

Self-Determination Fund Strategic Review

Mar 23, 2026

The Self-Determination Fund (Fund) is an independent First Peoples owned and controlled financial resource, designed by and for First Peoples. It was established to support and promote First Peoples's economic development, both through the Victorian Treaty process and into the future.

The Fund was established in October 2022, following the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria (Assembly) and the State Government reaching agreement about the Fund, as part of the Assembly and government negotiating the key Treaty elements in line with the *Advancing the Treaty Process with Aboriginal Victorians Act 2018* (Vic).

The Fund is a public charitable trust and is administered by the Assembly.

The Fund, along with the Treaty Authority and the Assembly are the key statewide Treaty organisations in Victoria's treaty process, operating independently of each other while also working collaboratively to support the Treaty process in Victoria.

Strategic Review of the Fund's activities and performance

- As part of establishing the Fund, the Assembly is required to carry out an independent strategic review of the Fund's activities and performance. The first review is to occur within the first three years of the Fund's operation, and every 5 years after that. The review is to include broad consultation with First Peoples.
- The Assembly engaged First Nations Co to undertake the independent review.
- The review was undertaken throughout 2025 and included consultation with Traditional Owner groups across the State in metro, regional and rural areas, and organisations that included the Federation of Victorian Traditional Owners and Treaty Authority.
- The review report (report) highlighted that the review was being conducted in the first few years of the Fund's operation and as such its recommendations should be considered in this context, which included following issues:
 - **Timing** – the SDF remains in its establishment phase. Long-term impacts on wealth creation and sustainability cannot yet be fully assessed.
 - **Evolving governance** – the SDF is an emerging entity, and its systems and dispute resolution processes are not yet extensively tested in practice.

- **Funding uncertainty** – the State government’s initial \$65 million contribution, while substantial, has been insufficient to meet demand across Victoria. Future contributions remain uncertain, affecting long-term planning.
- **Capacity challenges** – some Traditional Owner groups are at early stages of organisational development and face difficulties meeting governance and compliance requirements to access SDF funding.
- **Data constraints** – Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are still maturing. Evidence for this Review is drawn from Trustee reports, Assembly directions, and community consultations, but outcome data remains incomplete.”¹

Review focus and recommendations

- The review made 12 recommendations that respond to the following key areas:
- grant-making process to Traditional Owner groups accessing funding to support preparing for Treaty negotiations,
- governance and reporting, and
- financial performance.
- The review also considered the interconnected roles of the Fund, Assembly and Treaty Authority as part of the broader Treaty system.
- In summary, the review found that,

“Consultations undertaken across Victoria confirm that the Fund has created momentum and provided important early benefits. Communities consistently emphasised that without the Fund, many groups would not have been able to begin preparing for the Treaty. It has supported early steps to strengthen governance, bring families and communities together, and build confidence to consider entering the Treaty Negotiation Framework.

Whilst the SDF has generated momentum and delivered early benefits, its effectiveness is being constrained by significant systemic challenges.”²

- The review recommendations focus on,
 - “strengthening transparency, embedding Cultural Safety, improving operational efficiency, and ensuring long-term financial sustainability. These reforms are designed to support Treaty readiness and empower First Nations communities through a more accountable, culturally grounded, and future-focused funding model.”³*
- The 12 review recommendations are as follows:

Grant-making process

1. Adopt transparent guidelines and templates to ensure consistency and clarity in funding applications and assessments.
2. Clearly communicate equity safeguards which promote fair distribution, especially for underrepresented communities.
3. Adopt 60-day approval timeframe to support timely and predictable funding decisions.

4. Adopt individualised monitoring and evaluation processes that align funding outcomes with strategic priorities.

Governance and reporting

5. Clearly communicate the roles of the Fund, Assembly, and Treaty Authority to enhance coordination and accountability.
6. Strengthen partnerships with Traditional Owner groups to support community-led governance and capacity building.
7. Invest early in leadership and organisational capability to empower First Nations organisations.
8. Adopt clear feedback mechanisms to ensure governance structures remain responsive and culturally grounded.

Financial performance

9. Expand the capital base through government investment to ensure long-term viability.
10. Diversify funding sources including philanthropy and public donations to reduce reliance on any single stream.
11. Balance funding allocations to meet both immediate needs and long-term goals.
12. Seek transitional support during reform to maintain continuity and stability for communities and organisations⁴.

Next steps

- The report and recommendations are an important resource for both the Fund and Assembly to continually improve the Fund for the benefit of First Peoples in Victoria.
- Next steps include the Fund considering the report as part of developing a plan to implement the recommendations.

Frequently Asked Questions

Why did the review occur?

Under Section 13 of the Self-Determination Fund Agreement, the Assembly is required to undertake an independent review of the performance and activities of the Fund within the first 3 years of the Fund being established and every 5 years after that.

Who undertook the review and how were they chosen?

The Assembly engaged First Nations Co. to undertake the Review.

First Nations Co were engaged following a targeted, competitive tender process. First Nations Co is an Aboriginal-owned and led consulting firm committed to transforming systems and driving positive, lasting outcomes through utilising collective knowledges.

Guided by principles of self-determination, First Nations Co work with organisations and communities nationwide to foster sustainable, strengths-based change.

More information about First Nations Co can be found here [Our Story – First Nations Co.](#)



Who participated in the review?

A total of 32 stakeholder groups across the state were invited to participate. Sixteen of these stakeholders elected to engage in consultations for the Review, and of these, 10 in-person and 6 online consultations were conducted by First Nations Co. These consultations captured inputs from across Victoria, ensuring a balance of perspectives from metropolitan, regional, and rural Traditional Owner groups. Consultations included the Assembly, the Victorian Federation of Traditional Owners, and the Treaty Authority.

Who is responsible for implementing the recommendations?

The Self-Determination Fund is responsible for implementing the recommendations. The Assembly has oversight of the Fund and as part of this role will oversee the Fund's progress in responding to the review recommendations.

How do I find out more information about the Fund?

Information about the Fund can be found on its website here [Who we are – Self-Determination Fund](#)

Which groups have received support from the Fund so far?

The Fund's website lists the groups who have received funding to date which can be found here [Equal Footing Recipients | Discover Funding Opportunities Today – Self-Determination Fund](#)

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1. First Nations Co, *Self-Determination Fund Strategic Review*, December 2025, First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria, p.9.
 2. First Nations Co, *Self-Determination Fund Strategic Review*, December 2025, First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria, p.1.
 3. First Nations Co, *Self-Determination Fund Strategic Review*, December 2025, First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria, p.4.
 4. First Nations Co, *Self-Determination Fund Strategic Review*, December 2025, First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria, p.4.

To request a copy of the full report, contact Prue Stewart, Head of Governance and Negotiations via email PrueS@firstpeoplesvic.org or mobile 0409 505 173.

