

COUNTRY CONNECT

A National Indigenous Land, Housing and Opportunity Framework

COMPLETE GOVERNMENT SUBMISSION PACKAGE

HIGHEST VALUES

Proposed umbrella creative and project identity

Prepared by Samantha Pearce

21 September 2026

Contact: [Redacted]

[Redacted]

Package contents

1. Decision Requested from the Australian Government
2. One-Page Executive Briefing
3. Full Country Connect Proposal
4. Government Outcomes & Closing the Gap Alignment
5. Proposed 12-Month Pilot Program
6. Indicative 12-Month Pilot Budget & Funding Model
7. Implementation Assurance & Safeguards
8. Formal Submission Details

Note: The pilot budget is indicative only and is not a formal government costing. Final costs would be determined through feasibility, co-design and implementation planning.

1. Decision requested from the Australian Government

National Indigenous Land, Housing and Opportunity Framework

Submitted by: Samantha Pearce

Date: 21 September 2026

Purpose

This paper sets out the immediate decision requested from the Australian Government regarding COUNTRY CONNECT. COUNTRY CONNECT is not seeking immediate approval for nationwide implementation. Instead, it respectfully seeks government consideration of a structured feasibility and co-design process to determine whether the concept should progress to a limited, independently evaluated pilot program.

The decision requested

It is respectfully requested that the Australian Government agree in principle to assess the feasibility of COUNTRY CONNECT as a potential national framework connecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with opportunities relating to Country, Land, Housing, Employment, Training and Community.

Immediate decision sought

Agreement to commence a First Nations-led feasibility and co-design process for Country Connect, with a view to developing suitable regional demonstration pilots if that process supports further implementation.

It is proposed that the Australian Government nominate an appropriate lead department or interdepartmental working group to undertake an initial assessment of COUNTRY CONNECT. The assessment could examine:

- whether the concept complements existing Commonwealth initiatives
- whether similar programs or digital infrastructure already exist that could be utilised
- potential alignment with relevant Closing the Gap outcomes and Priority Reforms
- appropriate Traditional Owner and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance
- Indigenous data sovereignty, cultural authority, privacy and cybersecurity requirements
- potential Commonwealth, state and territory responsibilities
- suitable Aboriginal community-controlled delivery partners
- potential regional, remote and urban pilot locations
- indicative implementation and funding requirements
- an appropriate independent evaluation framework.

Co-design before implementation

A central recommendation is that government should not design the final COUNTRY CONNECT model independently of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. If the initial feasibility assessment supports further development, the next stage should be a formal co-design process involving appropriate representation from Traditional Owners, Elders, communities, young people, Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, Indigenous housing and land organisations, Indigenous data governance specialists, governments, and relevant professional and technical specialists.

What government is not being asked to approve at this stage

- national implementation or compulsory participation by any community
- creation of a national database without consultation
- transfer or alteration of Aboriginal land ownership, native title rights or existing land rights
- replacement of Local Aboriginal Land Councils or other Indigenous organisations

- publication of culturally sensitive information
- major housing construction expenditure
- a permanent new Commonwealth agency.

Proposed government pathway

COUNTRY CONNECT Concept → Government Feasibility Assessment → Traditional Owner & Community Co-Design → Three-Location 12-Month Pilot → Independent Evaluation → Government Decision → Modify, Expand, Integrate or Conclude

Desired initial outcome

For the Australian Government to consider COUNTRY CONNECT and determine whether it warrants a formal feasibility and co-design process. The proposal does not require government to commit immediately to a national program. It asks government to determine, together with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, whether the idea has sufficient merit to be properly tested.

2. One-page executive briefing

National Indigenous Land, Housing and Opportunity Framework

Purpose

COUNTRY CONNECT is a proposed national initiative designed to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access to land, housing, employment, training and connection to Country. It aims to create a transparent national pathway through which Traditional Owners, individuals and families can identify and participate in opportunities connected to their traditional lands.

Core proposal

The proposed National Indigenous Land and Opportunity Register, supported by a digital Connection to Country platform, would bring together available land and housing opportunities; community housing initiatives and land development opportunities; employment and training programs; cultural land management and regional development opportunities; community-led projects; and pathways for Traditional Owners to register interest and participate.

Traditional Owner participation

A fundamental principle would be that Traditional Owners have the opportunity to participate directly in decisions and opportunities relating to their Country. The framework should complement, rather than replace, Local Aboriginal Land Councils and existing Aboriginal organisations.

Youth employment and training

Government funding could support Local Aboriginal Land Councils and other appropriate Aboriginal organisations to employ young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as Land and Housing Officers, creating a practical pathway from training to employment to community leadership.

Housing and connection to Country

COUNTRY CONNECT could help identify underutilised land suitable for housing, community-owned housing opportunities, regional and remote housing pathways, culturally appropriate housing models and pathways toward home ownership. The digital platform could also connect people with housing, employment, cultural programs, land management, education and community projects on or connected to Country.

Pilot and governance

The Australian Government could initially fund several regional pilot locations, allowing communities and government to test the framework before considering national implementation. Development should occur in partnership with Traditional Owners, communities, Indigenous organisations, governments, housing organisations and training providers, with strong safeguards for Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property, privacy, cultural authority and Indigenous data sovereignty.

Proposed next step

Establish a Commonwealth-led feasibility and consultation process to determine suitable pilot locations, governance arrangements, funding requirements and implementation pathways for COUNTRY CONNECT.

3. Full Country Connect proposal

HIGHEST VALUES

Proposed umbrella creative and project identity

Connecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with Country, land, housing, employment, training, participation and economic opportunity.

Prepared by Samantha Pearce

21 September 2026

Acknowledgement of Country

Country Connect acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the lands and waters of Australia.

The proposal recognises the continuing cultural, spiritual, social and economic relationships Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples maintain with Country and acknowledges the authority, knowledge and responsibilities of Traditional Owners.

Country Connect is founded on the principle that decisions concerning Country should be developed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, rather than for them.

1. Executive summary

Country Connect proposes the development of a nationally coordinated, First Nations-led framework connecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with information and opportunities relating to Country, land, housing, employment, education, training and economic development.

Australia has established land rights, native title, housing, employment, community development and economic development systems operating across Commonwealth, state, territory and local jurisdictions.

However, these systems can be complex and fragmented.

An individual or family seeking information about land, housing, returning to or maintaining connection with Country, employment, training or community development opportunities may be required to navigate numerous government agencies, Aboriginal organisations, land councils, Native Title bodies and separate programs.

In some circumstances, people may also find that access to information, consultation or decision-making processes is controlled or restricted by the relevant land council or other representative body, including in relation to matters affecting the Country with which they identify or to which they maintain a connection. This can leave community members feeling excluded from decisions made about their own Country, particularly where they do not have a direct pathway to understand the decision, provide their views or seek fair and equal treatment.

Community members may also miss important opportunities or notices because land, property and development information is often advertised across different newspapers, community noticeboards, websites and other channels. This is particularly concerning in remote areas, where advertisements about the sale or transfer of land may be seen by larger companies or outside interests without every affected community member being aware of them. If a community member does not see an advertisement or receive timely notice, they may lose the opportunity to understand what is occurring, express an interest, exercise any applicable rights or take steps to protect their connection to or interest in the land.

Country Connect proposes to create a bridge between these systems while supporting transparent, culturally safe and accountable participation.

The framework would have four principal components:

1. A National Indigenous Land & Opportunity Register

A secure, culturally appropriate digital information platform connecting people with legitimate land, housing, employment, training, community development and economic opportunities.

2. The Country Connect Digital Platform

A website and mobile application providing a simple point of entry into otherwise complex systems, including accessible information about relevant organisations, consultation processes, decisions and avenues for feedback or review.

3. Aboriginal Land & Housing Officers

A funded employment and training pathway enabling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people — particularly young people — to develop careers in land administration, housing, property, community development, mapping and related fields.

4. Country Connect Regional Pilots

Place-based pilots bringing together Traditional Owners, communities, Aboriginal organisations and governments to test how land, housing, employment and training opportunities can be coordinated.

Country Connect would not replace Land Councils, Native Title organisations, Prescribed Bodies Corporate, Traditional Owner organisations or existing Aboriginal governance structures. It would instead provide infrastructure capable of connecting those structures while improving transparency, accessibility, participation and accountability for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals, families and communities.

2. The policy opportunity

The central question behind Country Connect is:

How can Australia better connect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with Country and with the opportunities that can flow from land, housing, employment, training and economic participation?

Information currently exists across multiple systems.

- who holds or manages particular land
- which Traditional Owner organisation has authority
- whether Native Title rights or interests exist
- whether housing opportunities are available
- which Aboriginal housing provider operates locally
- whether government land programs apply
- whether employment or traineeships are available
- whether grants exist
- whether land-management opportunities are available
- which Commonwealth, state, territory or Aboriginal organisation should be approached.

3. The Country Connect principle

The framework is based on a simple pathway:

COUNTRY → CONNECTION → INFORMATION → PARTICIPATION → OPPORTUNITY → SKILLS & TRAINING → EMPLOYMENT → HOUSING & ENTERPRISE → STRONGER COMMUNITIES → OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

Connection to Country should not be reduced to an economic concept. Country has profound cultural, spiritual, familial and historical significance.

However, where communities choose to pursue economic and social development, connection to Country can also support housing, employment, enterprise, environmental management, education and intergenerational opportunity.

Non-negotiable design requirements

Dignity, choice, consent, transparency, accountability and access to human assistance are design requirements of Country Connect. They are not decorative values or statements of aspiration. They should be reflected in governance, technology, information practices, service pathways, community engagement, decision-making and evaluation. Digital access should complement, not replace, meaningful human assistance. Participation should remain informed and voluntary, with individuals and communities retaining appropriate choice and agency in matters affecting them.

In practice, this means people should be able to understand what is being offered, what information is being used and why; give or withhold consent where applicable; seek correction or raise concerns; know who is responsible for decisions and referrals; and obtain culturally appropriate human support when a digital pathway is unsuitable, inaccessible or insufficient.

Connection should also include the ability to access information, understand how decisions are made, express a view and be treated fairly and equally in processes affecting Country and community life.

4. National Indigenous Land and Opportunity Register

It is proposed that the Australian Government investigate the establishment of a National Indigenous Land & Opportunity Register.

The Register would not be a new determination system for Aboriginal ownership, Traditional Ownership or Native Title. Instead, it would operate as a secure information and referral platform.

- Aboriginal-owned land
- recognised Traditional Owner areas
- relevant Native Title information
- Aboriginal Land Council information
- Prescribed Bodies Corporate and other relevant organisations
- available housing programs
- community housing opportunities
- land-management programs
- Ranger employment
- government land initiatives
- employment opportunities
- apprenticeships and traineeships
- education and training
- grants
- business and enterprise opportunities
- community development opportunities
- pathways towards housing and home ownership
- information about relevant consultation, participation, complaints and review processes
- publicly available notices concerning proposed sales, transfers, leases or other dealings with land where inclusion is legally and culturally appropriate.

5. Direct access to information

A fundamental objective of Country Connect should be ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have reasonable access to information about opportunities and decisions affecting their communities and lives.

This principle is not intended to diminish Aboriginal Land Councils or other representative organisations. Strong Land Councils, Native Title organisations, Traditional Owner corporations and Aboriginal community-controlled organisations would be essential partners.

However, Country Connect should also recognise the individual.

- What opportunities are available?
- Who do I contact?
- What organisation represents this area?
- Are there housing opportunities?
- Are there employment opportunities?
- Is training available?
- Are there programs that could help my family or community?
- How are decisions affecting this Country made?
- Can I participate or have my views considered?
- Are there advertisements or notices concerning land connected with my community that I may have missed?
- What can I do if I have been excluded from a decision or treated unfairly?

6. Traditional Owner authority

A national platform must not inadvertently undermine the very relationships with Country it seeks to strengthen.

Traditional Owner authority must therefore be incorporated into the design from the beginning.

Country Connect should recognise that Aboriginal land ownership, Native Title, cultural authority and community governance differ considerably across Australia.

The platform should clearly distinguish between information about Country and authority to make decisions about Country.

Providing information through Country Connect would never itself confer a legal interest, cultural authority, Native Title right or entitlement to land.

Relevant Traditional Owner structures, legislation, Native Title arrangements and Aboriginal land-rights frameworks would continue to apply.

At the same time, recognition of Traditional Owner authority should not be used to justify unnecessary secrecy, exclusion or the denial of basic procedural fairness.

- respects lawful Traditional Owner and organisational authority
- protects confidential cultural information
- makes non-sensitive information reasonably accessible
- supports participation by affected community members
- identifies conflicts of interest and relevant safeguards
- provides clear reasons and records for decisions where appropriate
- ensures people are not excluded on arbitrary or discriminatory grounds
- provides independent assistance or review pathways where a person believes they have been denied a fair opportunity to be heard.

7. Country Connect Land and Housing Officers

A significant opportunity exists to make the administration of Country Connect itself an employment initiative.

It is proposed that participating Aboriginal organisations be funded to employ and train Country Connect Land & Housing Officers, with particular emphasis on creating opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.

These officers could provide practical local assistance across the following areas:

- housing pathways
- land information

- referrals
- government applications
- property and housing enquiries
- community development opportunities
- employment programs
- grants
- land-management opportunities
- digital mapping
- maintaining appropriate local information
- monitoring relevant public sources for land advertisements
- notifying community members about relevant land sales, transfers, leases or consultation notices
- understanding consultation and decision-making processes
- preparing questions, submissions or requests for information
- identifying complaints, advocacy or review pathways
- liaising with government agencies
- navigating the Country Connect platform.

8. BUILDING A NEW SKILLED WORKFORCE

Country Connect could establish a career pipeline such as:

Community / School Traineeship → Country Connect Land & Housing Officer → Certificate or Diploma → Senior Land / Housing Officer → Specialisation in Housing | Property | Planning | Geographic Information Systems (GIS) | Land Management | Community Development | Government | Project Management | Community Advocacy → Leadership

Government investment in Country Connect could therefore create Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment while building long-term professional capability in land, housing, mapping, community development and related fields. Geographic Information Systems (GIS) are digital mapping systems used to capture, manage and display location-based information, making them particularly relevant to land, property, infrastructure and community planning.

9. COUNTRY CONNECT HOUSING PILOT

It is proposed that Country Connect initially be tested through three regional demonstration pilot locations, consistent with the proposed 12-month, three-location pilot program.

The three pilot locations should represent different geographical, community and legislative environments so the model can be tested across varied settings.

Rather than treating housing solely as construction expenditure, each pilot should examine how housing investment can also generate employment, training and local procurement. Each location could assess:

- local housing need
- available or underutilised land
- land tenure
- Traditional Owner interests
- infrastructure requirements
- community housing opportunities
- employment requirements
- skills available within the community
- training opportunities
- local Aboriginal businesses
- potential Commonwealth and jurisdictional funding
- home ownership opportunities where appropriate
- longer-term community development.

10. COUNTRY CONNECT DIGITAL APPLICATION

The Country Connect application should be deliberately simple. Rather than expecting users to understand complicated government structures, its starting point could be: WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO DO?

- Connect with Country
- Discover my Indigenous heritage
- Learn about my family, language group or community
- Find culturally safe genealogy and family-history support
- Find my relevant Aboriginal organisation
- Understand who makes decisions about this Country
- Find information about consultations and community decisions
- Find notices about land sales, transfers, leases or other land opportunities
- Receive alerts when relevant land advertisements are published
- Have my views heard
- Seek help if I have been excluded or treated unfairly
- Find housing
- Explore land opportunities
- Find employment
- Find training
- Explore home ownership
- Find Ranger or land-management opportunities
- Start or grow a business
- Find grants
- Find opportunities for young people.

11. Data sovereignty and cultural protection

Country Connect should not become an unrestricted national database containing culturally sensitive information.

Information concerning sacred sites, cultural knowledge, restricted places, family information or other culturally protected material should not become publicly accessible simply because a national platform exists.

Where detailed cultural information is unnecessary for achieving the platform's purpose, it should not be collected.

- Indigenous Data Sovereignty
- informed consent
- cultural authority
- privacy
- cybersecurity
- community control
- restricted information
- access permissions
- ownership of information
- the right of communities to determine how their information is used.

12. Governance

Country Connect should be developed through genuine shared decision-making.

Government participation would be important. However, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation should not be merely advisory.

The governance model should provide meaningful involvement in the design, implementation, oversight and evaluation of Country Connect.

- Traditional Owners
- Elders
- young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- Aboriginal Land Councils
- Native Title organisations
- Prescribed Bodies Corporate
- Aboriginal community-controlled organisations
- Aboriginal housing organisations
- regional and remote communities
- Aboriginal businesses
- people with experience of exclusion from land-related decision-making
- relevant professional expertise
- Commonwealth, state and territory governments.

13. Alignment with Closing the Gap

Country Connect has strong potential alignment with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

The National Agreement establishes four Priority Reforms centred on formal partnerships and shared decision-making, strengthening the community-controlled sector, transforming government organisations, and improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access to data and information.

Country Connect could provide a practical mechanism through which several of these principles operate together.

It also intersects with national outcomes concerning employment and economic participation; appropriate and affordable housing; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' relationships with land and waters; and access to information enabling informed decision-making.

14. Implementation

PHASE ONE — NATIONAL CO-DESIGN AND FEASIBILITY

The Australian Government would establish a First Nations-led feasibility and co-design process.

PHASE TWO — REGIONAL PILOTS

A limited number of Country Connect pilots would be established.

PHASE THREE — INDEPENDENT EVALUATION

The pilots would be independently evaluated against agreed community and government outcomes.

PHASE FOUR — NATIONAL EXPANSION

Subject to demonstrated results and community support, Country Connect could progressively expand nationally.

15. Accountability and measurable outcomes

Country Connect should be judged by outcomes rather than simply expenditure or activity.

The evaluation framework should combine quantitative measures with community-defined measures of success.

- people successfully connected with housing
- housing projects facilitated

- employment created
- traineeships completed
- qualifications achieved
- young people progressing into long-term employment
- Aboriginal businesses contracted
- land-management employment created
- people accessing relevant land information
- relevant land advertisements and notices identified and distributed
- community satisfaction
- Traditional Owner satisfaction
- improved accessibility of government information
- reduction in duplication between programs
- users connected with trusted genealogy or heritage services
- users supported to participate in consultations or decision-making
- complaints or concerns referred to appropriate independent services
- evidence that participating organisations improved transparency, accessibility and accountability.

16. FUNDING PRINCIPLE

Country Connect should initially be approached as a co-design and demonstration initiative, rather than seeking immediate funding for an untested national bureaucracy.

Initial Commonwealth investment could support national co-design, technical feasibility, regional pilots, Land & Housing Officer positions, digital platform development, heritage and reconnection referral pathways, privacy and Indigenous Data Sovereignty safeguards, AI-assisted notice monitoring, independent participation support and evaluation.

Where possible, Country Connect should identify opportunities to better coordinate existing expenditure rather than relying exclusively upon new expenditure.

17. Proposed government action

It is respectfully proposed that the Australian Government:

- Agree in principle to investigate the Country Connect concept.
- Commission a First Nations-led feasibility and co-design process for a National Indigenous Land, Housing and Opportunity Framework.
- Examine the feasibility of a National Indigenous Land & Opportunity Register and Country Connect digital platform.
- Work with Traditional Owners and relevant Aboriginal organisations to establish appropriate governance, cultural authority and data-sovereignty protections.
- Establish a Country Connect Land & Housing Officer employment and training model, with particular opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.
- Identify suitable communities and regions for voluntary Country Connect demonstration pilots.
- Investigate opportunities to coordinate existing Commonwealth, state and territory housing, employment, land-management and economic-development programs through those pilots.
- Ensure individuals and families have transparent pathways to obtain information while preserving Traditional Owner authority and existing legal rights.
- Develop a culturally safe heritage-discovery and family-reconnection pathway.
- Ensure that people affected by decisions concerning Country can access clear information, participate where eligible, seek assistance if excluded, and use fair and culturally safe complaints or review pathways.
- Investigate an AI-assisted monitoring and notification service for relevant public land advertisements and notices, subject to human oversight and cultural safeguards.

- Independently evaluate the pilots, with participating communities having a meaningful role in determining success.
- Report to Government on the feasibility of establishing Country Connect as a permanent national framework.

18. WHY COUNTRY CONNECT IS DIFFERENT

Country Connect does not propose another organisation sitting above Aboriginal communities. It proposes connection.

It connects people with information; people seeking their Indigenous heritage with trusted cultural and family-history support; people affected by decisions with fair opportunities to understand, participate and be heard; community members with timely information about land advertisements and notices; young people with careers; housing with employment; land with opportunity; government investment with community development; digital technology with local knowledge; and future generations with Country.

The framework recognises that government programs can achieve substantially more when they work together.

19. Conclusion

Country Connect begins with a straightforward proposition:

Connection to Country should also provide a pathway to opportunity, participation and fairness.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, Country is far more than an economic asset. Country carries identity, culture, history, family, responsibility and belonging.

This proposal does not seek to commercialise that relationship. It asks whether government systems can do a better job of supporting people who want to live, work, learn, build and create opportunities connected with Country.

Country Connect proposes bringing existing knowledge, institutions, programs and Aboriginal organisations together in a more connected system.

It seeks to make information easier to find, government easier to navigate, Aboriginal governance stronger, employment pathways clearer, heritage reconnection safer, decision-making more transparent and land-related information more accessible.

Most importantly, it seeks to ensure that opportunities created today can become opportunities for the generations that follow.

Supporting Digital Pathways

The Discover my Indigenous heritage pathway should explain that identity and cultural connection are personal and should not be determined by an app alone. It should direct users to trusted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, Link-Up services, archives, family-history services and community-controlled support.

The Have my views heard pathway should help users understand decision-making structures, consultation periods, eligibility, public records and available complaints, advocacy or dispute-resolution services.

The Land notices and alerts pathway should monitor approved public sources, identify relevant notices, provide source and closing-date information, and distribute alerts through appropriate digital and non-digital channels.

Safeguards for AI-Assisted Monitoring

- human verification where practicable
- clear identification of original sources
- regular testing for missed, duplicated or incorrectly classified notices

- no automated legal conclusions about ownership, eligibility or rights
- privacy protections for subscribers
- culturally appropriate controls over sensitive land information
- accessible alternatives for people without reliable internet
- processes for correction and independent oversight.

Formal Submission Details

Submitted for consideration by the Australian Government

Date: 21 September 2026

Prepared by: Samantha Pearce

Proposal: Country Connect — A National Indigenous Land, Housing and Opportunity Framework

Purpose: Request for Commonwealth consideration, First Nations-led co-design, feasibility assessment and regional pilot development.

Project authorship and assistance

Concept and proposal by Samantha Pearce. Prepared with research, drafting and editorial assistance from ChatGPT by OpenAI.

IMPLEMENTATION ASSURANCE

Decision sought: Commonwealth agreement to a First Nations-led feasibility and co-design process, rather than immediate national implementation.

Governance: Co-design should include Traditional Owners, relevant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, Native Title and land-rights bodies, community-controlled organisations, youth representatives and relevant Commonwealth/state/territory agencies.

Indigenous Data Sovereignty: Cultural authority, consent, access controls, privacy, data minimisation and community governance should be designed before any digital register or platform is piloted.

Pilot and evaluation: A staged 12-month demonstration across carefully selected locations should test usability, participation, cultural safety, referral outcomes and administrative feasibility before any broader rollout.

Measurable outcomes: Evaluation should consider participation and referral rates, access to housing/land/opportunity information, youth employment and training outcomes, timeliness of notices, user trust and satisfaction, and evidence of improved coordination.

4. Government outcomes and Closing the Gap alignment

Supporting Connection to Country Through Housing, Employment, Education and Community-Led Opportunity

Purpose

COUNTRY CONNECT is designed around the principle that secure housing, employment, education, community participation and connection to Country are interconnected. It has the potential to complement relevant priorities within Australia's National Agreement on Closing the Gap, subject to genuine partnership, community control, appropriate governance and evaluation.

Potential Areas of Alignment

- Housing
- COUNTRY CONNECT could assist communities and governments to identify and coordinate housing demand, available housing, appropriate land, community housing opportunities, vacant or underutilised properties, affordable and culturally appropriate housing, and pathways toward home ownership.
- Employment
- The Land and Housing Officer program would directly create Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment and could connect community members with local jobs, Indigenous businesses, land management, housing-sector work, apprenticeships and traineeships.
- Education and Training
- Paid employment could be combined with accredited education in housing, community services, property services, Indigenous land management, administration, project management, digital technology and leadership.
- Youth Opportunity
- Young people would be active contributors to community development, assisting with housing navigation, opportunity information, Elder support, consultation, land projects and digital access.
- Connection to Country
- The platform could help people identify culturally appropriate opportunities to return to, maintain connection with, or participate in activities on Country.

Traditional Owner participation

- Traditional Owner participation should be embedded in governance, pilot selection, land-related decisions, cultural information management, program evaluation and future development.
- Community-Controlled Delivery
- Where possible, funding should strengthen existing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations rather than create unnecessary parallel systems.

Indigenous data sovereignty

- Information governance should address ownership, control, access, publication authority, cultural authority, privacy and cybersecurity.

Closing the Gap Priority Reform Principles

- Partnership and shared decision-making through Traditional Owner and community involvement.
- Strengthening the community-controlled sector through locally determined delivery.
- Improving government coordination across housing, employment, skills, regional development and Indigenous affairs.
- Improving access to appropriate information while protecting Indigenous data and cultural authority.

Measurable Outcomes

- people assisted into housing or housing pathways
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people employed and retained in employment
- training commenced and completed
- youth Land and Housing Officers progressing into further work or education
- meaningful Traditional Owner participation
- community-defined Connection to Country outcomes
- land and opportunity referrals successfully progressed
- community satisfaction.

Success should be measured by what happens after the connection is made: Did somebody find housing? Obtain employment? Complete training? Did a community project progress? Did a Traditional Owner participate in a decision concerning Country? Did someone gain a meaningful opportunity to reconnect with Country?

5. Proposed 12-month pilot program

From connection to Country to opportunity

Purpose

This document proposes a 12-month COUNTRY CONNECT pilot program to test a practical model for connecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with opportunities relating to Country, land, housing, employment, training and community participation.

Pilot objectives

- improve access to land and housing opportunity information
- strengthen Traditional Owner participation
- support connection and reconnection to Country
- create pathways into secure and culturally appropriate housing
- create employment and accredited training opportunities
- improve coordination between communities, governments and Aboriginal organisations
- increase transparency around opportunities.

Pilot locations

Three diverse pilot locations could be considered, subject to consultation and community agreement: one regional, one remote, and one urban or peri-urban location. Final locations should only be selected following consultation with the relevant Traditional Owners and communities.

Local Country Connect hub

Each pilot location could establish a small COUNTRY CONNECT Hub operating collaboratively with Traditional Owners, Aboriginal organisations, Local Aboriginal Land Councils where relevant, housing providers, government agencies and training organisations.

Youth Land and Housing Officers

Each location could employ approximately 2–4 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander trainees or young workers as Land and Housing Officers. Responsibilities could include housing navigation, opportunity identification, platform maintenance, community consultation, Traditional Owner engagement, employment and training referrals, housing project support and digital assistance.

Connection to Country platform and Opportunity Register

The pilot would test a secure prototype digital platform and local demonstration version of the proposed National Indigenous Land and Opportunity Register. Sensitive cultural information would not be publicly available. Participation should occur with the consent of relevant landholders, Traditional Owners and responsible organisations.

Housing pathway

- The housing pathway could identify vacant or underutilised housing; appropriate land potentially suitable for housing; renovation and community housing partnerships; transitional and affordable rental pathways; culturally appropriate housing; and pathways toward home ownership where feasible.

Community governance and safeguards

Each pilot should have a local advisory structure involving Traditional Owners, Elders, community members, young people, Aboriginal organisations, housing organisations, relevant government representatives and appropriate advisers. Safeguards should include free, prior and informed participation, cultural authority, Indigenous data sovereignty, privacy and transparency.

Measuring success

- housing opportunities and placements
- employment and retention
- training completion and progression
- Connection to Country participation
- Traditional Owner participation
- opportunities recorded and progressed
- community feedback.

Independent evaluation and national pathway

At the end of 12 months, an independent evaluation should determine what worked, what communities valued, whether measurable outcomes were achieved, and whether the model should be modified, expanded or concluded. Successful elements could then progress from pilot to regional expansion and, only if evidence supports it, a national framework.

6. Indicative 12-month pilot budget and funding model

Three-Location Demonstration Program

Purpose

This document provides an indicative funding model for the proposed 12-month COUNTRY CONNECT pilot. It demonstrates potential scale and structure rather than constituting a formal government costing. Final requirements should be determined through consultation and co-design.

Indicative pilot investment

\$3 MILLION – \$4.5 MILLION

This indicative range is for program establishment, employment, technology, community participation and evaluation. It does not assume that major housing construction costs would be funded from the pilot allocation.

Indicative allocation

1. Local COUNTRY CONNECT Hubs

\$750,000 – \$1,050,000

Local coordination, shared service costs, community engagement, administration, travel, communications, technology and operational expenses.

2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Youth Employment

\$600,000 – \$850,000

Approximately 6–12 direct Land and Housing Officer opportunities across three locations, including wages, superannuation, on-costs, mentoring and workplace support.

3. Accredited Training and Professional Development

\$150,000 – \$250,000

Recognised training in housing, community services, property services, land management, administration, project management, digital skills and leadership.

4. COUNTRY CONNECT Digital Platform

\$600,000 – \$900,000

A secure minimum viable Connection to Country platform and Indigenous Land and Opportunity Register, including privacy, reporting and Indigenous data governance mechanisms.

5. Traditional Owner and Community Co-Design

\$300,000 – \$450,000

Traditional Owner consultation, community workshops, Elder and youth participation, culturally appropriate engagement and appropriate remuneration for specialist contributions.

6. Indigenous Data Governance, Privacy and Legal Framework

\$200,000 – \$300,000

Advice concerning privacy, cybersecurity, Indigenous data sovereignty, Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property, land rights, native title and information governance.

7. Independent Evaluation

\$150,000 – \$250,000

Measurement of housing, employment, training, participation, Connection to Country, platform usage, community satisfaction, cost effectiveness and scalability.

8. Contingency and Remote Delivery Costs

\$250,000 – \$450,000

Transport, accommodation, telecommunications, technology access, workforce support and unexpected regional or remote implementation costs.

Funding principle

COUNTRY CONNECT should avoid unnecessary duplication of existing government expenditure. It should connect existing programs and investment more effectively. Housing capital projects identified through COUNTRY CONNECT could be referred to existing or separately funded housing programs, while training could utilise existing vocational education and Indigenous employment programs where appropriate.

Potential funding structure

The Australian Government could provide principal pilot funding while establishing partnerships with state and territory governments, Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, Indigenous housing organisations, Local Aboriginal Land Councils where applicable, training organisations, universities, community housing providers, Indigenous businesses, philanthropic organisations and appropriate private-sector partners. Community participation should not depend upon an ability to raise private funding.

Financial governance

- Financial governance should include clearly defined funding agreements, transparent procurement, regular financial reporting, community oversight, conflict-of-interest requirements, independent evaluation and appropriate Commonwealth audit arrangements.

Value of the investment

The pilot should be measured by real-world outcomes: people housed, people employed, young people completing training, Traditional Owners participating in decisions, land and housing opportunities progressed, people reconnecting with Country, community projects commenced and long-term pathways created.

Proposed funding decision

It is respectfully proposed that the Australian Government consider funding an initial feasibility, co-design and pilot development process. Following that process, government would receive a detailed implementation plan, participating community agreements, final budget, governance arrangements, technology specifications, performance indicators, risk and privacy assessments, and an independent evaluation framework.

7. Implementation assurance and safeguards

Country Connect is seeking a First Nations-led feasibility and co-design process before implementation. It is not seeking immediate approval for compulsory national rollout, a new determination system for Traditional Ownership or Native Title, or publication of culturally sensitive information.

Governance

Governance should preserve Traditional Owner authority and involve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, Native Title and land-rights bodies, community-controlled organisations, youth representatives and relevant government agencies.

Indigenous data sovereignty

The framework should embed Indigenous Data Sovereignty, privacy, access controls, data minimisation, cybersecurity and culturally appropriate controls over sensitive information from the outset.

Pilot and evaluation

Subject to feasibility and co-design, three diverse voluntary locations could test the model for 12 months. Independent evaluation should determine whether the model should be modified, expanded, integrated with existing programs or concluded.

Measures of success

- Measures of success should include access to housing, land and opportunity information; participation and referrals successfully progressed; youth employment, training completion and progression; the timeliness and reach of approved land-notice alerts; Traditional Owner and community participation; user trust, satisfaction and community-defined outcomes; and improved coordination and value from existing government investment.

Core legal and cultural boundary

The proposed Register is an information and referral platform. It would not determine ownership, Traditional Owner status, Native Title, cultural authority or legal entitlement. Access to information must remain clearly distinct from authority over Country.

8. Formal submission details

Submitted for consideration by the Australian Government

Date: 21 September 2026

Prepared by: Samantha Pearce

Address: [Redacted]

Email: [Redacted]

Phone:

Proposal: Country Connect — A National Indigenous Land, Housing and Opportunity Framework

Purpose: Request for Commonwealth consideration, First Nations-led co-design, feasibility assessment and regional pilot development.

Project authorship and assistance

Concept and proposal by Samantha Pearce. Prepared with research, drafting and editorial assistance from ChatGPT by OpenAI.

COUNTRY CONNECT — Connecting Country. Connecting People. Creating Opportunity.