

# Establishing a First Nations Governance Network of HIPPY Providers

## Acknowledgement

In the spirit of deep respect, we acknowledge the sovereign lands of all the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nations on which we have walked, listened, learned and yarned throughout the last decade.

We pay our heartfelt respects to Elders past and present, and to the young leaders who carry forward the strength, knowledge and cultural legacy of their Ancestors.

We honour and pay respect to the cultural practice, leadership and governance that continues to thrive in local communities despite the impact of colonisation. We acknowledge the authority and expertise of First Nations leadership as holders of Lore/Law.

We endeavour to walk humbly alongside community, listening deeply to the direction and decisions of Elders, community leaders and members.

## Purpose

HIPPY in Australia is at an important crossroads. Acknowledging that while working to strengthen cultural governance and self-determination at First Nations sites through local Aboriginal community control, the Brotherhood of St. Laurence (BSL) is aware that its own role as grant and program licence holder obstructs deep and true community ownership.

In 2025, First Nations HIPPY providers and stakeholders, supported by the Brotherhood of St Laurence, called for the establishment of a HIPPY First Nations network, guided by an ACCO-led First Nations Governance Network. This Governance Network will guide the future direction of HIPPY, ultimately deciding how HIPPY sites will be managed and how a new First Nations controlled entity, fulfilling the role of grant and licence holder, could be established.

We acknowledge your expertise and authority as a leader and would value your being a part of guiding the future of HIPPY by joining the HIPPY First Nations Governance Network. This document has been written to provide background information to support your decision on whether to participate.

## HIPPY and its current governance structure

HIPPY is a two-year, home-based early childhood learning and parenting program that empowers parents and carers to be their child's first teacher. Families start HIPPY two years before their child starts school (usually around three years old). HIPPY is a free, voluntary program that which has operated in Australia for 27 years.

HIPPY is an international program with a strong evidence base operating in 15 countries. The BSL is currently the only HIPPY licence holder in Australia and acts as the community partner with government, facilitating the service delivery relationship with the local partners delivering HIPPY in place.

The program is funded by the Commonwealth Government through the Department of Social Services (DSS). DSS's Grant Agreement with BSL outlines HIPPY's overall funding and requirements around numbers of families to be reached, reporting and compliance around privacy and child safeguarding.

HIPPY is delivered through partnerships with 71 local community organisations (35 First Nations providers and 36 broad focus providers), working with an annual target of 4025 families.

Each provider currently enters into a sub-licence with BSL which outlines their funding arrangements, model fidelity, obligations, compliance requirements and reporting. See Figure 1 below for current funding structure outline.

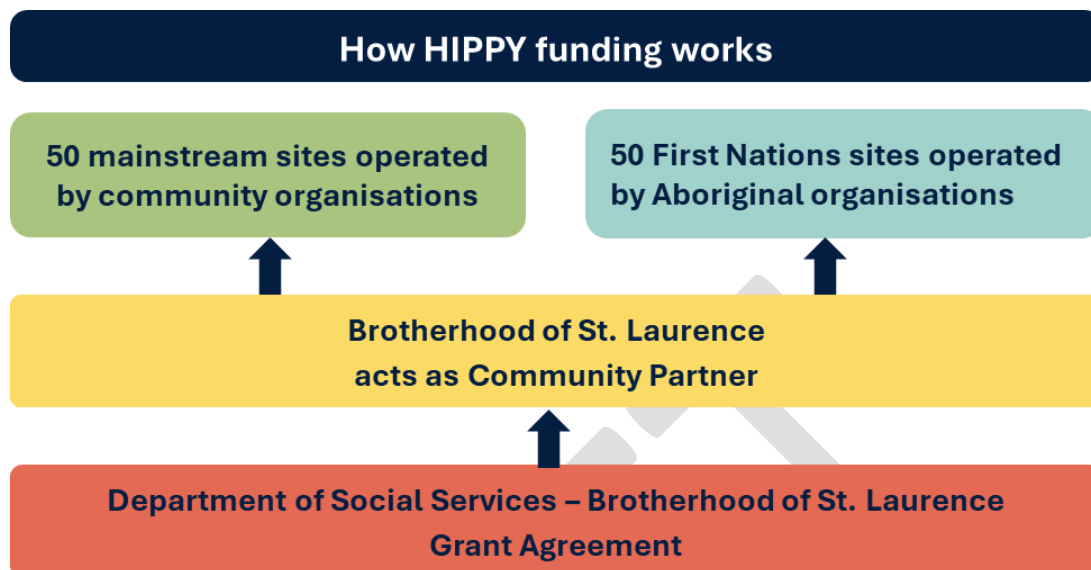


Figure 1 HIPPY Funding Structure

Each HIPPY site is staffed by a tertiary qualified (or equivalent) Coordinator, supported by four Tutors. Tutors are recruited from the parent cohort, acknowledging the power of peer learning and that parents and carers are their children’s first and most important teachers. Tutors build carers’ confidence and knowledge to complete fun educational activities with their children that support development and inspire a love of learning. Tutors are paid employees and receive training and support from the coordinator and are assisted to plan a career pathway post involvement in HIPPY.

## Walking towards self-determination

In 2022, BSL signed onto a new five-year grant agreement with DSS which included a commitment to increase the number of ACCOs delivering HIPPY at First Nations sites.

This opportunity importantly allowed an independent First Nations organisation to ask local communities whether HIPPY was still suitable and effective. Community consultation in First Nations communities confirmed that HIPPY is regarded as a valuable component of their early years’ service landscape and has strong support.

During 2024 and 2025, BSL, under the guidance of local communities, transitioned HIPPY management from broad focus providers to First Nations organisations. As of December 2025, all First Nations focused sites are delivered by an ACCO or through partnerships with First Nations organisations or community members.

In late 2025 BSL aligned their HIPPY national office team to enhance support for the First Nations providers and the potential First Nations Network by creating a First Nations Network team. The focus of this team in 2026 is to support and resource the establishment of the new HIPPY providers and the development of the First Nations Network.

## Transitioning the Community Partner role from BSL

With the transition of HIPPY site level program, BSL is keen to address its role as community partner. Advice from First Nations HIPPY providers and key stakeholders confirmed that BSL stepping away from its role as community partner for First Nations sites, directing contracts and funds, is critical for strengthened cultural governance and self-determination.

HIPPY International is the licence owner of the HIPPY program and, up until recently, it has expressed a preference to only have one license holder per country. However, a recent change of policy has allowed other countries to increase the number of license holders for specific reasons related to local needs. BSL has been in discussions with HIPPY International about the potential for another license holder in Australia in order to respond to Closing the Gap and to support self-determination. HIPPY International is open to continuing these discussions understanding that an additional licence may be needed to meet the needs of First Nations communities.

BSL is currently actively advocating for funding and a new grant agreement (expected in 2027) for broad focus as well as all First Nations focussed sites whilst the First Nations Network is formed and future directions are established by the Network. Enabling a First Nations voice in future discussions with both government and HIPPY International will be essential and could not be timelier.

BSL hopes that bringing together the 36 First Nations providers will facilitate the identification of a path forward, giving Network members a forum to share opinions, provide direction and decisions about the future of First Nations HIPPY, and add weight to the advocacy.

## Supporting change in 2026

Forming a new HIPPY First Nations Governance Network provides an opportunity for leaders from First Nations providers to explore the ways in which First Nations HIPPY sites could be managed and a new entity, to act as the community partner, could be established to act as the First Nations network community partner and licence holder.

To commence this process, we are seeking a committed and consistent senior ACCO representative from your organisation to participate in regular meetings, bringing their expertise and leadership to guide and shape the ACCO-led Governance Network.

In addition to the current First Nations providers BSL believes it may be helpful to include some other First Nations experts and stakeholders. Independent, external First Nations facilitation of the Governance Network is being explored to embed cultural governance and leadership and enable all group members opportunities to participate actively in decisions

BSL have also invited SNAICC, as the peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, to consider joining the Governance Network as an advocacy and advice partner to offer respected culturally grounded insight in relation to policy, advocacy, ways of working and national early years sector developments.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> SNAICC'S role in the network is defined as an expert advisor, contributing policy, advocacy and sector-level expertise. SNAICC are not representing themselves as an ACCO or their membership within this forum, and involvement has no link to a contracting outcome or any predetermined position or decision.

BSL proposes a provisional structure where the Governance Network will meet online quarterly throughout 2026, with an in-person summit mid-year. BSL will handle all secretariat work behind the scenes- papers, minutes, briefs, and coordination so all we ask is for time, voice, and steady presence at the table.

BSL is committed to walking alongside First Nations providers through this journey and assisting wherever possible with this phase of the transition. We are committed to working for the successful transfer of the program, ensuring sustainability and improved outcomes for First Nations families.

## Statement of Commitment from BSL

BSL is committed to walking alongside First Nations providers in the creation of a First Nations Governance Network grounded in sovereignty, self-determination, and community-led leadership. Our purpose is to enable this work, not direct it.

We offer secretariat support, infrastructure, and resourcing only to strengthen ACCO leadership. We will not seek voting rights, authority, ownership, or influence over the Governance Network.

At a practice level we commit to sharing all curriculum materials, resources, systems and our program knowledge and expertise. This practice arrangement will be guided by the First Nations Providers.

Our role is temporary, transitional, and always secondary to First Nations governance. We will follow guidance from the Network. There will be no competition- only support, integrity, and partnership.

BSL commits to continuing to progress the necessary internal governance steps to formalise this commitment. As ACCOs build and lead the Network on their own terms, BSL will step back and eventually step out, consistent with our values and our respect for First Nations leadership.