



Indigenous Languages Priorities

“Language is a fundamental human right. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are the first languages of Australia. They are the very essence of our identity, well-being, and knowledge. They are our connection to Country, Cultures, and Kinships. Australia has one of the highest rates of language loss in the world. Past colonial policies deliberately broke our connection to languages and therefore cultural and spiritual identity. To this day, policies fail to recognise our languages and to nurture them. Immediate action is required to reverse this loss to allow our languages and our voice to once again thrive and survive.” – International Decade of Indigenous Languages Directions Group, 12-13 September 2022

Purpose of the paper

The *Indigenous Languages Priorities* paper has been developed by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages Directions Group (Directions Group). The Directions Group advocates for major reforms, such as national legislation to protect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, increased investment in community language activities, and compensation for the destruction of languages caused by assimilation policies that prevented language transmission and removed our people from their families and lands.

The policy priorities outlined in this paper have been provided to the Australian Government and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages Policy Partnership (LPP) as well as informing the development of [Australia’s Action Plan for the International Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022–2032 \(Voices of Country\)](#). These priorities reflect what we know to be important to our communities, networks, and our people. Australia is a diverse nation of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures each with their own language and contemporary language context. This is the key challenge to providing a national voice to a national process. The policy priorities in the paper also align with Outcome 16 under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (the National Agreement) to ensure languages are supported and flourishing and Target 16: *by 2031, there is a sustained increase in number and strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages being spoken.*

This paper does not specifically reference new and emerging languages in respect to the right of individual communities to determine how new languages are considered. Detailed consideration of Translating and Interpreting for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages was limited when developing this paper by resourcing constraints. The Directions Group supports the call for more coordination and sector support for the Interpreting and Translating sector as determined by interpreting and translating sector experts and the LPP.

The implementation of these priorities requires meaningful partnerships and shared decision making with relevant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, stakeholders, and organisations. Co-design of policies, activities and reform, involving community members as experts and equal collaborators from the beginning, is essential for the success of the priority objectives outlined below. Dr. Terri Janke’s [True Track Principles](#) are a recommended guide for working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to implement the language priorities. In this paper, references to ‘we’ refer to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members of the Directions Group.

The three priority objectives are:

- Stopping the loss and supporting languages to reawaken, grow and flourish
- Ensure continued growth and security of investment
- A new coordinated way forward

The five priority policy reforms are:

- Develop a national approach
- Sector strengthening
- Access to education and employment opportunities
- Truth telling and celebration
- Community access to information



Develop a national approach

Government policies since settlement have been responsible for the decline of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. Policies such as child removal, community relocation, and imprisoning people, and English-only compulsory education and essential services impede intergenerational transmission of language and culture. These policies have had a devastating impact on languages, cultures, health, and well-being. Some recent policies are supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages in a small way and a shift in the policy landscape has increased engagement.

It is timely that the Australian Government considers how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages survival, recognition and use can be supported through legislation. It is also critical that national priorities translate across state, territory, and local governments. The LPP will help to coordinate efforts at the national, state, and local level. This must be supported by an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led evidence base and measures of success that are relevant to community ensuring a place for reflection on and evaluation of measures and programs.

The essential work and efforts involved in language revival and maintenance far outweigh available funding, and this is an ongoing community burden. Most community-driven efforts do not receive ongoing funding, and where resources can be accessed, they are minimal. To achieve the five priority policy reforms outlined in this paper, we must secure a policy infrastructure that ensures safety, investment, and ongoing commitment across governments. The call for national legislation must include a funding model with increased investment in language centres and community activities.

Activities the sector requires to develop a national approach

- Begin exploration and consultation towards national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages legislation.
- Develop a national languages policy: to provide national direction and a policy structure for language work across Australia.
- Consider a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages commission, with an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander commissioner responsible for developing and managing funding for languages.
- Consider a relevant authority to scrutinise, report, and recommend on how mainstream policies could include measures to stop the loss of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, and – most urgently – on how aspects of proposed policies are likely to exacerbate this loss, even if unintentionally.
- Consider establishing a national body for languages that includes representation from all states and territories.
- Strongly request that state and territory governments match the level of Commonwealth Government funding on a dollar-for-dollar basis to support language work and activities until such time that a sustained funding model is implemented.
- Strongly request that all governments use and offer Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander translating and interpreter services within departments and agencies delivering services, including during recruitment and procurement activities.
- Strongly request that all governments sponsor Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff to undertake Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language courses and to promote community Language Allowances schemes that remunerate staff who use their language skills at work.
- Government services provided through the medium of the local language and employment and training people to deliver government services, while also expecting non-local people to learn the language where appropriate.
- Make interpreting and translating services available for better service delivery.
- Determine all measures for tracking progress on language work through a community co-design process.
- Changes to the Australian Intellectual Property system so that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Knowledges, including languages, are fully protected under relevant legislation.
- Ensure continued resourcing and consistent senior representation from both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and government decision makers in the LPP.
- Extend the Directions Group membership to oversee the duration of the International Decade of Languages (the Decade).
- Develop a national mechanism for community engagement, advocacy, and agency in the languages sector.
- Develop a stronger Australian evidence base around the benefits of supporting languages, noting that this evidence must be made available to communities in a form that is culturally appropriate, useful, and informative.





- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led, specific and targeted research into language use, loss, and revival, and the resulting social, emotional, and health impacts.
- Opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language experts training in critical evaluation of programs to build an evidence base that comes from solid analysis of processes, outcomes, and identifying factors that affect those outcomes.
- Continue to ensure the National Agreement on Closing the Gap includes languages measures, i.e. Target 16 and explore opportunity for embedding language measures in other Targets.
- Develop guidelines to operationalise working in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities on language priorities.





Sector strengthening

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language sector requires appropriate, safe, and secure funding to stop language loss. This policy reform is about recognising, investing, and strengthening the sector to undertake the work required to ensure the safety and security of our languages. People working in the sector require training, professional pathways, and appropriate remuneration and recognition of the multifaceted role of language experts. The sector needs to be viewed and resourced equivalently to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health sector. The sector needs to embed fee-for-service to build capacity and meet the ongoing increase in demand for language services, which is not currently sustainable. Part of this increased demand is a result of the International Decade and Target 16 of the National Agreement, which both provide a welcome spotlight on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. In addition, the sector would be greatly strengthened by infrastructure such as buildings and offices in locations accessible to communities.

Activities the sector requires to support sector strengthening

- Ensure safe and secure funding to stop language loss.
 - Develop an appropriate funding model for the languages sector.
 - Increase the number and capacity of language centres, programs and projects.
 - Establish language hubs and place-based services to support community language work.
 - Develop and implement national fee-for-service guidelines for the languages sector.
 - Support language programs across health, justice, tourism, education, economic, environmental, ecological, and the arts and culture sectors.
 - Review funding priorities of government programs in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language experts. Increase the number and capacity of language centres, language nests, hubs, mobile centres, and other community language groups, programs and projects.
 - Support communities to innovate and develop new, culturally appropriate ways to research and deliver language services.
 - Support language activities where children can receive education in their mother tongue languages.
- Develop a sector workforce strategy.
 - Identify, develop, and promote professional learning opportunities and industry pathways.
 - Identify and create language employment opportunities across the languages sector.
 - Develop national industrial awards and standards for the language sector.
 - Develop a sector workforce strategy that sets out remuneration and minimum conditions for language teachers and workers in line with specialist knowledge they hold.
 - Review and document the role of language experts to understand the value of these roles.
- Support strong governance and strategic planning.
 - Complete a stock take of the capability, funding, and services provided by language centres.
 - Support language centres with strong governance to apply for Reconciliation Australia's Indigenous Governance Program.
 - Create opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language experts to learn from international best-practice language documentation, preservation, and educational practices.
 - Identify and promote successful approaches for language revival.
 - Develop best practice guidelines for language centres organisational governance.
 - Alongside language centres, support language groups who are in the early stages of establishing their organisations.
 - Prioritise conferences, network groups, and other language ecosystems that seek to share knowledge within Australia while also looking to international examples.





Access to education and employment opportunities

This aim of language learning is to teach our kids to be cultural beings. Languages are critical to future generations. Language learning opportunities are needed in communities, families, on Country and within early learning centres and schools. The aim is to foster community-led initiatives that return control of language, culture, and heritage back to community. The educational aspect of this reform is about making languages front and centre of every Australian's learning experience. Teaching the local language should be a minimum standard across all schools. Another important aspect of education is ensuring talented Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can access tertiary education that leads to jobs that specialise and contribute to stopping the loss. The employment aspect of this reform is about embedding language positions in professions beyond education, such as health, science, social services, tourism, environmental, management, justice, media and broadcasting, and arts and culture sectors. These priorities recognise levers in education differ across state, territory and federal governments. This would ensure languages are included across all mainstream services and activities.

Activities the sector requires to support access to education and employment opportunities

Education: State and Territory Governments

- Develop funding models that can support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages education in schools.
- Commit funding for schools to develop the curriculum for local languages, including resource development, community planning, and training.
- Reintroduction of bilingual-biliterate and immersion schools and support for existing bilingual-biliterate settings secured by legislation that these schools are properly resourced to implement best-practice bilingual-biliterate models.
- Bilingual-biliterate and immersion schools required in all communities where children are still acquiring an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language as a first language.
- Create language tutoring programs within schools.
- Prioritise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander owned and run education providers for funding and support over mainstream education providers in communities where this is a priority.
- Develop guidelines for education providers about engaging language teachers.
- Give priority to both bilingual and immersion language schools and make them available to all communities that want them.

Education: Nationally

- Deliver greater support to community-led language schools.
- As ABSTUDY students can't access accredited training outside of their home state, recognise language learning as a subsidised course to support travel costs.
- Explore possible links between language centres and the Australian Government's commitment to develop a national curriculum for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages in primary schools across Australia.
- Fund more home and community-based language learning programs, starting from babies to early education, for example, mums and bubs programs, Deadly Dads, childcare, and playgroups.
- Fund community language groups to develop curriculum for their own languages.
- Remunerate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language learners who are engaged in a language course so they can maintain their income while learning.

Employment

- Support and fund the implementation of First Languages Australia's **Yalbilinya: National First Languages Education Workforce Strategy** to facilitate employment pathways in the languages education sector.
- Partnering opportunities with TAFE, tertiary, and training authorities and experts on language teaching for the delivery of accredited training.
- Create accredited university-level courses for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language teachers and linguists.





- Recognise Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems, inclusive of language, as a qualification across environmental industries.
- Continued employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rangers, including interpretive cultural rangers, in government, and other programs.
- Embed language roles and specialisation across all appropriate professions and industries.
- Create career pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander qualified teachers to move into language educator roles within schools.
- Establish grants and employment opportunities in mixed media sector that promote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors and their work.
- Support community-led training opportunities and development of facilities and ensure language training positions are paid roles with a scale that reflects their knowledge.





Truth telling and celebration

All activities and campaigns that celebrate languages and language work should be to increase support for communities' language work. The net benefit should always be towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language communities. The process of truth telling and celebration requires recognition of our right to use our languages in our everyday lives (work, community, schools, and on Country). We need to create awareness across wider Australia that our languages exist, matter and are still living. The lack of language in our everyday lives is harmful to our identity and well-being. All Australians need to recognise and celebrate the beauty and importance of our languages, and their essential role in arts, culture, knowledge, science, history, spirituality, and stories. There is also a need to pay tribute to what has been lost through a national process of truth telling that acknowledges the impact of language loss caused by the laws, policies, and practices of successive governments.

Activities the sector requires to support truth telling and celebration

- Truth telling
 - Embrace messages about language and culture that corroborate authentic knowledge and understanding of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history.
 - Acknowledge the impact of policies on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages.
- Support events, activities and campaigns that celebrate and showcase languages
 - Establish a national week for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and provide small grants to communities for local celebrations.
 - Highlight the launch of Australia's Action Plan for the Decade at PULiiMA's Indigenous Language and Technology Conference (Darwin, August 2023).
 - Support the delivery of PULiiMA Indigenous Language and Technology Conference.
 - Support opportunities that ensure people experience our history through authentic cultural content that is connected through language.
 - Support an Australia-wide connected event, or series of events, to celebrate and recognise the Decade.
 - Support language festivals at the local, regional, and national level.
- Support language usage in everyday life
 - Encourage and properly resource the use of language in all environments (work, community, school, and on Country).
 - Encourage the development of language actions, or specific plans for language in conjunction with Reconciliation Action Plans (RAP) where that is a local community priority.
 - Organisations with an Elevate RAP support community priorities and aspirations for languages.
 - Embed languages into the national calendar of significant events (National Reconciliation Week, NAIDOC, Indigenous rounds in sports).
 - Engage high-profile language ambassadors.
 - Encourage and support community-led place names and signage initiatives.
 - Support community-led media activities and programming that target language use and learning.
 - Support opportunities to learn on Country.
 - Create a glossary with appropriate terminology and meaning available for non-Indigenous institutions with a focus on language to improve communication with non-Indigenous institutions working in the languages sector.





Community access to information

This reform is about restoring and enhancing intergenerational language transmission. Communities require access to historical records to support the development of materials needed by community members learning language and teaching in local schools. This has been called for by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities for decades, much of which is outlined in the [National Indigenous Languages Collection Strategy — First Languages Australia](#). Australian governments should support community-led negotiations, treaties, activities, and international and national conventions that focus on language retrieval and return language materials, recordings, lists, documents, and other materials and resources back to community. Some communities require urgent support to document and record languages at risk, and to implement strategies for intergenerational transmission. Our people require laws to ensure that the languages remain owned by the community whether they are in tangible or intangible forms. There is an urgent immediate need to capture language and knowledge, which we are losing quickly through traditional oral ways, using modern methods, such as digitisation.

Activities the sector requires to support community access to information

- Collecting institutions be proactive in building community capability for working with archives and provide training and employment pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people to have careers in the sector.
- Collecting institutions undergo cultural safety audits and put in place plans to ensure the cultural safety of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and communities.
- Support language communities to develop protocols about how their archival information is accessed.
- Establish a dedicated service to proactively return archive materials to communities and invest in community-owned and run Keeping Places.
- States and territories review their records legislation to ensure materials can be legally repatriated to communities.
- Partner with collecting institutions (archives, libraries, land councils, museums, and galleries) to provide communities and language centres access to language documentation.
- Support a coordinated approach between organisations and institutions (such as archives, museums, libraries, and language centres) to facilitate the repatriation of language materials both within and outside Australia.
- Institutions' policies must ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities can access the historical language documentation required to reclaim their languages.
- Provide more funding for the development of dictionaries, encyclopaedias, thesauruses, grammar, and orthography documents, including learner guides.
- Ensure language knowledge is community-controlled, accessible, and digitised to be delivered throughout all levels of schooling
- Support community-controlled digitisation of language collections, resources, and materials, both written and oral.
- Support low-cost local publishing to resource local bilingual-biliterate and immersion schools for communities to learn on Country.
- Build on existing successful digitisation software in communities across Australia, such as smart phone applications.
- Provide archival training that empowers communities to engage with collected materials and manage local collections and meta data.
- Fund community recording hubs to document current speakers and their language knowledge.
- Explore and develop language programs in justice settings and with other disadvantaged or vulnerable groups.
- Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) and other collecting institutions could provide community workshops to teach people how to access, reclaim and conserve their language materials.

