

The National Development Lab

The First Nations Discovery Process Report



March 2026

We, Foundations for Tomorrow, acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the Country and waterways on which we operate, and for which our livelihoods depend. We pay our respects to Elders past and present and we honour the resilience and strength embodied across generations of First Nations communities who have fought for their rights, their cultures, and their self-determination. We also acknowledge those who tirelessly strive to protect, preserve and celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, leaving a profound legacy for future generations.

We recognise that sovereignty was never ceded.

We affirm that the Country now known as “Australia”, always was, and always will be, Aboriginal land.

As an organisation committed to shaping a better future for Australia, we pledge to work in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, embracing self-determination, social justice, sustainability, equality, and reconciliation. We recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are diverse, with deep-rooted histories and rich cultures that continue to thrive despite past injustices. We deeply honour the contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities, and we strive to amplify their sacred wisdom, knowledge and expertise as we work collaboratively to pave the way for future generations.

A Note on Country

We use the term “Australia” throughout this report for clarity and consistency. This continent has been home to sovereign First Nations for tens of thousands of years, known across hundreds of distinct language groups whose names for their own Countries and places carry living meaning and authority, among them Naarm (Melbourne), Gadigal (Sydney), Lutruwita (Tasmania), Meanjin (Brisbane), and Boorloo (Perth), alongside countless others across the continent. These names predate the formal naming of Australia in 1824 and extend far beyond it. This continent has always been, and remains, a place of sovereign First Nations whose leadership, cultures and custodianship continue to this day.

Authors: Taylor Hawkins & Tanisha Frescon

With support from: Paris Riebeling

With Gratitude to the Leaders Who Shaped This Work

We extend our deepest gratitude to the leaders who contributed their time, insight and guidance to this process. In engaging them, we did so with the commitment that their perspectives would carry real decision-making weight, not as input to a process already defined, but as foundational guidance that would determine whether and how this work proceeds.

We are grateful for the generosity, candour, and trust extended to us through these conversations. The insights shared have directly informed the foundations of the National Conversation Development Lab, and will continue to inform our work. We hope they will also serve as a contribution to guide the work of our colleagues across the sector.

Stephanie Beck, Wongatha Ngadju woman, Vice Chancellor of IMAGI-NATION (University) working at the intersection of imagination, systems change, and knowledge translation.

Joshua Creamer, Waanyi and Kalkadoon barrister specialising in human rights, native title, and large-scale systemic legal reform.

Rona Glynn-McDonald, Kaytetye woman based on Arrernte Country; Chair of Common Ground and Director First Nations Futures, working across storytelling, economics, and narrative change.

Professor Gregory Phillips, Waanyi and Jaru medical anthropologist; Professor of First People's Health and CEO of ABSTARR Consulting, specialising in power, race relations, and systemic reform.

Lisa Rapley, Aboriginal woman with ancestral connections to Gumbaynggirr – Mirlagalgi/Garby Country; Adviser at the National Indigenous Australians Agency and Co-founder of Yuludarla Karulbo, supporting young Indigenous cultural leadership.

Benson Saulo, Proud descendant of the Wemba Wemba and Gunditjmarra peoples of Western Victoria, with heritage from New Ireland Province, Papua New Guinea; specialist in economic development and international relations.

Dr Tristan Schultz, designer, researcher and strategist of Gamilaroi and Australian-european descent, working at the intersection of foresight, decolonial thinking, and strategic systems design.

Dr Skye Trudgett, Gamilaroi woman, CEO of Kowa, and nationally recognised expert in Indigenous Data Sovereignty, and impact measurement.

Table of Contents

Introduction	05
How We Got Here	06
Purpose and Scope	06
What We Heard	07
Deep Dive: First Nations Data Sovereignty	12
What This Means for Us: Design Principles to Carry Forward	14
Design Adjustments Made	16
Our Commitment	18

Introduction

Between November 2025 and February 2026, Foundations for Tomorrow (FFT) undertook a structured First Nations Discovery Process to determine whether the National Conversation Development Lab should proceed, and if so, under what conditions.

This was designed as a genuine threshold for continuation. If the risks outweighed the potential benefit, if Foundations for Tomorrow was not the appropriate convenor, or if the design proved incoherent with the outcomes sought, the work would not proceed in its current form.

This process invited a small group of 10 First Nations leaders, whose work has informed and shaped this field over time, to provide foundational guidance on whether and how this initiative should proceed. The intention was to centre genuine leadership input at the design stage rather than retrospective feedback on a predetermined model.

This document consolidates insights from a series of confidential interviews with respected First Nations leaders, engaged to interrogate the appropriateness, risks, and design implications of the National Conversation Development Lab.

That National Conversation Development Lab ('the Lab')

The National Conversation Development Lab is an 18-month, cross-sector collaboration led by Foundations for Tomorrow to design and test how Australia can run a credible, large-scale National Conversation about its long-term future.

The Lab does not run the Conversation itself; it builds the model for it. This includes the governance, engagement methods, inclusion safeguards, civic technology and policy pathways needed to ensure a future National Conversation is trusted, inclusive, and capable of informing real policy decisions.

In practical terms, the Lab brings together communities, institutions and leaders to prototype and pilot how Australians can participate in shaping long-term national direction, and how those insights can be translated into durable decision-making and reform.

Why First Nations Leadership Is Foundational to the Lab

Foundations for Tomorrow holds a firm conviction that Australia, home to the longest continuous cultures in the world, carries an abundance of wisdom about intergenerational thinking and long-term governance.

First Nations leaders across the continent have long-practised intergenerational thinking and stewardship. These knowledge systems, governance approaches, and cultural practices demonstrate what it means to steward land, community, and decision-making across deep time. This work not only builds on the existing wisdom and practice of intergenerational stewardship held by First Nations communities, but also intersects with the landscape left by the 2023 Voice to Parliament referendum, where questions of Australian identity, recognition, and trust remain live. Therefore, the engagement of First Nations leaders before we commence the Lab is essential.

Language and Terminology

In this report, we use "First Nations from Australia" as the primary term to respectfully acknowledge the many distinct nations and cultures across Australia. Other terminology may be used where contextually appropriate, including where it reflects language used by contributors or established frameworks.

How We Got Here

The concept of a National Conversation has been embedded within Foundations for Tomorrow's work for several years. In mid-2025, it became clear that a National Conversation represented a high-leverage intervention for the challenges Australia faces.

In response, Foundations for Tomorrow undertook a 12-week research sprint to test three core questions: whether a National Conversation should take place; whether it should take place now; and who is best placed to initiate it. These conversations indicated that a National Conversation was widely seen as both necessary and timely, and Foundations for Tomorrow was identified as a credible convenor to design a uniquely Australian model.

Upon conclusion of our 12-week sprint, we recognised that the project had not met our own standards for First Nations engagement. Stakeholder availability, time constraints and overlapping priorities limited the depth of engagement required. Recognising this gap, and consistent with our organisational commitments, we initiated a dedicated First Nations Discovery Process.

Purpose and Scope

The Discovery Process explored two core questions:

Should the Lab proceed at all in its current context?

This question engaged with the realities of the post-referendum landscape and Foundations for Tomorrow's position as a non-Indigenous-led organisation. Discussions focused on appropriateness, timeliness, and the tensions between the potential value of this work and the risks of undertaking it with limited resourcing and organisational capacity.

Across all interviews, the Lab's premise was consistently viewed as positive and valuable. At the same time, contributors affirmed that the risks identified by Foundations for Tomorrow are real and must be actively addressed through careful design, strong governance, and ongoing accountability.

If the Lab proceeds, what risks, tensions, conditions and boundaries must shape its design?

Insights gathered across interviews emphasised that Foundations for Tomorrow's role will be to hold and navigate enduring tensions, including the need to hold multiple truths at once and to design a process capable of operating responsibly within that complexity. The consultation deliberately focused on surfacing risks, tensions, and the conditions under which this work could cause harm, in order to establish the safeguards required for it to proceed with integrity.

The findings from this Discovery Process are reflected throughout this paper in six ways:

1. **Our bias for surfacing tensions and risk**, explaining how and why the interview series was framed;
2. **Six key tensions** that must be actively navigated across every phase of the Lab's design and delivery;
3. **A focused examination of First Nations data sovereignty** as a foundational design requirement;
4. **Core design principles** emerging from the consultation to guide the Lab's development;
5. **Design adjustments** and commitments already made in response to this process;
6. **Our commitment** to ongoing learning, accountability and stewardship.

Our Bias for Surfacing Tensions and Risk

Foundations for Tomorrow has received strong encouragement and affirmation of this work from a wide range of stakeholders. However, the purpose of this Discovery Process was to rigorously test and challenge our existing beliefs rather than reinforce them.

Accordingly, interviews were intentionally framed to focus on risk, tension and the potential for harm. Contributors were invited to explore the conditions under which this work could cause more harm than good, and to surface the concerns, safeguards, and boundaries that must be addressed for it to proceed responsibly. As a result, this document places significant emphasis on risks and tensions. This reflects what was more important to interrogate to ensure the Lab's design is grounded, responsible, and fit for purpose, rather than the tone or disposition of those who contributed.

What we Heard

Navigating Tensions and Designing for Known Risks

Across interviews, several foundational conditions emerged for the Lab to proceed responsibly. These conditions address potential harms, not only delivery risks. Each must be actively held across every phase of the Lab's design and delivery.

TENSION ONE

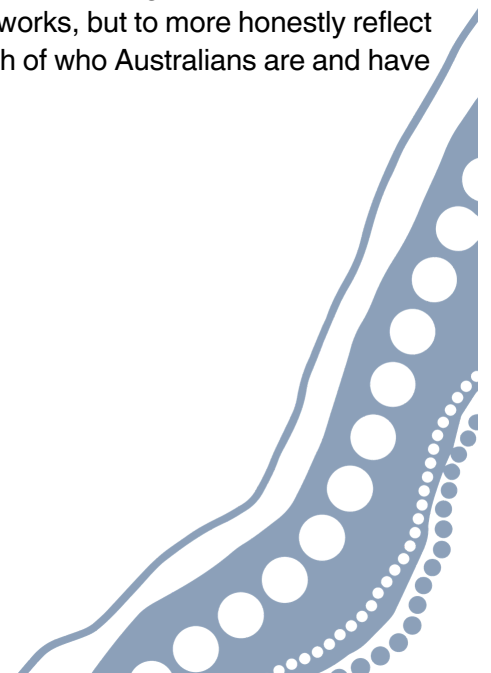
Future, Identity and History Are Inextricably Linked

Australia's future cannot be disentangled from its past. Present-day identity and shared futures visioning are inherently connected, and a National Conversation that sidesteps questions of identity, history and belonging is not a more neutral process, it is a less complete one.

This includes honest engagement with the realities of colonisation, dispossession and the Stolen Generations, as well as the broader assumptions that have shaped how Australia has understood and organised itself. It must equally hold the full picture of First Nations peoples: their survival across extraordinary adversity, their ongoing participation in civic and economic life, their cultural pride, and the leadership they have consistently demonstrated across generations. A National Conversation grounded only in terms of grievances risks narrowing the conversation from one that can hold the weight of our shared history, the evidence of endurance and the potential of our shared future. These are not peripheral considerations; they are part of the foundation on which any credible shared future must be built.

The risk identified is not that questions of identity surface through this process. It is that they surface without structure. Identity must be framed deliberately, oriented through ceremony and narrative, and held within disciplined facilitation. Not every question will yield consensus. Progress may lie in a deeper understanding rather than agreement, and the form of engagement matters as much as its content.

Australia's sense of national identity is already fragmented, and multiculturalism as currently practised may still operate within dominant power structures. Future identity may require models that move beyond existing frameworks, not to discard what works, but to more honestly reflect the full breadth of who Australians are and have always been.



There is a genuine opportunity to re-ground Australian governance and civic life in First Nations worldviews alongside contemporary society. This is a structural reconsideration, not an amendment. Critically, it cannot be carried by First Nations peoples alone. The population base is too small to shift entrenched political and cultural dynamics without broader national participation. Non-Indigenous Australians must engage meaningfully in this work.

TENSION TWO

Structural Authority Versus Symbolic Inclusion

A core gap identified across many initiatives is the treatment of First Nations inclusion as representation rather than leadership. There was strong and consistent support for First Nations leadership that is substantive, structural, and embedded in governance, not layered onto an existing framework or minimised to mere representation, with a focus on enabling the First Nations leaders engaged to contribute from within First Nations knowledge systems and authority.

A related concern was raised about common efforts to "embed Indigenous knowledges" in processes. Knowledge is relational and contextual, inseparable from Country, custodianship and lived relationship. Treating it as an abstract asset to be inserted into a process risks precisely that detachment. Incorporating First Nations perspectives within an existing framework is a fundamentally different proposition from enabling First Nations knowledge systems and authority to shape how the process is designed and held.

This tension extends into the post-referendum landscape. Framing that too closely resembles Voice-like structures risks triggering disengagement or political backlash before trust has been established. Several contributors engaged seriously with the question of whether it is possible to maintain genuine design integrity while carefully managing public framing to keep the work viable. What emerged was not a resolution but a shared recognition: whatever decisions are made about public framing, they must not come at the cost of structural authority. The tension between governance design and external communications must be actively named and held, not resolved by allowing one to quietly determine the other.

Resourcing compounds this tension. Unpaid labour expectations are neither fair nor feasible, particularly for First Nations leaders with high demands on their time. Honoraria provided early, even if modest, signal reciprocity. Strategic engagement with leaders in paid institutional roles where participation aligns with their existing remit, and fundraising sequencing that properly resources designated leadership roles, are approaches that honour both the task and the relationship.



TENSION THREE

Safety and Structure Versus Openness and Reach

A national process cannot guarantee frictionless safety. Cultural safety refers to structural safeguards: governance protocols, trauma-aware facilitation and clear decision rules. Cultural security refers to what individuals carry: identity, authority, cultural grounding and a sense of belonging within the space. Discomfort is inevitable and is a necessary part of genuine engagement with difficult national questions. The goal is to prevent avoidable harm while being honest about the tensions inherent in this work.

How people are inducted into a space shapes behaviour more fundamentally than in-the-moment facilitation. Ceremony, be it cultural or civic, serves as an essential unifier, establishing shared practice, protocol and understanding. It marks a transition toward shared responsibility and sets behavioural expectations before deliberation begins.

Where civic literacy is low, and contributors noted how much is lost through the absence of civics education, induction also carries the function of equipping people to participate meaningfully. The tension between political diversity and cultural safety is most effectively addressed through entry design, not managed after the fact.

TENSION FOUR

Breadth of Reach Versus Depth of Integrity

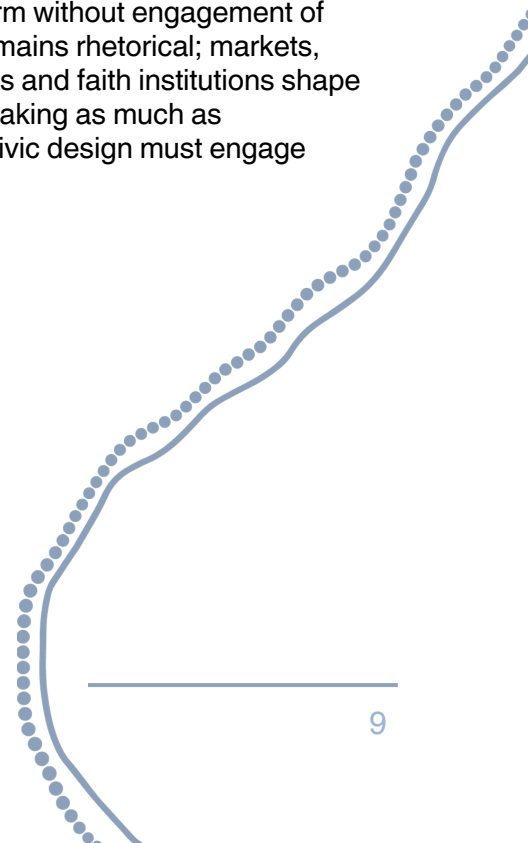
A genuine mandate requires engagement across the full breadth of Australian society, faith leaders, farmers, business communities, unions, young people, political actors across the spectrum, and communities historically underrepresented in civic processes. Intersectional reach is not aspirational. It is definitional to the work's legitimacy.

For this process to be legitimate, it must also be genuinely accessible, built around the reality of who must be able to participate, not refined toward it later.

Neutrality is one of the project's strongest strategic assets. In a polarised environment, perceived alignment with one party or ideological position will narrow participation and undermine legitimacy. Neutrality means resisting partisan framing and designing a process that feels civic rather than political. It must be demonstrated through the structure of the work, not only stated in its framing.

Several contributors highlighted the importance of language that allows people across the political spectrum to see themselves in the work. Words such as dignity, connection, self-reliance, responsibility and accountability cross ideological lines. Making space for what is working well alongside what needs to change, acknowledging continuity and conservation as well as transformation, matters for communities that do not see themselves as agents of disruption but whose participation is essential to any genuine national mandate.

A persistent challenge is the false trade-off narrative between economic prosperity and sustainability. Intergenerational leadership must actively reframe these binaries so that economic development, sustainability and social cohesion are understood as mutually reinforcing. Without this, reform will stall in the face of defensive politics. Policy reform without engagement of structural power remains rhetorical; markets, corporations, unions and faith institutions shape political decision-making as much as governments do. Civic design must engage power where it sits.



TENSION FIVE

Aspiration Versus Honest Trade-Offs

Effective change requires both a compelling vision and practical realism. Aspiration must be paired with honest acknowledgement of the compromises and trade-offs required. Promising frictionless consensus would misrepresent the nature of this work. Imagination surfaced across interviews not as creative ornamentation but as operational necessity, providing the elasticity that allows people to experiment with possibility rather than defend identity, and enabling long-term thinking where rigidity would otherwise take hold.

Respect emerged as the defining measure of success or failure. It is demonstrated when difficult voices are included rather than filtered out, when dissent is recorded rather than sanitised, and when decisions are explained transparently.

Disrespect is experienced when consultation feels tokenistic or when disagreement is quietly excluded. Decision-making norms must be agreed upon up front and applied consistently. People can accept outcomes they disagree with when the rules were known in advance and applied fairly.

Large-scale reform efforts often fail when they demand ideological purity or attempt to resolve everything at once. Those who push for complete transformation are not wrong to do so, and their position is too often used to sideline them rather than to engage seriously with what systemic change actually requires. The design needs to hold both the ambition of the project and the breadth of its coalition, finding pathways that do not force a choice between vision and progress. Pragmatism in the architecture does not have to mean timidity in the vision.

What matters is who sets the pace: the sequencing and tempo of change should be determined by First Nations leadership, not prescribed by others in the name of caution.

Working at the interface between community and institution carries real weight, and the personal toll of that work should not be treated as an individual problem to manage. Rather than repeatedly sending people into institutional environments and expecting them to absorb the strain, the design should bring institutions outward, redistributing the burden structurally. The sustainability of the National Conversation depends not only on protecting participants but on sustaining those who steward the process itself.

TENSION SIX

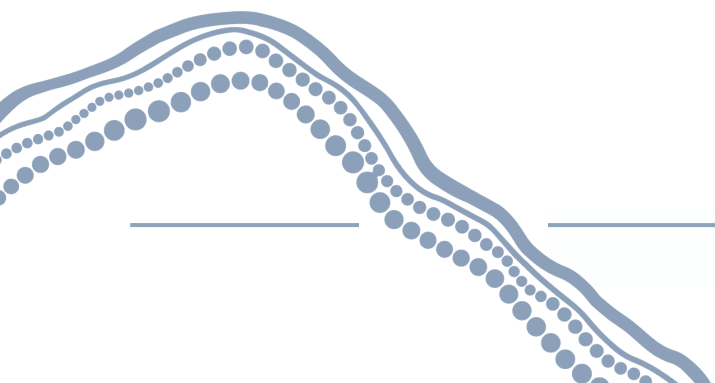
Movement Versus Moment, Sustaining What Is Built

First Nations relationship-building moves at the speed of trust. Culturally significant dates, major policy announcements and periods of heightened political sensitivity all affect how communities can engage, as does the emotional and practical capacity of leaders already carrying heavy loads.

Relationship-building cannot be treated as a line item. There must be a genuine willingness to pause or adapt if community attention is rightly elsewhere.

The distinction between building a movement and staging a moment has direct consequences for how the work is funded, governed and measured. One-off civic events without sustained infrastructure do not build confidence. They deplete it. As one participant described it, the process must climb the mountain before it raises the flag. Governance architecture must precede expansion. Momentum must follow demonstrated integrity, not precede it.

Communities that have been heavily consulted over time recognise extractive dynamics when they encounter them again.



The concern raised is not only that the Lab might fail to engage these communities, but also that arriving in spaces that are genuinely depleted with good intentions may cause harm, regardless of intent. The burden of proof lies with the Lab, not with communities, and it is higher precisely because of what has come before. The legitimacy of the project will rest in if people can trace their contribution through to something tangible and shared. Without visible feedback loops, participation risks feeling like harvesting.

Funders are frequently drawn to national scale, visible ambition and headline outcomes, while the conditions required for high-integrity relationship-building are almost the opposite: slow, deep, relational and difficult to demonstrate at reporting intervals. The Lab must be prepared to resist funding incentives that pull toward premature scale, and that resistance needs to be named and governed, not managed quietly.

Without a unified infrastructure, the initiative risks producing disconnected, smaller initiatives, each lacking the weight to shift anything. Yet centralised coordination carries its own risks, particularly if it reproduces the power dynamics it seeks to disrupt. The design challenge is building infrastructure unified enough to hold coherence and distributed enough to honour local authority. Place-based modelling offers a credible pathway, the relational value of the conversations themselves, the trust built, the stories shared, and the understanding deepened are meaningful outcome in their own right. But place-based depth and national mandate may not be straightforwardly compatible, and the Lab will need to make deliberate, transparent decisions about when depth should take precedence over reach, and vice versa.

Systems change is not achieved through a single national event or a published report. It requires sustained civic infrastructure, consistent relational presence and a long-term view of what success looks like. The Lab must be honest with itself, its funders and its contributors about that from the beginning.



Deep Dive: First Nations Data Sovereignty

Context Setting

First Nations Data Sovereignty is the inherent right of First Nations peoples to own, control, access, govern and steward data about their peoples, Country, cultures, knowledges and futures. It is not a technical compliance issue. It is an expression of self-determination.

In practice, it means First Nations peoples determine whether data is collected at all, what is collected, how it is interpreted and stored, who can access it, and how it is used. The right to say no must sit with First Nations peoples from the outset.

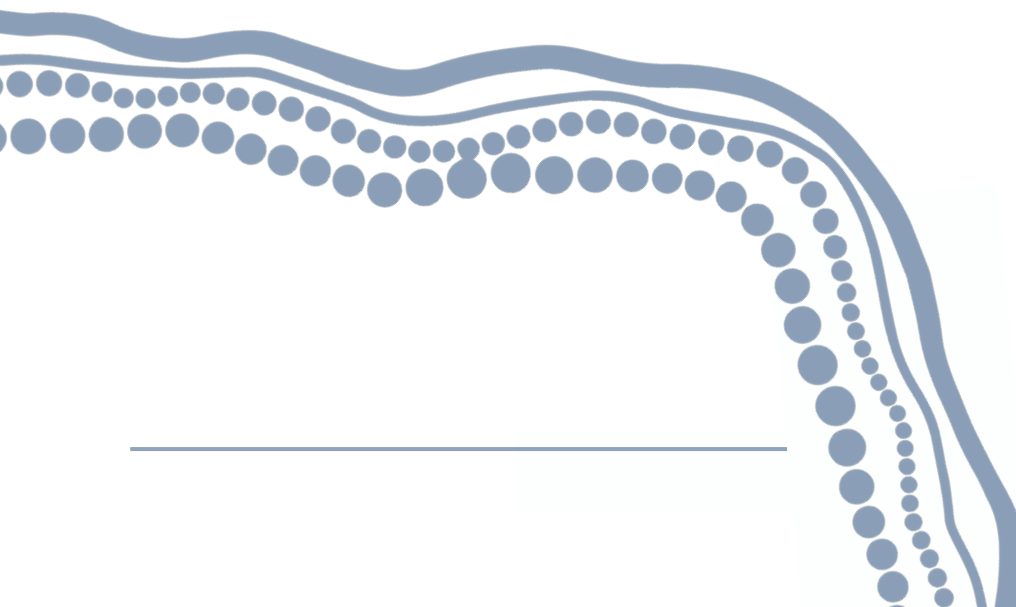
Data is not neutral. It shapes narratives, power and outcomes. Governed well, it enables communities to advocate, plan and build futures on their own terms. Governed poorly, it entrenches disadvantage and produces findings that reflect institutional priorities rather than community realities.

First Nations peoples are among the most researched populations in the world. That record has not translated into commensurate benefit, nor consistently reflected First Nations perspectives, priorities or ways of knowing. The pattern is well documented: data flows outward, decisions flow downward, and communities bear the consequences of both. Data must be understood as story: relational, contextual, and belonging to the people it describes.

Any new process enters this history whether it intends to or not. Good intentions do not change the experience of communities that have participated in repeated rounds of consultation with limited visible return. The burden of proof sits with the process, not with communities. The question is not only whether this initiative is different in its design, but whether it can demonstrate that difference in ways communities can see and verify.

Operationalising First Nations Data Sovereignty demands structural commitment, not goodwill alone. This means engaging local governance systems, ensuring data does not leave community control without consent, embedding accountability to First Nations peoples, and recognising data as a cultural, strategic and economic asset.

- [Caring for Data, Caring for Country](#)
- [A framework for operationalising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander data sovereignty in Australia: Results of a systematic literature review of published studies](#)
- [OCCAAARS Framework for First Nations Data Sovereignty \(FNDSOV\)](#)





National Scale Amplifies Risk

At the national scale, the stakes are amplified. Without Indigenous data governance from the outset, large-scale processes risk compounding existing patterns rather than disrupting them. With it, they can model genuine self-determination in practice, demonstrating what it looks like when communities hold authority over their own stories and knowledge.

Without an authorised structure, data practices may inadvertently become one-directional, trust may erode, findings may be interpreted in ways communities did not intend, and existing imbalances may be reinforced. The larger the platform, the greater the consequence of getting governance wrong. Governance must anchor scale.

Overarching Governance and Embedded Presence

An overarching Indigenous governance structure should exist across all initiatives within the National Conversation, flat and integrated rather than hierarchical. The same leaders who define principles should remain engaged across pilots and prototypes, maintaining continuity between design and delivery and between the values the process holds and how it operates on the ground.

Authority should be anchored in a core group of approximately three to eight members: individuals with influence and system navigation capability, leaders working in aligned spaces, young leaders supported appropriately, and long-term intergenerational thinkers. Members must be grounded and able to withstand political pressure. That is a significant ask, and the support structures around it must be commensurate.

Crucially, the governance group must define its own approach to Indigenous data sovereignty. Existing frameworks may inform that work, but principles must not be pre-written by the project team and presented for endorsement. Establish the group, then allow it to set the parameters.

Compensation, Authority and Perception

Resourcing should be reciprocal and contextual, expressed through decision-making power, relationships and financial compensation where appropriate, without allowing flexibility to become an avenue for diminished standards. Compensation must reflect responsibility and authority, not simply participation. If governance roles are not visibly influential, trust will decline quickly. Authority must be real and traceable in outcomes.

How compensation is communicated requires equal care. The legitimacy test is straightforward: does the governance structure have genuine sway, and is that influence evident in how the work proceeds?

From Data to Story and Visible Outcomes

When data sovereignty surfaced across interviews, it was framed as part of a broader concern about one-directional value flow. The language of "data" implies something collected, processed and held by institutions. "Story" implies relationship, purpose and reciprocity, locating meaning with the people the information belongs to. That distinction shapes not only how knowledge is governed, but how the entire process is experienced by those who contribute to it.

People contribute more freely when they can see what they are building toward. Written records, film and collective documents give people a shared destination and a basis for accountability. The legitimacy becomes: can contributors trace their input to something tangible and shared?

What This Means for Us

Design Principles to Carry Forward

The following principles emerge from the synthesis of what was heard across the First Nations Discovery Process. They are orientations that must be held simultaneously, and in tension with one another, across every phase of the Lab's design and delivery.

Throughout the consultation, contributors consistently affirmed FFT's role as a space that can hold competing tensions without collapsing them into false choices. The task is always both. This is the orientation from which each principle below should be read.

ONE Reject the Binary

The instinct to resolve tension into a clean position is a design failure in this context. Economic development and cultural integrity, political neutrality and moral clarity, aspiration and honest trade-offs do not need to be reconciled. They need to be held and navigated..

TWO Authority Must Be Structural

First Nations leadership must sit within governance, methodology and decision-making before design, data collection or synthesis begins. Authority layered on after design risks embedding harm at scale. Data sovereignty is an expression of self-determination and must be treated as such from the outset. Integration must reinforce authority, not absorb it; separate governance structures that are poorly integrated risk being perceived as tokenistic, while distinct authority collapsed into generic leadership risks dilution.

THREE Sequencing is Strategy

Internal work must precede joint dialogue. Relational foundations must precede architecture. Core group alignment must precede broader sector engagement. Order is infrastructure. Moving to scale before foundations are secure is one of the most consistent failure patterns identified across the consultation.

FOUR Relational Architecture Over Procedural Mechanism

The National Conversation must be experienced as a living cultural encounter built on genuine reciprocity, rather than a consultation exercise. Without deliberate reconfiguration, inherited engagement formats revert to extraction, fatigue and performative participation. The critique is of design inheritance, not intent.

FIVE Language is Design

Words like 'embedding,' 'consultation,' 'safety' and 'data' carry more political weight than they appear to. Each signals whose frame is operating, who belongs in the room, and what kind of process is being run. Every word choice is a design decision.

SIX Imagination is Structural

Without imagination, systems work becomes brittle. People need elasticity to engage complexity without defending identity. Imagination is part of how difficult trade-offs are held safely and productively.

SEVEN Close the Loop

Contributors must be able to trace their contribution through to something tangible and shared. Without visible feedback loops, engagement becomes extraction.

EIGHT Dissent is Data

Managed consensus erodes credibility. Disagreement should be recorded, visible and traceable. Decision-making norms and thresholds should be published early and applied consistently. People can accept outcomes they disagree with when the rules were known in advance and applied fairly.

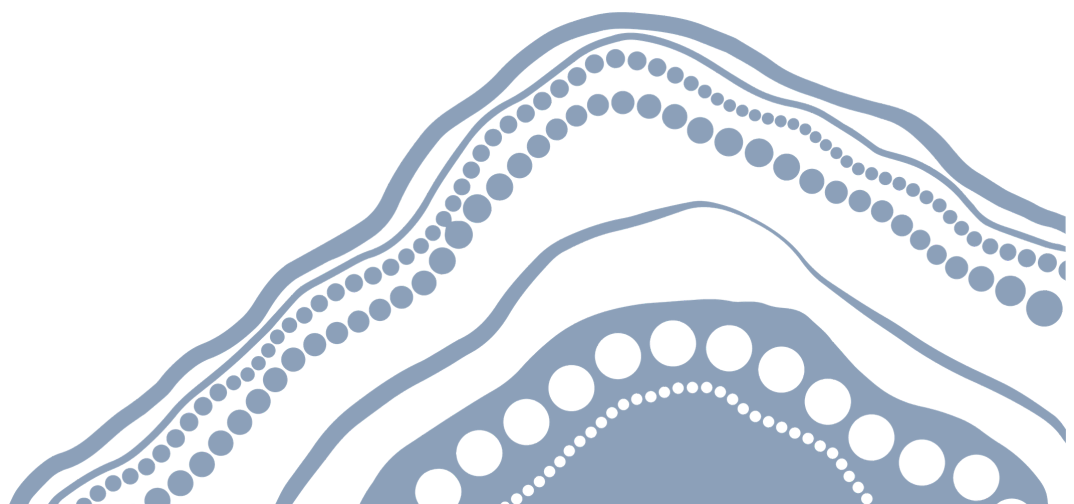
NINE Depth Before Breadth: Scale Can Slip, Standards Cannot

A process that achieves national reach by sacrificing relational integrity has reproduced the problem it set out to address. Where the choice is between letting scale slip and proceeding in ways that cause harm, letting scale slip is the right decision. This is an ethical commitment, and should be stated as one.

When Priorities Conflict

The principles above will not always point in the same direction. Where they conflict, contributors were clear about the order of priority. Trust and legitimacy take precedence over speed. Capability-building takes precedence over extraction. Sequencing takes precedence over scale. Stewardship takes precedence over ownership. Authority takes precedence over expansion.

These are decision rules. They should be held explicitly, named in governance conversations, and revisited as the work evolves.



Design Adjustments Made

The Discovery Process has led to concrete changes in how the Lab will proceed. The adjustments below reflect a genuine re-orientation of the work in response to what was heard, and a commitment to letting that process determine direction rather than confirm decisions already made.

Ongoing Accountability to the Principles and Insights

The insights from this process will not be treated as static inputs. They will serve as an ongoing reference point for how the Lab is designed and delivered. Foundations for Tomorrow will provide six-monthly public updates to Lab contributors and partners outlining how the initiative is operating in alignment with the principles identified in this report, tracking how the Lab is embedding intercultural practice, cultural responsiveness and First Nations leadership over the life of the project. This ensures the process remains a living influence on the work, rather than a one-off consultation.

Adjusted Timeline to Prioritise Relationship Building

In response to consistent feedback on the primacy of trust and relationship-building, the project timeline has been extended to include a dedicated pre-design phase. An additional three-month relationship-building period has been inserted prior to the formal launch of the Lab. During this period, participating organisations will be invited to identify and bring in additional stakeholders, particularly those not yet represented, and to build trust with them before the formal design process begins. The Lab begins from a foundation of relationships and shared understanding, rather than attempting to build these in parallel with complex design work.

First Nations Data Sovereignty Governance

The importance of First Nations data sovereignty was one of the clearest and most consistent messages to emerge from the consultation. FFT acknowledges that it has not yet had sufficient time to complete the internal design work or engage the full range of stakeholders required to establish a governance model that meets the standards expected in this space. This is foundational. Without it, the integrity of the project would be fundamentally undermined. The three-month relationship-building period will be used to co-develop an appropriate governance approach in genuine partnership with First Nations leaders already engaged in this project and others as required. The specific structure is not yet determined, but it must reflect genuine authority, cultural integrity and decision-making power in line with established principles of First Nations data sovereignty. Progress will be shared transparently as it develops.

Development of an Internal Engagement Map

To ensure the Lab reflects the breadth and diversity of Australian communities, Foundations for Tomorrow will develop and maintain an internal engagement map making visible which communities, sectors and perspectives are represented, where gaps exist, and where risks of under-representation are emerging. This map will be used as an active decision-making tool to ensure inclusivity and reach remain front of mind throughout the Lab.

First Nations Leadership and Intercultural Design

The Lab's design will embed genuine First Nations leadership structurally within governance and design processes. This will be complemented by expertise in intercultural practice, recognising that the Lab must move beyond multicultural coexistence toward active intercultural exchange and mutual influence, and by a culturally responsive framework that supports ongoing responsiveness to contributors rather than assuming cultural safety can be guaranteed in advance.

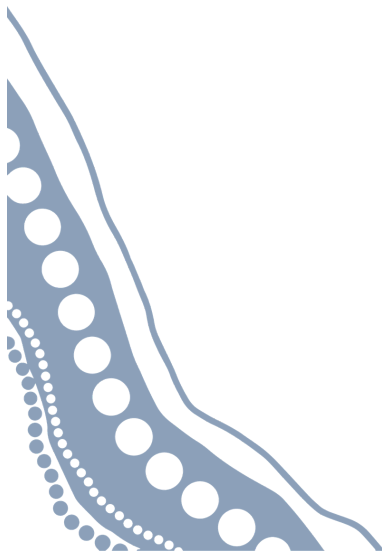
Clear principles and protocols for working with First Nations communities will be established, alongside a commitment to Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property principles, ensuring knowledge governance, cultural authority and data practices align with established national and international standards.

Participant Onboarding and Shared Terms of Engagement

Contributors cannot enter this work without shared expectations, capabilities and commitments. The Lab will include a curated onboarding process that establishes a shared understanding of the nature of this conversation as a truth-telling process, agreed terms of engagement including cultural responsiveness and active reflection on positionality and bias, and the mindsets and skills required to engage in complex, long-term and intercultural dialogue. Contributors will be expected to actively agree to these terms before entering the substantive design process.

Establishing a Shared Purpose and Why

The launch of the Lab will include a dedicated session focused on reasoning together about the purpose of the initiative, establishing a common frame for the National Conversation as both a civic and truth-telling process, and building alignment across contributors on the ambitions and responsibilities of the Lab. A shared why anchors the coherence of the work that follows.



Reasoning Together as a Core Method

The Lab will continue to use structured, facilitated reasoning processes to support contributors in engaging constructively across difference, holding complexity and uncertainty without rushing to premature conclusions, and building collective ownership of insights and directions. We will harness the following to support this:

- **Visible reasoning.** The Lab will prioritise structured spaces where contributors work through disagreement together and where that process is visible to others.
- **Transparent recording of disagreement.** Mechanisms will be built in to document dissenting views and explain why certain directions were taken. Managed consensus erodes credibility. Disagreement recorded and acknowledged with care builds it.
- **Traceable feedback loops.** Contributors must be able to see how their contributions have shaped the direction. Where they cannot, the process risks replicating the extractive dynamics it is designed to move beyond.

Embracing Complexity and Unresolved Questions of Australian Identity

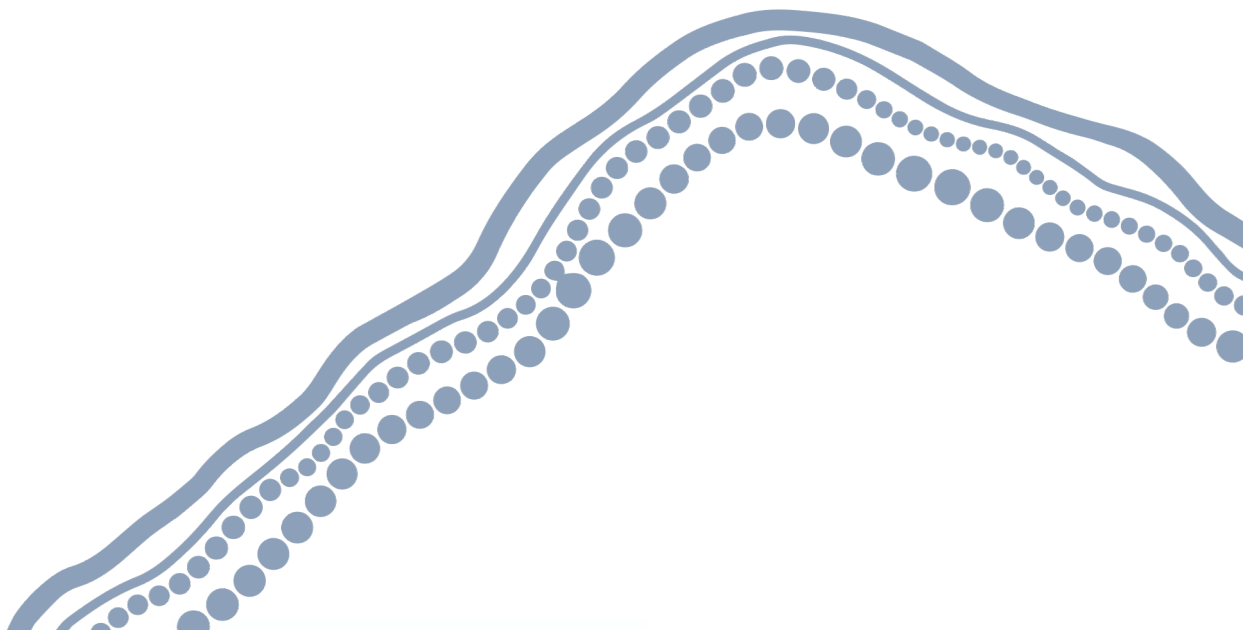
The facilitation approach will explicitly acknowledge that key questions of Australian identity, history and future direction are unresolved and contested. Rather than simplifying or resolving these prematurely, the Lab will create space for these tensions to be explored constructively, support contributors to engage with ambiguity and complexity, and treat the National Conversation itself as a process of ongoing collective sense-making. Meaningful progress requires the willingness to sit with, and work through, difficult questions, not to resolve them before the room is ready.

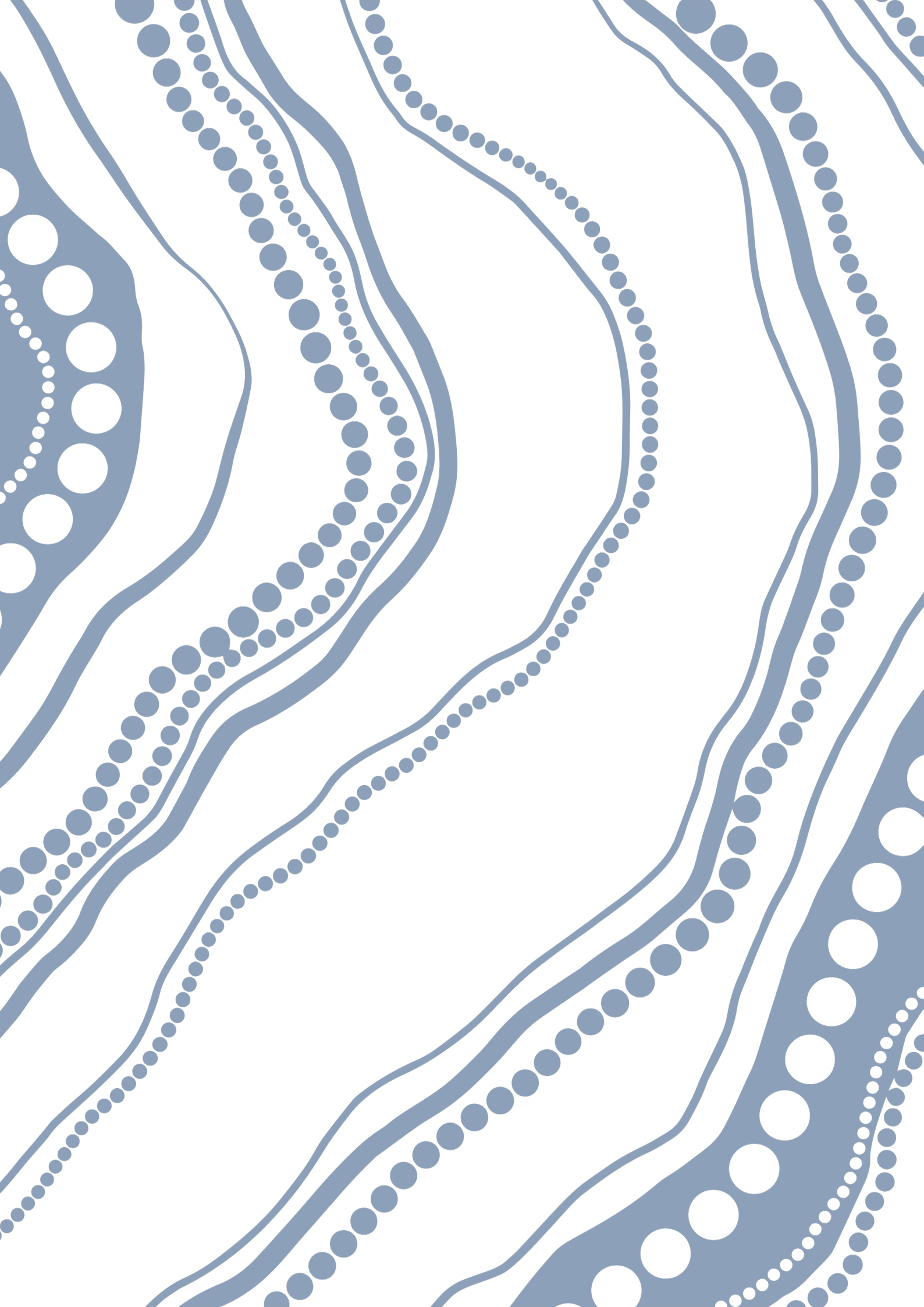
Our Commitment to Learning, Accountability and Stewardship

We entered these interviews willing to be changed by them. The process was treated as a substantive leadership contribution, with a genuinely open threshold: a strong, substantiated indication of risk from even a small number of leaders would have been sufficient to stop or redesign the work. That the initiative is proceeding reflects that no participant recommended it should not move forward. The guidance provided has shaped how it proceeds, under what conditions, and with what safeguards and responsibilities.

This report is intentionally transparent. We understand and acknowledge that there may be times when our capacity falls short of our aspirations; in these instances, we will explore this explicitly rather than quietly lowering the bar.

We invite feedback, challenge and partnership as we continue working to be a constructive and trusted contributor to shaping a better future for Australia.







Foundations

for Tomorrow



www.foundationsfortomorrow.org



hello@foundationsfortomorrow.org
