State Voice Annual Address 2026
12 November 2026

Acknowledgement of Country and Opening remarks

I begin by acknowledging the Traditional Owners of the lands on which we meet today, the Kaurna people, and pay my respects to their Elders past and present. I also acknowledge the continuing connection of First Nations peoples to Country, culture, community and knowledge, and extend my respects to First Nations peoples across South Australia.

As I present this year's address to Parliament, we reflect on a year of change, progress and challenge. It has been an election year for both South Australia and the Voice, providing an opportunity to consider our priorities, the commitments made to our communities and whether these are translating into meaningful outcomes.

In the past twelve months, we've seen the second election of members to the First Nations Voice, we've welcomed a mix of old and new faces to the Local Voices, and we've also seen our advocacy lead to real change that in time could deliver lasting improvements for Aboriginal communities around our state.

At times, it has felt like we are still flying the plane while continuing to build it. We have moved beyond some of the major construction, but important foundations are still being established.

While it was the second First Nations Voice election, this was the first time that our election was held at the same time as the State Election meaning that we all began the same year doing something very similar campaigning.

To be fair, that may be the closest we'll ever get to common ground with some of the members here today but it's worth saying.

For us, it was campaigning on two fronts.

Some of you here today ran on a platform of abolishing the Voice… of cutting off this direct link we've worked so hard to build and to strengthen.

We weren't just campaigning to get elected, we were campaigning for our existence.

We're still encountering the cynicism from some segments of the community – including from those in Aboriginal communities who question whether we can be truly independent and whether we can truly bring about change.

And that remains at the forefront of what we do each and every day knowing we still need to build trust among Aboriginal communities and the broader South Australian community

To show that this isn't preferential treatment, that it isn't a waste, and that we can work together collaboratively, positively and in a spirit of understanding that delivering better outcomes for Indigenous communities delivers better results for all of us.

And that philosophy underpins our work.

Each and every candidate that put their hand up understands the importance of these roles, understands what it means for their communities and what it means for all of us.

It was so heartening to see that despite some of the negative talk about the Voice and about its members that members of the Aboriginal community showed up to be heard.

Across the board, voter turnout increased between the last Voice Election and this year's election, despite the significant barriers many of our communities faced when trying to have their say.

Much has been said about the experiences of Aboriginal voters across South Australia, but they are worth acknowledging.

These were not simply issues of long queues or delays.

People were questioned about their Aboriginality, denied the opportunity to vote and subjected to racist behaviour, segregation, judgement and cultural exclusion while exercising their democratic right.

For communities where distrust and barriers to electoral participation have long existed, these experiences risk further undermining confidence in the democratic process.

However, we are hopeful that these experiences can lead to meaningful change before the next elections in 2030.

We have worked directly with former Australian Electoral Commissioner Tom Rogers AO as part of his review into the management of the State and Voice Elections.

Through our consultation, we heard from more than 280 First Nations people, capturing their honest experiences and recommendations across six regional submissions.

Importantly, some people also reported positive experiences, demonstrating that accessible, respectful and culturally appropriate voting arrangements are achievable.

Mr Rogers has shown an understanding of the issues and a commitment to identifying the changes needed. We now hope his findings translate into practical action.

Future elections must build confidence in democratic participation, not create further barriers. This requires adequate staffing, properly trained personnel, clear information, effective queue management and polling place arrangements that respect Aboriginal people, their rights and their cultures.

The 2026 election marked a change as we welcomed new members to the Voice, said farewell to those who either were not re-elected or chose not to stand again.

We saw 24 inaugural members returned, alongside 22 new members.

I acknowledge the inaugural members for their commitment, service and contribution, and particularly their courage in leading the way for our mob in establishing South Australia's first Voice to Parliament.

Serving on the Voice requires time, dedication and resilience, alongside family, community and professional responsibilities. Their work has helped establish the Voice's role and presence, and their contribution deserves recognition.

I also welcome our new and returning members, who have come together to continue this important work. They inherit both the progress achieved and the responsibility to advance the interests and priorities of First Nations people across South Australia.

Our responsibility remains to bring community experiences and priorities to Parliament and Government, provide independent advice, challenge where necessary and advocate for meaningful outcomes.

The change in membership has brought fresh perspectives, new ways of working and new ideas on not only how we can do this job better, but the types of policies, laws and changes we can advocate for that will make a difference for our communities.

Like the very Members of Parliament who are in this chamber right now, the First Nations Voice to Parliament is also governed by laws.

And, under the *First Nations Voice Act 2023*, our Local Voices, the six regional bodies that make up the State Voice have to meet between four and six times each year, as does the State Voice.

We've met this requirement, with 29 Local Voice meetings around the state during 2026 and 5 State Voice meetings, with a 6th scheduled for December 2026.

But this is not all we've done.

We've gone beyond this because doing our job properly, means being out in our communities, talking to people and speaking up for them.

We've been getting together with our communities talking to community members, Elders, local organisations, government representatives and stakeholders across metropolitan, regional and remote South Australia.

Our Local Voices held 31 community engagement sessions across the State.

We observed the Spinifex Court Program in operation and provided feedback to the Magistrate on culturally responsive court processes... and raised awareness with government agencies about the impacts of unpaid fines and debt on vulnerable First Nations people.

We visited Mobilong and Cadell Prisons, identifying concerns about cultural awareness, Elders' visitation, mental health support, and access to cultural practices.

We held a NAIDOC community stall to engage and connect with community members and continued community consultations on local priorities, including the North Adelaide Golf Course redevelopment and Lot Fourteen cultural centre project.

We visited Gawler Health Services to learn more about Aboriginal health services, workforce challenges, and opportunities to improve culturally appropriate care and attended the SA Aboriginal Football and Netball Carnival (Nunga Carnival), engaging with Elders and community members from across South Australia.

Our focus continues to be on Housing and Infrastructure, Health and Wellbeing and Justice and Policing areas where significant systemic change is needed and where we believe the Voice can make a strong contribution.

Already, we have seen positive actions from Government.

An example of this is the Safe Birthing on Country initiative. Our advocacy highlighted the importance of culturally appropriate birthing options and ensuring Aboriginal mothers can access care closer to home and on Country.
This is an important step towards services that are shaped around the needs, knowledge, cultural practices and experiences of women, families and communities.

Another is the Spinifex Court Program in Port Augusta, a recommendation of the Voice, and that now provides an accessible and more culturally supportive and appropriate court process for Anangu people and Aboriginal defendants from remote communities, particular those from the APY Lands, Ceduna and Yalata.

We look forward to seeing how these initiatives develop into consistent, statewide approaches.

In our discussions with Government, we highlighted further areas requiring attention, including:

- Exploring culturally informed pathways for skills recognition.
- Addressing under-occupancy in social housing.
- Engaging on homelessness reform and service improvements.
- Supporting the establishment of an Aboriginal community housing provider.
- Strengthening whole-of-government responsibility for Aboriginal justice outcomes.
- Improving access to education and training while on remand.
- Supporting and evaluating the Youth Aboriginal Community Courts trial.

Progress Must Translate Into Action

Despite this, considerable work remains translating announcements into action, and action to results.

Some initiatives that Government has agreed to progress are yet to translate into meaningful action including the proposed Aboriginal co-design approach to replacing damaged State Owned and Managed Indigenous Housing.

This must move beyond an agreed approach to genuine engagement and implementation.

Similarly, culturally informed skills recognition requires further progress beyond initial discussions.

We cannot afford to lose momentum once commitments are made.

We will continue to monitor progress and raise concerns where delivery falls short.

We're not being critical for the sake of it.

We are ensuring commitments translate into strong change. We will hold Government accountable for delivering on those commitments and ensuring outcomes are visible to our communities.

Where progress is made, we acknowledge it. Where there are delays, we should be honest, and where commitments are not being delivered, we must ask why.

We have proposed progressing these priorities through pilot programs in metropolitan or regional areas to show these programs work, get the evidence to back us up, and work to expand them.

In terms of legislation, since the 2026 State Election, the Voice has provided advice and made submissions on four separate pieces of legislation.

One was the Opposition's bill to repeal the Voice legislation a bill we clearly and unequivocally opposed.

For the record and for the benefit of those members present and those who may simply choose to catch up on the Hansard later on let me be perfectly clear.

The First Nations Voice to Parliament can work. It is working.

The Safe Birthing on Country initiative… the new 30-bed bail accommodation support program for northern Adelaide. New Spinifex Court in Port Augusta, the Pilot for Aboriginal co-design for replacement of damaged State Owned and Managed Indigenous Housing, and mandated inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives at the heart of South Australia's preventive health governance.

Our advocacy has helped get the attention of decision-makers, influenced policy discussions and contributed to action by Government.

So yes, our work is leading to change.

And I would hope that even those members who question our very existence can see the value of our work on the ground and the initiatives that we are championing.

This is happening because a body made up of Aboriginal people, elected by Aboriginal people and hearing directly from Aboriginal people…. can make a difference when speaking to Ministers, Chief Executives and the people responsible for delivering those services.

Our work has value. Our work has purpose. And our work can lead to positive change… not just for the Aboriginal communities who are continuing to experience significant disadvantage, but for the whole of South Australia, because when our Aboriginal communities do better, we all do better.

When there are clear, culturally sensitive pathways to break the cycle of recidivism, we are all safer and when there are improvements that help with the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people in South Australia, the repercussions of that can be felt throughout the public health system.

We have also provided feedback on the draft *Mental Health and Wellbeing Bill 2025,* providing our views on mental health assessments in prisons, community support systems, the benefits of mental health triaging, suicide prevention, and support for families following suicide.

These are complex issues, but issues close to the hearts of many in our communities. We hope that highlighting the experiences Aboriginal people currently have with mental health services in South Australia, and having those views considered through the legislative process, can lead to better outcomes for all South Australians.

Similarly, the Flinders and Upper North Local Voice made a submission on the amendments to the *Roxby Downs (Indenture Ratification) Act*.

Members objected to the amendment Bill proceeding due to the broad approval it would grant for the expansion of mining operations and processing capacity and emphasised the importance for strong consultation with Traditional Owners under

And there's the one issue where we find ourselves both at loggerheads with the Government that has supported our existence and on the same side as those who feel the Voice should not exist, fracking.

We have been, and will always be, opposed to fracking in the South East, and members from the Murraylands, Riverland and South-East region worked alongside local councils, State MPs, community groups and Traditional Owners to advocate against a Bill that would have lifted the ban on fracking in the South East.

One of our members, joined local businesses, members of Parliament, community groups and others to speak against the Bill on the steps of Parliament House and also spoke publicly on the steps of Parliament about its potential cultural impacts.

This issue is not just about Aboriginal communities and listening to Aboriginal communities it's about listening to all South Australians who are directly affected by this activity and we will stand with those affected to speak against this activity.

Confronting Racism And Addressing Systemic Barriers

There is another issue that we cannot continue to avoid: racism.

Many of the issues we have spoken about today cannot be understood without acknowledging the role that racism, discrimination and systemic bias continue to play.

We must be honest about some uncomfortable truths.

Too often, our people are left dealing with the consequences of systems and decisions that were not designed with us. These are not isolated incidents; they reflect broader systemic issues.

Our people are over being a political football. We've had enough of our identity, rights and place in this State used for political division.

We want a South Australia that embraces and celebrates its cultural diversity, respects Aboriginal people, values contribution and allows our children to participate without discrimination. But we need to get the foundations right.

If we are serious about building an enduring relationship between First Nations people and Government, we must confront these issues directly. Government must lead, with clear expectations, stronger accountability, and frameworks that prevent racism, rather than simply respond after harm has occurred.

Too often, we find ourselves identifying the same gaps and trying to fix the same problems. It can feel like repairing a leaking boat while still at sea, constantly patching holes without addressing why they keep appearing.

We need to move beyond that.

Aboriginal people must be involved from the beginning in shaping the policies, legislation, services and systems that affect us rather than being asked to respond once decisions have been made or problems have emerged.

Closing the Gap cannot be achieved through targets and reporting alone. It requires governments to examine its own systems, address institutional barriers and take responsibility for the decisions and practices that continue to contribute to inequitable outcomes.

This is not about solving every problem overnight. It is about recognising that lasting change requires more than another program, strategy or funding announcement. It requires confronting the underlying causes, addressing systemic barriers and strengthen legislation and accountability.

Otherwise, we will continue treating the symptoms rather than addressing the causes.

Looking to the future, next year marks ten years since the Uluru Statement from the Heart. That Statement called for Voice, Truth and Treaty.

From a South Australian perspective, we have one out of three, a Voice.

Last year, as a Voice, we renewed our call for Truth-telling and Treaty, the next great steps in our journey towards justice and reconciliation.

It's not simply policy initiatives. They are important steps towards acknowledging our shared history, addressing the ongoing impacts of past injustices and establishing stronger relationships between First Nations people and Government.

Pleasingly, we've seen a commitment from this Government to begin that journey… announcing an investment of eight-and-a-half million dollars to establish a Truth Telling Commission and progress Treaty activities in South Australia.

We understand work to progress these initiatives is expected to commence next year… which is welcome news indeed and a very significant step forward for Aboriginal communities.

But it is just that, a step forward, and should be recognised as such.

The Commission's success will depend on its independence, meaningful First Nations leadership and the opportunity for our people to shape the processes that affect them.

We look forward to working with Government to ensure the commitment translates into effective, practical action.

We are also working with Government on an evaluation framework to strengthen Government accountability by ensuring First Nations perspectives and lived experience inform the evaluation of policies, programs and services.

Announcing a program or funding a service does not guarantee meaningful outcomes. We must ask whether services are culturally safe, meet community needs and deliver real change. Ultimately, we want to understand how our advocacy influences decisions, shapes policy and leads to better outcomes for our communities.

We're also working to see how collaboration between Government and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, those bodies that provide services directly to Aboriginal communities around South Australia, can be strengthened.

Because greater partnerships and collaboration between Government and ACCOs can help provide better services and ensure First Nations organisations and communities have a meaningful role in shaping the services delivered to them.

An institution that is still evolving

While much of our focus is on advocating for our communities, significant work is also happening behind the scenes to strengthen the Voice itself.

In many respects, we are still building the institution while carrying out its responsibilities.

This includes the work gone into reflecting on the experiences of the 2026 elections, engaging with the Remuneration Tribunal on arrangements that better reflect the responsibilities and realities of the role of the Voice. and we are currently preparing for an independent, Aboriginal-led review of the First Nations Voice Act, whilst continuing to develop an evaluation and accountability framework to measure impact and progress.

These are not small pieces of work. Each could influence how the Voice operates, how it is supported, how it is held accountable and how it develops into the future.

These processes can strengthen our foundations, and ensure the Voice's structure, resourcing and accountability reflect our work and our futures effectiveness and independence.

The review of the Act provides an opportunity to consider the lessons we have learned, the work we have undertaken. and the structures and arrangements that will best support the Voice moving forward. The experiences and evidence from all these pieces of work should inform that review.

These processes are interconnected. What we have learned through the work of the Voice, the challenges we have encountered and the responsibilities we have taken on should all inform our structures and supports.

At times, it can feel like just as we are finding our feet, something changes.

We are establishing new ways of working, navigating new processes, adapting to evolving arrangements and helping shape the very structures within which we operate.

Unlike established Government institutions, we are learning and building these foundations while being expected to deliver.

It is challenging, but also an important opportunity.

We are not simply waiting for others to decide what the Voice should look like; we are actively shaping an institution that is fit for purpose and responsive to our communities.

We know that the Voice will continue to evolve and the decisions made now will shape its effectiveness, independence and sustainability for years to come and, all of this is happening while we continue to meet our responsibilities to communities, engage with Government, and advocate for the changes that brought us here in the first place.

Because the true measure of the Voice will not be the number of meetings we attend, the submissions we make or the statements we release.

It will be whether our work helps others whether it helps Aboriginal people in South Australia, whether it helps their communities and whether it helps us all and helps our State as a whole.

That is the responsibility entrusted to us, and one we must continue to honour with purpose, determination and respect for the communities we represent.

Thank you.

And I now present to the Joint Sitting of Parliament the First Nations Voice Annual Report 2026