CITY OF SYDNEY

City of Sydney submission: Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap 2026

Submission
October 2026

The City of Sydney acknowledges the Gadigal of the Eora Nation as the Traditional Custodians of our local area.

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Introduction

In March 2022, the Council of the City of Sydney resolved multiple recommendations to embed national Closing the Gap priority reforms and socioeconomic actions to address inequality experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and achieve life outcomes equal to all Australians. These commitments are embedded in the City's community strategic plan. The City is also committed to the NSW specific fifth priority reform 'Employment, business growth and economic prosperity'.

These commitments are actioned across our strategies and operational teams. Our reconciliation action plans have been key in delivering specific outcomes as well as reporting progress on our commitments.

Our responses

Our commitments to the Closing the Gap Priority Reforms within our community strategic plan have enabled us to align our strategies and programs with these aspirations. This ensures we have the strategic driver behind implementing the actions and direction to achieve these in support of greater First Nations community outcomes.

Strategic approach to Closing the Gap

The City's approach to Closing the Gap is underpinned by a commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, self-determination and shared accountability across the organisation. Rather than positioning Closing the Gap as the responsibility of a single team or program, the City is working to embed First Nations leadership across its work and strengthen the organisation's capacity to respond to community priorities.

A critical enabler of this approach is the active support of the Chief Executive Officer and senior leadership, together with the involvement and oversight of experienced First Nations employees. Senior First Nations staff bring professional expertise, cultural knowledge, lived experience, trusted relationships and strong community connections. Their leadership helps the City remain connected to community, grounded in Aboriginal perspectives and responsive in its decision-making.

The City has established a First Nations Leadership Team, comprising senior Aboriginal staff and key Aboriginal roles working strategically across the organisation. The team provides leadership, oversight and coordination of First Nations priorities, connecting community needs and aspirations with the work of the City. It leads and co-designs work, identifies emerging and urgent priorities, and brings together the right areas of the organisation to enable coordinated responses.

First Nations staff with cultural knowledge, professional expertise and strong community relationships can influence priorities and decisions with the appropriate authority, resources and organisational visibility.

The City is continuing to learn how this model can support institutional change. We are seeking to build stronger internal systems while also delivering projects, reducing barriers, advocating for community priorities, championing organisational change and implementing new approaches. This work is developing and is not yet consistently embedded across all areas of the organisation.

Our experience indicates that strong internal First Nations leadership is a critical driver of reform. It helps connect community priorities with organisational decision-making and supports the City to move beyond individual or token activities towards more coordinated and meaningful outcomes. This internal leadership does not replace direct engagement or shared decision-making with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and community-controlled organisations. Rather, it strengthens the City's capacity to undertake that work appropriately and respond to what it hears.

First Nations Strategic Framework

The City of Sydney is committed to supporting a city where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can self-determine their cultural rights, social justice, economic prosperity, meaningful engagement and healing through truth-telling. This commitment is documented and given strategic direction through the First Nations Strategic Framework.

The Framework brings the City's work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples into a single, integrated and organisation-wide approach, connecting this commitment to the City's services, programs, policies and opportunities.

Importantly, the Framework focuses on people, communities and impact, rather than activity alone. It supports work that is informed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander priorities and strengthens community influence over the decisions, policies and services that affect them. In this way, the

Framework provides a strong foundation for the City's contribution to Closing the Gap and its commitment to self-determination.

Managing colonial load

An important consideration in sustaining this approach is the colonial and institutional load carried by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, particularly senior First Nations employees.

The City is continuing to develop its understanding of this load and how it should be managed. The City recognises that managing this load is not solely a workforce or wellbeing matter. It is an important organisational governance, risk and accountability consideration.

Sustaining First Nations leadership requires appropriate resourcing, early involvement, stronger coordination and collective responsibility across the organisation. First Nations staff should not carry sole responsibility for transforming government or delivering Closing the Gap commitments. Their leadership must be supported by senior leaders and the business areas responsible for implementing change.

While we have commented below with input from relevant teams throughout the organisation, we recognise the importance of hearing from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community perspectives of our relationships.

Shared decision-making through formal partnerships

Building successful partnerships

Since 2006 we have maintained the Principles of Cooperation with the Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council. This is a commitment that outlines how we'll work together and seek opportunities to foster reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people to increase understanding of Aboriginal cultures, and to recognise our respective responsibilities. Over time this relationship has strengthened with regular scheduled meetings between the respective CEOs and senior First Nations staff.

Our informal partnerships are where we do not have a written agreement and meetings are less frequent but we actively maintain these with local Aboriginal community-controlled organisations. These are important conversations where we highlight how we can work together on upcoming projects and raise awareness of issues. Some of these partnerships include funding support or venue access.

The power sharing in these arrangements is guided by the nature of the issues and opportunities where we collaborate or seek the advice and support from the community. Real power-sharing is a challenge.

These relationships are affected by resourcing impacts on both sides, especially where community organisations provide vital support services. The relationships can thrive and strengthen when there are tangible and meaningful projects to work on constructively. These two factors are where support would enhance the partnerships to really build:

– Aboriginal community-controlled organisations are suitably resourced to meet their operational requirements alongside governing these partnerships
– identifying and actioning meaningful opportunities for collaboration.

Partnership decisions and influence

Since 2008, the City has had an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander advisory panel. The group has evolved over time and continues to provide advice and guidance on matters of interest to First Nations communities. Items discussed range from major public art or design projects to strategic policy commitments. The panel's members are recruited through an open expression of interest which attracts a diverse group and helps build a membership with key knowledge, skills and life

experiences. While not a decision-making group, the panel's guidance helps to ensure that we hear from a range of voices within the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and what priorities, needs and aspirations they hold.

The panel often help us navigate our community engagement approaches and offer direction and clarity in what to prioritise, stakeholders to work with and issues for deeper work and greater community oversight. An example of a barrier is poor timing built into projects and their governance to ensure meaningful and timely influence on the work.

We often look to how other local governments approach this work. This is done through information sharing within NSW local government networks both through correspondence and gatherings. Another example here in Sydney would be Resilient Sydney which brings together all local governments across greater Sydney alongside various agencies. The Resilient Sydney strategy was developed in consultation across Sydney with local governments and their community networks. The Resilient Sydney model pools resources from members and can facilitate place-based collaboration, knowledge sharing and mutual benefit.

Building the community-controlled sector

Prioritising funding and supporting service transition

Our grants provide wide reaching support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals, groups and organisations. The program includes a dedicated grant called the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collaboration fund that is a year-round program open only to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander applicants. This grant supports the priorities and aspirations of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and contributes to a sustainable, community-controlled sector. Its priorities are projects that:

– support events and other activities to strengthen cultural identity and local community
– improve access to spaces, tools and resources to provide services or run programs
– provide crisis support for organisations with existing relationships, programs and services embedded in the local community.

First Nations oversight and governance of staff is embedded in the systems of assessing and recommending these applications.

Our grants programs also manage accommodation grants which have included Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations and individuals as tenants. This program offers the ability for tenants to seek reduced funding if they can demonstrate need. Space is in high demand across all sectors, some locations actively prescribe uses such as cultural, creative or community uses. These have hosted local Aboriginal organisations over the years and some work in close partnership with other venues including our community centres.

Sector strengthening

The support to the sector through our grants is managed through our competitive open application processes. Each grant program has focus areas and priorities to support. In acquitting each grant, the community organisation self-reports on how they have achieved the outcomes they set out when applying. This is then reviewed for approval by City staff.

Our social programs team manages a range of community support programs and activities. Connect Sydney is a program designed specifically targeting community sector organisations in the local government area to upskill employees and volunteers with professional development.

Transforming government organisations

Cultural safety and responsiveness

Our strategic approach is informed by our recently adopted First Nations Strategic Framework[1] developed by First Nations staff alongside our Stretch Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) 2025-2028[2]. The strategic framework coordinates all our work with First Nations communities to increase visibility and guidance to ensure improved local community outcomes. The framework includes a steering committee made of equal numbers Executive representatives and senior Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees.

We are developing a strategic approach to anti-racism in our organisation and local area. This has a strong focus on centring First Nations voices within anti-racism in both the development and implementation. Anti-racism is crucial in cultural safety and is one of the guiding principles of our First Nations Strategic Framework.

There are experienced First Nations employees in our people & culture team who work closely on both engaging with our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce and advocate for policy change. We also have engaged highly skilled consultants who have exceptional ability to guide the development of the anti-racism framework.

Delivering in partnership and increasing transparency

A key deliverable in our Stretch RAP has been increasing our employment of First Nations people. As we have grown to employ more skilled, experienced staff especially those with local knowledge and relationships these have helped to build trust out in the community. This is developing both our internal change to become an employer of choice and externally how we are able to better work with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Our commitment to recruiting and retaining First Nations employees has matured over time and is pivotal in the success of the work the City does with First Nations communities.

Shared access to data and information

Access and use of data

The City Archives is improving access to records of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the archival collection. When relevant items are located, they are added to the First Nations collection tile on the home page of the Archives & History Resources catalogue to promote ease of access. A right of reply is available to challenge any incorrect information in the records. A take down policy provides a mechanism for removing access where relevant. Staff are able to provide assistance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people searching the collection. City archivists attend community events to engage in-person with the public about our collections and seek feedback throughout the year.

We collect data from and about First Nations people in numerous ways. Sometimes these are targeted enquiries so specific First Nations data is easily identifiable, but mostly it is part of a bigger data set and has limitations on specific approaches. Sometimes the restrictions are due to the small sample size of 100 respondents, such as with our Wellbeing Survey. The smaller the sample, the higher the margin of error which affects the reliability of the results. Other challenges can be for project specific activities, the intellectual property and agreements in place to collect

[1] https://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/strategies-action-plans/first-nations-strategic-framework
[2] https://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/strategies-action-plans/reconciliation-action-plan

information may restrict wider publication and sharing. These may also be across many small and discreet activities and no such collecting exercise is in place.

Collection and governance of data

The City Archives consults with communities prior to accepting donations or processing transfers of items relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Descriptions of all relevant records are reviewed to ensure they are appropriate and that Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property is identified.

Staff in our archives, public art and engagement teams have participated in opportunities to learn more about Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Governance.

Every four years, the City conducts a Wellbeing Survey and has taken steps to increase participation by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. In 2023, targeted in-person engagement, including working with a local Aboriginal community organisation, contributed to 122 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander responses.

The City is exploring a standalone First Nations Wellbeing Survey, developed with key stakeholders, to enable more culturally informed questions and engagement approaches, and support the collection and management of distinct data in ways that align with Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles and practices.

Technology presents both opportunities and challenges. While the Wellbeing Survey is now primarily digital, digital participation can create barriers for some community members. Maintaining alternative ways to participate, alongside culturally appropriate face-to-face engagement, remains important. Technology also needs to support the safe, accessible and meaningful sharing of data with First Nations communities, while meeting privacy and cybersecurity requirements.

Developing and delivering policy with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Engaging and sharing decisions across the policy cycle

The City's experience with its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Panel demonstrates that genuine engagement and shared decision-making require more than consultation. They require deliberate processes that create the conditions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to understand, influence and shape decisions.

We have seen the strongest outcomes where engagement occurs early enough to influence the direction of work, sufficient time is provided for discussion, members receive clear background and context, and the matters brought to the Panel are relevant and provide a genuine opportunity for influence. This requires government processes to build engagement into the policy and project cycle from the outset, rather than seeking community input once key decisions have already been made.

Continuity is also important. Panel members serve defined terms, enabling relationships, trust and understanding of the City's work and policy environment to develop over time. Members receive sitting fees that recognise the expertise, knowledge and time they contribute.

The way engagement is structured also matters. Agendas are carefully managed and developed with the Panel's two Co-Chairs, who approve the agenda and help facilitate focused and productive meetings. This partnership supports greater Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership in determining how the Panel's time and expertise are used.

Our experience suggests that government systems need to provide time, flexibility and appropriate resourcing for meaningful engagement, while ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are involved at the points where they can genuinely influence decisions. Engagement is most

effective when it is treated as an ongoing relationship and part of decision-making, rather than a discrete consultation activity.

Building capability to deliver the Agreement

Through our Stretch RAP we are committed to implementing a staged cultural learning program. We set targets to map out groups who will undergo different stages based on the types of work they do, especially those working on First Nations projects, community facing roles and people manager roles. The baseline Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural awareness is mandatory and has been rolled out to all staff. The following stages to follow in the next 2 years target specific groups and topics to develop cultural competency for 50% of staff and a select leadership group undergoing immersive activities to develop toward proficiency.

We support local community development through our relationships, involvement in networks and grants program. This gives us close proximity to the work; the workers and issues faced in the community. Different teams work closely with service delivery, interagency networking and support which includes navigating across other City areas where appropriate with relationship management.

Enabling community-led efforts to close the gap

Place-based partnerships

Through our formal and informal partnerships, we are supporting a sense of certainty and consistency which helps to build trust and opportunities for open dialogue. What has been effective over a few years now has been scheduled meetings with senior appropriate staff with support of clear communication and accountability. A limitation is the availability of key personnel at times, as well as occasional break downs in communication and trust through change or unfavourable outcomes.

A key challenge is that Aboriginal community controlled organisations often do not have additional resources or capacity to engage with government, despite their expertise, community knowledge and relationships being critical to shaping effective policy and reform. Participation in consultation, co-design and decision-making can place an additional burden on already stretched organisations, particularly where their time and expertise are not appropriately compensated.

For genuine, shared decision-making, governments need to recognise and resource this contribution, providing appropriate funding, time and compensation so that Aboriginal community controlled organisations can meaningfully influence government policy and reform without this coming at the expense of their core work with communities.

Community authority

Increasing government and community's knowledge and skills around Indigenous data sovereignty and governance will support its growth and implementation. There are models for sharing ownership that need to be further explored to meet the needs of government and community. This includes ensuring safety of data with appropriately managed risk, while balancing community access and transparency. This will help establish platforms for communities to make use of information collected and shared by governments.

Local governance

Our strong and ongoing relationships with community help us to identify areas of need, opportunities to support and open lines of communication. This iterative approach means we have the ability to advocate and build long-term change while also being able to respond quickly when needed.

Senior staff meet every month with workers, leaders and contacts from local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations, businesses and groups. The nature of these

relationships will range from providing funding, hosting, collaborating on projects, procuring services and building networks.

We deliver, support and enable services, systems and programs that align with the socioeconomic outcomes of Closing the Gap. Our children's services and youth services are vital offerings that enable families and adults to manage the varied commitments of relationships, work, study and community. Our libraries create education opportunities, host public programs and social connections. We procure goods and services from a diverse range of First Nations owned and operated businesses, with a strong focus on growing our engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suppliers.

How actions will impact on the socioeconomic outcomes and targets

System enablers and barriers

Our strategic procurement aspirations to increase our spend with First Nations businesses would be supported by aligning our procurement capabilities with those of the state government under the Aboriginal Procurement Policy, including ability to directly engage First Nations businesses to higher value thresholds. The research is evident from Supply Nation[3] and Dilin Duwa[4] about the socioeconomic impact of First Nations businesses on the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Addressing racism needs to be resourced appropriately and treated not just as enabling cohesive communities but to address human rights and support the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Our 2023 Wellbeing Survey highlighted that the First Nations respondents experienced much higher rates of racism than the rest of the community. The national Anti-racism Framework and the Call It out First Nations racism register highlight the extent of harmful widespread impacts experienced by First Nations people. Our responses as government needs to focus on action to address incidences of racism.

Housing provided by Aboriginal community-controlled providers is much needed. Social, affordable, private housing and aged care need to be culturally appropriate, accessible and affordable. All levers of planning, finance, social services and legislation are needed to coordinate effectively towards meaningful self-determined housing equity.

Social and affordable housing

It is essential that social and affordable housing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is owned and managed by Aboriginal community-controlled organisations to support and strengthen cultural connection, self-determination and wellbeing for these communities.

When government land is being rezoned and/or redeveloped by governments there is potential to leverage social and affordable housing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households, through land use planning regulation.

An example of this is the recent rezoning of the Waterloo Housing Estate to facilitate the redevelopment of an 800 social housing dwellings for over 3,200 market, affordable and social dwellings. The Design Guide[5], that was published alongside the rezoning, established minimum targets for the delivery of social and affordable housing specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households.

[3] https://supplynation.org.au/resources/the-sleeping-giant-rises-report/
[4] https://fbe.unimelb.edu.au/cibl/research
[5] https://www.planningportal.nsw.gov.au/ppr/finalisation/waterloo-estate-south

In accordance with the Design Guide, Homes NSW and the Waterloo Partnership have committed that:

– 20% of the new social homes will be prioritised for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
– 15% of the new affordable homes will be prioritised for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

This will result in around 290 homes prioritised for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households in the Waterloo South redevelopment.

Development of Aboriginal owned land

The rezoning of Aboriginal-owned land to support housing outcomes, like any rezoning proposal, is influenced by a range of planning, technical and financial considerations.

A significant barrier can be the limited access to the expertise, resources and funding required to progress complex rezoning and development projects. Government support can help address these challenges and unlock opportunities for housing delivery.

The City is actively partnering with Aboriginal landowners and housing providers to facilitate new housing opportunities on Aboriginal-owned land, while helping to build the capability and capacity needed to deliver complex housing developments over the long term. For example, in 2025 Council approved Wyanga Aboriginal Aged Care Program Inc (in partnership with Uniting) to redevelop a council car park into residential Aboriginal aged care and the approval of funding for the Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council to redevelop a site they own in Redfern to provide Elders' housing.

The role of the Agreement

We have gradually shifted our resourcing and strategic approach from a cultural and social focus to more of an engagement and strategy approach. This has grown the impact into economic development, deeper consultation and community relations, and developed policies including our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander protocols and reconciliation action plans. Our current approach recognises the need to be coordinated in working towards community outcomes and aspirations, and the importance of self-determination.

Our grants program offers a way for local Aboriginal community organisations to deliver and lead their services and projects with our support. We're working to enhance the inclusivity and accessibility of relevant services through approaches that include information and briefing sessions, staff support and prioritising local outcomes.

From reform to outcomes

Engaged and supportive leadership is crucial. For our strategic governance, our 2 internal groups are newly revised and established to combine intentional attendees ensuring the groups are not too big, the owners of the work are the members, and there is First Nations representation and influence. We have Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal co-chairing and Executive sponsorship for the RAP working group, and the strategic framework steering committee has a balance of Executive representatives and First Nations employees.

We report publicly on our strategic commitments through our communications channels, in-person presentations and reporting systems. Our RAP report goes to Council and is reported to both our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander advisory panel and the internal employee network. We publish the report online which includes how we are tracking with progress on our employment, procurement and cultural awareness targets. From 2027, the annual report will cover the First Nations Strategic Framework and include RAP reporting.

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