

Aboriginal Engagement Stakeholder Interview Analysis

A report on interviews with Local Aboriginal Land
Councils in South East NSW



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Rebecca Bradley, Delivery Support Team, South East Local Land Services

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Report prepared for South East Local Land Services by Fiona Pigott and Peter Pigott

All Local Aboriginal Land Councils across the region who participated in conversations.

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Disclaimer: The information contained in this publication is based on knowledge and understanding at the time of writing April 2024. However, because of advances in knowledge, users are reminded of the need to ensure that information upon which they rely is up to date and to check currency of the information with the appropriate officer of Local Land Services or the user's independent adviser.

Acknowledging Traditional Owners

South East Local Land Services acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land and pays respect to Elders past, present and future. We also recognise the unique, diverse and enduring cultures of First Nations Peoples in NSW.

First Nations Peoples have a strong ongoing social, spiritual and cultural connection with their Traditional Lands and Waters. Obligations to care for Country remain integral to Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander law, identity, culture and social and emotional well-being. The way in which Traditional Lands are being managed is of great interest to First Nations communities and South East Local Land Services understands that Aboriginal people have a significant contribution to make in relation to land management in the region.

First Nations Peoples hold special knowledge and rights regarding the management of land and its resources. Aboriginal people occupied all areas of the region with Tangible and Intangible sites and show as evidence such as campsites, scarred and carved trees, rock shelters, grinding grooves, rock art, and ceremonial and burial areas present across all landscapes.

Cultural values across the region may also relate to natural resources such as native bush medicines, foods and tradable goods including ochre and stone suitable for tool making. Songlines, spiritual landscape storylines and intellectual property in relation to traditional knowledge is also acknowledged.

The South East region holds many Aboriginal cultural heritage values, and the preservation and management of these values is best determined by the Traditional Custodians of Country.

South East Local Land Services is committed to building strong relationships with First Nations communities, seeks to understand their aspirations and ensure that Aboriginal people have a voice to provide input into land management issues and in particular the management of cultural values. South East Local Land Services acknowledges the different ways Aboriginal people are identified, e.g. First Nations, Aboriginal, Indigenous and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.



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Executive summary

The South East Aboriginal Engagement Strategy Action Plan is a living document and is updated to reflect the ongoing and arising aspirations of the community.

During 2023, representatives from 15 Local Aboriginal Land Councils (LALCs) in the South East Local Land Services region were invited to share their support needs, perceptions of South East Local Land Services (SELLS) and suggestions for partnerships and projects – helping to shape action planning and other strategic priorities for the region.

As a result, 13 conversations were held with LALCs in September and October 2023. These engagements are intended to be one of many with South East Aboriginal Communities, seeking to establish and build relationships as well as gather data to guide the work of SELLS.



to revise + guide regional actions



13 interviews organised by outcome



Enriching relationships



77% of LALCs indicated that there is a positive history of working together. Respondents also reported a lack of current connection and uncertainty of how the two organisations align.



More frequent face to face interactions with a range of SELLS staff may build trust and provide more stable relationships.



LALCs want hands on support and help with strategic planning including projects, policy and processes. Specifically, there's a call for assistance in achieving Community Land and Business Plan targets.



Traditional land management, especially cultural burning, is recognized as an emerging area of collaboration. It is important to maintain skills and a workforce in this area.

Creating opportunities



Many LALCs are extensively involved in diverse environmental projects, like traditional land management, horticulture, natural resource management and heritage site assessments.



70+ ideas for possible collaboration were shared including ecological and cultural management, forestry work and river generation.



LALCs provide diverse services that SELLS could engage, such as environmental conservation, land management, fire mitigation, cultural education and plant propagation. There is interest in being added to approved provider lists to ease procurement procedures.



LALCs are also exploring initiatives including tourism, housing portfolio expansion, property management, and partnerships with Crown Lands and the Department of Regional NSW for land mapping and Biodiversity Stewardship Agreements. LALCs are actively engaged in education programs, and advocate for community needs like childcare, health care, and cultural centres. LALCs intend to generate income through initiatives like bio-banking land and renewable energy projects. They emphasised indigenous employment opportunities in areas like abalone re-wilding, wind farms, and logging.



92% of LALCs expressed a strong interest in training and technical skill enhancement, wanting more frequent delivery of accredited courses that lead to employment.



LALCs have gained skills and certifications in conservation, horticulture, water and land management, mental health first aid, aged care, and operational skills.



Literacy skill requirements, meeting provider prerequisites, and the lack of participants payments were identified as challenges in accessing training.



56% of LALC roles are casual with unstable funding sources. Staff turnover has a negative impact on service delivery due to interrupted continuity, skill development and relationships.



Efforts to address staffing needs and continuity include advertising, creating a talent pool, and using subcontractors. LALCs seek collaborative opportunities with SELLS to develop a career development program and streamline training requirements for contracts. They emphasised the importance of grant funding, contract work, and fee-for-service engagement to sustain ranger employment.

Enhancing respect



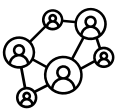
LALCS demonstrate strengths in collaborative practices, community engagement, and strategic partnerships. They achieve success in maintaining employment opportunities with innovative and resourceful practices.



Several LALCs face challenges in delivering services due to limited access to equipment, transport, accessing insurance or operational issues with partners. Recruiting staff is challenging due to the limited capacity to pay industry rates from grant funding.



LALCS face significant funding constraints, particularly with grants, as their short-term nature, along with complex application processes, hinder long-term workforce employment. SELLS support is sought to streamline the grant process and transition to a fee-for-service approach.



Governance processes, working with government agencies and local communities, and operational issues can be challenging. SELLS could offer administrative assistance, legal guidance, and improve organisational processes.

Building understanding



LALCS express willingness to CO collaborate with SELLS in preserving culturally significant places. They offered to deliver cultural heritage workshops for SELLS staff, including local tours, bush tucker walks, and engage with local Knowledge Holders to enhance the Cultural Heritage Handbook.



LALCS actively contribute to cultural heritage and education initiatives, offering opportunities for SELLS staff engagement. This includes workshops, cultural tours, and training, with a focus on building cultural understanding, addressing intergenerational trauma, and promoting sustainable employment for First Nations communities.

Introduction

Aboriginal communities in South East NSW have a rich history and deep connection to the land. When decisions are being made that affect their lives or their land it is critical to ask their opinions and take their needs into account. Consultation is also a way for South East Local Land Services (SELLS) to learn from the wisdom and knowledge that Aboriginal people have about their culture, the environment and how to take care of our shared landscape. The purpose of this consultation with South East Aboriginal communities is to establish and strengthen meaningful relationships and gather data that will inform action planning and other emerging strategic work.

The South East Aboriginal Engagement Strategy Action Plan (Action Plan) is a living document and is updated to reflect the ongoing and arising aspirations of the community. During 2023, representatives from Local Aboriginal Land Councils (LALC) were invited to share their support needs, perceptions of and suggestions for partnerships and projects with SELLS. This report is a summary of what their representatives said.

Interview methodology

A semi-structured interview is a method of gathering information and insights from individuals on specific topics. It also allows for new ideas to be shared through general conversation. The SELLS Aboriginal Communities Officer/Cultural Broker and another, varying, SELLS colleague, yarned for 1-3hrs with representatives from twelve out of fifteen Local Aboriginal Land Councils about how they could work together. One Aboriginal organisation provided representation for their area due to the unavailability of the LALC and their deidentified results have been collated with other responses.

Interview notes were taken by SELLS staff and these have been summarised using a thematic and framework analysis approach. Thematic analysis involves identifying recurring patterns in the interview data and summarising ideas that come up frequently. Researchers grouped these ideas together to create a structured understanding of the information. Framework analysis is a systematic way of sorting data into different predetermined groups. Information from the interviews has been organised under the four outcomes of the Action Plan to inform the revision of its objectives and guide future regional actions.

When working with data from Aboriginal communities it is essential to manage research bias to ensure what is reported is accurate and trustworthy. Researchers need to listen carefully, consider the unique perspectives of Aboriginal communities, and avoid making assumptions. Two social researchers worked with the SELLS Aboriginal Communities Officer/Cultural Broker to ensure the information in this report was carefully summarised and accurately represents the experiences and views of the people interviewed.

The report was provided to participants for feedback before being shared with the wider community.

What Local Aboriginal Land Council representatives said

This document summarises suggestions and insights offered to SELLS by individuals representing their Local Aboriginal Land Council. To retain their perspective, person-centered language has been used in section headings: 'we' refers to LALCs and 'you' refers to SELLS.

Enriching relationships

What we think SELLS does

The status of participation between LALCs and SELLS is characterised by a long history of collaboration with 77% of representatives indicating that there is a positive history of working together. However, recent engagement levels varied significantly amongst individual LALCs.

LALC representatives perceived that SELLS's role is to link service providers and landowners, foster collaboration between organisations, and build the capacity of private landowners, particularly the agricultural industry, in sustainable natural resource management. Representatives saw SELLS as playing a vital role in protecting waterways, managing rural properties, and overseeing diverse land management and biodiversity projects. Examples were given of SELLS-administered projects including Australian Government-funded Bushfire Recovery Funding, regeneration and environmental projects, cultural burning, cultural camps, and canoe workshops. SELLS was identified as providing resources for training including support to LALC staff cultural burn training, land management courses, local leaders program and Vertebrate Pest Induction Training.

Four LALCs recounted a lack of connection regarding the relationship due to their being in a phase of organisational rebuilding and/or not having recently worked together. There was also some uncertainty about how SELLS aligned with LALC business aims and what specific services SELLS provides. Some representatives had questions on how to seek help or initiate collaboration.

Three LALCs described active partnerships that had been in place for a number of years. These representatives described a positive history of cooperation which has built LALC capacity to provide fee-for-service project work. The staff at SELLS were recognised for their methodical approach, offering sound advice, having a good level of technical expertise, and a sensitive understanding of Cultural protocol. Recent positive experiences with training opportunities were also mentioned.

Let's yarn more

LALCs placed a strong emphasis on wanting to work effectively with SELLS. Around 25% of representatives stated that their current focus is on short-term planning and expressed an interest in having a yearly goal-setting conversation. Responses indicated a need to rethink how LALCs and

SELLS cooperate, and suggested a more collaborative and regionally-focused approach. This might include a detailed Memorandum of Understanding that incorporates specific targets, regular planning meetings, and a focus on mutual benefits. Many interviews mentioned a readiness to enhance communication with SELLS and co-deliver services that meet the diverse needs of their communities.

Representatives suggested ideas for engagement, such as an increase in the frequency of meetings and more regular visits to LALC community projects. They expressed a preference for face-to-face meetings that facilitate open conversations. Frequent interaction with a range of SELLS staff would build trust, something they said takes time within Aboriginal communities, and may provide more stable relationships during times of staff turnover. It was suggested that SELLS raise their visibility in the community to enhance general understanding of their work.

Let's do things together

Many LALCs are open to collaborating and are experiencing successful partnerships with other organisations. One representative remarked that “[partnerships] have never been better”. Interviews highlighted several positive aspects of the staff and operations at Local Land Services. It was acknowledged that SELLS staff provide valuable advice due to their high level of expertise. The support SELLS provides in facilitating connections with other agencies was seen as very important.

LALCs recounted receiving financial and technical advice, and support with contract agreements from SELLS. One representative described “SELLS [having] been our staple for a long time and still is”. The history of funded projects and positive experiences with specific staff members highlights the consistency and effectiveness of collaboration. The general sentiment was that SELLS has been a reliable and supportive partner, delivering on everything they had been asked for and responding to what LALCs wanted, not just what SELLS needed.

Co-designing projects, such as feral animal control or habitat corridor projects, was of interest to representatives. There was no mention in the interviews of collaborating in the management of Travelling Stock Reserves, a regional action in the Action Plan.

Representatives suggested that collaborating with each other would increase the presence of both organisations in the community, strengthen cultural heritage and land management practices on the South Coast and create more employment opportunities for Aboriginal people.

Let's be strategic

LALCs identified the need for more hands-on support and stronger relationships in strategic planning including projects, policy and processes. Specifically, there's a call for assistance in achieving Community Land and Business Plan targets and identifying synergies for building partnerships, such as enhancing native seed capacity. Additionally, LALCs advocated for a shift to adopt a proactive planning approach instead of a reactive one when working with SELLS.

One LALC has a perception that funding was more frequently granted in upper South Coast areas and “rarely made it further south than Nowra”. Another identified how the lack of follow-up funding limited their capacity to ensure ongoing impact, for example, to control blackberry through repeat maintenance.

Representatives recommended that SELLS take the lead in developing a regional approach to managing arrangements with LALCs, possibly through the creation of a Memorandum of Understanding. This may support a more structured and forward-thinking partnership.

LALCs are seeking more government support, a fee-for-service model, and increased contracts with SELLS to further their goals. They proposed that SELLS co-produce documentation to support business development. Practical ideas for collaboration included SELLS providing signage for bike trails, funding rangers to install signage, and mapping areas for ecological surveys and weed management.

Let's care for Country together

Many LALCs are engaged in vegetation and ecological management and were interested in exploring opportunities to collaborate through weed and pest management. The frequent mention of seeking training in horticulture, plant propagation, nursery work, and related areas indicates interest in a skill set that can contribute to joint ecological initiatives.

Traditional land management, especially cultural burning, is recognised as an emerging area of collaboration, and representatives mentioned the importance of maintaining skills and a workforce in this area.



Creating Opportunities

These are some of the things we are doing:

Environmental Projects

- Remediation work and equipment purchase for ShoalWater over the next 10 years
- Pest levy project and land stewardship with Local Land Services
- Coastal foreshore management work with local councils and NSW National Parks, mangrove restoration and nurseries, marine areas rubbish collection, and river plantings
- Traditional land management - weed control, revegetation, and cultural burning
- Horticulture, including nursery propagation activities
- Natural resource management services, such as revegetation, pest animal and weed management



Cultural Heritage and Education

- Cultural mapping project and site recording for Aboriginal Heritage Information Management System in collaboration with universities
- Incorporating cultural education into the land handback process
- Cultural heritage site assessments, including site surveys with archaeologists and 'due diligence' work
- Cultural Awareness Training for organisations dealing with Aboriginal communities
- School engagement and indigenous student support, such as youth services workers employed through funding via NSW Coalition of Aboriginal Peak Organisations to support students to stay engaged in high school



Community and Employment

- Securing employment opportunities for the community, such as weed control work with local councils
- Involvement in the Green Army's Dreamtime Connections program
- Expanding community knowledge on land management
- Caring for Country initiatives - environmental and cultural heritage services
- Housing and property management
- Transitioning toward fee-for-service asset management plans



We'd also like to do this

LALC representatives demonstrated clear aspirations with more than 70 initiatives mentioned in the interview data. These included ecological management, such as habitat surveys, quoll surveillance, rewilding forests for koalas, roadside vegetation management, weed eradication, and traditional land management practices like cultural burning.

Additionally, many LALCs aim to continue the ranger program, develop a ranger's crew, and explore opportunities in forestry work, river regeneration, and the rewilding of abalone. One LALC is actively involved in the NSW Department of Planning and Environment inclusive planning projects focusing on potential opportunities and risks related to environmental, economic, and social aspects. Diverse long-term plans include water quality testing, geographic information system development, cultural heritage and natural resources asset management, carbon and biodiversity stewardship projects, and partnerships with agencies for skill-building.

LALCs intend to collaborate with a wide range of organisations including schools, local councils, the agriculture industry, mining industry, NSW Government departments and programs, universities, and Landcare groups. Representatives emphasised their focus on cultural heritage management, training, and education, with plans for fee-for-service work in cultural and tourism business.

We offer services that you could use

There is an interest in direct engagement and contracting services to SELLS when opportunities arise. 85% of respondents described services SELLS could utilise including cultural heritage, land claims, cultural burning, community programs, and property and housing management. Developing multi-agency partnerships was mentioned, such as working with both SELLS and the Department of Primary Industry on an oyster industry project.

LALCs expressed a desire to be recognised on an SELLS-preferred or pre-approved supplier/contractor list to reduce procurement administration. Interview data also highlighted the need for engagement process information exchange, such as obtaining pricing lists and organisational charts from LALCs, along with identifying priority Community Land and Business Plan action areas.

Most LALCs are delivering initiatives that align with SELLS business, for example:

- applying for grant funding for river rehabilitation work, highlights a commitment to environmental management and conservation of waterways,
- ongoing negotiation for the management of LALC owned land, and frequent mention of weed and pest management work, demonstrates an expanding interest in land management efforts,
- fire preparation projects were frequently mentioned, such as managing vegetation along major roads, and using cultural burning and other traditional land management practices,
- applying to become involved in Crown Land management suggests a willingness to accept a broader scope and legislative responsibility,

- 46% of LALCs mention rangers involved in environmental and traditional land management activities, reflecting a skilled, available and dedicated workforce engaged in maintaining and preserving the land,
- five LALCs have established or are developing nurseries to provide plants for projects, such as rewilding koala habitats and bush regeneration. An emerging idea is to farm mangrove plants for organisations like River Watch to use in waterway management.
- running youth and community development programs including strategies for the ongoing employment of Aboriginal people,
- offering immersive environmental and cultural heritage training,
- five LALCs outlined a range of hospitality services they could offer, including catering from a commercial kitchen, barista service, and the sale of teas from local bush tucker foods. Additionally, one LALC plans to establish a café soon.

We've other services, too

Some initiatives being explored by LALCs do not directly align with SELLS business, such as tourism. Being aware of them, however, can enable SELLS to identify and link appropriate partnership opportunities as they arise.

Additionally, some initiatives are still in identification and development stages due to anticipated changes in Board personnel, partnerships with neighbouring LALCs being established, CEO turnover, and staff being only a few weeks into new roles.

Five LALCs mentioned wanting to build a housing portfolio and property management of houses and offices. One was in the process of working with Crown Lands and the Department of Regional NSW to map land owned by the LALC. Another was considering Biodiversity Stewardship Agreements for land it owned.

LALCs are offering education in schools and communities through Junior Ranger Programs, exchange programs and youth services that support students to stay engaged in school. They are also supporting communities through advocating for childcare, health care, community gardens and cultural centres in their areas.

The aspiration for growth and independence was mentioned by six LALCs. They expressed a desire for expansion, with a focus on progress rather than perfection, aiming to serve as an exemplary model for others and become deeply integrated within the community. They want to leverage existing groundwork into a readiness to deliver services. LALCs are seeking financial independence, aiming to reduce reliance on grants, and NSW Aboriginal Land Council allocations by generating their own income through bio-banking landlocked parcels of land or renewable energy, such as wind or solar farms.

Furthermore, there's an emphasis on projects designed to enhance indigenous employment opportunities, such as re-wilding abalone, wind farm initiatives, and logging.

We see the benefit of developing skills

Building capacity for 'job readiness' was a high priority for LALCs and was mentioned in 92% of interviews through 63 individual comments on training and technical skill development. It was reported that training opportunities have a substantial positive impact on the community and its welfare, and are particularly beneficial for young community members. Attending training together brought the group closer and inspired staff to offer more professional services through improved procedures, enhanced skills and confidence.

SELLS was frequently mentioned as a supporter of relevant and quality training opportunities. Representatives offered ideas for improvement, such as offering a larger range of training, running training more often, providing accredited training that could lead to employment, and sharing a graduation video from trainees to build interest in future courses. Comments captured the importance of maintaining and expanding the skilled workforce for future projects and initiatives, particularly in the context of cultural and environmental conservation.

Specific reference was made to a leadership training course offered by SELLS. The rangers who participated in the training have seen considerable personal and professional growth, building capacity and taking ownership of their roles. This training cultivated rangers into consistent and reliable young leaders with strong cultural heritage management skills.

Representatives suggested that SELLS offer support to training opportunities in areas such as:

- technical operational skills + accredited courses: chainsaw, senior first aid, White Card, health and safety, basic GIS analyst training, Dashboard training
- knowledge: pest animal and plant management training (7 requests), land management, cultural heritage surveying
- practice skills: South East Local Leaders

Some LALCs were engaging in TAFE-based Certificate 3 in Conservation and Ecosystem Management. Others expressed concern about the cultural appropriateness and literacy requirements of TAFE courses and were building provider relationships with Aboriginal training organisations. One LALC expressed interest in becoming a registered training organisation themselves.



We have learnt a lot already

Interview data lists 24 different workshops or certified courses that LALCs have recently (last 3yrs+) participated in including:

Environmental Training

- Mangrove rehabilitation training focused on erosion control and restoring fish habitats
- Land management workshops, including pest animal and plant management
- Cultural site assessment knowledge sharing
- Indigenous mapping workshops
- and fire management, such as Firesticks and Rural Fire Service training



Certifications and skills Development

- Completion of TAFE Conservation Land Management Course, Conservation and Ecosystem Management and certifications in horticulture, water and land management
- Mental Health First Aid training
- Aged Care training for respite care
- Koori farm maintenance and repairs training
- Training in operational areas, including chainsaws, White Card, operating drones, Geographic Information Systems, and cultural heritage preservation.

Accessing training can be challenging

Representatives identified several challenges related to training opportunities and capacity building. Some trainees were hindered by courses' literacy skill requirements. Capacity to meet provider requirements (cost, minimum number of participants) is sometimes a barrier. Participant payment is often unavailable, meaning participants have to forgo a day's income to attend training. This is seen to reinforce inequitable access when others, for example, government staff, are paid to attend.

Representatives said that SELLS could provide support to the LALC in various administrative and operational areas. These included assistance with grant-related activities, such as grant writing and guidance on available sources of funding. SELLS could also help with environmental studies, providing expertise in mapping and technical advice. SELLS could support LALC's initiatives with practical assistance, knowledge, and guidance in navigating administrative and technical processes.

LALCs expressed a need for increased training opportunities, particularly in the form of targeted and locally relevant accredited training programs. They seek support for upskilling and training

initiatives aligned with the community's interests, emphasising education in natural resource management and native vegetation. The LALC sees significant benefits in receiving more training supported through SELLS, indicating a desire for collaborative efforts to enhance the skills and knowledge of the community members in areas that align with their priorities.

We want a more secure workforce

Interview data makes reference to the significant casualisation of LALC employment with about 56% of roles described as casual or part-time. All LALCs mentioned a desire to increase job stability and tenure for their casual workforce, and many acknowledge the negative impact of casual turnover on continuity, skills and relationships. Representatives identified LALC staff who could be employed on SELLS projects, such as 23 recent trainees in ecological management.

Permanent positions tended to include administrative roles, such as LALC CEO or finance manager, administrative support, some rangers and nursery staff. Casual and part-time roles included environmental rangers, cleaners, maintenance work, cultural heritage officers, fieldwork officers, and site assessment officers.

Nearly all LALCs, 10 out of 13, mentioned staffing challenges, such as staff capacity, funding constraints, employment stability, continuity of work, recruitment, and the need for collaborative solutions with other LALCs. Succession planning, the need for senior staff, pathways for leadership development and project managers is highlighted in interview data.

LALCs face difficulties in offering competitive salaries and stable employment conditions. Uncertainty in future funding opportunities further complicates workforce planning. LALCs aim to create continuous work opportunities, both part-time and full-time, to build capacity.

Recruitment challenges are exacerbated by the need for long-term sustainable local employment. Training may not always lead to accredited positions and fully trained staff obtain positions which require them to move away from working on-Country. Finding and retaining the right people is a challenge. It was suggested that LALCs partner with each other to address staffing challenges creatively, possibly through secondments or joint-employment arrangements.

We could use some help with providing job security

LALCs discussed recruitment methods and challenges. They mentioned a commitment to hiring within their communities whilst balancing relational issues. Ideas to enhance job security and maintain a skilled casual workforce include the intention to advertise and create a talent pool, as well as using subcontractors when necessary. Entrepreneurial training for site officers is being considered to support succession planning.

Ideas have been discussed to address the challenge of retaining trainees and providing longer-term mentoring and support, potentially through pooling resources with other government agencies or offering secondment arrangements to other LALCs for experience and mentorship.

The LALC also expresses the desire for SELLS to create a bundle of requirements for various contracts to streamline training and be ready for 'fee-for-service' opportunities. An invitation was

made to partner with SELLS to develop a career development program or strategy for employment, funding or in-kind support.

Grant funding, contract work and fee-for-service work play a crucial role in supporting ranger employment. LALCs intend to apply for senior rangers funding in the future to sustain this workforce. Additionally, efforts are being made to secure Bushfire Local Economic Recovery Funding or Government grants to support the ranger crew. There was a request for SELLS to provide a capability statement for rangers.



Enhancing respect

The South East Aboriginal Engagement Strategy Action Plan, Outcome 3 - enhancing respect addresses the need to increase and retain Aboriginal staff. Whilst this need was not explicitly mentioned in the interview data, the importance and value of the SELLS Aboriginal Communities Officer/Cultural Broker role was identified in almost 50% of interviews. This role was described as providing an initial contact for communication and building relationships. Specific staff were mentioned for their sound understanding of LALC's operational strengths and challenges, and high-level interpersonal skills. General SELLS staff appreciation is referenced on p9 and acknowledged as a contributing factor to enhancing respect.

Ten LALC representatives provided recommendations on how SELLS could enhance respectful engagement, and these have been reported against their relevant outcome areas. The following emergent themes have been included to highlight that respect can also look like understanding context, challenge and strength. Taking the time to 'listen to understand' is key to enhancing respect.

We have lots of strengths



Collaborative Practices: Representatives felt that LALCs work collaboratively, both within their team and with the community. They prioritise effective communication and leadership, and have strong support from their membership and board.



Trust and Openness: Many LALCs reported that having a strong and responsible board, combined with a welcoming and open staff, allows them to build effective relationships and seize opportunities. LALCs value trust and openness, with staff openly sharing ideas and fostering connections with each other.



Community Participation: Despite overcoming past cultural issues and tension, LALCs maintain a high level of community participation. Their strategic plans have full support from both the community and the board. Initiatives focus on building and strengthening the community, and emphasise the importance of getting people out on-Country.



Partnerships and Collaboration: Many LALCs have established strong partnerships and collaborations with neighbouring LALCs, local councils, and innovative external projects, like the circular economy project managed by Bega Cheese.



Knowledge and Experience: LALCs' well-qualified staff hold expertise including cultural knowledge, and experience in government agencies, land management, and bush regeneration works. Their advocacy and contacts with government organisations have been crucial in navigating systems and processes. LALCs achieve success in offering job-ready training and maintaining employment opportunities. They have a clear strategic direction around employment and training, demonstrating innovation and resourcefulness. Having a plan also enables LALCs to 'say no' to becoming

involved in projects that are not a current priority and may drain resources. Most LALCs practise good financial management.



Diverse and Respected Team: Representatives reported teams composed of local Traditional Owners, a diverse and respected board, members, and proactive young members. The consistent presence of a CEO connected to the community has facilitated relationship building.

Sometimes, delivering services is challenging

Six LALCs acknowledged that delivering services was constrained by access to suitable equipment, transport, capital items and insurance. Others identified difficulties due to legal and operational issues with partners, such as joint management of leases, accessing leases or land, and relying on third parties to construct or maintain resources. LALC's limited capacity to pay industry rates from available funding makes recruiting and retaining staff challenging. One LALC described the challenging experience of getting previously mismanaged land handed back under Native Title and immediately being regulated around weed and pest management.

Working within funding constraints is very challenging

LALCs reported mix-method funding sources, such as NSW Aboriginal Land Council, fee-for-service income, Aboriginal Affairs NSW/National Indigenous Australians Agency, grants and investments.

Grants were identified as a particularly challenging funding source due to their short-term and piecemeal nature, and convoluted application and reporting processes. LALCs were discerning about seeking funding from certain organisations, such as those involved in mining or big industry. Instances were reported of grant amounts not covering the costs of salaries to deliver the project, and their irregular nature limits long-term workforce employment. LALCs are experiencing grants becoming harder to administer which makes them less appealing when considering capacity and reward for effort.

SELLS could support LALCs and reduce the administrative burden of the grant process by accepting simplified Expression of Interest forms. Training in grant writing and support letters for funding opportunities would also be appreciated. It was suggested that SELLS funding move to a fee-for-service approach rather than administering grants.

Funding complexities were mentioned 28 times in the interview data and were a major concern for 46% of LALCs.

Issues raised included:

- that funding requirements and conditions skew opportunities and are not always responsive or aligned with community need,
- using grants to fund roles leads to unsustainable employment,
- more funding is needed for capital items and maintenance,

- reducing time lag between funding being awarded and actually received,
- requirements to deliver complete services before payment is received, instalments being paid late (Bushfire Recovery Fund and Bushfire Local Economic Recovery Fund) or not being made aware of milestone payment opportunities,
- secure funding needed to retain trainees and staff in the longer term,
- establish clear outcomes and time valuation in engagement to prevent consultation fatigue and to avoid feeling rushed during project execution.



Running an organisation can be challenging

Representatives discussed various aspects of good governance, highlighting the need for continuous effort and understanding of management processes. Succession planning and career development were identified as needed to sustain LALC leadership. There is a perceived gap in understanding LALC governance processes, both from government agencies and the general community, with a sense that agencies are 'not listening to the right people - to local knowledge' and LALCs are 'set up to fail'. Tension can also arise with local Aboriginal communities who may not understand the process or need to change how LALCs do business. Similarly, the structure and composition of LALC Boards can be questioned by members who feel they are not representative of the local Aboriginal community. It was acknowledged that some Boards may lack the necessary knowledge in governance procedures, communication, strategic planning or technical understanding of business. Board and LALC staff turnover leads to periods of transition and adaptation within the organisation and this can slow down the delivery of services.

Four LALCs described logistical or internal organisation operational challenges and requested SELLS support in this area. Administrative support is sought to improve documentation quality, Human Resources policies, position descriptions, office organisation, IT skills, and online resource development. Legal guidance is needed on intellectual property protection. The tension of First Nation communities being required to conform to the structures of organisations and the rhythm of the 'working week' was mentioned.

Working within one's own community can also be challenging with six LALCs mentioning that there was, at times, organisational conflict or Aboriginal political affairs that impact operations. There have been historical challenges in working with other LALCs on joint projects, or tensions from having other LALCs working on their land. Community expectations can also be high and not always based on understanding the limited scope of LALCs. For example, representatives indicated a need for similar groups to manage waterways and want increased capacity to influence Native Title claims. Some community members need motivation to participate or are co-dependent on the LALC for employment.

LALCs also reported that working with other agencies can be challenging. One felt discriminated against by government agencies and wanted more input from the community in decision-making. Local councils were identified by three LALCs as being difficult to work with, for example, not having a Memorandum of Understanding which guided priorities, requesting frequent consultation meetings without payment for these services, or placing limitations on initiatives, such as cultural burns. Intellectual property concerns were raised about sharing knowledge with Rural Fire Services on cultural burning techniques.

Building understanding

LALC representatives have experienced SELLS staff having the cultural knowledge and understanding to build respectful relationships and deal with any problems that arise. Specific SELLS staff were mentioned who were great to work with, were reliable and 'got things done', and introduced the group to new areas of work.

Let's care for Culture together

It was acknowledged that SELLS assists with preserving culturally significant places like midden sites. Five LALCs offered to run cultural heritage workshops for SELLS staff, such as local tours, bush tucker walks, food, dance, yarning with Elders, diving and fishhook making. One LALC thought it would be meaningful for rangers to know that they are teaching people from another organisation and learning at the same time. Representatives also suggested working with a wide range of local Knowledge Holders to ground the SELLS Cultural Heritage Handbook in Truth.

We could help build your Cultural understanding

Most LALCs are delivering cultural heritage and education initiatives. These include fostering a connection to culture in schools, organising cultural tours and bush tucker walks, providing cultural heritage training, and promoting cultural education with an emphasis on eco-tourism. There is also an active interest in language training. LALC representatives mentioned that intergenerational trauma is not well-understood by organisations. They observed that organisations often lack the policies and support to enable and empower First Nations communities into sustainable and fulfilling employment.

Offers were made for SELLS staff and young rangers to partner for workshops on cultural heritage, with a focus on building confidence, artefact discovery. Many LALCs offer Cultural Awareness Training which could be utilised by SELLS in their annual mandatory training programs. LALCs are often involved in organising local cultural celebrations and commemorative occasions, such as NAIDOC Day, which SELLS staff could attend.

No interviews mentioned being invited to offer Welcome to Country protocols at SELLS public events, or experiencing Acknowledgement of Country at regular SELLS events. Similarly, no LALC mentioned having been showcased as a case study to promote traditional and/or contemporary land practices in SELLS publications.

Conclusion

The findings from the semi-structured interviews conducted by South East Local Land Services staff with twelve Local Aboriginal Land Councils and one other Aboriginal organisation provide valuable insights into the dynamics of their collaboration and areas for improvement.

The report highlights the richness of existing relationships between SELLS and LALCs, with most representatives expressing a positive history of collaboration. However, it also sheds light on the need for enhanced connections and a clearer alignment of objectives between the two organisations. The importance of regular interactions, increased visibility of SELLS in the community, and fostering trust through consistent engagement with SELLS staff members are identified as crucial steps to enriching these relationships.

Opportunities for collaboration and growth are a central focus, with ideas for future projects emerging from the interviews. The report underscores the potential for Aboriginal organisations and businesses to contribute to NSW's first economy through training, contracted services, and community-led projects. The emphasis on job readiness, capacity-building, and the alignment of aspirations between LALCs and SELLS is evident in the recommendations, emphasising the importance of creating opportunities that benefit both parties.

The report also addresses the need to enhance respect and understanding between the organisations. While the role of the Aboriginal Communities Officer/Cultural Broker is acknowledged for its value in communication and relationship-building, the importance of all staff understanding the context, strengths, and challenges of LALCs is highlighted. SELLS is invited to build cultural capability, foster understanding, and navigate challenges together with LALCs.

As SELLS revises its objectives and plans for future regional actions based on the interview data, it is clear that collaboration, understanding, and mutual support are central themes. The report suggests formalised agreements where desired, assistance in achieving Community Land and Business Plan targets, and identifying synergies for building partnerships as avenues for further progress.

In summary, this report serves as a comprehensive guide for SELLS to enhance its South East Aboriginal Engagement Strategy Action Plan, ensuring that it continues to evolve in alignment with the aspirations and needs of the Aboriginal community. The identified themes and recommendations provide a roadmap for fostering enriched relationships, creating opportunities, enhancing respect, and building a deeper understanding between SELLS and Local Aboriginal Land Councils.

