# Indigenous Governance Awards 2026

RECONCILIATION AUSTRALIA

AIGI Australian Indigenous Governance Institute




# Finalist Site Locations

## CATEGORY ONE

**Bindjareb Djilba Kaadadjan Bidi Yarning Circle**

Bindjareb Noongar communities across Bindjareb Boodja Country, Western Australia

Winjan, Harvey and Waroona Aboriginal Corporations

**Northern Nunga Network**

Communities across the northern suburbs of Adelaide, South Australia

**Wukul Yabang Aboriginal Health Research Community Panel**

Hunter New England region, New South Wales

## CATEGORY TWO

**Blak & Bright First Nations Literary Festival Limited**

Melbourne, Victoria

**Ngrragoonda Aboriginal Corporation**

Gudjala Country, Queensland

Approximately 10,617 square kilometres of land across the Regional Shire Councils of Etheridge, Flinders and Charters Towers.

**Point Pearce Aboriginal Corporation**

Narungga community of the Yorke Peninsula, South Australia

## CATEGORY THREE

**Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation**

Representing Yolŋu communities across northeast Arnhem Land, Northern Territory

**Jabalbina Yalanji Aboriginal Corporation**

Eastern Kuku Yalanji Land, Queensland

**Wyndham Youth Aboriginal Corporation**

Wyndham, Western Australia

# About the Indigenous Governance Awards

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have governed their own communities for thousands of generations, and today Indigenous-led organisations continue that legacy by embedding culture, kinship and community expectations at the heart of their decision making.

Now in their twenty-first year, the Indigenous Governance Awards publicly recognise and celebrate outstanding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led organisations and groups that, through their effective governance models, make extraordinary contributions to communities and to the nation.

**CATEGORY ONE:**

**Outstanding examples of governance in Indigenous-led unincorporated organisations and groups**

**CATEGORY TWO:**

**Outstanding examples of governance in Indigenous-led small to medium incorporated organisations**
***(under $1 million annual revenue)***

**CATEGORY THREE:**

**Outstanding examples of governance in Indigenous-led large incorporated organisations**
***($1 million and over annual revenue)***

The awards are held every two years and are proudly presented in partnership by Reconciliation Australia and the Australian Indigenous Governance Institute, with support from the BHP Foundation.

# Message from Reconciliation Australia

I have been reflecting recently on the foundations that have supported Reconciliation Australia over the last 25 years.

Our work has been driven by the people, organisations and communities that have shown us that meaningful change starts with relationships built on trust, respect and listening.

Relationships that created opportunities we could not have realised on our own and relationships that carry responsibility; to each other, to Country and to the generations to come.

The Indigenous Governance Awards (IGAs) are a powerful expression of this.

For 21 years, these awards have recognised the strength, innovation and diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance. They celebrate organisations and initiatives that, through governance models grounded in culture, community, Country and self-determination, make extraordinary contributions to communities and to the nation.

The 2026 finalists demonstrate the many ways strong governance takes shape. Across different communities and contexts, they are strengthening cultural knowledge, creating economic development, caring for and managing Country, improving services and forging pathways towards self-determination across generations.

While their work is diverse, strong relationships sit at the centre of their governance.

These relationships provide the knowledge, authority and trust that enable communities to make decisions about their own futures.

This is what has always made the IGAs so important.

They are an opportunity to celebrate the enormous successes of these organisations but also highlight the importance of First Nations leadership in governance as the most effective way of achieving meaningful change and reconciliation.



Karen Mundine, CEO, Reconciliation Australia.
Photo: Joseph Mayers

‘For 21 years, these awards have recognised the strength, innovation and diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance.’

For Reconciliation Australia, these awards are part of a 25-year journey of supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership.

At the heart of these awards is another strong relationship with our partner the Australian Indigenous Governance Institute. Their work in supporting organisations with sustainable systems of self-governance is invaluable.

And none of this would have been possible without the long-standing support of the BHP Foundation throughout the history of these awards.

I congratulate all the 2026 finalists and thank them for sharing their stories and achievements with us.

Their work reminds us that knowing and valuing Indigenous governance practices is key to meaningfully recognising and respecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and peoples as decision makers for our own futures. It is through this recognition and respect that we can work together to build a stronger, more just society for all.

**Karen Mundine**
Chief Executive Officer,
Reconciliation Australia



# Message from the Australian Indigenous Governance Institute

The Australian Indigenous Governance Institute (AIGI) is proud to once again celebrate the Indigenous Governance Awards in partnership with Reconciliation Australia and acknowledging the long-standing support from the BHP Foundation. The awards provide an important opportunity to recognise and celebrate the strength, innovation and leadership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities across Australia.

At AIGI, we know that Indigenous governance is about much more than structures, policies and compliance. Strong Indigenous governance is grounded in culture, community authority, relationships and a clear vision for future generations. It enables our people and communities to exercise self-determination, make decisions in ways that reflect who they are, and create lasting change on their own terms.

The 2026 finalists demonstrate what is possible when governance is both culturally legitimate and effective. Their stories reflect innovation, leadership and a deep commitment to their communities. They also remind us that there is no single model for strong Indigenous governance. Each organisation and community has its own culture, context and aspirations, and its governance must reflect that.

For more than a decade, AIGI has worked alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, organisations and communities to strengthen Indigenous governance through research, practical resources, learning and knowledge sharing. Central to that work is creating opportunities for our people to learn from one another, share what works and celebrate Indigenous governance excellence.



Ragina Rogers, CEO, AIGI
Photo: Supplied

‘The 2026 finalists demonstrate what is possible when governance is both culturally legitimate and effective.’

The Indigenous Governance Awards are an important part of that. They provide a national platform for the knowledge, leadership and innovation already thriving within our organisations and communities, and allow those experiences to inspire and strengthen others.

To each of our 2026 finalists, congratulations. Your work demonstrates the strength of Indigenous governance in practice, and we are honoured to celebrate your achievements and share your stories.

**Ragina Rogers**
Chief Executive Officer,
Australian Indigenous
Governance Institute (AIGI)

# Messages from the Indigenous Governance Awards 2026 judging panel

The Indigenous Governance Awards judging panel plays a crucial role in fairly assessing all applications against the five selection criteria: self-determination, effectiveness, cultural legitimacy, innovation and sustainability.

Chairing the judging of the three categories was shared by Ivan Ingram, Kenny Bedford and Jahna Cedar. They were joined by Sarah Brown, Matthew Walsh, Karen Sinclair, Ragina Rogers and Karen Mundine. The panel members brought a wealth of experience and perspectives from health, academia, economic development, business and governance. Each finalist organisation, its staff, board or committee, stakeholders and community members devoted two days to hosting judges on a site visit.

The judges were joined by a video crew from Wirrim Media and staff from Reconciliation Australia and the Australian Indigenous Governance Institute. Chairs facilitated engagement throughout the judging process, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of each finalist organisation.

## CATEGORY ONE

### Indigenous-led unincorporated organisations or groups

**JUDGING PANEL: Ivan Ingram, Sarah Brown, Ragina Rogers, Karen Mundine**

We were particularly struck by the tireless work of these three initiatives and their strong commitment to embedding cultural values within robust governance frameworks.

Coming together around a purpose-driven objective was exemplified through the well-demonstrated foundational nation-building in practice. We observed local communities and organisations coming together to address complex challenges – often through the breaking down of barriers and siloed ways of operating – towards a more collaborative and relationship-driven basis.

Although the Bindjareb Djilba Kaadadjan Bidi Yarning Circle is not a funded entity, it operates through a collaborative governance model led by three incorporated Aboriginal corporations. The Yarning Circle serves the Bindjareb Noongar community and the wider Peel-Harvey region of South West Western Australia, with members selected by Elders based on cultural authority. The Aboriginal organisations involved actively challenge existing systems and processes, encouraging agencies to reconsider how outcomes can be achieved in culturally appropriate ways.

The Northern Nunga Network was established to address the recognised fragmentation of the service system in northern Adelaide by connecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and social service providers. It now has more than 450 members, many of whom are represented at the monthly network meetings. During our visit, we saw the network's depth and impact in action, along with its strong cultural leadership and commitment to bringing people together, including non-Indigenous people, to learn, connect and collaborate.

The Wukul Yabang Aboriginal Health Research Community Panel is working to transform how Aboriginal health research is conducted across the Hunter New England region of NSW, ensuring Aboriginal people hold authority over research that affects their communities. We saw the panel's strong influence in ensuring research findings are shared back with community, as well as the confidence and authority with which members question researchers and academics.

As judges, we were encouraged by the vision, professionalism and energy demonstrated by each finalist. We saw the power of self-determination through community-based governance, alongside the pride and joy of community members as a result of the initiatives' successes.

**Ivan Ingram** – Category One Judging Panel Chair

## CATEGORY TWO

### Indigenous-led small to medium incorporated organisations

**JUDGING PANEL: Kenny Bedford, Sarah Brown, Matthew Walsh**

The privilege of being invited into the finalist organisations of the Indigenous Governance Awards is immense.

Each of the finalists in this category went above and beyond what was required by their remit. They demonstrated a strong sense of purpose and a clear understanding of their work, their communities and their relationships.

Blak & Bright is Australia's only First Nations literary festival. It is First Nations-led, with storytellers from First Nations communities across the country. Like all of our finalists, it works within inherited Western systems of governance and organisational structure, but it is the Blak way of being and doing that drives its work. Its longevity and success within a creative, dynamic and competitive sector, while promoting First Nations voices and stories and maintaining its integrity, is impressive.

Point Pearce Aboriginal Corporation (PPAC) has evolved from a largely administrative community body into a reform-focused governance organisation. It has supported the community to find a way forward from its traumatic history as a mission and reconnect with land and sea Country. It has established active and participatory decision-making processes and transitioned key programs into direct community control. Its commitment to self-determination is balanced with cultural strength and guidance.

Ngrragoonda Aboriginal Corporation serves Gudjala Common Law Holders and their families, protecting cultural heritage, managing community assets and creating pathways towards economic sovereignty and self-determination. Its work spans native title and cultural heritage management, agreement-making with government and industry, and ranger initiatives. It ensures Gudjala People can exercise decision-making authority over Country through governance that is both culturally grounded and legally robust.

Although each finalist is different in its structure, location and interests, all exemplify the remarkable capacity of First Nations people to find innovative solutions to local challenges and advance their communities.

**Kenny Bedford** – Category Two Judging Panel Chair

## CATEGORY THREE

### Indigenous-led large incorporated organisations

**JUDGING PANEL: Jahna Cedar, Karen Sinclair, Ragina Rogers**

It has been a privilege for our Category Three judging panel to witness the strength of leadership within these organisations.

Throughout the judging process, we recognised the responsibility they carry: remaining accountable to their people, honouring cultural authority and making decisions that will serve generations to come.

We saw governance grounded in relationships, responsibility and connection to Country.

Both organisations demonstrated how cultural authority shapes contemporary governance, with Elders, clan structures and community priorities informing decisions alongside the systems needed to manage complex organisations.

At Jabalbina Aboriginal Corporation, the connection between Eastern Kuku Yalanji cultural governance and practical outcomes was evident.

Clan representation and Elders' authority underpin its approach, while initiatives such as Return to Country, youth mentoring and Junior Rangers support connection, wellbeing and future leadership.

Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation demonstrated governance deeply grounded in Yolŋu kinship, language and cultural obligations. Traditional Owner approval for the site visit itself showed cultural authority in practice.

Its approach to research partnerships and protecting cultural knowledge reflected a clear expectation that others work respectfully within Yolŋu priorities. Investment in younger leaders, ranger development and knowledge transfer reinforced its commitment to continuity across generations.

Both organisations offered valuable lessons about innovation: adapting systems to local realities, using technology with purpose and building partnerships that support Indigenous decision making. They also highlighted the ongoing work required to sustain strong governance as organisations grow, funding changes and community expectations evolve.

We thank everyone who welcomed us, shared their experiences and spoke openly about achievements and challenges. That generosity made the judging process richer and deepened our understanding of governance in practice.

Congratulations to the finalists. Your work demonstrates the strength of governance shaped by our people, for our people. Its legacy is in stronger communities, cultural continuity and the next generation's confidence to lead.

**Jahna Cedar** – Category Three Judging Panel Chair




Gloria Kearing, Elder from Pinjarra and member of the Yarning Circle, shares the Bindjareb Gabi Wonga water story for Bindjareb Boodja. Here, she is pictured along the banks of the Waangaamaap Bilya (Serpentine River) with her son, Theo Kearing, a young leader and Yarning Circle member. Photo: Tom Hoy, Wirrim Media





# Bindjareb Djilba Kaadadjan Bidi Yarning Circle



At a Bindjareb Djilba Kaadadjan Bidi Yarning Circle, drawings and imagery are used alongside written minutes to capture meeting minutes and decisions in ways that are culturally meaningful, accessible and reflective of the Yarning Circle's collective voice. Photo: Tom Hoy, Wirrim Media

## One voice for Country

In 2022, three Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations came together in response to two connected challenges: the declining health of the Bindjareb Djilba (Peel-Harvey Estuary) and the fragmentation of the Bindjareb Noongar voice in regional decision making.

Winjan, Harvey and Waroona Aboriginal Corporations formed the Bindjareb Djilba Kaadadjan Bidi Yarning Circle to create a united, culturally authoritative voice for Country. Its members are chosen by Elders based on cultural authority and work alongside community to bring the Bindjareb Gabi Wonga (Water Story) to life.

*'The heart is around sticking to cultural values and old ways of doing things. What really works is having the elders bringing us younger ones along, having us learn directly from them, being in the same room, exposed to those conversations, so that by the time we're at that age, we're familiar and comfortable with that.'*
Brad Vitale, Bindjareb Djilba Kaadadjan Bidi Yarning Circle

## Healing Country through culture

The Yarning Circle works closely with the WA Government to lead actions under the Bindjareb Djilba Protection Plan, ensuring Noongar values are embedded in land and water management. Its work extends to cultural fire management, the Collaborative Aboriginal Ranger Program and intergenerational knowledge transfer.

The Bindjareb Kaadadjan Mia digital cultural mapping platform is another example of the Yarning Circle's commitment to protecting Cultural Intellectual Property and strengthening digital sovereignty.

*'From a local government point of view, we're able to consult with committees prior to decisions being made. Obviously, boundaries don't stop at Shire boundaries, nor do rivers, nor do waterways so, we're able to consult with everyone at that one place, which is really valuable for us.'*
Kirstie Ferraro, Shire of Waroona, Director Customer & Development Services

## United Front

The Yarning Circle's *United Front* model centres consensus rather than Western hierarchical voting systems. By bringing communities together around one culturally authoritative voice, the model strengthens collective decision making and creates a more effective way to engage with government and corporate partners.

It demonstrates how governance grounded in culture, Country and collective responsibility can strengthen both community authority and outcomes for Country.

*'It's a really great example of governance excellence, of people coming together around a purpose, to break down silos of communication amongst the organisations, their interface with their stakeholders, governments at all levels and others who operate in and around this Country.'*
Ivan Ingram, Indigenous Governance Awards Judging Panel, Category One Chair

# Northern Nunga Network



Members of the Northern Nunga Network at their August 2026 meeting held at Morella Community Centre. Since 2021, the network has grown from just three members at their inaugural meeting to over 450 members in 2026. Photo: Tom Hoy, Wirrim Media

## Weaving together a stronger system

The Northern Nunga Network was established in 2021 to address the recognised fragmentation of the service system in northern Adelaide by connecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health, local council, police and social service providers.

To have strong service delivery, the network partners knew they had to build a strong workforce of Aboriginal people as well as allies.

*'We didn't want it [the network] to be closed off so we needed to get everyone that was working in the space together but also find our allies to get them to come along with us to understand what the needs of the community were and how we were going to address them. I said "Well, why don't we just call a meeting?"'*
Schania Czygan, Northern Health Network, Indigenous Health Project Officer

## Supporting stronger outcomes

The purpose of the network is to build connections and promote collaboration between organisations, businesses and community members to minimise the gaps in services, improve access to services and strengthen referrals to better meet the needs of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across northern Adelaide.

The network also enables non-Indigenous service providers working with Aboriginal clients to come, listen and learn. All members are encouraged to provide guest presentations to promote their programs and services, and to engage in case study discussions to share and learn from fellow members.

*'It's a network of 25 different organisations coming together in one room and we've gone as high as 80 to 100 at some of our bigger events. Live cases that we produce throughout our workforce individually that can take anywhere from three to six months, we're able to solve in five to ten minutes.'*
Patricia Cotton, Northern Nunga Network, Co-Chair

## Community focus is the strength

With its unique non-hierarchical governance model, the network ensures all decisions are made by and for Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The network is led by a Steering Committee who draw on the input and feedback of members to update their terms of reference annually and refine and strengthen network activities.

Membership has grown from just three members attending the inaugural meeting in 2021 to over 450 members in 2026.

*'It's really positive and you can see that because the [people involved in the network] turn up and turn up in ever-increasing numbers. They're filling the holes in services, they're connecting people and then they're taking the hard edges off the mainstream system and actually teaching the mainstream system better ways of working together.'*
Sarah Brown, Indigenous Governance Awards Judging Panel

Northern Nunga Network Co-Chair and CEO of Yangadlitya Indigenous Corporation, Patricia Cotton, a proud Kamilaroi and Māori woman born and raised on Kaurna Land. Photo: Tom Hoy, Wirrim Media

# Wukul Yabang Aboriginal Health Research Community Panel




Wukul Yabang Aboriginal Health Research Community Panel members at the Wollotuka Institute, University of Newcastle. The panel brings together Elders, Traditional Owners, health professionals, researchers and community representatives to ensure governance reflects cultural authority and lived community experience, alongside research expertise. Photo: Tom Hoy, Wirrim Media

## Research our way

For too long, First Nations communities have experienced research being done about them, rather than with them. Wukul Yabang, meaning ‘One Path’, was established in 2023 to help change that in the Hunter New England region.

The Aboriginal Health Research Community Panel ensures Aboriginal people have a meaningful say in research affecting their communities, from how projects are designed and conducted to how they deliver benefits for First Nations peoples.

Wukul Yabang forms part of the *Research Our Way* strategy, developed in partnership with the University of Newcastle, Awabakal Limited Aboriginal Medical Service, Hunter Medical Research Institute and Hunter New England Local Health District. The strategy centres Aboriginal sovereignty, cultural governance and place-based decision making in research.

*‘Each panel member brings a variety of experiences there, they don’t just bring their position in an organisation, they bring their cultural authority, their knowledge and their lived experience and I think that’s what is unique about the panel.’*
Raylene Gordon, Wukul Yabang Community Panel Member

## Aboriginal voices from the start

Wukul Yabang brings together Elders, Traditional Owners, health professionals, researchers and community representatives, combining cultural authority and lived community experience with research expertise.

Researchers engage with the panel from the early stages of their projects. Panel members consider how First Nations people will participate, whether projects are culturally safe and responsive, and how research will benefit community.

This is more than consultation. Community voices and authority influence the design, delivery and outcomes of research, rather than being brought in after key decisions have already been made.

*‘To be involved from concept stage in research projects makes much more sense than trying to put us on at the end. If Aboriginal people aren’t involved in research projects from the very start how are we supposed to have equity within health in Australia.’*
Yeena Thompson, Wukul Yabang Community Panel Member

## Changing the way research works

The influence of Wukul Yabang can be seen in the research itself. Projects have returned to the panel after changing their methodologies, strengthening First Nations participation and embedding cultural safety in response to panel recommendations.

Rather than one-off consultation, Wukul Yabang creates ongoing relationships and accountability between researchers and community, with Aboriginal cultural values guiding the process.

By bringing together cultural authority, community knowledge, lived experience and technical expertise, Wukul Yabang offers a model for research that is accountable to the people it seeks to benefit.

*“It’s innovative because it’s community coming together to address a challenge, to address a need, that hasn’t been otherwise dealt with in the silos that operate here.’*
Ivan Ingram, Indigenous Governance Awards Judging Panel, Category One Chair

Wukul Yabang Aboriginal Health Research Community Panel member, Aunty Dawn Townsend. A Murri woman with strong connections to Gamilaraay Country, Aunty Dawn has been involved in the panel since the very beginning. Photo: Tom Hoy, Wirrim Media

# Blak & Bright First Nations Literary Festival Limited



Indigenous Governance Awards judges joined Blak & Bright First Nations Literary Festival staff and board at the Wheeler Centre during preparations for the 2026 festival themed, EVERY:WHEN. Photo: Tom Hoy, Wirrim Media

## Telling our stories, our way

Blak & Bright is Australia's leading organisation dedicated to showcasing First Nations storytellers. Created in 2016, the First Nations Literary festival has grown into a nationally-recognised organisation that delivers year-round programming – including the Blak Writer's Group and the Blak Stories Hub – across multiple cities and communities.

Guided by the belief that Blak stories are for everyone, Blak & Bright's purpose is to amplify the powerful narratives and diverse perspectives of First Nations writers, ensuring their voices resonate across the nation and beyond.

*'Yes, there are particular models that we inherit from Western systems in our governance, in our structure, but it does not influence the work that we do. What does is the blak way of being and the blak way of doing.'*
Bebe Oliver, Blak & Bright, CEO and Artistic Director

## Supporting storytellers for the future

The most recent four-day Literary Festival programmed 100 First Nations artists from across the country and showcased storytellers and singers across genres.

To encourage emerging writers, they created Yarn Bombers, an opportunity for audience members to deliver three-minute scripted pieces at the start of each formal session.

Initiatives like Yarn Lab worked with senior students and educators to shift how curriculum engages with First Nations knowledge and placed their stories at the centre of learning.

The establishment of First Stories Collective, delivered with Magabala Books, deepens industry relationships and creates consistent opportunities for First Nations storytellers and audiences.

*'We're really eager with Blak & Bright to try and set up this longevity for how we can support new storytellers, emerging storytellers but also continuing storytellers so they can keep that power in their own communities.'*
Evelyn Araluen, Blak & Bright, Director

## Blak stories are for everybody

Initially auspiced by the Wheeler Centre, Blak & Bright is now a fully independent, standalone organisation.

Blak & Bright champions intellectual sovereignty, fair remuneration and meaningful pathways for First Nations creatives early in their careers. It is working towards a stable and self-determined First Nations literary institution that shapes industry standards, grows audiences for First Nations literature and delivers lasting cultural and community impact.

*'From an initiative or idea, an event, to their journey to become an organisation in a very short space of time has been impressive. To be able to do that in a creative and dynamic sector that is very competitive, stick to their remit and maintain their integrity has been really, really impressive.'*
Kenny Bedford, Indigenous Governance Awards Judging Panel, Category Two Chair

Blak & Bright staff walk Indigenous Governance Awards judges through the narrm ngarrgu Library in Naarm/Melbourne, the site of a number of events across the 2026 EVERY:WHEN festival. Photo: Tom Hoy, Wirrim Media

# Ngrragoonda Aboriginal Corporation




Ngrragoonda Aboriginal Corporation directors (L to R) Gloria Santo, Nicole Santo, Adam Reid and Chairperson Nicole Huxley at Towers Hill on Gudjula Country. Photo: Tom Hoy, Wirrim Media

## A foundation for self-determination

Following the formal recognition of Gudjala People's Native Title rights in 2014, Ngrragoonda Aboriginal Corporation (NAC) was established to ensure Gudjala People could exercise their decision-making authority over Country through governance that is both culturally grounded and legally robust.

As the Prescribed Body Corporate for the Gudjala People of north Queensland, NAC supports Common Law Holders and their families while protecting cultural heritage, managing community assets and creating pathways towards economic sovereignty and self-determination.

*'Ngrragoonda represents all Gudjala people. The importance of bringing Gudjal people together has always been at the forefront. It's about making sure the future looks better.'*
Nicole Huxley, Ngrragoonda Aboriginal Corporation, Chairperson

## Building for generations

NAC's work spans native title and cultural heritage management, agreements with government and industry, ranger initiatives and the stewardship of the Five Star Charitable Trust. Through the trust, negotiated benefits are treated as intergenerational assets, with a focus on preserving capital and creating long-term opportunities for the community.

Strong community engagement underpins this work, including six community workshops since 2024 and an on-Country governance camp attended by around 280 community members in 2025.

*'It was just so spiritual, it was so good, just being there together, watching all the little people run around. All of us being there in the area that we needed to be, that we should have been.'*
Leighton Masso, Ngrragoonda Aboriginal Corporation, Future Fund Officer

## Culture at the centre

Gudjala Lore, kinship and responsibility to Country are embedded throughout NAC's governance. Elders, community consultation and on-Country decision making ensure traditional systems of authority remain central, while mentoring, workshops and committee participation support the next generation of Gudjala leaders.

An elected Board is supported by portfolio-based leadership, Elders and next generation committees. The separation of commercial activities through Gudjala People Limited further strengthens accountability and protects cultural authority, creating a governance model designed to support Gudjala self-determination for generations to come.

*'It's going to be really exciting to see where this corporation goes. They've got big plans, a great strategic plan, and lots of people getting trained up to be the leaders of the future.'*
Sarah Brown, Indigenous Governance Awards Judging Panel

(L to R) Chairperson of Jupiter Mosman Housing Company, Warringu Aboriginal Corporation Board member and artist, Tania Ault with Jennifer Huxley, Homelessness Services Coordinator at Jupiter Mosman. All three Aboriginal organisations in Charters Towers work together. Photo: Tom Hoy, Wirrim Media

# Point Pearce Aboriginal Corporation



Point Pearce Aboriginal Corporation Board Member and Elder Lyle Sansbury and General Manager Paul Heck show IGA judges around the community garden. Photo: Tom Hoy, Wirrim Media

## For community, by community

Point Pearce Aboriginal Corporation (PPAC) exists to serve and support the Narungga community through governance, land and asset management, youth programs, ranger initiatives, infrastructure projects and cultural activities that strengthen local self-determination and long-term community resilience.

PPAC leadership knew that if resources were to go to where they were needed most, it had to be community controlled. This has led to a formal governance body capable of holding leases, managing funding agreements, entering partnerships and advocating directly for community interests.

Through this structure, revenue generated from community assets is directed toward local priorities rather than administered remotely by external stakeholders.

*'In the past people were mainly passive recipients of services, we're turning that conversation around and making them active in the shared decision-making process.'*
Paul Heck, PPAC, General Manager

## Partnerships for community priorities

PPAC has now evolved from a largely administrative body into a reform-focused governance organisation. It has strengthened financial oversight, implemented structured board processes and worked to transition key programs into direct community control.

It navigates structured partnership with a range of government, community and industry stakeholders to deliver outcomes aligned with Narungga priorities.Through these partnerships, PPAC leads with community authority while collaborating transparently, sharing reporting obligations, co-designing projects and ensuring cultural protocols guide decision making.

All its partnerships prioritise community outcomes, accountability and self-determination.

*'Opportunities don't fall into our hands, we go out and we look for them and we bring them back and we build on them and we workshop as a community, and we implement them and those programs are successful.'*
Tshara Rigney, PPAC, Education Officer and Board Member

## Future resilience

PPAC's Board of Directors are community representatives, and major decisions are informed by member engagement and Narungga cultural protocols. This governance framework balances statutory compliance, financial accountability and community authority.

With this community guidance and governance framework, PPAC is working towards its long-term vision of a financially resilient, professionally governed and culturally grounded community organisation. One that can adapt to changing funding landscapes while remaining firmly anchored in Narungga identity and authority.

*'A real strength of the governance approach at PPAC is the continued approach to nation-building. Their multi-generational journey is not only thinking of their children and grandchildren but the values and direction their grandparents and great-grandparents wanted to go.'*
Matthew Walsh, Indigenous Governance Awards Judging Panel

Point Pearce Aboriginal Corporation Education Officer and Board Member Tshara Rigney discusses the history of the Narungga people and community. Photo: Tom Hoy, Wirrim Media

# Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation



Yolŋu man and Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation Ranger Rrawun Maymuru with members of the Board in the Dhimurru offices in Nhulunbuy. Business at Dhimurru is mostly conducted in Yolŋu Matha, the dominant language among Yolŋu in East Arnhem. Photo: Tom Hoy, Wirrim Media

## Keeping Country in Yolŋu hands

In 1992, Yolŋu Traditional Owners in northeast Arnhem Land established Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation in response to increasing pressure on Country from mining, tourism and external management systems.

Yolŋu Elders determined that land and sea Country must be managed according to rom (law), *gurruṭu* (kinship) and *wäŋa* (Country). More than three decades later, Dhimurru manages approximately 550,000 hectares of land and sea Country under Yolŋu governance.

*'Dhimurru was born of the understanding that, in order to care for our land and our sea, we need to use Yolŋu governance systems as the basis for our corporation.'*
Mayatili Marika, Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation, Co-Chair

## Working with Country

Dhimurru brings cultural knowledge and environmental management together across a broad program of work, from cultural protection and knowledge transfer to ranger programs, climate resilience and sustainable livelihoods.

Its approach is shaped by the Yolŋu seasonal calendar, which guides operational planning and helps rangers determine when to burn Country, harvest pandanus, monitor environmental indicators and undertake seasonal activities.

The organisation is also working to diversify its revenue streams, reducing reliance on grant funding while ensuring new opportunities remain aligned with cultural and environmental priorities.

*'Dhimurru is the eastly wind because we are on the far eastern part of Arnhem Land, sunrise people. It's how we direct ourselves and how we live, from the beginning of time.'*
Mangatjay Yunupingu, Yolŋu Elder

## Governance through kinship

At the heart of Dhimurru is a governance system grounded in *Yolŋu gurruṭu*, where authority and responsibility are shaped by relationships to Country and clan.

An all-Yolŋu Board of Directors and a majority Yolŋu-operated workforce demonstrate community control across governance and operations. Western governance requirements, including compliance, reporting and financial accountability, operate alongside Yolŋu governance systems.

Together, these systems create a model that supports strong cultural authority while enabling Dhimurru to deliver environmental, cultural and community outcomes at scale.

*'Dhimurru's governance brings Yolŋu and Western governance together, working side-by-side, with Yolŋu leadership steering the journey.'*
Karen Sinclair, Indigenous Governance Awards Judging Panel

Stephina Salee, a Kaantju and Argan woman and Executive Officer of Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation pictured on site at the Dhimurru offices in Nhulunbuy, East Arnhem Land, NT. Photo: Tom Hoy, Wirrim Media

# Jabalbina Yalanji Aboriginal Corporation



Jon Jon Ryan, Tourism Manager at Yalada Tours which is a social enterprise of the Jabalbina Yalanji Aboriginal Corporation, guides Indigenous Governance Awards judges through the Bamanga Muruku Tourism Hub. Located within Daintree National Park, the hub is designed to celebrate and share the living culture of the Eastern Kuku Yalanji people. Photo: Tom Hoy, Wirrim Media

## Getting Bubu back

Jabalbina Yalanji Aboriginal Corporation was established in 2007 following the recognition of Native Title and the negotiation of the Eastern Kuku Yalanji Indigenous Land Use Agreements.

As significant areas of land were returned through these agreements, a strong, culturally led organisation was needed to coordinate land management, support governance structures and ensure decisions affecting Country remained with Traditional Owners.

*'Originally our goal was getting our bubu back, and people wanting to go back and live on their Country, on bubu. But you've got to be self-sufficient, you've got to be able to look after yourself there out on country and you've got to be able to generate your own income. So, that's where we come in as a corporation trying to help our bama (people) to do that.'*
Laurel Denman, Jabalbina Yalanji Aboriginal Corporation, Chairperson

## Opportunities for the future

Today, Jabalbina is the central coordinating body for cultural, environmental, economic and community programs across Eastern Kuku Yalanji Country.

It supports Eastern Kuku Yalanji people to exercise their rights and responsibilities for Bubu (Country), including through ranger programs, cultural heritage services, youth initiatives, tourism and economic development.

*'Probably 90% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people employed in the organisation, majority of those being Eastern Kuku Yalanji people. So there's a real culture in the organisation of offering positions to Eastern Kuku Yalanji people and mob, and really giving them the best ability to get to the levels they need to be and really engage in these complex spaces.'*
Kallum Clarke, Jabalbina Yalanji Aboriginal Corporation, Chief Operating Officer

## Standing strong together

Jabalbina's governance brings together statutory responsibilities, cultural authority and community-led decision making. Its large and growing membership provides broad representation, transparency and accountability across the region.

The board maintains equal male and female representation and includes equal numbers of directors from the three Eastern Kuku Yalanji clan groups: Nyungkal, Yalanji and Jalunji.

Through this structure, Jabalbina continues to strengthen Eastern Kuku Yalanji decision making and ensure that the people with cultural authority for Country remain at the centre of its future.

*'It's been amazing not only to see the impact that Jabalbina are having in community but to see the cultural decision making and the procedures that really stand up with legitimacy and integrity around building cultural governance alongside corporate governance.'*
Jahna Cedar, Indigenous Governance Awards Judging Panel, Category Three Chair

Kuku Yalanji man and Jabalbina Yalanji Aboriginal Corporation Deputy Chair Andrew Gibson. The Corporation's Board is made up of even numbers of men and women and representatives from the three clan groups in the region, and Chairing responsibilities rotate through the clan groups. Photo: Tom Hoy, Wirrim Media

# Wyndham Youth Aboriginal Corporation

## A community response for young people

Wyndham Youth Aboriginal Corporation (WYAC) was established in 2017 in response to strong community concerns about youth wellbeing, crime and anti-social behaviour. The community recognised the need for locally led solutions that could support young people while keeping decision making in local hands.

A six-month pilot in 2018 provided social and recreational activities and case management for young people aged six to 25 who were at risk. Its success led to continued Commonwealth support and additional funding from the WA Department of Justice, allowing WYAC to expand its work.

*'We strengthen self-determination through our Youth Advisory Council, made up of representative Aboriginal young people under 18. The Council meets monthly and participates in operational and strategic planning processes. Young people identify issues, propose ideas and contribute to decision making. This creates meaningful influence while building leadership, governance capability and confidence to develop tomorrow's leaders.'*
WYAC Indigenous Governance Awards application

## Creating pathways and opportunity

WYAC has grown its youth and family support programs alongside employment, training and social enterprise initiatives. Its mechanical workshop, garden maintenance and rural skills programs provide practical pathways for young people to develop skills, build confidence and connect with meaningful employment.

The organisation is also working towards opening a social enterprise café and a new Night Space, creating further opportunities while providing a safe place for young people who are at risk.

*'Wyndham was initially overlooked for State pilot funding in favour of a larger regional centre. In response, WYAC negotiated alternative Federal funding and partnered locally to convert a disused church into a supervised night facility. As a result of this proactive approach, Wyndham's Night Space became operational 6–12 months before the larger centre that originally received State funding.'*
WYAC Indigenous Governance Awards application

## Community-controlled by design

WYAC is governed by the community it serves. Membership is open to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 16 and over who live in Wyndham or surrounding communities and belong to a recognised Wyndham Aboriginal family group.

Its governance structure reflects the region's main family groups, with each appointing a representative director at a general meeting or AGM.

By placing families and community at the centre of decision making, WYAC is building a model that responds to local priorities while creating stronger pathways for young people and supporting a safer, more connected Wyndham community.

*'The application clearly shows that WYAC has intentionally shaped its governance model around local cultural authority, community relationships and youth priorities, rather than relying on externally imposed governance approaches.'*
Application Review, Jahna Cedar, Indigenous Governance Awards Judging Panel, Category Three Chair

Wyndham Youth Aboriginal Corporation was unable to proceed to the site visit stage of the judging process but they retain their status as finalists.

# The Judging Panel



### Ivan Ingram

Dr Ivan Ingram is a Wiradjuri and Filipino man from Parkes, NSW, now based in Meanjin (Brisbane). He is a legal practitioner, academic and governance professional whose work spans native title, Indigenous governance and truth-telling. Ivan is Managing Director of Regional Economic Solutions, providing strategic advisory services bridging Indigenous interests with government and corporate decision-makers. He also teaches First Nations legal histories at the Queensland University of Technology. Ivan holds directorships and advisory roles, including with the Healing Foundation and Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation. He previously served as a member of the Queensland Truth-telling and Healing Inquiry and was the first Indigenous person appointed as Judicial Registrar of the Federal Court of Australia.



### 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. Kenny was also a Councillor and Deputy Mayor of the inaugural Torres Strait Island Regional Council and has served on national boards, including Reconciliation Australia. Through his business, Indigenous Initiatives and Innovation, Kenny applies his leadership and governance experience to supporting research, training and community projects designed to empower remote Indigenous communities. Kenny graduated with a Masters of Indigenous Business Leadership from Monash University in 2025.



### Jahna Cedar

Jahna Cedar OAM is a proud Nyiyaparli woman with ancestral ties to the Bardi Gija peoples. Recognised in leadership and governance, Jahna brings over two decades of experience advocating for equity, cultural integrity and economic empowerment for First Nations peoples across Australia and internationally. She has held executive and non-executive roles across the public, private and non-profit sectors, championing strategic reform, Indigenous-led innovation and culturally safe leadership practices. Jahna's leadership approach is grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems and self-determination, ensuring cultural governance is not an add-on but central to decision making. Through Jahna Cedar Consulting, she partners with boards, governments and communities to strengthen two-way governance, embed truth-telling practices and build culturally safe, inclusive structures.



### 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 23 years ago. In that time, Purple House has grown from one dialysis unit in Mparntwe (Alice Springs) to 20 remote clinics across NT, WA and SA, as well as a mobile unit, all supporting 200-300 patients. Purple House won an Indigenous Governance Award in 2016. Sarah has judged three rounds of awards and holds a Master of Nursing and a Graduate Diploma in Health Service Management. Prior to joining Purple House, she was a remote area nurse.





### Matthew Walsh

Matthew Walsh is an Anaiwan man and a lecturer at the University of Technology (UTS) Law Faculty. His research examines First Nations governance, autonomy and nation building, focusing on the practical facilitation of legal pluralism. A dedicated advocate for community development and governance, Matthew serves as a Director of the Australian Indigenous Governance Institute and as a board member of the Glebe Youth Centre. His policy and advisory work includes terms on the Museum of Contemporary Art Indigenous Advisory Group, the UTS Indigenous Research Committee and the UTS Wingara Indigenous employment strategy committee. Prior to academia, Matthew was the UTS Indigenous Employment Manager and the Executive Manager of Research at the Jumbunna Institute.




### Karen Sinclair

Karen Sinclair is a Ngarrindjeri educator and governance advocate with experience across teaching, research and Aboriginal board governance. Karen is currently Professor of Indigenous Learning and Teaching at Adelaide University and teaches postgraduate and undergraduate courses, refining the curriculum through strong relationships with Aboriginal communities and her lived experience in governance practice. Karen's governance expertise includes serving as the Indigenous Representative of the University's Human Research Ethics Committee, Board Director of the Australian Indigenous Governance Institute and Board Director of the SA Aboriginal Lands Trust. Through her combined teaching and governance work, Karen is committed to centring Aboriginal voices and governance rights.



### Ragina Rogers

Ragina Rogers is a proud freshwater Wiradjuri woman with strong ties to the Bundjalung Nation. Ragina is a visionary leader with a deep commitment to supporting the social and economic sustainability of Indigenous Australians. With a philanthropic leadership career at the interface of Culture and Governance, Ragina has worked consistently in the service of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, the disadvantaged and the vulnerable. With a Master's degree in Governance and Leadership, her career has spanned numerous areas, including work as a paramedic, clinical educator, board director and leader in Indigenous Health. Ragina is passionate about driving systemic change, empowering strong culture, connection to Country and equity grounded in self-determination.



### Karen Mundine

Karen Mundine is from the Bundjalung Nation of northern NSW. As CEO of Reconciliation Australia, Karen brings more than 25 years' experience leading community engagement, public advocacy, communications and social marketing campaigns. An architect of the landmark Australian Reconciliation Barometer, Karen works with governments, the business sector and civil society to advocate for change. She has been instrumental in some of Australia's watershed national events, including the Apology to the Stolen Generations, Centenary of Federation commemorations, Corroboree 2000 and the 1997 and 2021 Australian Reconciliation Conventions. Karen holds a Bachelor of Arts in Communication from UTS and is a member of the Council of the National Museum of Australia and Chief Executive Women.

# Indigenous Governance Awards 2026


## Acknowledgements

Reconciliation Australia and the Australian Indigenous Governance Institute acknowledge all organisations that took part in the Indigenous Governance Awards 2026.

We thank every applicant for the time, care and effort invested in the application process. The strength and quality of this year's applications reflects the outstanding work being led by organisations across the country and the strength of Indigenous governance in action.

We extend our particular thanks to this year's finalists. Each finalist went to extraordinary lengths to share their organisation's story with the judging panel and the broader Indigenous Governance Awards team. We were privileged to be welcomed onto their respective Countries and to witness the impact of their work in their communities.

The awards provide an opportunity to celebrate strong governance, share stories and showcase practices that can inspire others. The dedication of our judging panel is central to this process. We thank each judge for contributing their time, expertise and experience to the rigorous judging process.

We also thank Wirrim Media for joining the judging panel on each site visit and documenting the stories and work of each finalist. These recordings will create an important archive to teach and inspire long into the future.

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and particularly thank those on whose lands we travelled during the 2026 awards period.

Finally, we thank the BHP Foundation for its long-standing support of the Indigenous Governance Awards and its ongoing commitment to recognising and celebrating strong Indigenous governance.


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