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**Empowered Communities Partnership Joint
Decision-Making: Lessons Learned Review**

FINAL REPORT



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Project work package lead

Professor Tim Reddel

The Institute for Social Science Research at the University of Queensland (UQ) acknowledges the Traditional Owners and their custodianship of the lands on which UQ operates. We pay our respects to their Ancestors and their descendants, who continue cultural and spiritual connections to Country.

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Glossary of key terms

Terms	Meaning
Backbone Organisation	A secretariat with the responsibility to facilitate the EC Partnership in the EC regions and to drive regional development planning and related activities that deliver place driven Closing the Gap reforms, under the strategic direction of the regional EC Indigenous Leaders group.
Community Panel	A panel of community members who work together with the EC backbone organisation to deliberate on regional priorities, service performance data and other evidence and make recommendations to government about funding and future service investments.
Domains	Discrete areas of knowledge and practice that when combined will advance shared decision-making.
Empowered Communities Partnership	Government works with Indigenous people in the Empowered Communities Partnership to put in place processes and reforms so that Indigenous people are empowered to partner as equals with government.
Empowered Communities Leaders group	An Empowered Communities National Leaders group (representing the 10 EC regions) oversees implementation and acts in an advocacy capacity, bringing community perspectives from across their regions to drive reform.
Empowerment	In an EC context, empowerment means two things. It means Indigenous people taking all appropriate and necessary powers and responsibilities for their lives and futures. It also means Australian, state/territory and local governments sharing, and in some cases relinquishing, certain powers and responsibilities, and supporting Indigenous people with resources and capability building for place driven Closing the Gap reforms.
Growth Model	A visual representation of a change strategy.
Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS)	The IAS is the way the Australian Government funds and delivers a range of programs for Indigenous Australians. The strategy is administered by the NIAA and has six key components: Jobs, Land and Economy; Children and Schooling; Safety and Wellbeing; Culture and Capability; Remote Australia Strategies; and Research and Evaluation.
Joint Decision-Making (JDM)	Joint decision-making is part of a shared approach between EC and the National Indigenous Agency (NIAA) to Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS) funding. Government decision-makers come to the same table with Indigenous people to deliberate as partners for improved service performance and delivery in the EC regions.
National Indigenous	NIAA assists the Australian Government to achieve its objectives in improving the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples,

Terms	Meaning
Australians Agency (NIAA)	focusing on place, working in partnership and effectively delivering programs through the Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS).
Regional Development Agenda	Regional Development Agendas (RDAs) identify community priorities between government and EC regions for investments and reform of programs and services for Indigenous people in that EC region. RDAs provide a reference point for the joint decisions about IAS investment, as well as catalysing broader conversations about regional investment priorities.
Shared Decision-Making (SDM)	In the context of the Empowered Communities Partnership, Indigenous people are empowered to share decision-making authority with governments to accelerate policy and place-based progress on Closing the Gap through formal partnership arrangements.
Theory of Change	A method to describe how and why a set of integrated interventions and activities will result in change, includes a description of the predicted changes and the assumptions that underpin the 'theory' for the change.

Executive Summary

Background to the Lessons Learned Review

The Empowered Communities (EC) Partnership is an Indigenous¹ designed and led place-based reform partnership and aims to improve socioeconomic outcomes and close the disparity gap on the ground in 2–3 generations. The partnership is a collaboration between 10 significant Indigenous regions (urban, regional, and remote)² with government and represents an important national reform agenda. The partnership seeks to transform the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the Australian Government through the principles of empowerment, development, and productivity.

The existing EC shared decision-making (SDM) approach (known as joint decision-making (JDM) across EC regions) has been a signature reform achieved by the EC Partnership. Under SDM, EC regions convene panels of community members – who act like citizen juries to make recommendations to government on program funding decisions affecting the region. Community panels are not fixed and aim to increase the opportunities for Indigenous people to have some tangible influence in decision-making that would ordinarily be made by government alone.

In mid-2024, the Institute for Social Science Research (ISSR) at The University of Queensland was commissioned by the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) in collaboration with EC National Leaders to undertake a Lessons Learned Review (the Review) of JDM as a foundational part of the SDM reforms of the EC Partnership. The ISSR research team collaborated with representatives from the NIAA, EC National Coordination Team, and worked with the 10 EC regions, EC National Leaders, Indigenous research advisors and other stakeholders to identify key elements of successful JDM practice over the last six years of the EC Partnership and the elements of that practice that could be extended, including to other government agencies.

The Review conducted by ISSR is informed by interviews with over 100 people, extensive research on Indigenous reform and place-based approaches (PBAs) and was co-designed with the NIAA and EC participants. The Review's purpose was multi-faceted. A primary focus was to identify the success factors for JDM along with opportunities for further improvement. The Review provides valuable insights that can be applied to further build the EC Partnership including in new partnerships between EC regions and other government agencies and to help NIAA support partnership building with Indigenous people across the Australian Government. The Review also offers a foundation for ongoing learning and evaluation for EC and other partnerships between Indigenous people and government.

The EC Partnership is widely considered to be a highly advanced model of SDM across government. It has set a clear benchmark for how place-based initiatives aimed at Closing the Gap in place should operate. Based on this success, the EC Partners are both confident and ready to pursue further reforms to be involved in decision-making much earlier in the policy life cycle and to expand SDM to other programs, agencies and regions.

¹ Throughout this report we use the term 'Indigenous' rather than 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' or 'First Nations' because 'Indigenous' is the term that is preferred by Empowered Communities Leaders.

² The 10 EC regions are Goulburn Murray, Ngarrindjeri, East Kimberley, Far West Coast, North East Arnhem Land, Cape York, Inner Sydney, Central Coast, Tristate (NPY Lands), West Kimberley.

The innovative EC JDM reforms are of crucial importance in the context of current efforts of Australian governments to respond to inequality and target entrenched disadvantage. SDM has become an increasing focus for Australian governments in recent decades and is at the centre of key efforts to improve the effectiveness of policy and programs for the most disadvantaged. EC's JDM reforms demonstrate tangible progress in implementing SDM and serve as a 'proof of concept' that empowerment approaches are feasible.

The journey from the current EC practices of JDM, which have largely focused on ceasing grants funded under the NIAA's Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS) programs, to a more systemic SDM that empowers Indigenous people to influence the entire policy lifecycle will be challenging. However, this shift is crucial for achieving the EC National Leaders' vision of place-based empowerment for Indigenous people and so that government can increasingly deliver on its commitments to implement SDM. By expanding current SDM activities, leveraging regional strengths, enhancing the enabling environment, and sharing insights across regions, the potential for systemic impact increases, thereby strengthening Indigenous empowerment. The Review offers a strategic though incremental approach to grow SDM to include other government investments and thereby accelerate place driven Closing the Gap reforms by implementing a policy of empowerment through SDM.

Review Approach

The EC Lessons Learned Review was not an evaluation, nor was it a review of the EC model in its entirety or intended to evaluate the outcomes/impacts of activities or programs that have been delivered in the EC regions. Rather, its purpose was to explore the lessons learned from the JDM process that underpins the partnerships in the 10 EC regions. The review sought to:

- Identify the success factors (including capabilities) in the JDM partnership between EC regions and the NIAA, and opportunities for further improvement.
- Identify lessons that can be applied during new partnerships between EC regions and other government agencies.
- Establish a system of shared responsibility and learning for both the government and EC regions, which will support ongoing evaluation and adjustments in their partnership.
- Provide information that can help the NIAA improve its role in leading and supporting partnerships with Indigenous Australians across the Australian Government.
- Strengthen the NIAA's ability to support other government departments and agencies as they start working with EC and other Indigenous partners over time.

An Appreciative Inquiry approach was adopted, harnessing the power of positive storytelling to gather insights across the EC regions. The approach focused the attention of people and organisations on their strengths and future possibilities, rather than problems and shortcomings.

The research method was informed by the project's objectives to guide future place-based SDM models by garnering lessons learned to strengthen and inform existing and emerging partnership practice; identify practical actions that the government and Indigenous partners can take to improve JDM; and produce an evidence base that provides the NIAA with the policy levers to develop partnership practice and SDM across government.

Key Observations

There is strong commitment to shared decision-making by all parties

The Review heard strongly the clear aspiration of all parties to pursue the EC Partnership's aim for structural and systemic changes at scale through a national empowerment, development and productivity reform agenda. SDM is a central tenet of the EC Partnership model for achieving this aim.

The 2020 Closing the Gap Agreement's Priority Reform 1: Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision-Making, commits governments to building and strengthening structures to empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to share decision-making authority with governments to accelerate policy and place-based progress towards Closing the Gap.

The Agreement challenges governments to relinquish some control to enable SDM and self-determination. Importantly, partnerships and SDM are key drivers essential to the other priority reforms: building the Aboriginal community-controlled sector, transforming government, and shared access to regional level data.

This commitment to SDM directly challenges the entrenched and siloed policy, funding, delivery and data systems impacting on the lives of Indigenous people and their communities.

While the current JDM focus on IAS ceasing grants has been an important reform with many impactful outcomes for Indigenous people, it has a limited influence over broader government policy and funding systems. Building on these foundations and collaborating with other federal, state and local government, as well as community driven initiatives, the EC Partnership is ready to evolve to a broader SDM approach. This approach can more meaningfully shape government investments across the full policy lifecycle including legislation, policy development, program design and service delivery.

A strong base has been established via EC JDM to date

EC SDM has provided an important 'proof of concept' that Indigenous people and governments can partner effectively to jointly make decisions about services and funding in EC regions.

A shared commitment to Indigenous empowerment has been an essential feature of the success of JDM in EC regions. The Review found that Indigenous people have embraced and felt empowered by the opportunities to participate in funding decisions through JDM.

EC backbone organisations have engaged widely in their regions over multiple years to develop and refine Regional Development Agendas (RDAs) to ensure they reflect the aspirations of Indigenous people in EC regions. A comprehensive RDA with broad-based support from Indigenous people in a region is a powerful reference point for driving decisions about government investment in a region. RDAs are typically five year plans, but are living documents that continue to be reviewed as progress is made or new opportunities are identified.

The Review found that SDM is a mechanism through which local priorities can be elevated in government decision-making, service delivery can be increasingly transferred to Indigenous organisations from non-Indigenous ones, and services can be held to account by members of the local communities they are intended to serve. This has resulted in reduced duplication,

better alignment of funding and services with community priorities and improved the way services are delivered on-the-ground in communities.

On the community side, people have overwhelmingly commented on the value of being able to see a service in their community improve over time because government has embraced and implemented the changes they had requested. These include:

- Recommending changes to how a service should be delivered to better support local community needs
- Reducing unnecessary duplication of services in a local area with savings invested in other priority services
- Replacing a large 'out of community' provider with a local Indigenous provider working close to the ground in the place where the people needing support are living.

A strong theme in the feedback from Indigenous participants who have participated in JDM was how the sharing of information about funding increased community knowledge about the service system, and consequently their ability to advocate for change. An important function of SDM is to improve accountability for services that are not being delivered to the community's expectations, by recommending improvements or, in some cases, de-funding of services.

An important improvement that EC participants have highlighted is that SDM has meant that the definition of what constitutes success for a service has been re-defined more in line with what the community values, rather than relying on traditional government performance measures.

Government and backbone partners believe that the sector-by-sector priorities identified in Regional Development Agendas could be utilised in SDM assessments if SDM rounds were organised so that a range of funded programs related to a particular sector in a particular place could be considered at once.

The Review recognises the equal importance of cultural and other forms of Indigenous leadership such as family and organisational leadership in driving meaningful, Indigenous-led reform. The strength of EC lies in being able to harness the wisdom and guidance of a diversity of Indigenous leaders who are enabled to participate and have a meaningful influence in government decision-making.

The very nature of the EC model ensures that the work of EC remains grounded in cultural integrity and community aspirations. Together, a broad and diverse Indigenous leadership provides crucial on-the-ground input into decision-making, strengthening the ability to create sustainable change and ensure every step taken is informed by cultural wisdom and on-the-ground Indigenous priorities. Through this empowered leadership, EC continues to champion Indigenous-led governance and self-determination, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity.

A partnership approach is central to the success of SDM

Partnerships are the cornerstone for SDM between Indigenous people and governments.

The current partnership between EC and NIAA demonstrates the value of the Australian Government working with Indigenous people and organisations to shape how grant funding is directed in EC regions.

The Review found that there is evidence that the partnership has been successful in:

- developing a shared vision for Indigenous empowerment
- improving service delivery on-the-ground for Indigenous people
- enhancing the sharing (and quality) of information and data
- developing more collaborative and partnered ways of working.

However, there are several areas where the partnership could be improved. These include enhancing the enabling conditions in which the partnership operates and building trust among the partners, particularly at the local/regional level.

There is also a significant opportunity to continue to expand the partnership scope from ceasing IAS grants to service design and policy development, as well as to expand its reach to other Australian Government agencies and to other spheres of governments.

The Review identified six key actions to strengthen partnerships for SDM. These are:

- Formalise partnership arrangements

All partners have acknowledged that formalised partnerships, in the form of partnership agreements, are foundational in shaping the authorising environment for SDM.

- Clear authorising environment established and devolved as close to the ground as possible

Any authorisation created via legislation, policy and formalised partnership agreements, must be enacted in a meaningful way. Effective leadership across the ecosystem is essential as is the need to devolve decision-making as close to the ground as possible.

- Expand the model beyond ceasing grants to full SDM

In addition to expanding the reach of SDM, considerable benefit could be obtained by expanding the scope of SDM, from beyond ceasing IAS grants, to service design, policy development and reform.

- Expand the model to other agencies and levels of government

The conditions that support the partnership between NIAA and EC regions can be extended to partnerships with other Australian Government agencies, state/territory and local governments.

- Provide opportunities for sector based approaches

Government and backbone partners believe that the sector-by-sector priorities identified in Regional Development Agendas could be even more useful in SDM assessments if SDM rounds were organised so that a wide range of funded programs related to a particular sector (in a particular place) could be considered at once.

- Provide opportunities for new regions to join EC

There is capacity for the geographic footprint of EC to be extended to other regions over time. Such expansion would need to carefully consider the capacity and willingness of other regions to join EC and the resource implications for all parties.

Systemic reform is needed to support the growth of shared decision-making

If fully embraced by policy makers, communities and service providers, SDM is an opportunity to shift governance institutions and policy settings that have driven Indigenous affairs since the 1970s.

The sharing of power through a SDM process occurs within a complex system that operates at multiple levels. EC SDM has provided a process for bringing a range of services together at the same table, enabling discussion about reducing duplication, improving information-sharing and achieving better coordination of services in a location. This has helped break down silos and factionalism that have prevented services working together. While EC regions are making some strides in dismantling silos at the local and/or regional level, starting from the ground up, their efforts are somewhat limited without the support of top-down frameworks to fully realize their potential.

SDM has seen EC regions make significant progress in shaping programs that are more meaningful to support better outcomes for their communities. As SDM is embedded and evolves to broaden the operationalisation of SDM further, there will be capacity for greater systemic impact. However, this potential can only be realized through the development of enabling systems that support holistic local and/or regional decision-making regarding investment and service delivery.

Clear and formalised tripartite partnership table arrangements, which outline and mandate respective roles and responsibilities, could provide a key structural mechanism supporting a strong authorising environment and partnerships between Indigenous people, the Australian Government, and state/territory/local governments at local and regional levels.

The commitment to expand EC SDM would shift the purpose of the current partnership from funding decisions about ceasing grants to co-designing and sharing decision-making authority in a way that can accelerate policy and place-based progress towards Closing the Gap. This means that more government investment and more government agencies will work with the EC regions to advance on-the-ground priorities.

A sustained and authorised program of systemic reform is required to address power imbalances, strengthen local and regional governance, and align policies, funding and services with community priorities. Importantly, having effective and authorised Local and/or Regional Development Agendas to guide local decision-making and investment priorities across each region was a constant theme throughout the Review.

Implementation of more holistic, cross-sectoral approaches to service delivery within EC regions will necessitate the adaptation of current funding arrangements. The need for appropriate delegation of power to the local level to support SDM was highlighted. The absence of agile funding arrangements supporting SDM was reported by both NIAA regional staff and EC regions as a significant barrier to readily shaping more efficient and better-targeted service systems in regions, despite this being a key goal for SDM and for government.

Indigenous communities and service delivery are dominated by public finances and the current system for governing this funding is fragmented and centralised, impacting on local governance capability. Devolved funding reforms such as pooled funding arrangements do not involve relaxing accountabilities for how public funds are used, but rather they 'aim to heighten accountability for results.' One way that a pooled funding approach could work is

for a JDM round to be organised so that a wide range of funded programs related to a particular sector in a particular place could be considered at once.

A strong evidence base is fundamental to good decision-making

The Review demonstrated that two-way knowledge sharing between government and Indigenous people that is supported by data collection, analytical and integrative approaches is most impactful to inform joint decision-making.

There is broad recognition that high-quality information and data is foundational to SDM success from all groups of participants throughout the regions. This sentiment was reflected across participant groups including community panels, service providers, NIAA and EC backbones.

Backbone teams and community panel members have consistently raised the need for better information about program and project effectiveness to be available to assist community members involved in JDM rounds. At the same time as navigating the perceived or actual impartiality of evidence, research participants also reflected on a need for better data literacy for community members, as well as for community panel members.

It was recognised by all parties that community members' intelligence and wisdom affords the community panels unique and invaluable evidence to guide decision-making. When triangulated with the other key parties for shared decision-making (e.g., service providers, government practitioners), the quality of decisions is bolstered in meaningful ways through the effective sharing of data and insights.

Continued buy-in is essential to the future growth of shared decision-making

Achieving buy-in requires a shared understanding by all parties that their efforts to engage in the process will result in improvements that are of collective benefit and contribute to the shared goal of Closing the Gap for Indigenous Australians.

Participants on all sides must be convinced that any risks, sacrifices and diminishments of power through engaging in the SDM process are outweighed by the benefits that will accrue to their own interests and to the system.

In the SDM process, the most important, and the most difficult, task for backbones is convening appropriate community panels including attracting more Indigenous community members to participate. For Indigenous people to feel heard, they need to see evidence of the outcomes of their participation. A recurring concern raised by Indigenous community members is that they do not receive timely, or in some cases any, feedback or updates on the outcomes, after the recommendations leave the community panel or the regional negotiation table.

For SDM to be successful, the buy-in of the service providers who deliver the programs under consideration through the process is crucial. Participating in JDM is an opportunity for a service provider to showcase their service to community groups, to the funding body and to other service providers attending JDM meetings. Service providers have found that this has built community members' understanding of their service, reduced criticism and even prompted community advocacy for greater support for the service. Service providers have gained data about community impacts that has bolstered their service. Far from putting their funding at risk, some service providers have found that participating in JDM has resulted in

increased funding for their services, by identifying funding gaps or unmet needs or demonstrating to funding bodies the program's impact and level of community support.

Future State: Significant opportunities for further growth of the SDM Model

While many Indigenous people have embraced the current SDM opportunity to participate in decisions about IAS ceasing grants, their buy-in could be substantially leveraged if government expands the amount of decision-making power shared.

This will require a broadening of the government's willingness to expand SDM power, to other Australian Government agencies and to state and territory and local governments. It will also require addressing the gaps and constraints in the enabling systems for SDM that currently frustrate Indigenous people, such as the limitations of the pooled funding mechanism³ to redirect funding to identified community priorities.

The Review revealed important insights regarding the existing strengths that can be leveraged across the regions, with opportunities to learn from one another in the context of localised needs and wants. The process by which the performance of programs, projects and service providers is reviewed alongside their relationship to community priorities and needs – the strategic planning of SDM – was observed by some parties as an area for further development.

The desire for a more strategic approach was also recognised by EC Leaders and backbone staff. There is acknowledgement of a need for more planned and considered approaches to SDM that include community priorities (including as set out in RDAs developed through participatory processes under EC) and leveraging these priorities in the SDM process so that the process can advance place-based, community driven priorities.

The Review proposes a theory of change (see Figure 7, page 37) based on a core challenge that policies, programs, service design and investments of governments fail to advance the life chances and wellbeing of Indigenous people and their communities. To address this challenge and advance the goals in the theory of change, six domains for growing SDM are proposed based on research and engagement, including what EC participants say is 'working well' and opportunities for broader reform. The domains can be seen as the building blocks to progress a place-based Closing the Gap reform agenda that targets entrenched disadvantage and advances Indigenous people's empowerment and regional development priorities.

1. Indigenous people are empowered and heard

Indigenous people having the authority and capacity to actively participate in priority-setting and decision-making, enabling broad representation and genuine influence on decisions is a central tenet of the EC model. A comprehensive Regional Development Agenda (RDA) with broad-based support from Indigenous people in a region is a powerful foundation for driving decisions about government investment. The Lessons Learned Review found that EC Leaders and backbone organisations have engaged widely in their regions over multiple years to develop and refine their respective region's development agendas. While considerable progress has been made, RDAs could be enhanced to improve the alignment between government investment decisions and the community driven local and/or regional priorities expressed in the RDAs. Building on the foundation provided by RDAs, the SDM

³ referred to as "quarantined" funding within NIAA.

process enables Indigenous people to be heard and to participate in local and/or regional investment decisions through community panels. The Review highlighted the opportunities for place-based advocacy by Indigenous peoples to transform and improve more local services through SDM.

2. Partnerships

The Review saw evidence of effective partnering in many of the EC regions and at the national scale between the National EC Leadership and NIAA National Office. There are several partners involved in SDM including NIAA regional staff, EC Leaders and backbone staff, community panel members and service providers. The Review found many instances where SDM is showcasing a partnership with a shared vision for Indigenous empowerment, trust, the open sharing of quality information to inform decisions, collaborative mindsets, and agreed ways of working that practically nurture the relationships in the partnership. There remain some challenges and ways that the partnerships can be strengthened to achieve shared goals. A key area for greater focus is the relationship between EC backbone organisations and NIAA regional offices. To be effective, this relationship needs to be authorised and function at a high level. The enabling conditions for an effective partnership include shared accountability and agreed goals for Indigenous empowerment, the capacities, skills and mindsets for collaborative ways of working and practical actions that nurture and maintain the partnership.

Expanding the EC Partnership to other agencies and governments will require additional investment in EC to support the current ten EC backbones to accommodate SDM with other programs. Expansion of EC to new regions will also require additional resources for community engagement to build trust and identify local and/or regional development priorities, and develop new governance structures. Capability building for the government partners in partnership skills is also needed. Fortunately, over the last few years, the Australian Public Sector Commission (APSC) has focused on developing the public sector's partnership skills and mindsets to prepare the sector for partnership.

3. Buy-in

A clear finding from the Review is that for SDM to yield the desired benefits, it is critical that community participants, government agencies, service providers and other key groups actively 'buy-in', by placing their trust in the process and committing the time and effort to make it work. The Review highlighted the role of champions for EC within NIAA and other agencies as instrumental to the success of SDM, especially in cases where Regional Managers have provided strong leadership in supporting the concept.

Under the policy authority of Closing the Gap Priority Reform 1, NIAA staff are seeking to embed SDM practices across their agency and to extend that buy-in to other Commonwealth, state, territory and local government agencies. There have been some steps in some regions towards state and territory governments using EC SDM mechanisms to review their investments. A challenge to be addressed is the perception in some jurisdictions that the Australian Government SDM process is in competition with state or territory strategies for increasing local decision-making. Community and service provider buy-in to SDM is also critical. Clear messaging about government commitment to EC in each region is vital, as is local community members being able to make a difference by influencing decisions that impact their families and communities.

Achieving strong buy-in from service providers has been one of the most significant challenges for the successful implementation of SDM, as these organisations potentially have the most to lose from decisions about funding. Notwithstanding these concerns, the Review received feedback from a wide range of service providers that participating in SDM has been a positive experience including being able to showcase services in local communities, an opportunity to receive feedback for service improvement and to improve cross-service coordination.

4. Two-way knowledge sharing

The Review identified a strong desire across all regions to adopt an evidence-informed approach to making decisions regarding the services and providers that operate locally. The strong willingness to engage in two-way learning about the evidence base, indicates a solid foundation for SDM. Further, participants in SDM can learn from one other and develop new knowledge about community strengths and needs. The Review also highlighted the important role of community voice through community panels and other forms of engagement, where key elements of this two-way learning and knowledge sharing manifest.

Indigenous data sovereignty continues to be a challenge and an opportunity that SDM processes must navigate. Data is both a cultural and an economic asset and the rights of Indigenous people to govern the collection, ownership and application of data must be maintained. NIAA's Framework for the Governance of Indigenous Data provides practical guidance on how to build strong governance over Indigenous data assets held by the Australian Government. The Review highlighted emerging insights and approaches by EC regions and community panels to more integrated data sets to represent the cumulative impacts of local services and programs. A common area for improvement is the need for better evaluative information about program and project effectiveness to be made available to assist community panels and support the SDM process.

To support evolution and expansion, an enhanced monitoring, evaluation and adaptation framework supporting innovation is required. Going forward, there should be an increased focus on thorough monitoring and adaptation that is centred around a close connection to the ongoing efforts of Indigenous people to lead change on the ground.

In the *EC Design Report 2015*, EC Leaders highlighted the importance of a strong system of monitoring, evaluation and adaptation that can be used to support learning and adapting by all parties throughout the implementation process. Going forward a key role of backbone organisations will be to play a lead in developing shared measurements systems, targets and trajectories as part of the monitoring, evaluation and adaptation framework.

5. Enabling systems

The growth of SDM can only be realised through the development of enabling systems that support holistic local decision-making regarding regional investment for local priorities. Adopting a systems way of thinking can support more joined-up place-based strategies, cross-sectoral initiatives, and partnered ways of working with communities. However, this systems way of thinking needs to be supported by an authorising environment of policies, rules, procedures and incentives that support this changed approach. It is essential to move beyond silos, recognising that the needs of communities and service users are interconnected. This interconnectedness requires a collaborative approach to effectively address complex challenges. Implementation of cross-government and sector-focused approaches to investment within EC regions will necessitate the adaptation of current

funding arrangements. The EC Design Report (2015) proposed a range of funding reforms so that budgets respond to community identified priorities, for example through place-based regional investment and pooled funding arrangements. Such reformed funding approaches are complemented by more agile and relational funding mechanisms.

The enabler/partner role of governments under the EC Partnership model is different to its more traditional funder/decision-maker role. Officials need to be able to engage with communities and build relationships with Indigenous people through bodies such as EC backbones to influence how resources are allocated. Lessons Learned Review participants highlighted the important role and capability of EC backbone organisations to support funding reforms. NIAA and EC Leaders acknowledge that formalised partnership agreements are foundational in shaping EC's authorising environment and the further growth of SDM. Such agreements are evolving across EC regions and have the potential along with broader national policies and procedures aligned with the Closing the Gap Agreement (such as authorising greater delegation of decision-making to the local and regional level and more flexible funding arrangements) to assist with system level change.

6. (Scope for) Systemic Impact

The Lessons Learned Review highlighted the determination by many participants to fulfil the EC Partnership's commitment to pursue structural and systemic changes at scale through its national empowerment, place-based development and productivity reform agenda, while recognising that priorities for the day-to-day implementation, action and learning focus vary on the ground in EC regions. The Review highlighted the challenges but more importantly the key opportunities of a SDM approach whereby partners, including governments, build and share an agreed agenda, decision-making, risks, and responsibilities. Review participants and our understanding of the key conditions for collaborative governance and local empowerment highlight that designing and implementing a transition to SDM requires a fundamental shift in public policy and governance systems. This shift must go beyond tokenistic and ad hoc approaches, to empowering Indigenous people through partnerships that decentralise control and foster self-determination.

The Review highlighted opportunities and initiatives for systemic impact across the EC regions which were 'signposts' for broader reform goals such as more participatory budgeting, pooled funding and local and/or regional development investment strategies. For example, a pooled funding approach could be organised so that a wide range of funded programs related to a particular sector in a particular place could be considered at once. For example, a community panel could be convened to consider all the funded education or youth related programs in a region. There is also opportunity to develop new local and/or regional development investments, either by involving the community in the initial design of new programs (co-design) or involving the community in the initial decisions about funding service providers with government agencies such as the Department of Social Services.

Recommendations

A summary of the Review's key findings, recommendations and associated implementation responsibilities is provided in the table on the following pages. The Review's findings and recommendations provide a case for change. They reinforce the urgent need to address the Productivity Commission's key message from its 2024 Review of the Closing the Gap (CtG) National Agreement, that governments are not adequately delivering on their commitments to shared decision-making with Indigenous people. Shared decision-making is recognised through the National Agreement's Priority Reform 1 as a key mechanism for closing the gap and overcoming the entrenched inequality experienced by many Indigenous people. The Lessons Learned Review found that the existing EC SDM approach has demonstrated an effective model for how the Closing the Gap Priority Reform 1 – Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision-Making can be enacted in practice. The model provides a proof of concept and a platform that other Commonwealth, state and territory government agencies can leverage to meet their own commitments under CtG Priority Reform 1. The recommendations outlined below build on the Review's key findings and provide a framework for the expansion of the EC model to encompass the full policy life cycle, uptake by other Commonwealth agencies and levels of government, and to new EC regions.

Systemic reform is required to embed an authorising environment of policies, legislation, funding rules, procedures and incentives that support this expanded SDM approach. As the Review highlights there is a growing interest by governments and other key stakeholders such as philanthropy in place-based and community driven solutions to complex problems such as entrenched disadvantage. The EC model has been a key driver of this approach. There is an opportunity for the EC Partnership to both support these broader reforms and benefit from them as part of a sustainable and long term SDM approach.

Summary Table of Findings and Recommendations

FINDING	RECOMMENDATION
1. EC SDM is an effective model for empowering Indigenous people. It provides a: a. tangible mechanism for how the Closing the Gap Priority Reform 1 – Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision-Making can be enacted in practice b. proof of concept and platform that other Commonwealth, state and territory government agencies can leverage to meet their own commitments under CtG Priority Reform 1	It is recommended that the EC Partners work together to support the uptake of EC SDM in other government agencies as a way of driving progress under CtG Priority Reform 1 on the ground in place.

FINDING	RECOMMENDATION
2. The majority of current SDM is taking place at a grant/activity level. While this enables empowerment, development and productivity at a community-level, EC Partners have highlighted the need for decision-making to take place further upstream in the policy life cycle. Changes to centralised government policy settings and funding systems have to date, not been a feature of the current EC SDM model.	Consistent with the proposed Growth Model at page 116 of the report, it is recommended that the EC Partners: a. Explore how the current EC SDM model can evolve to influence a greater range of government activities from policy development to service design and delivery, as well as system reform, and begin implementing in NIAA and DSS. b. Work together to initiate reforms required to government policy, program and funding frameworks to enable implementation of EC SDM. c. Scope the potential for regional pooled funding mechanisms in EC regions and more transparency about the overall flow of funding going into EC regions to help inform cross-government sector investment strategies underpinned by SDM. d. Drive SDM approaches that prioritise place-based government investment in priority sectors across multiple agencies and levels of overnment. e. Should any barriers be identified within legislation and/or government guidelines as inhibiting the expansion of SDM, the Partners should jointly identify ways to address these in partnership with agencies such as DSS, the Department of Finance and the Treasury.
3. To support a sustainable and long term SDM approach, a clear authorising environment within government is required so that government officials at all levels understand their obligations in an SDM partnership.	It is recommended that the EC Partners work with other Commonwealth agencies to better define and strengthen the 'authorising environment' for SDM, so that government officers are better informed and supported to share decision-making authority with Indigenous people.
4. The Review identified six key elements of the EC Partnership that form the domains for shared decision-making. When combined, these domains enable successful place-based shared decision-making. These are: i. Indigenous people empowered and heard ii. Partnerships iii. Buy-in iv. Two-way knowledge sharing v. Enabling systems vi. Scope for systemic impact	It is recommended that the six domains identified in the Review be used to inform any future evolution of shared decision-making for existing and new Partners.

FINDING	RECOMMENDATION
5. There is a central role for EC Regional and/or Local Development Agendas in setting priorities and guiding investment negotiations and decisions for the long term. Development Agendas are typically five-year plans.	It is recommended that EC Regional and/or Local Development Agendas be a key mechanism for informing government priorities and targeting government investment in EC regions.
6. The Review found that in implementing JDM, there are capacity and capability challenges experienced variously by NIAA, EC backbones, community panel members and service providers.	To address capacity and capability challenges, it is recommended that: a. The EC Partners identify and embed greater opportunities for two-way knowledge sharing to support SDM capacity and capability building, particularly to assist new staff within NIAA and EC Backbone teams and community panels. b. As part of the APS Reforms, the APSC should build greater cultural and partnering capability amongst the APS, while also addressing the ongoing need to share data and embed knowledge about government priorities and processes.
7. While this Review has been able to surface examples of where SDM processes have had an influence on how services meet community needs, a full assessment of the impact of shared decision-making on community outcomes was out of the scope of the project.	To assist with the evolution and expansion of SDM, it is recommended that the EC Partners: a. Implement a 'learn as we go' monitoring and adaptation approach across EC Regions. b. Conduct a place-based evaluation that undertakes a full assessment of the impact of shared decision-making on community outcomes at the local or regional level.

Introduction and Background

In early 2024, the Institute for Social Science Research (ISSR) at The University of Queensland was commissioned by the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) to undertake a Lessons Learned Review of the Empowered Communities (EC) Partnership for joint decision-making (JDM). The ISSR research team, in partnership with a project steering committee comprising representatives from the NIAA, EC National Coordination Team ('EC National'),⁴ and EC regions, sought to explore and identify the elements of the JDM process over the last six years that have worked to enable successful place-based shared decision-making (SDM). The purpose of the review was to:

- Identify the success factors in the JDM partnership between EC regions and the NIAA, and opportunities for further improvement.
- Identify lessons that can be applied during new partnerships between EC regions and other government agencies.
- Establish a system of shared responsibility and learning for both the government and EC regions, which will support ongoing evaluation and adjustments in their partnership.
- Provide information that can help the NIAA improve its role in leading and supporting partnerships with Indigenous Australians across the Australian Government.
- Strengthen the NIAA's ability to support other government departments and agencies as they start working with EC and other Indigenous partners over time.

The Review focused on exploring the lessons learned from the JDM process, a central tenet of the EC partnership model, in the ten EC regions.

Empowered Communities – an overview

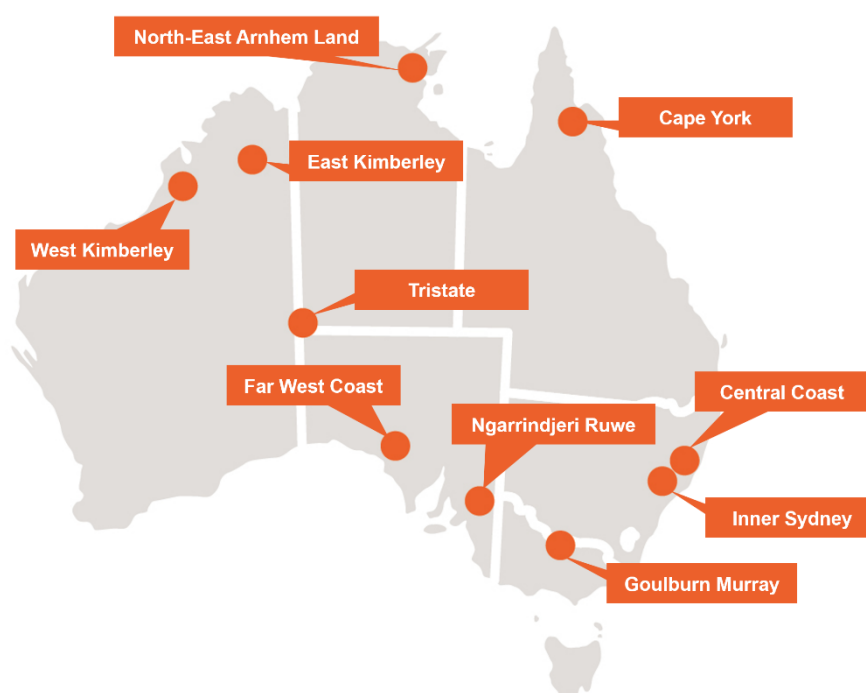
The Empowered Communities (EC) Partnership is an Indigenous designed and led place-based reform partnership. It aims to improve socioeconomic outcomes and close the disparity gap on the ground in 2–3 generations. It is a collaboration between 10 significant Indigenous regions (urban, regional, and remote), and represents an important national reform agenda. The 10 EC regions are:

- Inner Sydney, NSW
- Central Coast, NSW
- Cape York, QLD
- North East Arnhem Land (NEAL), NT
- East Kimberley, WA
- West Kimberley, WA
- Ngarrindjeri Ruwe, SA
- Far West Coast, SA
- Tristate, Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (NPY Lands)
- Goulburn Murray, VIC

Their respective locations are illustrated on the map on the following page.

⁴ EC National Coordination Team provides strategic advice and policy support to EC Leaders and backbones.

Figure 1 – Empowered Communities Regions



EC was launched in 2013 after Indigenous leaders from eight remote, regional and urban areas met together in Central Coast New South Wales to develop a proposal to the Australian Government setting out a framework for transformational change. By August 2013, there was bipartisan support for a detailed design phase to develop the proposed Empowered Communities reform agenda, and EC was launched with national media coverage. The Indigenous leadership group submitted its design report to the Australian Government in March 2015.

In November 2016, the then Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and then Minister for Indigenous Affairs (former Senator the Hon Nigel Scullion), jointly wrote to the EC Co-Chairs to restate the Australian Government commitment to EC:

'We have committed to retain discretionary funding in Empowered Communities regions where leaders identify funds to be freed up from service duplication or lower order priorities. To progress this work, our Department is working with Empowered Communities leaders to co-design a joint approach to decision-making.'

Implementation of local boards, regional partnership arrangements and backbone organisations commenced in eight regions from mid-2016. Since then, two additional regions have been added.

In March 2024, Minister Linda Burney wrote to the EC Chair, Ian Trust, committing funding for a further four years to 2027-28:

Letter from Minister Burney to Ian Trust (as EC Chair) 21 March 2024: 'I am committed to continuing the Commonwealth's partnership with EC. EC has demonstrated the practical benefits of working in partnership to drive on the ground action to Close the Gap according to regional and local First Nations development planning priorities. An immediate priority is to settle future funding,

and I invite you to work with my Agency on this detail. More broadly, I am committed to working with EC leaders to strengthen the EC Partnership...'

- An approach to shared decision-making on future government investment in EC regions was initially developed by Inner Sydney Empowered Communities. In 2017, the Minister for Indigenous Affairs (the Hon Nigel Scullion) agreed to support this approach in EC regions (MS17-001996).⁵

. The agreement included the following:

- Initial focus on discretionary IAS investment,⁶ with the intent to extend the approach to other Commonwealth agency discretionary funding in the long term.
- Any 'efficiencies' identified from reducing duplication, red tape and ineffective programs can be redirected and freed up to be reinvested in the region.
- The Minister, or the relevant NIAA delegate, giving significant weight (75 per cent) to EC Leaders' advice in making IAS funding decisions, noting government remains the final decision maker consistent with standard government processes. 'In respect of IAS, while I will retain responsibility for final funding decisions, I am prepared for advice from Empowered Communities leaders to be a strong factor in my considerations – as I have indicated, in numerical terms it could be expressed as a 75 per cent weighting.'
- Gradual transition to increase service delivery by local Indigenous service providers (from non-Indigenous non-government organisations). This aligns with Closing the Gap's *Priority Reform 2 - Building the Community-Controlled Sector*.
- The approach to be tested, refined and implemented progressively as regional development plans emerge.

The partnership approach which is central to EC is captured in the IAS Agency Collaborates Grant Opportunity Guidelines.⁷ For example:

Criterion 1: Need and community involvement

You should demonstrate this by identifying how the proposed activity:

- **Is needed by the target community/ies or group/s you are proposing to service;**
- **Will support improved outcomes in the target Indigenous community/ies or group; and**

Aligns with any community or regional plan that may be in place, including regional priorities identified by community leadership groups (such as in Empowered Communities—refer to Section 15 Glossary), where relevant.

AND that the target community/ies or group:

- **supports the proposed activity,**
- **has participated in the planning and design of the proposed activity, and**
- **will be involved in delivery of the proposed activity.**

⁵ Hon Nigel Scullion, Minister for Indigenous Affairs, correspondence to EC Leaders, 2 June 2017 (MS17-001996).

⁶ JDM is currently focused on the IAS grant assessment process in EC regions, which occurs biannually for grants ceasing in June and December each year. The discretionary IAS investment that is subject to JDM is allocated to regions and is continuing funding.

⁷ The IAS Agency Collaborates Grant Opportunity Guidelines (GOGs) are used by the NIAA for specific grant activities, typically urgent or ad hoc grant activities, and also for community-initiated activities.

Figure 2 – Empowered Communities Partnership Timeline



The EC Partnership seeks to transform the relationship between Indigenous people and government through the principles of empowerment, development, and productivity. The EC Partnership therefore involves Indigenous people and government working in partnership to set priorities, improve services and apply funding effectively at a regional level. The EC Partnership has worked to increase Indigenous ownership, participation in, and influence over decisions that affect Indigenous people. Within the common national agenda, priorities vary across regions according to local needs and circumstances. EC seeks reform in all its regions based on local need to attain parity of outcomes for Indigenous people.

Collaborative governance⁸ and shared decision-making (SDM) between government and Indigenous communities are central tenets of the EC Partnership model, and the EC collaborative governance approach is based on meaningful local, regional and national partnerships that have evolved since 2016. These arrangements are flexible and tailored to the local and regional characteristics of the EC communities. Each EC region has a backbone team to provide critical community capacity and develop implementation mechanisms such as Local Partnership Agreements with the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) outlining agreed actions, deliverables, roles, and responsibilities for all partners. While JDM is also tailored for each EC region's needs, its key features are nationally consistent. The common elements of EC governance arrangements that support SDM are outlined further in Appendix A.

In the seven years since it was introduced, over \$411 million of Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS) funding across 437 grant activities and applications has been recommended through SDM arrangements in Empowered Communities regions. A more detailed account of SDM in EC regions is outlined in Appendix B.

Structure of this Report

This report of the EC Lessons Learned Review is presented in four key parts:

1. An overview of the policy context for EC and SDM
2. The research scope and approach, incorporating the method and limitations
3. The research findings covering what's working well and what could be improved in the six domains for SDM
4. A brief conclusion

⁸ Collaborative governance can be defined as 'a governing arrangement where public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders in a collective decision-making process that is formal, consensus oriented and deliberative that aims to make or implement public policy or manage public programs or assets' (Ansell and Gash, 2008, p544).

Empowered Communities' Policy Context

'Place' is a defining concept for the Empowered Communities Partnership

What the EC Design Report (2015) called a 'place development agenda' aligns with and has informed broader thinking, policy making and practices in Australia about Place Based Agreements (PBAs) and their application. The Design Report highlighted, for example, that place-based development agendas are at the 'heart of funding decisions' and are a key tool for Indigenous people, leaders and organisations to increasingly drive development (Empowered Communities, 2015, p64).

Other recent examples of PBAs in the Australian context include the Department of Social Services *Stronger Places, Stronger People* (SPSP) initiative in 10 communities, the 6-month place-based partnership under the Closing the Gap agreement for regionalised decision-making and delivery of local outcomes in Tamworth, Gippsland, Doomadgee, East Kimberley, western suburbs of Adelaide and Maningrida facilitated by NIAA, alongside the *Logan Together* collective impact partnership. Place-based community-led change is also a key dimension of the Australian Government's Targeting Entrenched Disadvantage package announced in the 2023-24 Federal Budget. The package includes a whole-Government Framework to Support Community Change, an APS Shared Decision-Making Guide, an APS Guide to Working in Place, and additional funding to extend the SPSP initiative and enhance shared decision-making and local solutions in 6 of the 10 communities. A related development is the establishment in late 2024 of the new national organisation known as Partnerships for Local Action and Community Empowerment (PLACE) as a joint initiative of the Australian Government and philanthropy. PLACE has been established to support community-led place-based approaches to address social and economic challenges in communities and disrupt entrenched disadvantage.

PBAs are increasingly being adopted by many communities and governments to design shared solutions to complex and 'wicked' problems such as entrenched disadvantage. They are increasingly seen as effective because they look holistically at their physical and social environment and service systems, rather than simply focusing on individual or programmatically defined community needs (Moore & Fry, 2011; Dart, 2018; Hart & Connolly, 2022). There are numerous descriptions of PBAs. A popular definition used across Australian jurisdictions is:

A collaborative, long-term approach to build thriving communities delivered in a defined geographic location. This approach is ideally characterised by partnering and shared design, shared stewardship, and shared accountability for outcomes and impacts (Dart 2018, p. 15).

PBAs hold the promise of providing more effective, and potentially empowering ways to address entrenched disadvantage as they suit situations where there are complex issues localised in one place, requiring local community actors working directly with government agencies to develop cross-sectoral long-term responses (Lata, 2024). It is almost universally acknowledged that the effectiveness of Australia's business-as-usual, top-down and one-size-fits-all approach to Closing the Gap on Indigenous disadvantage must improve. New approaches that seek to share power with Indigenous people include 'empowerment', 'partnership', 'self-determination', 'collective impact' and 'shared-decision-making' approaches at the place-based level. A general argument, as highlighted in the EC Design Report (2015), is that PBAs aim to make government investment more responsive to local

needs and assets and aligns with the Government interest in embedding place responsiveness and person-centredness in government programs and services. While some PBAs can still be ‘top-down’ or externally derived and driven, more commonly PBAs seek to support enhanced forms of collaborative governance, and for many including EC, they involve new ways of working.

Australian place-based initiatives have been commonly classified by a three-part spectrum: place-focused, place-based and place partnerships. The spectrum is characterised by the degree of power sharing and place-responsiveness in the approaches, and whether the focus is on service changes or system reform. EC’s objectives, ambition and evolving practices can be clearly characterised as a ‘place partnership’ whereby partners, including governments and communities, build and share an agreed agenda, decision-making, risks, and responsibility. The focus is the entire system and each of the systems that together impact the social, economic, and environmental circumstances in a community. In a place partnership, data are shared among participants including individual and community-level, service and population-level data and that data informs the shared decision-making, learning and evaluation. Trust is central to the place partnership and time is invested in relationship building. Government partners commit to adjust policy, programs and funding and to delegate authority (including statutory responsibility) to local governance groups and community organisations. Government, philanthropic and private sector resources can be re/marshalled and pooled to be invested in community priorities (ISSR, 2025).

The Lessons Learned Review found that a ‘place partnership’ was the defining concept and operational approach for the EC Partnership since its inception in 2016 through to current practice across the 10 EC regions. Place-based collaborative governance built on the principles and practices of SDM between government and Indigenous people are central tenets of the EC Partnership model. These arrangements are flexible and tailored to the history, local leadership systems, service profile, community needs and strengths of each EC region. It is important to highlight that place-based partnerships (along with policy partnerships) are the key mechanisms to achieve the Closing the Gap Agreement’s commitment for governments to build and strengthen structures that empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to share decision-making authority with governments (Priority Reform 1).

National Agreement on Closing the Gap

In 2020, all Australian governments, along with the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations, signed the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (the Agreement). They committed to mobilising all avenues available to them to achieve the objective of the Agreement – which is ‘to overcome the entrenched inequality faced by too many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people so that their life outcomes are equal to those of all Australians’. The National Agreement has been built around four priority reforms that were directly informed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.⁹ While all four priority reforms are in many ways inter-dependent, Priority Reform 1 – Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision-Making aligns directly to the objectives of the EC Partnership. The

⁹ The other Priority Reforms are: Building the Community-Controlled Sector, Transforming Government Organisations, and Shared Access to Data and Information at a Regional Level.

Productivity Commission's 2024 Review of the National Agreement highlighted this alignment including the key themes of place-based partnerships, control and power sharing:

'Place-based partnerships and policy partnerships are the key mechanism used in the Agreement to achieve this. But at its core, Priority Reform 1 is about power sharing, and this requires more than consultation and partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It requires governments to relinquish some control over decisions and to trust that in doing so, they are enabling better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.'
(Australian Government, Productivity Commission, 2024, p4)

As the Commission proceeded to highlight, the capacity of governments to develop effective partnerships has been mixed at best. Place-based partnerships such as Empowered Communities are evolving, and governments appear willing to engage with Indigenous organisations and communities in the design process.

An evolving policy context

EC Leaders produced an important *Lessons Learned Report* in February 2020 reflecting on the early progress of the EC Partnership since its official commencement in 2016. Their key insights were:

- The place-based, Indigenous led Empowered Communities model will be an effective model to succeed in Closing the Gap on Indigenous disparity.
- An effective partnership with government in 'place' that is also nationally focused is fundamental to success.
- The model will not achieve its full potential without parallel structural change, and the EC Leaders remain strongly of the view that both Indigenous empowerment and agency and structural change in government are required to close the gap.
- New legislative backing is crucial to provide the necessary authority and scaffolding to regional structures, and enshrine empowerment, productivity and Closing the Gap as the priorities of a regional Indigenous and government partnership.

These insights remain relevant today but also highlight that Indigenous policy is always contested. Notwithstanding this apparently agreed policy consensus nationally, the most recent Productivity Commission review of progress on the refreshed 2020 National Agreement on Closing the Gap agreed to by all Australian governments and the Coalition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Organisations, amongst its many findings, highlighted that government's commitments to 'shared decision-making [between governments and Indigenous communities] is rarely achieved in practice' (PC, 2024).

The Commission's report also highlighted that 'partnerships are a familiar tool for government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people', taking a range of forms including (PC, 2024, p39):

- high-level partnerships between national, state and territory governments and the corresponding Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations in the relevant jurisdiction.
- thematic partnerships that focus on a coordinated approach in a priority sector such as health or child wellbeing.
- place-based partnerships, which focus on the priorities of a specific location or region like the Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly or Empowered Communities.

Shifting the policy focus of government-initiated partnerships from high level strategy or thematic areas to local empowerment has proven challenging as highlighted by this Lessons Learned Review.

This analysis and commentary are not new. As former Commonwealth Treasury Secretary Ken Henry highlighted in a 2007 speech:

(There are) ‘... *three interdependent foundations to Indigenous disadvantage: poor economic and social incentives; underdevelopment of human capability; and an absence of effective engagement of Indigenous Australians in the design of policy frameworks that might improve those incentives and capabilities.*’

Recognising the policy and particularly the delivery failures of governments in Indigenous affairs is critical. Over the past three decades there has been a fundamental failure in the governance of governments in relation to Australian Indigenous affairs. Symptomatic of this failure is that governments have not engaged effectively at an institutional level with Indigenous people and their communities. This historical perspective¹⁰ echoes the key messages and findings of the recent 2024 Productivity Commission Closing the Gap Review Report. This lack of progress continues to perplex, frustrate and anger Indigenous people, advocacy groups and governments.

¹⁰ Also see other writings, for example Neil Westbury and Michael Dillon, *Beyond Humbug: Transforming Government Engagement with Indigenous Australia*, (South Australia: Seaview, Press, 2007).

Research Scope and Approach

The EC Lessons Learned Review was not an evaluation, nor was it a review of the Empowered Communities Model or Partnership or intended to evaluate the outcomes/impacts of activities or programs that have been delivered in the EC regions. Rather, its purpose was to review the experience of six years of JDM and identify practical lessons that are relevant to the EC Partnership and the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, the APS Reform Agenda and the development of the EC shared decision-making model beyond NIAA. The project was to develop practical actions for government and Indigenous partners to enhance the partnership and for future place-based shared decision-making models.

The Review focused on answering the key research question:

What are the elements of the EC Partnership that have worked to enable successful place-based shared decision-making?

Four research sub-questions were derived from the key question and align with the project's purpose, and objectives:

- how have JDM practices for EC communities, service providers and government agencies evolved since its introduction in 2017?
- what capabilities are needed to implement JDM, and what was/is the capacity of community leaders, service providers and government agencies to apply these capabilities and work collaboratively to enact shared decision-making arrangements to achieve community outcomes?
- to what extent (and how) has the EC Partnership changed the way government policy and funding systems and service providers operate?
- what policy settings, funding systems, partnership arrangements and service delivery practices can support place-based shared decision-making to be sustainable and embedded across government?

The project identified evidence of what has worked to enable effective partnerships¹¹ between government and Indigenous people in the EC Partnership context. This evidence supports the guidance and recommendations for effectively widening implementation of place-based shared decision-making models across governments.

The co-designed nature of the project is noteworthy as both EC representatives and NIAA staff were intimately involved throughout each step of the project, acting as key informants and providing insights into the partnership and EC regional contexts.

Further, the qualitative nature of lesson learning, combined with the tailored implementation of EC across different regions, means that insights gained in one area may not be directly applicable to another. Consequently, findings in each region are not always generalisable to other places. However, the broad insights that can be drawn from regional level lessons will

¹¹ We have used the APS Reform's The Good Practice Guide – Charter of Partnerships and Engagement's description of partnerships as shared decision-making and power between groups to progress longer term shared goals, commitments and priorities – <https://www.apsreform.gov.au/news/charter-partnerships-and-engagement>

help to inform the ongoing/future development of the program in line with the goals for the project.

Appreciative Inquiry Methodology

Building on our key project question: What are the elements of the EC Partnership that have worked to enable successful place-based shared decision-making, the research team adopted a strengths-based approach to inquiry. Appreciative Inquiry is an asset-based and strengths-focused approach to dialogue and engagement with individuals, communities and organisations, which can be differentiated from a deficit-focused approach to understanding challenges and issues. Through this lens, we focused on identifying actions that EC participants and government can take to facilitate formal partnerships that enable successful shared decision-making. An Appreciative Inquiry approach, harnessing the power of positive storytelling, was adopted to gather insights across the EC regions. The approach focused the attention of people and organisations on their strengths and future possibilities, rather than problems and shortcomings from the past. As outlined above we explored the capabilities, practices and policy settings of the EC Partnership. This better enabled an understanding of 'what works', including the ways in which the challenges in JDM and EC Partnerships have been navigated.

We embedded a strong engagement ethos throughout the project, including an initial stakeholder consultation with the members of the Project Steering Committee with strategic advice from the Indigenous Leadership group to co-define and confirm the research and analytic strategy, and ongoing consultation to support sense-making, analysis and the design of effective project products. The project was guided by a team of Indigenous research collaborators and advisors. The three Indigenous research collaborators worked with ISSR lead researchers as they undertook field work across the 10 EC regions and assisted with the data analysis and sense-making.

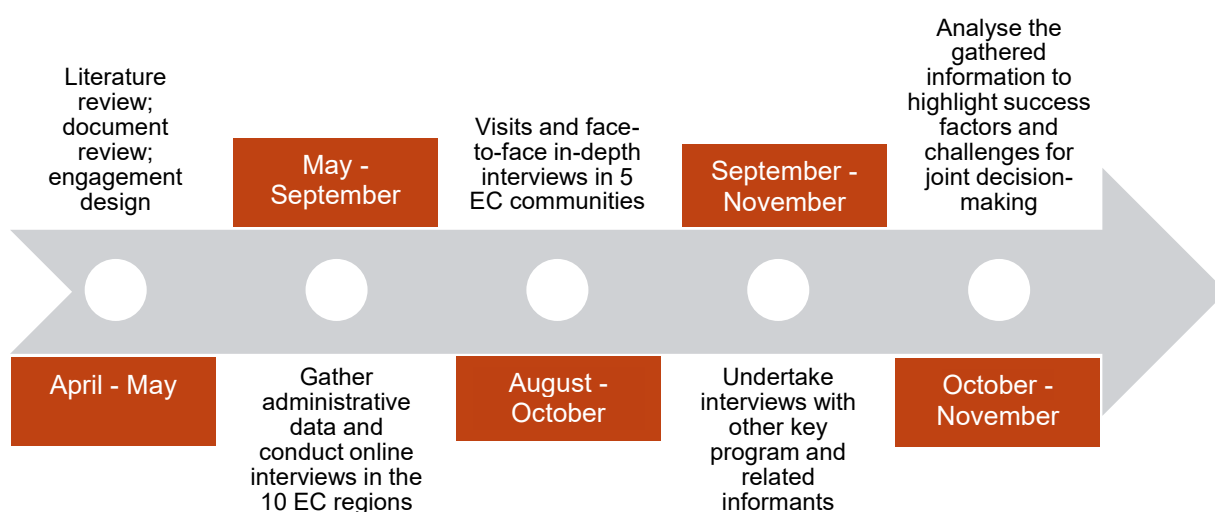
Acknowledging the national and international narrative to shift from the deficit framing and discourse dominating the reporting of outcomes for Indigenous peoples, a strengths-based approach (as highlighted by Appreciative Inquiry) to the research design was adopted. Underpinned by decolonising methodologies, 'the intention of strengths-based approaches is not to problem deflate, misconstrue results, or deny inequities, but to refocus research and policy on identifying assets and strengths within individuals and communities and avenues for action' (Thurber et al, 2020). A strengths-based approach emphasises the strengths of Indigenous communities, as opposed to Indigenous peoples being a problem that needs to be addressed (Shay & Oliver, 2021). By acknowledging power imbalances, a strengths-based approach can also help to shift power to the Indigenous community; centre research on Indigenous concerns and strength; and to respect Indigenous ways of knowing and worldviews.

The research method was informed by the project's objectives to guide future place-based shared decision-making models by garnering lessons learned to: strengthen and inform existing and emerging partnership practice; identify practical actions that the government and Indigenous partners can take to improve JDM; and produce an evidence base that provides the NIAA with the policy levers to embed partnership practice and SDM across government.

Data was gathered in several phases, commencing with a review of literature and practice to inform the interview questions (see Figure 3 below).

Introductory meetings took place with EC regional backbone staff and regional NIAA officers prior to the interview phase of the project commencing. Online interviews with key research informants across all ten EC regions commenced from July 2024. A case study method was adopted in five EC regions (Central Coast, East Kimberley, NPY Lands, Cape York and Inner Sydney), with fieldwork visits and additional data gathering to support more in-depth insights about JDM practice being undertaken between August and October 2024. Further online interviews with other key program and government informants, including NIAA and EC central policy staff and other federal and state government agencies, were undertaken from September 2024. ‘Sense-making’ conversations and analysis commenced as soon as most EC regional data collection had been undertaken.

Figure 3 – JDM Lessons Learned Review research phases (2024)



Data collection for online interviews and field visits saw a total of 75 interviews being undertaken, involving approximately 125 people. Participants in these interviews included 88 people from the EC regions including backbone staff, community panel members, service providers, regional and national EC Leaders, 17 NIAA regional staff and several EC non-opt-in organisations in the regions. Several state government stakeholders also participated in the project to discuss their experiences of EC. Interviews were also undertaken with national-level policy stakeholders, including NIAA, EC, APSC and DSS.

The recruitment strategy for participants was a relational one in that backbone organisations and regional NIAA staff connected the researchers with Lessons Learned Review participants. While this was successful for engaging those who were involved in EC in the regions, this strategy was not as effective for identifying and approaching non-opt-in organisations and other interested groups or sectors. The relatively small number of non-opt-in organisations and other interested groups/sectors interviewed as part of the review provided some insights into their experiences and perspectives, but this limits a more in-depth understanding of lessons that can be learned from this group.

Changeover in backbone and NIAA staff in some regions also meant that it took longer to engage relevant people in those regions affected by personnel shifts.

Literature and Practice Review

There is an existing body of literature that investigates and evaluates shared decision-making in place-based partnerships. However, these ideas and insights are found in disparate settings and contexts. The ISSR research team conducted an extensive review of the theoretical, policy and practice-based literature with the aims of bringing some clarity to this thinking and practice by focusing on the lessons learned to date from relevant national and international research and initiatives, and to highlight capabilities and enablers for shared decision-making in place-based partnerships and their applicability to the EC Partnership. Where feasible and relevant, we also examined the history, context, reviews and other preceding Australian local partnership initiatives involving Indigenous peoples that provide an historical foundation to the development of the EC model.

The literature and practice review undertaken by the ISSR Lessons Learned Review team highlighted that PBAs in their various manifestations have been a key part of Australian Indigenous affairs since the 1970s turn to 'self-determination' and a desire to move away from rational-technical approaches to policy and service delivery. This shift is also reflective of governments' history and inability to design and implement a more collaborative approach (Brown, 2020). The vision of self-determination envisaged by the influential Council for Aboriginal Affairs established in the late 1960s and chaired by the eminent former public official, H C Coombs, viewed the community (rather than the region, nation or state) as the scale at which Indigenous self-determination would be realised (Rowse, 2000). This view was operationalised from the 1970s through the funding of Indigenous community-controlled local organisations in domains including housing, primary health care and economic development. These earlier reforms provided some historical context to the EC Partnership and the limited range of initiatives that have sought to empower Indigenous people to influence policies, programs and services in their communities. Key initiatives reviewed included the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) established in 1989, the Council of Australian Governments' (COAG) trials from 2002 to 2007, the National Partnership on Remote Service Delivery (NPARSD) from 2008 to 2013, the Cape York Welfare Reforms established in 2008 and various Closing the Gap reforms.

The Lessons Learned Review highlighted that there have been significant initiatives in more recent times by governments in working with Indigenous people to build a more sustainable collaborative 'infrastructure'. These have included various expressions of partnership agreement and other processes. The literature, however, highlights the disjunction between the stated willingness of governments and the community sector to be innovative and work more effectively together. This literature also highlights the rigid and siloed institutional systems and cultures embedded in the major public funding agencies that obstruct the establishment of pooled funding, appropriately flexible reporting arrangements, and permission to experiment with adaptive approaches and shared responsibility for place-based planning, design and delivery.

Achieving effective collaborative governance and shared decision-making for Indigenous people and communities requires a fundamental shift in public policy and governance systems. This shift must go beyond tokenistic approaches, to empowering communities through partnerships that decentralise control and foster self-determination. For true progress, especially in the context of Closing the Gap, governments must shift from merely sharing decision-making power to genuinely relinquishing control, thereby enabling self-determination and fostering trust and collaboration with local Indigenous people. The

literature highlights the need for systemic reforms that address power imbalances, strengthen local governance, and align funding and services with community priorities (PC, 2024).

Data Analysis

Data (including interview transcripts, notes and other documents) were uploaded in NVIVO 14 and coded by research team members using an inductive thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2012). Themes were then sense-checked with research partners, Indigenous advisors and EC National Leaders to support a more reflexive thematic analytic approach.

Figure 4 – Collaborative approach to data analysis



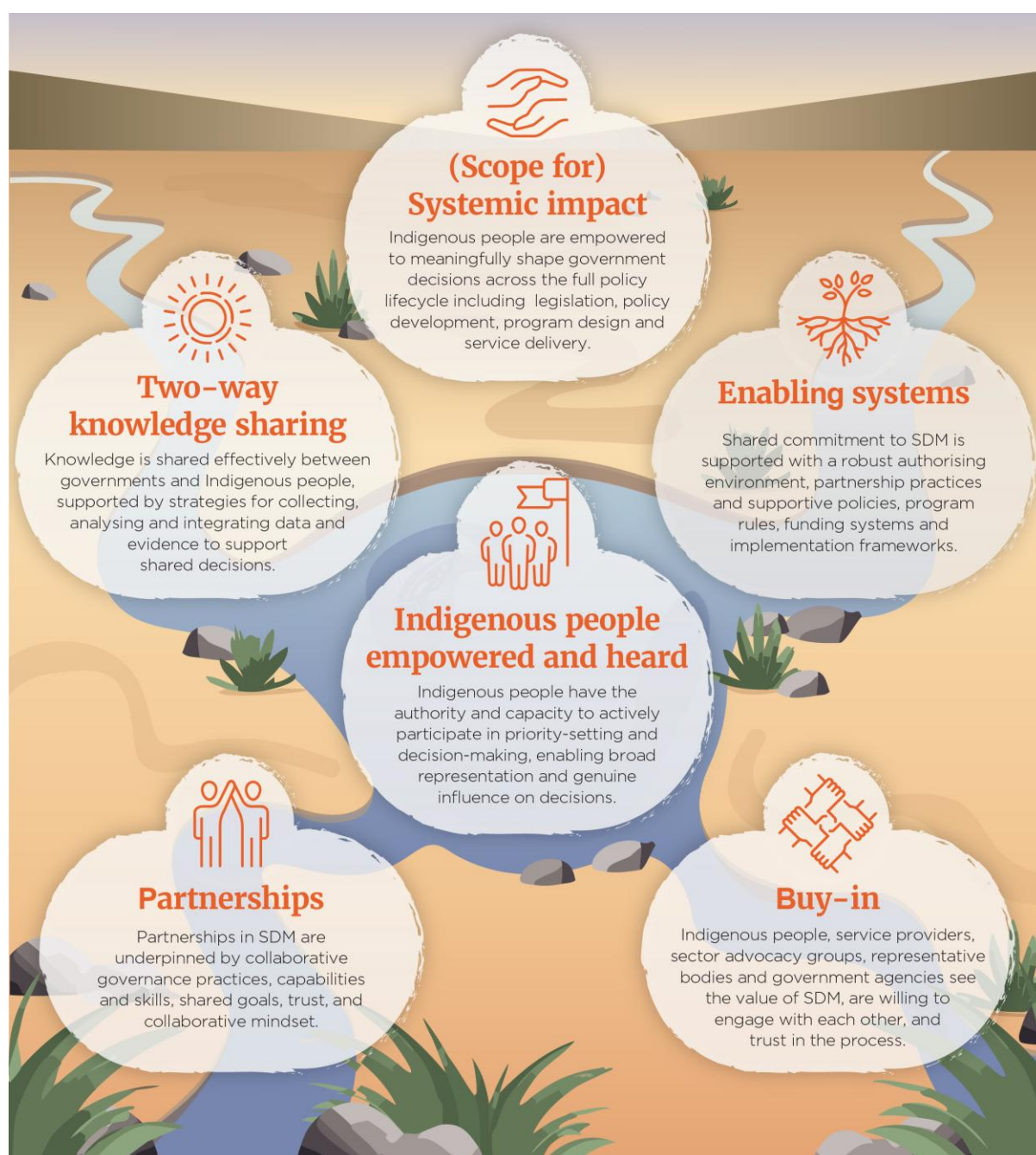
Ethics and Indigenous Data Sovereignty

The project required a two-stage human ethics application process, which was undertaken by the University of Queensland's (UQ) Human Research Ethics Committee. The online interview phase of the project was exempted from a full ethics review. However, a full ethics review was undertaken for the fieldwork activities to support data gathering in the case study sites, as the researchers sought to gather data about experiences with JDM from EC participants involved in the process. The review fieldwork and broader research approach was informed by the AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research. The ISSR Lessons Learned Review team recognises and respects the rights of Indigenous peoples to self-determination, data sovereignty and embraces a strength-based approach to research in this field, and rejects deficit narratives of First Nations peoples. Following Section 2 of the Code on Indigenous leadership, our project incorporated Indigenous scholars and other researchers with cultural capability.

Research Findings

Following analysis of the interview and administrative data from the EC regions and reflecting on our literature review of national and international empowerment policy and practice, six inter-related domains for a Growth Model for SDM were identified (see Figure 5 on the following page). These domains represent the elements and activities that are central for effective shared decision-making.

Figure 5 – A vision for EC shared decision-making (SDM)



The journey from the current EC practices of JDM focused on ceasing IAS discretionary grant programs to the aspiration for more systemic SDM that empowers Indigenous people to have influence across the full policy lifecycle and full breadth of government investment will be a challenging, but critical, one for achieving the EC Leaders' vision for empowered communities. By expanding current SDM activities, leveraging regional strengths, enhancing the enabling environment, and sharing insights across regions, the partnership can increase the potential for systemic impact and in doing so support greater Indigenous empowerment and place driven Closing the Gap reforms. Figure 6 on the following page illustrates a strategic though incremental approach to expand/grow SDM to include other government investments and accelerate place-driven Closing the Gap reforms.

Figure 6 – Strategic approach to growing SDM



The pathway to fulfil the aspiration to expand SDM will not be linear; rather it will be based on an adaptive learning or ‘try, test and learn’ approach. The Lessons Learned Review has highlighted the importance of building in a continual learning loop so that lessons from current and emerging JDM practices can guide the design and implementation of SDM that impacts local service delivery, regional planning and development and national policy design and practice. As the EC Partnership evolves and the context around it changes, opportunities to develop practices that support shared decision-making and learning about ‘what works’ will also continue to emerge. Policy making and funding systems will also need to grapple with more iterative ways of working. A more adaptive and collaborative approach that aligns high-level governance and policy making with a ground-up place-based reform agenda led by local voices and ‘street-level’ practitioners such as EC is possible but requires system change to be sustainable (see Head, 2022; Reddel et al, 2024).

Sharing Power in Empowered Communities' Partnership

The theory of change at Figure 7 (see following page) presents the challenge at the core of the Empowered Communities Partnership and the priority activities for both Indigenous people and governments to tackle that challenge and achieve thriving and fulfilling lives for Indigenous peoples.

Figure 7 – Theory of Change

Theory of Change

Sharing Power in the Empowered Communities Partnership

THE CHALLENGE

The policies, programs, service design and investments of Governments fail to sufficiently advance the life chances and wellbeing of all Indigenous peoples and their communities when they are developed in isolation to the perspectives of those most directly impacted by them

IF WE

- Empower Indigenous people to partner with all Governments to co-design policies, programs, services and investment for their communities
- Build capability in all Governments for sharing decisions, policy, program and service design with Indigenous people on the ground
- Direct Government policy, programs, service design and investment to the priority needs and solutions of local Indigenous people, as defined by those people
- Build a trusted partnership between Indigenous peoples and Governments
- Reform the service system so that Indigenous community-controlled organisations provide services to Indigenous people
- Support the economic, social and cultural development of Indigenous people as individuals, families and communities

BY

- Establishing and resourcing regional enabling Indigenous organisations to strengthen the Indigenous community-controlled service sector, lead priority-setting, and broker and partner in policy development, program design and joint decision making for service investment
- Building the skillset and mindset of Government officers to partner with Indigenous peoples and their local organisations
- Implementing joint decision making whereby Indigenous community members guide investment and standards of service by assessing the performance and suitability of services in their communities
- Authorising Governments to co-design policy, program and service design and investment decisions with Indigenous people
- Building capacity for iterative learning and adapting, including to rechannel effort and funding efficiently where required
- Building a National Indigenous leaders forum with direct access to Government decision makers to co-design, monitor, direct and redirect Government policy, program and investment systems and processes
- Sharing knowledge and data to support effective decision-making
- Progressing key policy priorities for EC regions and government such as better education, health and housing outcomes

THIS WILL RESULT IN

- Government policy, programs and investment is directed to priorities and solutions as defined by Indigenous peoples, to advance the wellbeing of Indigenous peoples
- Indigenous peoples feeling empowered to direct Government policy, programs and funds based on their experiences, priorities and solutions
- Government programs and Government and non-Government services are co-designed to be responsive to the priorities and solutions of Indigenous peoples
- Reduced duplication, better integration and improved value for money in services to Indigenous people
- A service system that delivers better results for Indigenous people
- Closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians

THEN

Indigenous people thrive and live fulfilled lives

Assumptions: Bipartisan and sustained support for the processes and organisations involved in joint decision making; expansion of joint decision making to all relevant parts of Government and across Governments; transparency and accountability in joint decision making; partners have the mindset, skills and capability to effectively participate; all Government investment partners, and their processes are streamlined, transparent and authorised; joint decisions are binding and enforceable; service providers commit to participating and implement the recommendations of joint decision making; Governments and communities support the growth of a culturally safe and responsive Aboriginal controlled service system.

Six Domains for SDM

The theory of change for sharing power in the EC Partnership is based on a core challenge that policies, programs, service design and investments of governments fail to advance the life chances and wellbeing of Indigenous people and their communities when they are developed in isolation to the perspectives of those most directly impacted by them. To address this challenge and advance the goals in the theory of change, we propose six domains for growing SDM based on our research and engagement, including EC participant insights about what is ‘working well’ and opportunities for broader reform. The domains can be seen as the building blocks to progress a place-based Closing the Gap reform agenda that targets entrenched disadvantage and advances Indigenous people’s empowerment and regional development priorities. The domains are presented with key quotes, a description of what research informants told us is ‘working well’ and good practice examples for activities that are relevant for each domain.



Indigenous people empowered and heard

Indigenous people have the authority and capacity to actively participate in priority-setting and decision-making, enabling broad representation and genuine influence on decisions.

Key observations

JDM has empowered Indigenous people with enhanced knowledge of the services being delivered in their communities and the opportunity to actively shape the government investments to improve accountability, performance and alignment with Indigenous priorities.

- Regional Development Agendas are a powerful tool for driving decisions about government investment in a region
- Indigenous people have embraced and appreciated the opportunity through JDM to access more information about programs and services, advocate for the role of ACCOs in community-driven service delivery, keep service providers (including ACCOs) accountable, keep government accountable for productivity and effectiveness of investments, and advocate for innovations to transform and improve the service system
- EC has evolved and convenes effective community panels for Indigenous participation in decision-making
- Indigenous community leaders see NIAA's current JDM initiatives as taking place at the grant/activity level and aspire to a significant broadening of the scope of government decisions in which they will be involved, to encompass all levels of government, a wide array of agencies and the full policy lifecycle from co-design to delivery

Introduction to Indigenous People Empowered and Heard

The Indigenous leaders who proposed and designed the EC initiative in 2015 were driven by an empowerment agenda. They saw EC as unwinding a knot of disempowerment and dependency that Indigenous people had been tied up in because of top-down, managerialist approaches to Indigenous service delivery. Several Indigenous and government participants in the Lessons Learned Review emphasised that the establishment of EC and the opportunity to participate in shared decision-making about funding decisions through JDM was crucial to reverse a disempowering trend in Indigenous affairs. These statements echoed the rationale underlying EC's original design report, which was that Indigenous people had been sidelined in the decisions about, and delivery of, programs and services to their communities.

That rationale aligns with a critique in the policy literature that the 'new public management' (NPM) approach to government programs and services has moved too far towards preferencing 'choice' over 'voice', with detrimental outcomes for disadvantaged groups (Considine, 2022). This critique contends that Governments' preoccupations with competitive, market-based models for delivering services actively disempowered Indigenous communities in two ways. First, they privileged government-defined outputs and economic efficiencies over these communities' expressed needs and desires. Second, they excluded Indigenous people's participation in and ownership of services through their own community-controlled organisations, which struggled to compete in market-based funding processes and received little capacity-building support under these modes of funding (Sullivan, 2018). The challenges of this competitive model are compounded when the services are operating in thin markets where, there can only be limited, or no competition between service providers.

Sullivan et al (2023, p.7) describe NPM as 'the most profound influence on Aboriginal community-controlled organisations since the abolition of ATSIC', replacing a relationship with government that had been based on grants that fostered self-determination with a new approach where ACCOs had to compete to be awarded government contracts based on private sector-like performance standards and efficiency measures. A leader from the Kimberley region explained how the EC Leaders' advocacy for EC is a direct response to the disempowerment they experienced during the shift to NPM:

'Well, from our perspective at the time was, after ATSIC's regional councils there was no Aboriginal representative group to advocate or partner with government. So that was one of our main reasons. To try and get a voice and to try and shape some of government's policies. And so, we seen a lot of the government program and policy didn't really suit our communities and our needs and there was no sort of representation to try and influence that since the ATSIC regional councils. And over the years in between, government had shifted to... I just call it neoliberalism, [putting] all the faith in the market... Aboriginal affairs is social issues, and are not part of that [market], but they place their faith in the market... But that's been the whole focus of governments... They just tended to outsource things. We've seen that as a real threat to our locally created organisations in this region. Some of our peak organisations are now three and four decades old and suddenly that all changed from grants to procurement – straight out procurement to the market. And a lot of our small organisations... well, not even smaller organisations... just can't compete in a procurement process against the Red Crosses and the big multinational not for profits... And in the early phases of that you had a lot

of not for profits moving into the Kimberley. And what that also did was kill local empowerment.' **EC backbone lead**

Following the establishment of EC in regions around Australia, JDM was designed as a mechanism to empower Indigenous people to participate with government in decision-making about NIAA's investments in Indigenous programs and services. The JDM model is premised on Indigenous people being empowered to have a voice at multiple levels:

- At the national level, the EC Leaders Group is a powerful advocate to government for the involvement of Indigenous people in centralised policy and program development work as well as the implementation and targeting of government investments to the Indigenous community.
- At a regional level, the EC backbones are authorised by the EC Leaders to play a role in facilitating, co-ordinating and collecting the views of Indigenous people to ensure their perspectives are represented to government. This includes the views of service providers, service users and other community members and Indigenous leaders.
- Within each region, Indigenous peoples' perspectives provide input into Regional Development Agendas (RDAs). These Agendas set out the region's social, economic and cultural development goals for the next five or so years. The EC design report intended that RDAs would be the touchstone for directing government investment in the region towards Indigenous priorities.
- At the local or sub-regional level, the JDM process empowers Indigenous people to participate in deliberative community panels (facilitated by the EC backbones), where they can firstly, review whether a service provider is delivering a service that meets community expectations, and secondly, consider whether the funding itself is addressing overall Indigenous needs and priorities as set out in the community-led RDA.
- EC Leaders and backbones put forward community-level recommendations to NIAA which are then discussed and agreed at regional negotiation tables to arrive at a shared decision on the outcome of the service assessment.

What's working well

The Lessons Learned Review found that Indigenous people who participate in the JDM process feel empowered to influence decisions about regional or local investments. The Review also found that JDM demonstrates the potential for Indigenous people to strongly influence regional investments beyond IAS ceasing grants to other agencies and across the policy lifecycle.

Regional Development Agendas (RDAs)

The Review found that a comprehensive RDA with broad-based support from Indigenous people in a region is a powerful tool for driving decisions about government investment in that region. EC backbone organisations have engaged widely over multiple years to develop and refine RDAs to ensure they reflect the

'[EC] have actually got a really good document [Regional Development Agenda]. It's all about the healthy wealthy community... They've done an amazing amount of work there, working with community to develop this agenda and document which actually is a great pathway moving forward... [It aligns] with NIAA's own internal regional strategy... It kind of validated both sides actually, which is really nice.'

NIAA regional staff

current aspirations and priorities of Indigenous people living in their region. RDAs may also include local plans where the region is made up of multiple communities/areas with distinct needs, or plans for key sectors such as early years, education and housing.

EC backbones highlighted that having the priorities identified in the RDA enables community panels and EC Leaders to make more strategic assessments when reviewing services as part of JDM rounds. For example, in East Kimberley, the JDM assessment tool scores programs on a range of criteria cross-referenced to the RDA, such as whether the program focuses on any of the 6 social norms that underpin the RDA. In Inner Sydney Empowered Communities, grants are assessed on the extent to which they are 'aligned' to the communities' priorities and the EC's Pathways to Empowerment model.

Empowerment through being heard

Under the JDM model, Indigenous people can be heard and participate in decisions about funding through community panels and through EC negotiation tables with government. The Lessons Learned Review found that Indigenous people have embraced and felt empowered by these opportunities to participate in funding decisions through JDM.

Several reasons were mentioned by community members as to why they are positive about being part of JDM. A consistent message was that community members were grateful to have more access to information about what was being funded in their community and what organisations are supposed to be delivering, which had previously been opaque to them.

Another positive that community members saw in JDM is the opportunity to advocate for transition from non-Indigenous providers to ACCOs. An EC leader emphasised how the JDM process had enabled Indigenous communities to advocate for reversing the situation where services run by ACCOs had been shifted to large non-Indigenous not-for-profits because of competitive tendering processes driven by 'new public management' principles. Another EC leader recalled that when ATSIC was abolished, many services run by community organisations had been put out to market and competitive tenders were won by large non-Indigenous NGOs. After more than a decade

'The good part about [JDM] is it's providing an opportunity that previously didn't exist. So previously to joint decision-making, government – someone in another office in the Kimberley or in Canberra – was making decisions about what they thought was best to fund and didn't involve anyone actually in the community who were going to be receiving those services. So, I think it's fantastic. It's a really valuable mechanism for shared decision-making, joint decision-making for local Aboriginal people to have their voices heard and to have their recommendations put forward.'

EC backbone

'So, what we're saying is, the money is coming in, a lot of money is flowing in, [but] who is the right person to deliver this, that actually gets an outcome for people on the ground? And I know seeing people's wheels turning and I'm seeing the lights come on in the face, you know, because before that, they've never, ever had any engagement with the money before. They've never, ever been a decision maker... For [the backbone] to come into contact with NIAA to have some level of power to be able to change things about where funding goes. I think that's a step in the right direction.' **EC backbone**

'I think that [JDM] is one of the best things that have happened. Because previously it was difficult to talk to government and be taken seriously. By being part of the decision-making process, we felt that our opinion was valued. And we in some cases, I guess we probably were able to twist the government's arms. Simply through community consent.'

Community panel member

'On the positive of lessons learned, I think the fact that Anangu have embraced the process, and they keep turning up for it, which means that there's something going for it, some value in it.' **EC backbone**

'I strongly believe that our voices are heard, and I feel like that we are a big asset to the decision-making.'

EC backbone

'I love the feedback that you get after the panels from mob, when they actually feel really heard... And you get indirect feedback from people who wasn't even on the panel, but they are talking about it in a very positive way and you're like, 'wow, I'm actually making people feel heard, after years of not.' **EC backbone**

of this situation, which the EC leader attributed to 'neoliberalism', JDM had finally enabled the community to advocate for the return of these services to ACCOs.

Another EC leader spoke of how JDM had enabled the community to advocate for the *continuation* of funding to ACCOs based on community perceptions of its value, where NIAA felt that the organisation was not performing based on the official NIAA performance measures. In enabling Indigenous people to advocate for the transition to, or continued support of, community-controlled services, the JDM process has contributed to strengthening the community-controlled sector, which aligns with *Priority Reform 2 – Building the Community-Controlled Sector* of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

Community members also spoke about the importance of JDM in keeping ACCOs accountable as service providers.

Community members also saw JDM as an opportunity to make government more accountable to ensure programs were not leading to duplication, waste or misalignment with community priorities. They were concerned that prior to JDM there were a '*multitude of examples of programs being put into the region that don't match the needs of community*' (EC backbone staff), or '*that continue to be funded when I know they don't achieve anything, and community knows they don't do anything*' (EC backbone staff). JDM was seen as an opportunity for the community to overcome government inertia and force a rethink.

A final reason why Indigenous people value JDM is because it is an opportunity to advocate for innovations that will transform and improve the way services are delivered in their community. This is exemplified by the community member who advocated for the Aboriginal parenting centre of excellence, described in Box 14: How community panel innovation and pooled funding can lead to service system improvements (see section on 'Scope for Systemic Impact').

'I think Empowered Communities... enables the voice to be heard to government from the people rather than from the politicians.'

Service provider

'They know that they're actually being listened to, but [it's] also providing them with insight on what services are being delivered to the community and where and what they're supposed to be doing compared to what they actually deliver.' **EC backbone**

'Even within our local Aboriginal organisations, they sometimes just want to tick the boxes saying they have done well here, or whatever. But then you have community people on the ground level that lives and breathes and experiences everything and see the day-to-day every day and who's opinion we take, and that's very important.' **EC backbone**

'In this region, a significant amount of programs that come through that receive IAS funding are local or regional Aboriginal organisations and I can see where joint decision making then is a really useful feedback loop that's outside of the governance of those organisations. I think community-based organisations can begin to assume their legitimacy, begin to assume their community voice, and then also become disconnected from it, whether they realise it or it's unintentional. The [JDM community panel] becomes an environment where people can talk about it.' **EC backbone**

'We showed government that the service that you're funding, and you receive a pretty report for, it's not known in community, it's not valued and it's a duplication really of another service.' **EC backbone**

'I think, you know, having lived and worked in this field for 30 years, I've watched so many programs continue to be funded when I know they don't achieve anything. And community knows they don't do anything. So, more importantly, [with JDM] Aboriginal people are having the say whether that's good, bad or great. And they are running that process. And doing that in a collective, so it's not one or two names and power bases making decisions.' **EC backbone**

Convening effective community panels

For the JDM process, EC backbones have adopted a diverse range of practices tailored to different regions to involve community members in community panels. To facilitate genuine Indigenous involvement in funding decisions, the composition of these panels must be seen as appropriate by all partners – government, service providers and the Indigenous community. The following sections illustrate the evolving practice of EC regions as they seek to empower community voice through JDM panels.

Service provider representatives

As EC backbone membership is generally drawn from Indigenous service provider organisations (ACCOs), some backbones rely on these organisations to supply members for the community panels. Indigenous staff or Directors of ACCOs are seen as suitable community panel members as they understand the service system and government funding while also being members of the community. On the other hand, they may be more likely to have conflicts of interest regarding particular grants being assessed. To manage this, panel members to do not participate in discussions where they have a conflict of interest. One EC backbone has a guideline that there must be at least the same number of community members as service provider representatives on any community panel. Another backbone has created a large standing panel so independent people can be drawn upon when constituting a community panel.

Community engagement

While convening community panels has emerged as routine practice in JDM in most EC regions, there are other avenues that EC backbones use to facilitate community input into decisions. For example, in the lead up to JDM rounds, some backbones have used various forms of community engagement to gauge community views about services that are due for assessment. Tools include community surveys, interviews with community members, discussion forums and Changemakers summits. This engagement may be an effective way to obtain feedback from service users (for example, mothers of children accessing educational programs) who might otherwise find it difficult to participate in a panel. This approach is used by Far West Coast EC (see 'practice example' box below).

Box 1: Practice Example – Far West Coast EC's Model for Facilitating Community Input in JDM

In Far West Coast EC, community participation in JDM is through the EC regional leaders table, the Far West Aboriginal Community Leaders Group, which includes the CEOs and chairpersons from the five communities in the region. To ensure that community feedback about services is captured for consideration at the JDM round, the backbone undertakes community engagement in each of the communities in the three to four months leading up to the JDM table. This 'listening and learning' approach involves a program of engagement activities in each location to discuss topics that are relevant to the services coming up for JDM assessment. For example, if Remote School Attendance Strategy grants are due for assessment at the JDM round, the engagement will focus on questions around school attendance, focusing on community views about successful strategies and gaps in this area. To maintain confidentiality, the backbone does not disclose which grants are being considered but gathers the feedback about service performance

indirectly through the thematic discussions. This enables the backbone to prepare an impact report as an evidence base for the regional leaders to consider at the JDM table.

Breadth of representation

Given the diversity of families, affiliations and interest groups in any community, the perceived legitimacy of a panel designed to provide Indigenous community voice will depend on whether there is breadth in representation. Different approaches have been developed depending on the context of the region. For example:

- To enable diversity, the backbone in one region is building up a pool of 50 people across the region who can be called on to participate in panels and backbones are mindful of the need for a gender and age balance.
- Central Coast is actively recruiting young people for their community panels.
- The Inner Sydney Empowered Communities JDM process includes two panels of six community members to assess a grant based on the Region's Development Agenda and alignment to the Pathway to Empowerment.
- In the Tristate EC, a broad-based community panel was established to represent the diversity of Ngaanyatjarra, Pitjantjatjara and Yankuntjajara interests. The Kulintja Kutju ('One Vision') Group comprises senior and emerging Anangu leaders from communities across the NPY region in SA, NT, and WA, and includes a number of directors of EC opt-in partner organisations.
- In the East and West Kimberley, the backbone organisations have established Local Management Committees in each community involved in JDM, comprised of leaders from key ACCOs that have opted-in to EC. This has the advantage of enabling the EC to harness the existing ACCO network.
- In Cape York's Pama Futures model, the backbone is committed to empowering decision-making at the clan, family level and individual level, enabling clans, families and individuals to discuss their plans and aspirations and input into community panel/partnership tables where shared decision-making takes place.

Youth

Several EC backbones have had success in involving youth on community panels. EC backbones such as Central Coast, West Kimberley, Cape York and Tristate have developed specific strategies for youth engagement. For example, following the lead of the Cape York Leaders Program, in 2019 the Tristate EC established an Emerging Leaders Program for Anangu aged 25-40 years, and some participants are now closely involved in JDM as EC backbone staff or members of the community panel, Kulintja Kutju. This is seen by Lessons Learned Review participants as a shining light of EC's work in this region. The other EC backbones who have successfully engaged young people in leadership programs have seen this as a strong foundation for engaging youth in SDM processes.

Empowerment through knowledge

A strong theme in the feedback from Indigenous participants in JDM was how the sharing of information about funding increased community knowledge about the service system, and consequently their ability to advocate for change. As one backbone organisation commented, JDM has provided *‘a bit of transparency about what the services are there for and therefore what they do, what the money is for, because community doesn’t [otherwise] get access to that.’*

Many EC backbone staff had seen a growth in this understanding over time, as Indigenous panel members participated in more JDM rounds. One staff member noted that people’s understanding of the service system and funding process grew, their *‘strategic thinking really improved’* along with their *‘ownership over the process’*. Another backbone staff member felt *‘it really opened a doorway’* for people, and enabled them to *‘ask difficult questions’*, which was empowering for them.

Preparing community members to participate in JDM

All Lessons Learned Review participants highlighted the importance of adequate preparation for Indigenous people to participate in decision-making processes such as community panels. A good process was one that:

- Explains the JDM process, the role of community participants, the types of recommendations that can be made, and the scope of their ability to influence decisions on funding.
- Outlines requirements around conflict of interest and confidentiality and expectations around conduct of meetings (for example, respect for diversity of opinion, respect for service provider presenters).
- Reinforces the relevant considerations and criteria for community panels to consider in their assessments and warns against bringing irrelevant considerations or criteria into decisions (for example, personal or political biases).
- Sets out the agenda for the meetings and expected time commitment for participants.

The adequacy of preparation for Indigenous community members to participate in JDM was raised by several NIAA regional staff. While recognising the challenges for EC backbones in getting community people to panel meetings, NIAA staff felt this was one of the most important factors determining the quality of the outcome.

‘Something that I saw as a benefit... [especially] where we’ve been able to bring in the same panel members... I did see the ability to critically engage in the process really improve over time. And so, people’s strategic thinking really improved, and their engagement in, and their ownership over, the process really improved as well. And those were the instances where we saw communities getting a stronger voice...’ **EC backbone**

‘Watching this network of people grow and learn more through that [community panel] process and understand their communities better and understand the providers better, I think it really opened up a doorway. Breaking down everything... That’s obviously empowering for people. Now they can ask the difficult questions. They’ve got insights into how the community works in ways they’ve never had before.’

EC backbone

‘[The backbone] gets all the [funding] information. We see everything. So, then you go through it and it’s really good. It sort of breaks it down. And you can see what other services are doing. You seen the inside of it.’

Community panel member

‘We do get access to what’s getting funded, how much do we get funded? And we have more knowledge of how it all runs and works and the reporting aspect of it. And then knowledge is power. And to have that knowledge, it’s good.’

Community panel member

The practice of EC backbones in preparing community members for panels differs widely across EC regions. In some remote regions, travel and resourcing issues reduce the amount of time available to run preparatory workshops, whereas in more urban contexts it may be possible to conduct more thorough inductions. The extent of preparation ranges from an hour or two at the beginning of a community panel meeting to a full-day workshop in advance of the panel convening.

Empowerment through a national network

A unique feature of the EC model is the EC National Leaders Group, which brings together the Indigenous leaders from across the country who put forward the original EC model or have subsequently joined the EC Partnership. This national network is viewed by many EC Leaders as an important driver through continued involvement and commitment to EC. EC Leaders highlight the empowering effect of having a collective voice, as well as the opportunity to share knowledge and experience with government and learn from each other.

'I think the fact [our EC backbone] is a part of a broader network across Australia, that's probably the benefit for us – to be aligned with a group across the nation that is speaking to our concerns.' **EC National leader**

What could be improved

The Lessons Learned Review received a range of suggestions to improve the extent to which Indigenous people are empowered and heard through JDM. In contrast to the generally positive perceptions of Indigenous people about being heard through JDM, there are some concerns and frustrations from Indigenous participants in the JDM process. These concerns primarily revolved around four issues: the role of RDAs in guiding JDM, pressure that Indigenous participants felt from being part of JDM; frustrations about recommendations not being implemented; and the lack of feedback, or delays in feedback, to community participants about JDM outcomes. More broadly, beyond NIAA's JDM process, stakeholders on all sides wanted to see the concept extended to SDM about a wider range of government funding and policy decisions about Indigenous communities. These areas for potential improvement and further enhancement of both JDM and the broader practice of SDM are discussed below. They are reflected in Recommendations 1, 2 and 5 (see 'Summary Table of Findings and Recommendations', pages 17-19 of this report).

Further development of RDAs

If RDAs are to provide the touchstone for assessing whether programs align with the community's priorities, they need regular updates to ensure they are current, comprehensive, widely supported by Indigenous people in the region and in the relevant subregions and developed in partnership with community and government partners. The comprehensiveness and level of community acceptance of RDAs differs across regions, but several Lessons Learned Review participants highlighted the importance of ongoing improvement to these plans.

Further use of RDA priorities to guide JDM

Several representatives of both Government and EC backbone partners suggested to the Lessons Learned Review that the sector-by-sector priorities identified in RDAs could be leveraged better in JDM assessments if JDM rounds were organised so that a wide range of funded programs related to a particular sector in a particular place could be considered at

once. For example, a community panel could be convened to consider Australian Government and state government school education programs, all the funded youth programs or all education-related programs in a community. This would enable looking at this sector in a holistic way, to assess whether the funded programs are working together to address Indigenous people's priorities for that sector, as set out in the RDA. To date, the JDM approach has not necessarily enabled rounds to focus on a particular sector, as the grants for consideration depend on their expiration dates, which are in turn driven by the funding types. However, there have been occasions where the end dates for several related grants from one sector have come up for review at the same time. The example set out in Box 13: Children and School Pooled Funding Reform in East Kimberley (see section on 'Systemic Impact') illustrates the positive results that can be achieved where sector-specific grants can be assessed against community priorities.

Both government and Indigenous partners felt that the current process for JDMs did not sufficiently enable community priorities as identified in RDAs to guide place-based government investment for sectors. As discussed in relation to 'Systemic Impact', there is a desire for more Indigenous community input into funding at the co-design stage, more holistic sector-by-sector reviews of funding, and more opportunities to pool and redirect misaligned or unproductive funding to community priorities identified in RDAs. This would be more in line with the original thinking of the EC Design Report, which proposed that RDAs be followed by regional accords between the EC and government about how government investment would be realigned to the RDA priorities. A greater focus on translating broad priorities in RDAs into more specific regional investment plans was flagged by some people as an important next step.

More feedback to Indigenous participants about JDM outcomes

For Indigenous people to feel heard, they need to see evidence of the outcomes of their participation in JDM. A recurring concern raised by Indigenous community members is that they do not receive timely, or in some cases any, feedback or updates from NIAA on the outcomes of JDM after the recommendations leave the community panel or the regional negotiation table. This erodes trust in the process and reduces the likelihood that the Indigenous community will engage in the partnership with government. For government partners in JDM, this illustrates the importance of 'closing the loop' and communicating back to community members involved in decision-making panels. Even if recommendations cannot be implemented in full, it is the hallmark of a strong partnership that this is communicated with the Indigenous partners.

It is not clear from the feedback where the feedback loop is breaking down for some JDM participants. In several cases, the concern was raised by community

'And [JDM] is only offering little snippets... and they don't even have oversight of the total amount of funding and where it's going... We're reviewing these three contracts. Like, wouldn't it be better that at the beginning of each financial year there's a whole couple of days spent reviewing all the funding that's coming in?' **EC backbone**

'Sometimes the frustration isn't solely because we didn't receive the desired outcome. But it's because of the lack of information or the lack of justification that NIAA is providing to us – so you can't just say, 'no, the delegate doesn't approve this.' We need to know why.' **EC backbone**

'We go into the next [JDM] round, and when [the program] shows up, NIAA will report back, and provide feedback back to the [backbone] Board saying, 'this is what we've done with this service, we've taken your recommendations on board, we're changing the KPIs or we're bringing in an extra reporting period for them.' Or 'actually, you've suggested that we cease the funding; however, we've decided to go this route and do something different'. So, they provide a report back on what they've decided to do.' **EC backbone**

panel members that they did not receive feedback about the outcomes of their recommendations, which was particularly frustrating when the same programs come up for consideration at subsequent JDM rounds. Some backbones also acknowledged that they had a role in improving the feedback loop to community panel participants about the final outcomes of JDM and the extent to which the panel recommendations were adopted at the regional negotiation table level or the NIAA delegate level.

In other cases, EC backbone staff said that feedback from NIAA about the ultimate outcomes either took far too long (for example, several months), was not provided at all or did not provide sufficient information (for example, about why a community panel recommendation had not been implemented). A particular concern was when ACCO service providers were not hearing whether funding would be continued by the end date for their contract, leading to job insecurity and stress for employees.

It appears that the bottlenecks in communication may be different across regions, and in some regions the feedback process works very effectively. It is an area that needs special attention in every region for JDM to be trusted and effective, and it is an important consideration for any other agency seeking to undertake SDM with Indigenous partners.

Better implementation of JDM recommendations and management of expectations

Where Indigenous community representatives expressed dissatisfaction with JDM, it was most often because they felt that their recommendations had been ignored or not implemented in a timely manner. Participants who had attended multiple JDM rounds were frustrated to see recommendations they made (such as a plan for transition to community control) had not been implemented by NIAA or the service provider.

Some EC backbone and government participants in the Lessons Learned Review observed that frustration about recommendations not being implemented may occur where expectations have not been managed about whether particular recommendations are realistic (for example, recommendations to increase funding or substantially expand services without additional resources), or information has not been provided that might affect NIAA's ability to implement the decision (for example, the panel's preferred ACCO has undisclosed compliance issues). This highlights the need for better communication about expectations and parameters for decision-making at the outset of JDM processes. Both government and EC Partners have a role to play in this regard.

'And so, we come back to panel and say, why are we even reviewing this again? Because we've said this is what needed to happen. We didn't get any feedback. We don't know what's happened and we've still got the same information.'

Community panel member

'We're grateful that we've got this opportunity to come to the table, but it's just – that other obstacle in front of us is that they have to really respect and listen to what we're saying, otherwise they're wasting our time, like everybody else.'

Community panel member

'What I've learnt about the joint decision-making process: Although the information [we provide] can be great, although the recommendations can be so beneficial to government, they'll only use it if they want to use it.'

EC backbone

Recruiting broader community panels

In the JDM process, the most important, and the most difficult, task for EC backbones is convening appropriate community panels. A wide range of views were expressed in the Lessons Learned Review about the appropriateness of community panels convened to date,

and this is an area of evolving practice for EC regions. The issues that need to be considered in convening appropriate community panels are discussed in this section, along with examples of how backbones have sought to address them. Ongoing efforts to broaden community participation is also seen as a priority for continuous improvement.

Legitimacy of panels

The Lessons Learned Review found that in some locations community members or government staff questioned the legitimacy of panels due to absence of Traditional Owner participation. EC backbone staff noted that Traditional Owners had an opportunity to nominate to be part of community panels, and that the relevant constituents for decisions made at JDM rounds were all Indigenous residents of the communities serviced by the programs being reviewed.

Some community panel members raised concerns about non-Indigenous staff members of ACCOs dominating some community panels. The legitimacy of Indigenous JDM panels requires the predominance of Indigenous community members on the panels.

Service users

JDM is an opportunity to hear feedback about government-funded services directly from the Indigenous users of those services. It can be difficult to attract service users to participate in JDM, because community members may be too busy to participate and may not understand the process (or have the time to undertake training) to be able to participate. EC backbones may not have sufficient notice about the services that will be included in a JDM round given the tight deadlines around the end-to-end process. Nevertheless, in forming panels, some EC backbones have specifically sought out service users. In Central Coast, the EC backbone actively seeks out individuals who have direct experience (themselves or their family members) of services in the region, including services that are subject to JDM. Central Coast also has a rolling recruitment for community panel members and a pool of inducted panel members to draw from.

As discussed earlier, a key element for effective JDM is ensuring an appropriate, broad-based community panel reflecting a diversity of interests and experience. However, in practice, attracting more Indigenous community members to participate in JDM has been one of the biggest challenges for EC backbones. The role is unpaid, the time commitment may be a few days (for a preparatory workshop and the panel meeting), the subject matter can be technical and complex, and the decisions have the potential to substantially impact funding and people's livelihoods.

Subject matter experts

The quality of decision-making can also be improved where the panel includes subject matter experts in the programs being assessed. Backbones have targeted community members with expertise in particular areas such as education or health. Some suggested that this would be easier if JDM rounds could be organised on a sector-by-sector basis – for example, if a JDM round was considering a set of education grants, the backbone could organise a local Indigenous education expert to participate in the panel.

Diversity for community panels

One of the most common concerns raised by NIAA regional staff and service providers about JDM was that community panels had too few participants or not enough breadth and diversity.

Strategies suggested for backbones to attract more community members to JDM included:

- Running more intensive expression of interest campaigns in target communities. For example, EC West Kimberley uses social media posts, website information, posters at community stores and clinics, and directly emails and makes contact with individuals who have previously shown interest.
- Greater promotion of the impact that community members can have in improving their communities through JDM.
- Targeted recruitment of community members with expertise and pitching the opportunity to contribute to sector-specific JDM rounds.
- Requiring opt-in member organisations to recruit community members in their community, as a responsibility that comes with joining the backbone as a member.
- Reimbursing community members for their time (for example, if they are not attending as part of their ACCO responsibilities). Some EC backbones provide supermarket vouchers to community members, while others provide a payment based on state government rates for advisory committees. In some locations, both NIAA and EC staff expressed the erroneous view that the funding contract did not permit any remuneration for panel members – this is only the case if the panel member is already being paid for their time through their employment in an organisation.
- An EC backbone staff member noted that they had succeeded in getting community members involved in JDM through first involving a wide range of people in other, less formal activities run by the backbone, such as co-design or engagement workshops. Some backbones rely heavily on their family networks to recruit community panels. Ultimately, attracting community members largely relies on pitching the opportunity to exercise power and influence in the decision-making for the betterment of the community.

Gender appropriateness

Gender diversity is beneficial in any decision-making process and may be particularly significant for cultural reasons for some programs being considered (e.g., programs related to women's business or family violence issues). This has been contentious in some locations. An organisation in a remote community that is highly critical of EC and the JDM model was concerned that a JDM community panel that reviewed its funding for services to women included men who were antagonistic towards the organisation, which rendered the process 'unsafe' for the organisation to participate in.

More in-depth community engagement by EC backbones

A concern raised by a few stakeholders (both community members and government staff) in some EC regions, especially those in remote Australia, is that the EC backbone is not sufficiently engaging with areas or communities within the region. There may be various reasons for this, including political tensions or lack of resources for engagement, especially

for travel in remote areas. A few people in these regions suggested that additional resourcing for EC backbones to increase grassroots community engagement, or to establish satellite offices in remote locations, would help address some of these challenges. The recent work in Cape York to move resources from the regional-level backbone to employ people from local communities to undertake the community engagement is another way of responding to this challenge.

Acknowledging and managing the pressure for Indigenous community panel members

An issue raised by several Indigenous participants in JDM is the pressure they feel in making decisions about funding. A community panel member explained that while she felt like she had influence over the decisions, *'that can be a little nerve wracking as well, because in small towns, as much as [they put a] confidentiality clause in, word gets out about who's on the panel'* and then people are saying *'you were the one who made us lose our funding.'* An EC backbone staff member recalled the difficulty for a community panel when NIAA was moving to de-fund a community organisation for non-compliance issues. While the panel recommended continuing the funding at the panel meeting, community members nevertheless blamed the panel when the organisation was subsequently de-funded under the compliance process: *'People were saying [to the panellist], you are my Auntie, you are supposed to stick up for my job, but now I'm jobless.'*

There was a concern by some Indigenous participants that they were being called upon to make the hard decisions that NIAA did not want to make about non-performing programs – that they were being used as the *'scapegoat'*. An EC backbone staff member recalled that in a JDM decision that ceased a grant, NIAA *'actually used [EC] as the reason they weren't getting funded, and we worked out that it was because they didn't want to deliver that bad message.'*

In some regions community employees of ACCOs make up a large proportion of the community panels. These staff explained that they found it difficult to provide feedback on the contracts of other ACCOs whose grants come before the panel because it is a small town and everybody knows everybody else: *'It can be hard to judge a program even if you think it's not working... You don't really want to speak up because the guy who runs the program is probably also a friend of yours or a neighbour.'*

The various social, family and reputational risks make it more difficult to attract Indigenous community members to participate in panels.

Some Indigenous community members called for the JDM process to pay more attention to managing and mitigating these pressures. It was noted that the pressure is exacerbated where the panel members do not feel like they have adequate information to make informed decisions. A solution, therefore, is to ensure better information is given to participants to assure

'The Aboriginal people that are working within the system are required to leverage their relationship on a community level in order to it to get all this participation. And I think that's what leads to some of the difficulties, to breakdown, burnout on an individual level... You raise all this expectation, and you get all of this sort of public garnering of excitement or whatever around it, and then it falls apart in the case that it becomes unfunded. And you're held accountable by your community because your relationship is what brings people to the hive.'

EC backbone

'The other thing people are saying is, 'I don't want to be a part of these jobs anymore [i.e. JDM Community Panels], because I feel like this whole pressure is coming to me, to make the stupid decision about who gives us a million dollars.'

EC backbone

them that they are making the right decisions. It was also suggested that better preparation for panel members to undertake their responsibilities would reduce their anxiety about the process.

A related issue raised by an Indigenous staff member of an EC backbone organisation was the community pressure that they experience from carrying out their role. This staff member emphasised that Indigenous staff *'leverage their relationships on a community level to get all this participation'* but then if expectations are raised and then dashed, *'you're held accountable by your community.'*

The way forward: Applying the lessons learned

The lessons learned from the EC Partners' efforts under JDM to ensure Indigenous people are empowered and heard can be applied both in the further enhancement of EC JDM in NIAA and in the broader development of SDM approaches across Government.

In the next phase of growth of SDM practice, the findings of this review suggest the following ways forward to build on current success:

SDM growth the next 12 months:

- The Partners determine the options available to consider all place-based government funding for a priority sector across multiple agencies and levels of government in EC regions
- Develop stronger community feedback loops about SDM outcomes
- Develop processes to recruit a wider cross-section of local people for all community panels
- Pursue opportunities to bring a broader scope of government decisions to the table for community input through SDM

SDM growth to 2028:

- Facilitate the development of cross-government sector investment plans for EC regions based on the agreed development agenda's priorities in that region



Partnerships

Partnerships for JDM are underpinned by collaborative governance practices, capabilities and skills, shared goals, trust, and collaborative mindset.

Key observations

A partnership approach is central to the success of JDM.

- A strong partnership model exists. It provides an important proof of concept that shows readiness for further expansion
- The model includes a clear and shared vision among all Partners that is focused on Indigenous empowerment, development and achieving improved productivity from government funding and services
- The Partnership has developed some strong collaborative ways of working and Partners continue to look for better ways to work together to build trust and improve outcomes on the ground for Indigenous people
- Regional Development Agendas and Local Partnership Agreements are in place or underway in all EC regions

Introduction to Partnerships

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap signed by all Australian governments in July 2020 offers a new approach to Indigenous affairs based on a full and genuine partnership. The 2020 Closing the Gap agreement's *Priority Reform 1: Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision-making*, seeks to apply the principles in the National Partnership Agreement to more partnership arrangements between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and governments at all levels. This aspiration for more partnership arrangements between Indigenous people and governments was strongly supported by the 2019 engagements, as expressed in the quote below.

'To effect real change, governments must work collaboratively and in genuine, formal partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples because they are the essential agents of change.' (Engagement survey participant from the Northern Territory)

The motivation for formal partnership arrangements between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and governments is to accelerate policy and place-based progress towards Closing the Gap. Clause 31 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap states the four purposes of formal policy partnerships and place-based partnerships to:

- a. drive Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-led outcomes on Closing the Gap;
- b. enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives, communities and organisations to negotiate and implement agreements with governments to implement all Priority Reforms and policy specific and place-based strategies to support Closing the Gap;
- c. support additional community-led development initiatives; and

- d. bring together all government parties, together with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, organisations and communities to the collective task of Closing the Gap.

In their recent review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, the Australian Productivity Commission (2024, p4) notes that:

'The Agreement commits governments to building and strengthening structures that empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to share decision-making authority with governments. Partnerships – place-based and policy partnerships – are the key mechanism used in the Agreement to achieve this. Some governments have demonstrated a willingness to partner and share decision-making in some circumstances, however, this is not observed more widely, and in some instances, there is contradictory practice. Governments are not yet sufficiently investing in partnerships or enacting sharing of power that needs to occur if decisions are to be made jointly. There appears to be an assumption that government knows best, which is contrary to the principle of shared decision-making in the Agreement. Too many government agencies are implementing versions of shared decision-making that involve consulting with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on a pre-determined solution, rather than collaborating on the problem and codesigning the solution.'

Despite the Productivity Commission's findings, the Lessons Learned Review identified evidence of effective partnering in most of the EC regions and at the national scale between the National EC Leadership and NIAA National Office. There are several partners involved in JDM including NIAA regional staff, EC Leaders and backbone staff, community panel members and service providers.

While most of the partnerships are working well, there are some challenges and opportunities for how the Partnership could be strengthened to support shared goals and to expand the approach to more federal and state government agencies, and potentially new EC regions.

What's working well

The Lessons Learned Review noted that in most instances, JDM has showcased a partnership which promotes a shared vision for Indigenous empowerment, the open sharing of quality information to inform decisions, and encourages collaborative mindsets and agreed ways of working that practically nurture the relationships in the partnership. This section highlights what's working well in the partnerships for JDM.

Shared vision for Indigenous empowerment and improved service delivery

There is evidence of shared goals for Indigenous empowerment, development and productivity, and for community having a voice in the design and

'I've learnt what great stuff can be achieved...if we have a real partnership and we have people that share community's vision on board'

EC backbone

'It does make us feel like we have a voice...giving us the trust to run these JDM processes and let community have their say about what is valuable and what's not in communities.'

Community panel member

performance of services that are responsive to the local needs of Indigenous people. A shared commitment to Indigenous empowerment is essential for JDM to work in the regions.

Information sharing

The sharing of quality information and timely responses is important as it demonstrates a commitment to the partnership and helps to build trust. The Two-Way Knowledge Sharing section in this report addresses the need for quality information and expanding the idea of what constitutes evidence for JDM.

Collaborative ways of working

Collaborative ways of working help to practically build and maintain relationships. There are many elements and multi-layers of effective partnering in the existing JDM processes in EC regions. There are partnerships between the EC Leaders and backbone organisations and service providers, and between EC Leaders and backbone organisations and Indigenous people. Those partnerships are needed to make JDM work effectively.

Some of the practical benefits and features of the EC Partnerships include the backbone's role in connecting NIAA to local Indigenous perspectives, aligning NIAA and EC regional agendas and adopting common language between the Partners.

Partnered ways of working

Building the skills and capabilities for partnered ways of working is central to the Australian Public Service (APS) reform agenda and there is a wide-ranging staff training and capability building priority across the public sector. As part of that reform, the APS Reform Charter for Partnership and Engagement promotes six principles (APS Reform, 2023) for working in a partnered and place-based way including:

- **Open:** Be open to engaging with a diverse range of perspectives to inform policy and program development, so that those affected can have a genuine and equitable opportunity to have their say.
- **Responsive:** Be willing to try new approaches to make sure engagements are fit for purpose, culturally appropriate and adaptable, while remaining outcomes focused.

'30 years ago, this [JDM] would never have happened. Government would have been telling people what to do, which is so wrong – and to now have this really genuine partnership...'

NIAA

'...at the end of the day, you want community to be receiving the best possible services they can to function as a healthy, happy community with access to services that they should expect and receive, and they've been identified by community as being those pillars that they need, you know and not from just government. It [JDM] needs to be community-led.'

NIAA

'So, it has moved well and truly beyond just reviewing what service is happening and whether to re-fund it or not. But you know they're going deeper now and actually like looking towards performance how these you know services going are they meeting their KPI's.'

NIAA

'With JDM... the biggest priority for me is actually seeing the feedback loop and the timelines improved in that regard because it affects so many people.'

EC backbone

'I found that everyone at the table has a voice and is valued.'

NIAA

'We're in contact [with NIAA regional staff], sometimes daily...we have regular, standing meeting invites plugged into our calendars to touch base on things. And we try...to show as much understanding as we can.'

EC backbone

'Some of my highlights for the partnership... personally, it's being able to have really robust... but respectful conversations. I think the right EC backbones and the right EC leads can really challenge the way you think and really start to challenge the status quo and quite rightly expect us to hold ourselves to a high standard.'

NIAA

'We used [JDM] as an opportunity to have a three-way partnership table between community, government and service provider.'

NIAA

[For the partnership] '...you need people invested people with the right skill sets to actually understand how government works and how community works.'

NIAA

- **Transparent:** Build public trust by acting with integrity, and being open and honest about expectations, roles and responsibilities, limitations, objectives and processes at the outset.
- **Accountable:** Maintain clear and regular communication by sharing information, taking responsibility for commitments made and informing people and communities on how they have contributed to the final decision.
- **Informed:** Underpin robust decision-making with the effective and ethical use of data, research and other insights, as well as informed by lived experience, history and context.
- **Collaborative:** Encourage and build relationships through respectful collaboration, and partner with communities, businesses, academia, industry and other sectors, to achieve the best outcomes.

'Because whilst NIAA have contract managers and project officers, which is unlike most other departments, they're not going to see the same things that we see. They're going to meet with a [service provider] agency and hear what they're providing without necessarily understanding the broader context on the community. So that's our opportunity to partner with NIAA to help them performance manage.' **EC backbone**

'I felt really good and proud about...true community engagement from a government perspective and giving community a line of sight and the opportunity to talk about solutions for them.' **NIAA**

The Review acknowledges the sentiment expressed by Review participants that a key part of working in a partnered way and committing to these principles, is to 'show up' as an active and committed partner.

Practice Examples

As well as the practices and sentiments expressed by Review participants, there are practice examples that demonstrate ways to strengthen and formalise partnerships between Indigenous people and governments. For example, partnerships between government and Indigenous people can be formalised through governance structures and partnership agreements.

Box 2: Practice Examples – Partnership Governance Structures and Partnership Agreements

Indigenous people, federal and state governments: tripartite governance

Cape York Welfare Reform was supported by a tripartite governance model whereby senior public servants from federal and state government along with the Cape York leaders shared the oversight for program reform and service delivery with local groups in the four trial communities. Supporting the governance structure was a \$20 million Queensland Government flexible service delivery fund to address local priorities with local communities, as agreed by the tripartite governance group.

Negotiation Tables: Local Decision-Making (NSW) and EC regions

Local decision-making (LDM) has been underway for ten years. Community consultation identified that Indigenous communities wanted to share decision-making with the NSW Government and work together to design, deliver and evaluate NSW Government programs for Indigenous communities.

There are eight regional alliances that participate in LDM and the statewide group (NCARA) which brings together the leaders of the regional alliances. The NSW EC

regions of Central Coast and La Perouse in Inner Sydney are LDM sites. As LDM matured, the purpose has shifted from government service accountability to reform of services and changing the models of service in some locations (for example, Aboriginal kindergarten in one region). The EC backbones meet with relevant agencies to discuss issues including changes to services. Senior representatives of agencies attend the negotiation tables with regional alliances. A lot comes down to personality, though they (regional state government officers) tend to be at the right level to be authorised to make decisions. The LDM process appears to have a strong authorising environment including importantly bipartisan political support, along with effective bureaucratic and community governance. There is an overarching Accord between the NSW Government (Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and Treaty) and the Chair of NCARA. The NSW Premier has sent a memorandum to all departments that they must participate in LDM. The departmental secretaries are sponsors centrally and they meet to oversight LDM for the state. Local departmental representatives for the LDM table must be at least Band 2 level. LDM is not legislated, although there is a move to legislate the principles of LDM and require agencies to participate including performance measures for government officers like KPIs in project descriptions and others.

Local Partnership Agreements (LPAs)

The EC Local Partnership Agreements are jointly determined by both of the EC Partners (i.e. EC and NIAA), and they provide a formal mechanism to scope the partnership within regions.

'If we didn't have that partnership agreement, then the power balance would still be all with them [government], as they are the funder.' **EC backbone**

What could be improved

There are enabling conditions that are foundational for government officers and Indigenous people and organisations to develop a high functioning partnership. The foundational conditions for the partnership include:

- shared and agreed goals for Indigenous empowerment, improved productivity of funding and services, individual and family development and policy reform
- trust among all partners to do what they say and to jointly share accountability for what works and what does not work
- timely and transparent sharing of quality and useable information
- capabilities, skills and mindsets for collaborative ways of working
- practical and regular activities that nurture and maintain the relationship such as regular, open and timely communication.

The Partners must remain vigilant and commit to the strengthening of these conditions to foster a culture of continuous improvement and ensure the long-term effectiveness of the Partnership is maintained.

Trust is essential to the partnership and trust can manifest in many ways. The Review identified some good examples of trust in relationships across EC regions. Having said this,

however, trust generally needs strengthening across the partnership. This is particularly true in those regions where the turnover in key government staff means new relationships and ways of working together are being established.

While there is no singular strategy to build trust, there are everyday practices that nurture and grow trust between partners. For example, in many regions, the NIAA and EC offices are physically distant, and this can emphasise the distance between the EC Partners, so a commitment to regular communication and face to face meetings between NIAA officials and EC backbone officers is essential.

Things that undermine trust in the partnership are the basic issues like the timing and lack of follow-through of feedback on the recommendations of the community panels, the quality of information provided to panel members to make decisions and losing sight of the value of the process for place driven Closing the Gap reforms.

The way forward: Applying the lessons learned

Partnership practices in JDM are proving effective for the partners and importantly, they work to empower community members involved in the community panels. The Lessons Learned Review has identified a range of opportunities to enhance these partnerships between government, service providers and Indigenous people, reflected in Recommendations 1, 2, 3 and 6 (see 'Summary Table of Findings and Recommendations', pages 17-19 of this report), and outlined below.

Expand the model to other agencies and levels of government

The conditions that support the EC Partnership can be extended to partnerships with other Australian Government agencies, state/territory and local governments to improve local service delivery, and advance regional planning and development and ultimately influence policy design and practice to support place driven Closing the Gap reforms.

Expand the model beyond ceasing grants to full SDM

In addition to expanding the reach of SDM both the Government and Indigenous partners see considerable benefit in expanding the scope of the partnership (beyond ceasing IAS grants)

'We're relational people. It's how we function. It doesn't mean we don't understand science and delivery and all the other things. But it sets the foundation on how we want to relate to government, Departments, to organisations, etcetera. And yeah, that's really a foundational issue for us... as you know that's why when policy changes or government go in a different direction... it rips your heart out, you know. Because you develop relationships along the way and then because of whatever the policy shift or change of government or whatever it is, it changes direction and changes the relationship.' **EC backbone**

I think [we need] greater respect for the decision-making process from all people involved, and greater understanding of the value of joint decision-making from all people involved too – and that's including government, communities, providers, ourselves. Because I think that we can lose sight of how valuable it is sometimes... **EC backbone**

'I get frustrated at the lack of follow-up on some of the organisations that are going through the [JDM] process.' **EC backbone**

'While NIAA's delays in EC delivery outputs have rationale behind them, it is not conducive to open communication [and] shared approaches to reform work...we work better when communication is frequent; actions are completed in a prompt timeframe; and actions/commitments are clearly recorded and circulated with cc'ing 'high-ups' where necessary.' **EC backbone**

'My main approach in all of this is EC needs to be useful. And so, I think that that's kind of a guiding principle for me. And then flexibility follows close behind that. We can be really rigid about what we look like and what we do, and we can end up playing in the sandpit by ourself.' **EC backbone**

to service design and policy development and reform. This aspiration seeks to shift the purpose of the current partnerships from ceasing grants to sharing decision-making authority to accelerate policy and place-based progress towards Closing the Gap.

To achieve this aspiration more government agencies and programs could partner with the EC regions to advance agreed community priorities, deliver better services on the ground for Indigenous people and better design and deliver much needed policy reforms.

EC's existing partnership approach which builds on current good practice in JDM to foster a collaborative culture and mindset could also be expanded to different spheres of government, the private and philanthropic sectors, community service organisations, other sectors.

Formalise partnership arrangements through formal partnership agreements

The significance of the relationship between Indigenous people and government was highlighted across EC regions and in particular many participants identified the importance of formalising this arrangement through partnership agreements and structures. Many participants noted that if the arrangements for working with government are only relationally underpinned, they tend to be transient and can be insufficient for creating an ongoing authorising environment. All partners have acknowledged that formalised partnerships are foundational in shaping the authorising environment for the EC program, and SDM within this.

In addition, clear and formalised Tripartite Partnership Table arrangements, which outline respective roles and responsibilities, could provide a key structural mechanism supporting a strong authorising environment and partnerships between Indigenous people, the Australian Government, and state/territory/local governments at local and regional levels.

Regional Development Agendas, partnership agreements and investment strategies are essential pieces of EC infrastructure. They are the foundation that guides good decision-making processes at the regional and local level. All EC regions should be supported to ensure these essential reform mechanisms are in place and regularly maintained so they can continue to ensure local decisions are aligned with local priorities wherever possible.

'It's a beautiful story as [we] kind of got more efficient and effective at running JDMs. I've particularly loved watching the growth of our panel members. I imagine we would have at least touched a good 100 people across panels, knowing the size of the panels and how many we've done, the millions of dollars that they've looked at, they're just going to get better and better at it and that then becomes the most powerful tool, because that's when you start to really unlock the story of what's in my community, what it's actually delivering, and where might we have some influence that's pretty powerful for me. There's nothing more powerful than the ability for NIAA to bring other agencies into this [it's] going to be the biggest telling story of this, to expand it from the IAS funding into more and then beyond that.' **EC National Leader**

'JDM... it can absolutely be a mechanism to ensure self-determination and community involvement. From the moment that governments are thinking about service designs, thinking about policy development' **EC backbone**

'[We need to] move from a crisis and intervention to an investment model for regional Indigenous advancement. To achieve this shift requires more than JDM for NIAA funding alone, it requires legal accountability and the Australian Government and other governments and others to be actively involved. There is a dividend to be made by investing in Aboriginal people and their plans'. **EC National Leader**

Clear authorising environment established and devolved as close to the ground as possible

Any authorisation created via legislation, policy and formalised partnership agreements, must be enacted in a way that will make a difference. This requires all sectors and groups to demonstrate a commitment to embodying the principles and pursuing the agreed goals of the partnership.

Effective leadership across the ecosystem is essential in driving this commitment and ensuring successful outcomes. Investment in EC infrastructure needs to ensure that demands on government and backbone organisations' resources and personnel can be met now, while also having sufficient flexibility to accommodate future growth in the scope of SDM into the future.

Within the NIAA context, for shared decision-making to be effective, the primary partnership between EC and governments must be authorised and function at a high level. Regional officers must have the confidence to fully participate in the partnership with the EC region. That means they need to share the ambition for empowering Indigenous people, and to have the authorisation to make decisions and for open, transparent communication to build a trusted and enduring partnership.

Importantly, effective and authorised regional development strategies to guide local decision-making and investment priorities across each region was a constant theme raised by participants throughout the Review.

Provide opportunities for new regions to join EC

The current EC Partnership includes 10 regions from across urban, regional and remote Australia. There is capacity for the geographic footprint of EC to be extended to other regions over time. Any such expansion would need to carefully consider the capacity and willingness of other regions to join EC and the resource implications for all Parties in doing so.

In the next phase of growth of SDM practice, the findings of this review suggest the following ways forward to build on current success:

SDM growth the next 12 months:

- Formal national partnership agreement signed with NIAA and DSS
- Framework for an expanded shared decision-making model developed and agreed between Partners
- Identify opportunities to partner with EC regions under the expanded SDM model
- Local Partnership Agreements signed for each EC region and Regional Development Agendas refreshed where required
- Resource requirements mapped for all partners, to ensure an expanded SDM model is effective

SDM growth to 2028:

- SDM model expanded to other agencies and jurisdictions
- SDM model expanded to include policy development, service design and system reform while continuing to make decisions about funding on the ground in EC regions
- Formal partnership agreements signed with other Commonwealth, state and local government agencies
- Authorising environment is clearly articulated and supports decision-making as close to the ground as possible
- Opportunities for new regions to join EC progressed as appropriate



Buy-in

Indigenous people, service providers, sector advocacy groups, representative bodies and government agencies see the value of SDM, are willing to engage with each other, and trust in the process.

Key observations

- The level of buy-in from the Indigenous community, government officers and service providers has grown over time as people have experienced the benefits of SDM
- Further strengthening buy-in at all levels of the system is critical to ensuring SDM can take place further upstream in the policy life cycle
- Government staff buy-in is founded on: communicating the commitment to SDM at senior levels; elevating the empowerment agenda; authorising and encouraging innovation in grant processes (especially managing probity issues while giving the community a voice in funding decisions); and maintaining the continuity of the staff involved in partnering on SDM processes
- Community buy-in has grown progressively as Indigenous people have appreciated the opportunities to gain greater information about funding and services and to influence decisions about government investments and activity affecting their communities
- Many service providers have embraced SDM as an opportunity to showcase their services, seek feedback on how to improve, and enhance their coordination with other services. However, other services have been apprehensive about the process for a range of reasons

Introduction to Buy-In

For a partnership such as EC to succeed, it is critical that all partners actively ‘buy-in’, by placing their trust in the process and committing the time and effort to make it work. The partners who need to buy-in to the JDM process for it to be successful are:

- the Indigenous community (whether service users, community panel members, community members and/or community leaders)
- government (not just NIAA but ideally other agencies and levels of government who could partner in the SDM process)
- service providers (both ACCOs and non-Indigenous service providers) whose funding is being reviewed through JDM
- sector advocacy groups and representative bodies working at the regional level

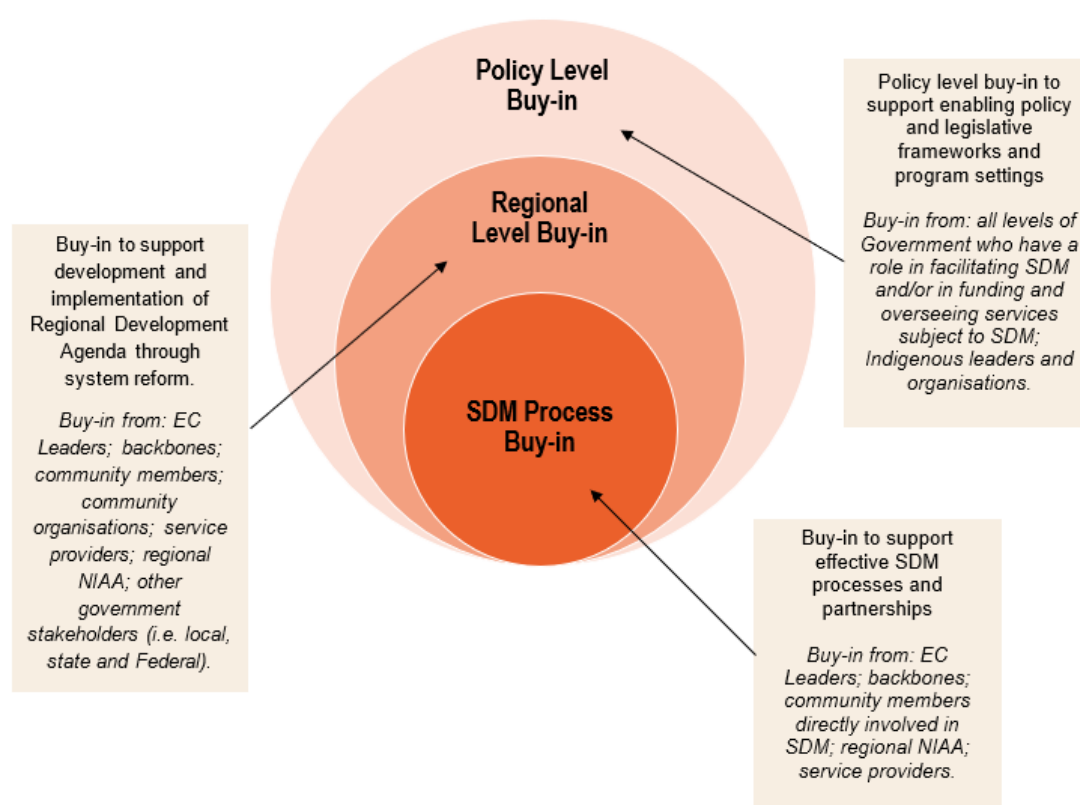
Achieving buy-in requires a shared understanding by all parties that their efforts to engage in the process will result in improvements that are of collective benefit and contribute to the shared goal of Closing the Gap for Indigenous people. Participants on all sides must be convinced that any risks, sacrifices and diminishments of power through engaging in the

JDM process are outweighed by the benefits that will accrue to their own interests and to the system.

The sharing of power through a shared decision-making process such as JDM occurs within a complex system that operates at multiple levels. Buy-in from the various sectors and groups is necessary at all levels to ensure successful implementation of shared decision-making models, as indicated in the figure below.

'My wish for the future is greater respect for the Joint Decision-Making process from all people involved. And I think greater understanding of the value of Joint Decision-Making from all people involved too. And that's including government, communities, providers, ourselves. All of it. Because I think that even we can lose sight of how valuable it is sometimes, you know, like when we're in the long grass. It's a risk because it was a pilot sort of thing. [Government] people keep asking the question: 'what's this program do?'" **EC backbone**

Figure 8 – Buy-in needed to support a shared decision-making process, such as JDM



What's working well

Government buy-in

As it is government that shares power to determine funding and services to Indigenous communities under JDM, the commitment of government stakeholders at the policy, regional and local level is fundamental to the success of the process (see Figure 8). Starting with NIAA sharing power over IAS ceasing grants, the aspiration of EC is to broaden government buy-in across NIAA and other Australian Government agencies, and ultimately, encourage buy-in from state, territory and local governments.

Government buy-in is founded on commitments at senior levels

The 2017 commitment by the then Minister for Indigenous Affairs, The Hon Nigel Scullion, to provide 75% weighting to EC advice, created a strong mandate for PM&C and then NIAA officers at all levels to support the JDM process on IAS funding. This commitment continues to be cited by Indigenous people as significant. EC Leaders also feel that there is generally strong buy-in for JDM from the central policy level in NIAA. The involvement of EC in assessing new investments under the Indigenous Skills and Employment Program (ISEP) and the Indigenous Rangers program is viewed by EC participants as a demonstration of the policy level commitment to JDM. In interviews for the Lessons Learned Review, NIAA policy and program level staff were positive about the value added by EC to the ISEP and Ranger program implementation.

Government staff need reassurance conflicts of interest are being managed

One of the main issues that has the potential to affect the attitude of government staff towards JDM is the management of conflict of interest and probity issues around Indigenous community members' involvement in decision-making about funding. The Lessons Learned Review identified a wide range of views from government staff about whether these issues are adequately managed through JDM. Most staff interviewed are alert to the issues but feel that the value of community participation in decision-making outweighs any risks, though this view did differ region by region. National office staff who have worked with EC regions on funding assessment processes were generally confident about the processes in place. For example, when EC regions were involved in the assessment of ISEP applications, independent probity advisors were engaged by the central office program staff, and the management of conflict of interest issues was considered by the staff and the advisors to be very robust. The staff felt that the success of involving EC in the grant processes hinged on clear communication about EC regions' and NIAA's respective needs, a willingness to innovate and be flexible around process, and a trusting relationship, where EC regions are seen as a 'trusted partner' that has as strong a stake in rigorous and fair funding processes as the agency has.

Within NIAA, policy and program teams are largely centralised, while the role of regional staff is to engage with local communities to understand their priorities and needs and how the service system responds to these. The role of the NIAA regional offices includes identifying opportunities for new grants and assessing performance of existing grants. This role at the frontline of the grants process means that staff in regional offices often tend to have a more practical, grant administration focus rather than a broader policy orientation. While NIAA regions have separate roles for grant administration (in the Grant Management Unit) and engagement, resource limitations may also lead to engagement officers being drawn into grant administration tasks that diminish their time available for building relationships with EC regions. In the interviews, regional NIAA staff were more likely to emphasise concerns about conflict of interest and probity issues in JDM processes.

Some Lessons Learned Review participants both within NIAA regions and EC backbones suggested that regional staff needed to be authorised and encouraged to shift from a predominantly grant administration focus, which was seen as leading to inflexibility, towards one that prioritises a broader empowerment agenda (see quotes later in this section). Both NIAA and EC participants expressed the view that some government staff who have a more rigid view of their role as being purely about grant administration, and not community engagement or empowerment, have tended to see JDM as an extension of the quality

assurance, 'tick a box' process to validate funding decisions. Such an approach does not take advantage of the opportunity that JDM presents for government staff responsible for managing funding contracts to collaborate and innovate with Indigenous stakeholders to improve funding outcomes. A senior NIAA executive recalled a situation where a disconnect occurred between a Regional Manager supportive of taking JDM forward and a manager tasked with JDM implementation who was 'risk averse' and repeatedly sought to 'revert to the grant rules'. On the other hand, a backbone leader said they had noticed a 'generational shift' amongst government procurement people, with younger staff more likely to be innovate and problem solving rather than being preoccupied with 'managing propriety' and applying narrow conceptions of what a conflict of interest is.

The perception that government staff are unwilling to shift from a business-as-usual approach has led some EC staff to question the commitment of government staff to the JDM process. A common concern raised by EC staff was that agreed timeframes were not always being met by government partners, either because internal systems were not streamlined or because JDM was insufficiently prioritised (see quotes later in this section). Two NIAA Regional Managers acknowledged the challenges their offices faced in meeting JDM timelines. One manager felt that NIAA systems were not optimised and embedded sufficiently to enable JDM to work seamlessly – for example, the lead time to identify ceasing grants for consideration in a JDM round takes too long. Other NIAA managers noted that JDM occurred in only part of their region, and the process was in competition with other regional priorities. Two Regional Managers noted the need for more staff to deliver agency commitments to JDM.

It is possible that the EC staff's perception that some NIAA staff are not as committed to JDM has come about because these NIAA staff have reservations about the model of empowerment championed by EC, not because they are not committed to Indigenous empowerment in principle. Indeed, where NIAA staff expressed reservations about the JDM process, this often reflected either concerns about the EC model (for example, perceptions that backbones auspiced by regional Indigenous organisations were not sufficiently independent), or concerns that the JDM process

'I have noticed a generational shift, where there were young ones coming through into those [government] procurement sections and sharing stories about this sort of community-based, whatever you want to call it, participatory decision-making, participatory budgeting... That yes, it is about conflicts of interest, but it's also about direct, valued interests. And that is in fact what we want. We want people who've got a critical stake in the efficacy of a social program to be involved. And so, the conversation started to shift from being one that was purely about managing propriety to one that was about getting value out of investment. And you can see that these bureaucrats, you know, who are sort of technical experts in procurement, started to actually shift into problem solving mode about, 'well, okay, this is what our bureaucratic frameworks tell us we have to do, we know that this is what we want, how can we do this inside these frameworks?' And so that's where the innovation, I think, started to spring. And that's why I think it is quite an exciting time in public service practice, because people are starting to rethink what conflict [of interest] looks like and what management of all of that looks like.' **EC backbone**

'But the inability [of NIAA] to actually practically implement those timelines was a point of frustration. I think, within the course of a year, there is plenty of time to carry out this process. But it's just something that felt like it was constantly moved to the backburner. I'm not sure how it works within the department, but it was something that always ended up being last minute...' **EC backbone**

'So, unless this is a priority for NIAA to get behind, [the EC lead] spends half [their] time chasing [NIAA] people up because this is just one thing out of their very busy agenda. And for these local people, it's not their main game. Hey, bottom line is unless this becomes everyone's main game, it's always going to be, you know, a junior footy match.' **EC backbone advisor**

'[T]hey are just program managers and this JDM just creates more work for them. So, there's a lot of systemic resistance, [because] that creates additional work and that doesn't fit with the cycles of government and contract management and budget cycles and stuff.' **EC National Leader**

needed to be streamlined to be less administratively burdensome. A senior NIAA executive noted that in regional offices, some NIAA staff may be long-standing government staff who have been 'tasked' with working on JDM, rather than necessarily 'choosing' to work on JDM as might be the case in national office.

Continuity of government staff and stronger onboarding contributes to greater understanding and stronger relationships

Some EC Leaders and staff emphasised that the level of government buy-in has been strongest where NIAA has been able to achieve continuity in the staff involved in JDM. By contrast, some Lessons Learned Review participants mentioned a (perceived) high rate of turnover of NIAA regional staff as an impediment to building understanding and commitment towards EC and the JDM initiative. Several Indigenous stakeholders felt that turnover of people in key positions every couple of years or less is a routine aspect of most government agencies' operations in regional locations. EC staff in several regions also expressed a view that turnover was higher for government staff involved in JDM than for EC backbones. Although the Review did not seek to verify the perceived turnover rates, the experiences reported by these staff suggest that it created an asymmetry in the relationship, with the EC partner having more experience and understanding of JDM than the regional office staff who were being relied upon to help implement the process.

Some EC staff and Leaders expressed frustration that they felt they were constantly having to 'educate' new NIAA staff about EC and the JDM process. EC staff and Leaders suggested that NIAA should do more work onboarding and inducting new staff about EC and JDM. A senior NIAA executive said that the problem of turnover in positions would be mitigated if the agency had clearer '*internal processes and standard operating procedures*' to support JDM, so there was not so much '*reliance on individuals*.'

NIAA staff mentioned the fact that EC regions usually only have partial coverage of a NIAA region, and this can also affect the level of buy-in by NIAA regional staff. In these cases, EC processes such as JDM may be seen as just a 'bolt-on' to the regional office's regular business or even creating more work. There is no doubt the current partial coverage of EC does increase the complexity for NIAA staff where a funded activity is being delivered in a much broader area than the location where JDM is being undertaken.

Champions within government have been critical

Champions for EC within NIAA have been instrumental in the success of JDM, especially in cases where regional managers have provided strong leadership in promoting the concept. A couple of EC Leaders and backbone staff also noted that the work of the EC National Co-ordination Team to act as advocates for JDM at the national and regional level of government was a positive for the partnership.

The EC Partners aspire to embed a much stronger appreciation and commitment to JDM across NIAA, and extend buy-in to other Commonwealth, state, territory and local government agencies. Strengthening NIAA buy-in may require more structured staff inductions and training and development to deepen understanding of EC's empowerment agenda and the mechanisms such as RDAs and JDM by which the agenda is supported.

A positive development is that many staff previously exposed to JDM have moved to other parts of NIAA and other Federal agencies and seeded ideas about incorporating JDM into their new area's plans. A senior NIAA executive emphasised that starting JDM within a

single agency (NIAA) rather than multiple agencies was a positive step because it created an opportunity for learning by both NIAA and EC regions, that could then be expanded to other agencies.

Some EC regions have garnered participation from state and territory governments

As far as extending buy-in to state and territory governments, there have been steps in some EC regions towards state and territory governments using EC's JDM mechanism to review some of their investments in Indigenous communities. A challenge in some jurisdictions is the perception that the JDM process is in competition with state or territory strategies for increasing local decision-making (LDM). The problem has been most acute in Cape York, where the Queensland Government has been focused on establishing Local Decision-Making Bodies under its Local Thriving Communities initiative. A government officer suggested that having the federal and state processes working in parallel created uncertainty and confusion for government staff at both levels to buy into the concept of shared decision-making. There has been some work recently to better align the Australian and Queensland government processes. In Central Coast, there is a complementarity between JDM and LDM. In that region, the backbone organisation uses its experience of JDM to strengthen and guide the LDM. The lessons learned from JDM, such as articulating regional priorities and engaging the voice of Indigenous peoples in program and funding decisions, are transferred to the LDM negotiations for that region. There are opportunities to apply similar learnings in Inner Sydney EC, where La Perouse is also an LDM site.

Some EC regions have been active in liaising with state and territory governments to encourage them to utilise the JDM process to review some of their own investments in Indigenous communities. The Tristate EC entered a memorandum of agreement with the NT Government to align their LDM initiative with the work being led by the backbone in empowering community voice through Kulintja Kutju. The future of the NT's LDM process in the longer term is not certain, however. In late 2023, the Western Australian Department of Communities *'tested some of their decisions through the JDM process'*, in relation to whether to continue or redesign an education, employment and housing program in Halls Creek. Some EC Leaders also have leadership positions within state advisory bodies, giving them a platform to advocate state involvement. In the East Kimberley, there is an opportunity for EC Leaders to engage with a broader range of government partners through the Closing the Gap Place-Based Partnership. While EC Leaders have been actively pursuing these opportunities, an EC staff member and a service provider suggested there was a role for NIAA to more strongly advocate for state and territory governments to buy into the JDM model.

There is also scope for EC regions to engage local governments in JDM. The most prominent example of this in the Lessons Learned Review was in NREC. This EC reports having *'a lot of success'* in building local connection with councils in the region.

'... we've certainly worked hard on trying to build that local community connection to the councils within [our] region and we've had a lot of success in that space. We're now entering into formal agreements with [our] Council[s]... So yeah, I'd say JDM is a huge part of that and certainly helps to strengthen relationships within government and all levels of government.' **EC backbone**

'I think a positive was starting with one agency learning as we went and then bringing in the other agencies. While there was a desire to have everyone at the table in the beginning, it is quite the learning process, for both government agencies and for the community.' **NIAA staff**

Community buy-in

For JDM to succeed, the buy-in of the Indigenous community, from leaders to ACCOs to grassroots community members, is needed from the national level down to the local level.

Community involvement in JDM has grown progressively through EC over several years

The expansion of the EC network from the original eight regions to the current ten regions shows increased buy-in by Indigenous leaders at the national level. These leaders have seen alignment between EC's empowerment agenda and their own regional priorities. Some were attracted to EC by the chance to be part of a national EC Leaders' network, advocating and working towards transformation of the way Indigenous affairs is conducted by governments, and sharing ideas about putting empowerment principles into practice.

Interviews with Indigenous leaders and staff working in EC backbones indicate a very high level of personal and professional investment in the concept and the practical application of JDM. They are highly motivated to maximise the impact from the government's willingness to involve them in JDM deliberations about funding and services. Indigenous people's buy-in to JDM seems to be motivated by two things: first, gaining access to information about government funding and programs in their communities and second, being able to make a difference by influencing government decisions that impact their families and communities. These benefits are highlighted in the quotes from community panel members later in this section.

If the main motivators for Indigenous people are accessing information and influencing decisions, community buy-in to JDM is therefore contingent on government's willingness to share information and power. The government's messaging to the community is critical to secure buy-in. While the 2017 Ministerial commitment to 75% weighting to EC's recommendations was pivotal, and there is currently a four-year commitment to fund EC through to 2028, Indigenous people have also flagged the need for government to communicate its long-term commitment to EC. An EC leader noted that JDM was tenuous as it *'only exists as a matter of policy and tacit agreement.'* Another EC staff member suggested that legislation was necessary to *'make sure that this practice and this habit that's built up around shared decision-making around investment in programs doesn't get washed away.'* A backbone staff member highlighted that the shift from one-to-two-year funding of EC to a multi-year

'Always [the backbone engagement officer] is calling me for a lot of things, so she knows my heart is in it. I'm here for the community, born and bred in [this community], and we would like to keep organisations accountable for what services they should be doing here. So, I believe, me being present, I could make a change.'

Community panel member

'I wanted to be part of this because I feel like I have a big mouth and I like to shake [the tree], provide feedback. And this process, it affects people's livelihoods.'

Community panel member

'But on the positive of lessons learned, I think the fact that Anangu have embraced the process, and they keep turning up for it, which means that there's something going for it, some value in it.' **EC backbone**

'[I spoke to a lot of panellists] and probably my key takeaway from those conversations is just how valued the JDM process is by the participants. Like any sort of government process, there's a number of steps. There's a lot of paperwork; there's a lot of attention to detail in terms of record keeping and the like. So, I was anticipating I might have heard some things about it being onerous or complex or time consuming. I heard none of those things. I actually heard about it being really valued and there being an appetite for a greater appreciation in the community of how it works. It's taken very seriously. There's potential to do more of this. It's not considered onerous. The benefit of it far outweighs the cost of doing it, from the community's perspective, is what I'm hearing.'

EC backbone advisor

commitment had been important to enable the backbone to attract community members and organisations to get involved. A service provider told the Lessons Learned Review they had not opted in to EC because they had assumed it would be replaced once the Voice referendum passed.

While many community members have embraced the opportunity to participate in community panels for JDM (see discussion under 'Indigenous people empowered and heard'), some Lessons Learned Review participants were concerned that enthusiasm might wane if the limited scope of JDM continued. EC backbone staff had observed frustration from community panel members when the scope of the matters for decision did not align with their aspiration to discuss broader issues. The JDM model has required the backbone staff to steer more general conversations about community issues back to the IAS grants under review, but 'then people have become disengaged off of that because they think that we're not listening to them.'

Community panel members have also become frustrated over time when the same contracts were coming up for review – 'They have been saying to us [EC backbone staff], 'well, we saw we saw this lot of contracts last time 2 or 3 years ago. So, why do we need to be looking at this again?'. It should be noted that some NIAA grants are moving to longer timeframes, such as 5 years. Community panel members' frustration is amplified when panels make recommendations for additional requirements in the funding agreement, but then they 'can't see good evidence that that's happened' (EC backbone staff). This backbone staff member suggested that the ability for the EC backbone to raise community panels will depend on new investment coming into the process for consideration, to enthuse community members to be involved.

Establishing backbones as strong, independent entities is important to build their acceptance

In regions where the level of community buy-in has been mixed, it is generally the result of dynamics and tensions between organisations and Indigenous groups affecting the EC backbone's credibility as a respected convenor for EC. For example, government and Indigenous stakeholders observed that the willingness of Indigenous individuals and groups to participate in EC was strongly affected by their view of the regional Indigenous organisation that auspices the EC backbone. A lesson learned from implementation of JDM is that establishing an identity that is independent of existing Indigenous organisations is an important precondition for the EC backbone to build broad coalitions of Indigenous leaders and groups to buy-in to EC.

Managing the pressure and challenges for Indigenous participants in JDM is key to their participation

The Lessons Learned review revealed that the pressure felt by Indigenous people participating as decision-makers in JDM affects their willingness to continue to be involved. Backbones have put in place measures to reduce this pressure and create a safe space for community involvement. For example, some backbones maintain strict confidentiality around the names of the community members participating in community panels.

Backbones have also found it is necessary to manage the practical challenges impacting on community participation. The complexity of the process and the material to be considered were raised by some participants. An EC backbone leader suggested that the pool of people in the region with required literacy levels and understanding of administrative processes to

be able to participate in JDM was very small. Several stakeholders emphasised the need for information provided to panel members to be proportionate and appropriately presented so it is readily understood and useful to the participants.

Further, the commitment of time to be on a community panel may be several days, including both training and JDM deliberations, and the work is unpaid. Some EC regions have looked to pay community panel members or give them a supermarket voucher in recognition of their contribution. Some EC backbones were of the understanding that this expenditure was not in the scope of their NIAA funding, so they had to use other funding sources. However, NIAA has confirmed that NIAA funding can be used for this purpose.

EC Backbone organisation staff have reported that the key to attracting Indigenous community members to participate in JDM is to promote the opportunity to make a difference to their families and communities. Some EC backbones have recognised that they need to do far more promotion and advertisement to communities about the power that government is sharing through JDM and the level of influence they can have through the process.

Service provider buy-in

For JDM to be successful, the buy-in of the service providers who deliver the programs under consideration through the process is crucial. Service providers play an important role in several aspects of JDM:

- Where the service provider is an ACCO, by opting-in as a member of the EC they support the governance framework for EC, including the process of setting community priorities (and developing the RDA), operating a broad-based board, bringing leaders together for regional partnership tables with government, and recruiting community members for community panels.
- For both ACCOs and non-Indigenous service providers, their commitment to JDM is necessary for the success of the service provider self-assessment process, which brings program-level information to the table to support panel deliberations. Ideally, service providers will also take the opportunity to prepare presentations for delivery to JDM panel meetings.
- Buy-in by service providers is also vital for the implementation of the recommendations of JDM, by taking on panel feedback, which may include improving local engagement, employing more Indigenous staff, or even working to transition a service to an ACCO.

One of the original design principles for EC was the concept of 'opting-in'. This referred to ACCO service providers and others opting in as members of regional EC, thereby committing to the empowerment agenda and being part of the EC governance framework. There is some confusion amongst Lessons Learned Review participants as to whether having a funded service put through the JDM process is also a voluntary, opt-in choice by the provider of that service. Some service providers appear to believe that if they have not opted-in to EC as a member, then their services are not subject to JDM. The review team understands, however, that all IAS grants in an EC region are potentially subject to JDM, whether or not the service provider is an ACCO that has opted-in as a member of the EC region. Some grants may be deemed out of scope for JDM, for various reasons such as being one-off funding or a national program. In practice, even where a service has been listed for consideration by JDM, service providers who are resistant have chosen not to

return the self-assessments and not to present at the JDM panel – in other words, they do not opt-in at a practical level.

Achieving strong buy-in from service providers has been one of the most significant challenges for the successful implementation of JDM, as these organisations potentially have the most to lose from decisions about funding. It has been common for service providers to express fear and anxiety about the process. The typical reasons that service providers express for their apprehension are set out in Box 3 below.

Box 3: Factors Affecting Service Providers' Buy-in

- Some perceptions that the EC backbone organisation may not be impartial because it is auspiced by an organisation that competes for funding with the service provider or is associated with an organisation that the service provider does not trust. In one region, a NIAA staff member recalled a large ACCO saying that *'if you include anything in relation to Empowered Communities in our contract, we will not sign it.'*
- Concerns that community panel members or regional leaders involved in making decisions about their service will have conflicts of interest or personal or partisan prejudices against the service provider that will come into the decision to the detriment of the service provider. For example, a service provider recalled *'I did feel threatened and worried that a competitor with an agenda to highlight the negative might be on the panel'*; although in this case the service provider was confident in the competence of the backbone team to manage this risk.
- Concerns that the community panels considering the service provider's grant will be too small and unrepresentative of the community or will not sufficiently understand the service to make an informed judgment. A service provider commented: *'So as a service being assessed, when you look around the room and see community, you go, 'there's no one here,' or 'these people they've just called in this morning, they don't know anything about it.'* On the other hand, this service provider had also been a community panel member and felt that it did not matter if a panel member did not have a comprehensive understanding of a particular service because they were given full information at the panel session.
- A view that the self-assessment process duplicates reporting that the service provider already does to NIAA. A NIAA officer reflected that there was a risk of the self-assessments being duplicative. An EC backbone staff member spoke about efforts to adapt the process to reduce this duplication to ease the administrative burden on the service providers.
- Concern that community panels will make uninformed and unrealistic recommendations, leading to new contract conditions that the service provider will not be able to meet. For example, a service provider recalled a JDM recommendation that their service should employ full-time staff in every remote community they serviced, with no additional funding to do this. The service provider noted that this was an instance where facilitation of the community panel was vital to ensure clear understanding of the scope of JDM and that recommendations are realistic and consider funding constraints.
- Concerns that onerous time and resource commitments are required to participate in JDM panels. A service provider emphasised that the cost of travelling to all the remote communities they serviced to make presentations to community panels was

between \$7,000-10,000, which was not part of its budget for service delivery. This individual suggested NIAA should provide funding for participation in the process.

- A view held by some ACCOs that JDM is unnecessary as the ACCO is already accountable to the Indigenous community and users of their service. These ACCOs point to their existing accountability mechanisms such as their own internal feedback and complaint processes, research, program evaluations, reporting to the community (e.g., annual reports, newsletters and social media), and organisational governance accountability to members of the community (e.g., through the board reporting to Annual General Meetings and being subject to election by members). These organisations question the value of JDM as it applies to ACCO service providers, although they may see a role for it in reviewing non-Indigenous service providers' contracts.

Many service providers have seen benefits from participating in JDM

Notwithstanding the fears and concerns about JDM expressed in Box 3, the Lessons Learned Review received feedback from a wide range of service providers that participating in JDM has had positive benefits for them. This feedback emphasised three perceived benefits for service providers, which are evident in many of the quotes from service providers set out later in this section.

Opportunity to showcase services

Participating in JDM is an opportunity for a service provider to showcase their service to community groups, to the funding body and to other service providers attending JDM meetings. Service providers have found that this has built community understanding of their service, reducing criticism and even prompting community advocacy for greater support for the service. Service providers have gained data about community impacts that has bolstered their service. Far from putting their funding at risk, some service providers have found that participating in JDM has resulted in increased funding for their services, by identifying funding gaps or unmet needs or demonstrating to funding bodies the program's impact and level of community support.

'People don't feel like they're being put on the spot by asking 'what are you doing?' – we tell providers that this is their opportunity to actually showcase what they do.'

NIAA regional staff

'[The community panel] is not just critiquing, but saying when things are going really, really well – and this should actually been funded at a higher level or for a longer period of time or expanded into other areas.'

EC backbone

'We get criticism from community for different things sometimes and a lot of it is based on them not knowing what the organisation does... what our funding is given to us for... I think [JDM] is a really good opportunity to say, 'hey, this is what we're doing.'

Service provider

'[Attending a community panel] forces you to actually look at yourself at an impact level ... And you don't really get a stronger sense around what that means to a region until you're in a table with the region and how powerful it was to hear from parents and uncles and aunties... [making] a request for new places [for our program] ... That voice that's for us, somebody else saying it... The panel were the biggest advocates for our program, and I underestimated how powerful that that experience would be.'

Service provider

Feedback for service improvement

Participating in JDM is an opportunity for a service provider to obtain direct feedback from the community about how a service is experienced and how it can be improved. Service providers have reported that community panels have been excellent forums for gathering ideas about tailoring services to community priorities. They have also been forums to discuss the challenges for delivering a service in a location and collectively problem-solving these with community groups.

Improving cross-service coordination

In many locations, staff of ACCOs participate directly in community panels (as they are also members of the community and therefore service users). Hence, JDM has provided a process for bringing a range of services together at the same table, enabling discussion about reducing duplication, improving information-sharing and achieving better coordination of services in a location. This has helped break down silos that have prevented services working together. Service provider participants have spoken about the benefit of learning more about other services, prompting them to identify opportunities for collaboration. EC Backbone representatives believe that the JDM process has helped to break down barriers and build more unity and common purpose amongst ACCOs.

Practice Examples

Strategies for encouraging service provider buy-in to SDM described by those included within the Lessons Learned Review offer possible guidance to others embarking on or further embedding SDM processes. One such practice example is outlined in the box below.

'At the end of [the panel], the provider and the community members have always come out and they're like, 'Thanks for inviting me' because the providers get that direct feedback of improvement of their service... like 'You guys deliver an awesome service but you come on a Tuesday and Thursday and someone's already delivering then, or you come and deliver during school and our kids are out of school. And then so you have the managers for the organisations that are delivering – the higher ups who are not on the ground – understanding that 'okay, they like our service, we just need to change our delivery.' EC backbone

'For us being the one being assessed. All the questions were good... It gets you thinking as well. Okay, what are we doing good? What are we not doing so good? What do we need to work on in those communities?'

Service provider

'[JDM is not about] challenging their power base or challenging their funding and all that, it's to ensure that the communities and the services can work collaboratively together for the benefit of everybody...' EC backbone

So, I think for me the joint decision-making is ... about bringing us together basically... You've got a lot of data coming out from it, working together, being able to have really good, achievable goals together.'

Service provider

Box 4: Practice Example – NIAA's Role in Encouraging Service Provider Buy-in

In an EC region, NIAA staff emphasised how their partnership with EC had evolved over time, with a specific focus on strategies for building engagement and relationships with service providers in particular. They recalled how defensive service providers can be initially when attending JDM panels but noted that education had broken down many barriers for service providers over time, despite some lingering anxiety about funding outcomes.

NIAA staff attributed the success in bringing service providers to the table to the following:

- spending time educating service providers about EC and JDM
- re-framing and tailoring the language and terminology used in JDM – for example by calling the service provider involvement in the panel meeting a ‘showcase’ rather than a ‘presentation’
- acknowledging the sensitivities that some providers will have about JDM assessments and ‘try to smooth the pathway for them to participate in this process’
- working ‘behind the scenes’ with ‘sensitive’ service providers and liaising with the EC Backbone to manage the service provider’s involvement
- providing sufficient information and making sure all stakeholders have the same information
- recognising the importance of the ‘human factor’ and how this can shape JDM – and thus ensuring an ongoing focus on relationship-building and maintaining relationships with service providers

What could be improved

The Lessons Learned Review has identified a range of opportunities to increase the level of buy-in to the current JDM process by government, service providers and Indigenous people. As per Recommendations 1, 2, 3 and 6 (see ‘Summary Table of Findings and Recommendations’, pages 17-19 of this report), the EC Partners should work together to implement these opportunities to strengthen current approaches and systems. These suggestions will also be applicable to any initiatives to broaden SDM practice to other areas of government activity.

Clear messaging about government commitment to sharing decision-making and the EC initiative generally

The feedback has highlighted how the buy-in of various partners in JDM is contingent on their belief that government has a long-term commitment to EC. This has led some participants in the Lessons Learned Review to reiterate the EC Design Report’s recommendation that EC be ‘embedded in legislation’. At the very least, clear messaging about the government’s ongoing commitment to EC is necessary to sustain and build the level of buy-in by government staff, Indigenous people and service providers.

More inductions and education of government staff about EC and JDM

EC Leaders and backbone teams have called for NIAA to ensure that any staff from NIAA and other government agencies involved in EC are provided with more induction and education sessions to explain the benefits of the process, both for empowering Indigenous people as well as improving the productivity

‘I think that the majority of the agency [NIAA] probably still see it as a grant funder-recipient relationship and that actually causes distrust in terms of decision-making authority. It also means that, the shared decision doesn’t always get the appropriate attention in terms of outcome.’

EC National Leader

‘What I found after this round is that I would love to see the [NIAA] staff educated more on the importance and value of joint decision-making for Aboriginal people. Like I want to see them be more invested in this process, not take it as another chore they have to do. Because I think that’s almost the vibe, I get sometimes... It’s not a criticism... it’s just about making things better... If they’re not really feeling invested into it, you don’t yourself have that feeling of empowerment... It doesn’t feel like you’re walking together.’

EC backbone

of funding and the effectiveness of the service system. A backbone staff member said they would like to see NIAA staff *'more invested in this process, not tak[ing] it as another chore they have to do'*. Inductions should directly address common concerns that government staff may have about how conflicts of interest and probity are managed when involving Indigenous community members in funding decisions. The education should demonstrate how EC regions proactively manage these issues in facilitating Indigenous participation in JDM.

Encourage buy-in by state, territory and local governments

Broader buy-in by more levels of government will consolidate the place of EC and the JDM process as a vehicle for empowering Indigenous people. There is a role for both EC Leaders, backbones and NIAA in encouraging other levels of government to participate. Work is needed by the EC Partners to find ways to harmonise state and territory local decision-making processes with EC's SDM processes to reduce confusion and duplication in Indigenous communities. There is a role for NIAA in raising awareness amongst state, territory and local governments about the opportunity to make use of EC's infrastructure for empowering Indigenous participation in government decision-making. This will support EC's advocacy work to expand the scope of SDM beyond NIAA ceasing grants to a wider range of government investments.

Communicate with Indigenous people about expanded scope of SDM

Indigenous people are incentivised to buy into JDM by the opportunity to exercise genuine power in decisions about matters that affect their families and communities. While many Indigenous people have embraced the current limited opportunity to participate in decisions about IAS ceasing grants, their buy-in will be further strengthened if government expands the amount of decision-making power shared. This will require broadening the scope of subject matter in line with Indigenous people's interest in seeing more systemic-level changes to improve services in their communities (as discussed earlier in relation to Systemic Impact). This will require a broadening of government buy-in to the concept of sharing decision-making power, to other Commonwealth agencies and to state and territory and local governments. It will also require addressing the gaps and constraints in the enabling systems for JDM that currently frustrate Indigenous people, such as the limitations of the pooled funding mechanism to redirect quarantined funding to identified community priorities. As the scope of SDM expands to other non-IAS funding to Indigenous communities, the EC model for involving Indigenous people will also need to expand – for example, by broadening community panels.

'People want to talk about all sorts of little things and the other issues that families might be facing. You know, people are talking about whole systems at a time. And it's not how the JDM process is structured. So sometimes we would bring people in, and people would give feedback about really, really big picture issues, and we'd have to whittle it down to, 'okay, but what about justice?' But then, you know, people have become disengaged off of that because they think that we're not listening to them.'

EC backbone

Improve the JDM feedback loop to Indigenous participants

A consistent theme in the comments by Indigenous participants in JDM is that there is not enough information provided to them afterwards about the outcome of their recommendations. Improving this feedback loop is crucial to ensure that Indigenous participants feel that they were heard and had some influence, which underpins their

willingness to participate again in the future. The feedback is important even where recommendations have not been adopted by government, as the act of providing feedback confirms that the recommendations were at least considered. Both EC backbones and NIAA staff acknowledged that the level of feedback to Indigenous participants in JDM could be improved.

EC backbones to consolidate enabling role as facilitators of Indigenous voice

Continued growth of community buy-in requires ongoing attention to strengthening the EC backbone organisations and the regional and local Indigenous governance structures they have nurtured. EC backbones need to continue to build their reputations as effective enabling partners to empower Indigenous people to be heard in government decision-making about funding and services. In some regions, this will require the backbones to establish an identity that is more independent of auspicing organisations, to address perceptions that they may favour vested interests. It may also require enhancing EC backbones' capacity for community engagement, by increasing their resources to establish a greater presence in remote communities within the EC region. For example, stakeholders commended the Tristate EC's willingness to travel regularly from the Alice Springs base out to remote communities across the region to engage residents, but a few people suggested that engagement could be enhanced further by having part-time staff based in remote communities, as has been done in Cape York. In the East and West Kimberley regions, the EC backbones have an opportunity to leverage the presence of their ACCO members in remote communities to increase local engagement. This already happens to the extent that backbone staff have time to travel and engage, but this could be enhanced by additional resources for backbones to have more dedicated community engagement roles.

More promotion of the benefits for service providers of being involved in JDM

The feedback from service providers that have participated in JDM indicates that, while they initially were apprehensive about the process, many of them have found the process beneficial. Sharing this positive feedback is an opportunity for EC Partners to promote buy-in by service providers.

Both EC Leaders and backbone organisations, as well as NIAA, have a role in encouraging service provider buy-in. Backbone organisations need to engage with ACCOs to pitch the benefits of proactively participating in JDM processes while encouraging non-Indigenous service providers to be proactive in undertaking self-assessments and engaging with the community panels. EC backbones also need to put in place robust processes to create a safe space for service providers within JDM, providing assurance that the integrity of JDM won't be compromised by conflict of interest or prejudicial input based on personal or partisan politics.

As the funding body, NIAA needs to communicate sensitively with service providers to promote the benefits of subjecting their programs and services to

'The majority of the outcomes are really positive. One in particular is a service that [we wanted to see] some sort of plan to potentially transition in the future that program over to a community-controlled organisation. And they've taken that really well. They've been really understanding and really open to working with the community to provide the best service. That feedback and those additional KPIs have been added and have been taken on board. And they've understood the process and there's been no complaints from community. And in fact, it's probably improved the quality of service of those organisations through the joint decision-making process...'

EC backbone

community scrutiny through JDM. The practice example earlier in this section outlines an example of how NIAA staff in an EC region have leveraged their relationships to reframe JDM as an opportunity rather than a threat, to strengthen service providers' buy-in to the partnership.

Streamline the process to minimise impacts on service provider participation in JDM

Even where they were supportive of JDM, service providers frequently raised the administrative burden and cost involved in participating in JDM. NIAA and EC backbones should minimise any duplication of reporting and unnecessary work for service providers because of the self-assessments and appearances before community panels. The partners should also consider additional resourcing to support service providers to participate, including travel to present to panel sessions in remote locations. For example, this could be part of the EC backbone's funding to facilitate JDM, or part of the service provider's grant.

The way forward: Applying the lessons learned

This section has outlined lessons learned by the EC Partners about how to foster strong buy-in from the various partners who are needed for successful SDM. Some of these lessons can also be applied to further enhance EC's JDM initiative with NIAA. The following enhancements are suggested to support an expanded SDM approach that can build on current successes.

In the next phase of growth of SDM practice, the findings of this review suggest the following ways forward to build on current success:

SDM growth the next 12 months:

- Facilitate the expansion of SDM to more programs/more agencies across the policy cycle
- Address logistical barriers for service provider participation in SDM such as fixed funding agreements and timeframes, disjointed administrative procedures/policies and inconsistent delivery areas.
- Increase NIAA government officer buy-in for SDM through strong NIAA leadership, strengthened mandate, fuller inductions and training in SDM for NIAA regional officers
- Promote the benefits of SDM to relevant agencies in the APS

SDM growth to 2028:

- Promote SDM to other government agencies through strong leadership; strengthened mandate; fuller inductions, incentives and training on SDM; greater promotion of its benefits to the NIAA regional offices and across the APS



Two-way knowledge sharing

Knowledge is shared effectively between government and Indigenous people, supported by strategies for collecting, analysing and integrating data and evidence to support shared decisions.

Key observations

Robust and timely two-way knowledge sharing is vital to quality shared decision-making.

- Indigenous people's knowledge and qualitative measures of service performance are being valued in JDM funding decisions
- The quality of data being shared with Indigenous people about service impact has improved, and Indigenous people are seeking broader service performance (outcome) data
- Service provider data collection and presentation of information to inform funding decisions has improved
- There is an appetite for greater mixed data sources including local knowledge and insights to guide JDM funding decisions

Introduction to Two-Way Knowledge Sharing

The EC Lessons Learned Review demonstrated that two-way knowledge sharing between government and Indigenous people, when supported by data collection, analytical and integrative approaches supports joint decision-making. The foundations of a robust approach to generating an evidence base will prove vital as communities work towards shared decision-making.

The Review revealed important insights regarding the strengths that can be leveraged across the regions, with opportunities to learn from one another in the context of localised needs and priorities. Some strengths highlighted within this report in the context of two-way knowledge sharing coalesce around themes including community voice, data sovereignty, the scope of data and the use of prepared data / information packages.

The Review identified lessons regarding opportunities to develop practice around strategic planning, quality of data and impartiality of evidence. Importantly, this Review has identified a desire across all regions to adopt an evidence-based approach to making decisions with community regarding local services and providers.

'The biggest push is more information, data. [The community panel] want to see actual outcomes evidence on those papers.' **EC backbone**

This desire for evidence-based decision-making is coupled with a willingness to engage in two-way learning about the evidence. This suggests that there is a basis for the participants in SDM to learn from one another as they work towards two-way knowledge sharing.

What's working well

Community Voice

When community voice is engaged and leveraged for the purposes of evidence-based decision-making, local intelligence and wisdom affords community panels unique and invaluable evidence to guide decision-making. When triangulated with the evidence from other parties in shared decision-making (e.g., service providers, government practitioners), the quality of decisions is bolstered in meaningful ways through the blending of data and insights. This also translated into positive community sentiment where people feel confident and comfortable with their inputs in arriving at decisions for communities.

Participants in the Review noted that alongside the triangulation of data sources, the composition of voices represented on community panels was also important. As some reflected, this was about effective planning but also for community panel members to reflect their insights in the context of the service under review.

In regions where community input is being leveraged and intentionally sought, opportunities to hear and understand Indigenous people's insights and views extends beyond the community panel meetings or joint decision-making contexts. For the EC backbone organisations, community voice is built into their ways of operating and extends beyond singular 'fact-finding' or individual meeting contexts to a more reflective and engaged approach for two-way communication.

Seeking community voice was observed as important to relationship building and 'community intel' was incorporated, in some regions, into 'fit for purpose' information packages utilised to support two-way knowledge sharing processes within the context of joint decision-making.

The lessons learned from participants in the Review suggest that community voice can be leveraged when the approach to gathering insights involves ongoing reflection and refinement, when representation and a diversity of voices is respected, and when the approach to synthesising the insights ensures they are translated into practical actions that are well-informed and relevant to priorities, needs and aspirations.

'The triangulation of having community members there, having organisation representatives there who are also delivering services, along with the service providers' perspective and the government perspective. And the additional evidence and data that we're producing in the packs has been sufficient information for people to feel confident and comfortable, making a decision.' **EC backbone**

'I think that every panel that we have, everybody's got their own individual information in their heads, so we're also all sharing that. I think that every panel that we have done, it's enlightening. You can see that you know this, that's why they're doing that. When you go through the list of what they've [Service Providers] given us, you can see why they're doing what they're doing in the majority of the time. Not always. But I think that just sharing that information between ourselves and knowing that the people who were sitting beside me also got lots of information and where my gaps are, they've got them, you know, like. I think for me, that's so important that we capture everything in that panel.'

EC backbone

'We've got a whole intel register of different information... it's very varied. And we also do a lot of – we call it engagement without intent – where we do a lot of engagement activities throughout the region where we don't ask them anything specific and we allow the Community to come to us. There's a lot of trust and relationship building. Through that whole process with the JDM, we'll gather all of that information that we kind of target without people realising we're targeting that information. But we also do similar work through our service collaboration to get feedback from services around different topics. And we put all of that together into an information package.' **EC backbone**

Indigenous Data Sovereignty

As awareness and understanding of Indigenous data sovereignty grows, there is an opportunity to revisit how JDM processes are adhering to these principles. In view of this emerging consideration within JDM, some work has been undertaken to generate a relevant framework for Indigenous data sovereignty within the context of joint decision-making processes.¹² As Maggie Walter and her colleagues note, data sovereignty *‘recognises data as a cultural and economic asset’* and built into any utility of Indigenous data should be *‘the right of Indigenous peoples to govern the collection, ownership, and application of data’* (Walters et al., 2021, p143). In two-way knowledge sharing, the rights to self-govern the collection, use and application can be optimised through careful and considered community engagement and using policies and processes which guide the use of Indigenous data and insights. While there are examples of effective data sovereignty practices, there are also illustrations of contexts where this can be improved. The NIAA’s recently released *Framework for Governance of Indigenous Data* provides guidance to APS staff on how to build governance for Indigenous data assets held by the Commonwealth.¹³ The Framework’s goal is to provide Indigenous people greater agency over how their data are governed which will enhance the SDM process over time.

‘The gem for me personally, is having local people be armed with data...to be able to sit down with community people and go ‘you want to know where your money is going, you want to know all the programme?’ That for me has been one of the most powerful positions as a player on this team to be able to sit down and say this is what’s happening – now you understand why the high rates of social problems, the high rates of disengagement. Who is holding them [government] accountable? So, people are following the money and they’re having data. I think this team, with the expertise that this team have, has made my job so much more easy. It is to be able to translate that information to mob and to be able to get it down on the ground to say and ‘you know who’s carrying all the social problems, you and me’.’

EC backbone

The dialogue surrounding Indigenous data sovereignty extends to data translation and generating understanding within and beyond the context of joint decision-making. While some illustrations of this may be quite targeted in approach, there are other more ad hoc examples where backbone organisations – as appropriate – share insights back into community regarding data literacy, which in turn serves to build capability in the regions.

Navigating Scope of Data Challenges

The Review highlighted emerging insights and understanding regarding the scope of data and its implications for evidence-based decision-making. For example, some regions adopt a more instructive approach and guide the type of data for inclusion in the community panel discussions. Also, some service providers call for better data scoping to inform decision-making so that individuals and communities can represent the cumulative impacts of services or programs that operate in community.

¹² Central Coast backbone lead Gary Field was a key member of the Advisory Group that developed the Framework.

¹³ Commonwealth of Australia, *Framework for Governance of Indigenous Data* <https://www.niaa.gov.au/resource-centre/framework-governance-indigenous-data>

While there are calls to include a broader suite of data and insights into the two-way knowledge sharing process, these must be viewed in the context of calls for increased monitoring and evaluation alongside the capacity and capability required to inform such an approach.

There have been examples in various regions of two-way knowledge sharing informing more 'fit for purpose' KPIs and indicators that have been utilised to better understand service performance.

The capacity of JDM to shift measurement practices and strategies signals an openness and willingness to contemplate various information as evidence.

Prepared Data / Information Packages

The preparation of 'fit for purpose' data and information packages for community panels with adequate time built into the process for their review was observed in all regions as foundational to robust joint decision-making processes. Also important is ensuring data and information packages are accessible for all parties engaged with joint decision-making. In reflecting on their experiences, many EC backbone organisations described a significant amount of work being required to ensure that data and insights were understood and spoke to the region-specific priorities and strategic intentions regarding service provision and programs operating within their communities.

Broadly, participants in the Review reflected on the data / information packs as being meaningful and useful to community panels and the broader joint decision-making process. This sentiment from participants was variable based on some region-specific experiences (e.g., scope of data, two-way data literacy, data availability).

Practice Examples

Several examples of two-way knowledge sharing practices described by those included within the Lessons Learned Review offer possible guidance to others embarking on or further embedding shared decision-making processes. These examples are outlined in the boxes on the following page. Practices to highlight in the context of two-way knowledge sharing include relational data sharing, and robust evidence briefings.

'... the information packs that I've seen given to the community members is really equipped with the right information and information provided. Hearing from those organisations where they get the chance to provide their feedback to some of the questions or concerns coming out from local people and so they've been given that opportunity and I think it's a fair process.'

EC backbone

'Our team have developed a data dictionary... where they access a lot of the stats and pull it together. It hasn't been easy and access to information is always a challenge. We do a lot of community surveys as well. [Our] teamwork with community members, identify those local strong voices to go out into, into households, hold neighbourhood barbecues and conversations to almost ground truth. 'What is ABS [Australian Bureau of Statistics] or health or education data telling us?' Let's deep dive a bit into that. We get a lot of that information as well. I mean, of course there's always improvement and we're always calling for better visibility on data and an investment into community. But that's a challenge that we face with government.'

EC backbone

'We've got a nice way of doing it because what we do is over two days. The first day we give them all the information, they look at the contracts, they look at the provider assessments and our assessments digest all of that information. We sort of have a conversation about what they [Community Panel] think about the contracts, their own community perspectives and the lived experience of those activities, and then start to formulate some questions, you know, and I think it's an all-inclusive process because at the end of that first day, I will send the questions that the community panel have gathered to the providers so they can have sort of they're not ambushed in their sessions... like they've got preparation time.'

EC backbone

Box 5: Practice Example – An Empowered Communities Region Leads the Way on Data Sharing

Relational Data Sharing: Barang Regional Alliance

Local decision-making (LDM) has been underway for ten years. The Barang Regional Alliance established a data sharing network on the Central Coast for the purposes of building community confidence to access and use data. Through establishing this data governance structure and related processes, the Barang Regional Alliance is working to facilitate relational two-way knowledge sharing that draws on mutual respect, cultural governance processes and a network of collaborators.

Barang Regional Alliance has established this data sharing network through:

- Drawing on a history and practice of cultural leadership to share relational accountability within and beyond Barang Regional Alliance
- Elevating and harnessing the community ties of stakeholders where appropriate to support relational data sharing practices
- Cultivating a network of personally invested stakeholders who have engaged over a long period of time with the SDM framework
- Initiated strategic planning and thinking regarding the longevity of the network moving into the future

'I just think we're so fortunate on the Central Coast that we have people who have had experiences that cut across different sectors - across the community-controlled and then into different layers of government ... most of the people who are in these government layers are also connected to community on the ground, at the grassroots.'

Community panel member

Box 6: Practice Example – Robust Data Packages Underpin Robust Decision-Making Processes

Timely and strong data packages facilitate timely inquiry and queries

Community panels are empowered to engage in robust shared decision-making through the provision of **data packages** offered with **adequate time for questions and responses to flow between stakeholders**. Empowered Communities East Kimberley (ECEK) reflected on their experience in facilitating evidence briefs that clearly communicated data and insights regarding service/s to be discussed by community panels. These include demographic and contextual information about community needs, or research about best practices in service delivery, relevant to the program or service being considered by the panel. The EC backbone also provides other evaluation data about the program or service under review. ECEK underscored that successful SDM hinges on the decision-makers having adequate knowledge and evidence to make a good decision.

JDM brings together the following sources of information about a service to enable the community and government partners to make an informed decision:

1. Contractual and service delivery performance insights from NIAA;

2. Service provider self-assessments;
3. The backbone organisation's data and insights – for example, best practice service delivery benchmarks and place-specific demographic data and insights; and
4. Indigenous community insights and knowledge.

A common critique reflected across multiple stakeholder groups was that the information provided by the NIAA is overly technical, relating to KPIs that were difficult to align with community concerns or interests, and insufficiently detailed for the purposes of making decisions regarding service providers or programs in community.

ECEK reflected on their translatable role for community panel members by ensuring that the information offered is 'fit for purpose' and understandable in the context of data literacy capabilities and community awareness of services or programs being discussed at the panel.

ECEK supported robust evidence briefs through:

- Collating and translating data and insights shared by NIAA into fit-for-use data packages for community panel members
- Requesting and obtaining supplementary data – where required – to ensure performance indications reflected community-centric markers of program success
- Undertaking further research – as appropriate – to ensure new investments being considered by NIAA were measured against best-practice benchmarks for service performance (e.g., programs in Indigenous early childhood being measured against evidence of 'what works').

[Following an initial community panel experience] 'So if we fast forward to the next cycle of the shared decision-making and decision-making process, we convened panellists, and through the process the advice was that the information that was provided didn't highlight any of the changes that they had spoken about in the original panel. And so, through our partnership, the panel went back and asked them if they could source additional information to hopefully provide a narrative or some evidence around the changes that community had asked for. Unfortunately, that organisation wasn't forthcoming with the information. They didn't see the benefit of community input and value in the decision-making process. As a result of that, the panel made the decision they should not no longer be funded and that [the funds] should go back into the pooled funding and reallocated.' **EC backbone**

What could be improved

More backbone involvement in collecting evaluation data to inform JDM

Backbones and community panel members have consistently raised the need for better information about program and project effectiveness to be available to assist community members involved in JDM rounds. The Review participants agree that collecting this information, through monitoring and evaluation activities or regular community engagement, is a role that backbones could play. The main barrier at present is the limited lead-time that NIAA can provide to EC backbones about the grants that are in-scope for the next JDM round.

Strategic planning

The process by which the performance of programs, projects and service providers is reviewed alongside their relationship to community priorities and needs – that is, the strategic planning element of joint decision-making – was observed by some parties as an area for further development.

The desire for a more strategic approach to joint decision-making was recognised by non-government participants – EC Backbones and service providers – in the Review. There is acknowledgement of a need for more planned and considered approaches to joint decision-making that include community priorities (as identified through the RDAs) and leveraging these priorities in the JDM process so that the process can advance place-based, community driven initiatives.

A key challenge occurring alongside concerns of data quality is the amount of time incorporated into joint decision-making processes for the consideration of data and information packages. Allowing for sufficient time to understand and work with service provider or program data in information packages was recognised as pivotal to ensuring decisions were well informed and well understood.

In response to challenges regarding data quality, data navigation and timing, some parties generated strategies such as upskilling community panel members, seeking new mediums for presenting information, or in some cases generating ‘data

‘We could put some wrap around structures in place that will feed into our knowledge base...They [service providers] do get stuck in the operational – In doing the doing so to speak... Maybe there's a separate review process that could happen outside of the JDM process...It could be something as simple as a community development piece of documentation – you know, ask specific questions around ‘how do you feel about this service?’...get that informal feedback that I was talking about before, in a more formal setting.’ **EC backbone**

‘Community Panel members don't have enough quality information to be able to judge whether this program [is] delivering or not.’

Community panel member

‘...it's [the scope of data is] fundamentally flawed because they still measure on inputs, outputs; a number of people come in; how long they stay. But what we really focus on is the quality of their stay and what they achieve while they [are in the Program]. We know we do really well because our programs are small compared to the big mainstream [programs], but they have, their numbers are a lot higher. We're always pushing back: ‘Shouldn't you be measuring quality rather than quantity?’...If you could do longitudinal studies that [show] a person went through the program changed the trajectory of his whole life that changes things...There's guys and women that have graduated from this program that are now in culturally safe spaces and employment...they're reunited with their families, they're looking to get their kids back...Now come in and you can measure that.’

Service provider

‘... we're just going through a process at the moment where we do it like every other organisation of strategic planning process. I'd like to think that we could do more on the front end of joint decision-making and sharing planning. We are consulting, but it's kind of [led by] us; we'll delve around, hold our own internal workshops, etc. I'd like to see more of the joint decision planning from the beginning.’

NIAA

dictionaries' to support understanding and utility of data and information packages.

Impartiality of evidence

In the context of two-way knowledge sharing, impartiality of evidence can be understood as both perceived and actual robustness / objectivity of data, information and insights. This was a challenge raised by participants in the review.

The impact of relationships in community, whether these be familial, work or personal, were observed by many as challenging to navigate, particularly given the embedded nature of service providers and programs. While timing and more extensive opportunities for consultation or deliberation were proposed as strategies for navigating the impartiality of evidence, a strategy of independent formal monitoring and evaluation was also proposed.

At the same time as navigating the perceived or actual impartiality of evidence, research participants also reflected on a need for better data literacy for community members, as well as for community panel members. Research participants also shared their insights on the possible solutions based on their experiences of JDM.

While impartiality of evidence related to the direct experiences of Review participants (i.e. being impartial reviewers of the JDM process), it also spoke to a need within each region to build agreement around the performance indicators within and beyond the regions to ensure shared agreement could be made regarding what constitutes sound and impartial evidence.

The way forward: Applying the lessons learned

The Lessons Learned Review has identified a range of opportunities to enhance the knowledge sharing that is needed to underpin SDM outcomes, which are reflected in Recommendations 6 and 7 (see 'Summary Table of Findings and Recommendations', pages 17-19 of this report). The best elements of two-way knowledge sharing presently underway could be further leveraged by:

'...you're never going to run a survey to ask people if they like what's happening because it's in human nature that everyone just tell you things they don't like. Very rarely do they think about the great things. But if you kind of map those transformational indicators and start seeing improvements that's your evidence that people are being included in the process because those improvements wouldn't happen without community coming to the table and progressing them.' **EC backbone**

'The only way that I can see forward – after looking at this for a couple of years – is to literally have an independent evaluator sitting at that table to give information to the 2 or 3 people that are sitting there to say, 'I'm not telling you what to say, but I'm telling you what the data [is] saying. The actual facts of this case. I'm not on a side here. It's still your decision.' Because if you want to say that you want to pick a community person who has some knowledge of that service, you could literally have one person sitting at the table and you [are] asking one person to make a decision about a million bucks. [That's] too much pressure.' **EC backbone**

'I think that day, there were three organisations being assessed. We come in, you sit down, you read all the information. Because it can't get given out beforehand – which I understand – you have to make a judgement and assessment and recommendations there and then on the spot. And if you [are] left with one person, that could go either way and whether we talk about family, community, politics or not, you never know if that's going to come into the decision-making process. If somebody doesn't like that organisation, they got issues with, they've had a run in with them previously [or] they used to work for them. Who knows? That comes down to one person making that decision and not a conversation with community around the best outcome of that organisation. So, the process is very tight...there's just not enough [time] given in my opinion, to really give a full assessment.'

Community panel member

- All EC regions continuing to embed good practices for impartiality and to improve the quality of community panel deliberations
- The Partners working together to better understand, determine and implement timeframes for review that support two-way knowledge sharing, robust review of the evidence, and consultation as necessary prior to Community Panels
- NIAA to enhance the planning and timeliness of service performance (outcome) data and knowledge sharing for JDM rounds
- EC backbones to document 'what works' for JDM and opportunities to further improve service performance in their regions, and share that knowledge with other EC regions
- The Partners to play a greater role in collecting evaluation data from the community for service performance

In the next phase of growth of SDM practice, the findings of this review suggest the following ways forward to build on current success:

SDM growth the next 12 months:

- EC regions to embed good practices for impartiality and to improve the quality of community panel deliberations
- Identify opportunities to collect better local and regional evaluation data including local knowledge and insights for assessing service performance
- NIAA to enhance the scope, planning and timeliness of service performance (outcome) data and knowledge sharing for JDM rounds

SDM growth to 2028:

- EC backbones to research 'what works' for JDM and the evidence needed to measure service performance in their regions and share that knowledge with other EC regions



Enabling systems

Shared commitment to SDM is supported with a robust authorising environment, partnership practices and supportive policies, program rules, funding systems and implementation frameworks.

Key observations

Foundational enabling systems that support shared decision-making around NIAA ceasing grants are underpinning greater community empowerment in planning and shaping service delivery for these programs:

- All parties work with the Ministerial authorisation for 75% weighting of EC Leaders' input in JDM
- The government commitment to multi-year funding for EC backbones as partners in SDM enables strategic backbone staff recruitment and strengthens EC backbone commitment to JDM
- EC backbones have legitimacy and capability as trusted convenors/enablers for Indigenous participation in SDM
- Locally driven partnerships between Indigenous communities, EC backbones and service providers are evident

These same enabling systems are being leveraged to influence investments and delivery beyond NIAA funding, helping to break down 'silos' across sectors and across levels of government funding at the local level. The model provides a proof of concept and a platform that other Commonwealth, state and territory government agencies can utilise to meet their own commitments under Closing the Gap Priority Reform 1. To facilitate this growth in SDM, a clear authorising environment within Government, supported by Government policy settings and funding systems that enable successful place-based SDM, is required.

Introduction to Enabling Systems

JDM has seen EC regions make significant progress in shaping programs that are more meaningful to support better outcomes for their communities. As SDM expands, there will be capacity for greater systemic impact. However, this potential can only be realised through the development of enabling systems that support holistic local decision-making regarding regional investment and service delivery.

Adopting a systems way of thinking across the EC ecosystem can support more holistic approaches to place-based strategies, cross-sectoral initiatives, and partnered ways of working with communities. However, this systems way of thinking needs to be supported by an authorising environment of policies, rules, procedures and incentives that enable this changed approach. It is essential to move beyond sectoral silos, recognising that the needs of communities and the experiences of service users are interconnected. This interconnectedness requires a holistic, collaborative approach to effectively address complex challenges. By embracing this approach, more comprehensive regional planning frameworks supported by different levels of government, EC regions and other key stakeholders can be

developed. These frameworks would enable community and regional priorities to be identified and guide government investment in a more holistic manner. This will help to ensure that resources are allocated efficiently in ways that truly reflect the needs and aspirations of the communities they are meant to serve.

Implementation of more holistic, cross-sectoral approaches to service delivery within EC regions will necessitate the adaptation of current funding arrangements. The Empowered Communities Design Report 2015 proposed a range of funding reforms so that budgets could be controlled closer to those affected, including place-based regional investment and pooled funding arrangements. Reformed funding structures need to be complemented by more agile and relational funding mechanisms, accompanied by clear guidelines.

An authorising environment with a clear mandate for SDM is essential across all levels of the ecosystem. To achieve this, supportive frameworks through policy, legislation, and program structures must be established. This includes appropriately delegating power and decision-making to the regional level to ensure meaningful SDM. The decision by the then Minister for Indigenous Affairs (former Senator The Hon. Nigel Scullion) in 2017 to restate the government's commitment to the EC Partnership, including giving significant weight (75%) to EC Leaders' advice in making IAS funding decisions was an important authorising milestone. Consistent with the agreed EC guiding principles of joint accountability and respectful relationships, it is critical that in the rare instances that EC recommendations are not supported by NIAA, timely and evidence-based feedback is provided to the EC Leaders, EC backbones and community panel members.

Clear and formalised tripartite partnership arrangements, which outline respective roles and responsibilities, provide a key structural mechanism supporting a strong authorising environment and partnerships between Indigenous people, the Australian Government, and state/territory/local governments at local and regional levels. These arrangements should address how partnerships will progress SDM in co-designing policy and programs, developing regional plans, negotiating regional investment, and ongoing monitoring, evaluation, and adaptation of programs and strategies.

Local Indigenous governance needs to be strengthened via more unified empowerment policy frameworks. The 2020 Closing the Gap agreement's *Priority Reform 1: Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision-making*, is driving change in the way that governments at all levels are engaging with and working with First Nation's communities. Policy frameworks supporting the empowerment of Indigenous communities developed by government such as the APS Reform Charter for Partnership and Engagement need to be supportive of local governance structures that are collaborative, inclusive, culturally appropriate and effective in addressing the unique needs and aspirations of Indigenous communities. Finally, there needs to be continued efforts to build capability and capacity for SDM.

Some similarities with the Collective Impact approach, a community-led, cross-sectoral collaborative method aimed at achieving strong community outcomes by recognizing the unique strengths, opportunities, and challenges of each place (Kania & Kramer, 2011) can be discerned in the EC model. This includes the establishment of independent backbone organisations that, under direction from the regional EC Indigenous Leaders, facilitate the negotiation of common development agendas at the regional level, the use of regional partnership tables as a mechanism for communication and decision-making, and the focus on shared data and measurement of service performance. A significant difference with the Collective Impact model is that the EC backbone team, or Secretariat, is not the EC regional

decision-maker. An EC backbone team takes its strategic direction from the regional EC Indigenous Leaders group. Existing collective impact practice is a foundational enabler for effective place-based initiatives (Lata & Reddel, 2022), and backbone organisations are a fundamental enabler for enacting this because they can drive engagement, partnering and information sharing where government, community and service provider partners lack capacity. For fully shared decision-making, the backbone organisation needs to be trusted as a convenor for Indigenous interests by Indigenous people in the EC region. It needs to have the capability to effectively facilitate community input into JDM, and to advocate to government for the input and recommendations put forward by the Indigenous community through the community panels.

Continued capability building within communities is important to strengthen agency. Community members need to have a shared understanding of the EC Partnership model, and capability and capacity to contribute to RDA mapping and SDM. Conflict of interest arrangements must be transparent and effectively manage the connections and multiple interests of groups at the local level, recognizing the unique contexts of local SDM.

The enabler/partner role of governments under the EC Partnership model is vastly different to the more traditional funder/decisionmaker role. As other shared decision-making experiences, for example OCHRE local decision-making,¹⁴ have shown, governments' strategic decision-making about broader policy and funding allocations needs to be more inclusive and collaborative to support meaningful local SDM. To achieve this, government officers must engage with communities and build relationships that enable Indigenous people to influence how decisions are made, and resources are allocated. Cultural capability is crucial for fostering relationship-building and mutual understanding, allowing government officers to work more effectively as partners in collaborative decision-making. Additionally, there is a need for an enduring commitment to sharing decision-making and making the necessary practical changes to frameworks and processes (Ombudsman NSW, 2019; 2025).

What's working well

EC backbone organisations

EC backbone organisations are regional partnership enablers that support the priorities of the Indigenous leadership and the RDAs in their regions. EC backbones occupy a challenging space at the intersection of community, EC Indigenous regional leadership, government and service sector interests. While the 10 EC regions are at different stages of evolution, experience to date has demonstrated the value of the concept of a backbone team in facilitating place driven Closing the Gap reforms.

In several EC regions, government and service provider representatives commented on the skills and experience of the staff who had been attracted to lead and work within backbone organisations.

¹⁴ OCHRE is the NSW Government's community-led plan to strengthen the relationship between government and community, with local decision-making being a key initiative – see <https://www.nsw.gov.au/departments-and-agencies/aboriginal-affairs-nsw/about-ochre>

In another region, a consultant who was engaged by the EC backbone to undertake an independent review of implementation of EC in the region¹⁵ heard feedback that the backbone was highly valued for 'its convening power', had 'good staff in [the] secretariat', and 'worked together well and with [Aboriginal people]'.

The Review noted the calibre and the passion of the Indigenous people, especially emerging young leaders along with the longer-term leadership group, who had been attracted to working in the backbone organisations. Many were encouraged by family or Elders to take on these roles. Some have come through emerging young leader programs run by the EC backbone teams themselves. Individuals who have the skills to gain employment in well-paid roles in government or the NGO or private sectors (for example, mining) spoke about being attracted to the chance to make a positive difference in their communities, and their passion for the Indigenous empowerment agenda.

The most important role played by the EC backbone organisations is as facilitator and enabler for Indigenous people (both leaders and grassroots community members) to participate in the EC Partnership with government. EC Leaders and backbone staff feel that they fill a crucial gap in the system by being able to harness the wisdom and expertise of Indigenous leaders from across the region to the benefit of government funding processes and the service system. As one participant put it, these are people who have a 'forever stake' in the Indigenous service system in a place, contrasting with more transient and/or non-Indigenous government staff or service providers, who may have less connection and personal investment in SDM processes and outcomes.

The effectiveness of an EC backbone team is contingent not only on its competence, but also its capacity to be an enabler of place-based reform and in a sense independent in terms of local community level decision-making. A backbone team has to try to stand apart from the Indigenous organisational dynamics in a region and avoid becoming a service provider competing with other organisations for funding. The backbone team also has to be clear about its role as a facilitator of Indigenous people to take the lead, rather than seeking to lead and influence in isolation and without a mandate from the Indigenous people on the ground.

'One of the attractions of [the backbone] is that they attracted some very good staff and people... You feel encouraged and kind of confident that yes, people are competent and had integrity and all the rest of it. So, it's what you'd want in a group that you're joining, that is representing you and is managing a process, especially around decisions around funding and so forth. So that was confidence inspiring in that sense'.

Service provider

'I cannot fault the staff of [x], which is our backbone organisation. Over the years, I cannot fault them in terms of the amount of effort and work that they put in. So, this would be a highlight, I guess, is that they've staffed it correctly and that they have tried, you know, the best that they could do'.

Community panel member

'...the backbone's role was to facilitate the conversations rather than influence. And you felt more that there was a community voice underpinning a lot of those conversations as opposed to the opinions of a select few... Like you can actually see...some of the work that they had done in terms of actually engaging community and a broad diversity of community...I found it came down to...the backbone and the understanding, knowledge and capability in terms of being able to run that type of a process.'

NIAA regional staff

¹⁵ Findings were documented in an unpublished report, which was shared with regional leaders and the EC backbone to inform ongoing implementation and support continuous improvement.

A lesson learned from the growth of EC backbone organisations is the importance of being seen as an 'enabler' with an accepted degree of 'independence' from the regional service system. The *perception* of autonomy and impartiality in gaining the trust of both government and service provider partners in EC is a critical factor. In many regions, contracts for backbone services were auspiced by existing ACCOs that are involved in competing for grants in the service system. While some EC backbones have moved to independent incorporation, where they have stayed under the umbrella of an existing ACCO this could affect their ability to build broad-based support from other ACCOs, service providers and regional NIAA staff.

Given that facilitating key JDM processes is a service that NIAA has contracted the EC backbone team to deliver, there is a grey area in terms of EC backbone teams maintaining impartiality by not competing for service provider funding. This can be a challenge when JDM has led to funds being quarantined, some of which are then directed to the EC backbone team to undertake scoping or lead co-design for a new service. It is incumbent on NIAA and other agencies seeking their services for SDM to ensure that EC backbone organisations are adequately funded for the scope of their role.

EC backbone teams play the key role in managing the logistics of JDM rounds, in partnership with NIAA regional offices. After several years of JDM, some EC backbone teams have developed very sophisticated processes to support JDM, including detailed implementation guides, timelines, templates, forms and communication materials. One NIAA regional staff member observed that the EC backbone team's processes were much more advanced than the Agency's in some cases, which created problems in the implementation. A benefit of the well-documented processes developed by 'early movers' with JDM is that newly joined EC regions have been able to adapt these resources to quickly establish their own JDM processes.

EC backbone teams have also invested significantly in culturally appropriate communication strategies. A feature of effective backbones is their use of clear, plain-English (and Indigenous language) messaging, and development of visual communication materials

'I really appreciated the innovative thinking behind Empowered Communities as a movement and very much interested in reform work for the betterment of Aboriginal communities... And I think that the reality is, our organisation is funded to reform government, like that's literally what we're funded to do, so I'm going to keep knocking on that door until that changes.' **EC backbone**

'What was different about this [EC] trial is that this time, you had a backbone, [x], essentially like a black bureaucracy to hold that for the Aboriginal side...Having that organisation there, performing that role is really critical because it means you start to build up institutional knowledge that previously sat with key leaders or key individuals...And previously, you might not have had that documented anywhere. But with the backbone organisation, you do start to have that documented better. I think that's important.' **EC backbone**

'With the neutrality comes the ability to build positive relationships because you don't have a stake in either side of the parties. And the relationship really is the driver of any of this work...We know it's so easy for trust to break down between government and community, and so there just needs to be someone in the middle that is well resourced to be able to broker that relationship. I really can't see joint decision-making being a feasible process if there wasn't a neutral organisation that was facilitating it.' **EC backbone**

'We're really clear to the community and to our partners that we are not a service provider. We don't want to be seen with the same lens as a traditional service delivery provision because we feel that our work kind of transcends that and from a non-hierarchical perspective, kind of floats above service provision, and we work really hard to keep separation from actual provision of services.' **EC backbone**

'You're compromised as a convener, as a facilitator, if you are perceived to be compromised.' **EC backbone**

that are easily understood by Indigenous community members. For example, Tristate EC's webpage has an animated video in Ngaanyatjarra and Pitjantjara language explaining EC (<https://www.npyec.org.au>).

The Review team noted the adaptive practice philosophy of some backbone organisations. Given the innovative nature of JDM, backbones have seen the need to conduct regular reviews following JDM rounds, and to organise reflective sessions with government and service provider partners. Some backbones have now had several iterations of their JDM implementation guides.

The need to manage conflicts of interest transparently and effectively in EC regions was also highlighted by EC backbone staff, community panel members, service providers, and government stakeholders who participated in the review. It was acknowledged that participants in JDM processes could wear many hats within a region and/or be connected to others with interest in the decisions being made. EC backbone staff and community members noted that the level of interest and investment in decisions strongly underpins engagement in many EC regions. This was considered both a strength of the approach and a significant factor shaping impactful outcomes.

'They actually came up with their own [conflict of interest] policy, which is pretty set standard stuff...If anyone's got an interest, they declare it. They step out of the discussion. They don't participate in a discussion or the decision. So, it's all pretty professional.' **NIAA regional staff**

However, Review participants also noted the need to balance this with appropriate arrangements to manage the potential for individuals and groups to be excluded or for decision-making processes to be unduly influenced by those with vested interests. People living within regions, service providers, and funders all need to have confidence in the rigour and legitimacy of JDM for the approach to be supported, successful, and impactful. EC regions have developed formalised policies and systems, supported via training, to ensure the effective management of conflicts of interest in their JDM and SDM processes. Examples are outlined in Box 7 below.

Box 7: Approaches to Managing Conflict of Interest

'We have very clear, conflict management policies. Our alliance has a partnership with [local law firm] and so all of our confidentiality agreements, all of our non-disclosure agreements and all of that kind of stuff is actually drawn up by that in the recruitment process. We are very, very thorough in terms of the expectations of all of our panellist around non-disclosure, confidentiality and what that entails. That is done separately as part of the recruitment process, for anyone that enters into the pool of panels, and we talk about the repercussions of that. All of our panels are also held offsite so that nobody in the community ever knows who the panellists are. The panellists don't know who each other are until that day. I send separate calendar invitations. I hand deliver all of the required documentation one week prior to all of the panellists, so that nothing's done electronically. Everything's hand delivered. None of the panellists know each other. All of the panels are held offsite. Because I have really innate knowledge of each of the panellists. Whenever I get a panel, requests from and I double, I like triple check to make sure that there's no conflict around that organisation, and then none of the panellists find out the organisation that they're assessing until, the day of assessment.' **EC backbone**

'I think it's incredibly well managed by us throughout the process, and that's one of the very first things that we do with the panel members is to go through that training of, ethical conduct and, conflict of interest declarations and then as a panel, you know, managing anything that's been declared. So, we have that documented. We workshop that through, each panel member signs that they have read and like, acknowledged, the documentation. And we keep all of that on file in-house as well. I think that's made very, very clear to everyone. And we do everything that we can to make sure that people are understanding of the importance of that, and that, you know, the confidentiality outside of this room. You can't take any of your papers with you. We only provide the packs to the participants on the day that they attend. They have to attend in person, and they don't get the packs until we go through the confidentiality and the ethical conduct and declare conflicts of interest. But there's really no knowing after the joint decision-making panel - how do we monitor that.' **EC backbone**

EC backbone organisations believe they can leverage valuable systemic impact by working beyond the scope of the JDM process, by championing and implementing innovative ideas put forward by community members during JDM. Review participants felt that EC backbones fill an important gap in this sense, as there was previously no specialised enabling Indigenous-led organisation in a position to advocate for community ideas about systemic reforms, and Indigenous service providers are often too busy and under-resourced to do this themselves. Box 8 outlines some examples of this sentiment.

Box 8: Backbones' Advocacy for Innovative Community Ideas About Reform

'A backbone organisation like ours, we're not delivering direct services into communities and our role is very clearly to coordinate, facilitate, co-design and advocate it. And when you communicate that effectively with the community members then they understand, 'okay, we can share information with them because they're not going to be competition for us.' We're not going to be applying for the same grant. All the ACCOs are busy delivering services, so they don't necessarily have the time or the capacity to be focusing on these types of concepts. Who's actually going to do that work of developing the concept model for a centre of excellence? People just don't have the time. They're not being funded to do that. And so [we are] promoting people to raise these types of ideas because we can do that with you and involve you. And I think [what is important is] just the commitment from the backbone of truly listening to what you're being told and documenting that, and then not forgetting about it and pursuing that advocacy piece, to strongly articulate this is a top priority for this location, and we need to make something happen here.' **EC backbone**

'A lot of community members felt very much over consulted, with people come in and they talk to them and give them all this lived experience and that knowledge, and nothing happens with it... And I suppose it's good that EC was established here because then like, you know, there's a local organisation that's actually holding that next stage of that process and following through and providing that feedback or showing the outputs.' **EC backbone**

Locally driven partnerships between Indigenous communities, EC backbones, service providers and governments are evident.

Review participants reported that once buy-in was achieved and people were participating in planning and decision-making activities within EC regions, a shared understanding of SDM at a local and regional level could be built amongst backbones, government, community members and service providers. This shared understanding is an important enabler for impactful SDM.

In a number of EC regions, it was observed that staff who had experience working in both government and in community organisations (including backbone organisations) had a much better understanding of the cultures, imperatives and challenges faced in different contexts. By leveraging their diverse experiences, they were often able to improve understanding of SDM across the ecosystem, and build capability for planning, decision-making and service delivery. Creating structures and programs that support cross-sector exchanges could thus help to build capability across the SDM ecosystem in a more systematic way.

Locally driven formalised partnerships are strengthening the authorising environment for SDM.

Empowered Communities (2021, p22), in their submission to the Indigenous Voice co-design process, highlighted the way in which formalising and embedding partnership arrangements with government was a key strategy for supporting ongoing government buy-in and the authorising environment necessary for meaningful SDM - *'In the early stages of Empowered Communities we did not get this element right. While things proceeded differently in each of our regions, we made slow progress setting up partnership structures such as regular joint meetings, Negotiation or Partnership Tables. As Empowered Communities matured, where regions were able to embed such interfaces as a cornerstone of the new partnership arrangements with government, more gains have been made than in those regions where this did not occur or where it took longer.'*

There is a recognition by the NIAA that formalised partnerships are foundational in shaping the authorising environment for the EC program, and SDM within this, with early efforts to negotiate local partnership agreements with each EC region and a commitment to revisiting and strengthening these agreements in 2025.

EC regions have been pursuing partnership arrangements from the ground-up, with varying degrees of buy-in. Where these partnerships have been formalised, they are creating a

'I just think we're so fortunate on the Central Coast that we do or have had people who have had experiences that cut across different sectors – across the community-controlled and then into different layers of government, whether it be local, state or federal – most of the people who are in these government layers are also connected to community on the ground, at the grassroots.'

Community panel member

'I really saw the benefits where it was different stakeholders in the system coming together to discuss, I guess, common needs...I saw, community panel members discussing the needs of the community with and as staff members, and in that room, people in that room coming to a clear understanding together around what was, what that funding was required to do. But then we also saw service providers coming together with the community, to discuss similar things. We saw, in some cases, service providers and NIAA coming together so, so different parts of the system that are often, no one speaks to one another. That's one of the issues. But through the joint decision-making panels, those parts of the system could come together. And it meant that there was a clear understanding. I think over time, especially the contracts that were discussed multiple times over time, there was a clear understanding around what the community needed, what the community priorities were and how NIAA funding could address that. And the ways NIAA couldn't address that as well.'

EC backbone

stronger authorising environment for SDM with other levels of government (for example, see Tristate and Goulburn Murray EC Partnership examples outlined in Box 9 and Box 10 below).

The Tristate EC has embarked on a journey of establishing formal partnership arrangements with the multitude of government partners who are responsible for investing in their region and delivering services. These partnership arrangements are featured in the EC regions' recently published Regional Development Roadmap, and outlined in Box 9 below.¹⁶

Box 9: Formalised Partnerships with Government to support NPY Lands' Tristate Regional Development Roadmap

The Tristate EC region, covering 350,000 square kilometres within the jurisdictions of South Australia, Western Australia, and the Northern Territory, is home to 26 remote communities.

There are four governments across the Tristate region – the federal, Northern Territory, South Australian, and Western Australian governments. Each are responsible for investing in the region and for delivering services. Formal partnership arrangements are in place with the Northern Territory Government and the NIAA. The EC region is also seeking partnership agreements with the South Australian and Western Australian governments. These formal agreements outline shared principles and the roles and responsibilities of partners for supporting EC regional planning and the development and implementation of a regional investment strategies. The Roadmap recognises the key role that governments need to play in supporting EC regions to understand need and service gaps across the region and to develop workable strategies to address these. The development of comprehensive formalised partnerships with all government stakeholders is considered critical for supporting the ongoing strong and collaborative relationships that can, over time, shape a more responsive and effective service system, and the policy and program frameworks that are required to enable this to happen.

The Goulburn Murray EC region has developed a set of agreements between governments and the region to promote Indigenous employment in the region and has had measurable impacts for employment outcomes in the region, as outlined in Box 10 below.

Box 10: Goulburn Murray Employment Accord

The Goulburn Murray Employment Accord is a set of agreements between the Algabonyah Community Cabinet (Goulburn Murray Empowered Communities) and various levels of government to promote Indigenous employment in the region. The agreement set policy targets for government, such as ensuring 2% of government jobs in the region are filled by Indigenous people but also sets reciprocal obligations to drive employment for the Algabonyah itself, providing an implementation partner for the government with ownership over results.

In line with the EC's obligations under the Accord, the Algabonyah worked to connect to existing government projects, such as those run by Infrastructure Victoria with promising Indigenous job candidates, to achieve a 2% Indigenous workforce. The Victorian Government, in enacting their Accord obligations, created an Indigenous employment

¹⁶ https://www.npyec.org.au/uploads/1/0/5/7/105789899/npv_regional_develop_roadmap_july_2020_web.pdf

program alongside community that pledged \$1.4M to create 75 new job placements, more than half of which were successfully placed in the first year.

As a result of the engagement and assistance of the Algabonyah, the Victorian Government has achieved its target in under 5 years. The clarity in roles and responsibilities, along with the strong authorising environment for mutual and complementary action created by the Accord, has been a crucial foundation for achieving employment outcomes in Goulburn Murray. This robust framework has enabled effective collaboration and sustained progress, ensuring that all parties work cohesively towards shared goals.

EC backbones reported some highly successful examples of locally achieving reinvestment of funding to support more targeted service delivery, and to address duplication (see section on 'Systemic Impact' - Box 13: Children and School Pooled Funding Reform in East Kimberley; and Box 14: How Community Panel Innovation and Pooled Funding Can Lead to Service System Improvements). These examples demonstrate the potential SDM can have for re-shaping more effective and efficient service systems.

EC Partnerships within the regions are also making some strides in dismantling silos at the regional level, starting from the ground up. However, their efforts are somewhat limited without the support of top-down frameworks to fully realise their potential. Silos being targeted include the fragmentation across sectors resourcing the delivery of similar or complementary programs in a region. EC regions have also had some traction in addressing silos between levels of government, such that funding across levels of government can be targeted better to meet the same local needs.

EC regional communities are navigating and leveraging empowerment policy frameworks and collaborative relationships beyond EC. The 2020 Closing the Gap agreement's *Priority Reform 1: Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision-making*, is driving change in the way that governments at all levels are engaging with and working with First Nation's communities. New policy frameworks are being developed and implemented at the state level (for example, the South Australian Government's First Nations Voice to Parliament; the West Australian Government's Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy). Nation-building and the native title system have also shaped the way in which Indigenous governance and cultural authority are conceptualised and enacted across contexts. The introduction of EC has taken time to fully establish in several communities, with community members needing to work together to understand respective roles and responsibilities and develop collaborative relationships to leverage the

'The whole process began to break down the program silos that exist in this region. Over time, participants in the process learnt about other programs and how their own services might be improved through greater exposure to best practice, hard evidence, collaboration and coordination.' **ACCO feedback to earlier JDM round**

'We were going to go down that approach [re-directing quarantined funds in the region], but realised it was a lot bigger project than we had enough money in the quarantine funds for. So, we did seek out [state Department of] Justice and wrote a business case to them and they funded it. It was also a really good first step in getting state government more aware of the JDM process and how the process can also identify gaps and barriers of services and funding delivery.' **EC backbone**

'So, I've used the learnings from EC as a foundation for other departments that we work with, and we're also incorporating that within a South Australian Government perspective on how we progress share decision-making.' **EC backbone**

opportunities that EC can offer. An example of this is outlined in the excerpt from an interview in Box 11 below.

Box 11: Maximising local empowerment by collaborating beyond EC

'The fact that the process was separated from [other Indigenous governance structures and processes in the region] probably caused a few issues. What we saw was that, you know, [our EC] becoming an organisation in their own right and another organisation within the community structure. And around about that time another Aboriginal corporation was being built via native title process - and everyone was vying for a similar space and peak body status and those sorts of things. And it became a bit of a dogfight really, and a bit messy. But anyway, we worked through that process, and we got to the other side so that we are not overlapping or competing....'

On achieving clarity on roles and authority in the region:

'...organizationally being really clear of what your remit is. We know that the native title management group manages native title and it's not all native title on our country, but it's about maybe 60%, and so they need to be very specific about what they, what they do and how they go about their business. We certainly understand that [our EC organisation] is about empowering the community. And so, staying within that lane - if we all did that - then there wouldn't be too much crossover... and making sure that those organisations deliver what they need to deliver because it's hard enough. You can't be all things to everyone.'

How EC and JDM supports empowerment in the region:

'I don't have decision-making powers around what we do, what they do. They bring us together and then they're like a filter. But then they're also a connector. So, they sit around the table - they allow us to filter out all of the grey areas, including where we have overlap and other things. But then they allow us to also connect to the appropriate funding lines, organisations, departments, etcetera, etcetera, so that we can work collectively rather than individually. So that's how I feel like Empowered Communities works for us right here and whereas we kind of looked at things 'just do the little things really well', now we look at how can we expand that to a bigger horizon and then we will work that out together and it's like everyone understands their place in that big picture and that's what Empowered Communities does for us here.' **EC backbone**

As the scope of JDM grows, achieving clarity, and shared agreement, about respective roles and authority for decision-making will pose continuing challenges. Greater consideration is needed as to how policy frameworks across government at all levels and decision-making structures interface with each other. A more 'joined-up' way locally is required to ensure that the intended empowerment outcomes can be realised.

What could be improved

The importance of SDM being supported by a robust authorising environment, along with supportive policies, program rules, funding systems, and implementation frameworks, was repeatedly emphasised across interviews in this Review. Many participants considered the absence or insufficiency of enabling systems to support EC progress at a local level to be limiting the current and future potential impact of JDM. The Lessons Learned Review has identified a range of opportunities to develop enabling systems for SDM, reflected in

Recommendations 1, 2, 3 and 6 (see 'Summary Table of Findings and Recommendations', pages 17-19 of this report), and outlined below.

Grow capacity for more meaningful community engagement, RDA planning and SDM

A challenge for EC backbones is not to be seen by their Indigenous constituents as too process-driven and bureaucratic, to the detriment of their grassroots community empowerment ethos. While this is a somewhat inevitable consequence of being engaged by government to run a process that is effectively about Indigenous empowerment through grants decision-making, it is a balancing act for EC backbones. Several EC backbone staff expressed frustration at how the demands of the funding process limited their ability to undertake much-needed community engagement work, especially in remote EC regions. Some of these frustrations are no doubt shared by many NIAA regional staff.

Some Indigenous leaders are concerned that the backbone arrangement enables government to simply shift bureaucratic processes and risks into the Indigenous domain without the fundamental systemic reform and grassroots empowerment of Indigenous communities that is necessary for improved outcomes. Some collaborative governance models have been criticised as allowing government to shift responsibility and risk to disadvantaged and under-resourced local communities (Glendinning and Clarke 2004). Backbone staff emphasised they do not want JDM to be seen as merely an outsourced quality assurance or community consultation process around funding decisions, as this does not progress EC's empowerment agenda. This underlines why EC Leaders have called for significantly broadening the current scope of SDM beyond its current focus on IAS ceasing grants through NIAA's JDM initiative, as discussed later in relation to 'Systemic Impact'.

The investment in local infrastructure to support meaningful community engagement and participation in RDA planning, SDM and implementation of decisions needs to be grown alongside the evolution of JDM to SDM. The EC Leaders Lessons Learned Report 2020 highlighted the need for sufficient recognition of the level of resourcing required to involve the community beyond regional leaders, such as ACCO organisational

'What I've seen with the work of [the backbone], it's just bloody hard work. And I really think, after eight years, ten years, whatever it is now, I reckon government should be further along the journey... I feel like they really just handed another layer of bureaucracy on [the backbone]. And that really concerns me, because to be honest, we're not really functioning in an Aboriginal way, we're operating in a real whitefella way... I don't think government's really moving fast enough because they're not changing their ways. They're just transferring it to an Aboriginal organisation. And that's not fair. And it's also not letting go of their system.'

EC backbone

'[We are] building our people and local kind of secretariats and backbones or groups and structures... [so that our backbone] itself didn't become a bureaucracy or a gatekeeper, because we know through different staff, even with all good intent on our side, it can turn into that, if you're so determined by white man bureaucracy processes... Our job as... backbone is to build our people's capability.'

EC backbone

'I just think if you've got a process in place then you have to trust the process. To actually go over the heads – to come in and question the integrity of the organisation itself at the board and the executive from an NIAA viewpoint at a local level is wrong. Because what is driving that? We just had the senior executive of NIAA come in and say this is it and it can't be questioned and done. And that's the joint decision-making process out the window.' **Service provider and community panel member**

'It's very difficult that we do get asked...how can we change some of the funding agreement...the programme area has some set KPIs and it's very difficult, nearly impossible to change them. I think this is creating a bit of angst and rightly so. EC is saying well, look, we agree for this say for instance programme to be funded. We agree with that provider. We agree with the funding envelope, but there's a few things in the KPIs we would like to happily like massage to become a little bit more locally tailored for our region.' **EC backbone**

leadership, in shared decision-making. This need was echoed in interviews with current Review participants. Even in regions employing creative strategies to enhance community engagement (see Box 1: Far West Coast EC's Model for Facilitating Community Input in JDM, page 43), there is still the aspiration to grow community understanding and involvement in SDM. In larger regions, with multiple dispersed communities, capacity to engage with community members across the region and build capability is particularly challenging. Investment in EC infrastructure needs to ensure that demands on backbone organisations' resources and personnel needs can be met and continues to accommodate growth in the scope of SDM within EC regions.

Continue to develop frameworks that authorise SDM, support accountability, and provide structures for greater delegation of power to the local level

Authorisation, created via legislation, policy and formalised partnership agreements, needs to be enacted in a meaningful way to make a difference. This requires all sectors and groups to demonstrate a commitment to embodying the principles and pursuing the agreed goals. Effective leadership across the ecosystem is essential in driving this commitment and ensuring successful outcomes.

The need for appropriate delegation of power to the local level supported by national policy and program settings to support SDM was highlighted. Specific mechanisms for this will vary depending on existing program structures (for example, how much government infrastructure and presence there currently is regionally/locally versus centrally). Greater flexibility in program arrangements creates capacity for EC regions to work with local service providers in nuanced ways via SDM. This is important to leverage the market stewardship role they are undertaking in many regions. Having capacity to work closely with service providers in thin markets to support capacity and capability growth is a key way for EC regions to address service gaps and enhance the quality of service delivery.

The significance of relationships with government, and the need to formalise these, was highlighted across EC regions. If arrangements for working with government

'I think it's great that we leave it up to individual regions to build a system that suits them, but I think there needs to be a national framework that they sit within because you want some consistency in the interface between regions and NIAA. Otherwise, it's actually really easy for them to get away with saying, 'oh, we don't do that' when you know that they can, and other parts of NIAA do that – and that's around provision of information and what they're willing to compromise on with decisions...I feel like there could be a national framework that each region then builds their own, you know, consistency of even forms and assessments.' **EC backbone**

'That national approach doesn't mean people have to change what they're doing. It's about identifying the consistencies and creating, creating accountability 'cause I think it's easier to shirk accountability when everything's different, and it's easier to, you know, assume I don't know what someone else is doing.'

EC backbone

'My opinion is it's still rolling out, the JDM. It's still business as usual. It's not what EC was designed and set up for, where we're the community face. Instead, we are the agent of government of NIAA, that's where it has transitioned to. And that's all it is. Probably works differently in different regions – I can't comment. But we're just there to allow the [NIAA] office to say, yes, we consulted with Aboriginal people.'

EC backbone

'If we're just putting people through the hoops and it's still a government decision...I don't know if NIAA is capable of the full Empowered Communities model. They just don't know how to be anything other than government and as a true partner, you have to let go of some of that.'

EC backbone

'JDM just creates more work for them. So, there's a lot of systemic resistance because that creates additional work and that doesn't fit with the cycles of government and contract management and budget cycles and stuff like that.' **EC backbone**

'For example, we still don't have finance guidelines, grant management guidelines, advice, anything that mentions JDM or place-based work...'

National level policy officer

are only relationally underpinned, they tend to be transient and can be insufficient for creating an ongoing authorising environment.

Strengthen NIAA capacity to partner effectively with EC

Review participants highlighted a role for NIAA at the national level to provide clear frameworks to support the tailoring of SDM that needs to happen at the local level in the regions. These frameworks help ensure accountability imperatives associated with SDM are transparent and can be met by both partners.

Leadership within government, and particularly within the NIAA, has been especially important in supporting better outcomes in EC regions. When NIAA local leadership is mirrored by strong buy-in and leadership at a state level, local NIAA staff feel more authorised and supported to engage in effective partnering with EC backbones, service providers and communities. Across most regions, participants of the Review reported that NIAA leadership had been inconsistent and that NIAA engagement in the partnership is important for shaping the ability for EC regional staff and other sectors/groups to be as effective as possible in their roles. NIAA regional offices have many demands placed on them, and in 8 out of 10 regions, the EC region is only part of the NIAA regional offices' geographic coverage, as well as just part of the NIAA regional officers' role. This can limit capacity to engage with key stakeholders in EC regions, build strong relationships, and deeply understand regional issues and priorities. Greater resourcing of NIAA's role in the regions would create more time to invest in supporting EC program delivery and relationship building for the partnership, offering greater confidence when delegating power for SDM to the local level.

Many participants in the Review also considered that fundamental cultural change was required within government to support government capacity and capability to act as partners and enablers and shift away from more traditional funder/manager roles. This sentiment echoed the reflections of the EC National Leaders Group (2020), which noted that the *'Early stages of EC implementation did not get this element right. We voiced a strong desire to lead implementation on one hand, while government*

'We've actually got a service gap at the moment because a provider decided to not take up funding, so now we've been having to step through our layers of bureaucracy to try and re-scope, re-face and get a provider in place. But because we make things so clunky, it actually doesn't provide an agile environment for Empowered Communities to pivot and turn and redirect. We can't actually move that quickly for them to do that. So that's one of the challenges I suppose that we have been working through with them in terms of if they identify a programme, activity or something that they want to sort of re-focus or redirect. We've had to really work with them to help them to understand our processes, to realise it can't just happen that quickly...there needs to be needs to be a transition process so that there's not a service gap, and it's fair to providers who need to step out of that space – they might have employees...' **NIAA regional staff**

'Our agency has created this process of joint decision-making and there are articulated agreed plans for quarantined funds and now, at the back end, there is no process for it and we're getting caught up in a policy authority [situation] that we should not be caught up in because that is disingenuous to place-based decision-making, which is what JDM should be.'

NIAA regional staff

'The only way that [JDM] is actually going to shape the system is if we're actually doing sector by sector reviews on investment.' **EC backbone**

'I think joint decision-making is limited because it's based on what activities are coming up in that actual financial year. It's not forward-looking and out over multiple years so that you can actually look at the investment that needs to happen... there needs to be more of a regional budget as opposed to based on current IAS activities and also it needs to be across all Commonwealth funding, ideally state as well...there probably needs to be a whole of government commitment to actually engaging with empowered communities.'

NIAA regional staff

'...trying to flip the joint decision-making from let's not look at your past three years, but look at the next three years and talk about you. Tell me what you're planning to do in line with the needs of the community and our strategies. And then at the end of that period, we'll see if you did what you said you would...and then we can kind of look forward instead of looking back, which I think is a wonderful evolution of joint decision-making.' **EC backbone**

officials in many cases were unable to action (or understand) the enabling role. This resulted in a passive or 'business as usual' approach. This, combined at times with a deficit of trust on both sides, contributed to slow progress in setting up partnership structures.'

As highlighted previously, experiences like OCHRE local decision-making (Ombudsman NSW, 2019), have shown that increasing government officers' involvement in regional place-based planning and investment through SDM requires investing in building government capability to work in partnership with communities. Building the skills for this partnered way of working is central to the Australian Public Service (APS) reform agenda. The implementation of organisational incentives and supports can foster and embed greater consistency in leadership and partnership practices. Strategies might include targeted training programs, recognition and reward systems, and clear pathways for career progression, all designed to reinforce the importance of sustained leadership commitment to partnership and relational practices to enhance the overall effectiveness of EC initiatives. By sharing learnings via the implementation of these approaches, similar capability building can be fostered at state and local government levels. In doing so, the Australian Government can help to ensure that partnering capability is developed across the entire ecosystem, maximising the impact of collaborative, place-based efforts.

Funding arrangements that better support locally driven investment strategies

The absence of agile funding arrangements supporting JDM was reported by both NIAA regional staff and EC backbones as a significant barrier to readily shaping more efficient and better-targeted service systems in regions, despite this being a key goal for JDM.

While the project identified examples of successful reinvestment of funding at the local level, the absence of an embedded and streamlined regional pooled funding mechanism posed challenges that needed to be navigated – and was reported as a barrier to similar reinvestment approaches in other contexts. The challenges in redirecting and reshaping funding investment in regions may be further evidenced in the high proportion of JDM decisions that continue existing funding arrangements (as illustrated in Figure 14 on page 125). In addition to a more holistic approach to JDM, as JDM grows to SDM, there is also a need to be more forward looking.

Regional investment and reinvestment strategies require clear and readily actionable policy frameworks to authorise more localised decision implementation. Additionally, clear processes and guidelines are needed to enable the efficient and effective redirection of quarantined funds. Given that EC decision-making may extend beyond regional and/or program boundaries, policy frameworks also need to be able to accommodate this.

To complement clearer reinvestment policy frameworks and regional pooled funding mechanisms, funding arrangements need to be better aligned. Many argued that moving to a sectoral approach to planning and investing in service systems is important for EC's capacity to bring about more meaningful change.

While noting this would require some system level changes especially for grant making processes, NIAA could work with other agencies to explore how grants about a particular topic or sector (e.g. early childhood, youth, housing etc) in a place could be considered more collectively at a systems level in in SDM processes. As a broader range of government investments become a focus for SDM, other government partners could also work towards contributing information to support more comprehensive sector-based SDM in the region.

The way forward: Applying the lessons learned

The lessons learned by EC Partners in implementing JDM highlights the importance of enabling systems for meaningful SDM. The absence of such systems can hinder local empowerment. Critical enabling systems include resources and infrastructure for community engagement in planning and decision-making, investment in formalised partnerships across key stakeholders, and policy, program, and funding arrangements that support power-sharing down to the local level. Growing SDM to pursue and enact the sector-level changes needed to implement Regional Development Agendas will require systemic reforms that authorise and better support power-sharing and decision-making across programs and levels of government.

In the next phase of growth of SDM practice, the findings of this review suggest the following ways forward to build on current success:

SDM growth over the next 12 months:

- Support more agencies and governments to use EC national and regional infrastructure for SDM to co-design their new investments
- Gather and share the innovations and systemic reforms that have emerged from JDM with other agencies and governments

SDM growth to 2028:

- Initiate reform of government policy, program and funding frameworks that authorise and enable implementation of SDM (e.g. progressing regional pooled funding mechanism aligned to sector investment plans)
- Strengthen the 'authorising environment' (including the challenges of moving from 'top-down' procurement' practices to more relational grant making) for government officers to share decision-making authority with Indigenous people
- Formalised tripartite partnership/s are established between Indigenous people, the Commonwealth and state/ territory/ local governments for SDM



(Scope for) Systemic impact

Indigenous people are empowered to meaningfully shape government investments across the full policy lifecycle including legislation, policy development, program design and service delivery.

Key observations

JDM and the EC Partnership highlight the opportunities and initiatives for systemic impact across the EC regions as signposts for broader reform aspirations such as participatory budgeting, pooled funding and regional development strategies.

- There is evidence of funding and services being transitioned to Aboriginal community-controlled organisations
- There is evidence of success in sector-based reorienting of programs through JDM and the quarantining of funding for identified community priorities
- NIAA has progressed SDM approaches for the co-design of new programs and funding allocations, such as the Indigenous Skills and Employment and Indigenous Rangers programs
- Other APS agencies such as the Department of Social Services is developing a whole of government SDM framework

Introduction to (Scope for) Systemic Impact

The 2020 Closing the Gap agreement's *Priority Reform 1: Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision-Making*, commits governments to build and strengthen structures to empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to share decision-making authority with governments to accelerate policy and place-based progress towards Closing the Gap. Clause 32.c of the Agreement outlines key attributes of shared decision-making including: “by consensus where the voices of Indigenous people hold as much weight as governments” and “transparent” based on shared and understandable information and support for self-determination. The Agreement challenges governments to relinquish some control to enable shared decision-making and self-determination to co-exist. Importantly, partnerships and shared decision-making are key drivers for other priority reforms: building the community-controlled sector, transforming government and shared access to regional level data.

The Review has highlighted the aspiration by many participants to fulfil the EC Partnership's commitment to pursue structural and systemic changes at scale through its national empowerment, development and productivity reform agenda, while recognising that priorities for the day-to-day implementation, action and learning focus vary on the ground in EC regions as outlined in the EC Design Report (2015):

‘Empowerment, in our meaning, has two aspects. It means Indigenous people empowering ourselves by taking all appropriate and necessary powers and responsibilities for our own lives and futures. It also means Commonwealth, state and territory governments sharing, and in some cases relinquishing, certain powers and responsibilities, and supporting Indigenous people with resources and capability building.’

The 2024 Productivity Commission's Closing the Gap progress report, however, highlights 'shared decision-making is rarely achieved in practice' (Productivity Commission, 2024). The Commission highlighted some 'pockets of success' but there was no overall longer-term systemic change in 'when and how decisions are made, indicating limited progress in government sharing decision-making' (Productivity Commission, 2024, p42).

The EC Partnership highlights the challenges but more importantly the key opportunities of a SDM approach whereby partners, including governments, build and share an agreed agenda, decision-making, risks, and responsibilities. This shared decision-making focus directly challenges the entrenched and siloed policy, funding, delivery and data systems impacting on the lives of Indigenous people and their communities.

What's working well

Fulfilling the aspiration for systemic impact by the EC Partnership will take time, but this Review found pockets and examples of reform initiatives that can be foundations for broader structural change to embed an empowerment agenda. JDM is having some impacts on improving the overall service system. Review participants acknowledged that a limitation of JDM's broader impact is that it only considers a small proportion of grants in a particular location or in a particular sector. So, the impact is often more at the individual grant or service level, rather than the whole service system – although cumulative impact on many small grants can lead to incremental system improvement.

Improvements in services

Improvements that have been noted by EC participants, include:

- better information sharing between services
- improved integration and partnership between services
- some services improving responsiveness to community needs expressed through JDM
- better alignment of funding to community priorities, for example, increased investment in language education and early childhood education and care in regions where these are prioritised.

'Community-led decision-making supported the creation of the new Tribal Warriors Family Mentoring Program (Redfern), focusing on building the capacity of parents for family restoration within 12 months of children being removed. Inner Sydney has been highlighting the need for such a focus since the early 2010s, and now it's finally happened.' **ISEC, EC Submission to the Indigenous Voice Co-design process**

'If you leave it to government, they would just do the same thing as last year. Always. Unless they find something they really dislike. And they might decide to defund [the] project.' **Community panel member**

'There was also an opportunity presented to us by DSS, to do the local Service Plan community fund... Because we had that skill set and that set of relationships, it then meant that [EC backbone staff] could convene community workshops to co-design proposals for funding from DSS... Running JDM parallel to another process like that was quite amazing to watch, but also really just showed that the relationships they had and the trust that they had with participants meant that they were able to ask organisations to come together to do this.' **EC backbone**

Addressing under-performing services

An important function of JDM is to improve accountability of services that are not being delivered to the community's expectations, by recommending improvements or, in extreme cases, de-funding of services. Review participants felt that previously government was prone to keep funding under-performing services, whereas community leaders were more likely to focus more on improving existing services. Of course, de-funding an underperforming service is challenging if there is no alternative service or potential provider in the region.

Elevating community measures of success

An important improvement that EC participants have highlighted is that JDM, particularly through the role of community panel members, has meant that the definition of what constitutes success for a service has been re-defined more in line with what the community values, rather than relying just on traditional government performance measures. For example, in the Central Coast region, community panels include former and current service users who bring their lived experience to the JDM process. Community panels across EC regions are comprised of experienced community leaders who are able to use both service level administrative data along with local knowledge in their decision-making and recommendations.

Transition to the community-controlled sector

Although many services in EC regions are already run by Aboriginal community-controlled organisations (ACCOs), the JDM process has been an opportunity for communities to push this imperative which is consistent with the principle of subsidiarity¹⁷ and the Closing Gap's *Priority Reform 2: Building the Community-Controlled Sector* which emphasises the value of the expertise and knowledges that ACCOs bring to developing service models and solutions that are culturally safe and suited to communities. As the Review highlights, the transition of a service to community control can take several years to implement. The EC Partnership and the JDM process has placed an increased focus on the transition of service provision to ACCOs, with this issue being a key concern during community panel deliberations.

'And I always found that the Aboriginal leaders have enough courage to make hard funding decisions to stop funding something, and the bureaucrats don't.'

EC backbone

'The core question is 'What would an effective service system look like?' It is not 'Which programs should be funded?''

Service provider

'...what EC [regions] brought to the table was a lived experience. You know, they understood what might work in a region, what might not. They [EC regions] had collected what the community's views were on particular applications, so that brought a richness to the assessment process that you just don't get if you're just reading, you know, I guess an application with no context.'

NIAA

¹⁷ The EC Design Report highlights the principle of subsidiarity as central to an empowerment agenda i.e. authority to decide and act should rest at the closest level to people or organisations the decision or action is designed to service (2015, iii).

Box 12: Practice Example – How JDM has Supported Growth of Capability of Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations

In the APY lands, since 2014 NIAA had funded a non-Indigenous NGO based in Port Augusta to deliver the Remote Schools Attendance Strategy. At one of the first JDMs for the NPY Empowered Communities region in 2019, the Kulintja Kutju community panel made a recommendation to transition this contract to a community-controlled organisation, Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Education Committee (PYEC). The intention was for the transition to occur quickly, but in practice an extended transition period was required. While PYEC had been in operation for two decades, its role had been largely advisory rather than service delivery. Support was required to build PYEC's capability to take on the NIAA funding. The South Australian Government provided some capacity-building funding, and a capability partner was appointed to assist PYEC. This transition has been a success, with PYEC flourishing as an Anangu-led organisation employing a number of capable Anangu staff and running an expanded range of services in the APY Lands, including a Pathways to Employment project under the Indigenous Skills and Employment Program.

Box 13: Practice Example – Children and School Pooled Funding Reform in East Kimberley

The EC backbone lead explained the context for a JDM round in Kununurra that was able to take a sector-wide approach to reviewing IAS grants:

'In the first round [of JDM], which is around about 2017, it just so happened that there were a set of contracts that were thematically related... A bunch of children and schooling contracts came up for review... So, we had the opportunity to work with the Local Management Committee [LMC] – which is one of the participatory governance structures in the East Kimberley region – and we spent a bit of time in the lead up to the JDM round articulating what the education strategy for people in town should look like. So, we had these marker points of what the objectives for funding a social program to support Aboriginal education in town should be.

And then we were able to use that plus the evidence reviews that we always got in the habit of doing in the lead up to JDM, as a way of supporting people to reflect on the programs that were being funded, what was working and not working, and then actually move things around in the system, so they repurposed the investment rather than just stopping a program, or tweaking a program...'

The LMC's aim was to find the best service mix available for the total \$3.2m invested in the six contracts. The members believed that to improve school attendance and educational outcomes in Kununurra required transformational rather than incremental change. The EC backbone directors accepted this approach, which put at risk funding to their own organisations, demonstrating commitment to EC principles of reducing duplication and seeking a productivity dividend ahead of organisational self-interest. Achieving this pooled approach to reconfiguring the funding in the community required considerable work between the EC backbone and NIAA on developing a 'regional pooled funding mechanism.' The final service mix was settled at a Regional Negotiation Table meeting between ECEK Leaders and NIAA. Changes in the service mix were

progressively implemented over a number of years, for an Intensive Family Support Program, to best fit the needs of children and their families, maximize school attendance and attainment, and help manage the transition to high school.

A major change to align funding with community priorities was redirecting educational funding towards Aboriginal language education. 'And what that led to was, I think, quite a significant shift in the town, whereby NIAA hadn't previously been terribly interested in funding Aboriginal language education as a means of supporting Aboriginal educational outcomes... But local mob were very clear [in saying] 'we're seeing duplication here in, say attendance support programs, so we have to stop doing some of that. And we're going to really funnel the investment towards the Miriwoong Language Nest [an Aboriginal language program].' So, there was a significant uplift in the funding to upgrading the Miriwoong Language Nest program. And that's enabled the incremental achievement of a long-term goal, which was to get Miriwoong language education into school, from kindergarten through to year 12. They've increased that slowly over the last 7 to 8 years so that it's now gone from just having the language education up to grade three – it's now up to grade six with an intention to grow it up to high school. And they've also managed to take it back to early childhood, context and environment as well...

It's started to reframe what the funder NIAA values as well, because community has said so clearly: 'Actually language education we see as critical. We see it as creating strong identity leading then through to kids feeling mastery in classroom contexts and therefore having knock on effects in terms of educational outcomes.' And so, we now see the agency valuing that as well.

*And I think that's a classic example of what joint decision-making actually is. It's about brokering and renegotiating values. Do you get to say what's important? So, the agency always typically focused on probity [and] good governance – you know, all of these sort of Western values. [But] the community model was focusing on things of cultural value, etcetera. And trying to bring those two together and renegotiate whose values actually count in funding decisions is really what JDM is all about. And that's what you're trying to broker.' **EC backbone lead***

What could be improved

The Review surfaced a significant number of initiatives in the ten EC regions that highlight the broader empowerment and systemic reform aspirations of the EC Partnership. The examples of good practice (below) provide signposts and areas for further development as to how Indigenous people can be empowered to meaningfully shape government investments across the policy lifecycle. These areas for potential improvement and further enhancement of both JDM and the broader practice of SDM are discussed below. They are also reflected in Recommendations 1, 2 and 3 (see 'Summary Table of Findings and Recommendations', pages 17-19 of this report).

Expanding SDM

While the current JDM focus on IAS ceasing grants has been an important reform with many impactful outcomes for Indigenous people, it has a limited influence over broader government policy and funding systems. Indigenous empowerment, however, remains a key aspiration for the EC Partnership. Local Indigenous people through the JDM process are, often for the first time, able to have a direct say in government decisions that affect them and their families. Building on these foundations and collaborating with other federal, state, local government and community driven initiatives, the EC Partnership can shift to a broader SDM approach, to meaningfully shape government investments across the full policy lifecycle including legislation, policy development, program design and service delivery.

Towards Participatory Budgeting

EC's JDM model and the critical role of community panels and other partnership or negotiation structures ('tables') was seen by Review participants to provide a form of participatory budgeting in that it allows panels of local people to provide input into the funding decisions made by government. While still evolving, these processes and structures aim to provide a more authorised and deliberative approach to funding decision-making. The Inner-Sydney EC Pathway of Empowerment¹⁸ – illustrated in Figure 9 on the following page – is based on three key domains ('Rebuilding our economy'; 'Investing in people'; and 'Social infrastructure') which guide the region's development agenda and JDM process. Expanding the focus and scope of JDM provides an opportunity to develop further the participatory and deliberative nature of EC decision-making. The Pathway of Empowerment was in part designed to address funding and service delivery approaches that create 'a cycle of disempowerment' through services that do not support individual capability and social infrastructure that is not focused on community building.

'You've got 10 EC regions that have Regional Development Agendas. They should all then be pulled up to a national EC strategy that picks up the common themes and gives each strategy a place...that not only gives the ability to scale, but it amplifies the regional strategies to a point that...we can all be working on it together.'

EC backbone

'...that's the thing isn't it, is that people I think that there's this assumption that (shared) decision-making is just about funding and actually it's a mechanism of structural change that can be used across. And that's why I keep saying this is a mechanism, right? You can use it across an entire systemic framework in whatever way. This is a system of racial led transparency and accountability.'

Service provider

'Perhaps a regional budget as opposed to one based on current IAS activities...across all Commonwealth funding, ideally state as well...there needs to be a whole of government commitment to actually engaging with EC.'

NIAA

'...communities and justice type stuff, DSS, Education, Health – they've all got big buckets of Indigenous specific funding we don't have visibility on. I personally think the next stage of the JDM is to look at all those too... a thematic approach would be good too. I think we could step back and look at everything that's happening at once – at the moment, we're still just getting pieces of the pie at once and assessing each piece...'

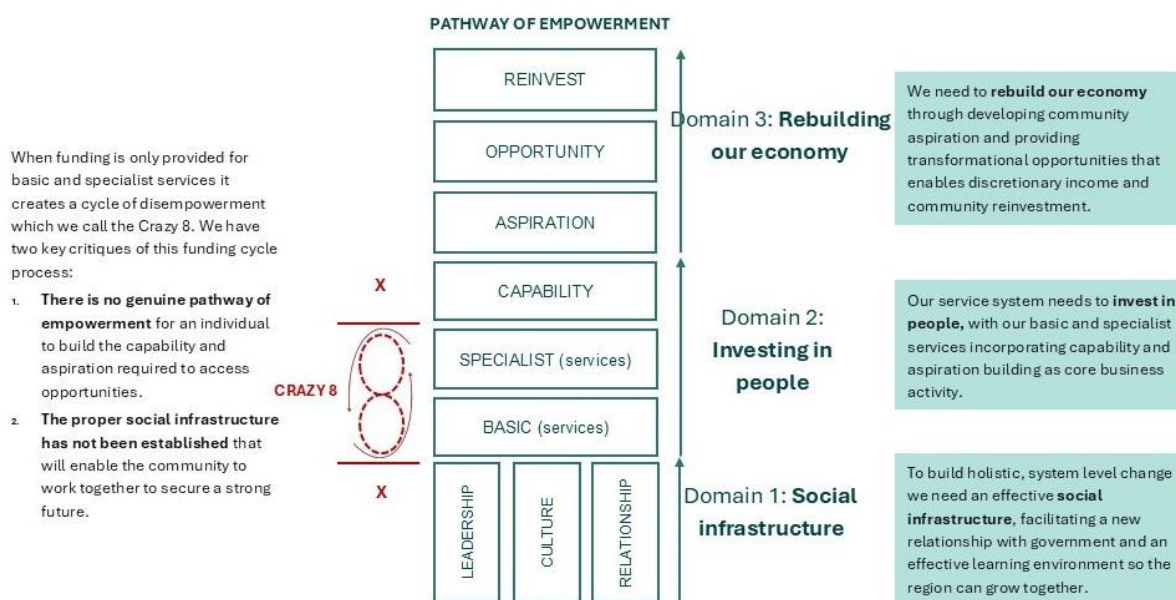
Community panel member

¹⁸ Inner Sydney Empowered Communities (2024) *Community Panel Information Pack - August 2024*.

Figure 9 – Inner Sydney EC Pathway of Empowerment

Pathway of Empowerment

The ISEC Development Agenda is a new set of guidelines for doing business in the region, ensuring that stakeholders work to the communities priorities and are aligned to the Pathway of Empowerment.



The Funding System

The EC Partnership model highlights local partnerships, shared decision-making, and adaptive systems as a counterpoint to traditional modes of policy making and service delivery. However, specific goals, methods, and partnership arrangements are often mandated by governmental funding and program controls, meaning that the government substantially defines the goals and processes shaping service design, funding processes and performance reporting. Even when the terminology of community partnerships and collaboration is endorsed by government agencies, the structures for delivering services to local communities have retained key features of contract-based service delivery and associated compliance reporting.

Devolved Funding

Service provider organisations are placed in an ongoing cycle of applying for and reporting against small, short-term grants, that are specific in scope, administratively burdensome, and divert focus away from collaboration and service quality. Indigenous communities and service delivery are dominated by public finances and the current system for governing this funding is fragmented and centralised, impacting on local governance capability. Devolved funding reforms do not involve relaxing accountabilities for how public funds are used, but rather they 'aim to heighten accountability for results' and critically, devolved funding models promote local governance and delivery by embracing the politics of places, including competition, privilege, exclusion and factionalism (see Moran & Porter, 2014).

Local Solutions

The Queensland Productivity Commission's (2017) inquiry's report into service delivery in remote and discrete Indigenous communities highlighted the significant financial investment (\$1.2 billion a year or \$29,000 per person) by the Queensland government on services to remote and discrete communities. Despite this expenditure, outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities were not improving. The Commission concluded that the service delivery system is 'fundamentally broken', characterised by a 'bureaucratic maze' of disconnected administrative silos (Queensland Productivity Commission, 2017, p17). The Commission concluded that the 'key to achieving a sustained improvement is to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander communities to develop solutions for themselves' (Queensland Productivity Commission, 2017, p. viii).

Reinvestment and Pooled Funding

A further suggestion for the future made by Review participants was to improve the government processes around the 'pooled funding' option that is possible under JDM. Under the JDM process all regions can cease and quarantine funding¹⁹ as highlighted by the Review's engagement with the East Kimberley region, where a community panel can recommend 'cease contract and pool funding' where a service is not meeting the community's needs. This approach is also evident in other EC regions. This places the funding in a 'regional pooled funding mechanism', so the funding can be 're-directed to something more strategic' in the future. While acknowledging scaling up the role of SDM in ceasing grants and quarantining funding will be challenging (only 2% of activities that have been assessed through a JDM have been ceased or funding quarantined), this approach is seen as a key element of a growing SDM model for current and new funding.

Further work is needed to ensure this reinvestment mechanism could work effectively to enable pooled funding for both current and potentially new investments to better meet community needs. Greater clarity is needed around the process for redeploying these funds to community priorities, which NIAA prefers to call 'quarantined' rather than 'pooled' funding. If EC shifts to a greater focus on SDM, there should be a stronger role for the community in deciding the use of these funds.

Sector-Based Funding

One way that a pooled funding approach could work is for a JDM round to be organised so that a wide range of funded programs related to a particular sector in a particular place could be considered at once. For example, a community panel could be convened to consider all the funded education programs or youth programs in a community. This would enable the panel to look at this sector in a holistic way, to assess whether the funded programs are working together to address Indigenous people's priorities for that sector, as set out in the RDA or other local community plan for that sector. To date, the JDM approach has not necessarily enabled rounds to focus on multiple grants from a particular sector, as the grants for consideration depend on timing issues. However, there have been serendipitous occasions where the end dates for several related grants from one sector have come up for review at the same time. The practice example in Box 14 below illustrates the positive results that can be achieved where sector-specific grants can be assessed against

¹⁹ See NIAA's Joint Decision-Making Handbook, April 2023.

community priorities. Many Review participants have recommended that JDM rounds should be specifically engineered to enable sector-by-sector reviews of funding.

Reviewing funding on a thematic basis based on RDA priorities, as is occurring in some EC regions, also enables the backbone organisation to facilitate a process whereby the community developed a long-term strategic agenda for the place around that one theme, which could then guide decision-making about the grants. Backbone staff saw this as the key to success of the case example where early childhood funding was reallocated on a community-wide basis. Some regions have thematic sub-plans that sit under their regional development agendas.

Program-Investment Reform

The current JDM process provides a platform to develop new regional development investments, either by involving the community in the initial design of new programs (co-design) or involving the community in the initial decisions about funding service providers. For example, regions such as East Kimberley, Cape York, and Far West Coast have been involved in discussions with the Department of Social Services about co-design around new funding programs. The resource implications for the backbone team would need to be carefully considered. An expanded SDM will engage backbones as partnership enablers and this role in SDM with additional agencies will require more work for the backbones.

Many regions, such as Central Coast and Cape York, reported successfully engaging with agencies beyond DSS, influencing policy, funding systems, and community outcomes in health, education, and community justice. EC regions had also collaborated with state, territory, and local governments on service planning and infrastructure needs. These opportunities to take a more thematic and cross-sector approach to investment planning and service delivery can be built on to influence broader systemic change.

'How do we take the principles of joint decision-making and apply that to a non-ceasing grant? New grant programmes with EC we've been piloting, such as the Ranger expansion programme and the Junior Ranger programme and the ISEP programme...we're slowly starting to see other opportunities for governments to partner with communities around decision-making that has started with the seed that's grown from joint decision-making.'

EC backbone

"More broadly though, we are constantly having discussions with local governments. It's not directly related to the JDM process, but we've certainly worked hard on trying to build that local community connection to the councils within the region and we've had a lot of success in that space. We're now entering into formal agreements and are involved in their project planning and reviewing their annual infrastructure projects for the year so that we can see what cultural impacts...I'd say JDM is a huge part of that...it helps to strengthen relationships within government and at all levels of government...we've gotten it to a point where we're at the table, we're at the start of the planning process.'

EC backbone

Box 14: Practice Example – How Community Panel Innovation and Pooled Funding Can Lead to Service System Improvements

A Broome community panel in mid-2022 was reviewing a set of contracts related to early years and parenting support activities in Broome. One of the panel members was a community member who had previously worked in early childhood programs but was currently on maternity leave and attended with her baby. An EC staff member recalls the discussion and how this panel member made an important contribution:

'It was fantastic to just observe the discussion that was happening with the panel and helping facilitate that kind of flow. And the panel could see that a variety of providers who were being funded to deliver these services were all experiencing similar things, like not necessarily being provided enough money to attract staff or to deliver the contracts. And cost of living expenses increasing, [impacting clients'] fuel costs and the ability to travel [to Broome] and people being unable to live and be housed up here. So, one of the panel members had this idea. Wouldn't it be fantastic if we had just like a central, purpose-built centre of excellence where all of these early childhood playgroups and parenting programs could be co-located and share resources and almost share staff and be like a one stop shop hub for parents to increase the access, to attend some of these things. The panel member described it as an Aboriginal early learning and parenting centre of excellence in Broome.' **EC backbone**

Another EC staff member reflected on how the panel was able to use JDM's quarantined funds mechanism to redirect funds to service system improvement:

'It's a really good JDM success story, because NIAA followed EC West through that whole process... A contract in that panel wasn't an ACCO, so [the panel] decided to quarantine that funding because the [non-ACCO] service provider doesn't align with the [community's] values. But then they also identified the duplication in services around delivering to the same cohort. Everyone was doing the same thing, but not everyone had enough [funds] to deliver very well. [So, the panel said:] 'Can we use that [quarantined/pooled] money to start a discussion about each of these services that are delivering to the same people, but they're all struggling? How do you share services? Why can't they just all work in the same place? The child is at day-care while the parent goes to parenting classes.'... So, you know: 'You focus on long day care while we focus on the mobile playgroup and then you guys can focus on just doing the parenting. You use the \$250,000 that you receive every year to just focus on delivering parenting classes and don't overextend yourself to then try and do community engagement or the remote playgroup. Leave that to this organisation who is already getting the same funding but also trying to deliver both of those same things.' So [the result would be] each of these services are delivering very well but not trying to spread themselves across all areas with the same delivery in their contracts.

So, they discussed that in the panel, went back and wrote in the recommendation for NIAA to support the conversation in creating a co-location facility for all of these services... [EC West received] some quarantine funds to write a business case and help us sort of facilitate that conversation about 'what would you want it to be?' And it was very well received from the parents, especially the lady from that JDM panel, who followed it all the way through.' **EC backbone**

The concept has now been named the Jirril Birnyurdany Aboriginal Centre of Excellence, which is Yawuru for 'strong because of roots'.

Box 15: Practice Example – Leveraging Opportunities for Program Reform with the Department of Social Services

'We've been doing shared decision-making with DSS since 2016 around some of their other programmes and I've sat on the national leadership group for Stronger Places, Stronger People...I've used the learnings from EC as a foundation for other departments that we work with, and we're also incorporating that within a South Australian Government perspective on how we progress shared decision-making... I'm writing a paper on shared decision-making at the moment...through that lit review, it's really clear that the concept of joint decision-making and shared decision-making has popped up in bubbles...but it's never really been formalised in a structure that can be embedded and scaled. So, if you consider JDM as the invention of a concept of decision-making partnerships between government and community, I think shared decision-making is then the innovation of an existing concept. People have taken the seed that's been planted through EC and have understood how it can start applying in other areas.' **EC backbone**

The way forward: Applying the lessons learned

Review participants and the broader literature on collaborative governance and local empowerment highlight that designing and implementing a transition to SDM requires a fundamental shift in public policy and governance systems. This shift must go beyond tokenistic and ad hoc approaches, to empowering Indigenous people through genuine partnerships that decentralise control and foster self-determination. Recent Government initiatives such as the Targeting Entrenched Disadvantage (TED) package, the establishment of the new national centre for place-based collaboration known as Partnerships for Local Action and Community Empowerment (PLACE), together with Closing the Gap priorities (i.e. Priority Reform 1 and Priority Reform 2) are important foundations for these policy and governance reforms.

For true progress, governments must shift from merely sharing decision-making to genuinely relinquishing control, thereby enabling self-determination and fostering trust and collaboration with Indigenous people. Indigenous policy making has been characterised historically by trials, pilots and time limited programs, often at the whim of ad hoc policy decisions and changes in government. A sustained and authorised program of systemic reform is required to address power imbalances, strengthen local and regional governance, and align policies, funding and services with community priorities. Importantly effective and authorised Regional Development Agendas to guide local decision-making and investment priorities across each region was a constant theme throughout the Lessons Learned Review.

In the next phase of growth of SDM practice, the findings of this review suggest the following ways forward to build on current success:

SDM growth the next 12 months:

- Review findings are considered as part of the the APS Shared-Decision-Making Guide that is being developed by the Department of Social Services under the Targeting Entrenched Disadvantage (TED) package. This should include options for an enhanced role for participatory budgeting in Government decision-making.
- The EC Partners to support more agencies and governments to use the existing EC national and regional infrastructure for SDM to co-design reforms to existing programs and best practice approaches to new investments.
- The EC Partners to gather and share the innovations and systemic reforms that emerge from SDM with other agencies and governments.

SDM growth to 2028:

- Reporting under Closing the Gap is expanded so that each Agency is required to publicly report on how they are sharing decision-making with Indigenous People consistent with Priority Reform 1.
- Progress opportunities to demonstrate a place-based model for SDM with pooled funding involving multiple programs and government agencies.

Conclusion

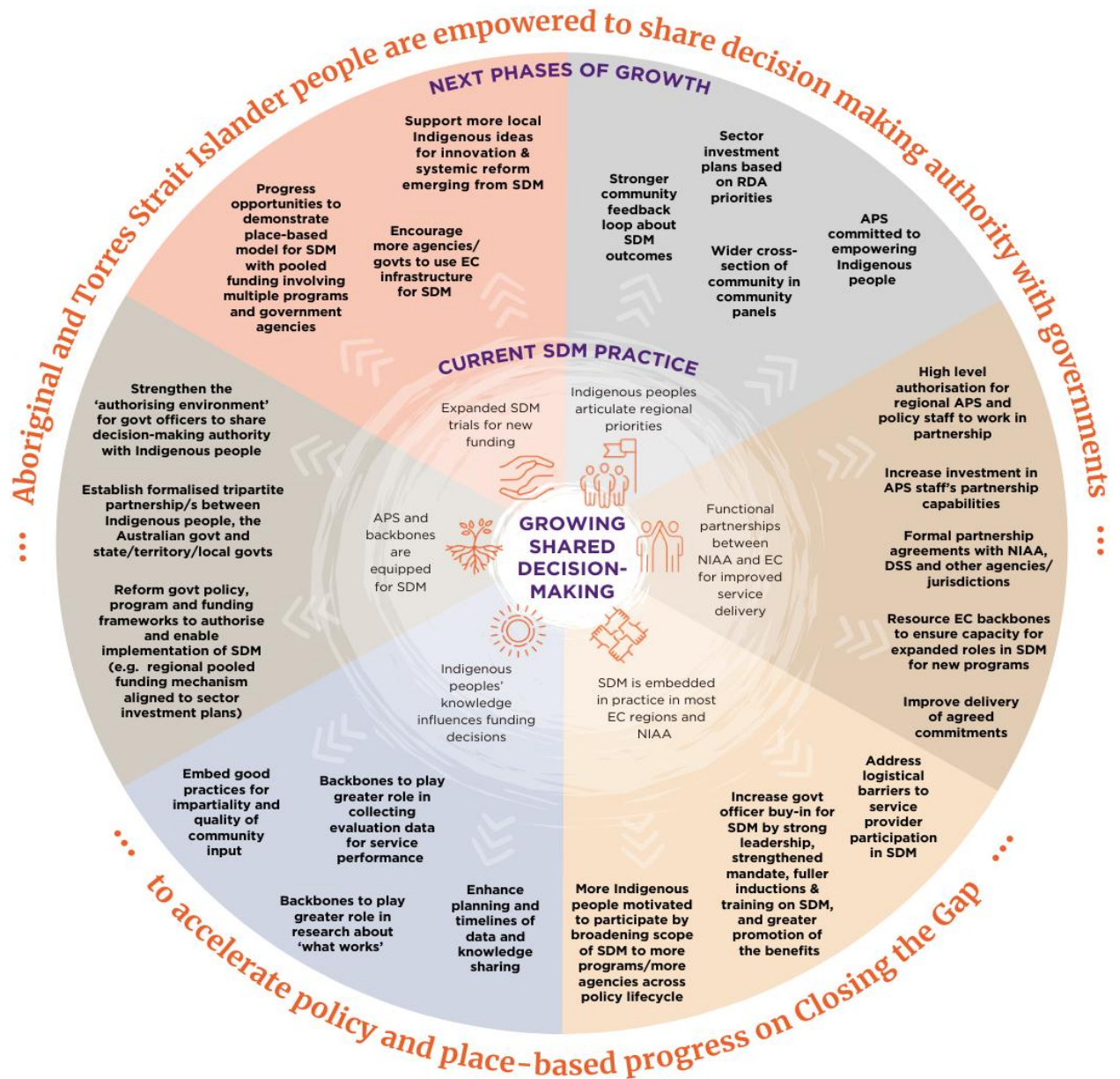
While it is not an evaluation of the EC Partnership, this Lessons Learned Review is informed by a literature review, interviews with over 100 people, and extensive research and co-design with the NIAA and EC participants. As outlined in the introduction to this Report, the Review's purpose was multi-faceted. A primary focus was to identify the success factors for JDM along with opportunities for further improvement. The Review provides valuable insights that can be applied during new place-based partnerships between EC regions and other government agencies and can help NIAA support partnership building and shared decision-making with Indigenous people across the Australian Government and more broadly. The Review can also be a foundation for ongoing learning and evaluation for EC and other partnerships between Indigenous people and governments.

In conclusion, the existing EC SDM approach has demonstrated an effective model for how the Closing the Gap Priority Reform 1 – Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision-Making can be enacted in practice. The model provides a proof of concept and platform that other Commonwealth, state and territory government agencies can leverage to meet their own commitments under Closing the Gap Priority Reform 1. The majority of current SDM is taking place at a grant/activity level. While this enables empowerment and subsidiarity at a community-level, the Review has highlighted the need for decision-making to take place further upstream in the policy life cycle. When combined, the six domains that are highlighted in this Review form a Growth Model for shared decision-making and are the key enablers for successful place-based shared decision-making. The six domains provide a framework for policy, practice and action to support the growth of SDM.²⁰

The Growth Model for the Empowered Communities Partnership shared decision-making acknowledges the innovation, reform and improved outcomes for Indigenous people through the current JDM model and the broader activities of the EC Partnership. The Growth Model reflects the importance of Indigenous empowerment and place partnerships aligned with a broader Regional Development Agenda to drive government investment and productivity for Indigenous people for Closing the Gap reforms. In providing practical guidance for further growth, this model also recognises the inter-dependency and inter-relationships among the six domains. While none of the six domains is elevated in importance relative to others, the model recognises the primacy of centring *Indigenous people (being) empowered and heard*. There is also recognition that growth in SDM practice cannot be achieved without parallel structural change to the legislative, policy, governance, funding and delivery systems impacting on the lives of Indigenous people. Figure 10 on the following page summarises the next phases of growth for SDM by domain, drawing on the insights for each domain discussed in this document. Detailed growth phases for each domain are outlined in the Table in Appendix C.

²⁰ See the 'Growth Model for the Empowered Communities Partnership's Shared Decision-Making' document.

Figure 10 – Growing shared decision-making – the next phase



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Appendix A Common elements of EC Governance arrangements to support SDM

The Empowered Communities: Empowered People Design Report (2015) highlights the ways in which specific governance arrangements and structures within each EC region vary, depending on context and local circumstances. However, there are a number of common elements across the regions that support the work of EC as illustrated in the figure below.²¹

Figure 11 – Common elements of EC regional governance arrangements



Central to regional governance is a leadership group with cultural authority to guide the work of the EC backbone in each location. For example, EC backbone organisations work closely with EC Leaders to engage and consult with other Indigenous-led organisations and Indigenous people within their regions to support building Regional Development Agendas and to implement strategies that address regional priorities. Regional governance arrangements also include mechanisms for Indigenous people in the region to engage with government on local and regional priorities. Examples include the regional negotiation tables that are assembled to review recommendations around IAS ceasing grants (as part of the NIAA joint decision-making process) and partnership workshops to co-design Local Partnership Agreements. Representatives at the regional level may include members of the leadership group, but also opt-in organisations, members of the community and others with specific expertise, as relevant. The regional mechanisms can also play a role in disseminating information and data that can inform improvements and adaptations to policy, programs and services. The backbone organisation performs a key secretariat function supporting regional governance arrangements and the interface mechanism.

EC Leaders from regional leadership groups also meet as a national network, drawing on the insights and experiences in their regions to learn from each other. They act as a collective voice to amplify regional issues and to advocate for systemic change. A NIAA-

²¹ This figure has been taken from page 47 of the Empowered Communities Design Report (2015).

funded EC National Coordination Team supports the work of backbone organisations and the EC Leaders national network.

EC regions convene panels of community members—who act like citizen juries to make recommendations to government on program funding decisions affecting the region. Community panels aim to increase the opportunities for Indigenous people to have some tangible influence in decision-making. Approaches to community engagement, recruitment, training and support are tailored by EC regions to suit their specific context. However, nomination and selection of individuals to participate is determined by the EC region in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity and to draw in representation from as broad a pool of people as possible and as is appropriate in the context (e.g. considering the need to avoid conflicts, and the skills and experience of participants and the whole panel given the subject matter at hand). Panel members are not paid but volunteer their time. Panel members are supported by the backbone team and NIAA with information and capability building support in the decision-making process.

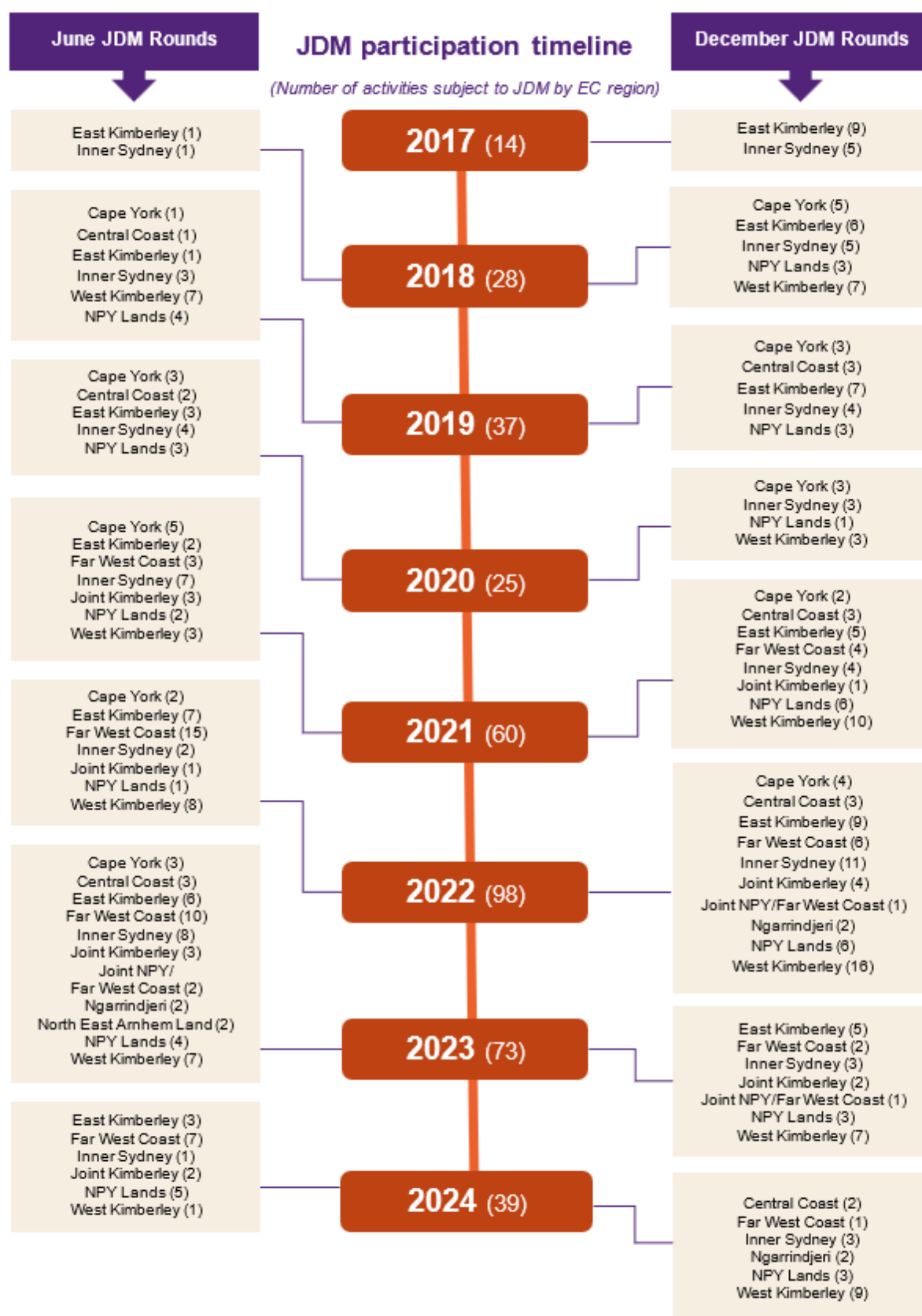
Appendix B An overview of SDM since EC inception

From the first JDM rounds reviewing IAS ceasing grants undertaken in December 2017, until the December 2024 JDM rounds, over \$289 million of IAS funding across 374 activities has been considered through JDM arrangements in Empowered Communities regions.

The first JDM rounds took place in Inner Sydney and East Kimberley, and JDM has continued since then with rounds held twice a year. In December 2018, West Kimberley, NPY Lands and Cape York EC regions also participated in JDM, and in June 2021 FWCP EC commenced JDM. By 2021, NREC had commenced JDM, and joint JDMs across adjoining regions (FWCP and NPY Lands; East and West Kimberley) were undertaken. NEAL EC undertook its first JDM process in June 2023. Goulburn Murray EC have opted not to take part in JDM on IAS ceasing grants, due to the smaller volume and value of IAS investment in their region. Instead, the region has been focused on the development and implementation of a regional plan for Indigenous advancement that goes beyond NIAA investments, and has been working actively to engage government, philanthropic and private investment in the region to implement the community-led regional plan.

Details of the numbers of activities subject to JDM in each region by JDM round are outlined on the timeline of JDM participation in the figure on the following page.

Figure 12 – Timeline of JDM participation across JDM rounds by EC region



The focus on ceasing grants means that historical allocations and funding arrangements for IAS-funded programs within each region has shaped the magnitude and nature of funding that could be subject to JDM deliberations at each round.

The majority of JDM processes have related to 'Children and Schooling' program funded activities (207 decisions from December 2017 to December 2024) and 'Safety and Wellbeing' program funded activities (134 decisions between June 2018 and December 2024). A total of 17 decisions have been made in relation to 'Culture and Capability' funded program activities, 13 decisions have been made for 'Remote Australia Strategy' funded program activities, and only three decisions have been made for 'Jobs, Land and Economy' funded program activities.²² Figure 13 below illustrates total funding shaped by JDM across the five programs, with this amount being far greater for the programs where JDM has focused to date. Median, 'smallest' and 'largest' total funding amounts for each program provide a picture of the range and variability of funding subject to JDM across EC regions for each program. Funding variability reflects the diversity and scope of services that are funded via these programs.

Figure 13 – Overview of IAS funding subject to JDM Dec 2017 to Dec 2024 by program²³

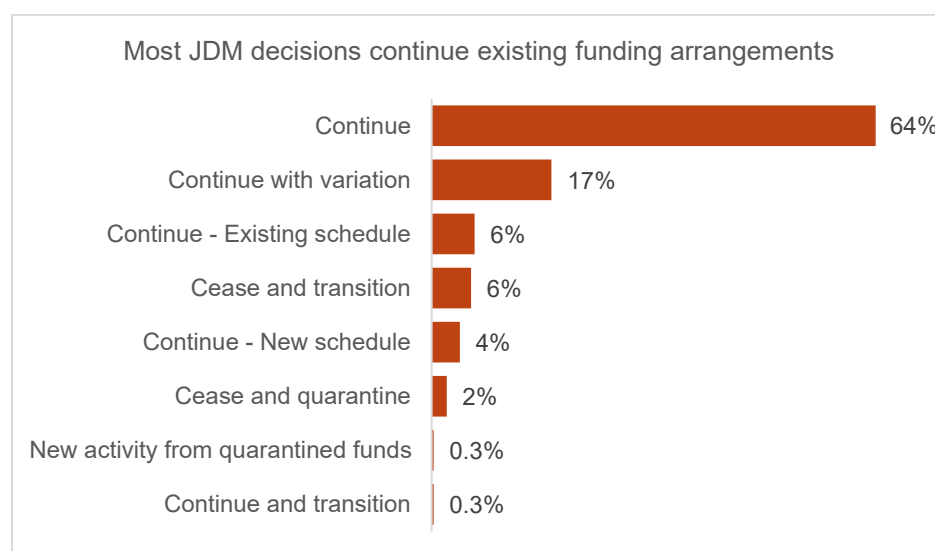
IAS Funding Program	Total no. of decisions	≈ Total \$ (millions)	Smallest Total Funding Amount	Median Total Funding Amount	Largest Total Funding Amount
1.1 Jobs, Land and Economy	3	\$1.7	\$240,000	\$500,000	\$1,000,000
1.2 Children and Schooling	207	\$130.2	\$12,738	\$265,722	\$14,464,156
1.3 Safety and Wellbeing	134	\$143	\$10,488	\$510,147	\$7,860,344
1.4 Culture and Capability	17	\$8.6	\$30,000	\$360,000	\$1,986,264
1.5 Remote Australia Strategy	13	\$7.2	\$154,280	\$390,000	\$1,620,036

The most common outcome of JDM processes is that the funding arrangement for the service or program being considered is continued or continued with some variation (approximately 91% of decisions had this outcome). The JDM process, however, provides the opportunity to explore how the service has been working and to discuss and consider strategies for enhancing access, delivery strategies and the effectiveness of funded services and programs.

²² The majority of 1.1 Jobs, Land and Economy programs are national programs (e.g., CDP etc) and are not determined at a regional level. EC has been able to input to these through other processes. For example, for RJED, EC regions were invited to share economic development priorities in their region to be considered alongside their Regional Development Agendas.

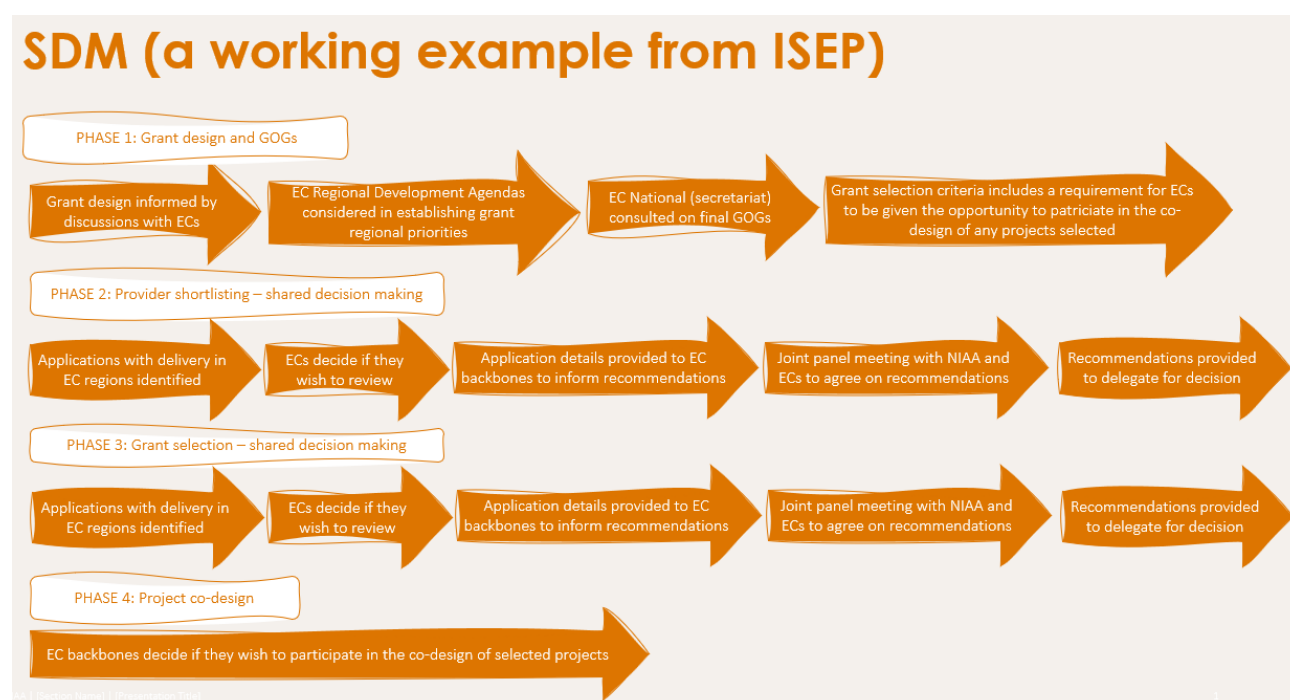
²³ This table documents IAS funding subject to JDM in the participating EC regions only, and is not representative of the total IAS funding for each program across Australia.

Figure 14 – JDM Outcomes Dec 2017 to Dec 2024



Drawing on the experience of JDM for IAS ceasing grants, SDM across the grant lifecycle was trialled in the context of NIAA's Indigenous Skills and Employment Program (ISEP) in 2023, with eight EC regions participating and a total of 14 funding proposals from SA, QLD, WA and NSW being jointly reviewed. Approximately \$56.4 million in ISEP funding was approved. Figure 15 below illustrates the phases of ISEP SDM in EC regions.

Figure 15 – ISEP SDM processes across the grant lifecycle



Building on the success of the ISEP SDM, EC regions were involved in SDM for the NIAA's Indigenous Rangers program in SA, WA, QLD and NSW in late 2023 and 2024. Recommendations were provided on 46 proposals, with decisions on a total of approximately \$65 million in Rangers Program funding being endorsed.

Most recently (in early 2025) an SDM process focusing on NIAA's Small Sporting Grants was undertaken in NSW with a small number of proposals considered and \$896,000 allocated to the successful provider.

Thus, in addition to over \$289 million determined via JDM for IAS ceasing grants, EC regions have been involved in SDM involving a total of approximately \$122 million in further IAS funding across 63 applications. Thus, currently over \$411 million of IAS funding across 437 activities and/or proposals has been recommended through JDM arrangements in Empowered Communities regions.

More broadly at the national level, four EC regions (Inner Sydney, West Kimberley, East Kimberley, and Tristate) are working with the Department of Social Services on the Outcomes and Evidence Fund.²⁴ trials being undertaken over the next 3 years. EC National Co-ordination team is brokering the fund at three of the sites. Backbone teams across all four regions are playing a role in:

- Selection of final proposals for submission to DSS following a full community co-design process
- Negotiation of service agreements
- Monitoring of project deliverables and outcomes
- Oversighting and compiling reporting requirements
- Undertaking sector strengthening activities

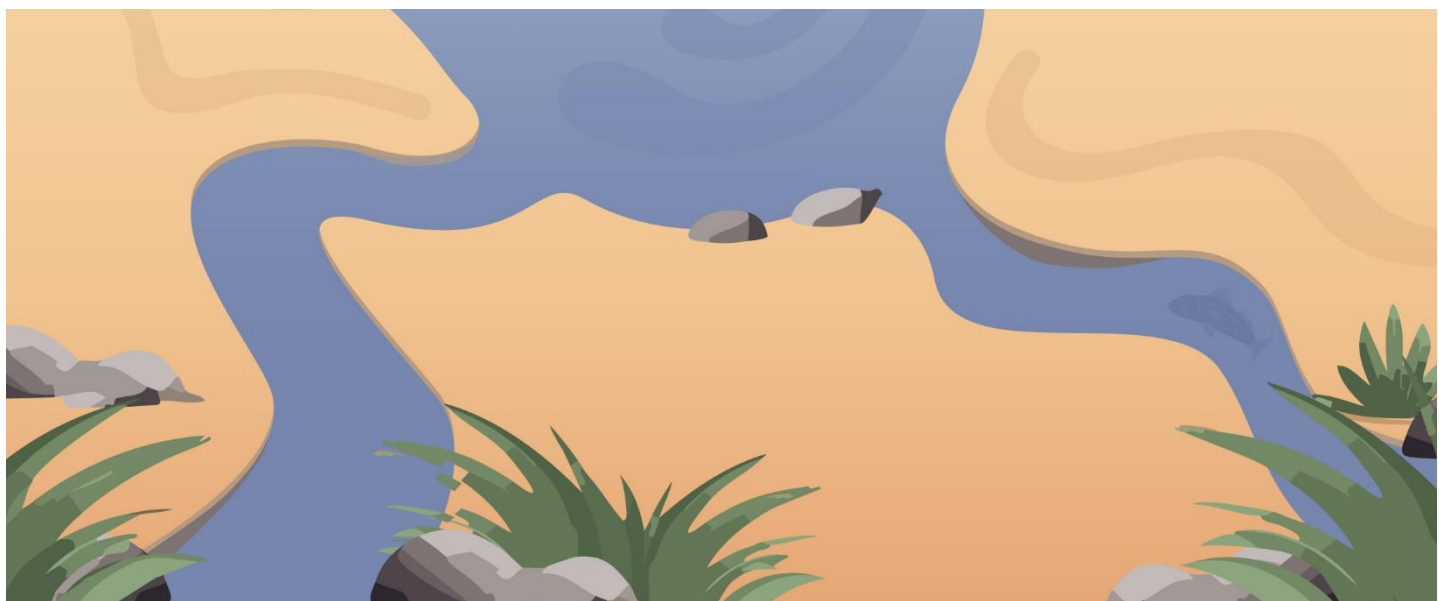
In addition to these Australian Government program-driven opportunities for SDM, the Lessons Learned Review found that EC regions have also been leveraging their relationships locally, and drawing on the lessons learned via JDM, to develop and/or engage in SDM with state and local governments.

²⁴ The Closing the Gap Outcomes and Evidence Fund is a program for First Nations people, organisations and communities to co-design, trial and evaluate projects aimed at contributing to Closing the Gap Targets 12 and 13 that seek to reduce the rates of children in out of home care and reduce family violence – <https://www.dss.gov.au/closing-gap/closing-gap-outcomes-and-evidence-fund>

Appendix C Phases for growing current SDM practice

SDM DOMAIN	Current SDM Practice	SDM growth over the next 12 months	SDM growth to 2028
INDIGENOUS PEOPLE EMPOWERED & HEARD 	- Evidence of innovative community ideas being seeded through the SDM process - Indigenous voices are being heard, and people are empowered in IAS funding decisions - Regional Development Agendas are in place, and they are capturing Indigenous priorities - All parties demonstrate knowledge and skills for SDM - Community engagement processes and EC regional governance are in place to support SDM	- The Partners determine the options available to consider all place-based government funding for a priority sector across multiple agencies and levels of government in EC regions - Develop stronger community feedback loops about SDM outcomes - Develop processes to recruit a wider cross-section of local people for all community panels - Pursue opportunities to bring a broader scope of government decisions to the table for community input through SDM	Facilitate the development of cross-government sector investment plans for EC regions based on the agreed development agenda priorities in that region
PARTNERSHIPS 	- A strong partnership model exists, providing an important proof of concept that shows readiness for expansion - The model includes a clear and shared vision among all Partners that is focussed on Indigenous empowerment and improved service delivery - The Partnership has developed some strong collaborative ways of working and Partners continue to look for better ways to work together to build trust and improve outcomes on the ground for Indigenous people - Regional Development Agendas and Local Partnership Agreements are in place or underway in all EC regions	- Formal national partnership agreement signed with NIAA and DSS - Framework for an expanded shared decision making model developed and agreed between Partners - Identify opportunities to partner with EC regions under the expanded SDM model - Local Partnership Agreements signed for each EC region and Regional Development Agendas refreshed where required - Resource requirements mapped for all partners, to ensure an expanded SDM model is effective	- SDM model expanded to other agencies and jurisdictions - SDM model expanded to include policy development, service design and system reform while continuing to make decisions about funding on the ground in EC regions - Formal partnership agreements signed with other Commonwealth, state and local government agencies - Authorising environment is clearly articulated and supports decision-making as close to the ground as possible - Opportunities for new regions to join EC are progressed as appropriate
BUY-IN 	- Clear evidence that Indigenous people are embracing JDM as an opportunity to have their say in regional investment planning and decision-making - There are champions in government who promote SDM practices and mindsets across the Australian Public Sector - The number of service providers opting-in to the JDM process has increased, including ACCOs - Service providers are seeing the benefits of JDM in enhancing service quality and responsiveness - APS staff particularly in the NIAA are appreciative of the benefits of a SDM approach for all partners	- Facilitate the expansion of SDM to more programs/more agencies across the policy cycle - Address logistical barriers for service provider participation in SDM such as fixed funding agreements and timeframes, disjointed administrative procedures/policies and inconsistent delivery areas. - Increase NIAA government officer buy-in for SDM through strong NIAA leadership, strengthened mandate, fuller inductions and training in SDM for NIAA regional officers - Promote the benefits of SDM to relevant agencies in the APS	Promote SDM to other government agencies through strong leadership; strengthened mandate; fuller inductions, incentives and training on SDM; greater promotion of its benefits to the NIAA regional offices and across the APS

TWO-WAY KNOWLEDGE SHARING 	• Indigenous people's knowledge and qualitative measures of service performance are being valued in JDM funding decisions • The quality of data being shared with Indigenous people about service impact has improved, and Indigenous people are seeking broader service performance (outcome) data • Improved service provider data collection and presentation of information to inform funding decisions • There is an appetite for mixed data sources including local knowledge and insights to guide JDM funding decisions	• EC regions to embed good practices for impartiality and to improve the quality of community panel deliberations • Identify opportunities to collect better local and regional evaluation data including local knowledge and insights for assessing service performance • NIAA to enhance the scope, planning and timeliness of service performance (outcome) data and knowledge sharing for JDM rounds	• EC backbones to research 'what works' for JDM and the evidence used to measure service performance in their regions and share that knowledge with other EC regions
ENABLING SYSTEMS 	• All parties work with the Ministerial authorisation for 75% weighting of EC Leaders' input in JDM • The government commitment to multi-year funding for EC backbones as partners in SDM enables strategic backbone staff recruitment and strengthens EC backbone commitment to JDM • EC backbones have legitimacy and capability as trusted convenors/enablers for Indigenous participation in SDM • Locally driven partnerships between Indigenous communities, EC backbones and service providers are evident	• Support more agencies and governments to use EC national and regional infrastructure for SDM to co-design their new investments • Gather and share the innovations and systemic reforms that have emerged from JDM with other agencies and governments	• Initiate reform of government policy, program and funding frameworks that authorise and enable implementation of SDM (e.g. trialling regional pooled funding mechanism aligned to sector investment plans) • Strengthen the 'authorising environment' (including the challenges of moving from 'top-down' procurement practices to more relational grant making) for government officers to share decision-making authority with Indigenous people • Formalised tripartite partnership/s are established between Indigenous people, the Commonwealth and state/ territory/ local governments for SDM
(SCOPE FOR) SYSTEMIC IMPACT 	• There is evidence of transition of funding to Aboriginal community-controlled organisations • There is evidence of success in sector-based re-orienting of programs through JDM and quarantined IAS funding for identified community priorities • NIAA is progressing SDM for the co-design of new programs and initial grant allocations such as ISEP and Indigenous Rangers • Other APS agencies are developing SDM models for Indigenous programs (e.g. DSS)	• JDM Lessons Learned Review findings are considered as part of the APS Shared Decision-making Guide that is being developed by the Department of Social Services under the Targeting Entrenched Disadvantage (TED) package. This should include options for an enhanced role for participatory budgeting in Government decision-making • The EC Partners support more agencies and governments to use the existing EC national and regional infrastructure for SDM to co-design reforms to existing programs and best practice approaches to new investments • The EC Partners gather and share the innovations and systemic reforms that emerge from SDM with other agencies and governments	• Reporting under Closing the Gap is expanded so that each Agency is required to publicly report on how they are sharing decision-making with Indigenous People consistent with Priority Reform 1 • Progress opportunities to demonstrate a place-based model for SDM with pooled funding involving multiple programs and government agencies



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