous children and young people, as reflected in the Safe and Supported Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan 2023–2026 and the National Agreement on Closing the Gap Implementation Plan.

Advocacy for the National Commissioner’s role began in the early 1990s, through organisations such as SNAICC. SNAICC was then known as the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care, which began advocating for stronger protections for children. These efforts gained national attention with the release of the 1997 *Bringing Them Home* report,³⁶ which exposed the consequences of past child removal practices and called for structural safeguards to prevent their recurrence. Continued over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care and detention led to renewed national mobilisation. This culminated in a 2019 Position Paper which was widely endorsed and grounded in community consultation, calling for an independent, legislated National Commissioner.³⁷

The National Commissioner’s role was identified as a strategic priority within the ECCDPP deliberations. The ECCDPP influenced the operational design of the National Commission. It helped articulate key design principles, including cultural safety, independence from government, and prioritising a community voice. Consultations held by the Department of Social Services with the Safe and Supported governance (which involved the ECCDPP stakeholders) further shaped the role’s structure. This ensured it reflected Indigenous leadership and holistic conceptions of child wellbeing. The Department of Social Services led the legislative and financial planning and coordinated interdepartmental engagement, working closely with the National Indigenous Australians Agency to support whole-of-government alignment and draw on the ECCDPP’s guidance throughout the process. These collective efforts marked a shift towards co-designed governance, driven by Indigenous priorities and grounded in formal partnership.

Collaboration between the ECCDPP and Safe and Supported governance bodies was central to scoping and designing the National Commissioner role. In 2023, a series of joint discovery and design workshops brought together representatives from both governance structures, including the Safe and Supported Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership Group, Aboriginal and Torres Strait

³⁶ Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (Australia) (1997) *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*.

³⁷ SNAICC – National Voice for our Children and Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Protection Peak (QATSICPP) (2019) *Establishment of a National Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People: Position Paper*. Melbourne: SNAICC. Available at: https://www.snaicc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/SNAICC_Family-Matters_Position-Paper_national-commissioner_FINAL.pdf

Islander Children’s Commissioner, Guardians, and Advocates from across jurisdictions. The first workshop, held on 11 September 2023 in Naarm (Melbourne), explored the case for change, the role of the National Commissioner, legislative strengths and gaps, national minimum standards, and the interface between state/territory and national roles. It also examined existing models and legal frameworks and barriers to establishing an independent national position. A second workshop on 17 November focused on developing policy options to advance the proposal.

These workshops supported Priority 5 of the ECCDPP Strategic Plan and aligned with Action 7 of the Safe and Supported: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan 2023–2026, which commits to strengthening Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commissioner roles.³⁸ Workshop outcomes were reported to both the ECCDPP and Safe and Supported forums and informed formal recommendations to the Joint Council on Closing the Gap in July 2024. The Department of Social Services was the lead agency and worked closely with the Attorney-General’s Department and the National Indigenous Australians Agency. This collaborative approach ensured the National Commission design was grounded in diverse jurisdictional perspectives and the lived experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders, particularly in child protection and youth justice. The process exemplified the principles of Priority Reform One, embedding shared governance and formal partnership at every stage.

In February 2024, the Australian Government publicly announced a commitment to establish a legislated, independent and empowered National Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People during the annual Closing the Gap address to the Parliament. This announcement followed extensive Cabinet processes and was embedded in the Safe and Supported Action Plan as a flagship commitment under Priority Reform One. In the months that followed, the Commission was initially established as an Executive Agency under the Public Service Act 1999 (Cth), with the intent to legislate the role to ensure enduring independence. In August 2025, Adjunct Professor Sue-Anne Hunter, a respected Wurundjeri and Ngurai Illum Wurrung leader with deep expertise in therapeutic healing and Indigenous child and family services, was appointed as the first permanent National Commissioner. Her appointment was an affirmation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and cultural authority in national governance.

The National Commissioner’s mandate is broad and designed to address both immediate and long-term systemic challenges. The National Commission has been established to:

1. promote and protect the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people through strategic policy advice and reports to government on matters affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, and their families
2. provide advice to government on and inform the implementation of key policy frameworks which seek to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people and their families
3. promote and enhance coordination across Australian and state and territory governments, commissioners, guardians and advocates and non-government organisations on matters related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people
4. undertake consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people and their families, relevant Australian and state and territory governments, commissioners, guardians and advocates and non-government organisations
5. ensure the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people and their families are reflected in advice to government.

³⁸ Department of Social Services (2022): *Safe and Supported: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Nations Action Plan 2023 – 2026*, p. 42.

It includes advocating for the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people. The National Commissioner also engages directly with communities through culturally safe engagement, to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families are not merely subjects but active participants in shaping policy. Although the enabling legislation is still being drafted, the office has been established to function independently, dedicated to protecting and promoting the rights, interests and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people and to hold systems accountable.

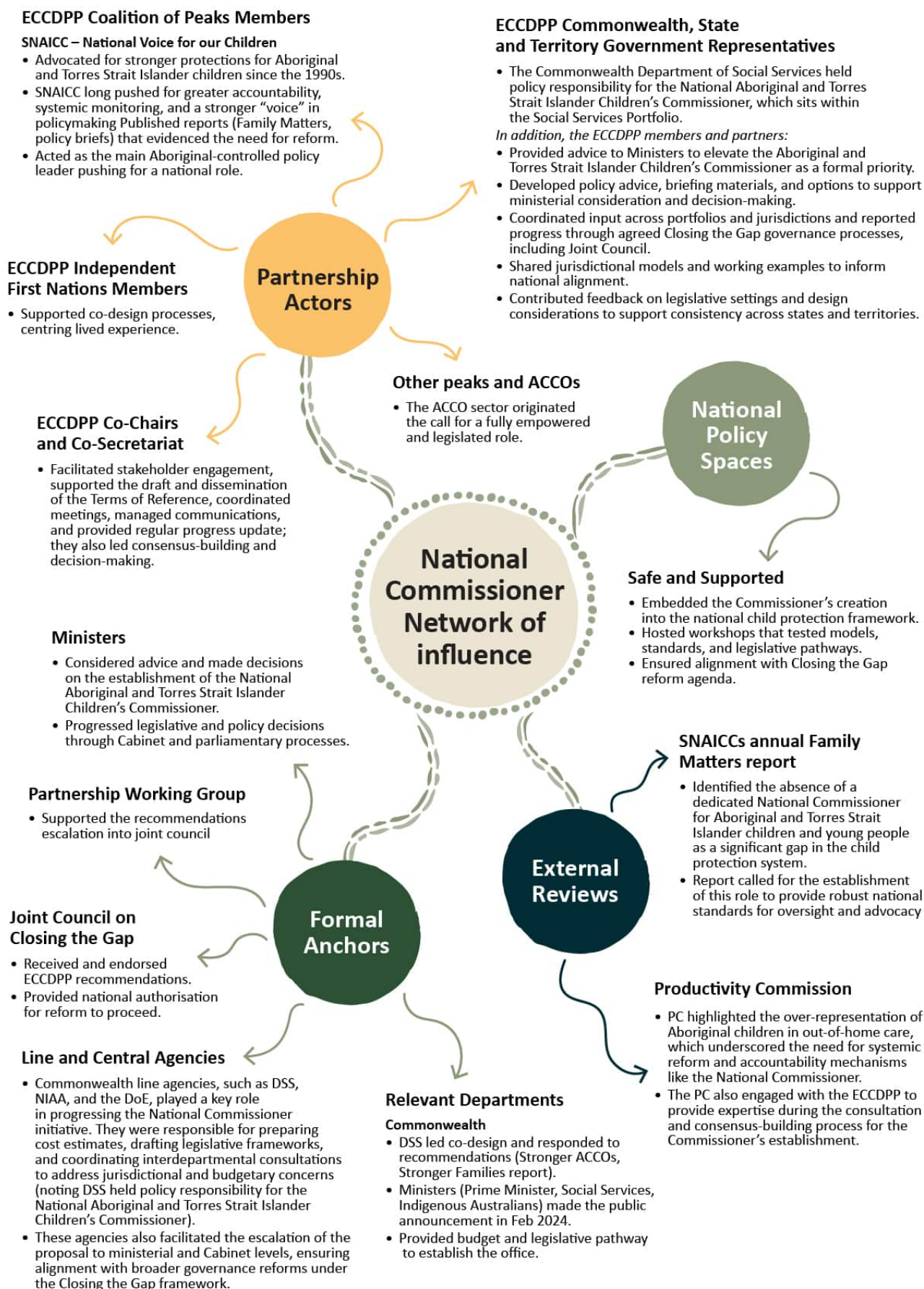
At the national level, the role provides a unified voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people which contributes to a stronger culture of accountability within government. The National Commissioner heightens visibility of systemic failures, which is critical to building public and political will for reform. Over time, the role is expected to help reduce child removal and incarceration rates, improve service responsiveness, and ensure alignment with international human rights frameworks, including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. By embedding the National Commission within broader reforms to early childhood development, education, and family support systems, the role focuses on reducing out of home care and incarceration. This will be supported through long-term prevention and healing that uses cultural strength, community connection, and trauma-aware care.

This achievement highlights how formal partnerships, when grounded in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, can operate as powerful drivers of systemic reform.

The influence network map displayed in [Figure 6](#) below shows how different people and organisations worked together over time to help create the National Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People. It traces how ideas and influence built up across communities, advocacy groups, and governments.

The map helps show that the National Commissioner's role was not created by one decision or person. It was the result of many years of advocacy, relationships, and shared effort across Australia.

Figure 6: National Commissioner network of influence



Influence within government systems

Finding 13: The ECCDPP's influence depends as much on how governments work internally as it does on the strength of the partnership itself

In Australia's Westminster system, public servants can be seen to occupy a dual role when they participate in a shared decision-making forum. They are both representatives of their government and custodians of the public interest. Under the Australian Public Service Values in the Public Service Act 1999 (Cth), senior public servants have a professional obligation to give frank and fearless advice to ministers, meaning advice grounded in evidence and in the public interest, while also implementing the elected government's policy agenda.

When public servants participate in a forum like the ECCDPP, they carry two simultaneous duties:

- **As government representatives** they must implement their government's agenda and work within Cabinet processes.
- **As members of the public service** they have an ethical duty to provide honest advice that serves the broader public, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples affected by their policies.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants, there is often an additional responsibility to community, culture, and kin, carrying the weight of lived experience, cultural knowledge, and relational accountability into government systems that have historically excluded those perspectives.

When public servants participate in the ECCDPP, they do so with delegated authority consistent with their role, agency, and jurisdiction. In practice, government representatives are able to make decisions within the partnership on matters that fall within their existing authorising environment, supported by pre-briefings, shared understanding of the ECCDPP's remit, and prior commitments made by governments under the National Agreement and related strategies.

At the same time, many of the reforms discussed through the ECCDPP require authorisation beyond the room, including ministerial, Cabinet, or cross-portfolio approval. Public servants therefore play a dual role: participating in shared sense-making and decision-making at the partnership table, while also carrying agreed priorities, advice, and recommendations back through their internal authorising pathways.

As set out in Clause 16(c) of the ECCDPP's Agreement to Implement, government parties are responsible for ensuring appropriate ministerial or cross-ministerial engagement on key actions to enable ECCDPP agreement. This reflects the non-linear and distributed authorising environment within which the ECCDPP operates, where progress depends not only on agreement at the table, but on how effectively that agreement is translated into formal government decisions.

Members highlighted that many of the current implementation challenges reflect a governance tension within the Closing the Gap framework. The Policy Partnership model has created genuine spaces for shared decision-making and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led influence, but the formal authority to move resources, change contracts, or amend legislation still rests with mainstream government agencies and ministers, many of whom are not present in the ECCDPP or Joint Council rooms.

The membership structure of the ECCDPP, which does not include central agencies such as Treasury, Finance, or Departments of Prime Minister or Premier and Cabinet, further shapes these dynamics. This design choice supports policy-focused partnership deliberation but means that government representatives often participate with a degree of removal from final decision-making authority, which may require coordination with central agencies and occur through broader budgetary or Cabinet processes. Public servants therefore carry limited and specific authority into the ECCDPP, which can create real decision-making and accountability tensions. These constraints can be frustrating for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members seeking timely reform, but they also reflect the structural realities public servants must navigate when translating shared priorities into authorising environments.

Relational governance opens doors; political authorisation keeps them open:

Ministerial offices play a crucial role in translating the ECCDPP advice. If the ECCDPP advice does not gain traction through these channels, it may be reframed, delayed, or deprioritised. Ensuring the ECCDPP perspectives are effectively communicated to ministers through Joint Council processes and department channels is essential to sustaining reform momentum and avoiding policy drift.

When the ECCDPP decisions are passed to departments, they confront internal divisions: budget constraints, departmental priorities, staffing capacity, existing program commitments. Public servants must reconcile their role as the ECCDPP partners with their duty to advise ministers independently. This also makes political change a structural vulnerability. When governments change, ministers are replaced, party priorities shift, or machinery-of-government reshuffles occur, relational commitments risk being lost. To survive political and administrative change, the ECCDPP influence must be anchored beyond individual relationships and knowledge holders. While individuals play a critical role in carrying institutional memory and relational continuity, they do not hold ultimate decision-making authority and may move roles over time. Institutional commitments, such as endorsed policies, funding arrangements, reporting requirements, and intergovernmental agreements, provide greater stability, but these too can shift with changes of government. Members emphasised that the most durable foundation for long-term reform is bipartisan political commitment, which helps ensure that shared decision-making priorities survive electoral cycles and machinery-of-government change.

Additionally, in some cases, ministers approve reforms or policy directions without full awareness of the ECCDPP's advice or the potential impacts on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood sector. Members described this as a systemic risk: uninformed or competing decisions can undermine long-term reform or reverse progress already made. This reflects the opportunity costs and competing priorities that exist within authorising environments, where time, attention, and political momentum are often spread across multiple reform agendas. This highlights a limitation in the authorising environment, when ministerial advice is not consistently informed by the ECCDPP, shared decision-making is at risk of becoming hollow.

The real measure of success is not just how many recommendations are agreed, but how many survive the relay across ministerial, bureaucratic, and electoral boundaries. Relational logic becomes durable when it is codified: embedded in budgets, ministries, departmental plans, legislation, or intergovernmental agreements.

Durability and electoral cycles:

Although the National Agreement was designed to be bipartisan and durable, in practice reform continuity remains vulnerable to political cycles, short-term funding, and shifting administrative priorities. The National Agreement's cross-party endorsement provides moral stability, but implementation still relies on the political will and administrative continuity of successive governments. As members noted, bipartisan commitment does not automatically translate into consistent delivery; machinery-of-government changes, shifting ministerial portfolios, and leadership turnover can all unsettle shared reform agendas.

The ECCDPP model depends on stable institutional memory and relational continuity, both of which can be disrupted by these changes. Members expressed frustration that reforms affecting Aboriginal children's wellbeing can be delayed or diluted by electoral timetables.

"This is not political debate — our children are being harmed." — First Nations caucus member

To make the principles and progress of the National Agreement durable, the partnership needs structures that keep it steady through changes of government. That means locking in long-term funding, multi-year agreements, clear reporting requirements, and where possible, legislative backing. To date, funding for most Policy Partnerships, including the ECCDPP, has been secured through individual portfolio budget and

Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook (MYEFO) processes (which update government funding decisions outside the annual Budget cycle) rather than through a consolidated Policy Partnership funding mechanism.

Members discussed the Australian public sector was designed to manage risk, spending, and accountability within short political cycles. This machinery resets regularly, even when the policy intent remains the same. For shared decision-making to last, the ECCDPP needs to work with—not be undone by—this structure. The strength of the ECCDPP lies in the relationships it builds, but those relationships need institutional support so the work continues even when governments or departments change.

Systemic constraints:

The ECCDPP operates within a public sector still oriented around vertical lines of accountability. Structural features of this system inhibit shared decision-making:

- Fragmented authorising environments: each jurisdiction’s machinery, budget cycle, and sign-off processes differ.
- Electoral churn and short-term funding: commitments lapse or are renegotiated with each political transition.
- Machinery-of-government changes: departmental restructures erase institutional memory and relational continuity.

These conditions continually pull the ECCDPP’s relational work back into hierarchical logic. The ECCDPP’s success depends not only on strengthening relationships between actors but also on reshaping the bureaucratic settings within which they act.

Recommendation 10: Ongoing funding for the ECCDPP

Ongoing funding should be provided to the ECCDPP and its Co-secretariat until Outcomes 2,3,4,12 and 13 are achieved. All Australian governments have committed to these outcomes and sustained investment is required to provide system stewardship and drive the necessary reforms to achieve them.

Funding certainty is critical to protect the ECCDPP from electoral and budget cycles, sustains institutional memory and allows relational commitments to mature into structural reform. Without continuity, each change of government risks resetting progress, eroding trust, and weakening accountability.

Government ambition and elasticity of response:

The rhythm of reform is often explained as slow because of process such as Cabinet clearance, budget cycles, and consultation requirements. Yet recent crises demonstrate that government systems can move rapidly when a problem is politically or morally framed as urgent. For example:

- **NACCHO COVID-19 Response Inquiry³⁹**

NACCHO undertook the COVID-19 Response Inquiry (2023) to understand and assess the genuine partnership between the Department of Health and the community-controlled health sector during the COVID-19 crisis. The Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) partnered with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island COVID-19 Advisory Group, aligned with Priority Reform One, to bring community knowledge and unique understanding of rural influences. This partnership is now structurally embedded in AHPPC. The findings revealed that low case numbers, low COVID related deaths and high vaccination rates within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population was due to the collaboration and community led strategies, especially in remote communities. Although there was evidence of a strong partnership at Commonwealth level, some jurisdictions only employed shared decision-making in emergency situations. The Inquiry highlighted the need to empower Aboriginal Community-Controlled Health Organisations in the health space to ensure culturally appropriate and effective care models are being achieved nationwide.

- **Victoria's Working with Children Check (WWCC) Reform**

In July 2025, the Victorian Government announced a reformed WWCC will be introduced in October 2025 in response to a childcare worker being charged with more than 70 child abuse offences.⁴⁰ The individual had worked for over 20 childcare centres over eight years. Within three months of the conviction, the government drafted and passed the law changes to enact immediate WWCC suspension powers to the Worker Screening Unit if the person is placed on a provisional investigation.⁴¹ The changes also require more accountability from the individual, early childhood services and relevant regulatory bodies to streamline consistency. Previously, only a criminal conviction could trigger the WWCC cancellation.⁴⁰ The WWCC system overhaul was recommended 10 years ago in the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. Only now were strategies able to be quickly implemented due to a perceived urgency.

Both examples reveal that bureaucratic pace is not fixed but conditional. Systems can move quickly when political attention and public pressure align. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's wellbeing, however, urgency is rarely constructed in these terms. As one First Nations caucus member noted:

"When it's child safety in the news, the system moves overnight. When it's Aboriginal child safety, we're told to wait for the next meeting." — First Nations caucus member

Members reflected that political windows are an inevitable part of policy reform, often triggered by public scrutiny, leadership change, or crisis. The opportunity for influence lies in how prepared the ECCDPP is when those windows open. Strategic readiness, in this sense, means maintaining clear, evidence-based proposals that are already agreed across partners, so they can be rapidly advanced when conditions shift. It requires the ECCDPP to track emerging policy signals, align messaging, and keep reform priorities in a form ready for decision. Rather than waiting for moral urgency, the ECCDPP can use these moments to convert long-term relational work into tangible policy action, translating collective advocacy into reform while the political system is most elastic.

³⁹ National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, (2023), 'COVID-19 Response Inquiry', Available at: https://www.naccho.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/COVID-19-Response-inquiry_NACCHO-submission.pdf

⁴⁰ Taylor, J (2025), 'Victorian government to change state's Working with Children Check system', ABC News, Available at: [Victorian government to change state's Working with Children Check system - ABC News](#)

⁴¹ Victorian Government (2025), 'Changes to the Working with Children Check scheme', Available at: [Changes to the Working with Children Check scheme | vic.gov.au](#)

Finding 14: The ECCDPP's influence is impacted by jurisdictional variation

The ECCDPP operates in a federation of nine governments, each with its own Closing the Gap architecture, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance mechanisms, and departmental processes. This diversity is both a strength and a constraint: it allows innovation to emerge from multiple starting points, but it can also fragment accountability and slow national coherence.

Members described this as one of the hardest aspects of shared decision-making: even when national consensus is reached, implementation must travel through nine different bureaucratic ecosystems. The timeframes, authorising environments, and political appetites differ, so what is endorsed collectively may be enacted unevenly.

“All states and territories aren’t starting from the same starting line. That’s always a challenge.” — Government member

“Getting things to government in the timeframes has been quite challenging. The scale of the work is huge, and there needs to be consideration of what pieces will make the most impact first.” — Government member

The complexity is not only administrative but structural. Each jurisdiction’s Closing the Gap architecture interacts differently with existing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representative bodies, data agreements, and funding mechanisms. As one government member noted, *“The forum helps shape direction, but our state needs time to progress work through our own architecture. That pace frustrates others, but that’s how our system moves.”*

When the ECCDPP was first established, government members described a period of “shared confusion.” The ECCDPP’s scope spanned early childhood education, child care, maternal and child health, child safety and children and families, with intersecting areas of interest such as disability and housing.⁴² Each jurisdiction had to figure out who owned what and how to coordinate advice before coming to the table.

“The first year was us figuring out what we were doing. The work of the ECCDPP crosses over about four different agencies, so it’s a lot of work in the background working out who the right people were.” — Government member

“It’s been a long time working out how we can work outside our normal operating environment. We’re here now to put forward different perspectives, but there’d be nothing worse than coming in and saying we need to go away and ask someone else about that. We need to make the decision in the room.” — Government member

This cross-sectoral remit challenged existing bureaucratic processes. Departments that normally operated in silos were required to prepare joint positions, brief multiple ministers, and negotiate shared accountability. Over time, this challenge has become a catalyst for change. Jurisdictions such as Victoria have started building internal coordination mechanisms such as pre-meeting caucuses between portfolios, standing Closing the Gap subcommittees, and cross-departmental ECCDPP working groups. Similar coordination practices were also described in other jurisdictions, reflecting a broader shift toward cross-portfolio alignment in response to ECCDPP participation. These practices enable more coherent participation and ensure that commitments made in the ECCDPP can be carried back into departmental systems.

“In Queensland, we’ve got a working group that brings together the leads for all the Policy Partnerships. It’s helping us pull together priorities across portfolios.” — Government member

⁴² Early Childhood Education and Care and Development Policy Partnership, (2024), ‘Agreement to Implement’.

These examples show an emerging capacity for joined-up governance. The ECCDPP is acting as a catalyst for that shift, requiring departments to collaborate horizontally rather than vertically.

Still, the adaptation remains uneven. In some jurisdictions, internal authorising processes are slower or less defined. Representatives described difficulty securing ministerial sign-off in time for meetings, leading to delays or post-meeting ratification. This variation reflects broader differences in each state's Closing the Gap architecture and policy culture.

The ECCDPP is revealing how systems designed for vertical accountability are learning to operate relationally across portfolios. Members described this as slow, sometimes uncomfortable work, but also that it signals a deeper shift: governments learning how to act as partners within a shared ecosystem rather than as discrete agencies.

Recommendation 11: Embed shared learning to manage jurisdictional and cross-portfolio variation

The ECCDPP should embed deliberate shared learning mechanisms to surface, compare, and learn from jurisdictional and cross-portfolio variation in implementation. Rather than expecting uniform delivery across nine governments, the ECCDPP should treat variation as a source of insight that strengthens collective reform.

This could include:

- structured peer exchange between jurisdictions to identify cross-portfolio innovations, coordination practices, and authorising pathways that enable progress
- light-touch documentation of lessons learned, barriers encountered, and enabling conditions, maintained by the Co-secretariat as a shared learning resource
- a shared evidence base which tracks learning and relational progress, not just activity
- reinforcement of relational accountability- jurisdictions are learning with each other, not reporting up to each other.

Place-based and regional variation within jurisdictions

Members also emphasised that variation is not only between jurisdictions but within them. Urban, regional, and remote contexts present very different early childhood system conditions, including workforce availability, service coverage, infrastructure, and the maturity of ACCO provision. In some regions, early childhood education and care systems are well established and integrated with health and family support services. In others, particularly in remote areas, services are fragmented, intermittent, or absent altogether.

These internal differences further complicate implementation and accountability. National or jurisdiction-wide commitments may progress in metropolitan settings while remaining stalled in regional or remote communities, creating uneven outcomes within the same government. Members noted that this can give the appearance of limited progress, even where reform is occurring unevenly across places.

This regional variation reinforces the importance of place-based approaches. The ECCDPP priorities should be translated through local governance arrangements, community partnerships, and service ecosystems that differ markedly across regions. Without this localisation, national reforms risk privileging areas with more mature systems while leaving others behind. This place-based reality helps explain uneven progress and highlights why shared decision-making must remain adaptive and responsive to local conditions rather than prescriptive or uniform.

Gaps in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance architecture:

The ECCDPP's design assumes a federated system of partnership, where shared decisions at the national level are mirrored by corresponding mechanisms within each jurisdiction. In practice, this symmetry does not yet exist.

While all governments have established internal coordination structures to support their the ECCDPP participation, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation remains uneven. Jurisdictions such as New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland have well-developed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peaks and formal partnership agreements under the National Agreement. These structures enable the ECCDPP decisions to be localised, interpreted through community governance, and linked to existing state processes. In contrast, several jurisdictions lack equivalent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peaks in the early childhood or child and family sectors.

Where no counterpart exists, the ECCDPP decisions have limited anchoring in jurisdictional contexts. They depend instead on national peaks or individual representatives to carry messages through informal relationships. This reliance on personal networks rather than institutional design produces fragility and limits influence beyond the ECCDPP table.

The effect is a vertical imbalance in the partnership architecture. Government departments are vertically integrated and can move the ECCDPP decisions through established ministerial and Cabinet channels. By contrast, Aboriginal governance systems are relational and place-based, and in some jurisdictions, they are not yet institutionally recognised or resourced to operate at that scale. The result is a lack of parity between the two sides of the partnership: governments can operationalise decisions through formal machinery, while First Nations caucus members must rely on relational reach and goodwill.

This gap represents a missing link in the Closing the Gap infrastructure; the connective layer that enables decisions to move bi-directionally between national strategy and local action. The ECCDPP's current Priority 3A — supporting the establishment of state-based Aboriginal peaks — is an explicit attempt to correct this imbalance. Building this governance layer will both strengthen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander decision-making authority within jurisdictions and also stabilise the ECCDPP's national influence by embedding relational reciprocity into the system itself.



Outcomes and System Shifts findings

At three years into implementation, it would be premature to expect measurable impact on population-level outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. The ECCDPP operates upstream of service delivery, focusing on governance, alignment, and shared decision-making across governments. Its impact is seen in how it improves the way governments work together, set policy priorities, make funding decisions, and build accountability through relationships.

This chapter examines those early system shifts and the pathways through which the ECCDPP exercises influence. It highlights emerging proof points that demonstrate tangible policy impact, such as the Joint Council's endorsement of the ECCDPP's first recommendations, the reform of the Child Care Subsidy Activity Test, and the development of the ACCO Funding Model Options for early years integrated services. It also considers how the ECCDPP's outputs (research, guidance frameworks, and collaborative processes) are building the evidence base and infrastructure needed for long-term reform.

Finally, the chapter explores what structural embedding of shared decision-making might look like. Members and partners consistently reflected that long-term results depend on turning relationship-building into real systems change. That means linking shared priorities to how governments fund programs, design policies, and stay accountable over time.

The findings include:

Early Proof Points and Outputs

15. The ECCDPP's influence demonstrates it has informed and contributed to shaping the reform agenda as part of broader policy process.
16. The ECCDPP's outputs and research are strengthening the evidence base for reform.

Structurally Embedding and Funding

17. Members highlighted that sustainable funding is essential to structurally embed shared decision-making.

Early proof points and outputs

Finding 15: The ECCDPP's influence demonstrates it has informed and contributed to shaping the reform agenda as part of broader policy process

The ECCDPP's work over its first two years demonstrates that shared decision-making under the National Agreement can produce tangible policy and system shifts. The ECCDPP has moved beyond advisory influence to shaping national decisions, budget priorities, and system reforms. Three examples show how the ECCDPP's relationships and way of working have led to real, measurable change across Australia.

'Proof points' are early, observable examples of change that demonstrate a system's potential to deliver outcomes. They do not represent the full impact of reform but provide tangible evidence that the mechanisms of influence such as shared decision-making, relational governance, or evidence-informed policy are functioning as intended.

For the ECCDPP, proof points serve three purposes:

- **Demonstration** – They show that a relational governance model can lead to measurable policy shifts, validating the ECCDPP's Theory of Change.
- **Learning** – Each example provides insight into how influence travels through government systems from shared priorities to ministerial decisions.
- **Legitimacy** – They strengthen the moral and institutional case for maintaining long-term investment in shared decision-making structures under the National Agreement.

In practice, a proof point does not need to represent full-scale reform. It can be a decision accepted, funding secured, or framework adopted, any tangible outcome that traces back to the ECCDPP recommendations, advice, evidence, or coordination work.

The proof points below mark visible moments of translation where relationships, evidence, and political opportunity aligned to produce structural change.

Proof Point 1: Joint Council endorsement of the ECCDPP recommendations

Joint Council endorsed the ECCDPP's first set of recommendations in July 2024. This was a milestone for shared decision-making as it demonstrated that the ECCDPP could translate partnership work into tangible policy influence at the national level. While Joint Council endorsement is not legally binding, it carries political and influential weight. Once a recommendation is publicly endorsed, inaction becomes visible, a soft accountability mechanism that helps maintain momentum and pressure for delivery.

Before reaching Joint Council, the ECCDPP recommendations must travel through each jurisdiction's own Closing the Gap governance and authorising processes. Jurisdictions work internally to test feasibility, secure agreement, and reconcile recommendations with existing commitments. Only once this work occurs are recommendations brought forward through the ECCDPP reporting cycles to Joint Council for consideration and endorsement. This pathway underscores that Joint Council endorsement reflects prior cross-jurisdictional alignment, not a single point of approval.

Having some cross over between ECCDPP members that also sit on the Joint Council helps strengthen this pathway. Their dual roles allow intent and nuance to be carried directly into ministerial discussions, ensuring continuity and integrity of the ECCDPP's advice. The endorsement marked an important proof point of influence showing that the ECCDPP's authority comes not from formal power but from legitimacy, shared ownership, and strategic coordination across jurisdictions.

Proof Point 2: Establishment of a National Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People (see case study, p.67)

The establishment of the National Commissioner reflects how the ECCDPP can help mature long-standing reform ideas into credible policy proposals. While advocacy for a National Commissioner had spanned decades, the ECCDPP provided a structured partnership forum that enabled the proposal to be refined, endorsed, and aligned with Closing the Gap priorities. Through its link with Safe and Supported governance, the ECCDPP helped shape design principles such as cultural safety, independence, and community voice, ensuring they were embedded across jurisdictions.

The announcement of the National Commissioner in 2024 demonstrated that shared decision-making can strengthen the legitimacy and feasibility of complex reforms within government systems. The role, now led by Adjunct Professor Sue-Anne Hunter, establishes a nationally coordinated mechanism for accountability and advocacy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people. It shows how the ECCDPP's relational and sequencing approach can contribute to translating collective priorities into tangible system changes.

Proof Point 3: Reform of the Child Care Subsidy Activity Test

In 2024, the Australian Government announced it would replace the Child Care Subsidy Activity Test (Activity Test) from January 2026 and lift the automatic baseline entitlement for families caring for an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child from 36 to 100 subsidised hours per fortnight.

Participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in early childhood education and care was limited by affordability and administrative barriers particularly the Activity Test, which linked subsidised hours to parental workforce participation. Analyses by SNAICC (2023) and other sector research including submissions to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care (2023–24) have shown that the test disproportionately affected families whose participation in paid work was shaped by cultural obligations, community care, or part-time employment.^{43 44}

Under the ECCDPP's Year One priorities, the ECCDPP commissioned SNAICC to lead a systematic evidence review on the impact of early childhood education and care participation and subsidised hours. The review confirmed strong positive effects from additional hours of quality early childhood education and care, while noting no single 'optimal' model. It recommended a baseline entitlement of 30 hours per week at no or low cost for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

At Meeting Five, the ECCDPP strategically anchored this evidence by agreeing to share the Evidence on Optimal Hours of Early Childhood Education and Care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and the Funding Model Options for ACCOs Integrated Early Years Services Final Report with the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care (2023–2024) to inform the Inquiry. The research reports commissioned by the ECCDPP were provided to the Productivity Commission Inquiry and called for:^{45 46}

- removal of the Activity Test
- increased subsidised hours for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children
- sustainable, needs-based funding model for ACCOs to support delivery at scale.

Through this mechanism, the ECCDPP contributed evidence and advice as one of several key stakeholders engaged in the inquiry's consideration of affordability, access, and equity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. This simple, evidence-backed message provided a clear focal point for government action.

⁴³ SNAICC – National Voice for our Children 2023, Evidence Review on Optimal Hours of Early Childhood Education and Care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children. Available at: <https://www.snaicc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/240715-Evidence-review-on-optimal-hours-of-ECEC.pdf>

⁴⁴ Productivity Commission 2024, A path to universal early childhood education and care: Inquiry report, Productivity Commission, Canberra, released 18 September. Available at: <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries-and-research/childhood/report/>

⁴⁵ SNAICC – National Voice for our Children 2023, Evidence on Optimal Hours of Early Childhood Education and Care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children: Literature review. Available at: <https://www.snaicc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/240715-Evidence-review-on-optimal-hours-of-ECEC.pdf>

⁴⁶ SNAICC – National Voice for our Children 2023, Stronger ACCOs, Stronger Families: Final Report, SNAICC, Melbourne. Available at https://www.snaicc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/230502_8_Stronger-ACCOs-Stronger-Families-Report.pdf

In the 2024–25 Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook, the Australian Government announced it would:⁴⁷

- replace the Activity Test from January 2026; and
- increase the baseline entitlement to 100 subsidised hours per fortnight for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

The decision was consistent with the Productivity Commission Inquiry, and the evidence coordinated through the ECCDPP, marking a major policy shift toward equity and universal access. The reform lowers out-of-pocket costs and administration complexity, supporting more consistent attendance and improved continuity of learning. Increased attendance also strengthens educators ability to identify developmental needs early and engage families in targeted support.

Snapshot of the change is outlined in [Table 4](#) below.

Table 4: Activity Test changes

Element	Before	After (from Jan 2026)
Activity Test	Applied to determine Child Care Subsidy access	Replaced (new model to commence)
Baseline subsidised hours for families caring for an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child	36 hours per fortnight	100 hours per fortnight

While it is not possible to attribute this change solely to the ECCDPP, the partnership played an important role in mobilising shared evidence and sector advocacy within a national policy window. The Activity Test reform illustrates how the ECCDPP can act as a policy-mobilising mechanism, translating collective advice and research into influence across government processes through coordination and timing.

Emerging Proof Point: ACCO Funding Model Options Reform

The ECCDPP’s work on sustainable funding models for integrated early years ACCOs represents an emerging proof point of system influence.

In Year One, the ECCDPP prioritised development of an evidence base for ACCO funding reform, commissioning a research project to map cost structures, service functions, and gaps across ACCO integrated early years services. This positioned the ECCDPP as a policy enabler: producing shared knowledge and legitimacy for long-term structural change.

By Year Two, this work began shifting into policy design and considerations of implementation. Several jurisdictions are now using the ECCDPP research to inform their own funding and commissioning reforms, signalling a transition from evidence-building to policy mobilisation.

This trajectory (research, authorisation, then jurisdictional adaptation) exemplifies how the ECCDPP’s influence unfolds through strategic sequencing rather than single-point advocacy.

The proof points above demonstrate that the ECCDPP’s mechanisms are capable of producing real system effects. As the ECCDPP matures, there is an opportunity to deliberately track how influence travels, accumulates, and is sustained across jurisdictions and policy systems. A staged approach to outcomes evaluation would also support clearer understanding of the ECCDPP’s contribution without collapsing complex reform into narrow performance measures. Rather than seeking early population-level outcomes,

⁴⁷ Australian Government 2024, Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook 2024–25, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra. Available at: <https://archive.budget.gov.au/2024-25/myefo/download/myefo2024-25.pdf>

an outcomes evaluation could focus on intermediate system effects, such as changes in funding architecture, policy coherence, data visibility, authorising pathways, and the positioning of ACCO priorities within government decision-making. This would allow the ECCDPP to test whether its relational strengths are being carried forward into durable structural change.

Recommendation 12: Plan for a future outcomes evaluation of the ECCDPP

The ECCDPP should commit to a formal outcomes evaluation to be conducted toward the end of its second three-year cycle (around Year Six), building on the monitoring and accountability framework established under Recommendation 7.

This evaluation should assess whether, and how, shared decision-making through the ECCDPP is contributing to measurable system effects and improved outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families over time, including how these effects vary across jurisdictions. It should be positioned as a core accountability and learning mechanism that supports continued investment, course correction, and long-term reform.

This recommendation does not propose immediate population-level outcomes measurement. Rather, it establishes a clear and time-bound pathway for outcomes evaluation once ECCDPP priorities have translated into implemented reforms across jurisdictions.

This should include:

- Agreement that an outcomes evaluation will be undertaken at the end of Year Six (or otherwise determined during the development of an evaluation framework), recognising this aligns with the ECCDPP's staged maturity and funding cycles.
- Co-design of the scope, key evaluation questions, and success criteria with ECCDPP members, ensuring both community-defined and government accountability priorities are reflected.
- Evaluation questions structured around the ECCDPP's Theory of Change, distinguishing between partnership functioning, system influence, and downstream outcomes.
- Use of evidence generated through the monitoring and accountability framework (Recommendation 7) to inform outcome selection, baselines, and contribution analysis, including analysis of jurisdictional variation, implementation pathways, and enabling conditions.

This approach ensures outcomes evaluation is intentional, fair, and methodologically sound, while avoiding premature attribution of impact during the ECCDPP's early years.

Finding 16: the ECCDPP's outputs and research are strengthening the evidence base for reform

The ECCDPP's policy influence has been underpinned by a consistent rhythm of tangible outputs and evidence-building activities. These deliverables form the practical infrastructure of shared decision-making, the mechanisms through which ideas are translated into policy, advice, and advocacy.

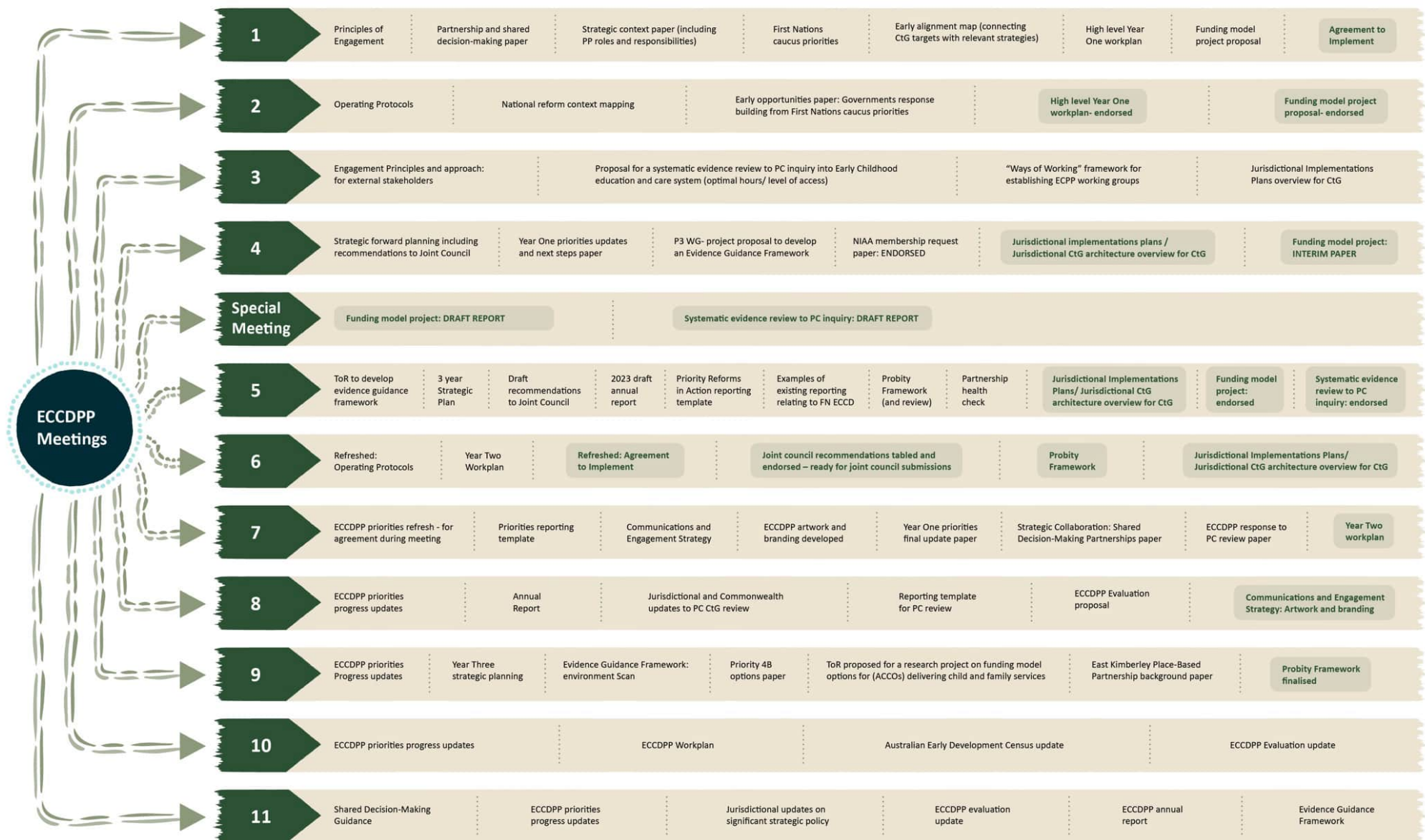
Outputs and activities:

Across its first three years, the ECCDPP has maintained an active schedule of partnership meetings, papers, and technical working sessions. Each meeting produced joint statements and agreed actions, signalling transparent progress to both governments and First Nations partners.

The ECCDPP contributed advice to the development of the Early Years Strategy 2024-2034 through the Interdepartmental Committee processes led by the Department of Social Services. In addition, the ECCDPP contributed research to national inquiries including the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care (as highlighted above), and coordinated consultations across multiple policy domains including education, family wellbeing, and workforce reform.

The volume and density of activity (see [Figure 7](#)) reflects the ECCDPP's dual role as both a governance mechanism and a reform accelerator. These outputs reflect a maturing operational rhythm. They show that the ECCDPP is not only deliberating but functioning as a coordinated policy mechanism capable of producing high-quality, joint advice.

Figure 7: The ECCDPP meeting outputs



Research and policy development:

In parallel, the ECCDPP has commissioned work and led several major research projects that strengthen the legitimacy and authority of its policy advice. The Department of Education committed \$2.033 million to the ECCDPP Research Fund over three years to support the development of informed and evidence-based advice and recommendations. The ECCDPP collectively determines the research priorities and directs how the Research Fund is used, with the Department of Education administering the funding. This ensures that research activity is guided by the ECCDPP's decisions and aligned with its agreed priorities.

These include:

- **The Funding Model Options for ACCOs delivering Integrated Early Years Services**, mapping cost structures and resourcing requirements for culturally safe, community-controlled early childhood services.
- **Probity Framework**, commissioned to support the Department of Education and SNAICC in their roles as Co-chairs and Co-secretariat of the ECCDPP. The framework supports the identification and management of probity matters arising through shared decision-making and the commissioning of projects and activities from the ECCDPP Research Fund, including conflicts of interest, confidentiality requirements, and adherence to Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles.
- **The Evidence Guidance Framework**, led by various stakeholders, aims to develop a shared understanding of 'evidence' within the context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led child and family support services. The framework is grounded in cultural knowledge systems and practices to inform government decision-making.
- **Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families with disability**, a research project to improve the availability and accuracy of data regarding children and parents with disability in contact with the child protection system.

In addition, the ECCDPP's work has been supported by projects funded by SNAICC through dedicated Peak Body Co-chair research and engagement funding. These projects have complemented the ECCDPP's formal research agenda and strengthened its evidence base and engagement reach.

These include:

- **Systemic Evidence Review on optimal hours of ECEC**, commissioned by the ECCDPP to provide an evidence base for the optimal hours of early childhood education and care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children with a specific interest in evidence surrounding a 30-hour entitlement.
- **Communication and Engagement Strategy**, enabling SNAICC and Department of Education to use their existing community relationships to promote the work of the ECCDPP across government, stakeholders and wider audiences to garner greater impacts from their objectives. The strategy included a commissioned custom artwork called 'Guiding Stars' by Tovani Cox.

Together, these research efforts provide a shared knowledge base for reform, evidence that is co-owned, culturally responsive, and usable across jurisdictions. They also mark a significant shift in who produces policy knowledge: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations are primary authors of the evidence governments use to make decisions, with the exception of the Probity Framework, which was externally commissioned.

"The research coming through the ECCDPP emphasises it can be a really good vehicle for this research to be done. I think this is a strength of the ECCDPP." — First Nations caucus member

Together, these research and policy development activities demonstrate how the ECCDPP contributes to Priority Reform Two (Building the Aboriginal Community-Controlled Sector), Priority Reform Three (Transforming Government Organisations), and Priority Reform Four (Shared Access to Data and Information). By commissioning Aboriginal-led research, strengthening evidence standards grounded in cultural knowledge systems, and embedding Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles, the ECCDPP has

supported the capability and policy influence of the community-controlled sector while reshaping how governments define, access, and use evidence in decision-making.

Structural embedding and funding

Finding 17: Sustainable reform depends on structurally embedding shared decision-making within government systems

Across consultations, members consistently identified resourcing and fiscal alignment as the critical constraint on the ECCDPP's influence. While the ECCDPP has demonstrated that relational governance can shape national priorities and policy directions, members emphasised that shared decision-making remains fragile once it enters government decision systems where funding, Cabinet authority, and administrative priorities are determined.

This reflects a broader structural feature of the Policy Partnerships model. Under the National Agreement, Policy Partnerships provide collective policy advice but do not direct funding or make binding decisions. These parameters are set out in the ECCDPP's Agreement to Implement and reflect the constitutional and administrative realities of Australia's federation.

First Nations caucus members described funding as the mechanism that converts shared priorities into lived change. Without a clear pathway from the ECCDPP advice and government budgeting and investment processes, implementation relies heavily on departmental goodwill and political timing, and can be slowed or reshaped by competing priorities.

"The funding model is what closes the gap and increases service delivery. And that will take a lot of different strategies—we have to get real money into these services" — First Nations caucus member

Members noted the importance of linking the ECCDPP advice to broader fiscal mechanisms such as intergovernmental agreements, budget measures, and joint funding arrangements so that priorities endorsed through the ECCDPP have a clearer and more predictable pathway to implementation. Without these system-level connections, shared decision-making risks remaining influential but not transformative. Members were clear that this limitation does not reflect a gap in the ECCDPP performance, but rather the boundaries of its current remit. It raises a broader question for the future design of Policy Partnerships: how shared decision-making can be more effectively connected to the systems that allocate resources and sustain reform.

Structural embedding beyond the partnership table:

During consultations, members identified several examples of how governments could strengthen structural accountability for shared decision-making over time. These included:

- aligning budget measures to the ECCDPP priorities
- requiring Cabinet submissions to demonstrate the ECCDPP consistency
- creating mechanisms for First Nations partners to participate in fiscal decision processes, not just policy design.

While these examples may sit outside the ECCDPP's current remit under its Agreement to Implement, members identified them as potential ways governments could strengthen structural accountability for shared decision-making in the future.

The ACT Government provides one example of what structural embedding can look like. Through ACT's Wellbeing Framework, all Cabinet submissions are assessed against wellbeing domains, including cultural identity and equity. Proposals must explicitly consider impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, separate from impacts on the general population, before approval.

This approach is operationalised through ACT's Wellbeing Impact Assessment (WIA) and Budget process (*see case study below*), which require all business case submissions to demonstrate alignment with the 12 wellbeing domains. The ACT has also issued specific commissioning guidance to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including shifting funding toward the ACCO sector.⁴⁸ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander procurement principles are embedded within the ACT Procurement Framework, supporting cultural change within the territory to reduce some of the barriers to government procurement encountered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enterprises.⁴⁹

More broadly, the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body (ATSIEB), established by legislation in 2008, conducts annual hearings which provides a mechanism for government accountability, shapes decisions through structured consultation, monitors and co-designs agreements, notably the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Agreement 2019-2028 (ACT Agreement). This approach demonstrates that relational accountability can coexist in government processes.

ACT ECCDPP members cited this as an example of how financial and relationship-based accountability can work together in government.

In this context, the evaluation identifies the development of a Shared Reasoning Framework as a feasible and within-scope mechanism to strengthen structural embedding of shared decision-making. A Shared Reasoning Framework would operate as a common reference point used by governments when developing policy proposals, budget submissions, and Cabinet advice related to early childhood care and development. Rather than directing funding decisions, it would provide a shared logic for how problems are defined, how benefits are articulated, and how proposals align with the agreed purpose and priorities of the ECCDPP. The evaluation finds that a Shared Reasoning Framework could provide a similar function at the ECCDPP level. It would not alter constitutional authority or funding control. Instead, it would strengthen coherence by ensuring the ECCDPP priorities consistently inform how governments reason about policy and investment choices over time.

⁴⁸ ACT Government Community Services Directorate (2024) Strengthening understanding of impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community through each commissioning cycle. Available at: <https://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/commissioning/resources/strengthening-understanding-of-impacts-on-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-community>

⁴⁹ ACT Government Procurement (2024) Procurement from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations – policy and resources. Available at: <https://www.procurement.act.gov.au/policy-and-resources/procurement-from-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-organisations>

Recommendation 13: Develop and use a Shared Reasoning Framework to structurally embed the ECCDPP priorities in government decision-making.

The purpose of the framework is to embed the ECCDPP priorities upstream in the machinery of government, so shared decision-making influences not only policy dialogue but the assumptions, narratives, and criteria used to authorise action. This framework is not intended to replace existing national investment frameworks, such as the National Child and Family Investment Strategy, but to provide a complementary, Aboriginal-led reasoning tool that helps governments apply those strategies consistently in the context of shared decision-making under the ECCDPP.

This could include:

- a shared articulation of the core problems the ECCDPP is seeking to address, grounded in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander priorities and lived experience
- agreed benefit statements describing what success looks like for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families, and communities, beyond program outputs
- a small set of shared principles or reasoning prompts that governments can use when developing policy proposals, Cabinet submissions, or budget measures connected to the ECCDPP priorities
- alignment with existing government tools where possible, such as wellbeing frameworks, impact assessments, or investment logic approaches, rather than creating parallel processes
- oversight by the ECCDPP Co-chairs and Co-secretariat to ensure the framework reflects shared intent and is applied consistently across jurisdictions.

A Shared Reasoning Framework would not change where decision authority sits. Instead, it could strengthen coherence, transparency, and continuity by ensuring the ECCDPP advice is interpreted through a shared lens as it moves through different authorising environments.

This could support more durable reform by reducing reliance on individual champions, increasing consistency across jurisdictions, and embedding shared decision-making principles within everyday government practice.

Case Study: ACT Wellbeing Model

Overview

The ACT Government's WIA tool is mandatory for all Cabinet submissions and Budget bids, requiring agencies to consider impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People distinctly from impacts on the general population.

How it works

Business areas developing new business case proposals must complete a WIA referencing the impacts of the proposal against the ACT Wellbeing Framework's 12 domains. As part of the ACT Budget rules and WIA process, business areas are required to liaise with the ACT Office for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (OATSIA) and/or the Aboriginal Service Development (ASD) Branch if a business case proposal has identified:

- a disproportionate impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; or
- alignment to Closing the Gap Priority Reform areas or the ACT Agreement.

In doing so, business areas are encouraged to engage with the ACCO sector, the ATSIEB and ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community to align meaningful funding targets and support the realisation of Closing the Gap commitments in the design of upcoming business case proposals.

These elements of the Budget process are supported by communication, including webinars, to staff. These are presented jointly by the OATSIA, ASD, Treasury (lead in the Budget process) and Wellbeing (lead in the WIA process) teams to reinforce that these issues are integral to the overall Budget process.

Why it matters

The ACCO sector can only achieve high quality services to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people if it is practically and financially supported to do so. In applying proportional funding, the ACT aims to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through increased choice and a more sustainable and better resourced Aboriginal Community-Controlled sector.

Limitations

The ACT Wellbeing Framework and WIA tool are a recent development (2020-2021), so there is currently limited longitudinal data or evaluation to demonstrate how the ACT's Wellbeing Model is affecting outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This challenge is compounded by broader ACT data gaps in Closing the Gap targets.

Resourcing, funding architecture, and long-term reform considerations:

Members also observed that intergovernmental agreements are one of the Commonwealth's primary levers for embedding shared accountability across jurisdictions. They are among the few instruments available to influence state and territory systems without overstepping constitutional boundaries.

The National Agreement provides a clear example of this approach. It commits all governments and the Coalition of Peaks to shared Priority Reforms, including shared decision-making and strengthening the

ACCO sector, alongside agreed socio-economic targets and joint accountability through annual reporting and independent monitoring.

However, members noted that while Closing the Gap establishes shared outcomes, funding and control largely remain fragmented across jurisdictions. The Commonwealth funds some related policy areas, such as early childhood and family support, but has limited ability to ensure that this funding is aligned to Closing the Gap outcomes or ACCO priorities. There is no joint funding model or performance-based mechanism tied directly to Closing the Gap targets. Accountability therefore relies heavily on reporting and relationships rather than on embedded fiscal consequences for slow or uneven progress.

This dynamic mirrors earlier findings in this evaluation. Once decisions leave the ECCDPP table, there are few structural levers to ensure they are carried consistently through the machinery of government. Shared decision-making is therefore sustained through relational effort rather than institutional design, a tension that aligns with the intent of Priority Reform Three to transform government systems and embed accountability.

The evaluation notes that resourcing constraints limit the ability of shared decision-making to translate into system-wide change. However, decisions about funding models, incentive structures, and bilateral agreements sit with ministers and treasuries and fall outside the ECCDPP's direct authority.

For this reason, the evaluation does not recommend a specific funding model. Instead, it includes discussion in Appendix F outlining how federated funding approaches have been used in other policy areas, both their potential and their limitations as a possible avenue for future consideration by the ECCDPP – and by extension, Joint Council and governments.

Importantly, members emphasised that any future funding reforms must retain flexibility, respect place-based decision-making, and avoid restrictive criteria that exclude ACCOs from design and delivery.

In summary, this finding highlights a core insight. Shared decision-making has matured relationally within the ECCDPP. Its next challenge is structural. Embedding shared reasoning into the machinery of government offers a practical and proportionate way to strengthen durability, accountability, and continuity of reform, without exceeding the Partnership's remit or authority.

Conclusion

This evaluation set out to understand how the ECCDPP has functioned during its first three years and what this reveals about shared decision-making under Priority Reform One of the National Agreement. It finds that the ECCDPP has moved beyond establishment into a phase of consolidation, where relational trust, shared practice, and institutional rhythms are now evident.

The ECCDPP has demonstrated that shared decision-making is a system of practices which includes caucusing, stewardship by Co-chairs, disciplined agenda setting, collaborative sense-making, and sustained backbone support through the ECCDPP Co-secretariat. Together, these practices have created a forum capable of holding complexity, disagreement, and long-term reform ambition. Members consistently described a shift from transactional engagement toward relational accountability, where influence is built through trust, preparation, and shared responsibility.

At the same time, the evaluation finds that the ECCDPP's influence remains shaped by structural constraints. Shared decision-making is working relationally, but systems are not yet designed to carry that work forward. Decisions reached through shared processes must still travel through various governmental systems, each with distinct authorising pathways, budget cycles, and political pressures. The ECCDPP does not control resources, and its recommendations are non-binding. As a result, the effectiveness of shared decision-making depends not only on the strength of the partnership but on how governments translate the ECCDPP's advice into their internal systems. Where this translation is weak, shared decision-making risks remaining advisory rather than transformative.

The findings highlight a central tension at the heart of the Policy Partnership model. Relational governance can open doors, but durable change depends on political and institutional authorisation. The ECCDPP has begun to address this tension by sequencing priorities, building shared evidence, and strengthening links to Joint Council and other national reform platforms. These early proof points show that influence is possible, but they also underscore the need for clearer pathways between shared decision-making forums and the fiscal, legislative, and administrative systems that ultimately determine outcomes.

The recommendations in this report respond to this moment of transition. They focus on strengthening the foundations of Partnership Health, clarifying governance and authorising pathways, improving shared accountability and data visibility, and exploring longer-term reform options that could embed shared decision-making more deeply into government systems. Taken together, they reflect a shift from asking whether shared decision-making can work to asking how it can be sustained, scaled, and protected over time.

Importantly, this evaluation does not suggest that the ECCDPP should move faster than system readiness allows, nor that uniform solutions are appropriate across jurisdictions. Instead, it points to the value of sequencing, learning, and place-based adaptation. The ECCDPP's strength lies in its ability to align national ambition with local reality, enabling governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members and partners to move together without erasing difference.

In its first three years, the ECCDPP has built a credible foundation for shared decision-making. The challenge ahead is to ensure that this container is matched by the structural conditions required for lasting change. Doing so will require continued stewardship, resourcing, and political commitment. It will also require governments to treat shared decision-making not as an adjunct to business-as-usual, but as core infrastructure for reform under the National Agreement.

The ECCDPP's journey to date demonstrates that when shared decision-making is taken seriously, it can reshape how systems think, decide, and act. The work ahead is to ensure that this relational achievement is translated into enduring institutional practice, so that progress for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families is not dependent on goodwill alone and embedded in the way governments operate.

4

Recommendations

This chapter consolidates the evaluations recommendations, proposed implementation timeframes and maps how each contributed to the stages of the ECCDPP Theory of Change to guide future planning and systems reform.

Chapter 4: Implementation Horizons for Recommendations

The evaluation identified 13 recommendations to strengthen the ECCDPP's functioning, influence, and sustainability. These are grouped under four Focus Areas aligned with the evaluation findings. Several recommendations align with more than one Priority Reform, reflecting the interdependent nature of the reforms and the ECCDPP's cross-cutting role within the Closing the Gap architecture.

Table 5: Recommendations aligned to each Priority Reform

Focus Area	Recommendation	Priority Reform One	Priority Reform Two	Priority Reform Three	Priority Reform Four
1: Formalising Partnership Health Monitoring	1: Periodic Membership and Representation Review	Yes	No	No	No
1: Formalising Partnership Health Monitoring	2: Safeguard Caucusing Independence	Yes	No	No	No
1: Formalising Partnership Health Monitoring	3: Leadership Succession and Capability Building	Yes	No	No	No
1: Formalising Partnership Health Monitoring	4: Funded Capacity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Participation	Yes	Yes	No	No
1: Formalising Partnership Health Monitoring	6: Embed Partnership Health checks and collective learning processes	Yes	No	No	Yes
2: Clarifying Authorising Pathways and Governance Practice	5: Intellectual Property and Attribution Protocol	No	Yes	No	Yes
2: Clarifying Authorising Pathways and Governance Practice	8: Strategic Agenda Design for Policy Imagination	Yes	No	Yes	No
2: Clarifying Authorising Pathways and Governance Practice	9: Sequencing Framework for the ECCDPP Priorities	Yes	No	Yes	No
3: Embedding Shared Accountability and Data Transparency	7: Strengthen Joint Accountability and Data Visibility through Monitoring and Evaluation	No	No	Yes	Yes
3: Embedding Shared Accountability and Data Transparency	10: Ongoing Funding for the ECCDPP and Co-secretariat	Yes	No	No	No

Focus Area	Recommendation	Priority Reform One	Priority Reform Two	Priority Reform Three	Priority Reform Four
3: Embedding Shared Accountability and Data Transparency	11: Shared Learning on Jurisdictional and Cross-Portfolio Variation	No	No	Yes	Yes
3: Embedding Shared Accountability and Data Transparency	12: Consider a future outcomes evaluation	Yes	No	No	Yes
4: Building a Federated Reasoning Framework to Sustain Reform	13: Develop and use a Shared Reasoning Framework to structurally embed the ECCDPP priorities in government decision-making	No	No	Yes	No

Implementation of recommendations

The following time horizons provide a practical roadmap for sequencing implementation of the evaluation's recommendations. The timeline reflects the ECCDPP's current operational cycle and recognises dependencies between recommendations. Short-term actions focus on maintaining current momentum and embedding quick wins. Medium-term actions build structure and capability. Long-term actions strengthen sustainability and alignment with future reform architecture.

The recommendations are deliberately sequenced to balance momentum and feasibility.

- **Short-term (2026):** Actions that can be implemented through the next the ECCDPP Strategic Plan and Co-secretariat work program without requiring structural reform.
- **Medium-term (2027–28):** Requires resource allocation, coordination across jurisdictions, and potentially updates to the Agreement to Implement.
- **Long-term (2028–30):** Involves broader system reforms, including potential integration with the Federation Funding Agreements Framework and bilateral funding models.

Table 6: The ECCDPP evaluation recommendations implementation

Time Horizon	Indicative Timeframe	Key Recommendations	Rationale / Focus
Short Term (within 12 months)	2026	• Recommendation 1 (Membership and Representation Review) • Recommendation 2 (Caucusing Independence) • Recommendation 5 (IP and Attribution Protocol) • Recommendation 7 (Strengthen Joint Accountability and Data Visibility through Monitoring and Evaluation)	Focus on consolidating the foundations of shared decision-making by strengthening representation, caucusing integrity, knowledge governance, and the introduction of a fit-for-purpose monitoring and evaluation framework. This phase establishes the structures, baseline measures, and learning mechanisms needed to track Partnership Health and influence over time, and can be integrated with the 2025 Strategic Plan refresh and the Co-secretariat workplan.
Medium Term (1–2 years)	2027–2028	• Recommendation 3 (Leadership Succession and Capability Building) • Recommendation 4 (Funded Capacity for Participation) • Recommendation 6 (Partnership Health Checks) • Recommendation 8 (Strategic Agenda Design) • Recommendation 11 (Shared Learning on Jurisdictional Variation)	Focus on embedding systems for leadership, accountability, and shared data visibility once foundational governance systems are stable.
Long Term (2–4 years +)	2028–2030	• Recommendation 9 (Sequencing Framework for the ECCDPP Priorities) • Recommendation 10 (Ongoing Funding for the ECCDPP and Co-secretariat), • Recommendation 12 (Outcomes evaluation) • Recommendation 13: Develop and use a Shared Reasoning Framework to structurally embed the ECCDPP priorities in government decision-making	Focus on building structural alignment between shared decision-making, fiscal systems, and national reform architecture. These reforms require intergovernmental negotiation and Joint Council endorsement.

Linking recommendations to the ECCDPP Theory of Change

The evaluation's recommendations align with the five stages of the ECCDPP's Theory of Change. Together, they describe how strengthening the foundations of partnership practice enables broader system shifts in shared accountability, cultural integrity, and long-term outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Table 7: Linking recommendations to the ECCDPP Theory of Change

Theory of Change Stage	Intent	Key Related Recommendation/s	Example Contribution
Stage 1: Establishing the model	Strengthen trust, representation, and partnership infrastructure	1, 2, 3, 4, 6	Builds stable leadership, resourced participation, and shared learning systems that sustain partnership quality.
Stage 2: Building trust and shared culture	Create enabling conditions for shared decision-making and transparency	5, 6, 7	Clarifies intellectual property, establishes relational indicators, and embeds data visibility to improve accountability.
Stage 3: Establishing shared priorities, evidence and levers	Improve coordination, agenda design, and strategic alignment across sectors	8, 9, 11, 12	Positions the ECCDPP meetings as spaces for generative policy work and shared learning across jurisdictions.
Stage 4: Exercising influence and sequencing reform	Embed shared accountability and relational governance into government systems	13	Secures recurrent funding and integrates shared reasoning frameworks into fiscal and policy processes.
Stage 5: Systems shifts and sustained reform	Achieve equitable early childhood outcomes through culturally grounded systems	13	Establishes a federated funding model that aligns investments with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander priorities and outcomes.

Turning recommendations into action

The recommendations in this chapter are intentionally framed at a strategic level, reflecting the ECCDPP's role as a shared decision-making partnership rather than a delivery body. To support implementation, the ECCDPP Co-secretariat should consider progressing these recommendations through a joint management response that assigns action owners, confirms timeframes, and identifies how progress will be monitored.

To illustrate how this could occur in practice, an example is provided below showing how recommendations might be translated into **Specific, Measurable, Actionable, Relevant and Time-bound (SMART)** actions.

Original recommendation:

Recommendation 1: Establish a periodic membership and representation review process.

Illustrative SMART action:

By June 2026, the ECCDPP Co-chairs, supported by the Co-secretariat, establish a light-touch membership and representation review process to assess balance across jurisdictions, portfolios, Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisation (ACCO) sectors, and the ongoing role of independent members. The membership and representation review process should be integrated into the annual workplan and reporting cycle and repeated every two years.

Indicative owner:

ECCDPP Co-chairs and Co-secretariat, with ECCDPP membership oversight.

Implications for governments and First Nations members and partners

The findings and recommendations of this evaluation highlight how shared decision-making under the ECCDPP is being established, where it is working well, and where further structural support is required. While the ECCDPP operates as a collective partnership rather than a delivery body, the recommendations have implications for how governments authorise, resource, and sustain shared accountability within intergovernmental systems.

These implications are intended to support reflection and action across the system, rather than assign responsibility to individual jurisdictions or organisations.

Implications for governments

For governments, the findings make clear that participation in partnership forums alone is not sufficient. Shared decision-making requires changes to how governments internally authorise, resource, and carry forward partnership decisions.

Recommendations relating to Partnership Health imply that governments need to treat the ECCDPP as core reform infrastructure under Priority Reform One, not as a discretionary or time-limited forum. For governments, this means committing adequate and sustained funding for the ECCDPP and Co-secretariat, supporting leadership continuity, and ensuring that public servants have the time, mandate, and internal backing to participate meaningfully. Without this, shared decision-making risks being dependent on goodwill rather than institutional commitment.

Recommendations focused on authorising pathways and governance practice imply a need for governments to be clearer and more transparent about how the ECCDPP advice travels through departmental, ministerial, and Cabinet processes. For governments, this means being explicit about where decisions sit, where constraints apply, and how shared priorities are translated into policy and funding decisions. It also means adopting consistent practices around intellectual property, attribution, and use of jointly developed knowledge so that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contributions are protected and respected once they enter government systems.

Recommendations on shared accountability and data visibility imply a shift in how governments approach transparency. Rather than using data primarily for compliance or reporting, governments are being asked to support shared access to data that enables joint learning and accountability. For governments, this

means investing in data infrastructure, governance arrangements, and analytic capacity that allow visibility across jurisdictions while respecting data sovereignty and contextual variation.

The development of a shared reasoning framework opportunity signals that if governments want shared decision-making to lead to sustained system change, they will need to engage seriously with federated reasoning and funding approaches. For governments, this means aligning investment logic, funding models, and accountability mechanisms across portfolios and jurisdictions, rather than treating the ECCDPP advice as supplementary to existing decision-making processes. It also means accepting that some reforms will require changes to how funding authority and risk are distributed across the federation.

Implications for First Nations caucus

For First Nations caucus members and partners, the findings reinforce that influence within shared decision-making is strongest when collective authority is resourced, protected, and strategically exercised.

Recommendations relating to Partnership Health imply the ongoing importance of strong caucusing, leadership development, and succession planning. For the First Nations caucus, this means continuing to invest in internal coordination, knowledge sharing, and collective strategy, while also making visible the resource burden this work places on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives. These pressures are not individual issues, but system-level risks that require sustained funding and support.

Recommendations focused on authorising pathways and governance practice strengthen protections for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and representation. For the First Nations caucus, this means greater confidence that participation in the ECCDPP leads to influence that is carried forward with integrity, rather than diluted or reinterpreted once it leaves the partnership table.

Recommendations on shared accountability and data transparency create opportunities to shape how evidence is defined, interpreted, and mobilised. For First Nations caucus members, this means using shared data not only to demonstrate progress, but to support advocacy, challenge assumptions, and hold governments to account for whether reforms are changing conditions on the ground.

The longer-term reform opportunity highlights the potential for the First Nations caucus to play a stronger role in shaping shared reasoning frameworks and funding approaches that reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander priorities and ways of understanding outcomes. This positions shared decision-making not only as a governance mechanism, but as a pathway to more durable reform that redistributes power, resources, and accountability over time.

5

Appendix



Appendix A: About the Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership

Purpose of the ECCDPP

The ECCDPP was established in August 2022 under Priority Reform One of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (National Agreement), which commits governments to formal partnerships and shared decision-making with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The National Agreement sets out the role of Policy Partnerships through clauses 32-33. Together, these clauses define the foundations of strong partnerships, including shared priority setting, joint governance arrangements, and the conditions required for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to participate on an equal footing with governments. Clause 32 establishes the principles of partnership and shared authority, while Clause 33 outlines how Policy Partnerships operate within the Closing the Gap architecture.

The ECCDPP provides a formal structure for all Australian governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives to work together on early childhood policy. Its purpose is to:

- ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (aged 0–5 years) are born healthy, grow strong, are supported by resilient families, and thrive during their early years
- promote children’s safety and security within families while addressing the effects of child protection systems on health, development, and wellbeing.

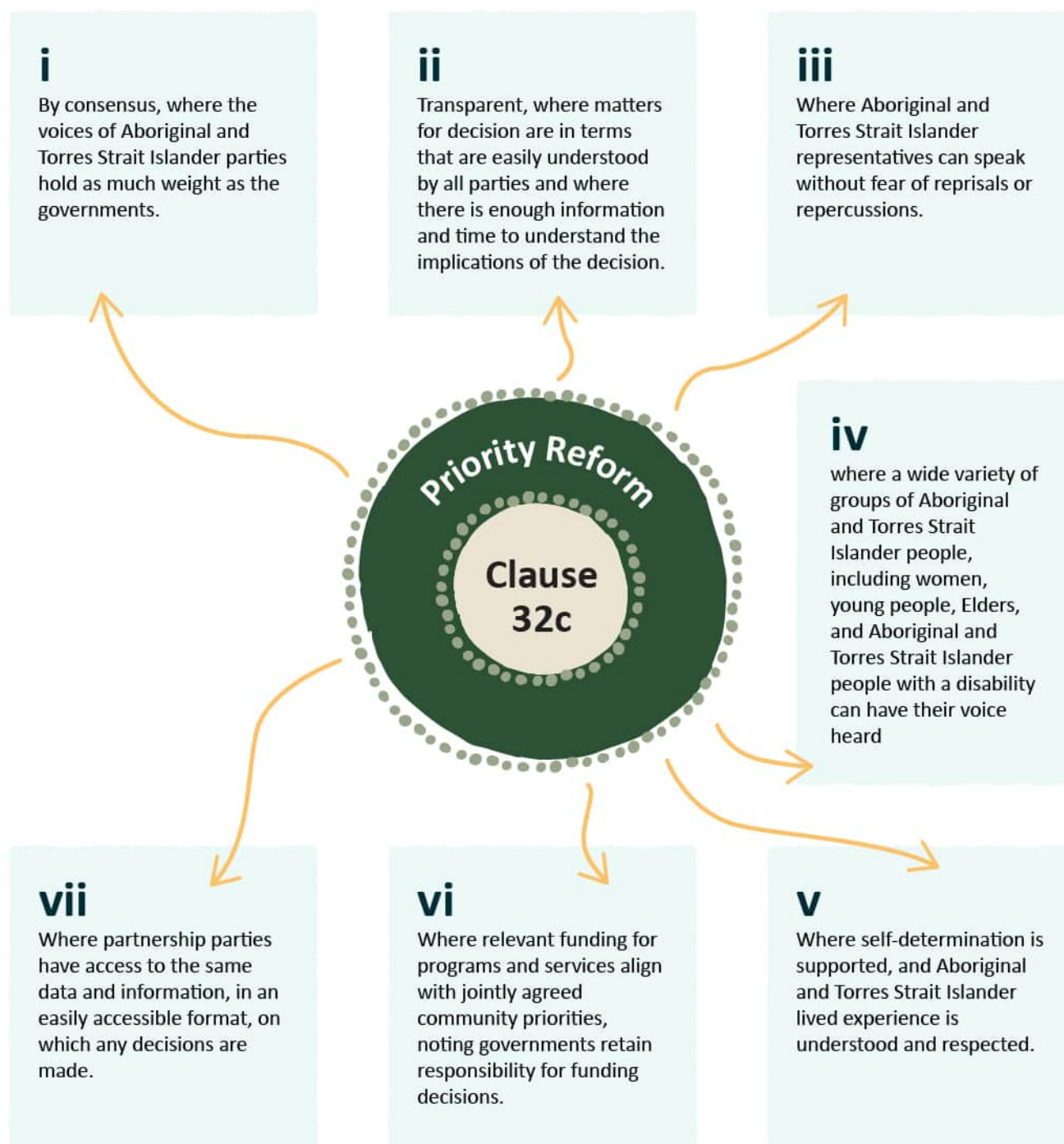
The ECCDPP’s primary role is to make collective recommendations to all governments, through the Joint Council on Closing the Gap, aimed at improving early childhood outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Within this broader partnership framework, Clause 32(c) of the National Agreement sets out the specific requirements for shared decision-making (see [Figure 8](#) below). It explains decisions are by consensus, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices carrying equal weight to governments. It requires transparent processes, enough information and time to consider issues, safe participation without reprisals, inclusion of diverse groups, support for self-determination and lived experience, alignment of relevant funding with jointly agreed priorities while governments still make funding decisions, and equal access to the same data used for decisions.⁵⁰

The ECCDPP gives effect to this clause by creating a national forum where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and government representatives jointly identify priorities, design reforms, and align efforts across portfolios. It is one of the key mechanisms through which the National Agreement’s promise of shared authority is being tested and refined in practice.

⁵⁰ National Agreement on Closing the Gap, agreed 27 July 2020, Clause 32(c). Available at: https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-03/national-agreement-ctg-mar-21_0.pdf

Figure 8: Clause 32 (c) of the National Agreement: Shared decision-making⁵¹



⁵¹ National Agreement on Closing the Gap, agreed 27 July 2020, Clause 32(c). Available at: https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-03/national-agreement-ctg-mar-21_0.pdf

Governance structure and design

The ECCDPP is co-chaired by a representative of the Coalition of Peaks, SNAICC – National Voice for our Children (SNAICC), and a representative of the Australian Government Department of Education (Department of Education). The Co-chairs jointly oversee meetings, set agendas, and ensure that both sides of the partnership are equally informed and engaged.

The Co-secretariat is a supporting shared administrative function between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members and partners, and government members and partners, responsible for coordination, briefings, and documentation. It ensures that decisions are jointly stewarded, meeting logistics are equitable, and members are supported to participate effectively.

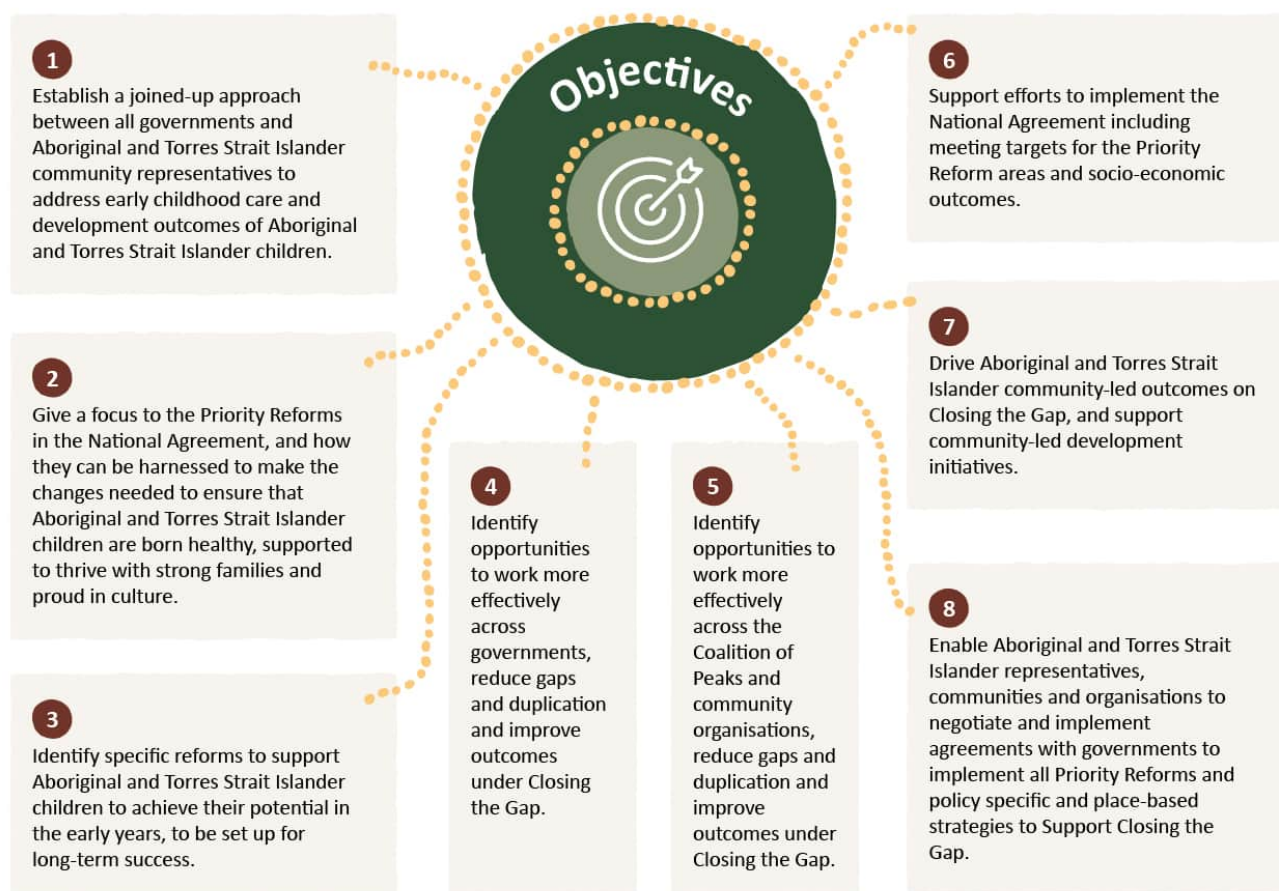
A key governance feature is the First Nations caucus, which provides First Nations caucus members a dedicated space to discuss issues, form collective positions, and prepare for joint meetings. Caucusing supports relational safety, allowing First Nations caucus members to speak freely and ensure that community and sector voice informs joint discussions.

Scope and functions

The ECCDPP's scope focuses on early childhood care and development for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 0-5 years. Early childhood care and development encompasses sectors including early childhood education and care, maternal and child health, child safety, and children and families, with recognised intersections with other policy areas such as disability and housing.

The ECCDPP operates as a policy partnership under Priority Reform One of the National Agreement. Its primary function is to make recommendations to governments, through Joint Council, to improve early childhood outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, supported by shared decision-making between governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives.

Within this remit, the ECCDPP's work program is guided by eight core objectives set out in the ECCDPP Agreement to Implement, which shape its priorities, agenda setting, and decision-making displayed in [Figure 9](#) below.

Figure 9: The ECCDPP objectives⁵²

In accordance with the Agreement to Implement, the ECCDPP has oversight of, and supports the development of, policy reforms outlined in the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy and the Early Childhood Care and Development Sector Strengthening Plan.

Topics considered within the scope of the ECCDPP include:

- issues and actions that progress the objectives of the ECCDPP and improve socio-economic targets in the National Agreement
- reviewing and creating new partnerships, including place-based partnerships to support Priority Reform One
- strengthening the community-controlled early childhood sector aligned with Priority Reform Two
- transforming government agencies and their operations that unfairly impact Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, under Priority Reform Three
- developing community-led data policies in accordance with Priority Reform Four
- issues and actions related to prevention and early intervention.

The ECCDPP objectives are pursued through an agreed annual workplan and a consensus-based decision-making process. The ECCDPP members jointly determine which topics fall within scope, and a formal dispute-resolution process supports clarity and collaboration when consensus cannot be reached.

⁵² Department of Education 2022, Agreement to Implement the Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership, Australian Government. Available at: <https://www.education.gov.au/closing-gap/resources/agreement-implement-ecpp>

Together, these functions position the ECCDPP as a shared decision-making and policy coordination mechanism within the Closing the Gap architecture, supporting joined-up policy development while respecting the roles and responsibilities of governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partners.

Membership, roles and responsibilities

Each half of the ECCDPP have their members and their partners. At the time of this evaluation (June 2025 to January 2026, membership in the ECCDPP includes:

Table 8: Membership in the ECCDPP

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives		Government representatives	
Members	Partners	Members	Partners
• SNAICC – National Voice for Our Children, Co-chair • National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation • First Peoples Disability Network • Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre • Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated • Aboriginal Family Support Services	• SNAICC – National Voice for our Children • Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Protection Peak • NSW Child, Family and Community Peak Aboriginal Corporation	• The Australian Government Department of Education, Co-chair • ACT Education Directorate • NSW Department of Education • NT Department of Children and Families • QLD Department of Education • SA Office for Early Childhood Development • Tas Department for Education, Children and Young People • Vic Department of Education • WA Department of Communities	• The Australian Government Department of Social Services and National Indigenous Australians Agency • ACT Health and Community Services Directorate • NSW Department of Communities and Justice • NT Department of Education and Training • QLD Department of Families, Disability Services, and Child Safety • SA Department for Child Protection • Tas Department for Education, Children and Young People • Vic Department of Families, Fairness and Housing • WA Department of Education
<i>Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives:</i> • Joanne Della Bona, Coolabaroo • Darcy Cavanagh, REFOCUS • Paul Gray, Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research • Garth Morgan, ChangeWise • Elizabeth Cox, Wunan Foundation			

In practice, early childhood care and development policy is shared across multiple government portfolios, including education, health, child protection, and children and families. The ECCDPP is designed to operate within this context of joint responsibility. Government representatives are expected to bring cross-portfolio perspectives to the partnership, supported by internal coordination within jurisdictions and, where appropriate, the participation of additional partners from relevant departments. This shared responsibility is central to the ECCDPP's function, enabling joined-up policy discussion and reducing fragmentation across early years systems.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander membership within the ECCDPP is structured to reflect sector representation rather than jurisdictional geography. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives, including Coalition of Peaks members and independent representatives, are collectively nominated to bring the perspectives, expertise, and priorities of the Aboriginal community-controlled early childhood sector and related community organisations. They do not represent individual states or territories. This approach is intended to ensure the First Nations caucus reflects sectoral knowledge and lived experience across the early childhood continuum, rather than mirroring government jurisdictional arrangements.

As detailed within the ECCDPP Agreement to Implement,⁵³ all representatives are responsible for developing a joined-up approach to policy by:

1. Developing a joined-up approach to the early childhood care and development policy area including:
 - a. identifying opportunities to work more effectively across governments
 - b. reducing gaps and duplication, and
 - c. improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's early childhood outcomes.
2. Agreeing the priorities and work plan for the ECCDPP
 - a. conducting and commissioning research and studies, analysing data and information, preparing reports
 - b. developing recommendations and taking forward action through the implementation approaches of the National Agreement, and
 - c. tracking and reporting on progress.

The government Parties will:

1. Liaise with other agencies in their jurisdiction to develop cross-agency perspectives to inform the work of the ECCDPP.
2. Engage with other organisations to seek expert advice.
3. Engage with relevant ministers and seek ministerial clearance of key actions for the ECCDPP agreement, as required.
4. Consider how recommendations of the ECCDPP and actions agreed can be implemented in their jurisdiction, including through the implementation planning process or more urgent action.
5. Communicate the work of the ECCDPP to other agencies in their jurisdiction.
6. Share data with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives, where government is the owner of that data and privacy or other requirements allow, to inform shared decision-making.

The Coalition of Peaks Parties will:

1. Liaise across the Coalition of Peaks and their membership and bring the perspectives of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities and organisations, their expertise, and their lived experiences to the deliberations of the partnership.
2. Provide opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities and organisations to inform them of their concerns and how they might be ameliorated (resolved).

⁵³ Department of Education 2022, Agreement to Implement the Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership, Australian Government, *Roles and Responsibilities*. Available at: <https://www.education.gov.au/closing-gap/resources/agreement-implement-ecpp>

Strategic Plan

The ECCDPP’s three-year Strategic Plan⁵⁴ sets out a staged approach to building partnership maturity and impact. It focuses sequentially on foundation building, collaboration, and results and reflection. [Table 9](#) shows the focus and key goals for the first the ECCDPP’s Strategic Plan from 2023-2026.

Table 9: Focus and key goals for the ECCDPP's strategic plans

Year	Focus	Key Goals
Year One (2023)	Establishing foundations	Equal weighting of voices; identify reform priorities; align across government silos; set research agenda.
Year Two (2024)	Strengthening connection and collaboration	Increase visibility and accountability to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities; collaborate with other policy partnerships; translate priorities into tangible policy and funding reforms.
Year Three (2025)	Measuring progress and learning	Assess partnership function and impact; consolidate reforms; identify opportunities for continuous improvement.

The Strategic Plan provides a roadmap for how the ECCDPP sought to embed shared decision-making, strengthen relationships, and build capacity for sustained system reform in the first three years of operation. The ECCDPP also has publicly available annual reports that describe their progress and achievements from the year in alignment with the Strategic Plan.

⁵⁴ the ECCDPP, (2023), ‘Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership Three-Year Strategic Plan’, Available at: [Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership. Three-Year Strategic Plan. October 2023](#) [Accessed on: 17 Oct. 2025]

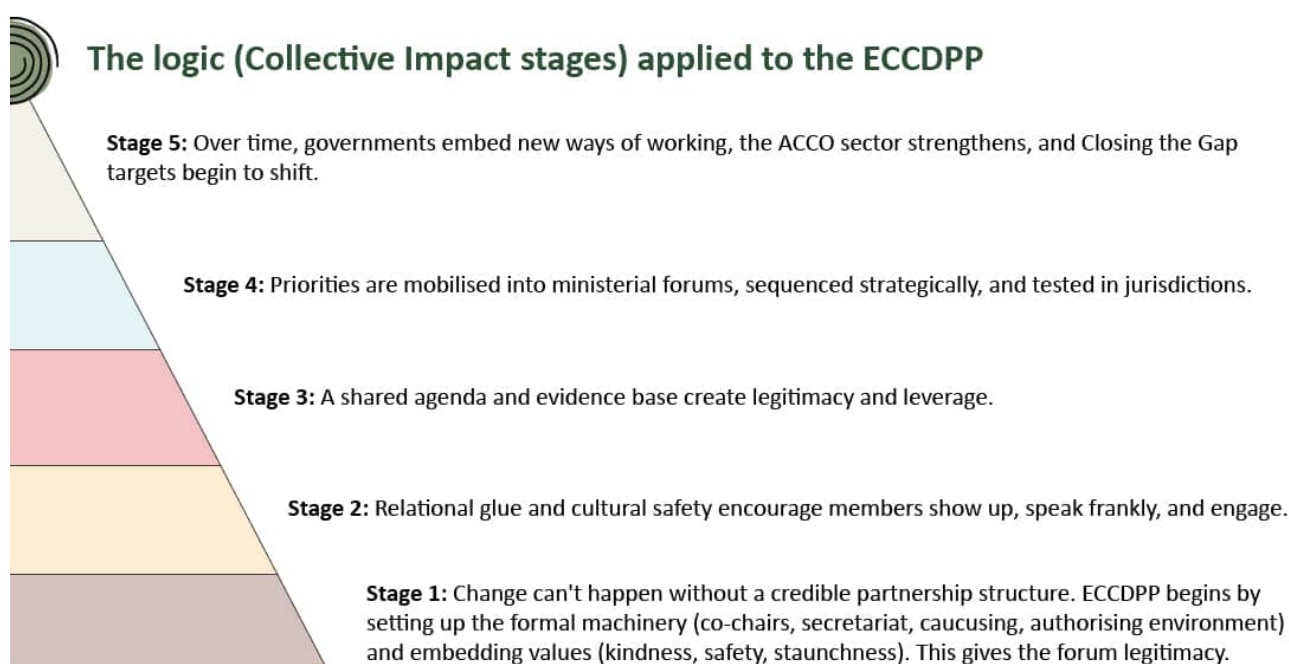
Appendix B: Expanded Theory of Change

To support interpretation of the findings and recommendations, *yamagigu* developed a Collective Impact-informed Theory of Change for the ECCDPP. This Theory of Change recognises that shared decision-making partnerships do not operate as linear programs with direct attribution between activity and outcome. Instead, they evolve through stages of maturity, with influence emerging over time as relational and structural conditions are established.

The Collective Impact-informed Framework is particularly suited to the ECCDPP context. It reflects members' repeated emphasis on the importance of trust, caucusing, stewardship, and negotiated pathways to agreement. It also acknowledges that meaningful reform cannot occur until a stable partnership 'container' is built, followed by shared priorities, coordinated action, and aligned authorising pathways.

Rather than treating outcomes as the sole measure of success, Theory of Change highlights the enabling conditions required for outcomes to emerge. These include a common agenda, shared measurement, mutually reinforcing activities across jurisdictions, continuous communication, and sustained backbone support through the Co-secretariat. These conditions are not peripheral to impact; they are the infrastructure that makes impact possible.

Figure 10: The ECCDPP Theory of Change overview



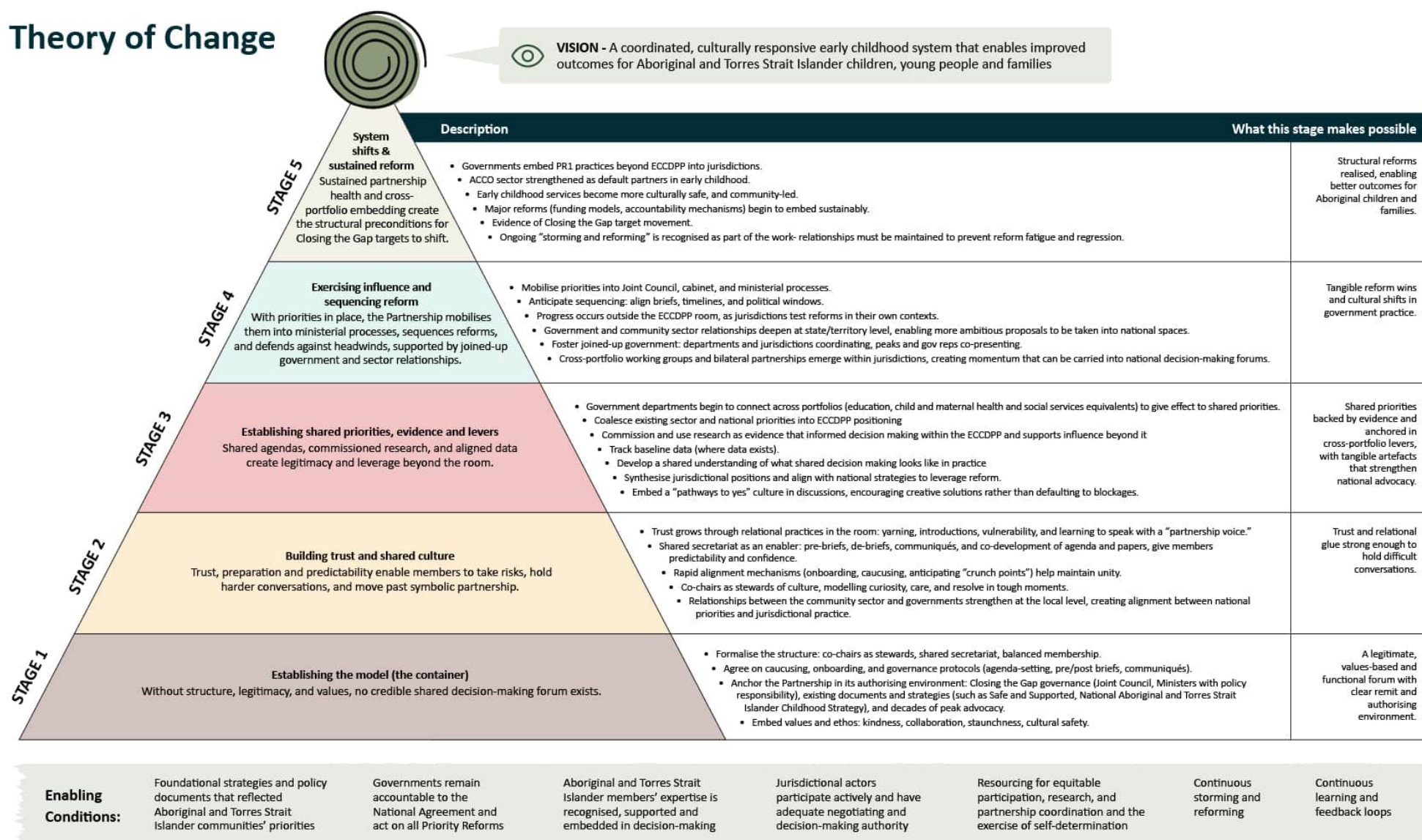
This Theory of Change is intentionally designed at a system and partnership level. It does not prescribe service models or implementation approaches. Instead, it describes the shared conditions, practices, and pathways through which the ECCDPP enables reform. These pathways are expected to be interpreted and enacted differently across urban, regional, and remote contexts, and through community-led models appropriate to place.

Theory of Change has been informed by document review, observation of the ECCDPP processes, and consultation insights. It is intended as an interpretive and sense-making tool, not a predictive model. Its purpose is to make visible how influence is built, where it can stall, and what needs to be nurtured at each stage for shared decision-making to translate into durable policy and system reform.

The diagram should be read alongside the findings in chapter 4, which provide empirical grounding for each stage of the pathway.



Figure 11: The ECCDPP Theory of Change



Appendix C: Evaluation domains, questions and sub-questions

Evaluation domains

The evaluation explores three core domains aligned to the ECCDPP's expanded Theory of Change, Priority Reforms and Clauses 32(a)–(C) of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (National Agreement). The domains below are structured to explore not just implementation but contribution to long-term systemic reform. Each domain reflects key elements of the Priority Reforms as follows:

Partnership Health

Focuses on how effectively the ECCDPP is operating as a genuine shared decision-making mechanism. This includes governance, relational practice, and mutual accountability. Given the interrelationship between Priority Reforms, Partnership Health also examines Priority Reform Three's call for transformed government systems, and Priority Reform Four's emphasis on shared access to data and information.

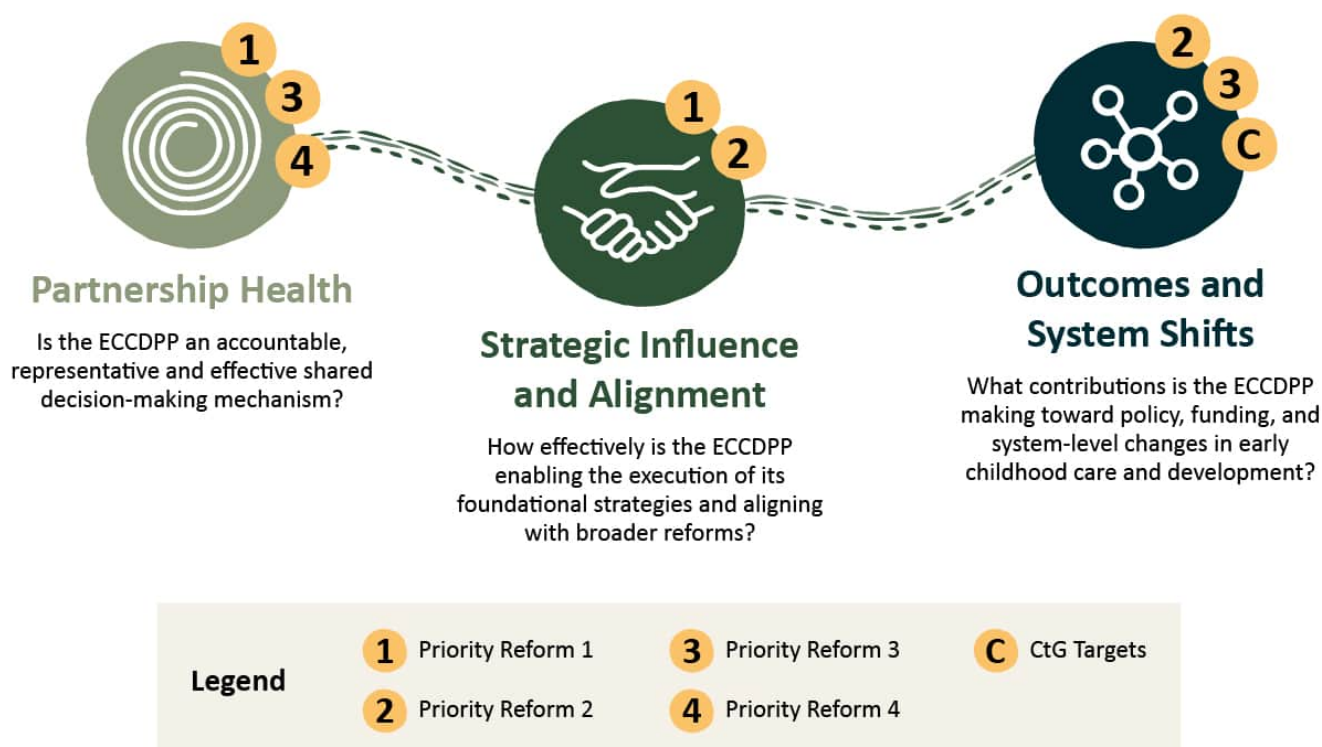
Strategic Influence and Alignment

Explores how the ECCDPP enables the execution of foundational strategies (such as Safe and Supported: National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2030, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy and the Sector Strengthening Plan: Early Childhood Care and Development), informed broader decision-making, and aligns with broader reform agendas. This domain reflects Priority Reform One's shared decision-making and Priority Reform Two's focus on strengthening the Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisation (ACCO) sector.

Outcomes and System Shifts

Examines the ECCDPP's contributions to tangible policy, funding, and system-level changes in early childhood. This includes how ECCDPP outputs shape decision-making, influence cross-government coordination, and support longer-term change. This domain will focus on early indicators of influence rather than attempting to attribute long-term outcomes at this stage. This domain reflects progress Priority Reform Two's drive for strong, self-determined ACCO leadership, Priority Reform Three's structural transformation of mainstream government systems, and Priority Reform Four's focus on data sovereignty, transparency, and continuous learning.

Figure 12: Evaluation domains



Evaluation sub-questions

For each domain, a focus question and set of sub-questions guide inquiry into key areas of implementation, contribution and change. The sub-questions reflect the ECCDPP's purpose, Theory of Change, and clause responsibilities under the National Agreement.

Domain	Focus	Clause Alignment	Sub questions
 1: Partnership Health	Is the ECCDPP an accountable, representative and effective shared decision-making mechanism?	32(a), 32(b), 32.2, 32.3, 32.5	- Is the ECCDPP's governance structure and planning processes clearly defined, culturally safe and effective in supporting shared decision-making and progressing agreed priorities? - Is the composition of the Partnership representative, balanced and seen as legitimate by stakeholders? - Do members feel they have adequate negotiating and decision-making authority? - How strong are the relational dynamics within the ECCDPP, and how have they supported effective collaboration and decision-making?

Domain	Focus	Clause Alignment	Sub questions
 2: Strategic Influence and Alignment	How effectively is the ECCDPP enabling the execution of its foundational strategies and aligning with broader reforms?	32.3, 32.5, 32(d), 32(e), 32(f), 32(h)	• How effectively is the ECCDPP progressing the execution of its foundational strategies and shared priorities? • How well does the ECCDPP align with other Closing the Gap initiatives, including jurisdictional reforms, Policy Partnerships, and sector strategies? • What mechanisms support the ECCDPP to remain strategically aligned while responsive to community priorities and system change opportunities? • How are members disseminating ECCDPP insights and coordinating follow-up action? • In what ways have ECCDPP relationships contributed to its credibility, positioning, and strategic influence?
 3: Outcomes and System Shifts	What contributions is the ECCDPP making toward policy, funding, and system-level changes in early childhood care and development?	32(g), 33, 32(e), 34(a), 34(c)	• To what extent are ECCDPP recommendations contributing to changes in early childhood policy, funding, or program decisions at national and jurisdictional levels including through its engagement with Joint Council? • To what extent is the ECCDPP contributing to more culturally safe, integrated, and community-led early childhood service models? • What evidence is there of more relational, joined-up, and accountable systems across governments and portfolios in response to ECCDPP contributions? • What early indicators suggest that ECCDPP contributions are supporting improved outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families?

Appendix D: Joint Council recommendations

This appendix summarises the recommendations put forward by the ECCDPP to the Joint Council on Closing the Gap. All recommendations were accepted in July 2024. The table below outlines each recommendation, the formal response from Joint Council, and progress to date as reported through the ECCDPP 2024 Annual Report.

Table 10: ECCDPP Joint Council Recommendations as stated within the ECCDPP 2024 Annual report

Recommendation	Action from Joint Council	Progress
1. The delivery and publication of the 2023 Annual Report and Three-Year Strategic Plan	Noted	The 2023 Annual Report was published in August 2024. The Strategic Plan will be published as of February 2025.
2. The finalisation of the first two commissioned research projects of the ECCDPP: a. Funding Model Options for ACCO Integrated Early Years Services. b. Evidence review on optimal hours of early childhood education and care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children	Noted	Both reports have been finalised and published as of July 2024: - Funding Model Options for ACCO Integrated Early Years Services Final Report. - Evidence on optimal hours of ECEC for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children.
3. That jurisdictions develop implementation advice in response to the findings of the research reports commissioned by the ECCDPP and report progress through the implementation planning reports and the Partnership's Annual Reports to Joint Council.	Agreed	Priorities 2A and 2B were agreed to by the ECCDPP in June 2023 to progress this recommendation.

Recommendation	Action from Joint Council	Progress
4. That the Australian Government partner with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, in line with the principles of shared decision-making, in the establishment and process for the government appointment of a legislated, independent and empowered National Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People (National Commissioner). The National Commissioner should be established within the lifespan of the Safe and Supported: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan 2023-2026, to drive progress against Closing the Gap Outcomes 2, 3, 4, 12 and 13 and the cross-cutting priority area of disability. To support this work, all jurisdictions will continue to commit to implementing the minimum requirements for independent, effective and empowered Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Commissioners or similar that is being progressed as an action under Action 7 of the Safe and Supported: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan 2023- 2026**	Agreed	The establishment of the National Commissioner was announced on 4 October 2024 and is operational as of 13 January 2025.
5. That jurisdictions develop coordinated responses to reviews and inquiries relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families with disability in partnership with community, relevant peaks and the sector, in line with the Partnership's cross-cutting remit and with reference to the Disability Sector Strengthening Plan.	Agreed	Priority 4B was agreed to by the ECCDPP in July 2024 to progress this recommendation, led by the Department of Social Services (DSS) and First Peoples Disability Network (FPDN).
6. That the Commonwealth develop actions to implement the Stronger ACCOs, Stronger Families review, with other jurisdictions to provide advice on relevant recommendations of the review. That all jurisdictions report on progress through the implementation planning process and the Partnership's Annual Reports to Joint Council.	Agreed	In August 2024, DSS finalised the Stronger ACCOs, Stronger Families (SASF) Part 2 project. The outcomes and recommendations of both SASF Part 1, which resulted in SNAICC's Stronger ACCOs, Stronger Families report, and SASF Part 2 are informing the design of future DSS grant policy and processes. Priority 1A agreed to by the ECCDPP in June 2024 will progress this recommendation.

Recommendation	Action from Joint Council	Progress
7. That jurisdictions collaborate on improving the transparency and effectiveness of reporting on Closing the Gap in partnership with the Policy Partnerships, drawing on the lessons learned through the ECCDPP	Agreed	Ongoing reporting processes for jurisdictions to update the Partnership on progress towards the ECCDPP Priorities have been established. The ECCDPP is working with NIAA to link into existing reporting on the Closing the Gap Priority Reforms and Targets relevant to the ECCDPP, including reporting on progress to implement the recommendations of the Productivity Commission Review into Closing the Gap. the ECCDPP Co-chairs are also working with other Policy Partnership Co-chairs to improve governance processes via the Policy Partnership Co-chairs forum.

* One government party abstained from agreeing to one of the Joint Council recommendations. The government party has since indicated their support for the intent of this recommendation through other governance channels.

** The WA Government's position on this recommendation is 'supported in principle noting the governance for this matter remains within the Safe and Supported Framework.'

Appendix E: Policy landscape

This appendix provides a point-in-time overview of the national policy, governance, and accountability frameworks that shape the early childhood care and development system within which the ECCDPP operates. It focuses on national strategies, reform architecture, and oversight mechanisms relevant to shared decision-making under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (National Agreement).

This appendix is not intended to provide a comprehensive account of state and territory policies or programs. Jurisdictional implementation continues to evolve and is addressed elsewhere in the report where supported by evaluation evidence.

National early childhood and family policy strategies

National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy (2021)

The strategy provides a roadmap for improving early childhood outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, with a focus on culturally responsive services, family support, and community-led approaches.

Early Years Strategy (2024 – 2034)

The Australian Government's Early Years Strategy provides a whole-of-government approach to improving outcomes for children aged zero to five years. It emphasises the importance of integrated services, family support, and early intervention, with a strong focus on equity and inclusion for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Early Childhood Care and Development Sector Strengthening Plan

The Sector Strengthening Plan outlines priorities for building a strong, sustainable early childhood system, with a focus on workforce, service integration, and strengthening Aboriginal community-controlled early childhood services. The ECCDPP's work has been shaped by and contributes to this broader reform direction.

Early childhood education and care quality frameworks

National Quality Framework (NQF) for Early Childhood Education and Care

The National Quality Framework (NQF) provides a national approach to regulation, assessment and quality improvement for early childhood education and care and outside school hours care services across Australia. The NQF is underpinned by two national approved learning frameworks. The Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF) V2.0 2022 is Australia's national guiding document for early childhood education, providing principles, practices and learning outcomes for children from birth to five years.

Child and family health frameworks

National Framework for Universal Child and Family Health Services

This framework outlines the provision of universal health and development services for children and families, supporting early identification and intervention for vulnerable children.

Child safety and family wellbeing frameworks

There are several policies and strategic frameworks that have historically influenced the child safety and family support landscape.

Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children (2021 - 2031)

Safe and Supported is Australia's national child protection framework, developed in partnership with state and territory governments and collaboratively with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership Group. It sets out a shared agenda for improving child safety, wellbeing, and outcomes, with a particular emphasis on prevention, early intervention, and addressing the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in child protection systems.

First Aboriginal Action Plan (2023 - 2026)

Forms a critical component of Australia's national approach for child protection under Safe and Supported. Developed through genuine partnership between governments and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership Group, the Action Plan sets out targeted strategies to address the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in child protection systems, deliver on Target 12 of the National Agreement and to drive systemic reform. The key objective is to deliver transformational change towards an Aboriginal led sector and Aboriginal led decision-making for Aboriginal children, families and communities.

National Principles for Child Safe Organisations

These principles provide a nationally consistent approach to creating child-safe environments across all sectors, including early childhood education, health and community services.

Family Matters Report (Annual)

The Family Matters campaign, led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, publishes an annual report tracking the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in child protection systems. This report is developed by SNAICC – National Voice for our Children (SNAICC) annually and provides data, analysis, and recommendations to governments and stakeholders, highlighting progress and areas requiring urgent action.

Accountability and oversight

Governments have enacted accountability and oversight systems to influence the early childhood education and care landscape. Also discussed are the recent inquiries and reviews into early childhood, child development and related systems.

Productivity Commission – Review of the National Agreement Closing the Gap (2024); Closing the Gap Annual Data Compilation Report (annual); Closing the Gap Information Repository Dashboard (live)

The Productivity Commission is responsible for monitoring and reporting on the progress of the National Agreement. It assesses government performance against agreed targets and Priority Reforms, providing independent analysis and recommendations for improvement. The review had six key findings and made four recommendations. Some of the findings that relate to the ECCDPP include:

- Commitment to share power and decision-making with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is rarely achieved in practice.
- Progress in the Priority Reforms is not occurring at the necessary pace.
- Progress to transfer funding and decision-making to Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCOS) is slow.
- Outcomes for early childhood development are worsening.

Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-Led Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2025)

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations play a central role in accountability through co-designed review processes. These include the establishment of independent Aboriginal-led bodies to monitor Closing the Gap implementation, ensuring that community perspectives and priorities are reflected in reporting and evaluation.

The review set out 12 key findings and nine recommendations. Some of the key findings from their reports were:

- The Closing the Gap architecture is broadly sound but is inhibited by inaction.
- A clear imbalance of responsibilities is impeding implementation.
- The cultural load is heavy.
- Accountability and transparency are critical.
- Funding reform is needed.
- The National Agreement is grounded in principles of global human rights standards, including self-determination and non-discrimination.

Report on Government Services (ROGS)

The Productivity Commission's annual ROGS provides comprehensive national data on government spend across key areas. It enables benchmarking across jurisdictions and informs policy development and resource allocation. Chapters include:

- Early Childhood Education and Care (chapter 3)
- Health including sub sections on child and maternal health (chapter 10)
- Child Protection (chapter 16)

Australian Early Development Census (AEDC)

The AEDC is a national data collection initiative that measures the developmental progress of children in their first year of full-time school. It informs policy and service delivery, highlighting areas for targeted support.

Productivity Commission Inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care (2023)

This recent inquiry examined the accessibility, affordability, and the quality of early childhood education and care in Australia, with recommendations to improve outcomes for children, families, and the workforce, to address barriers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. The ongoing role of the Productivity Commission ensures a level of accountability and transparency in implementing Priority Reform One, emphasising structural transformation rooted in Indigenous leadership.

Australian Child Maltreatment Study (2023)

This national study provided the comprehensive prevalence data on child maltreatment in Australia, highlighting the need for strengthened prevention, early intervention, and trauma-informed responses.

Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2013 – 2017)

This landmark national inquiry examined systemic failures in protecting children from sexual abuse in institutions, resulting in wide-ranging recommendations to strengthen child safety, reporting, and redress. Its legacy continues to inform national frameworks, including the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations.

Gillard Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care in South Australia (2022 – 2023)

Chaired by Hon. Julia Gillard AC, this commission was established to review and recommend reforms for South Australia's early childhood education and care system. The final report delivered a blueprint for universal access to high-quality early learning, improved workforce conditions, and enhanced support for vulnerable children, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. The commission's recommendations are informing significant policy and investment decisions in South Australia.

Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory (2016 – 2017)

This inquiry exposes significant failings in the child protection and youth justice systems in the Northern Territory, leading to recommendations for systemic reform, improved cultural safety, and greater involvement of Aboriginal organisations.

Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System (2019 – 2021)

While focused on mental health, this commission highlighted the intersection between early childhood, family wellbeing, and child protection, recommending integrated, family-centred approaches.

Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry (Carmody Inquiry, 2012 – 2013)

This inquiry led to major reforms in Queensland's child protection system, including greater focus on early intervention and family support.

South Australian Child Protection Systems Royal Commission (Nyland Royal Commission, 2014 – 2016)

This commission identified systemic issues in South Australia's child protection system and made recommendations to improve safety, accountability, and service delivery.

Appendix F: Long-term reform considerations for structurally embedding shared decision-making

This Appendix outlines potential long-term reform considerations raised through consultations. These are not findings about the ECCDPP's current performance, nor recommendations for immediate implementation. They are included to respond to consistent feedback from members about the structural limits of shared decision-making under existing policy and funding arrangements, and to identify possible areas where the ECCDPP could, in future, develop advice for Joint Council within its agreed remit.

The evaluation finds that the ECCDPP has demonstrated legitimacy and authority as a shared decision-making mechanism. However, its influence remains constrained by the fiscal and procedural architecture of government. The next step is to translate the ECCDPP's relational achievements into structural ones, embedding shared decision-making within the financial systems that drive reform.

Purpose of inclusion:

This Appendix is intended to:

- acknowledge the structural constraints identified by members
- document federated funding models as part of the broader policy landscape influencing shared decision-making
- signal a potential area for future advice or exploration, should the ECCDPP and Joint Council wish to consider how funding architecture could better support shared priorities.

These considerations should be read as contextual and future-facing. They do not form part of the evaluation's findings or recommendations, and no action is implied or required.

Options for developing advice on a Federated Funding Model:

Members discussed the potential value of funding models that reward alignment with shared priorities while preserving jurisdictional autonomy. Once a shared reasoning framework is in place, governments could move toward a federated model that aligns or partially pools funding across early childhood, family support, and health systems. This could include bilateral agreements with clear milestones, incentive funding linked to progress, and shared outcome measures. The goal is to move from parallel investments to co-investment under shared principles.

Members cautioned that existing bilateral funding agreements often include restrictive criteria that exclude Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCOS) and limit genuine co-design. Any future funding reform would therefore need to explicitly support community-led design, flexible regional application, and Aboriginal data sovereignty.

Potential use of bilateral agreements:

Rather than requiring full pooling of funds, the model could begin with **aligned bilateral agreements**, supported by a Commonwealth incentive layer. This is similar in design to the *National Housing Accord* and *National Partnership for Remote Housing in the Northern Territory*, where payments are released upon delivery of agreed milestones.

In this model:

Baseline funding remains with each jurisdiction.

Incentive payments are unlocked when reforms or outcomes are achieved (e.g., increased ACCO commissioning, adoption of relational funding principles, improved workforce retention, or implementation of shared data systems).

Joint accountability is maintained through shared metrics, dashboards, and transparent reporting cycles.

This approach would allow the ECCDPP to operationalise shared decision-making through fiscal levers rather than policy rhetoric. It would also give governments predictable, multi-year funding horizons while rewarding alignment with the ECCDPP's Theory of Change.

Incentive funding to increase accountability:

Recent national reforms demonstrate how incentive-based funding can strengthen accountability in a federated system without requiring structural overreach. When authority is constitutionally dispersed, the Commonwealth's most effective lever for driving reform lies in funding design rather than directive control. Performance-linked incentives align effort across jurisdictions by rewarding delivery, transparency, and collaboration.

Two housing examples illustrate how this logic works in practice. The National Housing Accord (2024) sets national housing supply targets while allowing states to retain delivery control. The Commonwealth uses performance payments and enabling infrastructure funds to reward jurisdictions that exceed their agreed housing targets.⁵⁵ Similarly, the National Partnership for Remote Housing in the Northern Territory ties Commonwealth payments to clear milestones, such as the number of houses built, improvements in housing condition, local employment targets, and reporting standards.⁵⁶

Additionally, a similar model is used in education. The Better and Fairer Schools Agreement (2025–2034) and the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement – Full and Fair Funding 2025–2034 (collectively known as the BFSA) establish shared national objectives for student outcomes and set national targets with bilateral agreements linking Commonwealth funding to reform commitments. While each jurisdiction retains control over delivery, progress is monitored through annual performance reporting requirements under the BFSA and the Australian Education Act 2013.⁵⁷

While the above examples show that incentive-based funding can balance autonomy with accountability, giving states and territories flexibility in delivery but reward for meeting shared outcomes, evidence of their full success is still emerging. These examples also operate within the Commonwealth's Federation Funding Agreements Framework, which guides the design principles for bilateral funding arrangements that link payments to performance and outcomes. The framework offers a structural precedent for how partnerships like the ECCDPP could strengthen alignment between shared policy priorities and funding architecture.

⁵⁵ Australian Government Treasury 2023, National Housing Accord, Department of the Treasury, Canberra. Available at: <https://treasury.gov.au/policy-topics/housing/accord>

⁵⁶ Australian Government & Northern Territory Government 2024, Northern Territory Remote Housing Schedule — Federation Funding Agreement 2024-2034, National Indigenous Australians Agency, Canberra. Available at: <https://federalfinancialrelations.gov.au/agreements/northern-territory-remote-housing>

⁵⁷ Australian Government Department of Education 2024, Better and Fairer Schools Agreement 2025–2034, Department of Education, Canberra. Available at: <https://www.education.gov.au/recurrent-funding-schools/national-school-reform-agreement/better-and-fairer-schools-agreement-20252034#toc-bilateral-agreements-under-the-better-and-fairer-schools-agreement>

Case study: National Housing Accord as an evolving cross-jurisdictional funding architecture

Background and purpose

The National Housing Accord was launched by the Australian, state and territory governments to drive a national increase in housing supply, unlock investment, and improve affordability. Under the Accord, governments agreed a shared target: to deliver 1.2 million new, well-located homes over five years starting 1 July 2024.⁵⁸

The Accord is designed to tackle structural reform in housing supply: aligning land and planning reform, infrastructure investment, and fiscal incentives across jurisdictions.

Design and mechanics

Jurisdictions commit to agreed implementation schedules detailing actions each will take. The Commonwealth offers incentive payments: For example, the New Homes Bonus program, offering up to ~\$3 billion in performance-based payments to states/territories that exceed their target share under the Accord.⁵⁹

States and territories maintain existing funding but commit to the national target and unlock additional support when milestones are reached. The Commonwealth also committed ~\$1.5 billion via the Housing Support Program for enabling infrastructure, with further budgets for modern methods of construction and planning reform.

The model uses shared outcome-focus and performance-linked funding rather than simply continuing separate siloed programs.

Results and strengths

- It provides a visible national target that aligns all jurisdictions around one measurable outcome (1.2 million homes).
- The incentive design gives the Commonwealth a lever to influence jurisdictional behaviour without directly dictating state policy.
- The structure blends alignment with flexibility: states retain their budgets but coordinate under shared logic and outcome measures.

Challenges and lessons

- Early data suggests the supply trajectory may fall short: the National Housing Supply and Affordability Council forecasts gross supply over the Accord period will reach ~938,000 new homes under current settings, below the 1.2 million target.⁶⁰
- Critiques point to slow progress in approvals, regional variation, and structural barriers (land supply, planning delays) that incentive payments alone may not overcome.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Australian Government Treasury (2023) Delivering the National Housing Accord. Available at: <https://treasury.gov.au/policy-topics/housing/accord>

⁵⁹ Australia Government Treasury (2024) 'Increasing housing supply'. Available at: <https://treasury.gov.au/policy-topics/housing/increasing-housing-supply>

⁶⁰ National Housing Supply and Affordability Council (2025) 'National Housing Supply and Affordability Council calls for reform, investment and innovation', media release, 21 May. Available at: <https://nhsac.gov.au/news/release-state-housing-system-report-2025>

⁶¹ Kohler, A. (2025) "Housing supply without controlling demand suggests National Housing Accord won't fix affordability", ABC News, 5 October. Available at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-10-06/house-affordability-density-accord-first-home-buyer-cgt-student/105853500>

- The need for data, accountability, and coordination across jurisdictions remains high. Without structural reforms in planning and regulation, funding incentives may not be sufficient.

In response to advice from the Housing Policy Partnership and sustained advocacy, the Australian Government has since revised elements of the model. Housing Australia's Round 3 includes a dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander funding pool, concierge support for ACCOs, strengthened alignment with the National Agreement, and minimum tenancy targets for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households.⁶² These changes demonstrate how shared decision-making mechanisms can surface design flaws and prompt iterative reform over time, rather than delivering fully effective models at inception.

Relevance for the ECCDPP and shared-decision-making model

- The combination of a shared national target, common logic, and incentive funding is a replicable architecture for cross-jurisdictional reform.
- It demonstrates how the Commonwealth can use funding design to influence state systems without needing full legislative control, relevant because early childhood systems similarly sit across jurisdictions.
- The model underscores the importance of measuring outcomes, aligning data systems, and embedding accountability mechanisms.

For the ECCDPP, the National Housing Accord is not a template to be replicated, but an illustrative example of how national targets, incentive funding, and jurisdictional flexibility can be combined – as well as where such models can fall short without Aboriginal-led design from the outset. The case underscores the importance of embedding ACCO leadership, data visibility, and dedicated funding pathways early in reform design. It also highlights the value of shared decision-making forums in identifying shortcomings and reshaping funding architecture over time, rather than assuming alignment will automatically produce equitable outcomes.

How this could support better data transparency:

Currently, data is collected inconsistently across jurisdictions (different systems, definitions, and reporting cycles), no one entity owns the job of bringing it together and funding for data and evaluation is short-term or siloed inside programs. Data is not coordinated, comparable, or funded as shared infrastructure.

A federated funding model could address this in several ways:

a. It makes data a funded enabler

Under a federated model, 'data, evidence, and measurement' would be recognised as one of the core enablers of system reform. That means baseline and longitudinal data become part of the investment logic, something governments must jointly resource.

b. It creates a mandate for shared measurement.

Once governments agree on shared outcomes, a common evidence base is needed to track progress. That creates the political and technical will to agree on what counts as a baseline, how data will be collected, and who governs it.

⁶² The Hon Clare O'Neil MP (2025) 'Albanese Government delivering biggest HAFF round yet', media release, 23 November. Available at: <https://ministers.treasury.gov.au/ministers/clare-oneil-2025/media-releases/albanese-government-delivering-biggest-haff-round-yet#:~:text=Round%203%20changes,unlock%20larger%2C%20more%20ambitious%20projects>.

c. It aligns incentives around transparency.

When funding is federated and performance is shared, governments have a reason to share data. Everyone's accountability is visible, so everyone benefits from high-quality, shared baselines and reporting.

d. It can fund Aboriginal data sovereignty mechanisms.

A federated model could allocate dedicated funding for Aboriginal-led data governance ensuring that baseline data is collected, interpreted, and stored according to community-defined protocols.

As discussed in Finding 8, the First Nations caucus' call for baseline data is about visibility and credibility, to see that system change can be measured from a known starting point.

The Shared Reasoning Framework is the why; the Federated Funding Model is the how. Together, they embed shared decision-making into the machinery of government — linking the ECCDPP's moral legitimacy to structural authority.

If implemented, this model could:

- increase fiscal alignment without requiring constitutional change
- enable consistent accountability across governments through measurable outcomes
- incentivise system reform without penalising slower jurisdictions
- make ACCO solutions visible, valued, and sustainably funded.

The result would be a system where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led early childhood reform is not an adjunct to bureaucracy but a design feature within it, anchored in shared reasoning, mutual accountability, and coordinated investment.



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