

Informing a partnership on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander economic development

Engagement Report



Coalition
of Peaks

March 2025

Acknowledgement of Country

The Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community-Controlled Peak Organisations acknowledges and pays respect to the Traditional Owners of the lands, the waterways and seas on which we work and enjoy life and celebrate our enduring connections to Country.

We pay our respects to the Elders and Ancestors who guide and watch over us and all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities as we work to achieve the aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

We pay our respects to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for keeping our culture strong. We extend this respect to the people of the Stolen Generations, their families and their communities. We recognise the importance of truth telling and acknowledging impacts arising from exclusionary government policies.

We also acknowledge the important role that Aboriginal community-controlled organisations play across the country in supporting our people's self-determination and improved cultural, social, and economic outcomes.

We thank those who have offered their time, experiences and expertise to contribute to the outcomes of this report and inform the new partnership on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander economic development.



About the Coalition of Peaks

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community-Controlled Peak Organisations (Coalition of Peaks) came together to as an act of self-determination to change the way Australian governments work with our people.

We are made up of more than 80 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled peak and member organisations across Australia, representing some 800 organisations.

Coalition of Peaks members have their own unique histories, needs, and priorities and share a commitment to legitimate community-controlled representation of our communities on matters that are important to our people.

We work for and are accountable to our communities, not governments. We share a belief that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should have a meaningful say on policies and programs that impact us through formal partnerships with all levels of Australian governments, because we know how to best advance our lives.

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap, which came into effect on 27 July 2020, sets out how governments and the Coalition of Peaks will work together to improve the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

About the Coalition of Peaks artwork

Depth of knowledge is shared and exchanged within an open and inclusive space.

Strong community coming together.

Working together to pave the way forward for positive change. Knowledge transfers, flows and keeps us connected. This is an ongoing journey.



Coalition of Peaks

Capturing the strength and power of two way learning to build strong and trusted partnerships.

Contents

About the Coalition of Peaks 03

About the Coalition of Peaks artwork 03

Foreword 05

Introduction and overview 07

Why a new policy partnership on economic development? 09

Engagement process 11

Focus of the Partnership 12

Governance 13

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation 13

State and Territory participation 15

Australian Government 17

Accountability 18

Priority Reform 1 Formal partnerships and shared decision-making 19

Priority Reform 2 Building the community-controlled sector 21

Strengthening employment opportunities in the existing community-controlled sector 21

Building new community-controlled economies 23

Priority Reform 3 Transforming government organisations 24

Reforming mainstream employment services and growing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into a range of roles and positions 24

Supporting the growth of Indigenous businesses 26

Priority Reform 4 Shared access to data and information at a regional level 29

Create a clear picture of First Nations economic development and participation 29

What else we heard 31

What comes next? 32

Appendix A: Organisations who contributed to the engagements 33

Foreword

Policy Partnerships are an important commitment made in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, which was developed and negotiated between all Australian Governments and the Coalition of Peaks in 2020. They enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community representatives from across the country to come together with governments to work on discrete policy areas and to drive Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-led outcomes.

Policy Partnerships are already in place for other priority policy areas such as housing and early childhood care and development. Economic development is another critical space where greater collaboration and collective effort is needed.

Discussions towards establishing a First Nations Economic Partnership began in late 2022, following the Commonwealth Jobs and Skills Summit.¹ The Prime Minister re-affirmed the Australian Government's commitment to a new Partnership in his speech to the Garma Festival in 2024:

“A new partnership for a new direction – with greater independence, real empowerment and lasting economic security for communities”

To ensure the new Partnership reflects the needs, aspirations and priorities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, in 2024 the Coalition of Peaks undertook open engagements with our communities and

organisations across the country. We asked Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people what the focus of the Partnership should be, what are priority areas for action and who should represent the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in making decisions with government.

The engagements confirm that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people consider economic development to be a priority. There was a strong shared view amongst engagement participants that the threads that make up the current economic development ‘system’ for our people are disconnected, underfunded, and are not supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities to thrive in the way that they should. This Partnership must enable us to take a step back, look for strategic connections and opportunities, and weave these threads together so that the system works to unlock the potential in our communities for a strong future.

There was also a clear message that to accelerate economic development and wealth creation – and to reach economic empowerment – we must have the right building blocks in place. Engagement participants described the complex and overlapping barriers that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people currently face when looking for stable and secure employment. The Partnership must address these barriers, and have a strong focus on more and better jobs in organisations that support us and are close to where we live, stronger education and training pathways that work for us, and more opportunities to leverage our skills and resources to start and sustain our own businesses. Responding

¹ See Commonwealth of Australia (2023) Working Future: The Australian Government's White Paper on Jobs and Opportunities (treasury.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-09/p2023-447996-working-future.pdf)

to these issues will help us overcome the entrenched poverty that far too many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, whether they are living in cities or remote communities, continue to suffer and help meet the employment targets in the Closing the Gap Agreement.

While it is hard for many of our people and communities to dream big when faced with daily poverty, we know that there is more to economic development than good jobs. Several engagement participants noted the potential of better leveraging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander assets for community benefit, such as land, water, environmental practices, and cultural knowledge.

Around the world, there are examples of First Peoples who are looking to their traditional land rights to secure better economic outcomes for their communities. This is happening in Australia too. A First Nations Economic Empowerment Alliance (Alliance) led by the Australian National University and the National Native Title Council has been formed to take this work forward.²

We thank the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and people that participated in the engagements – giving their time, expertise and advice.

These insights were a critical input into the \$16.9 million in funding that has now been announced by the Australian Government in December 2024 to establish and support the Partnership over five years. This funding will also enable the development of a First Nations Economic Framework and will be progressed jointly between the Coalition of Peaks and the Alliance.

We look forward to working with the Australian Government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled representatives from across the country to finalise a formal Partnership Agreement in line with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap that reflects the contributions and priorities outlined in this report.

Finally, thank you to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations who gave their time, views and expertise throughout the engagements. We thank our government partners who supported the engagements and who came and listened to what was said – government truly listening to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is a foundation of any partnership.



Pat Turner
Lead Convenor, Coalition of Peaks CEO,
National Aboriginal Community Controlled
Health Organisation



Jamie Lowe
Economic Development representative,
Coalition of Peaks CEO, National Native Title
Tribunal

² See in particular: First Nations Portfolio, ANU (2024) Murru waaruu (On Track) Economic Development Seminar Series Outcomes Report (<https://services.anu.edu.au/files/2024-06/Murru%20waaruu%20Outcomes%20Report.pdf>)

Introduction and overview

The Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community-Controlled Peak Organisations (Coalition of Peaks) and the Australian Government have committed to establish a new partnership on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander economic development (the Partnership).

Both the Coalition of Peaks and the Australian Government recognise that the Partnership must be centred on the strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities, and work to translate these strengths into tangible and sustainable social and economic benefits.

To this end, the Coalition of Peaks, with the support of the Commonwealth Treasury, has been engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations across the country. The outcomes of these engagements will shape an agreement between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled representatives and government to establish the Partnership.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were asked about:

- **Partnership focus** – where should government prioritise its efforts to achieve better economic development outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and meet the closing the gap employment targets
- **Partnership areas for action** – what steps should be taken to implement the Closing the Gap Agreement’s Priority Reforms to achieve better economic outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- **Partnership arrangements and governance** – who should represent the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Partnership, how those representatives should work with government and how the parties to the Partnership should be held accountable.

This report sets out what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people said is needed to improve economic outcomes for our people.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who participated in the engagements overwhelmingly supported the establishment of a new partnership between the Australian Government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled representatives with an aim of improving economic empowerment and lasting economic security for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.

The engagements have identified six potential action areas for the Partnership that contribute to this aim, and which align to the Priority Reforms in the Closing the Gap Agreement. Figure 1 below summarises the input from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on the Partnership.

Figure 1

Input from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on the Partnership



Photo by: Seleena Blackley - Ingki-ingki (basket dilly-bag), Kalkutungu Country

Why a new policy partnership on economic development?

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap (Closing the Gap Agreement) represents a commitment from all Australian governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community representatives to a new way of working.

It recognises that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can achieve better life outcomes when governments enable the right of our people, as First Peoples, to exercise self-determination in the design and delivery of the systems, policies and services that affect us.

Priority Reform One of the Closing the Gap Agreement commits signatories to building and strengthening structures that empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to share decision-making authority with governments on matters that have a significant impact on our people.

These structures are **formal partnerships** – agreed arrangements about who makes decisions, how decisions are made, and what decisions will be about. Two types of partnerships are included in the Closing the Gap Agreement. Policy partnerships involve working on discrete policy areas. Place-based partnerships are based on a specific region.

The proposed partnership on economic participation and development would be a policy partnership for focused effort in recognition that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people currently experience much poorer economic and employment outcomes than other Australians.

Much more needs to be done to tackle the systemic and complex barriers that persist for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in employment, education and training. These barriers create and perpetuate disparity and disadvantage. More also needs to be done to open doors for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses and innovators so that we can grow a thriving First Nations economy.

The work of the Policy Partnership is intended to contribute to the following Closing the Gap targets:

- By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth (15–24 years) who are in employment, education or training to 67 percent
- By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 25–64 who are employed to 62 per cent.

“Solutions can only be found when there is a shared understanding of the problems that have led to and continue to shape the current situation.”

Engagement participant

To achieve these targets, the Closing the Gap Agreement envisages that all four Priority Reforms are brought to life and implemented. We follow this intent in the structure of this report, which maps issues and priority areas for action against each Priority Reform.

The next section of this report provides an overview of the engagement process.

Economic exclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

The poor economic outcomes that are faced by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have deep historical roots. Since colonisation, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have faced systemic exclusion from the economy. This exclusion has been driven by a combination of discriminatory policies, social and cultural disruption, and ongoing economic disadvantages.

Dispossession of land precluded access to and control of resources and participation in trade. Discriminatory laws and policies forced many of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into unpaid or underpaid labor, and limited access to education and employment. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were placed on missions and reserves where movement, employment and economic activities were strictly controlled.

Historically, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were not able to vote, own their own homes or access social security payments. Segregation and systemic racism precluded many people from accessing opportunities that underpin economic development.

Addressing this legacy requires a sustained commitment to economic justice, the recognition of Indigenous rights, and the promotion of policies that empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which has been endorsed by Australia, affirms the right of Indigenous peoples to self-determination.

Article 21 of the Declaration states that:

Indigenous peoples have the right, without discrimination, to the improvement of their economic and social conditions, including [...] in the areas of education, employment, vocational training and retraining, housing, sanitation, health and social security.

States shall take effective measures and, where appropriate, special measures to ensure continuing improvement of their economic and social conditions. Particular attention shall be paid to the rights and special needs of indigenous elders, women, youth, children and persons with disabilities.

Article 23 of the Declaration states that:

Indigenous peoples have the right to determine and develop priorities and strategies for exercising their right to development. In particular, indigenous peoples have the right to be actively involved in developing and determining health, housing and other economic and social programmes affecting them and, as far as possible, to administer such programmes through their own institutions.

These rights and obligations are central to efforts to Close the Gap through more effective and meaningful partnerships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and government.

Engagement process

The engagement process was guided by the principles in Priority Reform Three of the Closing the Gap Agreement.³

In particular, that engagements with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be done in a way where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people:

- have a leadership role in the design and conduct of engagements
- know the purpose and fully understand what is being proposed
- know what feedback is provided and how that is being taken account of
- are able to assess whether the engagements have been fair, transparent and open.

The design and conduct of engagements was led by the Coalition of Peaks, with input from Commonwealth Treasury.

A background paper was prepared to support people and organisations to participate in the engagements. This paper described the purpose of the engagements, provided context about the proposed partnership,

noted how input from participants would be used, and stepped through key engagement questions. The background paper was published on the Coalition of Peak's website, and information packs were provided to workshop participants ahead of time.

The engagements were advertised through a range of media, including the Coalition of Peak's website, social media, and membership networks. They were held between May and July 2024, and included:

6 themed online workshops, attended by approximately 140 participants

9 one-on-one sessions with mostly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations

1 online survey, with 99 responses from organisations and individuals, 70 per cent of whom identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander

12 written submissions, received from a range of organisations and individuals, including Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, and businesses.

“The [Policy Partnership] needs to have a representative that can talk to training and skills for our people. If we are not job ready, then the rest doesn't work, and we need to know what's coming early enough to get trained.”

Engagement participant

³ Closing the Gap Agreement Clause 59(f)

Focus of the Partnership

Engagement participants agreed that the current system is not working. Supports and services are poorly coordinated, ineffective, and do not respond to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities – particularly those experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage.

Participants saw the potential of the Partnership as a mechanism to bring government and community to the collective task of making this system work better – driving economic independence and economic development through job creation, improved education and training pathways, and more culturally responsive supports. These were seen as the key steps to lifting communities out of poverty and giving everyone the chance to fulfil their potential. These steps were also seen as the foundation to pursuing and achieving economic self-determination.

Key engagement findings - Partnership focus

To accelerate economic development, the Partnership should focus on the 'building blocks' of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander economic empowerment and economic security.

Generating good jobs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that change lives and strengthen communities and are centred on the strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, their communities and organisations will help provide a solid foundation for economic empowerment and greater independence.

“Any strategy for economic development will be incomplete if it does not address poverty and seek to ensure that people’s basic needs are met.”

Engagement participant

“Community has the solutions for community and the needs of urban, regional, and remote Indigenous communities must be recognised as distinct from each other and their respective voices enabled to be heard and acknowledged.”

Engagement participant

Governance

The Closing the Gap Agreement states that policy partnerships are between:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, where participation in decision-making is done by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people appointed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in a transparent way, based on their own structures and where they are accountable to their own organisations and communities
- up to three levels of government, where government representatives have negotiating and decision-making authority relevant to the partnership context
- other parties as agreed by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives and governments.

Engagement participants were asked who should represent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Partnership, how those representatives should work together, and how the parties to the Partnership should be held accountable.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation

There were a range of perspectives about how to ensure the Partnership is representative of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities.

Nearly half (48 per cent) of survey respondents believed that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people elected by and representing community-controlled organisations engaged in economic development are the most important to represent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Partnership (see Figure 2, page 14). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people who represent their communities were also a priority group for representation.

In the same question, 35 per cent of respondents gave the lowest preference to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people representing their individual businesses.

“It is crucial to ensure the inclusion of private Aboriginal businesses and organisations [...] This inclusion will enable the partnership to fully represent and address the diverse economic needs and aspirations of Aboriginal communities across Australia.”

Engagement participant

Figure 2

Who should represent the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities in the partnership and making decisions with government?

(per cent of respondents)

	Ranking				
	1 (most important) – 4 (least important)				
	1	2	3	4	N/A
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people representing their communities	48%	26%	6%	12%	8%
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people representing their individual businesses	14%	23%	40%	14%	9%
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people representing the business sector	14%	18%	23%	35%	9%
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people elected by and representing community-controlled organisations engaged in economic development	20%	25%	22%	28%	6%

However, some engagement participants considered that it was important for the Partnership to include representatives from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses and industries, particularly in relation to priorities around training and employment pathways.

Some written submissions noted the challenges of a national-level Partnership aiming to represent the lived experiences and diverse strengths and needs of local communities, especially given gaps in funding or service delivery in regional and remote areas. Diversity in community representation was agreed to be important. One suggestion was that the Partnership should include mechanisms to support regional and local-level input into prioritisation and decision-making.

One written submission put forward that community representatives in the Partnership should:

- have a track record of advocating for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander economic self-determination or have demonstrated expertise in the Indigenous business sector
- have a deep understanding of the economic, cultural, and social issues facing communities
- be chosen by and from within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
- be respected and trusted by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

State and Territory participation

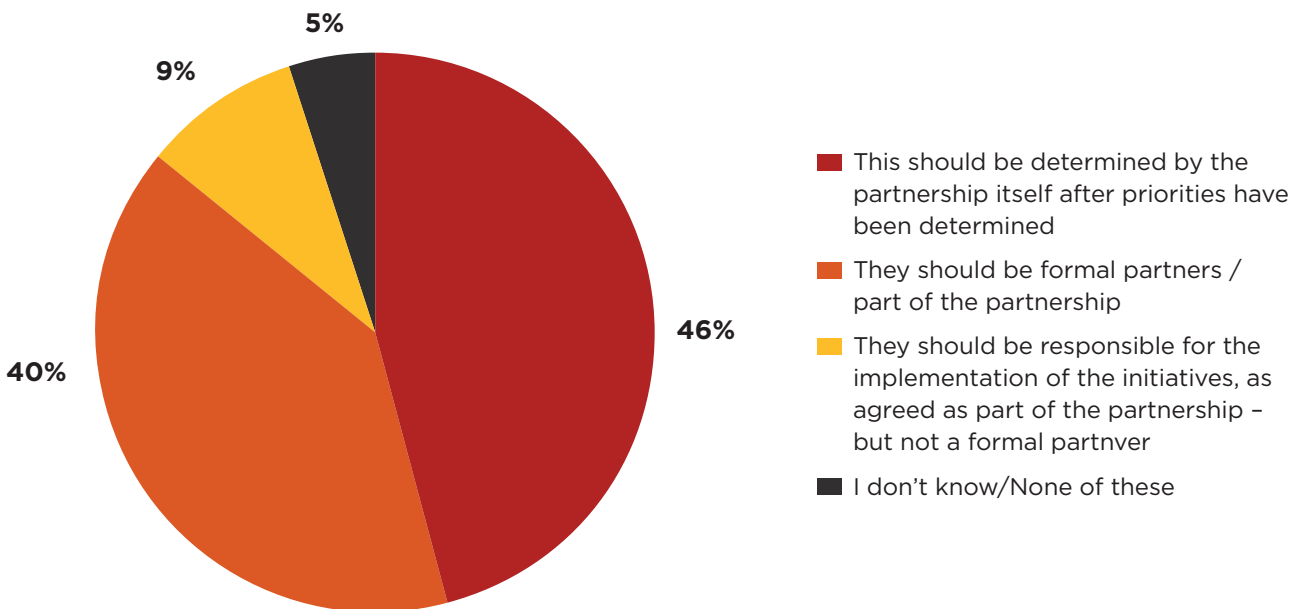
Survey respondents were divided on the question of State and Territory involvement in the Partnership. Forty percent of respondents were of the view that all government representatives should be formal partners, whereas 46 per cent thought that State and Territory representation should be a matter for the Partnership once it has determined its priorities (see Figure 3 below).

Engagement participants reflected that many of the services and supports that are enablers of economic participation and prosperity (e.g. housing, health, mental health, education) are state responsibilities, and suggested that the State and Territory representatives form a separate but coordinated working group under the auspice of the new Partnership. However, maps of each jurisdiction's 'architecture' for economic development was seen as an important resource for the work of the Partnership, as was meaningful and contemporary data (see Priority Reform 4).

Figure 3

How do you think State and Territory governments should be involved in the partnership?

(per cent of respondents)



“The governance of the Partnership should reflect the diversity of First Nations communities in urban, regional and remote areas, as well as other aspects of diversity including age and gender.”

Engagement participant

Key engagement findings – Partnership arrangements and governance

The Partnership should include representatives from:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people elected by and representing:
 - the Coalition of Peaks
 - community-controlled organisations engaged in economic development
 - community-controlled enterprises or business advocacy bodies
 - community-controlled education and training organisations
 - community-controlled organisations in service sectors

- the Australian Government – specifically, the departments or agencies with negotiating and decision-making authority relevant to economic development and participation (e.g. Commonwealth Treasury and Indigenous Business Australia).

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives in the Partnership should come from a range of sectors and geographic locations (including metropolitan, regional and remote areas). Support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people’s participation should also be considered.

State and Territory involvement requires further consideration and should be informed by the Partnership’s priorities and workplan. State and Territory governments could be engaged in implementation of key priorities or place-based initiatives.

“It is essential that the process of selecting representatives for the Partnership moving forward is inclusive, transparent, and respects the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, ensuring that perspectives from various regions, including northern Australia, and cultural backgrounds are heard and represented effectively.”

Engagement participant

Australian Government

Participants agreed that the new Partnership must meet the strong partnership elements in the Closing the Gap Agreement, including genuine shared decision-making with government.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives must be empowered through the Partnership to share in decisions about the priorities and initiatives that will improve the economic development and participation opportunities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Engagement participants also talked about the importance of the Australian Government taking a leadership role, and ensuring their representatives have the negotiating and decision-making authority relevant to economic development and participation. This could include Commonwealth Treasury, NIAA, the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations and Indigenous Business Australia.

A lack of genuine shared decision-making from government was cited as an example of what has limited the success of other structures and bodies. Participants reflected that previous attempts at shared decision-making have been limited by:

- a lack of adequate funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives to participate in the partnership
- insufficient time or funding to undertake genuine community engagement activities to support and inform the work of the partnership
- ways-of-working within government that see government representatives ‘consulting’ with community on fully developed plans, policies or proposals, rather than going through the journey together in a meaningful way.

Consistent with the strong partnership elements, survey respondents identified the following examples of what can work well through a partnership approach:

- agreeing priorities for action based on the aspirations and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- clear and relevant reporting on partnership activities to monitor progress and outcomes
- clear partnership and decision-making arrangements with governments and other parties.

Engagement participants also agreed that the Partnership must approach its work in a new way – one that is grounded in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural values about what it means to live a good and prosperous life.

Key engagement findings – Partnership arrangements and governance

The Partnership should meet the strong partnership elements set out in the Closing the Gap agreement. This includes adequate funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parties to participate in the partnership, and genuine decision-making with government.

“As it has in the past, Aboriginal education funding needs to ‘glow in the dark’. Communities are entitled to know where the funding is going, who it is benefitting, and what outcomes are being achieved.”

Engagement participant

Accountability

When asked about how the Partnership should be held accountable for its work, all options seemed equally important to survey respondents, highlighting the need for transparency and consultation (see Figure 4 below).

This input was echoed in written submissions, which agreed that the Partnership should:

- have transparent goals or commitments
- report publicly on its progress
- publish the outcomes of Partnership meetings
- regularly engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on its activities.

Key engagement findings – Partnership arrangements and governance

The Partnership should:

- publish its goals and commitments
- publish the outcomes of Partnership meetings
- publish progress reports
- regularly engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to inform its work.

Figure 4

How should parties to the partnership be held accountable for their work?

(# of responses, multiple answers allowed)

46 Regular consultations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be required

47 They should be required to report on their progress against commitments on a regular basis

45 Outcomes from Partnership meetings should be made public

45 They should be required to make their commitments under the Partnership public

Formal partnerships and shared decision-making

Priority Reform One aims to build and strengthen formal partnerships and decision-making processes that empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to share decision-making authority with governments to accelerate progress on Closing the Gap.

Clause 31 under Priority Reform One of the Closing the Gap Agreement states that the purpose of policy partnerships is to:

- drive Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-led outcomes on Closing the Gap
- enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives, communities and organisations to negotiate and implement agreements with governments to implement all Priority Reforms and policy specific and place-based strategies to support Closing the Gap
- support additional community-led development initiatives
- bring together all government parties, together with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, organisations and communities to the collective task of Closing the Gap.

Engagement participants were asked to reflect on their experiences working in partnership with government to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander economic development and what lessons could be learnt from these experiences to ensure the new Partnership is effective.

There was a shared view that too many major policies and programs are being designed and delivered without adequate consultation and engagement from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and that as a result they do not respond to the needs and lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Engagement participants noted that more effort is needed to achieve progress on the implementation of this Priority Reform as it is set out in the Closing the Gap Agreement.

The new First Nations Reference Group – which is tasked with the co-design of the Remote Jobs and Economic Development program – was raised as an example of a body that does not fully meet the strong partnership elements in the Closing the Gap Agreement. That submission went on to suggest that the delivery of the new program should come under the auspice of the Partnership in order to help ensure strong Indigenous-led governance of this critical reform.

“While community-controlled organisations are crucial, they ‘ALONE’ are not equipped to overcome all our economic challenges.”

Engagement participant

Some written submissions noted that the creation of the Partnership presents an opportunity to establish or formalise community representation arrangements around economic development, particularly in jobs and training.

There were also calls from some engagement participants for the Partnership to focus its efforts on the places and communities in Australia that are the most disadvantaged when it comes to employment and economic participation (e.g. remote communities in the Northern Territory and Queensland). As Priority Reform One contemplates both policy and place-based partnerships as mechanisms to accelerate progress against Closing the Gap, the Partnership could consider the prioritisation of locations for new place-based partnerships as part of its workplan.

Key engagement findings - Action areas: Priority Reform 1

- Consider strengthening and formalising community-controlled representation arrangements around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander jobs and training
- Consider place-based partnerships for dedicated and focused effort in areas where economic development outcomes are worse
- Ensure the First Nations Reference Group meets the strong partnership elements.

Kellie Andrews -
Sunset at Streaky Bay



Building the community-controlled sector

The focus of Priority Reform Two is to build the Aboriginal community-controlled sector to deliver services to support Closing the Gap.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community control is an act of self-determination. Under the Closing the Gap Agreement, an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisation delivers services, including land and resource management that builds the strength and empowerment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and people and is:

- incorporated under relevant legislation and not-for-profit
- controlled and operated by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people
- connected to the community or communities in which they deliver the services
- governed by a majority Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander governing body.⁴

Clause 43 under Priority Reform Two of the Closing the Gap Agreement states:

The Parties acknowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled services are better for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, achieve better results, employ more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and are often preferred over mainstream services. Priority Reform Two received the strongest support in the 2019 engagements.

The community-controlled sector is the third largest employer of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the country, and organisations in this sector are often operating in locations where they are the main employment option for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Notwithstanding, engagement participants noted that progress on implementing Priority Reform Two has been slow, underscoring the need for more concentrated effort in this space.

The Background Paper for the engagements noted that there is an opportunity for the Partnership to both increase employment opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the existing community-controlled sector, as well as expanding it into other service areas.

Strengthening employment opportunities in the existing community-controlled sector

Engagement participants – particularly those who attended the themed workshops – were of the view that community-controlled organisations have better work and more supportive career pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

In a workshop on ‘Growing the ACCO Sector’, participants discussed the ways in which ACCOs were successfully supporting workforce participation, including by:

- providing culturally safe workplaces, and employment practices that are aligned with the values of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
- providing visible and supportive career pathways, including alternative pathways for young people in education

⁴ Closing the Gap Agreement Clause 44

- supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to grow their skills and confidence before seeking jobs in the mainstream sector
- offering models of care and ways of working that incorporate cultural knowledge, and demonstrating that these can deliver better outcomes for communities
- reducing the cultural burden for employees, compared with mainstream employers.

However, engagement participants noted that it can be difficult for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to find meaningful and stable employment in a community-controlled organisation in their chosen industry. Over 60 per cent of survey respondents gave a response of 3 or above on a scale of 1 to 5 in response to a question on this topic, with '5' being 'most difficult'.

Discussions at the workshop identified the following challenges:

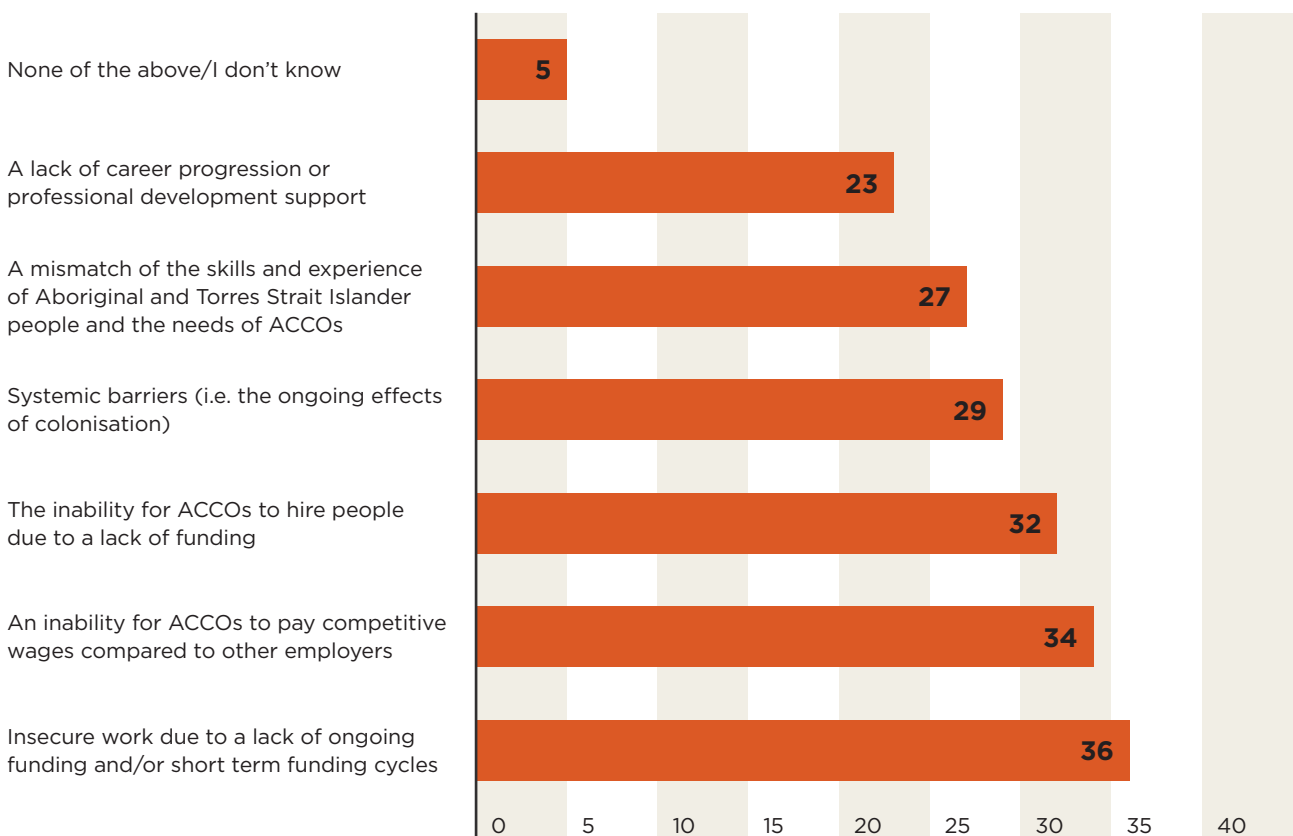
- insecure or short-term funding, leading to insecure or short-term roles
- lower wages than what is available in the mainstream sector
- inadequate funding for trainee positions e.g. one day a week
- variable opportunities for professional development, particularly in regional communities
- a lack of resourcing to help new starters become 'work ready'.

These challenges are echoed in the survey responses (see Figure 5 below).

Figure 5

What do you see as the biggest challenges to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people finding meaningful and sustained employment in ACCOs in your industry?

(# of responses, multiple answers allowed)



Building new community-controlled economies

Participants in the workshops and who provided written submissions agreed that another area of focus for the Partnership should be expanding the community-controlled sector into other community services. ACCOs were seen as significant contributors to the economy in some regional and remote areas. There are opportunities to build the ACCO sector and support more jobs and the economy in these places through leveraging government programs in e.g. aged care, community care and early childhood care. There are also opportunities in housing construction and maintenance. This was supported by the survey results, in which 'building economies and employment opportunities in communities around the services communities need' was the second most selected priority area for the new Partnership. Participants at the workshop also discussed the critical need to 'grow our own' - building the capacity of the next generation by investing in them and empowering them to make choices that can break cycles of disadvantage. Mentorship could be a powerful platform for this.

Key engagement findings - Action areas: Priority Reform 2

- The Partnership should consider how to address the challenges (in Figure 5) and how to strengthen employment opportunities in the community-controlled sector through the creation of additional secure jobs, wage parity, new professional job streams and associated professional development opportunities.
- The Partnership should look at building economies and creating jobs in communities around the services communities need, including housing and repairs and maintenance, aged care, health, family and child support.

“[I’ve] never met so many people qualified to drive forklifts in communities with no forklifts.”

Engagement participant

Transforming government organisations

The focus of Priority Reform Three is the transformation of mainstream government organisations and institutions to be more responsive, safe and accountable to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and make a bigger contribution to Closing the Gap.

On this topic, engagement participants were asked to reflect on their experiences with current government practices and programs that are intended to support economic development and participation.

Reforming mainstream employment services and growing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into a range of roles and positions

There was a strong view amongst engagement participants that mainstream employment programs are not responsive to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and are, in some cases, doing more harm than good.

Participants thought that the current system rewards big mainstream providers, with no long-term accountability for outcomes. Workshop participants in particular highlighted a range of barriers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people finding steady incomes and stable employment through mainstream job service providers. These include:

- application processes that are confusing and hard to navigate
- no accountability for long term employment outcomes
- a mismatch between training pathways and local economies – particularly in regional and remote areas where people want to stay on Country

- inadequate support for career planning and development
- poor cultural awareness and cultural safety, leading to discrimination and burnout.

Workshop participants reflected that there are a range of barriers that people experiencing long term unemployment must overcome in order to become employed and to stay employed – these include having recognisable and transferable skills and qualifications, as well as stable housing and transportation to be able to go to and from work.

Unlike many ACCOs, mainstream job service providers and Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) do not provide culturally safe wraparound supports for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander job seekers, or ‘stick’ with them to sustain their employment (as there are no incentives to do so). Their programs are also often poorly matched to the jobs that are actually available in a community.

A lack of holistic support also impacts the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people successfully completing vocational training or apprenticeships. Engagement participants considered that career planning and development should start much earlier (e.g. Year 9) to get young people ‘work ready’ and help them map out a career pathway.

For many workshop participants, the fragmented nature of mainstream training and employment programs leads to compromised employment outcomes, the perpetuation of disadvantage, and significant inefficiencies (i.e. government is not getting value for the funding it invests). In some cases, the system also creates disincentives to being employed – particularly in remote areas, where the job market is thin and income support is preferred to the part-time or seasonal work that is available.

Participants at the workshops and in the one-on-one sessions discussed what actions the Partnership could take to increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in secure employment, and to improve and broaden the quality and types of jobs that are available in urban, regional and remote areas.

Potential actions included:

- reforming mainstream employment programs so they are more responsive to the needs and lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- delivering seamless wraparound support at critical transition points, including resourcing for community-controlled RTOs to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people entering or re-entering the workforce
- creating more accessible and culturally safe entry points to further education and training
- better mapping skills and training to industries where work is available
- more 'stackable' qualifications that are transferable between different sectors or employment types
- earlier and more intensive career planning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.

There are a range of programs and legislative schemes that aim to improve economic outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through employment. At a federal level, these include:

- the Indigenous Procurement Policy
- the Community Development Program, which is being replaced by the Remote Jobs and Economic Development program from September 2024.

Of the people and organisations who responded to the engagement survey:

- 60 per cent indicated that they have had experience with the Indigenous Procurement Policy, with the majority of respondents having a negative experience
- 47 per cent indicated that they have had experience with the Community Development Program, with respondents overwhelmingly reporting a negative experience.

Just under 80 per cent of survey respondents reported that they regularly engage with government agencies in their work – mostly with the National Indigenous Australians Agency.

Generally, engagement participants considered that government programs aimed at increasing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in employment lacked sufficient flexibility, scope, and funding to deliver better outcomes in the long term. Specific issues with procurement policies are discussed in the next section.

Key engagement findings - Action areas: Priority Reform 3

The Partnership should take steps to reform mainstream employment services and look at what actions are needed to create culturally safe workplaces that value and invest in growing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into a range of roles and positions.

“Remote employment policy needs to reflect the reality of the labour market in remote Australia.”

Engagement participant



“Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses and our community-controlled organisations is a critical part of any policy approach to our peoples’ economic empowerment.”

Engagement participant

Supporting the growth of Indigenous businesses

To inform the scope and focus of the new policy partnership, feedback was sought on the role that Indigenous businesses and entrepreneurs have in providing self-determination and economic empowerment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Many participants at the focused workshop on this topic noted that businesses that are owned or operated by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people often employ Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander staff, and that there was a real opportunity for the Partnership to foster job creation by better supporting private sector enterprise.

However, participants also noted that the data and evidence on the number of businesses owned and operated by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is often poor quality and out of date. There was a shared view that this is a space where more can be done by government, including by improving or tightening procurement policies e.g. to counter ‘black cladding’ – whereby a business claims to be ‘Aboriginal owned’ to win government contracts but the profits go to its non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander shareholders, and not to communities. There was some discussion at the workshop about whether a higher threshold than the current ‘50-50’ definition of ‘Aboriginal owned’ was something the Partnership should consider.

Participants in the workshops and the one-on-one sessions were also of the view that procurement policies often inequitably

favour larger enterprises, and that small to medium businesses (which are more likely to be owned and operated by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people) are not able to compete. Similarly, procurement policies were seen as ‘pulling from the top’ (i.e. supporting businesses that are well established) when there is scope for them to be a key support for emerging enterprises.

Another issue raised in the one-on-one sessions related to companies tendering for public infrastructure projects by committing to employ young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as apprentices, but the projects themselves conclude before the apprenticeships are complete (leaving them without a qualification).

More funding for business development programs, new programs to foster mentoring between Indigenous businesses, capacity-building in procurement processes, and sustained support over the life of a business (not just at start-up) for core capabilities including HR, administration, and legal skills were all suggested as actions the Partnership should take forward to increase the sustainability and competitiveness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enterprises.

“Money does not buy happiness, but it does buy choices.”

Engagement participant

Engagement participants were also asked how mainstream financial institutions could be improved to provide more support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Greater access to capital and access to more affordable capital, including through the mobilisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander assets (e.g. land, water and cultural knowledge) was identified in the workshops and some written submissions as an important topic for the Partnership to consider.

We note that potential reforms to land rights to secure better economic outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are being explored through an adjacent process by the First Nations Economic Empowerment Alliance. Engagement participants were cautious of the Partnership making decisions in this space, noting that the ability to realise economic value from traditional lands requires direct consultation with land councils.

Workshop participants also noted the difficulty of turning cultural knowledge into a profitable enterprise without losing collective ownership of this kind of asset. For example, there may be opportunities to monetise native foods and botanicals, but in doing so the intellectual property can be lost to the community and producing something at scale can come into conflict with obligations to care for Country. A participant in the one-on-one session also noted that, while government often asks for Elders and community leaders to sit on advisory boards, this knowledge and expertise is otherwise undervalued.

A lack of access to capital was identified as a barrier to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities being able to 'get in

front' of macroeconomic trends and emerging industries, including renewable energy and environmental sustainability. Other barriers noted by engagement participants included:

- the need to better map potential opportunities and upskill communities in financial literacy and business development
- a lack of reliable internet access in regional and remote communities
- a friction between the collective ways of being and knowing in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, and the individualistic and competitive approach to enterprise in Western culture.

Engagement participants noted too that Indigenous business are often subject to checks by lenders or brokers that are not required of mainstream businesses, and that this is an example of how the system disincentivises enterprise.

Key engagement findings - Action areas: Priority Reform 3

- The Partnership should leverage skills and resources to start and sustain Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses, including ways to enhance inclusive procurement practices to ensure benefits are flowing to communities.
- The Partnership should consider how to improve access to capital and markets for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses.

“The[se] foundational issues [of definitions and standards] are critical before we spend energy on building the sector.”

Engagement participant

A sunset over a beach with footprints in the sand. The sun is low on the horizon, casting a warm glow over the scene. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and blue. The beach is dark, with several footprints visible in the foreground.

“Aboriginal Land Rights must be seen as a public outcome and a way to deliver on the key government priorities and to provide broader community benefits, including jobs growth, sustainable economic progress, stronger community connections and climate change resilience.”

Engagement participant

“Government needs to change the way government does business with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations.”

Engagement participant

“We can be giving our knowledge away and communities don’t even realise they’re giving it away”

Engagement participant

Shared access to data and information at a regional level

Priority Reform Four aims to improve the accessibility of data and information for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities. More access to better data is essential to self-determination and to genuine shared decision-making with governments.

Almost 75 per cent of survey respondents reported that they find it difficult to access the data that they need in their work to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The top three barriers to access are that the data:

- 1 is scattered across multiple sources and may be inconsistent in format or definitions
- 2 is unreliable, inaccurate, or outdated
- 3 does not exist.

Create a clear picture of First Nations economic development and participation

Engagement participants were also asked to reflect on what data they thought would be needed to inform the work of the Partnership. Respondents across the written submissions and workshops discussed the importance of building a clear picture of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment data as well as having the right data to analyse the impact and effectiveness of current training pathways and support services.

One of the challenges to the effective working of partnerships identified through the engagement process is that often community representatives are not provided with the evidence or data they need to make fully informed decisions e.g. about priorities and resource allocations.

“Without strong evidence, it will be difficult to find consensus on how to best allocate resources, which can undermine trust.”

Engagement participant

“The [Policy Partnership] has to start with data and should commission work to understand where the opportunities are (and are not), and understand why they are not being actualised.”

Engagement participant

“We are often finding out about things 12 months before something happens, when the planning started 5 years earlier.”

Engagement participant

To understand the impacts of a program, it is important to measure key outcomes of importance to Indigenous communities, including the quality of jobs (e.g. whether they are well-paid, meaningful, on-country) and services provided to people in communities (e.g. timely, culturally appropriate, and effective).

Participants reflected that more capacity building for communities around data and cultural knowledge is key. Many organisations provide reports to government on funding outcomes and contribute their cultural knowledge and expertise without fully informed consent or an understanding of how this information and knowledge is then used.

A number of submissions and participants considered that one of the priorities of the Partnership should be to better understand the data priorities of ACCOs and communities in relation to economic development and participation.

There was also a view that governments need to be more transparent about project and policy pipelines so that communities can participate in the process and take advantage of any potential opportunities.

Key engagement findings - Action areas: Priority Reform 4

The Partnership should build a comprehensive data picture of the current state of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with respect to economic development and participation opportunities.

“Collectively, there is inadequate understanding of existing data held by governments and absence of First Nations people’s input into determining the data they need, and how data is collected, accessed and used by governments.”

Engagement participant


“To understand the impacts of a program, it is important to measure key outcomes of importance to Indigenous communities, including the quality of jobs (e.g. whether they are well-paid, meaningful, on-country) and services provided to people in communities (e.g. timely, culturally appropriate, and effective).”

Engagement participant

What else we heard

Many engagement participants raised that economic development is strongly linked with other important social outcomes. Health, housing, and education were raised as specific examples as having a significant impact on someone's capacity to become employed, to stay employed, and to earn a good wage.

Engagement participants noted that for many of our communities, these critical enablers are out of reach. While it is vital that this understanding informs the work of the Partnership, it is also important to note that actions in this space are not directly in scope for this Partnership, which is one of several new policy and place-based partnerships being established under the Closing the Gap Agreement. Some of these new partnerships are already in place e.g. in justice, housing, and early childhood.



“Apart from the obvious injustice that such a significant proportion of this country’s First Peoples continue to live in deep and persistent poverty in an otherwise wealthy nation, poverty is a barrier to economic development: it is much harder to find and keep a job, or to plan for your future, when you are struggling to afford food, keep the power on or don’t have an adequate roof over your head”

Engagement participant

What comes next?

The Coalition of Peaks thanks everyone who contributed their time, experience and knowledge to these engagements.

We will now work with the Commonwealth Government on the first draft of an agreement to establish the Partnership. The draft agreement will be based on the findings and key messages outlined in this report. Outcomes and issues from the engagements will also shape the Partnership's future workplan.

Once drafted, we will gather the proposed government and community representatives together to discuss and negotiate the agreement, and plan for the formal establishment of the Partnership.

Through the Partnership and its everyday work under the Closing the Gap Agreement, the Coalition of Peaks is committed to an ongoing process of listening and learning from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives from communities across the country.

Dion Everett -
The stillness of Country



Organisations who contributed to the engagements

#	Organisation / stakeholder
1	Aboriginal Affairs NSW
2	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service (QLD) Ltd
3	Aboriginal Family Legal Services Qld
4	Aboriginal Health Council of Western Australia
5	Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Forum
6	Aboriginal Housing Northern Territory
7	Aboriginal Housing Victoria
8	Aboriginal Legal Service NSW/ACT
9	ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body (ATSIEB)
10	Amaroo Local Aboriginal Land Council
11	ANZ Bank
12	APA Group
13	Australian Sustainable Finance Initiative
14	Barralong Consulting Group
15	BlaQ
16	Central Land Council
17	Council of Aboriginal Services Western Australia
18	Dilin Duwa Centre for Indigenous Business Leadership
19	Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporation
20	First Languages Australia
21	First Nations Affairs
22	First Nations Economics
23	First Nations Foundation
24	First Peoples Disability Network Australia
25	Ganbina
26	ICaN Learn Achieve Believe
27	Indigenous Allied Health Australia
28	Institute for Urban Indigenous Health
29	Jenname
30	Kate Kelleher Consulting

#	Organisation / stakeholder
31	Kimberley Land Council
32	Kimberly Aboriginal Medical Services (KAMS)
33	KSJ Consulting and Platinum Civil Construction
34	Literacy for Life Foundation
35	Murnong First Peoples Gathering Place
36	National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Corporation (NATSIEC)
37	National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services
38	National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation
39	National Family Violence Prevention and Legal Service Forum
40	National Native Title Council
41	Neami National
42	New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc.
43	New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council
44	New South Wales Coalition of Aboriginal Peak Organisations
45	Ngaweeyan Maar-oo
46	Nirrumbuk Abgnl Corp, Aarnja Ltd, NACP Pty Ltd
47	Northern Australia First Nations Alliance
48	Northern Land Council
49	Queensland Aboriginal and Islander Health Council
50	Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Protection Peak Limited
51	Queensland Indigenous Family Violence Legal Service
52	[Individual participant]
53	South Australian Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation Network
54	South Australian Aboriginal Education and Training Consultative Council
55	Stolen Generations Council NSW/ ACT Inc
56	Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre
57	The Lowitja Institute
58	Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO)
59	Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages
60	Victorian Aboriginal Education Association
61	Victorian Aboriginal Health Service (VAHS)
62	Waalit Foundation
63	Worthwhile Ventures
64	Yarpa Hub

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