



Government of Western Australia
Department of Communities



Department of Communities

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Aboriginal Engagement Framework summary



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A message from the Director General

The Department of Communities (Communities) is committed to building partnerships with Aboriginal people to ensure they have a genuine say in the design and delivery of services that affect their lives.

The Aboriginal Engagement Framework (AEF) has been developed to guide culturally responsive engagement with Aboriginal stakeholders, in consultation with representatives from Aboriginal community, advisory bodies, and community controlled organisations, as well as key Communities stakeholders including regional leadership teams, Aboriginal leaders, and the Aboriginal Employee Network.

I acknowledge that improving outcomes for Aboriginal people requires a fundamental change in the way we build trust and support Aboriginal self-determination. It's critical that governments transform the ways they collaborate and partner with Aboriginal people to fulfill reform and policy commitments, such as the National Agreement on Closing the Gap and the WA Government Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy.

Our aim is to build the cultural competency in our approach and engagement with Aboriginal people and to build relationships, understanding and collaboration with communities and organisations.



Mike Rowe
Director General
Department of
Communities



A decorative header featuring a variety of Aboriginal patterns in blue, orange, and white, including circles, dots, and stylized figures.

Acknowledgement of Country

The Department of Communities acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands throughout Western Australia (WA) and pays respect to, and recognises the contribution from, all Elders past and present. We recognise the diversity and the significant importance of cultural heritage, values and beliefs of Aboriginal people and their continuing connection to land, sea and community.




A decorative header at the top of the page featuring a variety of Aboriginal patterns, including circles, dots, and stylized figures, in shades of blue, orange, and white.

Special thanks

Communities extends its gratitude and appreciation to the Aboriginal employees, representatives, and community members who have shared their stories and experiences. Their contributions have been invaluable in guiding the development of the AEF.

Language

The term 'Aboriginal' is used in preference to 'Indigenous' or 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' people, in recognition that Aboriginal people are the original inhabitants of WA. Use of the word 'Aboriginal' throughout this platform refers to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

A decorative footer at the bottom of the page featuring a variety of Aboriginal patterns, including circles, dots, and stylized figures, in shades of blue, orange, and white.



The artwork: Together We Thrive

The artwork represents the ongoing and meaningful collaboration between the Department of Communities and Aboriginal peoples. The core element, the large meeting Place, symbolises the essence of this engagement, a space where Aboriginal perspectives, knowledge and experience are prioritised. Within this meeting place, six smaller spaces represent the six guiding principles of the Aboriginal Engagement Framework (AEF), each reflecting a commitment to collaboration, respect, and shared responsibility in shaping departmental strategies and goals.

At the centre of the design, the figures symbolise the pivotal role of Aboriginal people in all decision-making processes. This central positioning emphasises the belief that Aboriginal communities should drive the initiatives that impact their futures, ensuring that engagement is led by their priorities and aspirations. The large white circle in the

background symbolises continuity – a commitment to lasting, positive change and improvements for Aboriginal communities.

The design also draws from the rich and diverse flora of Western Australia, paying respect to the various Aboriginal nations and communities across the state. Embedded within the background, kangaroo tracks represent forward movement, symbolising progress and the journey ahead. Meanwhile, intricate connection lines weave throughout the artwork, reflecting the exchange of knowledge, information, relationships and collective strength.

This artwork not only highlights the ongoing relationship between the Department of Communities and Aboriginal peoples but also reaffirms a commitment to mutual understanding, empowerment and a shared vision for the future.

The artist: Chantelle Ah Chee

Chantelle is a proud Nyikina woman on her mother's side. The traditional lands of the Nyikina people are located in the West Kimberley region, WA. Nyikina people describe themselves as Yimarrdoowarra, which means belonging to the Mardoowarra, the Fitzroy River. Chantelle has found joy from being able to engage with

community through art. Being an artist allows Chantelle to express herself and gives her a sense of belonging and connection to culture spiritually, mentally, emotionally and physically. Her aim is to share Aboriginal culture through art with others and to be a role model for her children and the next generation.



About

The development of the AEF is an action of the Communities Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO) Strategy 2022 to 2032 and the Communities Aboriginal Cultural Framework 2024–2034. The AEF will enable key focus areas and actions under these strategic policy pieces by guiding and facilitating meaningful engagement with Aboriginal people. The AEF aims to ensure Aboriginal voices are heard and rights respected, and that cultural values are reflected in decision-making processes across Communities.

Communities is committed to forming authentic partnerships with Aboriginal people for having a genuine say in the design and delivery of services that affect their lives. Transforming the way governments collaborate and partner with Aboriginal people is necessary to progress partnerships and other commitments under national and state policy and reform pieces such as the 2020 National Agreement on Closing the Gap (National Agreement) and the WA Government Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy 2021–2029 (Empowerment Strategy).

Vision

Sustained improvements in outcomes for Aboriginal people through culturally responsive engagement and increasing Aboriginal voices in decision-making.

Purpose

Guide culturally responsive engagement to facilitate genuine relationships and collaboration with all Aboriginal stakeholders.



Outcomes

- Culturally appropriate engagement behaviours and practices are embedded into Communities' systems and ways of working.
- Communities' employees are culturally competent, minimising the cultural load on Aboriginal employees.
- Improved coordination of engagement with Aboriginal stakeholders.
- Communities' employees are equipped with the tools and resources to guide culturally appropriate and responsive engagement with Aboriginal stakeholders.
- Involvement and empowerment of Aboriginal people in the identification and development of place-based priorities and solutions is increased across Communities.
- Relationships between Communities and the Aboriginal community continuously improve.

Guiding principles



The guiding principles are depicted in a circle, representative of a holistic and balanced system, where each principle holds equal importance and is interconnected. The strength of the system lies in the way the principles work together rather than in isolation.



Aboriginal representation

Aboriginal stakeholders are represented in all areas of engagement relating to matters that affect their lives, through participation processes that support individual accessibility and inclusivity needs.



Collaboration and partnerships

Authentic collaboration and partnerships with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and Aboriginal communities is prioritised.



Cultural safety

Cultural safety is embedded in practices, governance structures, and service delivery, and responds to the diverse cultural needs and perspectives within Aboriginal communities.



Empowerment

ACCOs and Aboriginal communities are empowered through capacity building initiatives and development of economic and socio-economic opportunities.



Genuine relationships

Relationships with ACCOs and Aboriginal communities are developed and maintained through consistent and transparent engagement approaches.



Self-determination

The right to self-determination in service provision and decision-making processes is recognised and respected for Aboriginal people, communities and ACCOs.

The AEF also embodies Communities' iCREATE values of Integrity, Courage, Respect, Empathy, Accountability, Trust and Empowerment as core principles that underpin our shared behaviour and guide our culture. They define how we work together with our partners and with the people we serve.

Engagement

Communities recognises the valuable contribution Aboriginal perspectives, knowledge and ways of working bring to improving outcomes for Aboriginal people. It also recognises the importance of place-based, Aboriginal-led engagement across Communities portfolios. Adopting culturally responsive and trauma-informed engagement practices is an important part of building and maintaining respectful, meaningful and productive relationships when working with Aboriginal people.

Throughout the engagement facilitated for the development of the AEF, consistent themes emerged regarding culturally responsive engagement with Aboriginal people. These included:



Prior planning

Prior planning is important when engaging with Aboriginal stakeholders; for example, identifying key stakeholders and other consultations being conducted with the same group or community by another Communities team. Consultation fatigue puts unnecessary stress on stakeholders and prevents engagement from having a broader, more holistic impact across portfolios.

Relationship building

Dedicating time to building relationships is critical for culturally responsive engagement with Aboriginal people. Allowing time for face-to-face meetings of a relaxed nature prior to formal information seeking or information sharing shows respect for stakeholders and acknowledges Aboriginal ways of working.

Clear communication

Using clear language and messaging, maintaining consistency, and communicating back to stakeholders on decisions, outcomes and findings from engagement demonstrates respect to stakeholders and is conducive to reaching shared goals.

Place-based approaches

Engagement that is place-based and face-to-face was identified as key for culturally responsive engagement with Aboriginal stakeholders and should be prioritised wherever possible. Place-based engagement is particularly important at the beginning of any engagement process to create space for genuine relationship building.

Truth-telling

Truth telling is an important part of acknowledging and understanding the impact historical government policies have had, and continue to have, on Aboriginal people. Prioritising time and space for truth-telling at the earliest stages of and throughout engagement with Aboriginal stakeholders allows for effective relationship building and working towards real improvements for Aboriginal children, families and communities.


These findings, along with a range of research pieces on best practice engagement approaches, should be considered and adapted to suit engagement with Aboriginal stakeholders across all types and all levels of engagement.



Trauma-informed approaches

Trauma aware and informed practice is a strengths-based healing approach grounded in understanding and responding to the impacts of trauma. It emphasises physical, psychological and emotional safety for both people seeking help and the helpers. It creates opportunities for Government agencies to be accountable to people affected by trauma, for building a sense of empowerment and self-determination. It recognises the prevalence of trauma and is sensitive to and informed by the impacts of trauma on the wellbeing of individuals and communities (see [Aboriginal Cultural Framework 2024–2034](#)).

Trauma-informed approaches to engagement require acknowledging and addressing the impacts that colonial and other traumas play in Aboriginal peoples' lives at every stage of the engagement process, including ongoing experiences with racism and discrimination. Being culturally responsive by understanding Aboriginal peoples' collective trauma and its impacts can help to overcome systemic barriers to genuine collaboration and partnership. Valuing Aboriginal peoples' strength, resilience and survival stories, and an understanding of trauma and truth-telling, is critical for successful engagement that enables Aboriginal leadership and self-determination.



Intersectional approaches

Intersectionality refers to how the interconnected nature of individual identities plays a role in the challenges and opportunities individuals face. Aboriginal communities are diverse, with language, culture, spirituality, gender, age, (dis)ability, sexuality, socio-economic status, and other social intersections all coming together to shape lived experiences. Varied levels of privilege, discrimination and disadvantage based on these social intersections are also underpinned by systemic power structures, particularly those embedded in the ongoing legacy of colonisation in Australia.

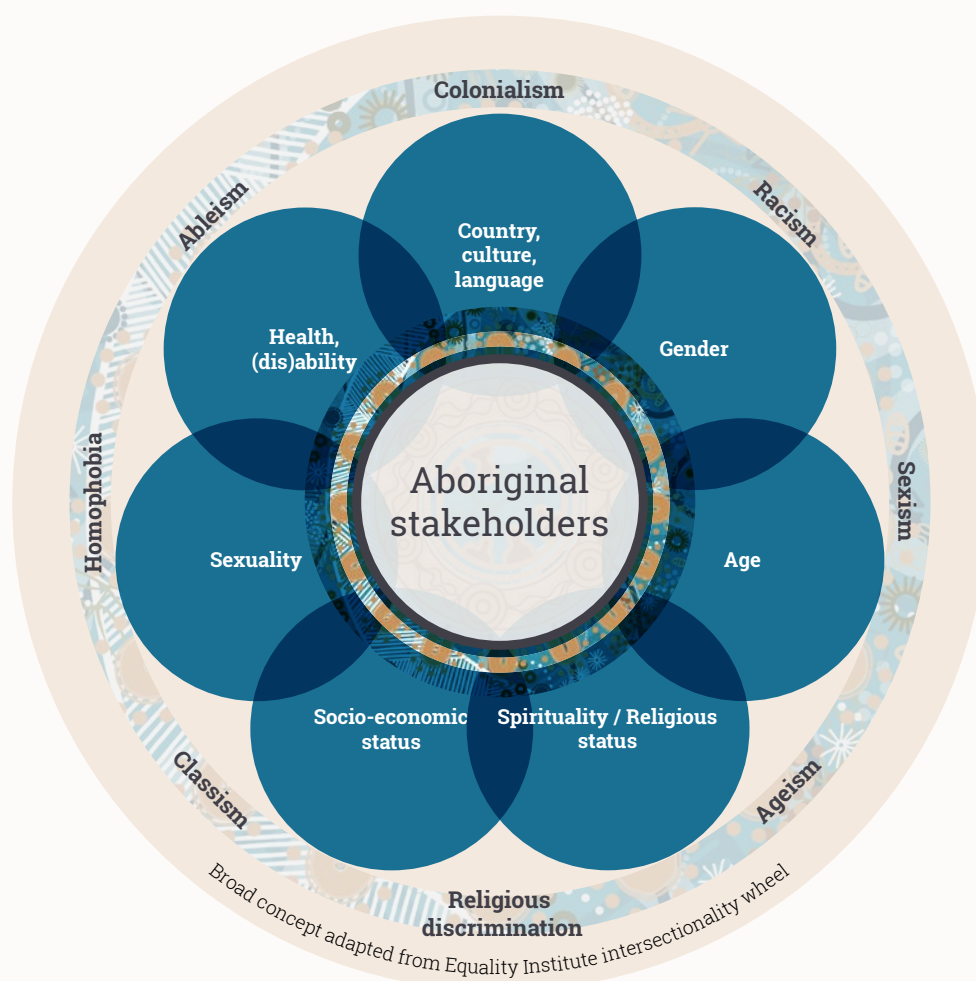


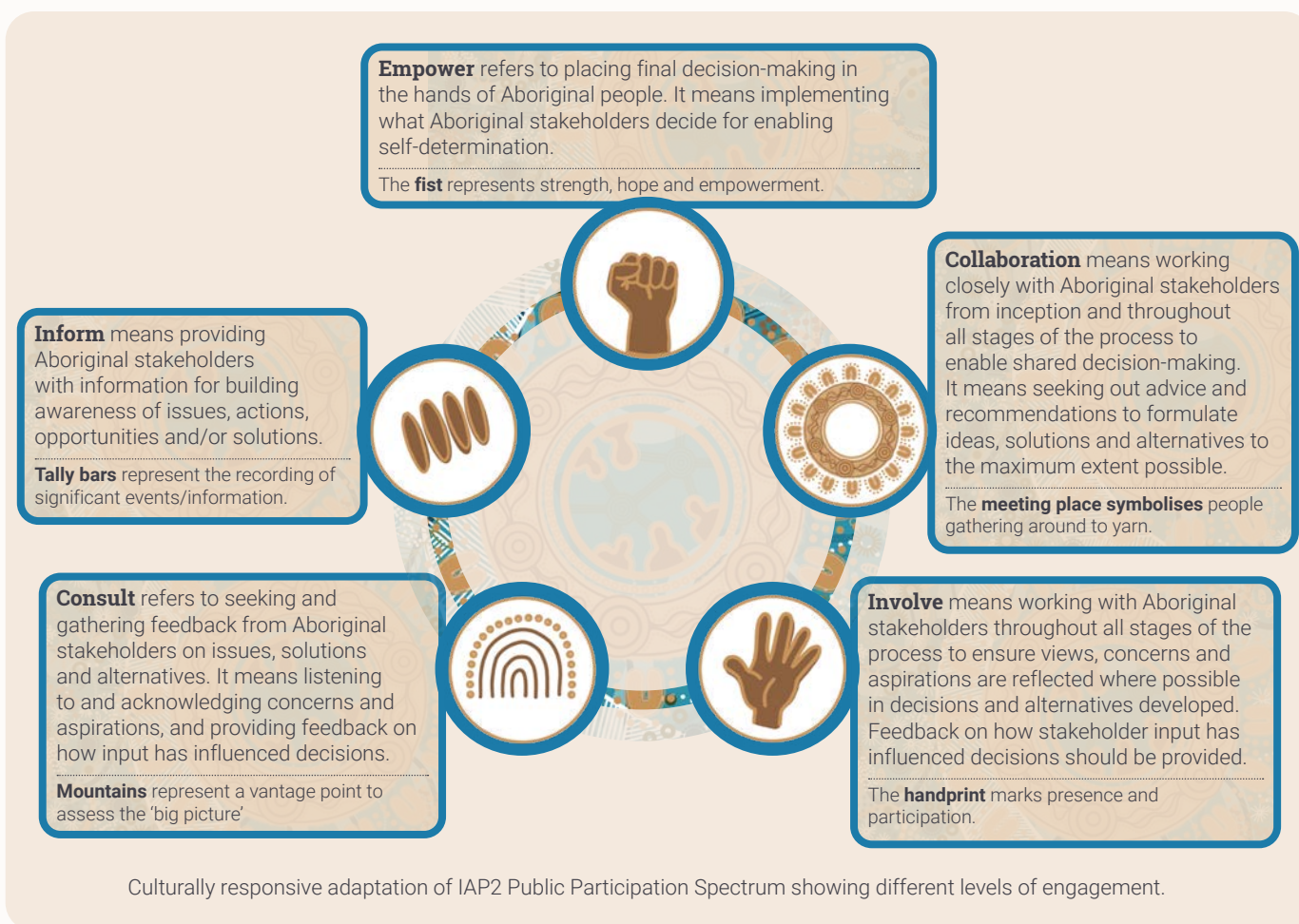
Image: Visual representation of intersectionality wheel with cultural considerations

Aboriginal people experience better outcomes when policies and systems are designed, developed and implemented utilising intersectional approaches that respect the knowledge and self-determination of diverse Aboriginal people and communities. At every stage of engaging with Aboriginal stakeholders, it is important to consider the appropriateness of engagement approaches based on relevant social intersections and what these may mean for accessibility to engagement activities and engagement outcomes. Considering intersectionality when planning engagement also makes space for, and helps to avoid making assumptions about, the diverse range of perspectives, needs and aspirations of Aboriginal people.

Levels of engagement

Communities engages Aboriginal stakeholders for various purposes, across multiple portfolios, and at differing levels based on the context of any given project or initiative. [Communities' Aboriginal Stakeholder Engagement Scale](#) provides a culturally framed approach for employees to identify the appropriate level of engagement that will determine the impact Aboriginal stakeholders are likely to have on decision-making outcomes. In alignment with Communities' Stakeholder Engagement Framework, the Spectrum outlines five levels of engagement as adapted from the [International Association for Public Participation \(IAP2\) Public Participation Spectrum](#).

The level of engagement with Aboriginal stakeholders will depend on the purpose of the engagement, vary across stakeholder groups, and can fluctuate throughout the engagement process. At the lowest level, Inform allows for one-way communication with a high number of Aboriginal stakeholders, however, the level of impact on decision-making is lowest. At the highest level, Empower enables Aboriginal self-determination by placing decision-making in the hands of stakeholders, however, typically involves fewer participants.



Tools and resources

Communities' strategic direction and plans

[Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy Western Australia 2021 –2029](#)

[Department of Communities – Vision, Purpose, Values and Strategic Direction](#)

[Aboriginal Strategic Advisory Group](#)

Communities' frameworks and guides

[Department of Communities Partnership Framework](#)

[Aboriginal Cultural Framework](#)

Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCO) resources

[Department of Communities ACCO Strategy 2022 –2032](#)

[Department of Communities ACCO Commissioning Framework](#)

[Council of Aboriginal Services Western Australia \(CASWA\)](#)

Closing the Gap resources

[Resources | Closing the Gap](#)

Regional and cultural knowledge resources

[Native Title Claimant Applications and Determination Areas – National Native Title Tribunal](#)

[WA country Health Services – Map of WA Aboriginal Health Services](#)

[50 Words Project](#)

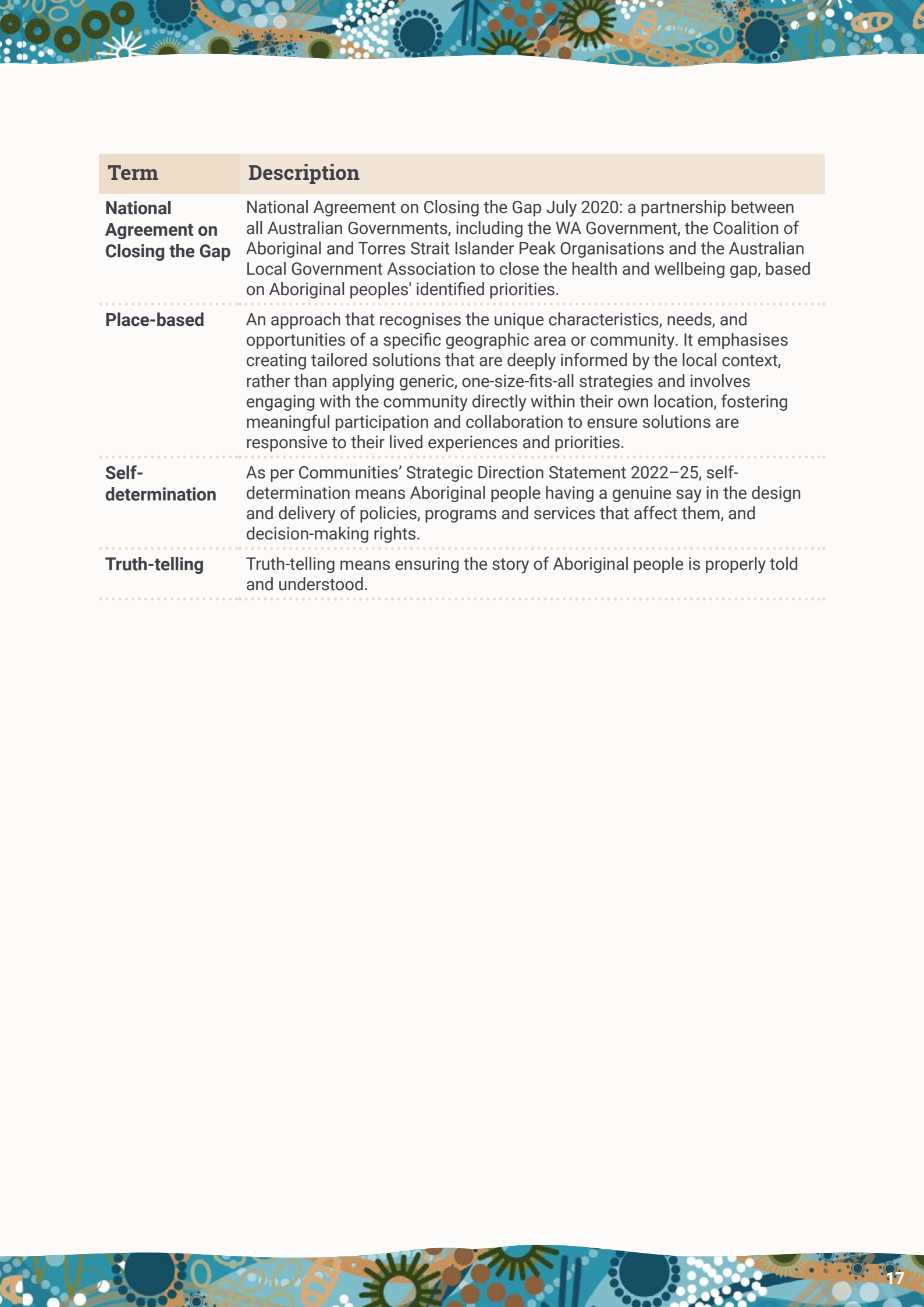
[Map of Indigenous Australia | AIATSIS](#)



Glossary

Term	Description
Aboriginal advisory bodies	Aboriginal advisory bodies are structures established to provide advice to government on matters impacting Aboriginal communities.
Aboriginal business	<p>In line with the Department of Finance definition, Department of Communities (Communities) defines Aboriginal business as:</p> <p>“Aboriginal businesses (including subcontractors, subconsultants and suppliers) registered on the Aboriginal Business Directory WA or Supply Nation and may be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a sole trader where the person is Aboriginal • a partnership or firm where at least 50 per cent of the partners are Aboriginal • a corporation where Aboriginal persons own at least 50 per cent of the legal entity.”
Aboriginal community	An Aboriginal community refers to a group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who share a sense of belonging, connection and identity, often based on their relationship to land, family and shared experiences. It's more than just a geographic location, encompassing cultural, social and often spiritual ties.
Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO)	<p>Priority Reform Two of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap defines an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation as an organisation that is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. incorporated under relevant legislation and not-for-profit b. controlled and operated by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people c. connected to the community, or communities, in which they deliver the services d. governed by a majority Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander governing body.
Aboriginal corporation	<p>The Corporations Act 2013 defines a corporation as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. “a company; and b. any body corporate (whether incorporated in this jurisdiction or elsewhere); and c. an unincorporated body that under the law of its place of origin, may sue or be sued, or may hold property in the name of its secretary or of an office holder of the body duly appointed for that purpose.
Aboriginal Employee Network (AEN)	<p>Communities’ Aboriginal Employee Network. This is a network of Aboriginal employees across the state, providing a voice for Aboriginal staff across the state to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • drive best practice in working with Aboriginal people • create a welcoming space to connect through peer support • promote cultural safety in the workplace and services delivered by Communities • drive change through two-way communication with Communities leadership • advocate for professional development, career pathways and leadership positions.

Term	Description
Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy	Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy – Western Australia 2021–2029
Aboriginal organisations	Aboriginal organisations encapsulate not-for profit, ACCOs, Aboriginal businesses and Aboriginal corporations.
AEF	Department of Communities Aboriginal Engagement Framework
Authentic collaboration	Foster genuine, transparent, and collaborative ways of working between government agencies, ACCOs and Aboriginal communities to co-design and deliver effective and sustainable services.
Authentic partnerships	Genuine partnerships, with ACCOs, are to meet the ‘strong partnership elements’ set out in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap 2020 cl.32. For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partnerships are accountable and representative. • Formal agreements are in place. • Decision-making is shared between government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
Communities	Department of Communities
Cultural heritage	Aboriginal cultural heritage – <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) means the tangible and intangible elements that are important to the Aboriginal people of the State, and are recognised through social, spiritual, historical, scientific or aesthetic values, as part of Aboriginal tradition; and b) includes the following – <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i) an area (an Aboriginal place) in which tangible elements of Aboriginal cultural heritage are present; ii) an object (an Aboriginal object) that is a tangible element of Aboriginal cultural heritage; iii) a group of areas (a cultural landscape) interconnected through tangible or intangible elements of Aboriginal cultural heritage; iv) the bodily remains of a deceased Aboriginal person (Aboriginal ancestral remains), other than remains that are buried in a cemetery where non Aboriginal persons are also buried or remains that have been dealt with or are to be dealt with under a law of the State relating to the burial of the bodies of deceased persons.
Culturally responsive	The ability to recognise cultural differences and respond respectfully and professionally in a safe way.
Cultural safety	Only the Aboriginal person who is a recipient of a service or interaction can determine whether it is culturally safe. For the purposes of this document, the term ‘cultural safety’ refers to overcoming the power imbalances of places, people and policies that occur between the majority non-Aboriginal position and the minority Aboriginal person so that there is no assault, challenge or denial of the Aboriginal 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 people.



Term	Description
National Agreement on Closing the Gap	National Agreement on Closing the Gap July 2020: a partnership between all Australian Governments, including the WA Government, the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations and the Australian Local Government Association to close the health and wellbeing gap, based on Aboriginal peoples' identified priorities.
Place-based	An approach that recognises the unique characteristics, needs, and opportunities of a specific geographic area or community. It emphasises creating tailored solutions that are deeply informed by the local context, rather than applying generic, one-size-fits-all strategies and involves engaging with the community directly within their own location, fostering meaningful participation and collaboration to ensure solutions are responsive to their lived experiences and priorities.
Self-determination	As per Communities' Strategic Direction Statement 2022–25, self-determination means Aboriginal people having a genuine say in the design and delivery of policies, programs and services that affect them, and decision-making rights.
Truth-telling	Truth-telling means ensuring the story of Aboriginal people is properly told and understood.



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