



AIGI

Australian  
Indigenous  
Governance  
Institute

# Exceptional Governance

Stories of Success from the 2024  
Indigenous Governance Awards





We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of all lands where we live, work and collaborate.

We honour and celebrate their Elders, past, present and emerging, and acknowledge their right to self-determine their future, celebrate culture and their ongoing connection to land, seas and waterways.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be aware that this document may contain names or images of people who have passed away.



Acronyms

General

- ACCO  
Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation
- ACNC  
Australian Charities & Not-for-profits Commission
- CEO  
Chief Executive Officer
- IGA  
Indigenous Governance Awards
- LALC  
Local Aboriginal Land Council

Organisations & Corporations

- AIIG  
Australian Indigenous Governance Institute
- AH&MRC  
Aboriginal Health & Medical Research Council
- BDAC  
Bendigo and District Aboriginal Co-operative
- DAC  
Djarindjin Aboriginal Corporation
- GMAAAC  
Granites Mine Affected Area Aboriginal Corporation
- LMARG  
Loddon Mallee Aboriginal Reference Group
- LoCP  
Learning on Country Program
- MTWAC  
Melaythenner Teeackana Warrana (Heart of Country) Aboriginal Corporation
- ORIC  
Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations
- WWWG  
Wintjiri Wiṛu Working Group
- WYAC  
Wajarri Yamaji Aboriginal Corporation
- VOH  
Voice of Hope Aboriginal Corporation

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# Acknowledgement

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We would like to thank the many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups, leaders and organisations who have generously shared their knowledge and insights.

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Publication images feature the 2024 Indigenous Governance Awards finalists.

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## Australian Indigenous Governance Institute

Australian Indigenous Governance Institute (AIGI) is an independent, Indigenous-led centre for governance knowledge and excellence. We connect Indigenous Australians to world-class governance practice, resources and professional development to meet their self-determined governance needs. We envision a future Australia where Indigenous peoples, communities and nations experience self-determination, and enjoy political, social, cultural and economic development through strong self-governance.

## Reconciliation Australia

Reconciliation Australia is an independent not-for-profit organisation whose vision is for an equitable, just and reconciled Australia. Our purpose is to inspire and enable all Australians to contribute to the reconciliation of the nation.

## BHP Foundation

BHP Foundation works to address some of the world's most critical sustainable development challenges. By working in partnership with others who share these ambitions, we seek to raise the bar, find new solutions and set new standards for the future. These efforts are designed to enhance the contribution the global resources sector can make to the achievement of many of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. In Australia, one area of focus is Indigenous governance, and our partnership with AIGI and Reconciliation Australia aims to support self-determined governance for Indigenous development outcomes.



# Introduction

## Indigenous Governance Awards

The Indigenous Governance Awards were established to identify, celebrate and promote outstanding governance in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, projects and initiatives nationwide and their ability to organise, govern and self-determine their communities’ futures.

We know that effective Indigenous governance successfully combines traditional practices based on culture and kinship while working within the requirements of non-Indigenous systems. Our finalists are shining examples of how two-way governance works in practice.

The Awards are also an excellent opportunity for us to showcase our finalists and their governance practices by providing our readers with practical insights into what makes their governance so exceptional.

The Australian Indigenous Governance Institute, Reconciliation Australia, and the BHP Foundation proudly partner to deliver the Indigenous Governance Awards, which have been running biennially since 2005.

The 2024 Awards include three categories for outstanding examples of governance in Indigenous-led organisations:

Category 1: Non-incorporated organisations, initiatives or projects;

Category 2: Small to medium incorporated organisations;

Category 3: Large incorporated organisations





# Foreword

The Indigenous Governance Awards are finally back on the road!

The 2024 Indigenous Governance Awards marks the first time since 2018 that our judging panel were able to return to visiting communities in person, seeing first-hand the positive impacts of effective governance in our communities.

Our judging panel first travelled to Bendigo to visit Loddon Mallee Aboriginal Reference Group and witnessed their incredible work as a collective voice for change across the region. Judges also had the privilege of visiting the Djarindjin Aboriginal Corporation on the Dampier Peninsula in WA, whose spirit of self-determination has led to out-of-the-box thinking and the establishment of the first Aboriginal-owned and operated commercial airport in Australia. The next stop

was Yulara, where judges visited the Wintjiri Wiru Working Group, comprised of Senior Anangu from the Kaltukatjara and Mutitjulu communities, who have shared an ancient songline through new media to generate economic freedom and self-determination for their communities. Next up, the judging panel visited Wajarri Yamaji Aboriginal Corporation in Geraldton, whose governance arrangements centre the voices of over 4,000 Wajarri members at the heart of their decision-making processes.

In Perth, the judges had the opportunity to connect with the Voice of Hope Aboriginal Corporation, who are dedicated to providing a safe space for women exiting incarceration. VOH offer a space for collective healing and empowerment. The judging panel then headed to Alice Springs, Yuelamu, and

Yuendumu, where Granites Mine Affected Area Aboriginal Corporation is working closely with communities to build long-term financial security and positive outcomes. Equally inspiring was the judges' visit to Melaythenner Teeackana Warrana Aboriginal Corporation, who are working to revitalise the Country and community connection in Tebrakunna Country in northeastern Tasmania. Judges then headed north to meet with Mibbinbah Spirit Healing, who are working nationwide to support communities to heal through self-love and cultural connection. The final site visit of 2024 was to the Learning on Country Program in Darwin, who are working with communities across the region to care for Country and keep culture strong.

We are blown away and inspired by the outstanding governance happening across

the nation. It has been incredible to witness the high decision-making standards and powerful community representation in the groups we've had the privilege to visit. When Indigenous governance is done effectively, we can control and self-determine our communities' futures. Getting our governance right is not just important; it's the key to our collective journey of nation building and empowerment. Across all our visits, one thing consistently stood out: the remarkable pride, joy, and leadership demonstrated by each of our finalists. It was evident in every community that voice and culture were not just acknowledged but were central to every decision-making process.

Thank you to all the organisations, projects, initiatives, communities and other groups who submitted applications for the 2024 Indigenous Governance Awards.





# Indigenous Governance Awards Process 2024

## Overview

The Indigenous Governance Awards are held biennially and are open to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led organisations, projects and initiatives.

Below is an overview of the Indigenous Governance Awards process:

### Step 1 – Application

Applicants complete the application form and submit the required supporting documents.

### Step 2 – Application review and shortlisting

A Review Committee assesses all applications and supporting documents based on the selection criteria. Once all applications are reviewed, a shortlist of applicants is made for each category.

### Step 3 – Judging

An independent panel of judges then reviews all the shortlisted applications and their supporting documents, selecting nine finalists across the three categories.

### Step 4 – Site visits

Each finalist organisation receives a site visit from members of the judging panel. If appropriate, we may also capture photography and filming during the site visits, resulting in possible media coverage for the finalist.

### Step 5 – Final selection

Following site visits, the judging panel reconvenes to review the site visit reports and decide a winner in each category.

### Step 6 – Winners announced

Winners are announced at an awards presentation.

# Our Judging Panel

For the 2024 Indigenous Governance Awards, we welcomed four new judges to the panel of eight. Their expertise and perspectives are drawn from health, justice, academia, economic development, business, and governance, bringing an invaluable lens to the awards' decisions.

## Romlie Mokak

### Co-Chair

Romlie Mokak is a Djugun man and a member of the Yawuru people. Romlie is a Consultant and was previously a Commissioner with the Productivity Commission between 2019 - 2024. Previously he has been the Chief Executive Officer of the Lowitja Institute and the Australian Indigenous Doctors Association, the latter of which he was CEO for almost a decade. Prior to these roles, Rom held policy and program management roles in the Australian and New South Wales governments. His responsibilities spanning a range of areas including substance use, eye health, ageing and disability. Additionally, Rom has been the chair or member of a variety of policy, research and evaluation bodies, notably past chair of the National Health Leadership Forum, a forum that brings together national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing organisations.

Rom is a patron of Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health and Community Services and a member of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Board.



## Belinda Duarte

### Co-Chair

Belinda Duarte is Wotjobaluk and Dja Dja Wurrung descendant with Polish and Celtic heritage. As an accomplished leader in elite sport, social equity and First Nations communities, Belinda is CEO of Culture is Life, an organisation which is dedicated to Aboriginal-led solutions for the prevention of First Peoples youth suicide.

She has been appointed to the Victoria 2026 Commonwealth Games Organising Committee, is a director of the Western Bulldogs, MCG trustee, board director of the AnnaMilla First Nations Foundation and Djaara Aboriginal Corporation.

Belinda has a vision of equality across all aspects of living for Aboriginal people. As a former elite athlete, Belinda is working on innovative projects to influence the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and to improve relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. In 2020 she was recognised for her work and awarded a CEW Vincent Fairfax Fellowship. Additional awards include Football Woman of the year 2012 and Emerging leader under the Fellowship for Indigenous Leadership in 2006-2007.





## Shirley McPherson

### Co-Chair

Shirley is a Yamatji and Nyoongar woman from the Perth and Murchison regions of Western Australia. She has experience in program delivery and business development at the regional, national and international levels of government.

Shirley is a Chartered Accountant and has held senior positions in the private, government and university sectors. She is currently a National Business Development and Engagement Manager for AFL SportsReady.

Shirley has been a consultant to the mining industry in negotiating land use agreements in Western Australia and held roles as Group Manager of Indigenous Strategy and Business with Leighton Contractors Pty Ltd. She was a member of the Australian Government delegation to the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.



## Kenny Bedford

Kenny Bedford is a Traditional Owner of the Meuram Tribe of Erub (Darnley Island) Torres Strait. Kenny has served his community and region as the Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA) Member for Erub and held the Fisheries Portfolio on the TSRA Executive for almost a decade.

Kenny was also a Councillor and Deputy Mayor of the inaugural Torres Strait Island Regional Council. As President of the Erub Fisheries Management Association (EFMA) Kenny followed in his father's footsteps to re-establish the only community-owned and managed commercial fishing operation in the Torres Strait. Kenny Bedford is an owner and director of his own business, a Director of the My Pathway Group, a Board Member of Reconciliation Australia, and is a Member of the National NAIDOC Committee.



## Val Price-Beck

Val Price-Beck is a Kamilaroi woman from the Liverpool Plains of New South Wales with over 20 years of experience in Indigenous economic development. Val also has extensive experience in both corporate services and corporate governance, having worked in both the private and public sectors. This has included being the Chief Executive Officer of the Indigenous Business Council of Australia and a member of Indigenous Business Australia's executive management team. Currently, Val is the Chair of the Australian Indigenous Governance Institute and a Director at the National Health Funding Body, a body that supports the obligations and responsibilities of the Administrator through best practice administration of public hospital funding.



## Sarah Brown

Sarah Brown AM is the Chief Executive Officer of Purple House and has been helping the Indigenous Directors to run the organisation since its inception more than eighteen years ago. As well as being a judge this year Sarah and Purple House were the winner of the Indigenous Governance Award Category A (incorporated organisations) in 2016, helping to provide her with a unique perspective to this year's judging panel. Sarah holds a Master of Nursing, a Graduate Diploma in Aboriginal Education, and a Graduate Diploma in Health Service Management. Prior to joining Purple House, she was as a remote area nurse and university lecturer. Sarah has been recognised in many ways for the work she does, being named Hesta's Australia's Nurse of the Year in 2017, being listed as one of BOSS magazine's 'True Leaders' in 2018, and in 2020 Sarah received an Order of Australia Medal for "her significant service to community health, remote nursing and Indigenous communities"

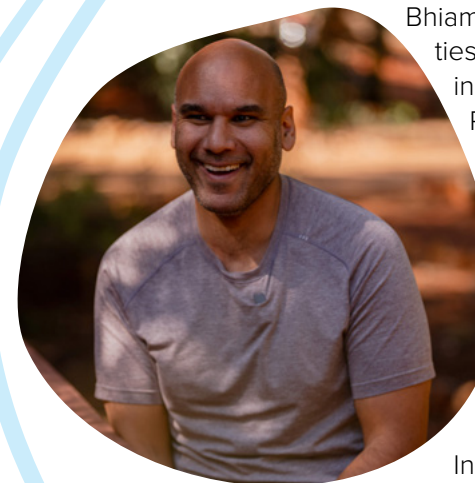


## Bhiamie Williamson

Bhiamie Williamson is a Euahlayi man from north-west New South Wales with familial ties to north-west Queensland. Bhiamie is a Senior Lecturer at Monash University in the School of Geography. Bhiamie leads National Indigenous Disaster Resilience, a research program which seeks to understand and quantify the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people before, during, and after major hazard events.

Bhiamie has a Masters of Indigenous Governance from the University of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada, and a Continuing Education Certificate from the Indigenous Governance Program at the University of Arizona in the United States.

In 2025 Bhiamie graduated with a PhD from the Australian National University. His thesis examines the histories and contemporary identities of Indigenous men and masculinities in Australia.



## Jim Davis

Jim Davis is a descendant of the Daurareb tribe from Mer (Murray Island) in Zenadh Kes (Torres Strait). He has over 20 years' experience supporting Traditional Owner led land and sea management initiatives, the implementation of cultural and corporate governance, the co-design of economic opportunities and the reaffirmation of cultural values on traditional estates. Jim has worked within the Public Service sector in Canberra, the Indigenous not-for-profit sector focussed on Cape York and with the Indigenous Engagement team at BHP. He holds a Bachelor of Arts from Griffith University, is an accredited Mediator and an executive member on government, corporate and philanthropic boards.





# Our 2024 Indigenous Governance Awards Finalists

Each finalist has found a distinct and culturally legitimate way of working with and for their community, providing a voice and vehicle for self-determination and independence.

## Learning on Country

### Learning on Country Program

The Learning on Country Program (LoCP) was established in 2013 as a joint initiative between Aboriginal ranger groups and schools. As of 2024, the program is offered across fourteen Top End communities across the Northern Territory. The LoCP blends Yolngu and Balanda (Western) teaching methods to equip high school students with the knowledge, skills, and experiences needed to transition successfully into post-school opportunities while ensuring that cultural knowledge continues to be passed down from generation to generation. Cultural legitimacy and community voice are embedded in the LoCP's governance structure through local community committees and an all-Indigenous steering committee.



# Category 1

Outstanding examples of governance in Indigenous-led non-incorporated initiatives or projects

## Wintjiri Wiru Working Group

Wintjiri Wiru Working Group (WWWG) comprises Senior Anangu from the Mutitjulu and Kalbarri communities with collaborators from Voyages Indigenous Tourism Australia (Voyages). WWWG shares a chapter of an ancient songline through new media in the spectacular drone and light show Wintjiri Wiru, meaning 'beautiful view out to the horizon' in the Pitjantjatjara language. A project grounded in cultural legitimacy and innovation, the culmination of the group's hard work has generated economic freedom and self-determination for their communities.



## Loddon Mallee Aboriginal Reference Group

Loddon Mallee Aboriginal Reference Group (LMARG) are a consortium of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) run for and by the community. Established in 1997, LMARG's work is steeped in a history of collective advocacy and self-determination. Through their advocacy, they've successfully changed Victorian regulations on who can obtain, possess and apply fluoride varnish. These changes mean Aboriginal health workers across Victoria can now do this meaningful work, enabling early intervention in oral health care and reducing long-term dental issues.



## Category 2

Outstanding examples of governance in small to medium Indigenous-led organisations



### Melaythenner Teeackana Warrana (Heart of Country) Aboriginal Corporation

Melaythenner Teeackana Warrana means Heart of Country. Melaythenner Teeackana Warrana (Heart of Country) Aboriginal Corporation (MTWAC) was established in 2008 by a group of Elders and their families from northeast Tasmania who were determined to reclaim their people's rightful place as the original people of Tasmania. MTWAC membership is limited to Tasmanian Aboriginal people who can show a direct link to northeast Tasmania. The Corporation is governed by a board of nine directors, overseen and advised by a Circle of Elders. MTWAC's effective governance structures ensures they're accountable to their community while planning for the long-term succession of the board. Their Circle of Elders and general members are invited to attend and participate in their discussions and operations, where non-directors can express their views through informal voting.



### Mibbinbah Spirit Healing

Mibbinbah Spirit Healing (Mibbinbah) works with communities nationwide to provide safe spaces and pathways towards healing through customised training, education and mentorship. Mibbinbah was established in 2007 to support First Nations people to heal, grow, and resume their roles as nurturers, teachers, and leaders. They operate in many states across urban, rural, regional, and remote communities. A small organisation with only three staff, Mibbinbah operate on a project-by-project basis, and approach their work with a whole of community focus through co-design.



### Voice of Hope

Voice of Hope Aboriginal Corporation (VOH) was established in 2022 to assist Aboriginal women in Western Australia to adjust back into community life after time spent in prison. They are a volunteer organisation governed by a board of six women (four First Nations and two non-Indigenous), and all activities are overseen by an Elders advisory subcommittee of five Aboriginal women. Through VOH's cultural programs supported by their Elders subcommittee, women are supported to navigate life outside prison, connect to culture and collectively heal.



# Category 3

Outstanding examples of governance  
in large Indigenous-led organisations



## Djarindjin Aboriginal Corporation

Djarindjin Aboriginal Corporation (DAC) is based on the Dampier Peninsula in the far northwest of WA. DAC's spirit of self-determination and innovative thinking saw the establishment of the first Aboriginal-owned and operated commercial airport in Australia. Established in 1985, DAC have fought endlessly to build economic freedom for their community and to be recognised as an Aboriginal Community, which was finally recognised in July 2024. Through their enterprises, they are generating untied income, which can be utilised to develop further and support the needs of their community. Led by a 100% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander board of directors, DAC is on a clear path to nation building through their financial stability and community-centred decision-making.



## Granites Mine Affected Area Aboriginal Corporation

Granites Mine Affected Area Aboriginal Corporation (GMAAAC) was established in 1991 in partnership with the Central Land Council to manage and distribute compensation payments provided to nine Tanami communities for the operation of the Granites gold mine on their Country. At least 50% of the funds received are invested to ensure future financial stability for the communities. The remaining income is used to administer the corporation and to fund projects in each of the affected communities. Each community elects a committee to prioritise, plan and fund projects; the committees elect eighteen directors who oversee GMAAAC's investments. GMAAAC holds a strong commitment to inclusive governance such as facilitating women's leadership in preserving cultural knowledge and practices. Their governance also has a number of initiatives in place to elevate diverse voices in their decision-making.



## Wajarri Yamaji Aboriginal Corporation

Wajarri Yamaji Aboriginal Corporation (WYAC) (formerly Meenangu Wajarri Aboriginal Corporation) was registered in 2013 and commenced operations as the RNTBC for the Wajarri Native Title Determinations in 2021. Wajarri Lands are over 100,000 square kilometres located in the Murchison and Gascoyne regions of Western Australia. WYAC has four land groups, Minangu, Burringurrah/ Milly Milly, Byro and Ngoonooru. WYAC's board of nine directors comprises representatives from each land committee, allowing member input in decision-making. WYAC are striving towards the long-term sustainability of Wajarri people through commercial investment, community programs and employment opportunities.



# Finalists: Deep Dive

How each finalist applies the principles of success to their governance.

## Overview

The following stories showcase our finalists and their governance practices during the 2024 Indigenous Governance Awards.

Each story is split into two sections: an overview of the finalist and a short case study that draws out aspects of their governance practices.

As our finalists were judged based on the same criteria, many of their practices sharing similarities and crossovers. This means that instead of sharing every detail of their governance practices, we have focused on showcasing innovative or unique elements of their governance practices.

All information and persons quoted with their nominated positions are accurate as of August 2024.

We hope you find the stories insightful and inspiring.



The children were asked,  
“Who will tell the stories when  
the Elders are no longer here?”

Their response was clear:  
“We will!”

— Trish Noy, Mutitjulu School Principal  
on impact of WWWG’s work



Learning on Country Program  
Winner Category 1

The Learning on Country Program (LoCP) blends Yolngu and Balanda (Western) teaching methods to equip high school students with the knowledge, skills, and experiences needed to transition successfully into post-school opportunities while ensuring that cultural knowledge continues to be passed down from generation to generation. The program is growing and nurturing the next generation of traditional custodians. Initially starting with four communities in 2013, the program now collaborates with seventeen Top End communities across the Northern Territory. As Danny Dangadnga, Steering Committee Co-Chair explains, “Learning on Country Program is based on Indigenous curriculum combining with modern educational system. They work side by side.”

Learning on Country has two tiers of governance. The first is the Local Learning on Country Committees, which consist of a Coordinator and representatives from schools, Ranger groups, and other local community members. There is a Local LoCP Committee for every community in which the program is delivered. The second is the Learning on Country Steering Committee, which comprises representatives from each LoCP site and oversees all aspects of the program delivery. Priorities of the program include promoting intergenerational knowledge transfer through

engaging senior traditional knowledge holders and rangers, field-based experiential learning, career pathway activities such as internships, and the completion of vocational education and training qualifications. Some examples of experiential learning activities students have been involved in include fish surveys, turtle tagging, and archaeology projects. This knowledge is brought back into the classroom, where further learning is undertaken. As Stephanie Anderson, Learning on Country Coordinator and Steering Committee Member, explains, “students are treated as part of the Ranger groups. They take on roles and responsibilities, learning them to become rangers as well. They’re doing all the work that they can, and they enjoy doing it.” The biannual Steering Committee meetings are a key element to the success of the programs. Here, regional leaders can bring ideas, share what they have learned, discuss challenges, and look for further collaboration opportunities. Having representation for each site also ensures that diverse community voices are involved in the decision-making processes of the whole program. This also builds the group’s capacity as a whole and ensures the program’s growth and sustainability into the future.



Deep-dive: Cultural Legitimacy and Community Voice

The LOCP Program thrives on a vibrant, community-driven governance model that empowers local voices through its decentralised, ‘ground-up’ approach. At the heart of this model is the Local Learning on Country Committees (LLOCCs), which bring together Traditional Owners, Cultural Advisors, school representatives, and Indigenous Ranger Groups to steer the program’s direction. These committees play a pivotal role in shaping program design and delivery. The LLOCCs also facilitate the election of community leaders to the all-Indigenous LoCP Steering Committee. This innovative approach drives the program’s ongoing success and relevance by ensuring governance is deeply rooted in local cultural values and responsive to community needs. It also builds a pathway for younger community members to build their skills and knowledge of governance.

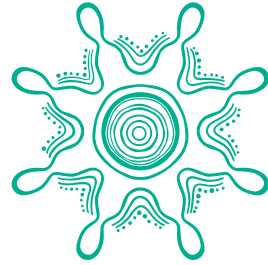
The LoCP Steering Committee exemplifies true community self-determination by taking proactive steps to address gaps in program delivery. In a powerful demonstration of local leadership, the committee recently led a successful push to reform the Northern Territory Department of Education’s excursion form policies. This change removes unnecessary bureaucratic barriers, making students’ school attendance easier and ensuring that parents

are fully informed. By streamlining the process, the LOCP Steering Committee has directly enhanced student participation and improved overall program outcomes, showcasing the power of communities taking control of their own educational journey. Their recent promotional activities demonstrate another example of this strong community voice. Their communications team presented the Steering Committee with promotional work, highlighting the program’s impact. This material showcased the milestones achieved, allowing LoCP to showcase the program’s effectiveness and celebrate its successes on a national level. However, the Steering Committee requested that the promotional content also be presented in the community’s local language, enabling them to celebrate their accomplishments in a way that resonates with their community. This is a powerful example of two-way governance, where cultural legitimacy is at the forefront, ensuring that the community’s voice and identity are integral to the narrative.

**Tip:** To ensure your group’s sustainability, create opportunities to empower local leaders to develop their skills and knowledge. LoCP does this by offering informal mentorship and opportunities for past participants to shadow Steering Committee and Local Learning on Country Committee members.







## Loddon Mallee Aboriginal Reference Group

The Loddon Mallee Region covers almost a quarter of Victoria and is home to over 25% of the state's First Nations community. Over this expansive distance, the Loddon Mallee Aboriginal Reference Group (LMARG) undertakes their impressive work of community-building and advocacy. LMARG are a consortium of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) run for and by the communities. The reference group is composed of representatives from ACCOs who deliver holistic health and family services from six locations. These organisations are Bendigo and District Aboriginal Co-operative (BDAC), Mallee District Aboriginal Services, Murray Valley Co-operative and Njernda Aboriginal Cooperative.

Formed in 1997, LMARG's work is steeped in a history of collective advocacy and self-determination. As Leanne Fary, Senior Cultural Advisor & Advocate at BDAC, who attended the group's first meeting, explains: "We knew that we would be stronger together; that's why LMARG was originally set up."

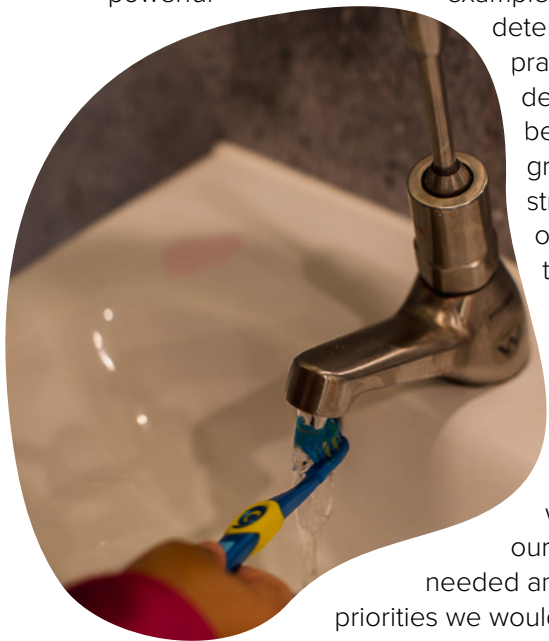
She explains: "When we think about self-determination today, that first meeting was a powerful example of self-

determination in practice. We decided we'd be a collective group and strengthen each other. We'd be the knowledge holders and tell the department how we wanted to be funded, what programs our communities needed and what priorities we would set for ourselves as Aboriginal

communities across the Loddon Mallee." These strong principles of self-determination continue to guide LMARG's work and advocacy. Their association provides a forum for strategic planning and collective decision-making among ACCOs, helping members collaborate and support one another as they work towards a common goal. They emphasise the "collective", understanding that "together, we can coordinate our actions, distribute our resources and achieve much greater outcomes."

The united voice of LMARG's member organisations enables them to collaborate effectively with other regional services and negotiate with the government. Through their advocacy, they've successfully changed the regulations on who can obtain, possess, and apply fluoride varnish in Victoria. These changes mean Aboriginal Health Workers across the state can now do this meaningful work, enabling early intervention in oral health care and reducing long-term dental issues. "The major impact of this change is that we are preventing tooth decay, preventing hospital admissions..., and keeping people out of the emergency department", explains Dallas Widdicombe, Chair of LMARG & CEO of BDAC. This is only one example of LMARG's leadership and self-determination.

They are now shifting their focus to supporting young people between the ages of 10 and 17 living in the Loddon Mallee Region. The Loddon Mallee Youth Action Plan prioritises community aspirations rather than government ones and invites LMARG to collaborate with the government on tackling issues facing their young people. As LMARG's Policy Officer Kate Glenie explains: "LMARG is in control of the plan, saying 'this is what we want to happen, and we'd like you to help us to work in a different way with these young people.'" This is what genuine community self-determination looks like, where the community sets priorities and stakeholders are invited to work with them on addressing this issue rather than the other way around.



## Deep-dive: Collective Advocacy and Self-determination

LMARG's purpose is to be a collective voice on issues affecting Aboriginal communities in their region. Shifting to a regional lens required the members of the ACCOs to look beyond the needs of their individual organisations and consider the collective needs in the area. During their meetings, they discuss community concerns, provide feedback and engage in brainstorming and agenda-setting. The first hour is for the member CEOs to strategise and plan. This is followed by a half-day session for CEOs and other senior executives to discuss issues affecting the region and how to address these issues best, including conversations on funding, writing submissions and resourcing requirements. Following this, partners and other stakeholders are invited to join for further discussions and collaborative solution-making.

To ensure LMARG is effective and meets their deliverables, a Policy Officer position was established in 2019 to provide secretariat support, apply for funding and develop submissions on behalf of the group and their members. The resourcing of a Policy Officer is critical to the effectiveness of LMARG as a reference group. The Policy Officer is responsible for following up on action items, often working with and supporting staff in the member ACCOs. Before introducing the Policy Officer role, different government agencies provided secretariat support. Having the Policy Officer embedded into LMARG's structure has facilitated a power shift, handing control and ownership back to the community.

The member ACCOs of LMARG share information, community priorities, policies, procedures and even position descriptions. They also support each other with accreditation and training through their Quality

Network, where each member ACCO's Quality Managers meet every six weeks. This allows organisations that need support to lean on the expertise of their collaborators, in turn building their and their region's capacity.

Each community in the Loddon Mallee region sets LMARG's priorities. They provide this invaluable information through their membership or feedback on service delivery. Priorities are then brought to LMARG meetings to discuss and understand where they fit in the overall priorities of the region. This is how LMARG can keep their communities at the heart of their decision-making. As LMARG Chair, Dallas Widdicombe explains: "We know we've done a good job, when community tells us we've done a good job."

LMARG leverages each ACCO's expertise and develops regional responses and priorities. Their model demonstrates the power of having a collective voice, where each community's and organisation's strengths are used for the collective good of the region. This work is based on collaboration rather than competition, enabling communities to build their capacity and determine their futures, reflecting cultural principles of sharing and contribution.

**Tip:** If you want to address regional issues, consider partnering with other ACCOs in your area to leverage your collective knowledge. When groups collaborate to share information, set priorities, provide training, and speak with a unified voice on issues affecting their communities, they can reclaim the power needed to achieve true self-determination.



Wintjiri Wiru Working Group

In the heart of the Country, across the communities of Muṯitjulu and Kaṯukatjara (Docker River), sits the Wintjiri Wiru Working Group (WWWG). WWWG comprises senior Anangu from the two communities with collaborators from Voyages Indigenous Tourism Australia (Voyages). They share a chapter of an ancient songline through new media to generate economic freedom and self-determination for their communities. The culmination of their hard work has resulted in the spectacular drone and light show Wintjiri Wiru, meaning ‘beautiful view out to the horizon’ in the Pitjantjatjara language. The story shares a chapter of the Mala Songline between Kaṯukatjara and Muṯitjulu. Mala are also known as Rufous hare-wallaby, a cousin to the quokka, which holds significance to these communities. The light and drone experience plays over the desert landscape with stunning Uluru in the background, a key location within the story. The two communities directly benefit from income generated from the experience, with WWWG responsible for its distribution in line with their Terms of Reference.

Over the last five years, five representatives from Muṯitjulu and five from Kaṯukatjara have collaborated with Voyages to ensure the Wintjiri Wiru experience remains culturally legitimate to the Mala Songline. As senior Elder, artist and WWWG member, Rene Kulitja, explains: “We came together as Elders and leaders; we were talking amongst ourselves asking how we are going to do it... and we got this idea of Wintjiri Wiru.” This commercial opportunity also facilitates genuine self-determination for these communities, as the income generated is distributed fifty-fifty directly to each community for social benefit and community support. Unlike most government or philanthropic funding, this gives the communities more control over how the money will be used.

Deep-dive: Cultural-legitimacy and Succession Planning

The Muṯitjulu and Kaṯukatjara communities partnered on the project by discussing how they would authentically share the Mala story to ensure its preservation. The development stage took longer than anticipated, but this deliberate, steady approach allowed for genuine community contribution. The process was thoughtfully designed to prioritise collaboration, empowering everyone involved. A key lesson learned along the way was that sometimes, slowing down is the best way to move forward. ‘This story is ancient and doesn’t need to be rushed’, a Working Group member points out. What matters is doing it the



Kaṯukatjara and Muṯitjulu community members can bring ideas, projects or program proposals to WWWG for support based on their community needs. This is discussed with final decisions for funding support made by their respective representatives only. This ensures community aspirations and voices are centred in the decision-making process and that the right people are making the decisions for their communities. Through this income, they have been able to run on-Country camps and school holiday activities, build a regional recording studio and support families with sorry business.

Another key benefit of the WWWG’s work is that the community has gained a deeper understanding of negotiating commercial partnerships while safeguarding their Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP). ICIP Protocols were explicitly developed for WWWG to protect Anangu ICIP rights. The knowledge and skills acquired through the group’s efforts are also shared with neighbouring communities, helping build the region’s overall capacity. As a result, WWWG members feel more empowered by the expertise they’ve developed, and community self-determination is strengthened.

right way, staying legitimate and grounded in culture. After each meeting, the Anangu members returned to their communities to continue workshopping ideas and collecting feedback. At the beginning of their working relationship, the group met every three weeks to develop ideas through songs, dance and art. Now that the show has been running for some time, they meet every three to four months to steer the implementation of all aspects of the show and make decisions regarding the ‘money lines’ to the two communities.

From the start, WWWG emphasised undertaking the project with cultural legitimacy and integrity.

The group is founded on the Anangu principles of Ngura, Wangka, Inma, Walytja, and Tjukurpa, which speak to home, language, ceremony, family, stories and lore. These five principles guide Anangu in their deliberations, ensuring culturally legitimate decisions. Additionally, an interpreter is provided for all meetings to enable people to communicate in their first language or language of preference. Another way they share these values and generate additional income is by providing cultural awareness training to everyone who works with Voyages. The WWWG leads and delivers this innovative training, which explores cultural values and practices through language. Their collective activities ensure language and culture are maintained for future generations. As Harry Wilson, Community Consultant, explains: “It’s opened our eyes up to tourism [opportunities] ... teaching visitors to our Country about the importance of our story, that’s been passed on over the generations, and the importance is taken on by the local primary school within the community to understand and learn about the cultural and their language and their story... Their tjukurpa.” This is one way they are implementing succession planning into their activities.

As Trish Noy, Principal of the Muṯitjulu School, explains, the Wintjiri Wiru show has ignited a strong sense of leadership and succession planning among the young people in these communities. The children were asked, “Who will tell the stories when the Elders are no longer here?” Their response was clear: “We will!” This signifies their growing understanding of the importance of preserving and passing on cultural knowledge and their future roles in this process. The children and the broader community take great pride in their families’ contributions to the show’s development. The children actively participate in various aspects

of the show’s delivery and related engagement activities. Their pride and excitement are evident in the number of visits they make to the show. They frequently talk about their aspirations to work on the production when they grow older, emphasising their desire to continue this vital work. Ruby James, senior Elder and WWWG director, says: “People are so proud. Really honoured...The kids loved it...and they were talking about what they seen and what they learned. Lots of kids came to see the show.”


Young people are further engaged in the group’s governance processes through their proxy voting mechanism. Proxy voting allows members to authorise another person to vote on their behalf, broadening community participation while giving young people valuable opportunities to participate in decision-making and gain first-hand experience in succession planning. This helps build a strong foundation for the future, ensuring that the young people of the community will carry forward the cultural legacy of the Wintjiri Wiru show. Taypaya Edwards, Chair of WWWG, says: “The positive outcomes I’ve seen is that everyone knows about the story, and they love the lights. Now everyone’s talking about what’s the next story that we are going to tell.”



**Tip:** If you are eager to involve young people in the governance of your group and build their leadership capabilities, consider using proxy representation, like the WWWG. This gives young people opportunities to gain experience in the decision-making process and understand how your board or committee functions. They may even want to join your board or committee after the experience.







“We created a live document where its community deciding what happens in the working agreement – how we will work together, who’s taking responsibility for this and how we’re all going to move forward – and at the end, we get this beautiful list...and everyone gets up and signs it. That’s what creates the safe space.”

— Lisa Baulman, Lead Facilitator, Mibbinbah Spirit Healing





## Melaythenner Teeackana Warrana (Heart of Country) Aboriginal Corporation

### Winner Category 2

Melaythenner Teeackana Warrana (Heart of Country) Aboriginal Corporation (MTWAC) was established in 2008 by a group of Elders and their families from northeast Tasmania. They were determined to reclaim their people's rightful place as custodians of Country and traditional knowledge holders. 'Melaythenner Teeackana Warrana' means Heart of Country. This name captures the spirit of the organisation's goal, creating a way for the community to return and develop a deep relationship with their ancestral Country, Tebrakunna Country. MTWAC is governed by a board of nine directors who are overseen, advised and guided by a Circle of Elders. The Circle of Elders play an advisory role and add a crucial level of cultural governance, particularly in relation to membership, family trees, and cultural practice. They have recently established a team of rangers to continue their roles as custodians and managers of Country and are developing a youth hub to support the growth and resilience of their young people.

Reaching their ten-year milestone in 2024, MTWAC's major annual event, Mannalargenna Day, celebrates the life and legacy of their ancestral grandfather Mannalargenna. Mannalargenna was a revered Bungana (leader) of the clans of the Coastal Plains Nation who was placed into exile on the Bass Strait Islands from Tebrakunna Country. This event is held on the land where he was taken from and is a significant landmark for the communities of the northeast and Tasmanian Aboriginal people more broadly.

Creating a space for community to connect and revitalise culture through events and activities is a key aspect of their work. "Making sure we have the opportunity to return back to our traditional lands in the northeast [is important] and...it's important to have the opportunity to make the promise that was

made to our ancestral grandfather, Mannalargenna, come true. He was promised, that if he helped George Augustus Robinson remove our people from the mainland of Tasmania, that one day he'd be able to return back to his traditional lands...that never occurred. That promise was broken, and he died on Flinders Island... in exile, and for our community, that legacy of Mannalargenna is very strong," explains Nick Cameron, Chair of the MTWAC board.

He continues, "one thing that MTWAC does through our programs like Mannalargenna Day event, is that it gives people the opportunity to come along and connect with their community members and sit down and actually yarn, practice culture through our different activities and engage directly with our Elders." The growth of Mannalargenna Day mirrors the growth of the organisation and is a crucial part of their community engagement. This event also supports the growth of the organisation and keeps their membership engaged.



### Deep-dive: Succession Planning and Inclusion

MTWAC has recently transformed from a small, volunteer-based organisation to a medium-sized organisation with the support of operational funding. MTWAC are focused on developing their internal capacity with aspirations to eventually build their enterprise activities to be independent of government funding. Another way MTWAC are securing the future of the organisation is through the development of their young people. Through their Trainee Ranger and Ranger Programs they hope to equip the next generation of leaders with the knowledge and skills they need to one day take over leadership of the organisation and continue the legacy of their Elders. In 2023

MTWAC ran a Trainee Ranger program, which led to the employment of two full-time rangers. Tully O'Neil is one of the young people who participated in the program and is now employed to look after Tebrakunna Country.

"I've been wanting to become a ranger since I was [a small kid], so coming out of...college I had some opportunities to chase that dream. I was lucky enough that MTWAC received some funding, and I was able to be a ranger on my homeland, where we're from," explains Tully O'Neil. Tully is also the Junior Ranger Program Coordinator. Through this role he continues to pass on his knowledge to the generation after him. "I think it's really important, especially for the youth, to have that [knowledge] passed down. I was lucky enough to have some really good Elders around me on my journey, so

it made it a lot easier to have that passed down to me and I think the stories and language is really really important...and how to look after Country and plants and animals," continues O'Neil. From the perspective of the Board, "everything we do, in my mind and in the Board's mind, is for young people" explains Nick Cameron.

MTWAC is a values-led organisation. Respect, collaboration, diversity, and inclusivity are key values of the organisation.

**"I've been wanting to become a ranger since I was [a small kid], so coming out of...college I had some opportunities to chase that dream."**

— Tully O'Neil, Trainee Ranger, Melaythenner Teeackana Warrana Aboriginal Corporation

Respect is embedded into their practices through how they conduct themselves and the incorporation of the Circle of Elders. Diversity is implemented through the way issues

are discussed. All viewpoints and opinions are considered, and decisions are made when consensus is reached. Both the Circle of Elders and general members are invited to attend these meetings and join in the discussions, which includes financial responsibilities and strategic planning. Open board meetings benefits MTWAC's governance in two ways. The first is that it provides transparency to the broader membership in how the board operates, conducts business on behalf of its members, and arrives at decisions. Secondly, it allows prospective new board members to see and learn how the board operates before raising their hand for nomination as a director. Importantly, it is an opportunity for the board to hear directly from its membership. While final decisions are ultimately made by the directors, the input from the members and Elders informs their decision-making process.

**Tip:** If you want to ensure that the community's voice is truly reflected in your decision-making process, consider opening board meetings to your members. If confidential matters arise, they can be discussed in a separate, directors-only meeting.





Mibbinbah Spirit Healing

Mibbinbah Spirit Healing (Mibbinbah) works with communities nationwide to provide safe spaces and pathways towards healing through customised training, education and mentorship. Mibbin (Eagle) holds deep cultural and spiritual significance to the communities of southern Queensland and Northern New South Wales, where the name originates. Mibbin represents a connection between the physical and spiritual realms. This understanding of the physical, emotional and spiritual connection underpins their holistic healing work. Mibbinbah was established in 2007 initially as a cooperative research project assessing the factors affecting

doing. You are heart healers. I know who I am.' There was love for himself, but that was him just understanding who he was."

Considerable effort has gone into developing a framework for their community engagement and program design and delivery. Mibbinbah's 'Proper Way' approach applies First Nations' ways of knowing, doing, and being to guide how they work with communities. The 'Proper Way' approach also describes their method of delivery that fits with local lore, customs and contexts. It ensures that activities are developed and delivered in a way

"Our main focus is the healing element of our work, which is allowing people to be comfortable with finding their purpose in life...when people understand who they are, that's how the healing takes place."

– Lisa Bauman, Lead Facilitator, Mibbinbah Spirit Healing

First Nations men's social and emotional well-being. Since then, Mibbinbah has evolved into one of the country's leading health promotion charities. Their programs and training address topics such as self-empowerment, healthy relationships, grief, anger and family violence, as well as hope, healing and resilience.

As Lisa Bulman, Lead Facilitator, explains: "Our main focus is the healing element of our work, which is allowing people to be comfortable with finding their purpose in life...when people understand who they are, that's how the healing takes place." She gives an example of their impact, "we've worked in communities, workshoping around identity and taking responsibility. There was no word in seven different language groups for identity. It was 'I am', which we uncovered after three hours of workshoping it. Then [a participant] said, "Now I know what you two are



that is culturally legitimate to local communities, facilitating community voice and self-determination. As Christina Grant, Mibbinbah's Partnerships Manager, explains: "We're not like a traditional organisation that is accountable to one particular community, like a community-controlled health organisation model where we service one area. We work across the country, and that means we are accountable to communities, Elders and people from all different walks of life. We've got an advisory board that we take advice from and who have different areas of specialisation, and then "Proper Way' introduces another layer of governance, which means all the different communities we serve have a clear pathway for reporting and accountability back to them." The Proper Way framework provides structure while being flexible enough to be customised to local community contexts.

Deep-dive: Cultural Legitimacy and Self-determination

Every program Mibbinbah delivers is co-designed with the community. This ensures that community needs are central to the design and delivery of their programs and supports the community's vision for their future. They spend considerable time building relationships with community members and stakeholders to understand their needs and ensure the partnerships are founded on the cultural values of each community. Their 'Working Agreements' are another level of project governance that sits across each project. As Lisa Bulman explains: "To create our safe space, we have a working agreement. We created a live document where its community deciding what happens in the working agreement – how we will work together, who's taking responsibility for this and how we're all going to move forward – and at the end, we get this beautiful list...and everyone gets up and signs it. That's what creates the safe space." The agreement provides a framework for transparent and open communication. It ensures that all parties are on the same page regarding roles, responsibilities, and goals, reducing the chances of miscommunication or misunderstandings. Co-developing the agreement gives First Nations communities a voice in the process. This empowerment fosters a sense of ownership and control over the project, which can lead to more successful and sustainable outcomes.

Another way Mibbinbah embeds evaluation and accountability into their program is through their annual National Gathering. Christina Grant reflects, "the AGM plays a really special role in Mibbinbah's model. We call it our Annual National Gathering". The annual National Gathering hosted by Mibbinbah supports cultural



legitimacy and self-determination by providing a space for program participants, stakeholders, and communities to come together, reflect, and celebrate their collective achievements. By inviting all past and current partners, it honours the experiences and contributions of the communities, ensuring their voices are heard and valued. This gathering allows for shared learning and accountability, strengthening relationships and empowering communities to take an active role in the ongoing development of the program. Through this collaborative and inclusive approach, the gathering reinforces cultural legitimacy by prioritising the communities' input and supporting their autonomy in shaping the outcomes and direction of the program.

**Tip:** If you'd like to embed community voice and ways of working into your program delivery, consider co-developing a working agreement. This agreement outlines goals, ways of working, expectations, and responsibilities. By collaboratively creating this agreement, you'll foster stronger working relationships, build trust, and ultimately achieve better outcomes.





Voice of Hope Aboriginal Corporation

Voice of Hope Aboriginal Corporation (VOH) supports Aboriginal women in Western Australia to adjust back into community life post-incarceration by providing a space for self-understanding, cultural connection and collective healing. VOH was founded by Lorraine Pryor, a Whadjuk Noongar woman whose roots extend to Ballardong and Gnaala Karla Booja. Lorraine’s own life experiences—marked by her survival of domestic violence, substance abuse, and years of incarceration—propelled her to support and advocate for Aboriginal women caught in the Western Australian prison system. She established Voice of Hope with a clear and powerful vision: to support and empower currently incarcerated

it into our organisation so that we can help create better and positive pathways for our women...We need to wrap ourselves around these women and help take them on a journey of recovery, of healing and...whatever other issues they may face.”

At the heart of Voice of Hope lies the Walbreninj Yorga (Healing Women) Program, a ten-week series of culturally sensitive sessions designed to assist incarcerated Aboriginal women in their healing journey. This program emphasises participants’ physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual recovery, guiding them to repair trauma and reintegrate into their families and communities. Noongar culture is central to this process, with each session named in the Noongar language to highlight the

“By me expressing myself, what I’ve been going through and my story...It’s strengthened me.”

– Chandal Narrier, Voice of Hope Community Participant



and formerly incarcerated Aboriginal women, helping them reconnect with their cultural identity and break the cycle of incarceration. Lorraine’s resilience and dedication have been recognised widely. As a survivor who turned her struggles into service, Lorraine has created a lifeline for those who have experienced the same hardships.



Lorraine, Founder and Director of VOH, explains how this mission began: “All the sort of opportunities that I didn’t have while I was in prison, I’ve sort of created

cultural relevance of the program. Voice of Hope’s approach goes beyond the prison walls. Through external workshops and community activities, the organisation provides continued support for women on the outside. These workshops are designed to help women address challenges such as domestic violence, addiction, homelessness, and family reunification. Voice of Hope participant Chandal Narrier reflects on the impact of her involvement with their programs, “you can bring anything ... when you’re here with the ladies and the Elders. Whatever’s on your mind and chest and you want to get it off, share it with them...By me expressing myself, what I’ve been going through and my story... It’s strengthened me.” Voice of Hope’s commitment to culturally sensitive community-driven support is underscored by its Elders Advisory Sub Committee, which provides guidance and ensures the cultural integrity of the organisation’s initiatives.

**Tip:** Strengthen your board’s governance by ensuring it has diverse skills and experiences. Assigning specific portfolios based on individual expertise allows for more focused oversight, clearer responsibilities, and better decision-making, ensuring that all areas of the organisation are effectively managed.

Deep-dive: Cultural Legitimacy and Diversity

Voice of Hope’s governance model is firmly grounded in the principle of self-determination. The organisation is led by four Aboriginal women and two non-Indigenous women. The board’s diverse skills and expertise ensure that all aspects of the organisation’s governance are effectively managed. While the board as a whole is responsible for decision-making, each director is assigned a specific portfolio based on their area of expertise. For example, one director, an accountant, oversees funding and reporting, while another, a mental health clinician, guides policies and procedures related to wellbeing practices. Lorraine explains, “all the women we have on our board...bring their own benefits to the table... that help Voice of Hope grow as a team.” This diverse expertise ensures that decisions are well-rounded and consider various perspectives. This leads to more informed, balanced, and effective decisions that account for different aspects of the organisation’s operations and governance.

Having a board that reflects a range of competencies also builds credibility with stakeholders and increases trust and confidence in the organisation’s leadership. This has supported VOH’s community engagement and partnership building. Through their partnerships, VOH collaborates with prison officials and community stakeholders to address the evolving needs of incarcerated women. This community-led governance model ensures that the decisions made reflect the real-life challenges faced by Aboriginal women reintegrating back into community life.

In keeping with Aboriginal cultural values, decisions within Voice of Hope are shaped by the wisdom of Elders. Their involvement ensures that the programs offered are both culturally legitimate and effective. VOH participant Jade Wallam expresses the Elders Committee’s vital role in their healing journey: “The Elders like to yarn, but they know what they’re talking about, and you have good open conversations with them. You ask them questions. They have a lot of knowledge, and it is pretty good to have them around - know that they’re there, know that they listen.”

Voice of Hope’s direct engagement with the Aboriginal community further strengthens their cultural legitimacy. The organisation regularly holds cultural programs and workshops, encouraging participation and fostering connections between women and their cultural heritage. These cultural initiatives are more than just programs—they are opportunities to reinforce identity, cultural pride, and collective healing. The success of the Walbreninj Yorga Program is evaluated through key performance indicators (KPIs) such as completion rates, voluntary attendance, post-release employment, and stable housing. These indicators provide tangible metrics for success and help ensure that the program remains impactful and relevant. Lower rates of reoffence among participants serve as a powerful testament to the program’s effectiveness in supporting women’s reintegration into society.

Voice of Hope also prides themselves on adapting and overcoming challenges. The program’s Hope Bags, which are distributed to women upon release, are a creative and resourceful way to provide essential items such as toiletries, clothes, and a mobile phone. These bags, primarily funded by private donations, have made a significant difference in the lives of many women. In times of unrest or crisis within prisons, Voice of Hope has been called upon by authorities to offer support, highlighting the organisation’s reputation and the trust it has earned within the justice system.

As Voice of Hope looks to the future, they remain focused on expanding their impact and securing the long-term sustainability of the organisation. With a steady increase in membership and continued community support, the organisation is poised to reach even more women in need. Through their holistic, culturally grounded, and community-driven approach, Voice of Hope continues to empower Aboriginal women and break down systemic barriers. Lorraine Pryor’s vision, leadership, and the unwavering support of the Aboriginal community have made Voice of Hope a beacon of hope for incarcerated Aboriginal women - a powerful example of the strength of self-determination, cultural legitimacy, and the enduring importance of community-driven governance.

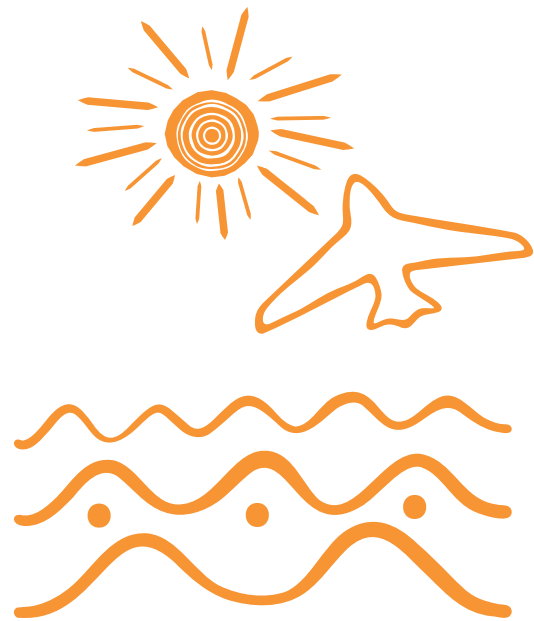


“Djarindjin is blazing the way for other organisations to learn from because we’re not risk-averse. We will see the risk and be informed and then we will make a decision, and we’ve got the capacity to pivot when something doesn’t work.”

— Nathan McIvor, CEO Djarindjin Aboriginal Corporation







## Djarindjin Aboriginal Corporation

### Winner Category 3

Djarindjin Aboriginal Corporation (DAC) is based in the remote community of Djarindjin on the traditional lands of the Bardi Jawi peoples, in the Dampier Peninsula in northwest WA. DAC's spirit of self-determination and innovative solutions have empowered the community to shape their own future, blending traditional knowledge with modern opportunities for sustainable growth and cultural preservation. As DAC CEO Nathan McIvor explains: "It has started from the community...We would not be where we are today if the board didn't change

their mindset 15 years ago and it's taken a long time to build where we are today." This mindset has become known as the 'Djarindjin Way' – taking responsibility for their community through economic independence. Nathan continues, "Djarindjin is blazing the way for other organisations to learn from because we're not risk-averse. We will see the risk and be informed and then we will make a decision, and we've got the capacity to pivot when something doesn't work."

The community has fought endlessly for over 40 years to be recognised as an Aboriginal Community, which was finally achieved in July 2024. This spirit of self-determination has also led to DAC operating several successful enterprises, including a roadhouse, caravan park, community store and Australia's first fully Aboriginal-owned and operated commercial airport. Profits from these enterprises are invested back into their community for their benefit. Some of the community initiatives DAC supports are a community garden, safehouse, men's shed, early childhood program, as well as youth and aged care.

with eighty-nine of its ninety-eight employees being Aboriginal. They are committed to building economic freedom for their community through enterprises that generate untied income, which they have full control over and can invest back into their community for their long-term benefit.

A board of six directors leads DAC, and culture is woven into the fabric of everything they do. The community firmly believes that the strength of their culture and their innovative thinking are their greatest assets. Vincent McKenzie, former DAC Director and Language Teacher, speaks about the importance of culture: "Because we're a cultural community.



We need to make sure we have strong culture in place. If you don't have a strong culture in place, it will be hard [getting things done]." Through their governance model, DAC ensures that cultural practices, stories, languages, and customs are not only preserved but also celebrated and passed down to younger generations. An example of how culture informs their governance practices is through their observance of cultural avoidance practices. DAC ensures that temporary walls are set up for meetings to facilitate this practice. Directors who cannot speak directly to each other due to this practice are supported and indirectly communicate with each other through talking to the group.

They also support their community through employment opportunities. DAC is the largest employer of Aboriginal people on the Peninsula,







### ***Deep-dive: Self-determination and Sustainability***

Self-determination is at the heart of the DAC's approach in all aspects of their governance and operations. The corporation was established to empower Bardi Jawi people to make decisions about their land, culture, and community. DAC's leadership includes a strong representation of Elders, who play a central role in guiding decision-making and ensuring that cultural protocols are respected in all activities. They also have a Cultural Advisory Committee who the board consults. Elders also serve as mentors to younger community members, sharing their knowledge and wisdom in ways that ensure the ongoing transmission of cultural traditions. Djarindjin's governance structure is community-led, with decision-making processes driven by the people it represents. The members of the corporation—Elders, youth, and other community members—are actively involved in shaping the organisation's priorities and setting long-term goals. Rather than relying on outside organisations to dictate priorities, Djarindjin takes a grassroots approach, ensuring that the voices of the community are heard and respected at every level. As former DAC Director and Language Teacher Vincent McKenzie explains, "the community gets involved in everything. We make sure to let them know we've got this event coming up, or we need their input on a project. We're getting the word out through media and word of mouth." This is reflected in the attendance at events like their annual general meetings, where they have over 100 community members present.

Economically, Djarindjin is working towards self-sufficiency by developing local businesses that provide employment opportunities and reduce dependence on external funding. As DAC Chairperson Brian Lee explains, "for many years, Djarindjin community was seen as the poor cousins up here on the Dampier Peninsula. A lot of other communities were getting infrastructure and housing before Djarindjin. We decided to operate our community as a business. We've invited people to come and make partnerships... All of our business and decisions we take ownership of, and we've been successful in that." Not only have they taken responsibility for their community and their decisions, DAC do not shy away from taking calculated risks.

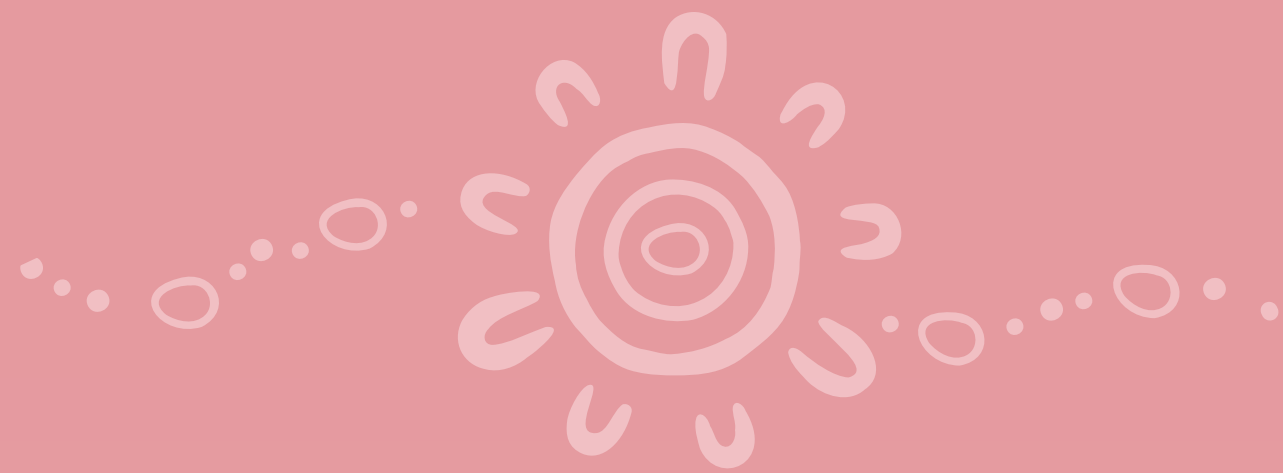
DAC's risk appetite allows them to dream big, follow their instincts and create real change. "What we want to do now is start the renewable energy company, freight company and building company and then a health service...They are the plans for the next five to ten years," explains DAC CEO Nathan McIvor.

They are also working on a Twenty-Year Strategic Plan. Nathan McIvor explains, "in twenty years' time, we will be the organisation that is...facilitating the community services, the economic development, all those types of things in the Dampier Peninsula and also assisting other communities." DAC ensures their organisation's sustainability by providing employment opportunities and building a pipeline of future community leaders. Nathan reflects on the importance of sowing ideas and supporting young people to dream bigger for themselves. He reflects, "I said to a young fella, four years ago, he was working out here at the airport, I said, 'Austin, you'll be a leader one day. You could be the supervisor. You could be the operations manager.' He said, 'Nah, nah, I couldn't'. I said, 'Yeah, you could. Just think about it.' I sowed the seed. He's a Team Leader now... You sow the seed, and the tree will grow."

Djarindjin Aboriginal Corporation demonstrates the power of self-determination, sustainability, and cultural legitimacy in governance. By taking control of their own affairs, building a resilient and self-sufficient future, and honouring their rich cultural heritage, Djarindjin provides an incredible model for Indigenous communities nationwide. Their governance approach ensures that they are not just surviving, but thriving on their own terms, in ways that are culturally grounded, and economically sustainable. This is a community that has learned to shape their own destiny and, in doing so, are inspiring others to do the same.

**Tip:** DAC has a healthy risk appetite that allows them to take calculated and measured risks. This is enabled through planning and risk assessments. When plans don't occur as anticipated, DAC can pivot, adapt quickly, and try another approach to reach their desired outcome.





### Granites Mine Affected Area Aboriginal Corporation

Deep in the heart of the Tanami Desert, across an area almost the size of Aotearoa (New Zealand) operates the Granites Mine Affected Area Aboriginal Corporation (GMAAAC). Through income received from affected area compensation, GMAAAC delivers projects to benefit the nine communities impacted by the Granites gold mine. The nine communities GMAAAC supports include Yuendumu, Lajamanu, Nyirrpi, Willowra, Yuelamu, Tanami Downs, Balgo, Billiluna and Ringer Soak. GMAAAC has two levels of governance: a board of directors and community committees. Each community elects a committee to prioritise, plan and fund projects. This means there are eighty-four

elected representatives across the region, ensuring genuine community representation and self-determination for these communities. This means the community can set their priorities, decide who their project partners will be and set project timeframes. These are details often prescribed by government funding.

Each of the nine community committees elects directors to the board. They lead, steer and navigate the organisation while managing the investments. The split of received funds into the community benefit and investments pools ensures future generations will continue to benefit long after the mine closes. Some of the projects funded

and delivered by GMAAAC include Lajamanu’s water park, a ‘cultural mapping’ project in Willowra, cemetery research projects in Balgo, Billiluna and Ringer Soak, as well as sports facility upgrades in Yuendumu. They also funded the gurrju Mani-njaku Ngurra (Making Yuendumu Beautiful) public murals project. “This project is about making young people proud of their community and inspiring them to feel strong,” says Belinda Napaljarri

“This project is about making young people proud of their community and inspiring them to feel strong.”

— *Belinda Napaljarri Wayne, Project Steering Committee and Yuendumu GMAAAC committee member*



### Deep-dive: Self-determination and Financial Sustainability

Since 2018, directors have allocated funds from the administration costs to a Good Governance Program. Through the Good Governance Program, directors are provided with education and training on the roles and responsibilities of board directors, accountability and regulatory mechanisms, and how to make informed strategic and financial decisions. The program uses cultural analogies to explain complex governance concepts, encouraging intellectual equality between the directors and financial advisors. Evaluation is embedded into the framework of this program, providing real-time performance indicators and enabling the program to adapt and change promptly based on participants’ needs and interests. Governance resources based on cultural concepts have been developed in partnership with the directors. Financial literacy and investing are key aspects of the Good Governance Program. The training aims to remove some of the complexity of finance and investing, enabling the directors to make informed decisions on how to manage their money so it can grow and benefit future generations. Through this practice, the communities are building intergenerational wealth along with the knowledge to manage it.

GMAAAC recognises that young people are their future leaders. Over the last two years, they’ve piloted a youth program in Yuelamu to increase the number of young people on their committees and board. The program has shown promise, with four young people actively engaged on the Yuelamu Committee. Through their projects, there is a strong focus on cultural maintenance, ensuring that young people know their culture, have a strong sense of self, and have the knowledge to be future community leaders.

**Tip:** Consider developing your own customised governance training with embedded evaluation. This will support your group’s and community’s capacity to make informed financial and strategic decisions. Embedding evaluation will also help you understand how to customise your training further to your needs.





Wajarri Yamaji Aboriginal Corporation

Wajarri Yamaji Aboriginal Corporation’s (WYAC) governance structure ensures the right voices are heard in the right places. WYAC has over 4500 members, representing traditional custodians from the Murchison and Gascoyne regions in WA, an area over 100,000 square kilometres. WYAC has multiple levels of governance, including four land committees and a board of directors. In 2024, they negotiated their first intergenerational contract—a fifty-year agreement with CSIRO to host the Square Kilometre Array (SKA) telescope on Boolardy Station. The SKA telescope will be used to explore the cosmos further. The site’s Indigenous Land Use Agreement (ILUA) facilitates the construction of the research facility. It ensures the Wajarri Yamaji people benefit from this partnership through community development, employment, training and education.

Wajarri Yamaji Aboriginal Corporation is part of the Wajarri Group, which also includes Winja Wajarri Barna Ltd (WWBL) and Wajarri Enterprises Limited (WEL). The three entities collaborate to protect and promote the interests of the Wajarri Yamaji people. To maintain independence and avoid conflicts of interest, each entity has its own board and operates under a separate rule book or constitution. The WYAC board has nine members—eight are Wajarri people, two from each of the four Land Committees, and one independent director. Land Groups elect their Land Committee representatives, with up to twenty-eight community representatives in total. WYAC has well-considered consultation and representation through this structure. Ensuring the right voices are heard on the matters that affect them is crucial for WYAC.

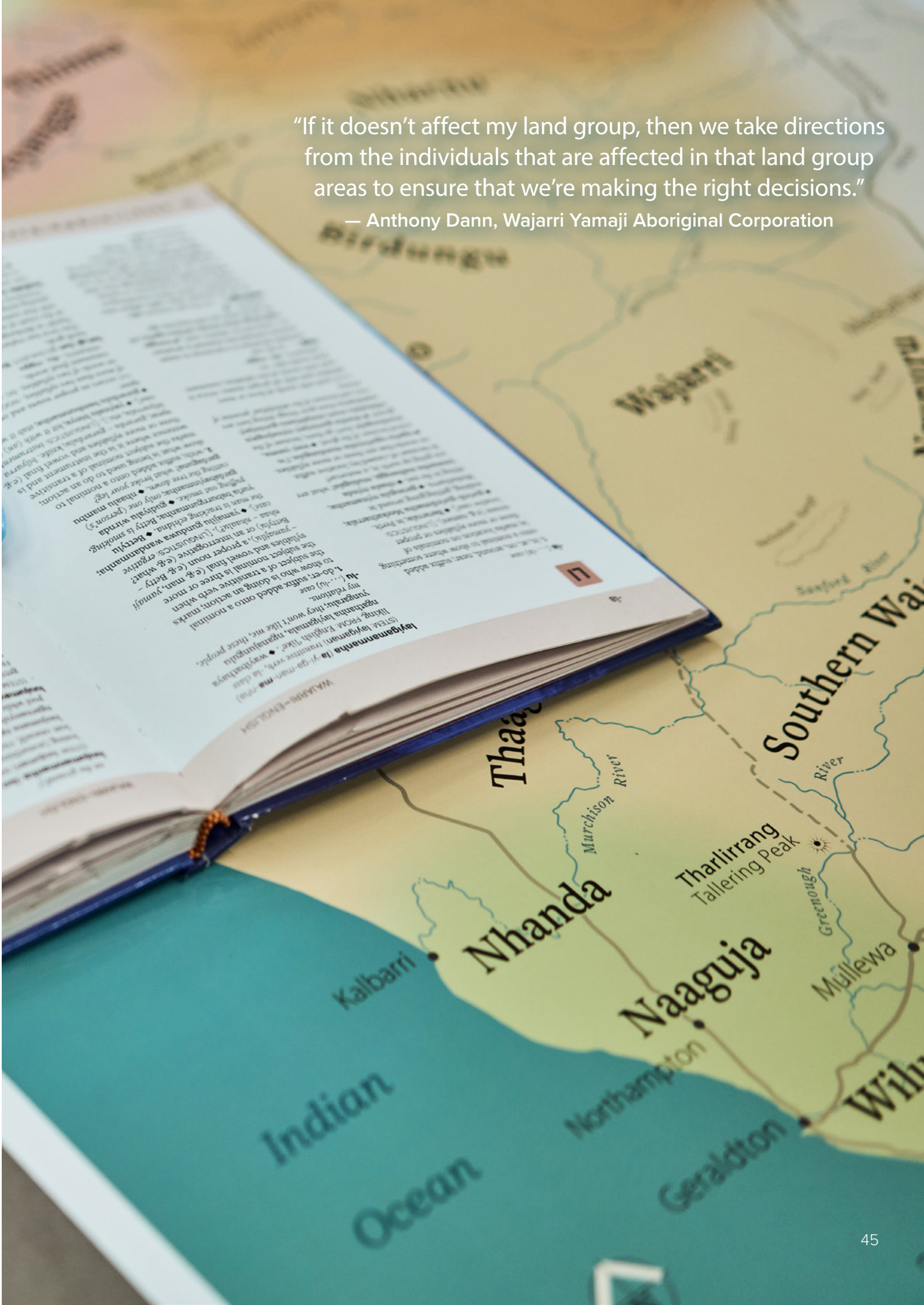
As Chairperson Anthony Dann explains, “we are one Wajarri. However, within our Wajarri structure, we have four different land group areas, and each of those land groups speaks for activities or developments...on their land...Each of us takes our

direction from our land committees and then up to our board...There’s a lot of steps that we follow before we actually make a decision at the board level...We’ve got our common law holders, who are involved in giving some advice and directions...we then have our land group areas...If there’s a big decision to make, then it goes to the land group. Then, the land group gives us some directions, and then it goes up to the Land Group Committee. Then, Land Group Committees endorse it up to the board... If it doesn’t affect my land group, then we take directions from the individuals that are affected in that land group areas to ensure that we’re making the right decisions.”



“If it doesn’t affect my land group, then we take directions from the individuals that are affected in that land group areas to ensure that we’re making the right decisions.”

— Anthony Dann, Wajarri Yamaji Aboriginal Corporation





Through their Members Benefits Programs, they support their community in the areas of healthcare, education, business, culture, language, and the arts. By implementing their Aboriginal Trust Management System (ATMS), they can monitor and track all support for members. Previously, all transactions and member information were maintained as hard copies. The implementation of the ATMS means WYAC were able to simplify the Trust distributions and reduce the application turnaround time from

**Deep-dive: Succession Planning and Sustainability**

Wajarri Group ensures its sustainability through its commercial activities. WEL, the Wajarri Group’s enterprise arm, is focused on building Wajarri-owned and operated enterprises where Wajarri people are employed and supported to grow their leadership skills. As Ehsan Haque, CEO of WEL, explains: “Wajarri [wanted to] find [a way] to support their members by setting up their own commercial arm, so we could divert profits back into the community programs and support them...that was the basis for why WEL was created, for that long-term sustainability.”

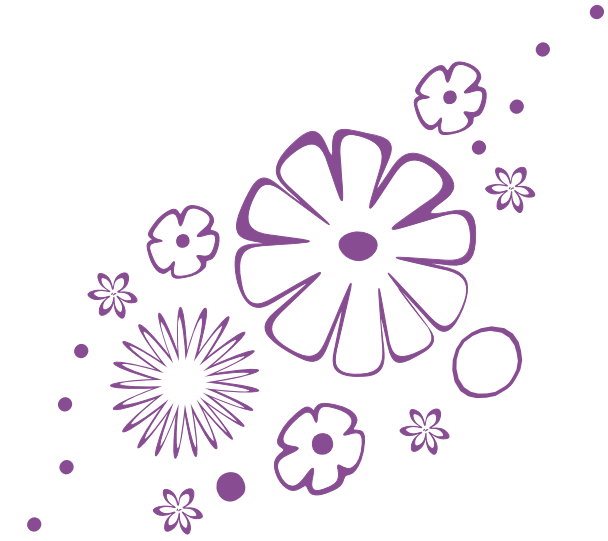
Through their ILUA with CSIRO, WEL secured the Boolardy Station Facilities Maintenance Contract through a joint venture partnership. This has enabled them to train and employ local Wajarri people, particularly those living remotely near the SKA radio telescope site. WEL also operates the Drummond Cove Holiday Park, just ten minutes north of Geraldton. Ehsan is dedicated to ensuring WEL’s activities have long-term benefits for the Wajarri people. As he explains: “The caravan park benefit is twofold for the Wajarri Group... with the trust owning the land...there’s going to be some capital growth, but in the meantime, Wajarri Enterprise’s goal...is to provide employment for Wajarri people... 90% of our maintenance crew is actually all Wajarri people, all your housekeeping and grounds people are all Wajarri people.” They understand and prioritise growing their community’s capacity through employment and training opportunities. He continues: “It’s very important for WEL and anyone in the Wajarri Group to keep their eye out for any Wajarri person and supporting that person because, ultimately, you’re making generational change.”

In addition to generating income and creating jobs for the Wajarri people, WEL’s activities also play a key role in the community’s succession planning. WYAC CEO Jamie Strickland is excited about the future of the Wajarri people and about creating pathways for young people to take on leadership

approximately two to three months to less than seven days on most occasions. Considerable effort has been put into staff training on the rulebook and WYAC’s governance processes. This empowers staff with knowledge of rights, processes and allocation of member support. “We follow the rulebook to help traditional owners negotiate and make decisions”, explains Cultural Heritage team members Keira Bonney and Riley Brown.

positions. He explains: “We’re keen to have Wajarri people involved in our corporation and being part of the operational structure...We’ve got some great young people at different stages in their careers, and I’d like to think they’d be looking at my chair [to take over my role one day].” One of those young people is Jack Bell, a Project Officer – Conservation with WYAC. He explains: “In ten to fifteen years, I hope to be CEO. It’ll take a while to get there but...we’re going to carry on what our old people wanted...If you look at it, big picture, I’m just a small jigsaw piece to the whole big puzzle and we’re slowly bringing it together when we bring on more people in our organisation.” By investing in their young people at the beginning of their careers, they are building a pipeline of future community leaders and ensuring the longevity of their organisations.

**Tip:** If you want to enhance your board’s skills, consider appointing an independent director like WYAC. An independent director not only provides valuable external expertise but can also act as a catalyst for enhancing the board’s skills, knowledge, and overall performance.



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— Jack Bell, Wajarri Yamaji Aboriginal Corporation







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