



Australian Government
Australian Public Service Commission

First Nations Partnership Playbook



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Acknowledgement

The Australian Public Service Commission proudly acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia, and their continuing connection to land, sea, waterways, skies, and songlines woven throughout.

We recognise and value the ongoing leadership, contributions and work of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.

We celebrate the rich cultures of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nations and pay our respects to their Elders past and present, for they are the holders of knowledge and wisdom.

Terminology

First Nations, Indigenous, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people(s) are used interchangeably within this document.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partners, people(s), organisations and communities are used interchangeably within this document, as partners may fall into any of these categories.

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Introduction

The [National Agreement on Closing the Gap](#) was developed in genuine partnership between Australian Governments, and the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations. Through the National Agreement, governments have committed to 'building and strengthening structures that empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to share decision-making authority with governments to accelerate policy and place-based progress against Closing the Gap.' This is built on the belief that, 'when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a genuine say in the design and delivery of services that affect them, better life outcomes are achieved.'

At the heart of the National Agreement, the [Priority Reforms](#) acknowledge that governments need to change the way they work to accelerate improvements in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Priority Reform One - formal partnerships and shared decision-making – reflects the commitment of government to share decision-making with First Nations people on how programs and services are delivered to their people, in their own places and on their own Country. Priority Reform Three – transforming government organisations – recognises the need for 'systemic and structural transformation of mainstream government organisations to improve accountability and respond to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people'; this includes transformation to improve engagement.

Building the capability of the Australian Public Service to effectively and genuinely partner with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will continue to be essential to give effect to the government's commitment to the National Agreement. While areas of excellence exist in the APS, the Productivity Commission's 2024 [Review of the National Agreement](#) found that governments are still not adequately delivering on their commitments under the National Agreements Priority Reforms. Its suggestions included transforming government processes and systems to become better, more credible partners. There is a significant opportunity for the APS to better deliver for First Nations people and communities by embedding relational ways of working into the core business of government as standard practice.

Purpose

The First Nations Partnership Playbook provides the APS with practical guidance and best-practice examples on working in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The Playbook is not prescriptive, as each partnership will be unique, requiring the partners to determine arrangements that best suit their shared objectives. While the systems and structures of government can inadvertently create barriers to genuine partnership for public servants and their partners, many of the barriers are cultural and behavioural. The Playbook provides guidance on how to navigate government processes in partnership, including the practices, behaviours and cultures which enable it.

The Australian Public Service Commission is working with key government agencies to develop an Action Plan to address non-legislative barriers to partnership and shared decision-making, which have been identified during the development of the Playbook. The APSC is working to develop partnership capability through APS Academy offerings.

How to use the First Nations Partnership Playbook

The Playbook should be read alongside the [Charter of Partnerships and Engagement](#), which sets out principles for how government can put people and business at the centre of policy, implementation and delivery, and the [National Agreement](#).

The text box below includes some quick reference FAQs that will help users understand how to get the most out of the Playbook.

Why use the Playbook?

The Playbook provides public servants with guidance on navigating government systems and processes in partnership, and outlines the importance of individual behaviours and relational ways of working in achieving outcomes for First Nations peoples and communities within existing government systems.

Who should use the Playbook?

The Playbook is an internal APS resource. All public servants – regardless of their level or their role – are encouraged to engage with the Playbook.

The Playbook is not intended to be a resource for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partners. Other efforts are underway across the service to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities to partner with government.

When should the Playbook be used?

The Playbook can be used at any stage of a partnership and in any policy setting. However, it is strongly recommended that the Playbook is used before commencing any work which affects the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

What are the limitations of the Playbook?

The Playbook provides guidance that is general in nature and not an exhaustive guide. Navigating government systems and processes in genuine partnership will naturally intersect with other legislative frameworks, guides and codes. Public servants and entities are responsible for ensuring their own compliance with existing legislative frameworks while working in partnership. The Playbook serves as a starting place for partnership - public servants are encouraged to explore specific solutions and pathways based on the specific needs of their partnership and partners.

Due to the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and communities across Australia, the Playbook cannot provide specific guidance for working in place or with a specific sector. Public servants are encouraged to use the Playbook as a starting point and seek out further specific or place-based information to inform their participation in a partnership.

How should readers navigate the Playbook?

All public servants are strongly encouraged to engage with the Playbook to understand what partnership is, why it is important and to develop an understanding of the partnership process. The Playbook is supported by additional resources and tools, some of which are role or process specific. Public servants should engage with these materials as relevant to their work.

Part 1: Foundations of Partnership

In this part:

- What is partnership?
- Considering the need for a partnership
- Forms of partnership
- Before establishing a partnership
- Strong partnership elements
- The functions of government as a partner

What is partnership?

A partnership is an arrangement between two or more parties to advance common goals. Genuine partnerships between government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples create an environment which enables self-determination, and where people can shape their own futures. The strength and diversity of skillsets and lived experiences add richness to partnership discussions and lead to better decisions being made on matters that affect the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. When working with First Nations stakeholders, look for best-practice partnerships and engagement models that are flexible, built on trust and transparency and enact shared decision-making with all involved.

What relationships between government and First Nations people are not partnership?

- Commercial relationships, such as procurement, contracting, commissioning, capacity building or funding agreements, do not typically include shared decision making and are not partnerships. E.g. engaging Indigenous Suppliers to deliver a service under the Indigenous Procurement Policy or entering into a grant agreement with a First Nations grantee.
- Advisory body committees and round tables are a form of engagement, but do not share decision-making and instead typically provide advice to government. First Nations members are typically appointed by government and not by their own communities or organisations.

Considering the need for a partnership

The [National Agreement](#) commits governments to working in formal partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples when making policies to close the gap and achieve life outcomes equal to all Australians. While there is an increased emphasis on formal partnerships, it is important to note that partnership ways of working are not new – with examples such as the CoAG Trials and Empowered Communities having a long history of working in partnership with governments.¹

The need for partnership extends beyond Indigenous specific policy areas, as all areas of government policy will affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to varying degrees. Partnership is just one mechanism government can use for working with external stakeholders. You should consider if partnership is the most appropriate approach. In some situations, engagement may be more appropriate, or you may be able to utilise an existing partnership arrangement.

Forms of Partnership

Spectrum of Partnering and Engaging

‘Partnership’ and ‘engagement’ are often used interchangeably to talk about the relationship between government and external stakeholders. The Charter of Partnerships and Engagement Good Practice Guidance demonstrates that they exist on a spectrum, a key difference being the extent to which decision-making is shared between government and external stakeholders.

Table A below demonstrates that it is possible to move along the spectrum from left to right to empower increased shared decision-making with external stakeholders. To give effect to government’s commitments through the National Agreement, the APS should be employing or working towards partnership approaches (‘partner’ and ‘empower’ in the right hand of Table A).

Formal partnerships may not always be the best type of partnership for the project at hand, and there are times when an informal partnership may be the practical option. Different types of partnerships may be suitable for different objectives. Where a best-practice partnership cannot be reached at the outset, public servants should still seek to embed strong partnership elements wherever possible. A partnership can strengthen and mature over time towards a best-practice model.

Types of Partnership

The understanding types of partnerships tool is intended to help understand what type of partnerships exist, or which may be most suitable for the activity or project at hand. Wherever possible the APS should be working towards strong partnership elements as defined in the National Agreement.

¹ [Refer to resource list.](#) The Playbook is supported by tools and resources which are attached to this document for the purpose of executive endorsement. However, final presentation may be through embedded links in a website presentation.

Table A: Spectrum of Partnering and Engaging

Charter of Partnerships and Engagement Good Practice Guide, APSC, 2024

Spectrum of Partnering and Engaging

Engagement approaches including co-design				Partnership approaches including formal partnerships	
Share	Consult	Deliberate	Collaborate	Partner	Empower
Government provides information on the policy or service.	Government asks for the views of groups and individuals, and some of these views may be incorporated into the final product, but they do not have a say in the design of the process or the outcome.	Government actively involves people and groups throughout an engagement process, taking advice on board to improve the policy or service. There may be formal structures like an advisory group in place. Remuneration for time may also be present.	There is more exchange of knowledge and ideas than involvement. Individuals and groups share some decision-making and say over the process and potential outcomes. Power is still not equal, but there may be some transfer of resources.	Government partners with an external group as equal parties to share decision-making through all stages. Even within partnering approaches there will be weaker and stronger forms of partnership.	External groups decide upon their priorities and government assists in implementing the decisions made. This includes self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, particularly when there is a commitment to meaningfully collaborate and build long term relationships.

Before establishing a partnership

Understanding government as a partner

A community's relationship with government does not begin with a partnership. It reflects their interactions with governments over decades. It is essential that you listen and understand the diverse contexts and experiences of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities that you wish to work with, before trying to work in partnership. Be mindful that your partnership will not be the only relationship a community has with government, and matters will likely be raised that fall outside the remit of your portfolio.

It is important to take a 'whole-of-government' approach when working in and with First Nations communities, to draw in relevant expertise, and escalate issues raised with appropriate areas of the APS. It is also important that relationships are led at an agency level, rather than by individual public servants, as this will help them to endure and strengthen over time (refer to [strengthening the partnership over time](#)). State and Territory governments and local councils may have responsibility for programs and services which seek to address the same priorities, and there is benefit in having partnerships which bring together multiple levels of government. A more coordinated approach across portfolios and jurisdictions will help to avoid consultation fatigue, and will contribute to better delivery for First Nations communities.

Essential skills, capabilities and mindsets

The foundations of a partnership are underpinned by the relationship between the parties. Partnership requires government to shift from a transactional way of working to a relational way of working. It also requires a unique mindset, and perspective. An appreciation of the social and cultural contexts of First Nations partners and an ongoing commitment to listening, learning and respect will ensure stronger partnerships are created and maintained. Strong relationships help public servants understand the operating contexts, effectiveness of expenditure and better delivery of shared objectives of the partnership and the government of the day.

The [APS Framework for Engagement and Participation](#) and the [Charter of Partnerships and Engagement](#) are useful resources for public servants engaging and partnering with stakeholders.

What does this look like in practice?

For any relationship:

- Be respectful and mindful of the cultural responsibility and resourcing of partners.
- Prioritise building trust, open communication, and working with humility, respect, transparency and honesty.
- Build relationships across your agency and across government with other public servants to bring a whole-of-government approach.
- Build relationships with people, communities and businesses beyond formal/funding partnerships.

For any partnership:

- Have a sound understanding of government processes and systems, to identify opportunities and navigate challenges with confidence and manage risks and conflict.
- Adopt innovative approaches to achieving the goals of the partnership.
- Appreciate the importance of social and cultural contexts in government work.
- Work through challenges flexibly, innovatively, with humility and respect for all partners.
- Bring a strengths-based approach to the partnership table, recognising the value in the diverse views and lived experiences.
- Have cultural competency and knowledge of the historical, cultural and political context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- Demonstrate a commitment to ongoing learning and respect.

Shift from transactional work to relational work

A relational approach, which focuses on a strong relationship between parties, can improve the design and implementation of government policies and programs across all types of government functions, beyond just decision-making in formal partnership arrangements. A collaborative mindset builds trust and mutual respect and lays a foundation for when complex or sensitive decision-making is required between groups.

Examples of transactional and relational ways of working are provided in [Table B](#) below. While not all characteristics of transactional ways of working are inherently negative (e.g. focusing on delivering KPIs), without a strength-based collaborative approach to working with communities this can result in consultation fatigue, or stakeholders feeling disempowered by government. It can also lead to policy and program design and implementation that does not meet the needs or aspirations of First Nations communities.

Table B: Transactional and relational ways of working

Transactional way of working	Relational way of working
Focuses on one-off, task-based engagements, where one side maintains control over the process. Can lead to engagement fatigue, where stakeholders are repeatedly engaged but feel unheard, or feel solely responsible for either finding a solution or owning any problem that is encountered.	Reflects a mindset of continuous improvement and negotiation, assumes outcomes are shared, both parties are responsive to the evolution of the relationship and have a shared commitment to the empowerment of First Nations partners and the issues faced. Aims to build the capability of both partners over time through two-way learning.
Focus on program and service provision, and meeting KPIs.	Goal of building capability and self-determination.
Focus on achieving a set goal (process is less important than the outputs).	Focus on how it is going to be achieved together. The process is just as important as the outcome.
Government prescribes the way of working, and scope of engagement.	Government enables a culture of working together, including by sharing both problems and decisions.
Engagements are time-limited or one-off to satisfy a particular task or activity.	Engagement is framed within the longer term and ongoing relationship.
Government is informing external stakeholders, or consulting them on a proposed approach.	Partners work together to develop a proposed approach.

Strong Partnership Elements

This section provides a high level summary of strong partnership elements set out in [Clause 32 of the National Agreement](#) which offer a blueprint for designing a partnership. Clause 32 was written in the context of place-based and policy partnerships under the National Agreement, however the APS needs to systematically embed working in partnership beyond these formal partnerships. While partnerships are a spectrum, and different [forms of partnerships](#) may be suitable for different objectives, formal partnerships and shared decision-making is the preferred model of choice for First Nations Peoples under the National Agreement.

Accountable and Representative

Sharing accountability in partnership means that all partners are responsible for the outcomes, successes and failures of a partnership. Each party will also have their own accountabilities:

- First Nations organisations and individuals may have institutional accountabilities (boards and/or membership), as well as accountability to their communities.
- Governments are accountable to parliament, and for delivering on the outcomes under the National Agreement.

Public servants should be mindful of the different accountabilities a partner may have when working in partnership (see [Functions of government as a partner](#) for more information).

A representative partnership is essential to ensuring the right voices are in the room, and that First Nations voices are not outnumbered by government. A representative partnership should consider gender representation as well as representation from people with disability, LGBTIQ+ people, people of different ages, and people from regional, remote and very remote areas.

A formal agreement is in place

A formal partnership agreement is a commitment between the parties and provides a framework for how the partnership will operate. Partners will need to commit time and resources to build relationships, discuss, understand, negotiate and agree on what to include in their formal partnership agreement. Formal agreements are signed by all parties and typically cover: partnership roles, purpose and objectives, timeframes, and reporting arrangements, as well as review and dispute mechanisms. The Considerations for a Formal Agreement tool² can be used to inform discussions with stakeholders.

² The Playbook is supported by [tools and resources](#) which are attached to this document for the purpose of executive endorsement. However, final presentation may be through embedded links in a website presentation.

Decision-making is shared

Shared decision-making is a central element of working in partnership and is essential for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to enact self-determination, where people are able to make decisions about matters that affect their lives. In practice this means that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partners hold as much weight as government. Decisions are made through consensus between the partners. Government cannot approach decision-making with a predetermined decision and an expectation that a partner will agree with the direction set by government. Shared decision-making recognises that First Nations voices are essential agents of change to accelerate policy and place-based progress on Closing the Gap.

Funding to support partnerships

Adequate resourcing is required to support any partnerships. [Clause 33 of the National Agreement](#) sets out the types of funding needed to support formal partnerships. While informal partnerships may not require the same degree of funding, holistically there is a need to recognise and resource the knowledge and expertise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partners bring to the partnership table to enrich policy and program design.

What does this look like in practice?

- A partner organisation receives funding to participate in a formal partnership, a partner organisation may distribute funds to other partners for their participation in the partnership.
- Government pays First Nations partners for their time directly e.g. direct invoice.
- An organisation has an existing funding agreement with the public service and parties agree the partnership is within the scope of their existing agreement e.g. a peak body receives government funding and is able to participate in a partnership within existing resources where it falls within the scope of that agreement.

The 6 functions of government as a partner

Throughout 2024 the APSC conducted internal consultation with public servants from across the Commonwealth who work in partnership with First Nations people to define the role of government as a partner. These 6 functions are what the APS needs to fulfil to build [strong partnerships](#) with First Nations people.

The work of a partnership and the maturity of a partnership may dictate the extent to which government is able to deliver these 6 functions. However, it is important to note that the cultural capability function is a baseline and prerequisite enabler to working in partnership.

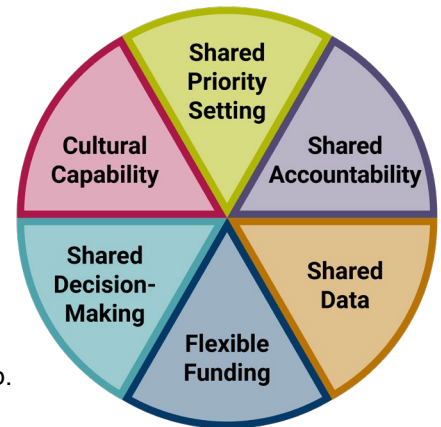


Figure 1. The 6 functions of government as a partner.

Cultural capability



First Nations peoples bring knowledge and lived experiences which enriches all aspects of Australian society. Taking a historically and culturally-informed approach to working in partnership will enable public servants to more effectively engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and it will ensure policy, program and service delivery will meet the needs and aspirations of First Nations peoples.

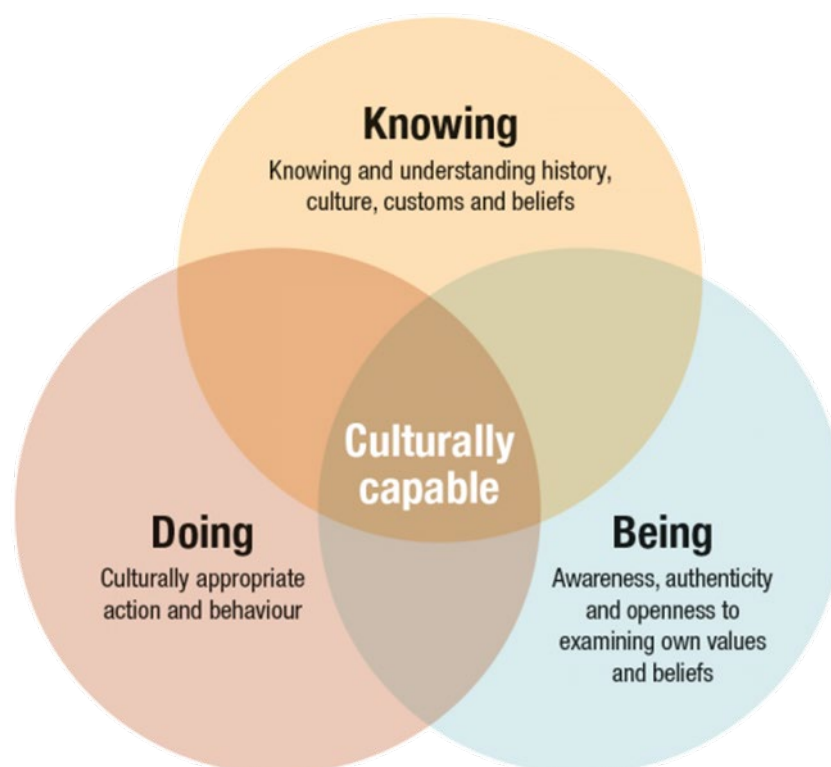
Cultural capability is a core skill without which the public service is not able to work in partnership. It is important to recognise that cultural capability is not static; it is an ongoing journey and a commitment to life-long learning. Strong cultural capability helps create culturally safe environments for First Nations employees, and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities we work with and serve. It is best understood as a continuum, rather than a point-in-time achievement. It encompasses ways of knowing, doing and being that will evolve throughout your career and lifetime.

The [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Capability Framework](#) highlights the skills, knowledge and practices that employees need to perform their duties in a culturally informed way. Foundational cultural capabilities are the baseline capabilities for all employees, regardless of their role, function, agency or classification and are required for successful partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. You can find more resources for building cultural capability here.³

Public servants can also explore cultural competency training as part of their agency's Learning and Development offering or visit the [Cultural Capability Hub](#).

³ The Playbook is supported by [tools and resources](#) which are attached to this document for the purpose of executive endorsement. However, final presentation may be through embedded links in a website presentation

Figure 2. The Commonwealth Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Capability Model



What does this look like in practice?

- **Knowing:**
 - You research or speak with other public servants, stakeholders and experts familiar with government work affecting the community or partners.
 - You take steps to understand the history, culture and practices, and customs or beliefs of a community before seeking to formally engage with them.
- **Doing:**
 - You suspend judgement.
 - You listen first, and show respectful interest in cultural and community issues.
 - You seek out opportunities to engage in ongoing cultural learning.
- **Being:**
 - You are respectful and seek out the views and experiences of First Nations people
 - Challenge bias in yourself and others
 - Acknowledge the contribution of your First Nations partners.

Shared priority setting



Priority setting by governments is a result of government decision making, based on the priorities and policy agenda of the government of the day. However, partnership requires a different approach to priority setting characterised by working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to determine and progress shared priorities.

Government is committed through the National Agreement to build and strengthen structures that empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to have a genuine say on issues that affect their lives. Working in partnership means having open and early discussions to reach mutually-agreed priorities which reflect the needs and aspirations of your partners. Failing to understand local community priorities and aspirations will not result in meaningful change, and may lead to wasted government and community resources, damage to relationships and trust with partners and cultural ramifications for individuals.

What does this look like in practice?

- You build relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders (which will vary based on the purpose and scope of partnership e.g. place based or sector specific) to form a shared understanding of the expertise and experience each party will bring to the table.
- You transparently share known government priorities, if possible, and as early as possible, including 'hard barriers' or parameters to the partnership, so partners can be informed in how they engage with the partnership.
- You are aware and respectful of the priorities that partners may bring to the table. This may include local community and place based priorities, sector specific priorities, historical priorities (e.g. known focus of past advocacy) and rights based priorities (e.g. [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#)).
- You recognise the authority of governance structures, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and First Nations people to represent the perspectives and priorities of their communities, and to determine how service systems and models of delivery can best reflect these.
- You ensure community has sufficient resources and time to plan and take the time to reach consensus on shared priorities.
- You share knowledge and data with your partners, including historical, contextual or policy information behind existing government programs or priorities. This allows your partners to have the information to arrive at an agreed understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by the community.
- You work with partners to consider existing policies and programs to identify duplicated effort, opportunities for greater alignment or gaps in service delivery for specific groups (i.e. a service might be open to all secondary school children, but in practice is only accessed by young women).

Shared accountability⁴



Accountability is a core enabler of partnerships and is essential to establishing and maintaining trust. At its core, accountability is about understanding what you are required to do and achieve and acknowledging responsibility for these requirements and being open and transparent about your performance against them.

When working in partnership, it is important to understand the different accountabilities of each partner. Government is accountable to the parliament, and a broad public sector accountability framework is established by the [PGPA Act](#) and [Rule](#). First Nations people and organisations are accountable to their own organisations (including governance structures and/or membership), as well as their communities. While government accountability is based on institutional authority, transparency and information sharing, First Nations accountability systems have additional features; they are about relationships, communities and protocols, and often transcends the job a person does, and is about accountability as a whole person. Public servants should be mindful of the different accountabilities a partner may have when working in partnership.

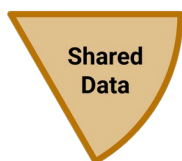
A partnership involves shared accountability, where both parties share responsibility for delivering on partnership outcomes. This means that a formal partnership is required to implement fit-for-purpose governance, risk management and performance reporting and monitoring and evaluation arrangements.

What does this look like practice?

- You and your partners understand what your roles are and what you have set out to achieve.
- You are open and honest when you do not have all the information, have limitations or have made a mistake, or where past government actions have caused harm.
- During the life of the partnership, you acknowledge and take responsibility for any missteps or failures and identify opportunities for improvement going forward.
- You establish systems to monitor the partnership performance against stated objectives, and take steps to ensure these processes are not unnecessarily burdensome on community.
- You work with your partners to adjust your practices when things are not working.
- You and your partners develop partnership governance frameworks that are fit for purpose and understood by all parties.
- You commit to information sharing, open communication and ongoing learnings.
- You recognise that partnership processes will need to take into account your partner's accountability to their organisations or community, for example:
 - engagement with board or member organisation
 - conversations and cultural authority from Elders
 - community consultation process.

⁴ Shared accountability appears twice in this document as it is both a strong partnership element under Clause 32 of the [National Agreement](#) and one of the six functions of Government as a partner identified through APSC consultation.

Shared data



Shared access to data and information is a commitment under [Priority Reform 4](#) of the National Agreement. It enables Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations to participate as equal partners with government, with equal access to information that supports shared priority setting and decision making.

Government plays a role in ensuring that data and information shared is timely, accessible and can be understood. Practising information sharing and ensuring the ‘story’ or insights from the data is well understood by all parties is key to creating a strong partnership and achieving outcomes. However, it is important that data is useful and locally relevant, and data should not be aggregated to a level that is no longer useful. The act of sharing data can be as important as the data itself, as it is a practical way government can be accountable and build trust.

While not a formal commitment in the National Agreement, public servants should be aware that there is a strong desire from First Nations people for Indigenous Data Sovereignty, which is the right of Indigenous people to govern the collection, ownership and application of Indigenous data.⁵ There are some overlaps between the National Agreement Priority Reform 4 and the concept of Indigenous Data Sovereignty. The [Framework for Governance of Indigenous Data](#) provides a stepping stone towards greater awareness and acceptance by government agencies of the principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty.

This should be read alongside the [National Agreement Priority Reform 4](#) ‘Data and information Sharing Elements’ and more resources for sharing data.⁶

What does this look like in practice?

- Your partnership agreements include an agreed approach to data sharing. You engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partners to understand their data needs, and enable access to data for planning and decision making.
- You consider what data government may hold that can help to inform the partnership. You share available, disaggregated regional data, information and insights with partners in a meaningful, user-friendly, and accessible format.
- Your partners have timely access to the data and the evidence needed to make informed decisions, and set priorities for their community or sector.
- You support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to build their data capacity e.g. if your agency is providing funding to support your partner, you may also include funding for data capacity building or data projects.
- You work with your partners to collaboratively analyse data and derive insights to inform the direction of your partnership.

⁵ This is a right outlined in the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#) (UNDRIP).

⁶ The Playbook is supported by [tools and resources](#) which are attached to this document for the purpose of executive endorsement. However, final presentation may be through embedded links in a website presentation.

- You respect that certain information may not be shared by your partner for cultural reasons, including secret and sacred information.
- You respect protocols if handling information that contains Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) and First Nations partners have free prior and informed consent on how their ICIP is used.⁷

⁷ Under [UNDRIP](#) Indigenous people have a right to maintain, control, protect and develop their intellectual property over such cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and traditional cultural expressions.

Flexible funding



The nature of Australia's federated system means that funding responsibilities are split between the Commonwealth, state and territory, and local levels of governments, with responsibility further split across portfolios. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, with needs that cut across jurisdiction and agency responsibility, navigating various funding systems and processes can be difficult and administratively burdensome.

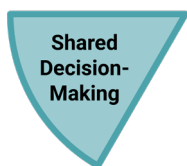
Government can address this by creating funding pools, or increasing flexibility within grants funding during policy and program development. The administration of funding which target Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities can also be made more flexible. This can reduce burden on grant recipients and better meet intended outcomes of a grant program, particularly where there is demonstrated evidence to support this need. There are growing expectations that grants should be tailored to the needs of the communities, particularly in place-based partnerships. When working in partnership, government should explore innovative funding models and work to create flexibility in government investment to deliver community outcomes. Flexible and pooled funding arrangements can enable communities to identify projects, which can cut across existing government and program boundaries.

Commonwealth entities have an obligation to ensure that any proposed flexible funding models are consistent with the [Budget Process Operational Rules 2023 \(BPORs\)](#), [PGPA Act 2013](#) and [Commonwealth Grants Rules and Principles 2024 \(CGRPs\)](#). Partnership ways of working are supported by the CGRPs, particularly the principle of 'collaboration and partnership', which recognises the need to work collaboratively with government and non-government stakeholders. The PGPA Act places a positive responsibility on accountable authorities of Commonwealth entities to take a proportional, risk-based approach to imposing administrative burdens on parties working with government.

What does this look like in practice?

- You work collaboratively with portfolios and levels of government on funding decisions to better support the partnership to achieve its outcomes.
- You consider the use of longer term grant agreements, where appropriate, take a proportional and risk based approach to create greater certainty of funding and reduce administrative burden.
- You work flexibly to apply the principles of the [PGPA Act](#) and [Rules](#), BPORs and CGRPs to explore flexible funding options for programs and grant design, to be more responsive to the needs of communities, particularly in place based contexts.
- Treat Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) as essential partners in program and service design and delivery, not simply as funding recipients.
- You explore mechanisms to give First Nations partners more control over the design and delivery of services so they can meet community needs and respond to changing priorities, whilst balancing probity and transparency.
- You share data and information on the performance and outcomes of grants program to inform decision-making of the partnership moving forward.

Shared decision-making



Shared decision-making in partnerships between government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is defined in [Strong Partnership Elements](#) and Clause 32 of the [National Agreement](#). For government, sharing decision-making is a significant shift from typical practices, both for public servants and executive government. Not all government decisions can be shared and there are powers delegated only to government officials through legislative and regulatory frameworks. When sharing decisions, public servants must ensure they uphold their duties relating to integrity, impartiality, accountability and transparency.

What does this look like in practice?

- You work with your partners to establish a shared decision-making process in your partnership agreement.
- You are honest and upfront with partners about what decisions cannot be shared e.g. Cabinet processes.
- You provide information to inform decision making with sufficient time for all parties to consider it, consistent with the principles of free, prior and informed consent.
- You practise consensus decision-making, meaning no decision is made against the will of an individual or minority. When needed, you come back to the partnership table with further information or solutions, or take more time for community consultation, until you can find a decision that everyone supports, or can live with.
- You work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to develop, design and deliver policies, programs and services, thereby influencing outcomes.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to have control over what happens in their community including the, 'what is being implemented', 'the implementation place', and the level of government support.
- You work together to ensure funding for programs and services align with community priorities, noting government retains responsibility for funding decisions.

Part 2: The partnership process

In this part:

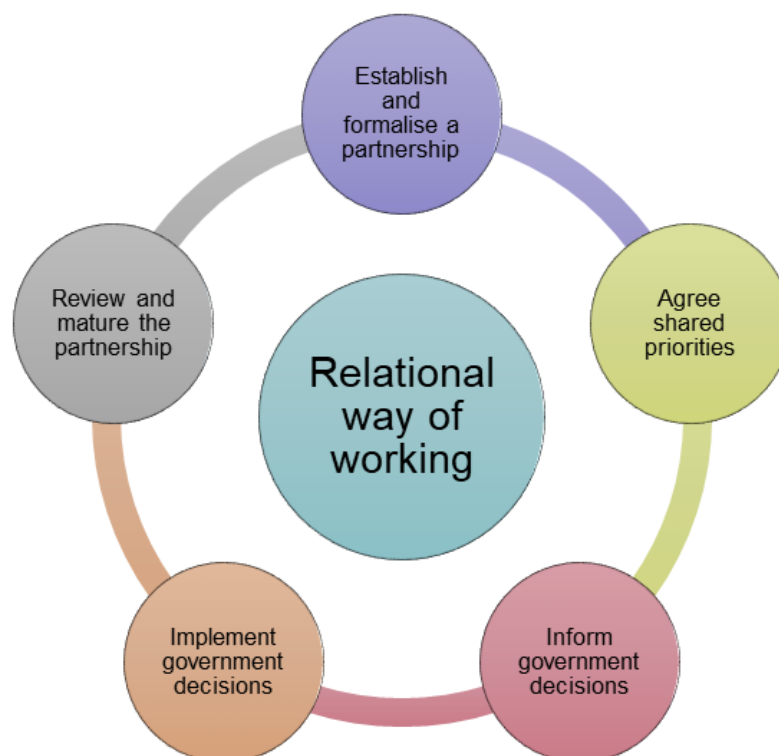
- Establishing and formalising a partnership
- Setting shared priorities
- Informing government decisions
- Implementing government decisions
- Reviewing and maturing a partnership

This section sets out the cycle of a partnership from the perspective of a public servant to demonstrate the building blocks of working in partnership. It includes key considerations for a public servant, and provides guidance on what can or cannot be shared through different government decision-making and implementation processes.

Working in partnership can be conceptualised as a cyclical process with relational ways of working at its centre, rather than a linear process. At any stage of establishing or maintaining a partnership, a public servant should have a reflective practice and check back in to ensure they are engaging in a relational way of working with partners.

All partnerships are unique. In some circumstances, priorities will be agreed before entering a formal partnership, while in other circumstances the commitment to partner comes before agreeing priorities. Part 2 focuses on what needs to be considered at each stage of the partnership cycle rather than the order of steps.

Figure 3. The cyclical process of working in partnership



Establishing and formalising a partnership

Partnerships may be created following an identified need from community or government, which is agreed by both parties. A partnership will reach the establishment phase when there is an identified [need for partnership](#), and will consider the appropriate [form of partnership](#).

Identifying potential partners

There is no 'right' answer as to who can be a partner. Each partnership will have different parties whose roles and responsibilities will vary depending on the circumstances of the relevant partnership. Once potential partners have been identified, it is important to determine whether all parties are ready for partnership. Depending on the priorities and scope of a partnership there could also be multiple Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups who wish to partner with government. It is important for APS officials to [understand government as a partner](#), including involving relevant cross-agency or cross-jurisdiction stakeholders and bringing a whole-of-government perspective to the partnership.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partners

Working out who the 'right' Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partner is within a community can be complex. While Western leadership systems are often top down, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities leadership systems are often horizontal; and who can speak with authority on a given subject is determined by kinship, culture, place, age or gender dimensions. For example, if engaging about a specific geographic location, that place may have ties to a specific family group within a community or may have significance for men or women.

Wherever possible, best practice is to provide an opportunity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partners to self-select. Where there is a history of transactional engagement by governments and low trust in governments from partners, this may require more time to build the relationship, trust and a shared purpose.

Other government partners

Consider working with state and territory or local government partners to create a more joined-up and cohesive approach to community priorities, particularly in place-based partnerships. State, territory and local governments have deep and enduring relationships with First Nations communities and are well positioned to make an impact.

Local governments across the country are often an active participant in the life of communities and run grassroots initiatives that may complement or dovetail with the priorities or initiatives of your partnership. Additionally, many First Nations communities in remote Australia have Indigenous local governments that are created through the State Government statutes and have elections held by the Australian Electoral Commission. These representatives of the community and the council staff can assist with identifying what is going on in a community and where other government programs and projects are focussing their efforts. This can assist with using existing partnerships so as to maximise the opportunities for your own projects.

Other non-government partners

It is important that government is clear from the start what other relationships already exist, or other expertise that will be brought in to the partnership and the key objectives of this engagement. Before bringing in other partners this should be agreed with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partners. All partners, including academic, philanthropic and business, should have a shared understanding of the need to support self-determination of First Nations partners through shared-decision making.

Ways to identify Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partners

- Consider which Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander parties might be affected.
- Speak with other areas of government or community to explore existing partnerships and seek out opportunities to build on existing partnerships so you do not have to start at the beginning, and to ensure that efforts are streamlined across government.
- Speak with state and territory governments or local councils that might have similar priorities, or existing partnerships or relationships that can be shared.
- If relevant, speak with philanthropic organisations or other groups (e.g. land or native title bodies) who have long-held relationships with a community or expertise on a subject matter.
- Where there are existing relationships, speak to trusted First Nations partners about who else should be involved.
- Consider if there is a representative body who can self-select a representative to participate in the partnership, or if there are multiple groups coming together to work with government. Partnering with a service provider is not partnering with a community; however partnering with community-controlled organisation or a peak body may be appropriate in a sector based partnership.
- Consider if potential partners are [representative](#), and as needed, work with your prospective partners to bring in other voices.

Assessment of readiness

For more information on the checklist to assess readiness for partnership, visit the [Playbook Resources Guide](#).⁸ Both government and potential partners should self-assess for readiness to enter a partnership. A group without a governance structure might not be ready to partner, but could be with support from government.

⁸ For more information on the checklist to assess readiness for partnership, visit the [Playbook Resources Guide](#).

What government can do to support a potential partner to prepare for formal partnership:

- Invest time and resources into building relationships with a potential partner to understand their context, perspectives and interests.
- Work with potential partners on discrete actions which work towards the mutual interest or common goal. This could involve taking a collaborative or co-design approach with potential partners rather than a formal partnership. This allows potential partners to build trust and understanding of each other's ways of working whilst working towards their mutual interest that may evolve into a formal partnership over time.
- Invest in enabling and supporting a potential partner to implement fit for purpose governance arrangements and supporting documentation.
- Invest in supporting an external partner to build their capabilities or to transform their systems.
- If a potential partner is not ready for formal partnership, there are other ways to work together (via engagement or collaboration) to build trust and understanding between the parties.
- Gaps in 'readiness' can be addressed through the commitment to work together and acknowledging the identified gaps.

Authorisation

Working in partnership means making a commitment to shared decision-making. Public servants require authorisation to work in this way and should refer to the [National Agreement](#) which creates the precedent. Authority may also be needed at various points in the partnerships lifecycle from establishment, to implementation of government decisions. It is important to keep in mind the multiple layers of authority which may also exist for your partner (from organisational to cultural) when seeking to establish a partnership. Coming to a partnership table with appropriate authorisation builds trust.

Considerations for ensuring your partnership has the appropriate authority:

- Has the Minister, Cabinet or delegate been appropriately briefed on the need and benefits of partnership to inform decision making?
- Has the Minister, Cabinet or delegate provided agreement for the Commonwealth to enter this partnership? Levels of authority may vary based on the intended scope of the partnership.
- Do you have the appropriate resourcing to establish the partnership and maintain it over time?
- Do the partner(s) have the authorising environment (this could include multiple layers of authority, such as their Board and governing documents, as well as cultural authority) to work towards the agreed purpose?
- Does your agency have portfolio responsibility or an appropriate link to the intended purpose of the partnership? Will the scope of the partnership's work require the involvement of other APS Agencies?
- Is the government representative at the partnership table authorised to make the types of decisions the partnership is likely to make? If no, would more senior representation be appropriate?

Negotiating and formalising an agreement

Formalising a partnership is an effective way to clearly articulate the common goal or mutual interest of the partners, as well as the respective roles of responsibility. This provides a framework for the relationship as a written agreement, signifies a clear commitment between partners and attempts to address the historical imbalances in power. Partnership negotiation agreements can be in different forms, from informal to formal. Existing strong relationships may negotiate a partnership agreement via conversations. In other contexts, negotiation may involve a bargaining process between the parties.

Elements of a partnership agreement

Formal partnership agreements should capture the unique arrangements of each partnership to be fit for purpose.

The Considerations for a formal partnership agreement tool sets out what partners should consider when contemplating a formal partnership agreement.⁹

⁹ For more information on the checklist to assess readiness for partnership, visit the [Playbook Resources Guide](#).

Considerations for a successful negotiation

- Is the government representative participating in the negotiations [culturally capable](#)?
- Does the government representative participating in the negotiations have the appropriate [authority](#), skills and delegation to negotiate and to make decision on behalf of the agency?
- Have all the parties had access to the same information and data to make informed decisions?
- How will multiple agencies or levels of government/s work to bring together a position for discussion?
- What matters are up for negotiation and what is non-negotiable?
- Where something is non-negotiable how will this be communicated in a trustworthy and transparent way?

Performance

Monitoring performance of a partnership or partnership outcomes is key to understanding the effectiveness of the partnership in working towards its shared aims and objectives (where possible specific, measurable goals). Partnerships may also need to consider how they contribute to the [National Agreement](#) socioeconomic outcomes, and have a plan to measure performance which feeds into this broader framework.

Managing shared risk

Managing risk in partnership is governed by the same risk oversight frameworks as any other public service work – including the [PGPA Act 2013](#), the [Commonwealth Risk Management Framework](#) and your agency's risk management policy. A key element of sharing risk is developing an approach to sharing oversight and the management of risk with partners, and communicating risk from a government perspective in a way that government understands. Working in partnership comes with unique risks, however partnership risks are not inherently more or less risky than any other type of government risk.

In addition to complying with existing risk management frameworks, there are a number of key considerations when working in partnership:

- **Understand your entity's risk appetite** and how that may apply to the context of your partnership.
- **Show individual courage to manage risk** – many barriers to partnership are perceived barriers or risks, which can be overcome through constructively managing risk.
- **Be aware of the unique risks faced by your partners** – if a partnership fails, a public servant not living in the community may not have repercussions of this in their day-to-day life, however a partner living in community may face reputational or interpersonal risk which affect all aspects of their lives.
- **Trust and ongoing communication** – a relational way of working helps partners to manage shared risk. Ongoing and open communication supports partners to understand each other's risk tolerances, and to effectively identify and manage risk.

[RMG211 – Element 6: Shared Risks](#) provides further advice on managing shared risks, including with external stakeholders.

Managing risk in partnership means:

- Partners seek to improve visibility of risk by understanding each other's operating context, how risk are perceived, can be managed and why risk appetite may differ based on context.
- You work collaboratively to identify and formalise a risk management approach. Each party understands their responsibility for implementing and managing controls and treatments.
- You understand the exposure to consequences and effects of risk by partners, other entities and the wider community. Where practicable, you establish mechanisms to appropriately share the burden of the risk exposure.
- You work with partners to embed risk management into decision making activities.
- Accountability and responsibility for the management of risks is identified and accepted by the partner best positioned to manage the risk.
- Partners regularly review their risk management approach and work together to improve risk management capability.
- Partners have regular and ongoing communication on risk issues.
- Partners develop fit for purpose supporting documentation such as risk registers.
- Partners should ensure that shared risks are agenda items for partnership meetings and for individual partner governance meetings.

Supporting partners to manage risk

Outside of the partnership, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance structures should consider their own governance and probity arrangements, which are unique and specific to each local or regional community. See more resources on managing shared risk.¹⁰

Government can support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance structures by:

- Supporting the partner organisation or governance structure to develop and implement best practice governance, documentation for codes of conduct and managing conflicts of interest, and mechanisms for managing misconduct.
- Supporting the governance structure to develop a clear, documented and transparent decision making process and follow-up actions.
- Supporting the governance structure to communicate effectively with their community on internal processes, decision-making, reporting and advice.
- Support the governance structure to review risk and accountability arrangements regularly and update as required that policies are fit for purpose and proportionate.

¹⁰ For more information on the checklist to assess readiness for partnership, visit the [Playbook Resources Guide](#).

Conflict of Interest in partnership

Managing conflict of interest in partnership is underpinned by the same principles as your agency's 'usual' conflict of interest processes and resources, to ensure the integrity and effectiveness of decision-making.

There may be additional considerations when navigating conflict of interest in a partnership with First Nations people. The population size and regional and remote location of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities may increase the likelihood of real or perceived conflicts arising. First Nations communities and service sectors can be comparatively small, and individuals may wear many hats: sitting on a number of Boards, or holding a number of jobs across a variety of organisations within a sector or community. It is important to choose an approach that constructively manages risk and balances the need for First Nations voices to be central to policy or program design. For example, it may not be possible or desirable to eliminate conflict of interest when working with partners, and this risk can instead be managed.

Standard government conflict of interest guidance materials often refer to family or immediate family. When working in partnership it is important to remember that First Nations kinship systems can be complex, with a large number of community members being considered immediate family. This can mean that partners have more declared conflicts of interest than you may have anticipated.

Each partner may have their own internal governance arrangements for managing conflicts of interest, but partners can also agree to a shared approach for managing conflicts of interest. See more resources on Conflict of Interest.¹¹

To manage partnership conflicts of interest partners should work together to:

- Develop a shared understanding of how your conflict of interest policy applies to the partnership. At its core, conflict of interest and its intent are simple; explain its role and importance to the partnership in a simple and easy to understand way.
- Encourage a probity and transparency rich environment within the relevant operating context, including sharing transparently any conflicts from government partners.
- Establish processes for conflicts to be declared and managed, both from the establishment of the partnership and as they arise e.g. a template or form, or as a standing agenda item in meetings.
- The government partner will maintain a shared conflict of interest register, and discuss risks transparently with partners, including where risks are considered low, medium or high.
- Partners discuss and reach consensus on how to manage risks. The declaration on its own is not enough to manage a conflict.
- Strengthen recordkeeping practices around decision making, including recording meeting outcomes and resolutions.

¹¹ For more information on the checklist to assess readiness for partnership, visit the [Playbook Resources Guide](#).

CASE STUDY: INFORMING THE DESIGN OF A GRANT PROGRAM

You are working with partners from a relatively small Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services Sector on the redesign of a sector specific grant program. You require the expertise of the sector to ensure that the redesign of the program has the best outcomes for government, First Nations partners and communities.

At the point of establishing the partnership you asked partners to complete a **Conflict of Interest form**. Because the sector is small, your partners are also grant recipients of your grant program and know and/or have personal or family relationships with other grant recipients. These interests were declared in the process of establishing the partnership and recorded on a **Conflict of Interest register**.

It is not possible or desirable to preclude all government grant recipients or those connected to grants recipients from the process, or public servants would be completing the redesign in a vacuum without the involvement of their partners.

Conflicts listed in the conflict of interest register are **assessed for risk** and declared low or medium; partners discuss a plan to ensure that the Conflicts do not affect decision making.

Partners agree on the below approach to **manage risk**:

- Ensure conversations relate to the goals, structure and outcome of the grants and not specific projects or recipients.

Partners **record** these discussions for transparency through the risk register and meeting minutes.

Supporting partners to manage conflict of interest

Government can support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance structures by:

- Supporting the governance structure to develop and implement their own conflict of interest policy, disclosure mechanisms and conflict of interest register.
- Providing or facilitating conflict of interest training or guidance.
- Collect and share practical examples to help partners to identify and manage conflicts of interest.

Setting shared priorities

A key barrier to setting priorities in partnership is viewing community and government priorities as 'yours' and 'ours'. Partnerships succeed when the priorities are 'ours' and shared. The process of negotiating and agreeing on shared priorities is an opportunity to build trust, respect and to form a quality relationship. There are 2 ways that partners can come to an agreement on shared priorities:

- i. Partners jointly review challenges and opportunities of a particular issue and then agree on the policy theme and shared priorities.
- ii. Government and external partners each have existing priorities. Partners agree to work on the priorities they have in common.

Priorities can change over time due to changes in the operating environment, circumstances of the partnership, leadership, or due to new or evolving data and information. While agreeing on shared priorities is helpful to define the scope of a partnership, government partners should be willing to shift and agree to new priorities, if required.

Creating shared partnership priorities through the analogy of a 'painting':

- Partners start with a blank canvas without a set view of what the painting will look like.
- The artwork is bounded by the size of the canvas and the materials on hand, which is known from the outset, in the same way a partnership may have parameters or a specific focus, or only certain tools at hand (e.g. grants, service delivery).
- Artists share source material so they can create their best ideas together (as with shared data).
- Partners discuss their ideas and agree to work together on an artwork that reflects the overlap of interests. Or, partners work together to create a shared vision of what it will look like.
- Partners use their unique skills to work together to create the painting, which is richer as a result of their collaborative efforts.

Government priority setting

As outlined in [Functions of government as a partner](#), [shared priority setting](#) requires a change of approach by government.

To work in partnership, public servants should consider the priorities of external partners and embed these priorities in advice to government. In practice, this could mean partners work together to brief their Minister on the priorities of the partnership and the known outcomes anticipated by all partners.

External partner priority setting

Identifying priorities for a community or sector and planning may commence before, during or after the establishment of a formal partnership. This should include an ongoing mechanism to ensure the views and aspirations of community or other stakeholders continue to inform priority setting of partners, with a mechanism for monitoring performance.

Government may be asked by a potential partner to support individuals, families and communities to define their own development goals and to enable collective agency. Government could support the priority setting and planning process by providing expertise, networks or resourcing, data and information sharing or brokering relationships with relevant stakeholders. In other instances, this might be something that happens independently by an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community or region.

Informing government decisions

The APS provides policy advice to government decision makers, to equip them with the information they need to make the best possible decision.

The model for Delivering [Great Policy Advice](#) outlines the 4 core elements of policy advice, including **well informed**:

We are forward looking and learn from the past. We actively seek multiple and diverse perspectives including from those impacted by the policy, so that we have a robust evidence base.

Being **well informed** goes one step further: to include the voices of the people who will be affected by the policy.

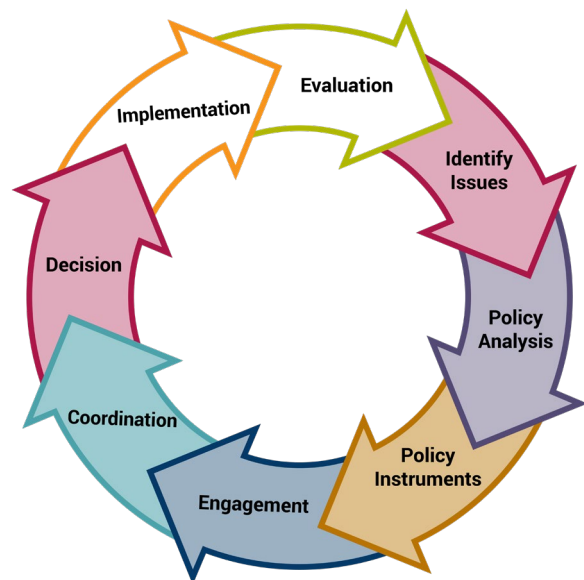


Figure 4. The Australian Policy Cycle

Opportunities and limitations

As per the [Cabinet Handbook](#), material prepared that is intended for submission to the Cabinet, including Budget processes, cannot be shared outside of the Australian Government; materials include Cabinet submissions and attached material such as New Policy Proposals (NPPs), and documents dealing with Cabinet meetings or its decisions. Cabinet material should be handled consistently with the requirements of the Protective Security Policy Framework.

However, this does not prevent public servants from engaging with First Nations partners to develop policy advice to government. In best practice, a partnership is established well before the provision of policy advice to government. For example, the APS (on behalf of the partnership) may have worked with their portfolio Minister to seek authority to bring forward a submission relating to the shared priorities of the partnership. The APS drafts the new policy proposal aligned with the shared priorities of the partnership, and ensures that the proposal clearly articulates that these priorities have been determined in partnership.

Clause 104 of the Cabinet Handbook notes that, at times, it may be necessary to consult with external sources in relation to matters which are the, 'subject of proposed or current Cabinet consideration to ensure that cabinet is fully apprised of the relevant information required for it to make an informed decision'. In all instances, guidance should be obtained from the relevant Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet's (PM&C) shadow policy team and/or from PM&C's Cabinet Division.

This part of the Playbook should be read in conjunction with further information on the Australian Policy Cycle and National Indigenous Australians Agency's (NIAA) [First Nations Impacts Assessments Framework](#).

What does this look like in practice?

You **can**:

- Be upfront about hard barriers to partnership in informing government decisions (i.e. confidentiality of Cabinet processes) and manage expectations with your partners.
- Consider opportunities to seek agreement to devolve decision making to partnership forums.
- Ensure government decision makers are well briefed about the purpose and scope of the partnership, and the work of the partnership as it progresses ahead of any proposal being brought forward.
- Put forward the recommendations of the partnership to government decision makers, information about how it was developed in partnership and links to elements of the National Agreement e.g. through Ministerial Briefing, Cabinet Submissions, or Incoming Government Briefing.
- Consider how the policy will be implemented, monitored and evaluated with the relevant partner.
- Work across the Commonwealth and across policy siloes to ensure priorities of the partnership are relayed to relevant areas of government and inform decisions made outside of your portfolio.

You **cannot**:

- Share documents or information relating to a proposal once it becomes part of a Cabinet process.

Implementing government decisions

Once a decision has been made regarding the way forward on a particular matter, the APS carries out the decision taken by government. There are a number of implementation methods – some of the most common are:

- legislation and regulation; and
- funding outcomes (including grants, service delivery, contracts and expenditure, procurement and funding state and territory delivery).

While implementation is a distinct phase of the policy cycle, thinking about how a policy is going to be implemented is a key part of policy analysis.

The model for [Great Policy Advice](#) outlines the 4 core elements of great policy advice, one of which is ***practical to implement***: *we work with those involved in implementation and try out multiple options.*

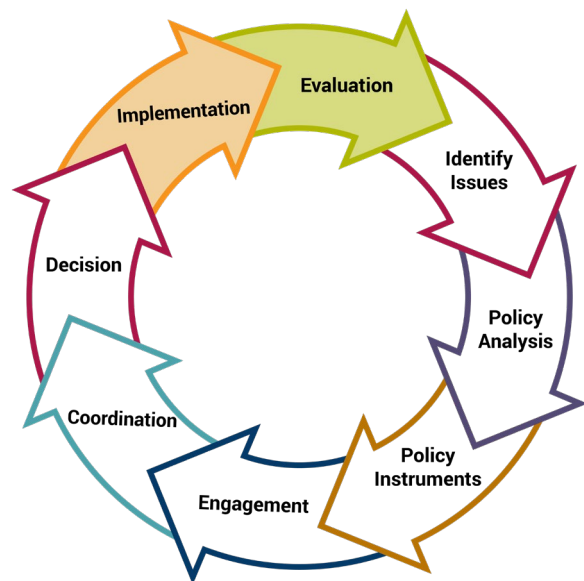


Figure 5. The Australian Policy Cycle

Opportunities and limitations

Working in partnership to inform implementation is critical to supporting the development of great policy advice, and is essential to enable the self-determination and aspirations of First Nations communities.

The decision taken by government may look different to the expectations of your First Nations partner, and there may be need to balance transparency while maintaining the confidentiality of Cabinet decisions.

Working in partnership in implementing government decision provides opportunities, as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people know what solutions will work best in their communities and how this can be implemented in the most appropriate way. Your partners can help you promptly identify and respond to unforeseen or unwanted outcomes.

What does this look like in practice?

You **can**:

- Consider implementation early in the policy design process with your partner, including avenues to work in partnership during implementation.
- Work with partners to understand impacts of implementation on First Nations people as part of the design process.
- Treat community-controlled organisations as essential partners in service design and delivery, and you work with partners to deliver high-quality services that meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across the country.
- Work together on the design (or redesign) of grant opportunities, including whether it has met the objectives of the initiative.
- Work with your partners to evaluate the success of the implemented policy, including whether it has met the identified goals of your policy.
- Work with your partner to respond to implementation challenges and make adjustments as necessary, within the scope of your authority.

You **cannot**:

- Share documents that have been submitted to the Cabinet or its Committees.
- Disclose the decisions or deliberations of the Cabinet unless this has been approved by the Cabinet or the Prime Minister.
- Change the implementation method outside the scope of your policy authority.

Reviewing and Strengthening a Partnership

Reviewing the health of the partnership

The health of a partnership is as important as issues being discussed at the partnership table, as without a healthy partnership you will not achieve mutually beneficial outcomes. It is important to regularly assess the health of the partnership; any review of partnership health should be done with your partner in a way that promotes free and transparent communication without fear of retribution. As highlighted by the [Productivity Commission review](#), self-assessment is not sufficient as it leaves organisations exposed to blind spots they have relating to institutional racism, cultural safety and other aspects of [Priority Reform 3](#). It also clearly cannot reflect the perspectives and priorities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The health of the partnership is distinct from whether the partnership is achieving its objective or purpose.

What does this look like in practice?

- The nature of a partnership health check will depend on the scope and resourcing of the partnership, but you may wish to consider:
 - partnership governance, capacity and resourcing;
 - relationships, communication styles, collaboration and co-ordination; and
 - power dynamics and shared decision making.
- You have informal or structured discussions with your partners to touch base on the health of the partnership.
- Where resources are available, you work with your partner to identify and engage a facilitator to hold a workshop with parties on the health of the partnership.
- Where resources are available, you work with your partner to identify an independent consultant to conduct a formal health check of the partnership, for national partnerships (e.g. [National Agreement partnership health check](#)).

Partnership Evaluation

Partnerships should also be evaluated to understand how well it is functioning against its stated objectives and purpose. This includes understanding what is working well, and what is not working and recommend ways it can be strengthened. Evaluation, like all aspects of a partnership, should be conducted together with your partners and consider Indigenous evaluation perspectives. You should consider both the [Commonwealth Evaluation Policy](#) and the [Indigenous Evaluation Strategy](#), which provides a whole-of-government framework for agencies to use when selecting, planning, conducting and using evaluations of policies and programs affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

What does this look like in practice?

- You consider evaluation as an input to the design of the partnership, in planning and resourcing.
- You build evaluation into the ongoing governance of the partnership.
- You work with partners to determine evaluation approach and methodology, and develop an evaluation plan.
- You identify ways to strengthen partnership elements, and work with your partners to mature a partnership over time e.g. formalisation of an informal partnership, or strengthening of information sharing and accountability mechanisms.
- When a partnership encounters a setback, you focus on maintaining the relationship and work together to consider new ways to drive community aspirations.

Strengthening the partnership over time

Senior leaders should steward contextual knowledge and relationships, ensuring partnerships are built and shared at an entity level rather than relying on individual public servants who have experience working with particular groups over an extended period of time. Failing to build and sustain relationships will affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's trust in government and can result in misalignment of expectations leading to services not meeting the needs of the community.

To build relationships and strengthen a partnership overtime, it is important that a community experiences positive outcomes, or they will likely lose faith in the partnership. There are many factors which may be beyond the control of a partnership, including at times the ability to influence government decision-making. Barriers can be mitigated in part by maintaining long term relationships and using this knowledge to inform government decisions over a long period of time. It is important to create an aspirational environment, where the vision of a community can come to the forefront, and while barriers may be encountered, all parties are working together over time towards this overarching vision.

What does this look like in practice?

- You and your entity invest in health and capacity of the partnership, and recognise that this is as important as any outcomes it delivers.
- You identify ways to strengthen partnership elements, and work with your partners to mature a partnership over time e.g. formalisation of an informal partnership, or strengthening of information sharing and accountability mechanisms.
- When a partnership encounters a setback, you focus on maintaining the relationship and work together to consider new ways to drive community aspirations.

Recognising and celebrating partnership

It is important to recognise and celebrate the achievements of a partnership over time, both within the partnership and more broadly. Partnerships between government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people support priorities and outcomes beyond those directly involved, including community or sector priorities and government priorities (including the [National Agreement](#)). Demonstrating delivery of outcomes is essential to both maintaining the health of a partnership and retaining authority to work in this way. You may wish to consider opportunities to include Ministers in the celebration of partnership outcomes and progress against shared priorities; this can also support building awareness and profile of a partnership and its objectives with Government decision makers. Like any element of a partnership, both parties should be involved in determining the best way to recognise and celebrate its outcomes.

What does this look like in practice?

- Ensure relevant Minister or delegate is briefed regularly on the progress of the Partnership and outcomes to date, this could include First Nations and government partnership representatives jointly briefing a Minister.
- Consider opportunities to involve Ministers in celebrating the outcomes of the partnership. This could include:
 - inviting the relevant Minister to a community event, sector conference or meeting with partnership members
 - media opportunities, including press releases or interviews (consider opportunities for Ministers to appear alongside First Nations partners e.g. joint-press release or interview)
- Consider opportunities to involve community members and leaders in the work and outcomes of the partnership. This could include:
 - community engagement through First Nations or mainstream media, social media or community forums
 - attending or holding community events to share information about the partnership
 - inviting First Nations leaders and experts to speak to partnership members.

Part 3: Glossary and abbreviations

Glossary

Term	Description
Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation	A business, charity, not-for-profit organisation, incorporated under Commonwealth, state or territory legislation, that has at least 51% Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander ownership and/or directorship and is operated for the benefit of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
Accountable authority	Under the PGPA Act , the person or group of persons responsible for, and control over, each Commonwealth entity's operations.
Australian Government	All bodies that comprise the public sector at the national level. This includes the Commonwealth, office holders, statutory corporations, Commonwealth companies and their subsidiary.
Co-design	Is a participatory tool for problem solving. Those with technical expertise and lived experience come together on equal ground to co-design specific solutions. For the purposes of this Framework co-design is not an engagement approach but rather a tool that can be within the approaches of the Spectrum of working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (consult, involve, collaborate, partner and empower).
Coalition of the Peaks	The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Coalition of Peaks (the Coalition of the Peaks) are a representative body of more than 80 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled peak organisations and members which have responsibility for policies, programs and services related to Closing the Gap. The Coalition of the Peaks came together as an act of self-determination to be formal partners with Australian governments and share in decision-making on Closing the Gap to improve the life outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
Cultural capability	Cultural capability is a process of continuous learning at the individual and organisation level. By uplifting cultural capability, we elevate respect, appreciation and understanding of people, culture and diversity.
Cultural responsibility	Cultural responsibility is the many responsibilities and obligations Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have in their lives that they balance every day including caring responsibilities and cultural and/or community obligations outside of the workplace. This may include: cultural responsibilities in relation to caring for family members and extended family; being part of local advisory councils and boards; balancing living and working in Community; and, supporting family and community who are experiencing the impacts of intergenerational trauma.
Cultural safety	Cultural safety is about overcoming the power imbalances of places, people and policies that occur between the majority non-Indigenous position and the minority Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person so that there is no assault, challenge or denial of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person's identity, of who they are and what they need. Cultural safety is met through actions from the majority position which recognise, respect, and nurture the unique cultural identity of Aboriginal

Term	Description
	and Torres Strait Islander people. Only the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person who is recipient of a service or interaction can determine whether it is culturally safe.
Data	Measurements or observations that are collected as a source of information, including qualitative data (pertaining to an individual or community's social realities) and metadata.
Devolved delegated authority	When parliament creates a statutory power, it vests that power in some individual or body who is then able to exercise the power. Legislation may expressly provide a statutory procedure for the devolution of a power. This most commonly takes the form of an express power to delegate the power to a person in writing. Such a delegate can then exercise the power in their own right. Not all powers can be delegated. Delegation is often necessary depending on the volume of decision making and to support the orderly function of a department's business. Further information can be found Fact sheet No 11.pdf (ags.gov.au) .
Formal Partnership	Is a best practice shared decision-making arrangement between governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples supported by a formal agreement that sets out the objective of the partnership, the scope of shared decision-making, and arrangements for working in partnership. The National Agreement identifies the 'strong partnership elements' required to meet a Formal Partnership.
Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP)	Refers to Indigenous peoples' rights to their cultural heritage based on the fundamental right to self-determination. Cultural heritage includes all aspects of cultural practices, traditional knowledge, resources and knowledge systems developed by Indigenous people as part of their Indigenous identity. This includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Artistic, literary and performance works (copyright) • Indigenous Languages • Different types of knowledge (e.g. plant and spiritual knowledge) • Tangible and intangible cultural property • Indigenous ancestral remains and genetic materials • Cultural and environmental resources • Sites of Indigenous significance • Documentation of Indigenous heritage and histories.
Indigenous Data Sovereignty	In Australia, Indigenous Data Sovereignty (IDS) refers to 'the right of Indigenous people to exercise ownership over Indigenous data. Ownership can be expressed through creation, collection, access, analysis, interpretation, management, dissemination and reuse of Indigenous' (Maiaam nayri Wingara 2023a).
Indigenous self-determination	That Indigenous Australians have the right to self-determination within the life of the Australian nation, as equal citizens and recognised as the Indigenous peoples of Australia.
legislation and regulation	Use of laws to sanction or proscribe particular forms of behaviour. These are sometimes particular, such as licences to do certain things that are otherwise prohibited, and sometimes more general, such as criminal law.
National Agreement	National Agreement on Closing the Gap is an agreement between Commonwealth, state and territory governments, the Australian Local

Term	Description
	Government Association and the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations (the Coalition of Peaks) to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and governments to work together to overcome the inequality experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and achieve life outcomes equal to all Australians.
New policy proposal (NPP)	Any proposal that requires a government decision and that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • have a certain or potential financial impact including on the fiscal balance, underlying cash balance, headline cash balance, net debt or net worth on existing estimates within the forward estimates period or beyond (including drawing down on cash reserves or moving expenditure from outside into the forward estimates) or • have changes in expenses offset by changes in other expenses or user charges (revenue) or • create a legal, financial, contingent or other commitment for the Commonwealth or • changes the intent of a previous new policy decision or position, including proposals that are fully offset, absorbed within existing resources, or involve movements between or within outcomes.
Partnership	Partnership is a term used to describe a relationship where two (or more) parties agree to cooperate to advance a mutual interest.
Relational approach	Reflects a mindset of continuous improvement and negotiation, assumes outcomes are shared, both parties are responsive to the evolution of the relationship and have a shared commitment to the empowerment of First Nations partners and the issues faced. A relational approach also aims to build the capability of those you are engaging over time, where all groups understand and own their responsibilities.
Service delivery	Provision of government services to the public, sometimes accompanied by enforceable rights.
Shared decision-making	Involves government working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to develop, design and deliver policies, programs and services, thereby influencing outcomes of decision-making. In this context, the voice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples carry equal or greater weight to that of government.
Strengths-based approach	A way of speaking about Indigenous affairs that recognises the inherent capabilities and strength of First Nations peoples and communities. This is counter to a deficit discourse, which represents Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in terms of deficiency which, 'narrowly situates responsibility for problems with the affected individuals or communities, overlooking the larger socio-economic structures in which they are embedded.' (Deficit Discourse and Indigenous Health , Fogarty, Bulloch, McDonnell & Davis 2018).
Stronger Partnership elements	Means clause 32 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.
Transactional approach	Focuses on one-off, task-based engagements, where one side maintains control over the process. A transactional approach to engagement can lead to engagement fatigue, where stakeholders may feel repeatedly engaged but unheard, or feel solely responsible for either finding a solution or owning any problem that is encountered.

Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full Title
ACCOs	Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations
APS	Australian Public Service
APSC	Australian Public Service Commission
BPORs	Budget Process Operational Rules
CGRPs	Commonwealth Grants Rules and Principles 2024
ICIP	Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property
PGPA Act	<i>Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013</i>
PGPA Rule	Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Rule 2014
NPP	New Policy Proposal
NIAA	National Indigenous Australians Agency
UNDRIP	United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples