

NTPS Aboriginal Employee Forum Evaluation Report

Top End - Darwin
19 & 20 August 2026



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Acronyms	Full form
AECD	Aboriginal Employment and Career Development
AEF	Aboriginal Employee Forum
AO	Administrative Officer
DCF	Department of Children and Families
DET	Department of Education and Training
DOH	Department of Health
DHLGCD	Department of Housing, Local Government and Community Development
DOC	Department of Corrections
NTPS	Northern Territory Public Sector
OCPE	Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment
SEWB	Social and Emotional Wellbeing

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Forum Overview

The Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment (OCPE) delivered the 17th Northern Territory Public Sector (NTPS) Aboriginal Employee Forum (AEF) on 19–20 August 2026 at the DoubleTree by Hilton Esplanade, Darwin. 151 Aboriginal employees registered to attend, representing the highest level of participation in the Forum's history. OCPE continued to support regional participation and sponsored eight registrations, with employees representing communities including Borroloola, Maningrida, Groote Eylandt and Nhulunbuy.

The forum provided a culturally safe and inclusive space for Aboriginal employees to connect, learn, share experiences and contribute to the future of the NTPS.

The 2026 forum focused on:

- Aboriginal Affairs Framework
- Social and emotional wellbeing and resilience
- Leadership, career development and capability
- Cultural safety and inclusive workplaces
- Future workforce capability and artificial intelligence
- Employment conditions and entitlements
- Workforce consultation and engagement
- Networking and connection across agencies and regions.

The two-day program combined keynote presentations, senior and youth panels, workshops, agency showcases, consultation and networking activities. The forum provided an important platform for Aboriginal employees to connect, share experiences, be heard and access information and resources to support their professional development and career pathways.

The forum program was designed to strengthen Aboriginal employee wellbeing, capability and career development while providing opportunities for networking, consultation and shared learning. Social and emotional wellbeing featured prominently throughout the agenda, alongside discussions on leadership, cultural safety, workforce capability and career development. A key feature of the forum was consultation on the proposed NTPS Workforce Strategy 2027–2032, with participants sharing their perspectives on workforce challenges, opportunities and priorities to help inform future workforce planning and Aboriginal employment initiatives across the sector.

The forum provided OCPE with:

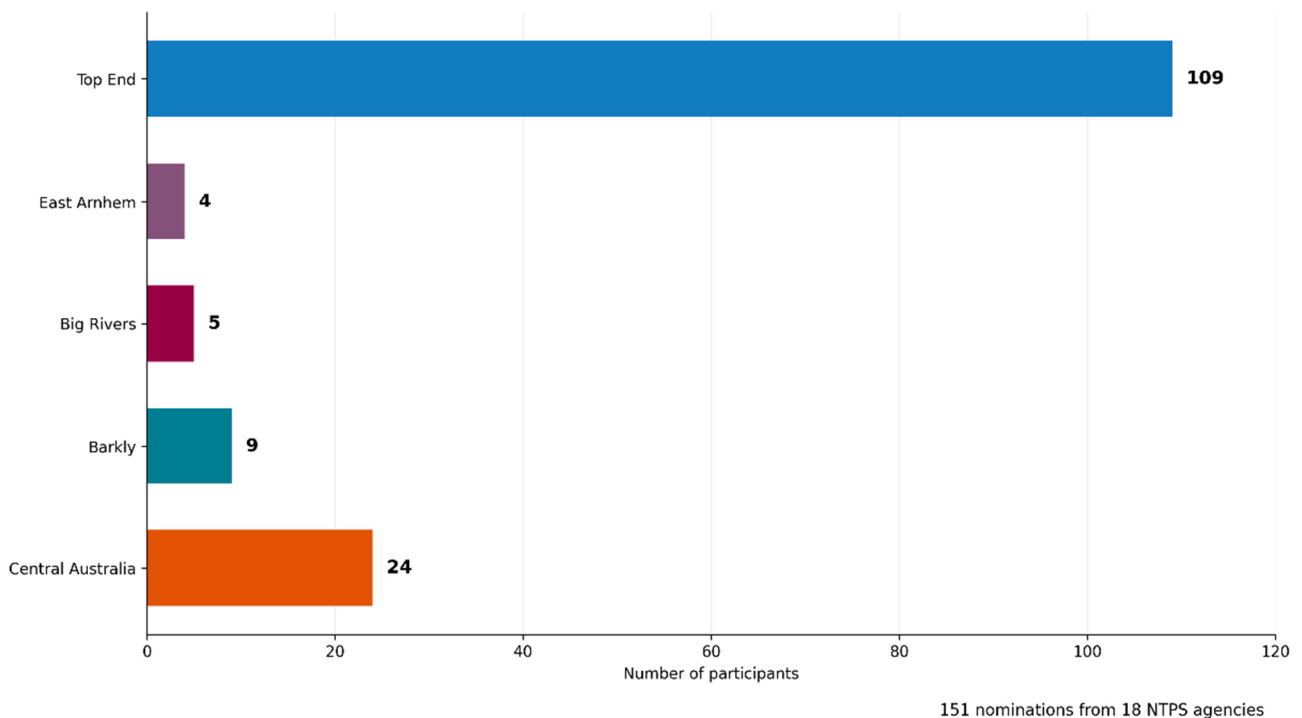
- A direct channel for Aboriginal employees to inform workforce priorities, policies and future initiatives.
- Valuable insights into the workplace conditions that support wellbeing, cultural safety, career development and retention.
- Practical recommendations to strengthen leadership capability, inclusion and workforce participation.
- An opportunity to test and refine workforce resources and initiatives with Aboriginal employees prior to broader implementation.

Participation and Agency Representation

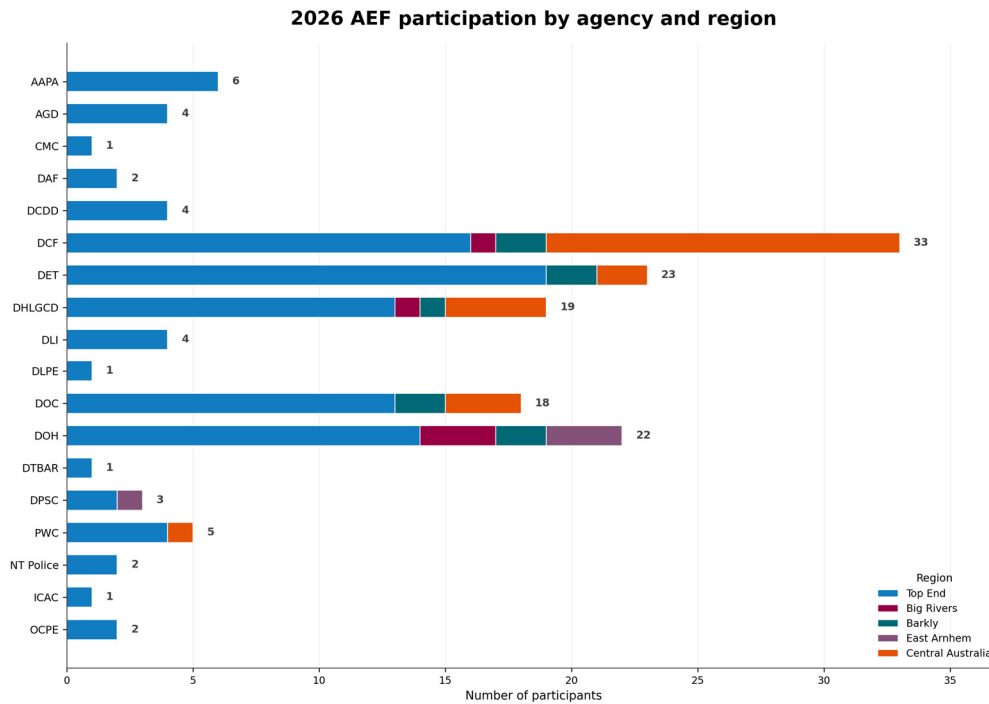
Nominations	Day 1 signed in	Day 2 signed in	NTPS agencies represented	Evaluation responses received
151	146 (96.7%)	130 (86.1%)	18	89

The forum attracted 151 nominations from Aboriginal employees from 18 NTPS agencies, representing participation from across the Northern Territory (NT). The Top End accounted for 109 (71.5%) of participants, with representation also from Central Australia 24 (16.6%), Barkly 9 (5.3%), Big Rivers 5 (4.0%) and East Arnhem 4 (2.6%)

2026 AEF participation by region



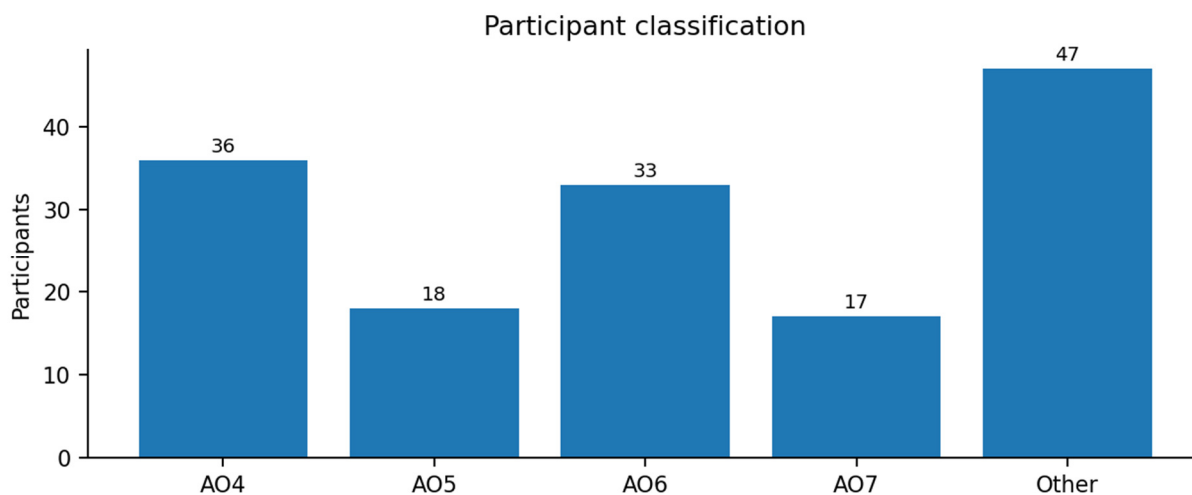
Participation was strongest across the Department of Children and Families (DCF) with 33 representatives (21.9% of forum attendees), Department of Education and Training (DET) – 23, 15.2%, Department of Health (DOH) – 22, 14.6%, Department of Housing Local Government and Community Development (DHLGCD) - 19 12.6% and Department of Corrections (DOC) – 18, 12.6%, collectively representing approximately 76% of all participants.



The distribution demonstrates the forum's broad NT wide reach, with participation across multiple agencies, regions and classification levels. Several agencies, including DCF, DoH and DHLGCD, had representation from multiple regions, supporting opportunities for Aboriginal employees to connect, share experiences and build networks across the NTPS.

Participant Classification breakdown

Classification data also shows participation across operational, technical and emerging leadership levels. AO4 – AO7 employees accounted for 104 participants (69%). Almost half of evaluation respondents (48%) attended for the first time. This mix of new and returning participants supports both the growth of the Forum and the continuation of established Aboriginal employee networks.



The forum continues to provide a cross-agency space for Aboriginal employees at different career stages. The regional spread reinforces the value of a forum that connects employees across different parts of the NTPS. Strong participation across AO4 – AO7 creates opportunities to connect career development with emerging leadership

The forum - what happened

Day One: Connect, listen and shape the conversation

Day One established the forum as a space for Aboriginal employees to connect, listen and shape the conversation. Participants were able to share experiences and identify priorities for Aboriginal employment, career development, cultural safety, leadership, workforce participation and regional workforce sustainability.

Summary of Presentation or Workshop	Evaluation Results	Participant Reflection
Welcome to Country Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation formally opened the forum with a Welcome to Country.	Provided a culturally grounded opening and set the tone for connection, inclusion and participation.	
Minister's Opening Address Hon Jo Hersey highlighted Aboriginal workforce participation, wellbeing and contribution to the future NTPS.	Key themes included Aboriginal employment growth, leadership opportunities, future capability, wellbeing and workforce planning.	
Commissioner's Address Commissioner Nicole Hurwood highlighted the Forum as a platform for Aboriginal employees to share experiences, be heard and shape the NTPS.	Key themes included Aboriginal employment growth, the Aboriginal Employment and Career Development Strategy, Workforce Strategy 2027–2032, cultural responsiveness and leadership pathways.	
Participant Introductions and Networking Cultural and professional introductions enabled connection across agencies, regions and career stages.	Networking and connection were consistently identified as key strengths in the overall evaluation.	
Aboriginal Affairs Framework Overview of the Aboriginal Affairs Framework 2026–2028, including cultural authority, local leadership, partnerships, shared decision-making and agency accountability.	❖ 49.4% Excellent ❖ 47.2% Good ❖ 2.2% Average	Participants were supported to explore the Framework and better understand how agencies contribute to Aboriginal affairs priorities.
Leading with Resilience – Senior Panel Senior Aboriginal employees with more than 10 years' experience shared their experiences of leadership, resilience, workplace culture, support networks and career journeys.	Participants valued hearing authentic experiences and different leadership journeys.	
NTPS Workforce Strategy 2027–2032 Participants were introduced to the proposed NTPS Workforce Strategy and its three pillars: Skilled and Future-Fit, People at the Centre and Built to Adapt.	❖ 47.8% Excellent ❖ 48.9% Good ❖ 3.3% Average	Participants contributed practical ideas on employment pathways, career development, mentoring, leadership, cultural safety, recognition, regional workforce sustainability, mobility and accountability.
Workforce Strategy Consultation Workshops Three concurrent sessions, aligned to the proposed pillars, were held. Participants were consulted on what is working, what could be strengthened, what is new and practical actions for the implementation plan.	Consultation feedback was captured through the engagement activities rather than a separate session rating.	
AI and Future Thinking Explored future thinking, problem-solving and practical applications of AI in the workplace, including the NTG AI Policy, AI Assurance Framework and responsible use of AI.	❖ 57.3% Excellent ❖ 38.2% Good	Participants valued practical insight into AI, future workforce capability and responsible use of emerging technologies.

Day Two: Learn, reflect and turn feedback into action

Day Two moved from learning and reflection into practical discussion and action. Sessions focused on social and emotional wellbeing, youth perspectives, agency approaches to safety and care, thriving at work, culturally responsive performance management, capability and career development, and employment conditions and entitlements.

Summary of Presentation or Workshop	Evaluation Results	Participant Reflection
Social and Emotional Wellbeing DOH session that explored social and emotional wellbeing from an Aboriginal perspective, including the connection between mental, emotional, cultural and community wellbeing.	❖ 58.4% Excellent ❖ 33.7% Good ❖ 6.7% Average	Participants reported an increased understanding of wellbeing, mental health awareness and available support.
Youth Panel – Thriving at Work Aboriginal employees with less than 3 years' service, shared perspectives on entering the NTPS, building confidence, finding support, developing careers and creating workplaces where people can thrive.	Participants valued relatable lived experience and the opportunity to hear emerging perspectives on working in the NTPS.	
Years of Service in NTPS activity Participants lined up by their years of service in the NTPS, representing a combined 1,094 years of experience.	The activity highlights the depth of Aboriginal employee experience and knowledge across the NTPS. This activity created an opportunity to connect with and reflect on career journeys.	
Agency Showcase – Safety Culture and Care DET showcased the department's Positive Duty framework and highlighted how leadership, workforce capability, reporting processes and governance systems can contribute to culturally safe, respectful and inclusive workplaces.	❖ 59.6% Excellent ❖ 36% Good ❖ 4.5% Average	Participants identified connection, belonging, supporting and being heard is important to thrive at work.
Wellbeing Session – Thriving Together DET session continued to a Thriving Together session and used yarning, reflection and group activities to explore wellbeing through Knowing, Being and Doing.	❖ 52.8% Excellent ❖ 40.4% Good ❖ 5.6% Average	
Respectful Performance Management – Cultural Safety OCPD delivered the workshop and provided an opportunity for participants to provide feedback on the draft Respectful Performance Management resource, identifying what should be retained, strengthened or changed.	❖ 48.3% Excellent ❖ 42.7% Good ❖ 7.9% Average	Participants provided insights into culturally safe performance conversations and respectful management.
Capability Framework and Career Development OCPD delivered a session introducing the NTPS Capability Framework and Capability Discovery Tool as practical resources to help employees understand role expectations, recognise their strengths, identify development needs, and plan their career progression.	❖ 39% Excellent ❖ 42% Good	Participants gained greater understanding of capability expectations, personal strengths, development opportunities and career pathways.
Employment Conditions and Entitlements OCPD delivered the Demystifying Enterprise Agreements: Understanding Your Employment Terms in the NTPS session and provided practical guidance on how enterprise agreements set out employment conditions, rights and responsibilities.	Participants explored how to navigate their enterprise agreement and identify key entitlements, including NAIDOC Leave and Cultural and Ceremonial Leave.	

Shaping Future Priorities

1 - NTPS Workforce Strategy 2027-2032

OCPE delivered an overview of the proposed NTPS Workforce Strategy 2027–2032 and outlined how Aboriginal employee feedback will help shape workforce priorities and implementation actions.

The presentation reflected on achievements under the NTPS Workforce Strategy 2021–2026 and the Aboriginal Employment and Career Development Strategy 2021–2025, including improvements to onboarding, capability development, leadership support and Aboriginal workforce participation.

The proposed NTPS Workforce Strategy 2027-2032 is structured around three pillars:

- **Skilled and Future-Fit:** attracting and retaining employees, strengthening workforce pathways and building workforce capability.
- **People at the Centre:** creating healthy, supportive and culturally safe workplaces led by capable and accountable leaders.
- **Built to Adapt:** improving workforce planning, mobility, succession planning, knowledge transfer and data-informed decision making.

Noting Digital and data capability underpins all pillars

The presentation also summarised consultation undertaken to date, including employee workshops, Aboriginal workforce workshops, agency leadership sessions and employee survey responses. Feedback highlighted a vision for a future NTPS workforce that supports employees to join, stay, grow and lead while working in culturally safe environments.

Participants were advised that five key Aboriginal workforce priorities had emerged through consultation:

- Retention and career progression.
- Cultural safety.
- Recognition of cultural knowledge, language capability and lived experience.
- Leadership accountability.
- Regional workforce sustainability.

This session provided the context for the consultation activities that followed.

Concurrent consultation sessions were held where participants worked across the pillars and considered their experiences of working in the NTPS, identifying what is working well, highlighting areas that could be strengthened, identifying emerging needs, and suggested practical actions to inform implementation of the NTPS Workforce Strategy 2027–2032.

Below is the summary of all three consultation sessions:

What is Working Well

Participants acknowledged a range of positive initiatives and practices that are already supporting Aboriginal employment and career development across the NTPS, including:

- Aboriginal employment pathways, traineeships, early-career programs and Special Measures recruitment initiatives that create entry points into government employment.
- Professional development opportunities, higher duties, training, study support and opportunities to gain exposure to different roles.
- Supportive leaders and workplace teams that foster inclusive and respectful working environments.
- Visible Aboriginal leadership and examples of Aboriginal employees progressing into senior and leadership positions.
- Cultural awareness initiatives, cultural advisors and Aboriginal liaison roles that support communication, service delivery and workplace inclusion.
- Strong commitment from Aboriginal employees to serving their communities and contributing to better outcomes for Territorians.



What Needs Strengthening

While recognising existing strengths, participants identified several areas that would benefit from increased focus and greater consistency across the NTPS.

Key themes included:

- Clearer and more visible career pathways across professional, technical, leadership and executive roles.
- More consistent onboarding processes and career development planning for employees.
- Increased access to mentoring, coaching, career conversations and leadership development opportunities.
- Improved communication and promotion of workforce initiatives, development programs and available supports.
- Stronger recognition of Aboriginal cultural knowledge, language capability, community connections and lived experience within workforce systems.
- Greater cultural safety, including increased accountability for workplace behaviours and employee experience.
- Improved succession planning, workforce mobility and knowledge transfer.
- Increased Aboriginal representation in leadership roles, workforce planning, recruitment processes and decision-making forums.

Emerging Needs and Opportunities for Action

Participants identified several opportunities that could further strengthen Aboriginal workforce outcomes across the NTPS.

These included:

- Creating structured career pathways from entry-level positions through to senior leadership and executive roles.
- Expanding mentoring, coaching, peer support and leadership development opportunities across all career stages.
- Improving recruitment accessibility through plain English job information, applicant support and stronger Aboriginal participation on selection panels.
- Building manager capability in cultural safety, cultural awareness and supporting cultural obligations in the workplace.
- Strengthening wellbeing supports, including recognition of cultural load, trauma-informed approaches and community responsibilities.
- Increasing Aboriginal involvement in policy development, workforce planning and decision-making processes.
- Improving workforce data, accountability measures and reporting to support evidence-based action.
- Supporting sustainable workforce development in regional and remote communities through local employment pathways and place-based solutions.



Feedback across all three pillars demonstrated a high level of consistency in the priorities identified by Aboriginal employees. Participants emphasised that while significant progress has been made in attracting Aboriginal employees into the NTPS, continued effort is required to support retention, career progression, leadership development and culturally safe workplaces.

The themes, insights and actions identified by participants will be considered alongside consultation findings from across the sector as part of the development of the NTPS Workforce Strategy 2027–2032 and its implementation plan. These insights will help inform practical initiatives that strengthen Aboriginal employment, career development, leadership opportunities and culturally responsive workplaces across the NTPS.

2 - Thriving Together: Wellbeing, Cultural Safety and Cultural Load

Jody Dixon, School Leadership, Culture and Care, Department of Education and Training, presented initiatives underway to create culturally safe, inclusive and psychologically safe workplaces for Aboriginal employees.

The session also explored the concepts of cultural safety and cultural load, inviting participants to reflect on their workplace experiences and identify the factors that support or hinder their wellbeing, inclusion and sense of belonging. Through facilitated discussion, participants considered three key questions:

- What helps you feel culturally safe at work?
- What contributes most to cultural load?
- What helps reduce cultural load?

Participants identified respect, support, understanding, inclusive leadership, connection and a sense of belonging as the factors that most contribute to feeling culturally safe at work. Conversely, ignorance, assumptions, unrealistic expectations, tokenism and a lack of cultural understanding were identified as the primary contributors to cultural load. Participants highlighted that cultural load can be reduced through culturally capable leadership, improved cultural understanding across workplaces, recognition of Aboriginal knowledge and lived experience, supportive networks, and shared responsibility for creating culturally safe and inclusive environments.

Knowing, Being and Doing

The Thriving Together workshop explored Aboriginal concepts of wellbeing through the framework of Knowing, Being and Doing. Participants reflected on the strengths, values and cultural knowledge they bring to the workplace, shared insights about what enables Aboriginal employees to thrive, and identified practical actions that support wellbeing, belonging and culturally responsive workplaces.

Wellbeing emerged as one of the strongest and most consistent themes throughout the workshop. Participants described wellbeing as holistic, encompassing physical, mental, spiritual, cultural and family wellbeing. Connection to Country, culture, kinship, identity, family and community was repeatedly identified as a source of strength, alongside self-care, support networks, trust, belonging and psychological safety.

Knowing: What wellbeing means to us

Participants emphasised that wellbeing extends beyond individual health and is strengthened through cultural identity, strong relationships, community support and opportunities for reflection and balance. Maintaining connections to culture, family and community was considered fundamental to personal wellbeing, resilience and a strong sense of self.



Being: Thriving at our best

Participants reflected on the conditions that allow Aboriginal employees to thrive at work. Common themes included feeling heard, respected, valued, supported, empowered and trusted. Positive leadership, meaningful work, cultural connection and supportive workplace relationships were consistently identified as important enablers. Participants also highlighted the importance of confidence, pride, belonging and being recognised for their strengths and contributions.

Doing: Growing wellbeing together

Participants identified practical actions that individuals and the NTPS can take to strengthen wellbeing, inclusion and career development. Priorities included:

- Increasing Aboriginal leadership opportunities and representation.
- Expanding mentoring, coaching and networking opportunities.
- Strengthening cultural capability and cultural supervision.
- Creating clear career pathways and succession planning opportunities.
- Recognising Aboriginal knowledge, cultural expertise and lived experience.
- Supporting inclusion, empowerment and connection between Aboriginal employees.

Across all discussions, participants reinforced the strong relationship between wellbeing and cultural safety. Culturally informed leadership, recognition of cultural responsibilities, opportunities to bring one's authentic self to work, and access to safe spaces for connection and reflection were seen as essential to employee wellbeing. Participants highlighted that culturally safe workplaces contribute to stronger engagement, confidence, retention and career development outcomes for Aboriginal employees.

Participants consistently emphasised that Aboriginal employees are most likely to thrive when they can maintain strong cultural connections, access meaningful support and development opportunities, and contribute their knowledge, strengths and lived experience in workplaces that are respectful, inclusive and culturally safe.

The themes identified through this session will be considered alongside broader consultation findings to inform the implementation plan for the NTPS Workforce Strategy 2027-2032.



3 - Respectful Performance Management

OCPE delivered an interactive workshop examining the relationship between cultural safety and performance management within the NTPS. The session reinforced that culturally safe workplaces and reasonable performance management practices are not mutually exclusive and, when applied effectively, contribute to respectful, fair and high-performing workplaces.

Participants explored practical examples of cultural safety, reasonable and unreasonable performance management practices, and the leadership behaviours required to support both accountability and cultural responsiveness. Through discussion of workplace scenarios involving attendance, communication and work quality, participants considered how respectful management practices can be applied in everyday workplace situations. The session also provided an opportunity for participants to review and provide feedback on the draft Respectful Management Practices poster, helping to inform its final development.

What is Working Well

Participants strongly supported the intent, content and Aboriginal lens of the Respectful Management Practices poster.

Feedback indicated that the resource effectively:

- Promoted respectful leadership and culturally safe workplace practices.
- Reinforced the importance of trust, transparency and accountability in management practices.
- Recognised the value of cultural awareness, communication and relationship building.
- Encouraged managers to listen, ask questions and avoid assumptions.
- Highlighted practical behaviours that support respectful performance conversations.
- Recognised cultural obligations, language diversity and the importance of creating space for culture within the workplace.
- Provided clear examples demonstrating the difference between cultural safety, reasonable performance management and culturally unsafe practices.

The consultation resource was well received by participants, who considered it a practical and accessible tool to support both managers and employees in understanding respectful workplace expectations.

What Needs Strengthening

Participants identified several opportunities to strengthen the resource and related workplace practices, including:

- Stronger emphasis on leadership accountability and the responsibility of managers to create culturally safe workplaces.
- Greater focus on active listening, communication and relationship-building before issues arise.
- Clearer recognition of Aboriginal cultural knowledge lived experience and community responsibilities.
- Additional guidance about cultural responsiveness in day-to-day management practices.



- Increased focus on learning, development and growth-oriented approaches to performance management.
- More explicit messaging about fairness, transparency and consistency throughout performance management processes.
- Stronger acknowledgement of employee wellbeing and the impact of workplace relationships on performance outcomes.

What We Heard

Common themes emerging from discussion groups included:

- Respectful leadership is essential to building trust and maintaining culturally safe workplaces.
- Cultural safety is determined by the person receiving the behaviour and requires ongoing learning, humility and accountability from leaders.
- Performance management should focus on supporting improvement and development rather than punishment.
- Managers need practical skills and confidence to have respectful performance conversations while recognising cultural obligations and cultural needs.
- Aboriginal employees want workplaces where cultural knowledge, community connections and lived experience are recognised as strengths.
- Workplace cultures that promote fairness, trust and transparent communication contribute to stronger employee engagement and wellbeing.

Suggested Actions

Participants identified several practical actions to strengthen culturally safe management practices across the NTPS:

- Continue developing practical resources that support managers to apply culturally safe leadership practices.
- Strengthen leadership accountability for cultural safety and respectful workplace behaviour.
- Expand cultural capability development opportunities for managers and employees.
- Promote strengths-based approaches to performance management and employee development.
- Incorporate Aboriginal employee feedback into workforce resources, policies and guidance materials.
- Ensure culturally safe workplace practices are embedded across employee lifecycle processes, including recruitment, performance management, development and leadership.

The workshop confirmed strong support for the principle that cultural safety and performance management can work together to create respectful, accountable and high performing workplaces.

Participants provided valuable insights into the behaviours, leadership practices and workplace conditions that contribute to culturally safe performance conversations and respectful management.

Feedback gathered during the consultation will be considered during the refinement of the Respectful Management Practices poster.

Looking Ahead: Future Forum Considerations

Participant feedback identified several opportunities to strengthen future Aboriginal Employee Forums and ensure they continue to meet the needs and expectations of Aboriginal employees across the NTPS.

Key themes included:

- **Connection and networking:** Continue prioritising opportunities for yarning, networking, peer support and cultural connection alongside formal presentations and workshops.
- **Practical learning:** Incorporate more case studies, workplace examples, scenarios and interactive activities that participants can apply in their day-to-day roles.
- **Career development and leadership:** Maintain a strong focus on mentoring, coaching, career pathways, mobility opportunities and leadership development.
- **Wellbeing and cultural safety:** Continue embedding social and emotional wellbeing considerations into the forum.
- **Cultural capability:** Provide practical opportunities to strengthen cultural capability and support culturally safe workplace practices across the NTPS.
- **Communicating outcomes:** Regularly update employees on actions arising from Forum feedback and demonstrate how participant input influences workforce initiatives and improvements.
- **Inclusive participation:** Expand opportunities for regional employees and Aboriginal employees at different career stages, occupations and classifications to participate and contribute.

Collectively, this feedback reinforces the importance of maintaining the forum as a culturally safe, practical and action-oriented event that supports connection, learning, career development and Aboriginal employee voices across the NTPS.

Conclusion

The 2026 NTPS Aboriginal Employee Forum was a highly successful two-day event that brought together Aboriginal employees from across the Territory to connect, learn, share experiences and contribute to discussions about the future of the NTPS workforce.

Record participation highlights the ongoing value of a dedicated forum that provides culturally safe opportunities for Aboriginal employees to build networks, share perspectives and inform workforce priorities. The forum reinforced the importance of Aboriginal employee voices in shaping policies, programs and initiatives that support meaningful employment, career development and inclusive workplaces.

Evaluation findings confirmed that participants highly valued the opportunity to connect with colleagues, hear lived experiences, strengthen their knowledge and contribute to discussions on cultural safety, wellbeing, leadership and career development. Consultation activities reinforced the importance of creating workplaces where Aboriginal employees feel respected, supported, recognised and empowered to grow and lead.

The forum provided OCPE with valuable insights into the factors that support Aboriginal employee attraction, retention, wellbeing, career progression and leadership development. Feedback consistently highlighted the importance of cultural safety, supportive leadership, connection, mentoring, wellbeing and recognition of Aboriginal knowledge and lived experience as critical enablers of employee success and thriving workplaces.

Participant feedback has provided a strong foundation for future action. OCPE is committed to working in partnership with Aboriginal employees and agencies to ensure these insights continue to inform workforce policies, programs and initiatives, including the development and implementation of the NTPS Workforce Strategy 2027-2032.

Continued focus on cultural safety, leadership accountability, career pathways, mentoring, wellbeing and the recognition of Aboriginal knowledge and lived experience will be critical to building a stronger, more inclusive and future-ready NTPS workforce. By continuing to listen to Aboriginal employees and translating feedback into action, the NTPS can strengthen employment outcomes and create workplaces where Aboriginal employees feel valued, connected, supported and empowered to succeed.