

Feedback on the Indigenous Voice Proposals *Sunshine Coast Council*

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the proposals for an Indigenous Voice, comprised of a National Voice, and Local and Regional Voices that aim to provide avenues to enhance local and regional decision making and regional governance through a principles-based framework.

Sunshine Coast Council acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of this region, the Kabi Kabi peoples and Jinibara peoples. Council is highly committed to working in partnership with the Traditional Custodians and the broader First Nations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) community to support self-determination through economic and community development.

The Sunshine Coast is a region of both ancient and contemporary significance. We are a region of abundance; rich in culture, knowledge, diversity, natural resources and strong communities. We are a highly engaged Council and are proud of the developing strength of our partnerships with First Nations peoples.

The Uluru Statement from the Heart highlights the needs of First Nations peoples for Voice Treaty Truth and Justice - Council supports the First Nations community in the pursuit of these four principles, as well as in their endeavours for greater consultation, respect for cultural practices and being able to authentically engage in the Local, Regional and National conversations for a Voice.

To better inform Council's position on this proposal, and in the spirit of meaningful engagement with and respect for our local First Nations community, we hosted the inaugural First Nations Self-Determination, Representation and Wellbeing Forum on 22 March 2021 – bringing First Nations people together to share in education, leadership, empowerment and networking, using a strengths based approach.

Key Community Advocacy

Through extensive consultation and listening, Council have heard the priorities and values the Sunshine Coast First Nations community hold in relation to the Local and Regional Voice. The following captures some of the key messages being voiced:

- First Nations people are the rightful custodians of their Country; sovereignty was never ceded
- Meaningful engagement with First Nations people takes time
- Truth-telling and deep listening are needed
- Education and acknowledgement of the First Nations histories of Australia is vital
- Self-Determination is a human right (as acknowledged by the United Nations)
- For genuine consultation to take place all First Nations voices must be heard
- Acknowledging strengths of First Nations cultural practices and knowledge systems
- Respect for, and integration of, First Nations governance systems and lore, including proposals to create 'Tribal Council/s'; returning to the oldest governance structure on the planet
- Being able to honour, protect and listen to Country
- A grassroots, bottom up approach is needed; no-one in the community is left behind.

Furthermore, the First Nations community has communicated to Council their desires for government to acknowledge and respect First Nations terms of reference and cultural practices - the need for space and time for First Nations voices, experiences and truths to be safely shared, listened to and respected.

Sunshine Coast Council's Position

Feedback on Indigenous Voice Proposal

Having heard the voices of our local First Nations community and considered the feedback, Council supports the following elements of the proposal:

- Need to ensure that local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have more of a say on the laws, policies and services that impact them, their communities and their lives, and that their voices are heard by all levels of government in the decision making process – as is the stated intent of the Indigenous Voice proposals.
- First Nations people are best placed to represent the region in responding to their needs as they have greatest understanding of their strengths, capabilities and challenges - Government's role should be as an enabler.
- In recognition of the significant diversity across Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia, Council supports the proposal that different regions could have different structures, based on what works best for their local communities rather than a set 'one-size fits all' structure for a Local and Regional Voice.
- Need to have gender balance in representation and support need for establishment of permanent youth and disability advisory groups.

Furthermore, Council supports the following principles in the proposed principles-based framework that would guide and support all Local and Regional Voices:

- *Empowerment*: Recognises strengths of First Nations people; Self-Determination; Culturally safe; Access to tools and resources they need to have greater control over their future; System's change to allow time for genuine engagement – more time and conversation.
- *Inclusive Participation*: All First Nations people have opportunity to have a say; All community members and family groups – historical residents as well as Traditional Owners – can participate or see themselves represented; Balances representation of men and women, youth and elders.
- *Cultural Leadership*: Local and regional voice structures are endorsed and/or connected with cultural leaders, in a way that respects how cultural leadership and authority operates in that region; Systems and structures based in traditional law/ lore and custom are drawn on or incorporated in the local and regional voice arrangements, as appropriate to each region; There are clear pathways for cultural leaders and Traditional Owners to be involved in the work of their local and regional voice; The Voice arrangements do not encroach on the specific remit of cultural leaders over traditional law / lore, custom and cultural matters.
- *Community-led Design*: Local and regional voice arrangements are determined by relevant communities, according to local context, history and culture; Community-led design is central to creating arrangements that meet local needs and aspirations;

Community-led design builds local ownership and gives authorisation and mandate to voice structures; Communities shape arrangements in line with their local context, history, culture and aspirations for the future.

- *Respectful Long Term Partnerships*: Respectful long-term partnerships recognises need for improved coordination between and within levels of government, including government system changes, to shift to a partnership approach; Governments support communities to build capacity and expertise and draw on community expertise to support ‘two way learning’. Both sides share their different capabilities, skills and experience to build and enhance effective partnership.
- *Transparency and Accountability*: Transparency and accountability is critical to success of partnerships between local and regional voices and government.
- *Capability Driven*: Communities have ongoing opportunities and support to develop and enhance local leadership and build their capability to engage in effective partnership; Governments develop their capability to engage in partnership arrangements and allow space and authority for communities to perform voice functions.

Further Recommendations

In order for the co-design process to be authentic and sustainable, and to enable First Nations people to be self-determining, Council believes further engagement is necessary prior to the Indigenous Voice being presented to government. It is recommended that consultation be respectful of existing cultural practices.

Further resourcing, appropriate timelines and early provision of information will be required to ensure meaningful engagement, where all First Nations voices are heard, including in-depth regional consultation in the forms of community forums and workshops. This is best practice for our local community, with the vision to create strong, sustainable and empowering outcomes for First Nations people.

In moving forward, Council recommends that the approach is mindful of the need to not create community division and ensure the Voice proposals are not being tokenistic or government driven. Furthermore, it will be important to respect that Aboriginal socio-cultural regions do not follow State and Territory borders.

Whilst Sunshine Coast Council looks forward to continuing on this journey, we acknowledge there are still important conversations to be had.

About Sunshine Coast Council Local Government Area

“OUR VISION – Together we thrive: In all of our communities people are connected, included and feel welcomed. At the heart of our communities are our people who come together and actively participate in their community and contribute to the social, cultural and creative life of our region. People are welcoming, caring and respectful and equal opportunities are available to all. The Traditional Owners, the Kabi Kabi and the Jinibara peoples’ enduring connection to country, and the contribution of the broader First Nations community is acknowledged, celebrated and valued. We value our heritage and diversity, our natural environment and the quality lifestyle that our region offers. Together we have created a shared future where we all thrive”.

(Sunshine Coast Community Strategy 2019-2041)

The current Census data (ABS, 2016) reports 1.9% of the Sunshine Coast’s population identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. However, through the First Nations Partnerships team engagement, this number looks to be at least twice this, with a large concentration of First Nations people residing in Nambour.

In 2011, Sunshine Coast Council was the first council in Queensland to develop a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) with Reconciliation Australia. Since then, Council has focused on strengthening relationships with the local First Nations community, including the creation of the First Nations Partnerships team.

Sunshine Coast Council’s third RAP – The Sunshine Coast Innovate Reconciliation Action Plan 2021-2022 – has been endorsed by Council and is due to launch shortly. This Innovate RAP will provide Council with a framework to embed a strong approach towards advancing reconciliation internally and within the organisation’s sphere of influence.

Council’s First Nations Partnerships team aim to be a leader in First Nations engagement, while nurturing a shared future that embraces culture, heritage and diversity.

The First Nations Partnerships team functions include:

- Compliance with the Cultural Heritage Act, Native Title Act and other First Nations legislations
- Engaging with the Native Title groups for both the Kabi Kabi and the Jinibara
- Providing internal advice to business areas across Council
- Providing internal consultation on policies, procedures and strategies
- Promoting and celebrating dates significant to First Nations peoples

Using the First Nations values of Connection, Listening, Story & Community, some key engagement activities First Nations Partnerships have implemented include:

- Sunshine Coast First Nations Community Meeting – a monthly, grassroots meeting, using a yarning circle framework and First Nations terms of reference;
- Sunshine Coast First Nations Accord – a monthly, roundtable meeting of corporates and not-for-profit organisations, supporting reconciliation activities across the Sunshine Coast;
- Involvement with Sunshine Coast First Nations Network Group (SC1NG) – organisations working with the First Nations Community;
- The inaugural First Nations Self-Determination, Representation and Wellbeing Forum – bringing First Nations people together to share in education, leadership, empowerment and networking, using a strengths based approach;
- An increase in First Nations suppliers; over 55 currently engaged.