

EAST ARNHEM REGIONAL COUNCIL

Youth Strategy 2026-2028





CONTENTS

Acknowledgement of Country	03
CEO Message	04
Introduction	05
Insights	06
Youth Strategy 2026-2028	16
Action Plans	23

Atria Group was appointed to lead the development of a Youth Strategy on behalf of East Arnhem Regional Council.

The authors acknowledge that a robust research and insights program has helped to shape this strategy. A reference list and acknowledgment is located in the separate appendix.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

Atria Group acknowledges the Yolngu people as traditional custodians of the lands and waters of which this work lives. We pay our respects to the Elders, past, present, and rising.

CEO MESSAGE

Young people are not just the future of East Arnhem—they are its strength today. The East Arnhem Youth Strategy puts them at the centre, recognising their power to shape solutions, set direction, and drive change across our Yolngu communities and homelands.

East Arnhem Regional Council's Active Communities & Youth Services program is the foundation of this work. Every year we engage thousands of young people – creating safe spaces, strengthening culture, supporting diversion activities, and building pathways for learning, growth, and leadership. This strategy builds on that foundation and ensures our direction is guided by what young people themselves identify as priorities.

Real change relies on families, schools, community leaders, service providers, and every level of government working together. When our efforts are aligned, young people, especially those most at risk are supported at every step.

I recognise the commitment of our staff who deliver these programs with determination, often in difficult circumstances, and I acknowledge the resilience, creativity, and leadership of young people who continue to inspire us.

This strategy is our call to back our young people with the opportunities, partnerships, and pathways that matter, and to recognise them as active contributors to the wellbeing of East Arnhem Land, its communities, and homelands, today and into the future.

Dale Keehne, CEO



INTRODUCTION

As the sun sets across our remote communities, the local basketball courts come alive, filled with the sounds of laughter and the shared experience of young people engaging in a range of activities.

These gatherings represent more than just sport or keeping young people busy — they are part of the fabric of community life. Everyone, from old to young have fond memories of taking part in youth activities- from sports, music, art, hunting and bush trips.

Youth programs in East Arnhem are essential, offering young people critical connections to mental and physical health, culture, social engagement and a sense of purpose. Beyond the immediate enjoyment of participation, these programs serve as vital connection points for at-risk youth. They bridge crucial gaps in health, education, justice, and employment, directly contributing to enhancing the wellbeing, safety and prosperity of remote communities.

East Arnhem Regional Council (EARC) is committed to ensuring that youth services continue to serve as a cornerstone of community life. EARC has a strong foundation in place, including a high percentage of Yolngu staff, youth demand for participation, leaders who care and established community connections.

Despite the strengths and resilience of the region, recent trends indicate growing numbers of young people are disengaging from community life, leading to declines in school attendance and participation in employment. Challenges such as anti-social behaviour, overcrowding and substance abuse exist, highlighting the need for enhanced support structures.

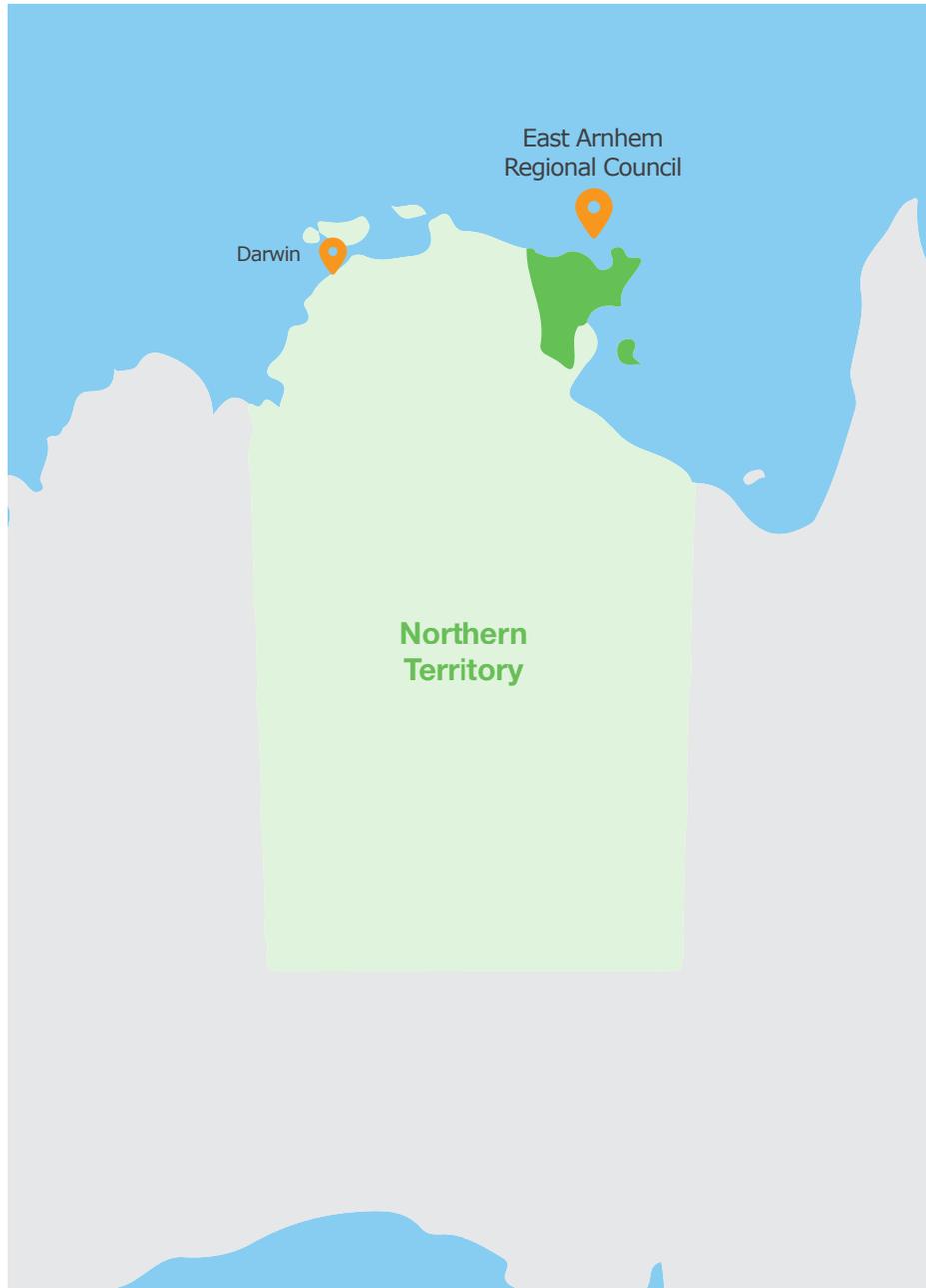
The young people that have been engaged in this consultation are a credit to the East Arnhem region. They are passionate for their peers that face additional barriers, keen to counter the common stereotypes about young people and want to help make the region an amazing place to live. They see possibilities for themselves both locally and far from home.

The goal of this strategy is to re-imagine youth services to drive an enhanced social return on investment.

To achieve this, EARC will elevate youth voices, step into a stronger regional leadership role, forge deeper partnerships, advocate strategically with funders, and expand evaluation to illuminate impact and guide future growth.

By aligning the strategy with the aspirations of community and Elders, EARC aims to help communities nurture a generation of young people who are strong in body, mind, and culture. The aspiration is clear: to provide pathways that allow youth to thrive today and become the leaders of tomorrow.

INSIGHTS



ENGAGEMENT OVERVIEW

Atria Group led an engagement process that sought to understand the experience of being a young person in East Arnhem Land. We invited youth, the community and stakeholders to partner in the co-design to unpack preferred future solutions.

This strategy has been shaped by an extensive engagement process, including:

- Over 1,000 participants
- 6 communities visited
- 5 local authority meetings
- 7 school visits
- 33 EARC staff members engaged
- 27 stakeholder organisations
- 19 community activations
- Over 700 people attended community events/ activations
- Over 250 young people engaged in conversations
- Over 100 community member conversations
- 61 Surveys
- 2 Written submissions



APPROACH

To engage the community and establish an evidence base the following approaches were undertaken:

- **Co-design with East Arnhem:** Working closely with the people who live and work in the 6 communities to ensure we connect through spaces and methods that are authentic
- **Respect for lived experience:** Prioritising storytelling through semi-structured consultations that value people's experiences
- **Varied data sources:** Capturing qualitative and quantitative data and providing a variety of opportunities for community and stakeholders to contribute
- **Community led and built on what is working well:** Celebrating the unique cultural, geographic and social aspects of being a young person in East Arnhem Land
- **Capturing youth voice:** A commitment to engaging directly with young people and placing their aspirations at the heart of the strategy
- **Culturally appropriate:** The design informed by First Nations people with experience in community engagement and social impact
- **Best practice benchmarking:** An evidence based approach that considers research and strategies from other jurisdictions and countries
- **Human centred design:** Capturing the participant journey and experiences
- **Tangible actions:** Prioritising the development of an action plan that is clear and relevant
- **Service mapping:** Engagement and assessment of the current operating environment



METHOD

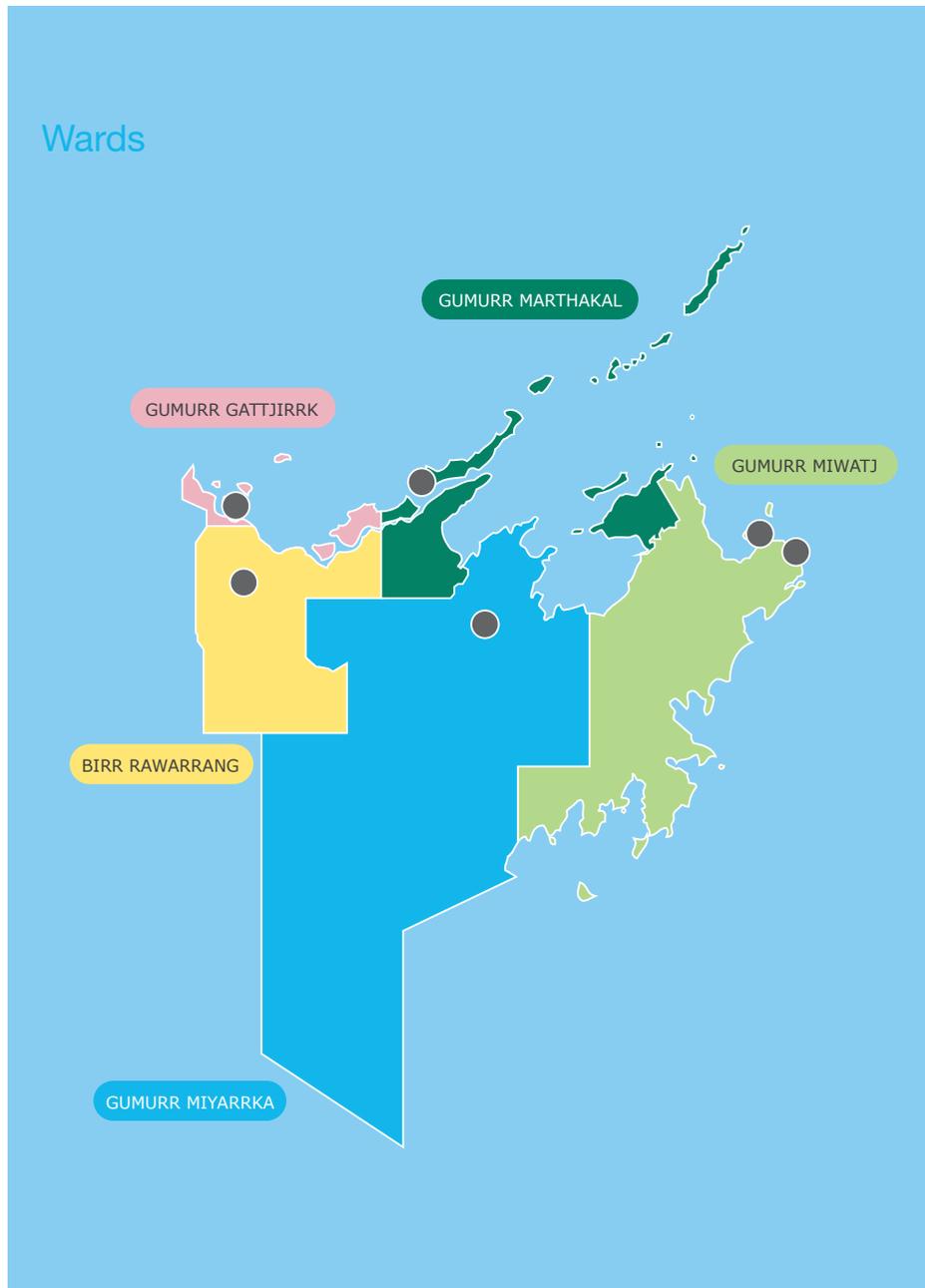
A mixed-method engagement was utilised to gather insights from the identified engagement segments:

- A. YOUNG PEOPLE**
- B. STAKEHOLDERS**
- C. COMMUNITY**

This included tactics to engage different segments of people:

- **Immersive community conversations:** Participating in community life to allow unstructured conversations and meet people on their terms at the right time
- **In-community consultation:** Attended all communities
- **EARC Elected Members and staff interviews:** With staff that live and work in community with young people
- **Community workshops:** An open invitation for stakeholders such as service providers and community leaders
- **School focus groups:** Collaborating with school staff to identify a representative cross section of youth covering age, location, background, engaged vs at risk
- **EARC's Active Communities & Youth Services events:** Attending a variety of EARC activities
- **Community activations:** Establishing a presence in locations across nine communities inviting everyone to participate
- **One on one meetings:** Targeted stakeholder consultation with identified service providers, school staff, State and Commonwealth Government partners
- **Online Survey:** Open to anyone with an interest
- **Written response:** Allowing stakeholders and community to submit a email

Wards



CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE ENGAGEMENT

This project acknowledges the unique cultural, geographic and social context of East Arnhem Land. The East Arnhem Regional Council consists of 6 Yolngu communities spread across vast distances of land and sea. Over 90% of residents identify as Aboriginal and the most commonly spoken languages in the area include Djambarrpuyngu, Dhuwaya, Djapu, Galpu, Gupapuyngu, Dhuwal, Dhuwala, Dhanu and English.

Developing the engagement methodology was informed by a co-design process with First Nations people with experience in community engagement, consultation and social impact. Collaborating with EARC staff based in community ensured that engagements were culturally appropriate and designed to maximise participation. The consultation design acknowledged that each community context was different and a one size fits all approach was not used.

Many First Nations partners were invited to participate in engagements. The following organizations contributed during local activations:

- East Arnhem Local Authorities
- The Arnhem Land Progress Aboriginal Corporation
- Yalu Aboriginal Corporation
- Rirratjingu Aboriginal Corporation
- Gumatj Aboriginal Corporation
- Bush Fit Mob
- National Indigenous Australians Authority



YOUTH VOICE LEARNINGS

We immersed ourselves in the lives of young people to learn about growing up strong in East Arnhem Land. These insights helped inform drivers and barriers for the Youth Strategy and Action Plans. From the collective youth voice they told us:

WHAT YOUTH LOVE

- Cultural and family connection
- Living on country and access to nature
- Living in both cultures
- Freedom and outdoor activities
- Trips out bush
- A range of activities such as sport, physical activity, dancing and art

CHALLENGES FACED BY YOUTH

- Alcohol, drugs and VSU
- Homelessness and overcrowding
- Gambling
- Breakdown of family relationships
- Safe places to go and things to do
- Bullying and jealousy
- Social media and cyber bullying
- Poor recreational infrastructure
- Mental health

WHAT YOUTH WANT FROM PROGRAMS

Predictability - consistency of program delivery, knowing when and what is on

Fun and variety - a program that is fun and caters for different age groups and interests

Youth led - young people having a say in the programs that are delivered.

Sense of achievement - meaningful activities that work towards a goal, such as skill acquisition, project development or team participation

Family participation - an environment that welcomes the extended family

Culture and country - integration of experiences that celebrate culture and facilitate on-country activities

Role models - you can't be what you can't see. Relationships with mentors and program leaders

Structured and un-structured activities - a consistent program of structured activities facilitated by an adult, as well as space for young people to 'hang out' with a purpose, such as a dance space, recording studio, bike track, or multi-purpose court

Improved infrastructure and facilities - young people have great ideas to improve the spaces they live, work and play

Community based competition - young people enjoy and want more consistent competitions

OBSERVATIONS

Our research, conversations with young people, engagement with stakeholders, and our first-hand observations while immersed in communities provided valuable insights.

STRENGTHS

- EARC should take pride in its existing portfolio of youth programs and services, which are highly valued amongst youth and stakeholders. The current delivery of these programs provides a strong foundation to be built upon
- Community leaders have fond memories of programs from their youth and appreciate both the current and potential impact for their youth
- EARC has existing assets and a profile to be leveraged, including staff in community, a spectrum of community services, long standing funding arrangements and basic infrastructure
- There is an established high demand for participation in youth programs
- When activities occur in the school holidays they fill an important gap in young peoples lives and are valued by stakeholders
- Observations show that program activity is delivering a commendable social and economic return on investment
- Existing data and evaluation is strong in capturing quantitative indicators
- The workforce has a strong representation of local First Nations people that builds local capacity

CHALLENGES

- Despite the resilience of the region, recent trends indicate growing numbers of young people are disengaging from community life, leading to declines in school attendance and participation in employment. Challenges such as anti-social behaviour, overcrowding and substance abuse exist
- There is a participation cliff. Once young people reach teenage years there is a pattern of disengagement from community life, including school, youth programs and employment pathways
- Overall, community infrastructure is insufficient, dated and not always fit for purpose to meet the demands and needs of youth. Comparatively, they are lacking to many other remote communities. This requires strong advocacy with funding partners
- There are inequalities that exist in East Arnhem Land for youth. For example within education 58.4% attendance in Term 1 2024, but some schools reported lower than 20% attendance. There is a 76.4% average attendance across the NT in Term 1 2024. Also 26.5% of Aboriginal people are participating in the workforce, this is significantly lower than NT and National average
- The local youth service sector is a congested space. To support local youth:
 - Government and funding providers need greater collaboration at the strategic level to better coordinate efforts and target funding
 - Generally, stakeholders were not well enough informed of each other's work which is resulting in duplication of services and misaligned efforts
 - There is a large quantity of documents and policies with many stakeholders unaware of each others relevant work and how they connect



- Funding requires improved understanding of what each other is doing for an improved coordinated approach to maximise benefit
- Collaboration amongst local service providers lacks effectiveness and impact
- Several NTG Departments identified the major opportunity for partnering to improve youth outcomes, including:
 - NT Department of Education highlighted a need to better share information resources and infrastructure within the region
 - THE NTG Office for Youth highlighted a need to partner and align resources efficiently to avoid duplication and inefficient impact for youth
 - NTG Sport & Recreation highlighted quality programs, infrastructure and workforce training as shared priorities



EXISTING EARC GOVERNANCE

EARC's governance is anchored in its six Local Authorities, which ensure meaningful community input into Council decision-making.

These Authorities play a central role in empowering local representatives and offer a culturally grounded forum for engagement. Regular meetings provide opportunities for Council and stakeholders to present updates, engage in discussion, and respond to community questions through open public forums.

This established governance structure offers a valuable mechanism to elevate youth voice. EARC is well positioned to foster intergenerational leadership, support young people to help shape local priorities, and strengthen two-way dialogue.

Youth voices are most impactful when aligned with existing governance practices. This doesn't require full integration, but rather thoughtful alignment with recognised community processes. It supports a more coordinated, culturally respectful, and inclusive model of youth and community leadership across East Arnhem.

EXISTING EARC PROGRAMS

EARC delivers youth-focused services that provide young people across East Arnhem Land with safe, structured and culturally grounded participation activities. Each year, they generate approximately 50,000 participant engagements (noting that young people attend multiple sessions).

As this report is finalised, the EARC Youth Sport and Recreation (YSR) team has been renamed the Active Communities and Youth Services (ACYS) team. This new title reflects insights gathered through engagements that the previous name did not capture the team's broad impact. The terms YSR and ACYS are used interchangeably throughout this report.

EARC's Active Communities & Youth Services operates in 6 communities, delivering regular weekly programs and seasonal events. Activities span sport, collaborate with community on cultural learning, on-country experiences, creative arts, and wellbeing amongst others. Delivery is largely led by local Indigenous staff who represent 70% of the workforce supported by EARC's central coordination team.

Program funding is sourced from both NT and Federal agencies, with the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) contributing the largest share at 59% of total funding. However, funding across all sources has remained largely static since 2019, despite rising costs, increased demand, and inflationary pressure.

The following findings provide a picture of the current delivery environment.

- A need to find increased funding with rising costs and inflation
- Improve program delivery by closer alignment with youth motivations for participation
- There are limited partnerships and pathways restricting opportunities for ongoing engagement in sports, education, arts, and employment
- Across the communities there are variations in program quality, workforce capacity and stakeholder collaboration that influences outcomes for young people
- The broad intent and impact of the EARC Youth Sport and Recreation program is not understood by some in the community and stakeholders. The name Youth, Sport and Recreation is a barrier to this understanding
- There is demand for more community-based sport competitions, particularly AFL. Stakeholders reported that its absence leaves a gap in the community and lives of young people, particularly young men. Engagement with AFL NT is necessary to support resourcing
- ACYS Activities in the school holidays fill an important gap in young peoples lives. When there is a lack of activities, local police and education stakeholders report an increase in social problems
- There is strong support for a new structured youth voice to EARC for two-way dialogue
- Current youth input into local program design and activities is occurring inconsistently
- Youth service providers consistently acknowledged the important work of EARC. Some identified the opportunity to improve the partnership
- Many stakeholders pro-actively expressed that they believed EARC was best placed to take a leadership role in coordinating partnerships for youth
- There is potential to improve connections between council service provision in community, for example ACYS, Night Patrol, aged care and other community services
- ACYS programs are achieving a social return on investment but is not effectively demonstrated through evaluation and used in advocacy
- Existing evaluation is inconsistent in qualitative and measuring social and economic outcomes.

YOUTH STRATEGY

EAST ARNHEM REGIONAL COUNCIL YOUTH STRATEGY 2026-2028

VISION:

“We want our young people to be modern time warriors- strong in culture, body and mind. We want to prepare them to be leaders in both-worlds”

Lapulung Dhamarrandji, President - Quote requires support

This Youth Strategy has been developed by East Arnhem Regional Council to benefit our community, our stakeholders and most importantly, our youth. It has been shaped by listening to everyone’s contributions to authentically place young people at the heart of our community.

MISSION IS TO HELP DEVELOP:



IT IS A COMMITMENT TO:

- **Amplify** the voices of young people
- **Activate** the environment for young people to participate in meaningful experiences and community life
- **Alliances** of youth stakeholders collaborating to put young people first
- **Assess** our efforts and the needs of young people through ongoing evaluation

There are suggested actions in the following pages, but the real impact will be felt when young people can identify and drive the actions that are most meaningful to them. By knowing that they have a voice along with the support of their community and stakeholder alliance it will drive new growth.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF ACTION

The Youth Strategy focuses on a proactive approach to prevent young people from disengaging before problems arise.

Fostering a positive social environment is the most effective solution for proactive youth engagement. It takes time and requires resources.

The principles are inspired by local insights, stakeholder engagement, research and adaptations from youth prevention models.

East Arnhem Regional Council will take a leadership role with partners towards a commitment for a unified approach of seven guiding principles of action.

1 Strong Connections:

Build on the bonds between young people, their families, communities and culture to help them thrive. First Nations cultural values are central to our approach to strengthen identity and grow leaders for tomorrow.

2 Listen to Youth:

Amplify young people's voices empowering them to help shape solutions across issues that matter to them

3 Long-Term Solutions:

Match the scope of the problem to the scope of the solution. This means focusing on lasting solutions rather than hopeful quick fixes, to ensure authentic change

4 Positive Environments:

Activate the community for young people to participate in a range of activities. This helps prevent problems before they occur. The development of young people is a reflection of the environment they grow up in

5 Work Together:

Local, NT, and national partners – including government, community groups, businesses, funders and leaders working to solve problems together not in isolation

6 Schools as Hubs:

Partner with education to help guide youth needs, activities, and share resources. Schools are a community hub that are essential to young people's health, learning, and success

7 Measure impact:

Track impact using data to make smart decisions, communicate clearly, and promote both youth challenges and progress



STRATEGY ON A PAGE

	1	2	3	4
Finding	<p>Young people in East Arnhem Land have a strong connection to their community and culture.</p> <p>They expressed a strong interest in wanting to have a say in decisions that affect them.</p>	<p>EARC have established a positive foundation of youth programs across communities.</p> <p>Overall there is a established demand noting some variables across communities.</p>	<p>There are a range of stakeholders operating in East Arnhem Land with a genuine intent to help youth.</p> <p>There is a commitment from stakeholders to better collaborate in supporting youth.</p>	<p>There is significant and commendable work being done that is helping youth in East Arnhem Land. It has many strengths and the quantitative data is thorough.</p>
Barrier	<p>There is no established process for young people to be engaged in formal decision-making processes for EARC and your stakeholders.</p>	<p>Program quality is inconsistent across communities due to variables such as youth behaviours, workforce capability, place based planning, activity delivery, promotion and stakeholder collaboration.</p> <p>The broader impact of EARC YSR is not widely understood limiting recognition of its role.</p> <p>Youth focused community infrastructure is lacking to meet demand and needs.</p>	<p>There is currently a gap in partnerships and collaboration at both the strategic and funding level in the delivery of Youth Services.</p> <p>Despite the abundance of strategies and plans, many stakeholders are unaware of each other's efforts, preventing cohesive action.</p> <p>Funding is often spread thinly across multiple service providers.</p>	<p>Existing evaluation captures quantitative data only and does not capture the long-term impact, return on investment or social impact.</p>
Insights	<p>Elders from all nine communities recognised the value of youth having a say to help shape the future.</p> <p>EARC has strong existing governance arrangements in how it engages with communities that can be leveraged.</p>	<p>Refocusing the Youth Sport & Recreation team presents an opportunity to better align with increased outcomes.</p> <p>The challenges that exist locally are common more broadly. They call for a long-term, place based and coordinated strategic and operational approach to achieve change.</p>	<p>Stakeholders shared that collaboration of services and programs requires leadership to drive it.</p> <p>There was a consistent theme that stakeholders identified EARC as best positioned to lead this collaborative group, to connect strategies, align resources, share information and advocate.</p>	<p>It is essential to embed ongoing data collection and evaluation in planning. With regular data, stakeholders will be equipped to refine strategies, allocate resources, and maximise impact.</p> <p>Aligning evaluation with outcomes will highlight the strong social return on investment and position EARC for future funding opportunities.</p>
Goal	Amplify the voices of young people	Activate the environment for young people	Alliance of stakeholders who work with young people	Assess the needs of young people
Solution	Youth council	Quality programs	Council led stakeholder group	Ongoing evaluation
Guiding Principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listening to youth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive environments • Strong connections 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schools as hubs • Working together 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Measuring impact • Long term solutions

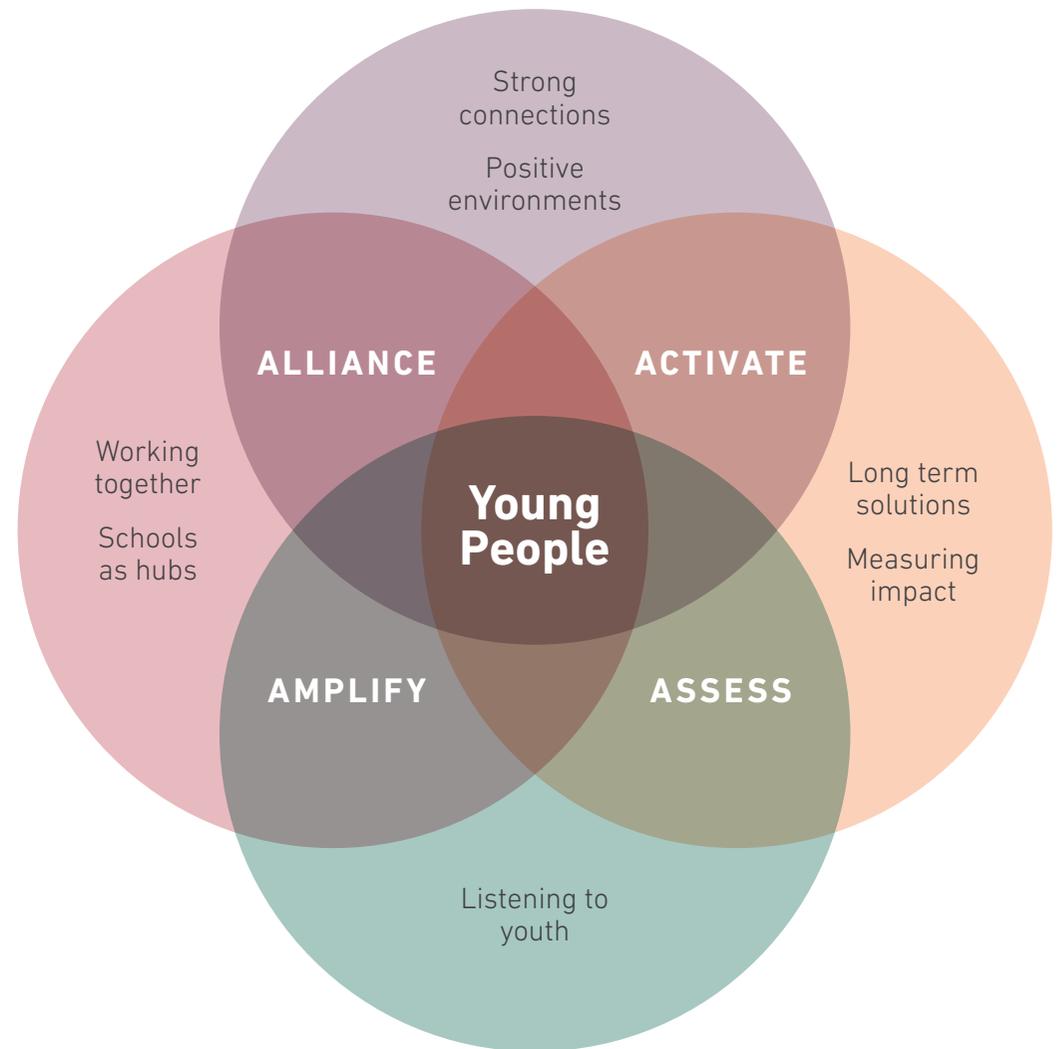
EAST ARNHEM YOUTH STRATEGY

The Youth Strategy diagram illustrates the interconnectedness of the approach in creating meaningful pathways to action.

At the centre is a commitment to the positive impact of young people. Surrounding this are four focus areas led by EARC - Amplify, Activate, Alliance, and Assess. Each drives action to elevate youth voice, strengthen program quality, foster collaboration, and embed evaluation.

Around these sit seven guiding principles that reflect the region's vision. Stakeholders are encouraged to align their work with the principles most relevant to them, building a region-wide approach.

Together, this Youth Strategy forms a connected, place-based framework that creates opportunities for young people to thrive in a vibrant life through meaningful experiences, learning, and culture.



East Arnhem Youth Council

East Arnhem Regional Council and Stakeholder

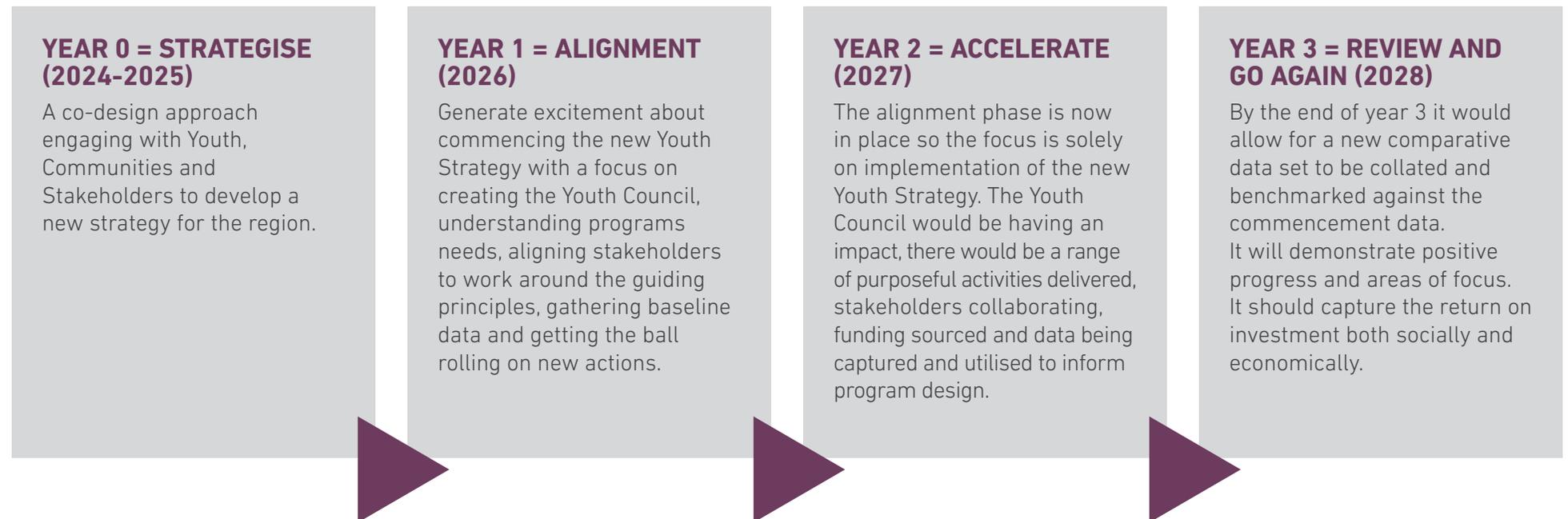
Leadership, Governance & Funding

A 3 YEAR ROAD MAP FOR ACTION

The road map is designed to support a continuing three year cycle through strategising, alignment, accelerated action, evaluation and then the cycle would begin again.

In this way, the learnings from each cycle are continuously included and reinforced. From each cycle, the *“new environment”* becomes the *“normal environment”* for the community. Stakeholders will get deeper knowledge of the East Arnhem Land community and youth over time.

Gradually, more and more effective results are achieved over time.





Atria Group acknowledges and respect the Traditional Owners of the land and waterways we work on. We pay respect to Elders past, present and emerging.

