



Indigenous Languages Priorities

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

Purpose of the paper

The *Indigenous Languages Priorities* paper has been developed by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages Directions Group (Directions Group). The Directions Group advocates for major reforms, such as legislation, increased investment in community language activities, and compensation for the destruction caused by assimilation policies that prevented language transmission and removed our people from their lands. The Directions Group supports the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages Policy Partnership* (Languages Policy Partnership), which will be used as a forum to advocate for the substantive reforms required from State, Territory and Commonwealth governments.

The Directions Group has identified and endorsed three overarching themes that inform five priority policy reforms requiring immediate action. Activities are listed to enable organisations, governments, and people to consider how they can contribute to stopping the loss of languages. This will be a living document to reflect the evolving aspirations of communities.

The policy priorities outlined in this paper will be provided to the Australian Government and the Languages Policy Partnership as well as informing the development of Australia’s Action Plan for the International Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022–2032 (the International Decade of Indigenous Languages). These priorities reflect what we know to be important to our communities, networks, and our people. Australia is a diverse nation of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures each with their own language and contemporary language context. This is a key challenge to providing a national voice to a national process.

The implementation of these priorities requires meaningful partnerships with relevant First Nations communities, stakeholders, and organisations. The Terri Janke’s *True Track* principles are a recommended guide for working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to implement the language priorities. In this paper, references to ‘we’ refer to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members of the Directions Group.

The three priority objectives are:

- Stopping the loss
- Ensure the safety and security of the current investment
- Thinking about a new way forward

The five priority policy reforms are:

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



Develop a national approach

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

The current Government has committed to implementing the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* through a process of Voice, Treaty, Truth. Currently, there is no overarching national approach to supporting First Nations languages. It is timely that the Australian Government considers how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages could be legislated. It is also critical that national priorities translate across state, territory and local governments. The Languages Policy Partnership will help to coordinate efforts at the national, state and local level.

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

Activities that could support developing a national approach

- Begin exploration and consultation towards national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages legislation.
- Develop a national languages policy: there is a critical need for national direction and a policy structure for language work across Australia.
- Establish a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages commission, with a commissioner responsible for developing and managing funding for language activities.
- Encourage state and territory governments to match the level of Commonwealth Government funding on a dollar-for dollar basis to support language work and activities.
- Provide government services through the medium of the local language and employ and train local people to deliver government services, also expecting non-local people to learn the language.
- Make interpreting and translating services available for better service delivery.
- Consider the issue of Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) copyright.
- Ensure continued resourcing and consistent senior representation from decision makers in the Languages Policy Partnership.
- Extend the Directions Group's membership to oversee the duration of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages.
- Develop a national mechanism for community engagement, advocacy, and agency in the languages sector.
- Develop a stronger Australian evidence base around the benefits of supporting languages.
- Support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led, specific and targeted research into language use, loss and revival, and the resulting social, emotional and health impacts.
- Continue to ensure the National Agreement on Closing the Gap includes languages measures, i.e. Target 16.
- Develop guidelines to operationalise working in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities on language priorities.





Sector strengthening

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

Activities that could support sector strengthening

- Ensure safe and secure funding to stop language loss.
 - Develop an appropriate funding model for the languages sector.
 - Increase the number and capacity of language centres, programs and projects.
 - Establish language hubs and place-based services to support community language work.
 - Develop and implement national fee-for-service guidelines for the languages sector.
 - Support language programs across health, justice, tourism, education, economic, environmental, ecological, and the arts and culture sectors.
 - Review funding priorities of government programs in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language experts.
 - Increase the number and capacity of language centres, language nests, hubs, mobile centres and other community language groups, programs and projects.
Support communities to innovate and develop new, culturally appropriate ways to deliver language services.
- Develop a sector workforce strategy.
 - Identify, develop and promote professional learning opportunities and industry pathways.
 - Identify and create language employment opportunities across the languages sector.
 - Develop industrial awards and standards for the language sector.
 - Review and document the role of language experts to understand the value of these roles.
- Support strong governance and strategic planning.
 - Undertake a stocktake of the capability, funding and services provided by language centres.
 - Support language centres with strong governance to apply for Reconciliation Australia's Indigenous Governance Program.
 - Create opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language experts to learn from international best-practice language documentation, preservation and educational practices.
 - Identify and promote successful approaches for language revival.





Access to education and employment opportunities

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

Activities that could support access to education and employment opportunities

- Education
 - Develop a funding model to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages education in schools.
 - Dedicated funding for schools to develop the curriculum for local languages, including resource development, community planning and training.
 - Reintroduction of bilingual schools and support for existing bilingual settings secured by legislation.
 - Bilingual schools required in all 'strong language' communities.
 - Community-led language schools.
 - Create language tutoring programs within schools.
 - As ABSTUDY students can't access accredited training outside of their home state, recognise language learning as a subsidised course to support travel costs.
 - Explore possible links between language centres and the Australian Government's commitment to teach First Nations languages in primary schools across Australia.
 - Prioritise home and community-based language learning programs, starting from babies to early education, for example, mums and bubs programs, Deadly Dads, childcare and playgroups.
- Employment
 - Support and fund the implementation of First Languages Australia's [Yalbilinya: National First Languages Education Workforce Strategy](#) to facilitate employment pathways in the languages education sector.
 - Increase the range of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages for which there are certified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander interpreters.
 - Partnering opportunities with TAFE, tertiary and training authorities for the delivery of accredited training.
 - Create accredited university level courses for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language teachers and linguists.
 - Recognise Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) and Indigenous knowledge systems as a qualification across environmental industries.
 - Continued employment of rangers, including interpretive cultural rangers, in government and other programs.
 - Embed language roles and specialisation across all appropriate professions and industries.
 - Create career pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander qualified teachers to move into language educator roles within schools.
 - Identify community-led training opportunities and support the development of community-led training facilities.





Truth telling and celebration

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

Activities that could support truth telling and celebration

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





Community access to information

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

Activities that could support community access to information

- Partner with collecting institutions (archives, libraries, land councils, museums and galleries) to provide communities and language centres access to language documentation.
- Support a coordinated approach between organisations and institutions (such as archives, museums, libraries, and language centres) to facilitate the repatriation of language materials both within and outside Australia.
- Institutions' policies must ensure that First Nations communities can access the historical language documentation required to reclaim their languages.
- Fund the development of dictionaries, encyclopaedias, thesauruses, grammar and orthography documents, including learner guides.
- Support community-controlled digitisation of language collections, resources and materials, both written and oral.
- Build on existing successful digitisation software in communities across Australia, such as smart phone applications.
- Provide archival training that empowers communities to engage with collected materials and manage local collections and meta data.
- Fund community recording hubs to document current speakers and their language knowledge.
- Explore and develop language programs in justice settings and with other disadvantaged or vulnerable groups.
- Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) and other collecting institutions could provide community workshops to teach people how to access, reclaim and conserve their language materials.

