

# CLOSING THE GAP INDEPENDENT ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER LED REVIEW



**Prepared by**

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## Acknowledgement of Country

The authors of this report wish to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the First Nations across Australia and pay our respects to them and to our own Elders both past and present. We have been welcomed onto Country in seven First Nations and listened to people from many more over the five months of the Review. We thank every person who took part for their extraordinary graciousness, generosity and dignity in allowing us to sit with them and hear their stories, their knowledge, their expertise and their solutions. We bear witness to their experiences and insights through this look at Closing the Gap. Without them, this review would not have happened and we are grateful.

## A note on terminology

In this report, we use the terms ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ and ‘Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people’ (where the ‘and/or’ recognises that some individuals belong to both groups) interchangeably with ‘Indigenous’ or ‘First Nations’ to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia. However, we recognise that this approach is not without contention. First, these terms do not reflect the diversity of Indigenous Australians, and it is important to remember that many Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people prefer to be known by their specific group or clan names, and some by ‘First Nations’. Second, we acknowledge that some Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people do not like being referred to as Indigenous, as this is deemed a catchall term often used by government. We have therefore, wherever possible, referred to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples or Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people but, where appropriate, we have used ‘Indigenous’ or ‘First Nations’. We apologise if this causes any offence – this is not our intention.

In this report, we also use 'Commonwealth' to refer to the national Australian Government and States or Territories for the federation of six states and two self-governing territories. The term 'jurisdiction' is used to refer to all governments, but also in the context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled peak bodies at the state/territory level.

We also use 'community' or 'communities' in this report to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities collectively.

'Jumbunna' here refers to Jumbunna Research, the research arm of Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research at the University of Technology, Sydney.

## **Disclaimer**

The authors have used all due care and skill to ensure the material is accurate as of the date of this report. UTS and the authors do not accept responsibility for any loss that may arise by anyone relying on its contents.

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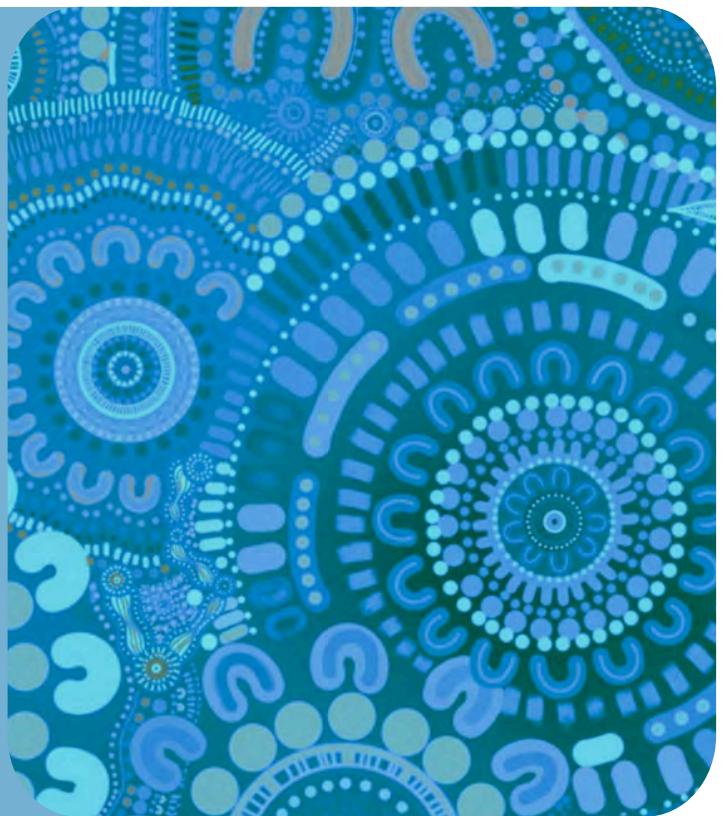
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## About the artwork - dhurrali

This piece is called 'dhurrali' and is about growing together and dreaming big. You can see mob sitting together on country and the marks they make as they move on country. The mirri (stars) in this piece speak to the way that they have always helped us navigate our surroundings but also the dreams that we have for ourselves and each other.



## About the artist

Jumbunna is privileged to have Associate Professor Kirsten Gray as part of our team.

Kirsten is a Muruwari/Yuwalaraay woman, mother, artist, and advocate. As well as being a highly experienced researcher, Kirsten is a talented artist of note and provided the artwork for this report.

[See Yuluwiribaa](#) for more of Kirsten's work.



Jumbunna  
Institute for Indigenous  
Education and Research

# **This story began with us**

Our culture is over 65,000 years old.

We are the world's oldest living civilisation.

For countless generations, our communities thrived.

We built strong societies, guided by sacred Lore.

We lived by deep wisdom - understanding the lands, the waters, the seasons, the skies.

We knew how to listen.

How to care for Country.

How to exist in harmony with all living things.

Our cultures were, and are, rich, diverse, and unique.

Each Nation with its own language, its own stories, its own Lore.

We carried knowledge systems so intricate and intelligent that today, scientists and scholars are only just beginning to grasp their depth.

Then came the invasion.

And colonisation.

The theft of our land and our children.

We have been brought low.

We have suffered.

We have known sadness, loss, and grief.

We have also known resilience, and laughter, and survival.

We have leaned on the strength, the wisdom, and the brilliance of our ancestors, and we have many stories to share.

This one started with the idea of closing a gap.

A gap that measured us against white people and told us we were falling behind. But also, a gap that revealed where opportunities had been denied, where respect had been withheld, where our voices had been silenced.

Too often, this story has been told about us.

*But this story began with us.*

It began with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples speaking out, calling for the recognition of health and wellbeing as basic human rights.

From the beginning, we knew this:

Real change would require more than commitments, more than words.

It would require respect.

And listening.

Truth-telling.

And a new way forward.

# Table of Contents

<u>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</u>	<u>01</u>
<u>Section 1: The Beginning and the Middle</u>	<u>24</u>
<u>Section 2: The Priority Reforms</u>	<u>45</u>
<u>PR1: Presence is Not Power Sharing</u>	<u>50</u>
<u>PR2: Culture Is Our Medicine</u>	<u>87</u>
<u>PR3: New Ways, Same Old Colony</u>	<u>107</u>
<u>PR4: Data Shapes the Story</u>	<u>135</u>
<u>Section 3: Review Outcomes</u>	<u>156</u>
<u>RECOMMENDATIONS</u>	<u>169</u>
<u>Section 4: Terminology and Abbreviations</u>	<u>179</u>
<u>Section 5: Endnotes</u>	<u>189</u>
<u>Section 6: References</u>	<u>200</u>
<u>Section 7: Appendices</u>	<u>208</u>



*Closing the Gap was the game changer... This was the first time that the voices of Aboriginal communities, of Aboriginal people, was set in concrete in a framework that I felt that, if given the respect and the commitment ...building what I would call is a partnership, a marriage, then we could achieve great things.*

*People who may not even be involved in community and continue to look at four or five year old stats... But what I want to reiterate, I suppose, without getting too emotional is that Closing the Gap, I can't speak for others, is the game changer. If we get it right.*

*What we wanted was to ensure that we could be an equal player in bringing parity to our people in obviously ensuring that our communities saw the outcomes, in dealing with the issues that are often missed because of what people think is the right thing for us.*

*At times, I think we continue to get down in the weeds. We continue to... look for a lot of blame and faults... But I think that it's time again to be quite honest. I don't think the Commonwealth's far more advanced than where we are. And I say that with all due respect. But I am concerned that unless we get this relationship sorted, we're not going to get to where we need to be and the only losers in that are our people...*

*I, in my heart, know that this is the game changer that we've all got, but until we get this partnership right and the respect and value of Aboriginal people in this partnership is taken in its entirety, I just don't see a lot of things changing.*

[Elder who took part in a depth interview]



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY





Closing the Gap is the story of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their life outcomes after more than 230 years of colonisation. Until 2020, that story had been written by governments, without the experiences or perspectives of the people living it. The negotiation of a new ten-year National Agreement, with The Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations (Coalition of Peaks) - representing the community controlled sector servicing communities across Australia - marked the first time Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were formal Parties with governments in developing, implementing and monitoring Closing the Gap.

From its inception in 2008, Closing the Gap was based on the principle of self-determination, which was embedded in the National Agreement in 2020. The right to self-determination is central to human rights - it is about the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to make decisions about their own lives, communities, and futures. This includes having control over policies, services and systems that affect them.

The essential connection between self-determination, community development, and community health and well-being has been noted in various government reports and policy briefs for many years, including in the National Agreement. The Productivity Commission Review of Closing the Gap released in 2024 identified self-determination as the 'ultimate goal' of the National Agreement and its Priority Reforms.

Such an approach recognises the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to collectively determine their political status and shape their social, cultural and economic futures, including those of their children. Australia as a nation is committed to the right to self-determination for all groups of peoples as a signatory to seven core international human rights treaties including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). Since 2009, Australia has, as a signatory, expressed support for the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the self-determination of First Nations peoples specifically.

The National Agreement reflects a commitment by the Parties to put them into the ‘right’ relationship with one another – one grounded in mutual respect, accountability, and the recognition of distinct authority and sovereignty. This requires the Parties to align their visions of what is possible under the Agreement, moving away from government consulting with stakeholders in the exercise of authority, toward self-governance by First Nations peoples.

Positive developments reflecting this shift have not yet been frequent but have been identified by the community-controlled sector as occurring within the context of the new arrangements under the National Agreement. While the rhetoric of partnership has changed and governments now speak of self-determination and community-led responses, this is too often not matched by action. But self-determination is essential to transformation, and without it, progress will be hindered and slow, with too much business as usual from governments.

This inaugural Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Led Independent Review of Closing the Gap is required under Section D (Clauses 125 - 128) of the National Agreement and preceded by the review undertaken of the Productivity Commission 12 months earlier. Each Review is set to occur every three years. Together they act as one form of accountability measuring progress on the implementation of the National Agreement.

The aim of the Review is, for the first time, to report on the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities who have been engaged in the implementation of the National Agreement by all governments, particularly its Priority Reforms.

## **Methodology**

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Led Independent Review of Closing the Gap (the Review) was underpinned by a self-determination framework and a strengths-based approach, emphasising the inherent capabilities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and recognising that they are best positioned to identify and address their needs and priorities. Indigenous Research Methods were used, meaning a foundational centring of First Nations experiences and insights was employed in this Review, distinct from and not replicating the 2024 Productivity Commission Review.

The Review identified three key questions to be answered:

1. How are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and governments managing systems, policy and programs aligning to the Priority Reforms?
2. How are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and governments adapting to new ways of working under the National Agreement?
3. Is the National Agreement working in the way you anticipated? How well is it working? What changes, if any, should be made?

Jumbunna implemented a mixed-method review using three main inputs:

- The views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people operating at each jurisdictional level through the mechanisms of the National Agreement
- The views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through the six Place-Based Partnership sites and more broadly in other communities and regions

- A rapid desktop synthesis of existing reporting and documentation on the National Agreement implementation, and
- The outcomes of the 2024 Productivity Commission Review.

Data collection tools used were:

- the desktop review and a small set of targeted preliminary conversations with key Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders to provide some initial framing
- community visits to the six Place Based Partnership sites where yarning circles and individual and group interviews took place
- virtual individual and group depth interviews
- an online national survey
- a written submissions process, and
- attendance at the Assembly Forum on Closing the Gap facilitated by Coalition of Peaks in Canberra from 1 – 3 April 2025.

In total, experiences, insights, stories and opinions were gained from more than 500 people across every state and territory in urban, regional and remote areas who took part in the Review representing Joint Council and Partnership Working Group members, members of Policy Partnerships, national and state/territory peak bodies and coalitions of peak bodies, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), local government representatives and individual community members.

## **Limitations**

The most significant limitation for the Review was the five-month timeline provided by Joint Council to undertake what is, realistically, a 12-18 month process. Time constraints limited the Review from inception and planning stages through to final reporting. This impacted in a number of ways, most importantly:

- The ability for Jumbunna to spend an appropriate and respectful length of time raising awareness of the Review among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander bodies and communities.
- The level of reach that could be delivered under those circumstances and the ability to access and listen to people's experiences across all the policy areas.

Every effort was made within the timeframe provided to apply the methodology designed on national First Nations ethical guidelines, but there was an impact on the number of people able to participate in the Review. Cultural protocols and traditional techniques such as deep listening take time and future consideration must be given for the timeframe provided to future Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander independent reviewers.

Time constraints also meant that what is included here should be read as illustrative and not exhaustive of all experiences and views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Testing preliminary findings and recommendations with delegates at the Assembly as part of the Review scope could not occur due to the timeline of the Review activities and when the Assembly was held. However, as with the Review itself, there was very strong correlation across the data collected and this was able to be considered against the Assembly data. Preliminary findings were instead tested with the Steering Committee and the Partnership Working Group.

This is the first time an independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Review of Closing the Gap has taken place. This report should be considered a starting point and a tool to raise awareness of, and interest in, the next Review in three years.

## **Key Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Led Independent Review Findings**

### **Key Review Questions**

In undertaking this Review, Jumbunna set out to answer three Key Review Questions to identify the strengths, challenges, and opportunities in the current implementation of Closing the Gap.

#### **How are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and governments managing systems, policy and programs aligning to the Priority Reforms?**

There is limited evidence that governments are making any systemic changes to meet commitments under the National Agreement. This has resulted in a lack of transformational change across all services and systems, policies and programs aligned to the Priority Reforms. A significant contributing factor to this is the lack of governmental knowledge about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of being, knowing and doing necessary to comprehend the work required.

The opportunities available to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to shape systems, policies and programs to date are limited, ad hoc and overburdensome. In addition, there is a continued imbalance in understanding, resourcing and capacity between governments and the community-controlled sector. This has inhibited the sector's ability to participate fully as equal partners in National Agreement processes.

This is compounded by a perceived lack of trust towards the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sector, who feel over-monitored, while governments are not subject to the same levels of transparency or accountability to communities. This environment continues to hinder systemic transformation under the Priority Reforms, emphasising the urgent need for independent accountability mechanisms.

Governments have been slow on attitudinal and systemic change, despite some evidence of individuals and teams within government that are championing reform. An overreliance on this has created an unsustainable cultural load on Indigenous public servants.

Though not widespread, there have been some positive developments, such as greater partnerships between services and First Nations community members, and more invitations to ACCOs to co-design policies and projects.

#### **How are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and governments adapting to new ways of working under the National Agreement?**

Governments are not substantively adapting to the new ways of working under the National Agreement and this constrains the ability of both Parties to achieve the changes intended by the Priority Reforms. Most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people do not feel that the changes sought by the Priority Reforms are on track.

There are positive aspects that can act as potential levers for change throughout the National Agreement including:

- increased visibility on the issues of importance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the starting point for creating momentum for real and lasting change, and
- advocacy opportunities to remind governments of community expectations, resulting in some increases in collaboration between ACCOs, peaks and communities, and governments, leading to better outcomes.

The efforts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisations are not being matched by governments at all levels. The lack of action on Priority Reform Three on government organisation transformation is hampering the creation of new ways of working, and unequal responsibility remains with the community-controlled sector. Ultimately this is all contributing to an undermining of the intent of the National Agreement and its implementation.

**Is the National Agreement working in the way you anticipated? How well is it working? What changes, if any, should be made?**

For the National Agreement to work effectively, there are several key areas where a shift in approach is needed. This includes in accountability, funding reform, self-determination and genuine partnership. Transforming governments requires the application of a cultural lens to policy and program development, including aligning jurisdictional policy decisions with the National Agreement and achieving cohesion between government levels through appropriate mechanisms.

### **Core themes**

Three core themes emerged as essential to any understanding of, and approach to, and ultimately the success of Closing the Gap.

#### **Self-determination**

Self-determination must become a lived principle in the way the Agreement is implemented and an activation of government commitments, including a fundamental shift to a strengths-based approach is still outstanding. While change is underway, the full expression of self-determination continues to be constrained by colonial systems and ways of working and the inability – or unwillingness - of governments to make space for worldviews that do not mirror their own. Until this core issue can be addressed, a mismatch in the overarching vision of the Priority Reform areas will persist, and implementation challenges will continue to emerge through the National Agreement.

#### **Capability building of all the Parties**

To realise the full potential of the National Agreement, *all* parties must build their capability to work in partnership. This means adequate resourcing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations to engage in government processes as equal partners. For all levels of government in Australia, this means a significant strengthening of their own capabilities to partner with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in ways that honour First Nations authority, culture and decision-making processes. This includes unravelling a worldview that seeks to subsume Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within its frame, and instead, learning to engage with them as distinct sovereign peoples. Genuine structural transformation is needed to achieve this.

Building true partnership capacity means rethinking policy cycles, timelines, and success measures, making space for Indigenous ways of knowing, doing, and leading. It also means recognising that community-controlled organisations hold cultural authority and deep local knowledge, and ensuring all Parties understand each other's worldviews and have the ability to find ways to work together towards success under Closing the Gap.

### **Governance building framework**

Closely linked to the principles of self-determination, Indigenous governance-building is the process by which Indigenous peoples strengthen governance, cultural identity, economic independence, and collective capacity to make decisions and take action. The opportunities within Closing the Gap underpin the need for a decolonisation process and finding a new way forward after more than 230 years of failed government approaches to working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait peoples. The opportunity lies in supporting these efforts – adequately resourcing First Nations to further design their own structures, restore decision-making power, and strengthen community capacity in ways that are culturally grounded and locally relevant. When fully realised, the Agreement becomes more than a reform agenda. It becomes a foundation for rebuilding strong, self-determined communities able to meet governments on an equal footing across the diversity of Indigenous Australia.

### **Key Findings**

Jumbunna found strong correlation with the outcomes of the first Productivity Commission Review and this Review has given stronger voice to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to deepen all findings through what they are seeing and experiencing.

Twelve Key Findings were identified:

#### **Key Finding 1: The Closing the Gap architecture is broadly sound but is inhibited by inaction**

The architecture under Closing the Gap and the 2020 National Agreement is broadly sound and provides a solid framework supported by all Parties, but the implementation challenges identified in both this Review and the 2024 Productivity Commission Review reflect a deeper tension between fundamentally different worldviews: a state-centric approach grounded in settler governance structures, and a First Nations vision rooted in human rights, self-determination and sovereignty. The Priority Reform areas provide a roadmap for elevating the latter. To achieve this, governments must rethink what genuine partnership entails; moving beyond inclusion within existing systems and toward reimagining those systems. This transformation continues to be constrained by the state's reluctance to de-centre its authority. Forgoing power in favour of partnership is urgently needed. There is an existing roadmap for governments in pre-existing commitments to international human rights instruments.

#### **Key Finding 2: A clear imbalance of responsibilities and resourcing is impeding implementation**

Success beyond current ad hoc examples is limited by implementation issues. Much of the burden for that success rests too heavily on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parties, while government parties carry a lighter responsibility. The Peaks, ACCOs and communities are doing the heavy lifting while at the same time being under-resourced in comparison with governments. This will continue to impact successful implementation under each Priority Reform and the associated Targets and Outcomes.

### **Key Finding 3: Progress across the Priority Reforms is interdependent**

The Priority Reforms must be understood and implemented as a coherent, interdependent framework, not as standalone initiatives. Each reform reinforces the others. Genuine shared decision-making (Priority Reform One) cannot occur without strong, well-resourced ACCOs (Priority Reform Two), and ACCOs cannot thrive if government systems remain unchanged (Priority Reform Three). Finally, partnerships are impossible without transparent, accessible data that communities control and trust (Priority Reform Four).

When approached holistically, the Priority Reforms provide a roadmap for rebalancing power, embedding cultural authority and achieving long-term, community-led outcomes, which in turn, will ‘close the gap’.

Despite this, implementation too often considers the Priority Reforms in isolation, or not at all, in the pursuit of the socio-economic Targets. It is the combined impact of the Priority Reforms implemented well that holds the greatest potential for sustained success, including with respect to the socio-economic Targets.

### **Key Finding 4: The cultural load is heavy**

The successes achieved through the National Agreement rely heavily on dedicated individuals and teams across the Commonwealth and State and Territory Governments rather than any systemic approaches to delivering on commitments under Closing the Gap. Linked to this is the reliance of governments on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants as bearing responsibility for government transformation.

### **Key Finding 5: Communication and education on Closing the Gap is inappropriate and insufficient**

The absence of appropriate and targeted communication and education about Closing the Gap progress has led to community negativity and perceived slow progress on targets vs actual progress. While people are not required to hold intricate knowledge of the Agreement or its mechanisms, there is a general lack of knowledge about Closing the Gap, the Agreement and outcomes. Appropriate communication strategies and resources that are accessible in a range of ways, and disseminated in the communication channels communities prefer, is needed to raise awareness and understanding.

### **Key Finding 6: Governments have yet to commence any genuine transformative work**

Governments continue with business-as-usual approaches that are inconsistent with their commitments under the National Agreement and are not yielding widespread impact. Government remains ignorant of the cultural side of transformation required by their own systems. Governments must look to structural reforms, improvements and power shifts as essential – there is mixed effectiveness, uneven influence, resourcing and power across the mechanisms of Closing the Gap and positive steps and outcomes are often the result of committed individuals and teams within government. Local Government has not yet commenced any quantifiable work as a Party to the Agreement, despite a small number of positive examples driven by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people or their organisations.

This limited commitment to the new ways of working under the National Agreement is the barrier to transformative change and the realisation of the human rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. A human rights-based approach that truly relinquishes total governmental control and adequately invests in community-controlled solutions as the new normal is part of governments' responsibility to addressing this deficit. This is not a new requirement, but rather the fulfilment of Australia's existing human rights obligations to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

### **Key Finding 7: Accountability and transparency are critical**

Accountability, and transparency is critical and must be introduced as a matter of priority under the National Agreement. The need for multi-jurisdictional independent accountability mechanisms is urgently needed to provide oversight and monitoring of government efforts. Implementing these mechanisms will ensure greater action across agreed priority areas, reduce the strain and frustration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and bring the partnership into true equilibrium.

Independent mechanisms must be adequately resourced and designed with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and their organisations to reflect the needs and priorities of their respective jurisdictions.

### **Key Finding 8: Funding reform is needed**

Funding reform is required to provide for sustainable, long term security to the community-controlled sector. This includes a rethink of competitive procurement funding models – shifting the purpose away from competition for service delivery, to a response to the social determinants associated with poor individual and community outcomes. In such a model, decisions about who manages services are grounded in equity and local authority, with legitimacy coming from local people, not from a central government. Under the current funding system, the complexity and volume of reporting requirements make it difficult for Aboriginal organisations to meet their core business requirements of delivering services to close the gap.

Governments must reconsider how they pursue their interest in efficiency and accountability. This requires reducing unnecessary administrative burdens so organisations can focus on achieving meaningful outcomes for their communities.

### **Key Finding 9: Expanded efforts are needed by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector**

The strength and unity of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector is a fundamental requirement for achieving progress under the National Agreement and in turn improving the lives of Indigenous Australians. However, realising this vision means that the community-controlled sector must continue to be strengthened and adapt to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Greater sector collaboration requires resourcing on top of existing arrangements to foster the growth, capability and capacity building that is needed.

There is a need for the sector to consider and improve on the ways in which engagement and information sharing currently occurs with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities at the ACCO, peak and jurisdictional levels. Current efforts are not sufficient and this effort must also extend to the relationship between the Coalition of Peaks and the broader community-controlled sector. A strong feedback loop will go a long way to improving outcomes across all areas of the National Agreement, including the levels of awareness and action on what is possible.

Focusing on these broad areas will ensure that the lessons learned from the growth and maturity in some sectors can be shared, that cross-sectoral areas are strengthened and that the community-controlled sector engages in an ongoing process of improvement.

#### **Key Finding 10: Racism is not being addressed**

Racism is a core foundational issue that sits across every aspect of Closing the Gap and any potential long-term, sustainable successes. Racism - in its myriad forms - is impacting on the effective implementation of all four priority reform areas. Despite the National Agreement commitment to identifying and eliminating racism, no systemic steps have been taken despite, or perhaps because, racism is a deeply rooted problem that was baked into government institutions from their very inception of this country.

#### **Key Finding 11: A return to bipartisanship at the political level is critical**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities cannot be used weaponised political tools if long term and sustainable success of Closing the Gap is to be attained. Strong and sustained political leadership is also a key component in delivering positive outcomes in the long-term.

#### **Key Finding 12: The National Agreement is grounded in principles of global human rights standards, including self-determination and non-discrimination**

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap should be understood as a nationally co-created policy platform for realising justice, equity, and dignity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. While not tied to a single international human rights instrument, the Agreement is grounded in principles that resonate strongly with global human rights standards, including self-determination and non-discrimination.

Importantly, it also responds to the denial of basic citizenship rights experienced by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people: the right to live safely, to access culturally safe services, to be healthy, educated, housed, and heard. In this sense, the National Agreement is not only about embedding self-determination in structures of governance, but also about fulfilling the basic promises of Australian citizenship. Self-determination cannot come at the price of government taking little to no responsibility for the citizenship and human rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Embedding a human rights approach requires taking active steps to address structural racism, uphold the right to self-determination, and ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are equal partners in decisions that affect their lives. A shared vision for Closing the Gap must therefore be grounded in these principles, while also reflecting a transformational understanding of the role of governments and their obligations to First Nations peoples.

## Recommendations

What is apparent from the outcomes of this Review is that there is a single point of focus for consideration by the Parties to the National Agreement: the nature of the relationship between State and First Peoples and the need for a respectful re-examination of what this relationship should be. In considering that fundamental relationship, there needs to be a commitment to self-determination in action, as well as the transformation of structures and abilities for all Parties. Despite the deficit nature of the wording, “Closing the Gap” is an attempt to move from assimilationist policy towards policy based in self-determination for First Nations peoples.

The spirit in which this Review was undertaken was to create safe and culturally supportive environments to listen deeply and give voice to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities about their experiences of implementing the National Agreement.

Not surprisingly, there is strong correlation with the findings of the Productivity Commission Review from last year. This Review has been able to delve deeper into the experiences of First Nations people, including why, in their experience, areas are slow or not progressing and what is required to break through the barriers.

The following key recommendations aim to provide feedback for all Parties and highlight that there are roadmaps to success for working together positively and constructively. The recommendations are provided as insight into how to move forward on those sticking points and barriers, directly from the people who need the National Agreement to work for their communities.

As required by the National Agreement, this Review has focused on priority areas where greater collective effort by the Parties is needed and advice on potential changes. The Review has purposefully not provided detailed, actionable recommendations, as these can often unintentionally reinforce the siloed nature of government and the current approach to the implementation of the Priority Reforms. Instead, the recommendations are provided as a lever for internal reflection, examining current relationships and what they have been built on, and as an invitation to all Parties to challenge themselves to rise to the ambition of the Review and the National Agreement.

## Recommendation One: Initiate a dialogue to align the visions of the Parties

The mismatch of visions between the Parties sits at the heart of many implementation challenges being experienced by the Parties. Without deliberate action to bridge these differences, efforts to implement the National Agreement will be fragmented and misaligned. A shared understanding of purpose and direction is essential to move forward together.

### a) Align the visions

The Joint Council should initiate a dialogue to align the visions of the Parties as they implement Closing the Gap. This process should be grounded in truth-telling, cultural respect, and a commitment to right relationship.

The shared vision should be clearly articulated, co-owned, and regularly revisited to guide decision-making, resourcing and accountability across all levels of implementation.

**Parties:** Joint Council

## Recommendation Two: Drive genuine transformation within governments through systemic and structural changes

Realising the transformational intent of the National Agreement requires sustained cultural and structural change across all levels of government. The following recommendations lay the groundwork for more effective, respectful and enduring implementation.

### a) Embed systemic change into leadership contracts and KPIs

The commitments under the National Agreement must be reflected in the key performance indicators (KPIs) and employment contracts of departmental Secretaries and agency heads, and flow through to senior executives and relevant staff. Position descriptions and performance development plans should explicitly include responsibilities for progressing structural reform, upholding genuine partnership, and delivering the Priority Reforms. Without this, cultural change across the system cannot be sustained.

**Parties:** Commonwealth Government, State/Territory Governments, Local Government

## b) Address the cultural load

The load carried by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector in relation to governments must be examined and areas of imbalance addressed.

Governments must recognise and understand the unique burden placed on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants who are often expected to carry cultural, relational and representational responsibilities on top of their formal roles. This includes addressing the emotional and cultural labour associated with navigating colonial systems while advocating for community. Agencies should co-design and implement specific supports and make sure workloads and expectations are realistic, not extractive.

Without addressing this cultural load, retention, wellbeing, and the effectiveness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership within government and the community-controlled sector will continue to be undermined.

**Parties:** Commonwealth Government, State/Territory Governments, Local Government

## c) Recognising First Nations' worldviews as separate from Western worldviews

In their *interpretation* and *implementation* of the National Agreement, Governments need to undertake a cultural and relational exercise, recognising First Nations' worldviews as separate from Western worldviews. This fundamental shift is required to gain a more holistic approach that emphasises the importance of living well across all stages of life. Greater interconnectedness and workable structures, particularly of those 'cross-cutting' areas, are urgently needed to guarantee the functioning of the Agreement reflects the lived experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

**Parties:** Commonwealth Government, State/Territory Governments, Local Government

## d) Local Government needs to step up to their Closing the Gap commitments under the National Agreement

There is an argument to be made for consideration of existing jurisdictional funding allocations dedicated to local government for recognising the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities so they are resourced to meaningfully contribute to the implementation of the National Agreement. Until sustained funding is provided, many local governments will remain unable to step into their responsibilities as genuine partners.

At the same time, local governments must strengthen their capability and cultural competence to engage respectfully with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. This includes building relationships, improving accountability, identifying and addressing all forms of racism, and embedding the Priority Reforms in local planning and decision-making processes. For local government peak bodies and many local governments, this will require examination of how to undertake this work in the absence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elected representatives or staff.

**Parties:** Commonwealth Government, State/Territory Governments, Local Government national and state/territory peak bodies, Local Government

## Recommendation Three: Reform funding systems

Structural reform will not occur without addressing the persistent under-resourcing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and the disproportionate accountability burden they carry. The following recommendations speak to the changes needed to realise this.

### **a) Resource Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations equitably to deliver on shared outcomes**

Funding must match the scope of responsibilities expected under the National Agreement. This includes core and sustainable funding that goes beyond short-term project delivery and supports long-term planning, governance, and workforce development. Governments should revise procurement and grant-making models to prioritise community control and localised decision-making, recognising that competition for funding undermines collaboration and self-determination.

**Parties:** Commonwealth Government, State/Territory Governments

## Recommendation Four: Implement the existing roadmap on monitoring and accountability

Strengthening accountability is essential to ensuring that implementation of the National Agreement is both transparent and transformative. Current approaches remain overly transactional and compliance driven. The following recommendations are necessary steps to redressing this.

### **a) Implement the Independent Mechanisms**

Prioritise the overdue work required under Clause 67 of the National Agreement that Government Parties each identify, develop or strengthen an independent mechanism to support, monitor and report on the transformation of mainstream agencies and institutions.

**Parties:** Commonwealth Government, State/Territory Governments, Coalition of Peaks, State/Territory Peak coalitions and councils

### **b) Shift from transactional to relational accountability**

Accountability processes should reflect genuine partnership. This means investing in relationship-building, feedback loops, and two-way learning, rather than relying solely on bureaucratic compliance mechanisms.

This also means that where possible, shared monitoring and evaluation should be guided by Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles and informed by community-led definitions of success.

**Parties:** Commonwealth Government, State/Territory Governments

## Recommendation Five: Initiate a community- controlled sector-led self-evaluation

The success of the National Agreement depends not only on government reform, but also on the continued strength and integrity of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector. As the sector grows in scale and responsibility, space must be made for reflection on whether its current structures, systems, and ways of working continue to reflect community priorities. The following recommendations will support this process.

### a) Undertake a self-evaluation process

The community-controlled sector should lead a self-reflective process to assess whether current structures, governance models and internal cultures continue to reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of working and community aspirations, or whether they have become overly aligned with mainstream government systems.

**Parties:** Coalition of Peaks, State/Territory Peak coalitions and councils, ACCOs

### b) Strengthen unity

Invest in efforts to strengthen unity and collective purpose across Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and their representative organisations, supporting shared strategy, trust-building, and coordinated advocacy.

**Parties:** Coalition of Peaks, State/Territory Peak coalitions and councils, ACCOs

### c) Build capacity and capability

Peaks should be resourced to strengthen the capability of their member organisations, particularly in relation to data use, infrastructure and evidence-informed policy engagement. This includes investing in community-controlled data systems in the absence of the proposed Bureau of Indigenous Data.

**Parties:** Coalition of Peaks, State/Territory Peak coalitions and councils, ACCOs

### d) Support cross-sector collaboration

Develop or strengthen peak body cross-sectoral structures to elevate intersecting policy areas including justice, child protection and disability, and to enable holistic, coordinated responses.

**Parties:** Coalition of Peaks, State/Territory Peak coalitions and councils

## Recommendation Six: Improve how information about Closing the Gap and the National Agreement outcomes are communicated by all Parties

Improving communication is critical to restoring trust, supporting accountability, and ensuring communities can meaningfully engage with the National Agreement. Clauses 97, 134, 135 and 136 of the Agreement all reference a communication strategy that has yet to be fulfilled in a meaningful way.

The following recommendations focus on building clear, accessible and culturally responsive communication pathways to achieve that.

### a) Communicate regularly

To restore trust and enable meaningful engagement, clear, consistent, and culturally appropriate communication about the National Agreement must reach the people and communities it is intended to benefit.

Parties must take responsibility for regularly communicating up to date information about the National Agreement, including what it is, what it seeks to achieve, how implementation is progressing and available mechanisms for engagement.

**Parties:** Commonwealth Government, State/Territory Governments, Local Government, Coalition of Peaks, State/Territory Peak coalitions and councils, ACCOs

### b) Communicate in ways preferred by community

A range of channels, including Indigenous media, community radio, visual materials, local leaders, and face-to-face engagement should be utilised to meet people where they are.

**Parties:** Commonwealth Government, State/Territory Governments, Local Government, Coalition of Peaks, State/Territory Peak coalitions and councils, ACCOs

### c) Communication must not be one-way

People need clear and visible entry points to engage with what is happening under the Agreement in their region and see how their voices and experiences are shaping decisions. Without this, there is a risk that the reforms will bypass the very communities they are meant to empower.

**Parties:** Commonwealth Government, State/Territory Governments, Local Government, Coalition of Peaks, State/Territory Peak coalitions and councils, ACCOs

## Recommendation Seven: Action Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Governance principles

Transforming data practices is central to achieving genuine partnership and self-determination under the National Agreement. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples must be supported to govern, interpret and use data in ways that reflect their priorities and ways of knowing. The following recommendations focus on the actions that are necessary to realise this.

### a) Embed and action Indigenous Data Sovereignty

Similar to the Productivity Commission Review recommendations, Governments must embed and action Indigenous Data Sovereignty (IDS) principles across the entire data lifecycle - from collection to use - and treat data as a core pillar of self-determination.

**Parties:** Commonwealth Government, State/Territory Governments, Coalition of Peaks, State/Territory Peak coalitions and councils, ACCOs

### b) Build community data capability and infrastructure

Resource and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations to understand and define what data matters to them, govern how it is used and build their own data infrastructure.

**Parties:** Commonwealth Government, State/Territory Governments, Coalition of Peaks, State/Territory Peak coalitions and councils, ACCOs

### c) Share data as a matter of priority

Governments must share access to regional and local data as a matter of equity and in a timely manner to enable informed, community-led participation. Data access must also be used to empower, not extract from, communities.

**Parties:** Commonwealth Government, State/Territory Governments, Coalition of Peaks, State/Territory Peak coalitions and councils, ACCOs

### d) Simplify and demystify data

Priority Reform Four implementation must meet ACCOs and communities where they are. This means simplifying processes, demystifying data and building data literacy through education and culturally grounded support.

**Parties:** Commonwealth Government, State/Territory Governments, Coalition of Peaks, State/Territory Peak coalitions and councils, ACCOs

## Recommendation Eight: Examine areas for future inclusion in the National Agreement

While Closing the Gap targets were developed to be purposefully staged, there is a strong argument to include areas that are of immediate importance, but which are not currently reflected in the National Agreement.

### a) Elders and older people target

There is a growing lack of interface between closing the life expectancy gap and services for Elders and other ageing community members. A 'whole of life' approach to targets could alleviate some areas becoming urgent during the life of ten year Closing the Gap agreements. In particular, the Parties should consider whether the inclusion of aged care targets, similar to the focus on primary health targets within the National Agreement, would assist in bringing greater monitoring and accountability to ensure our older people are able to access culturally safe, high quality aged care services.

**Parties:** Commonwealth Government, State/Territory Governments, Local Government, Coalition of Peaks, State/Territory Peak coalitions and councils, ACCOs

### b) Climate change

Since the original drafting of Closing the Gap, climate change has become increasingly present and impactful for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Consideration is required on the inclusion of targets to address urgent matters related to climate change based on community priorities.

## Recommendation Nine: Consider opportunities for strengthening the National Agreement

To realise the full intent of the National Agreement, greater attention must be paid to strengthening underdeveloped areas of implementation. In particular, the following two areas should be prioritised by the Parties.

### **a) Strengthen the visibility and recognition of Stolen Generations survivors**

All Parties to the National Agreement should take steps to ensure that the histories, experiences and ongoing needs of Stolen Generations survivors are made visible across implementation. This includes:

#### **Freeing up space within national narratives and commemorative platforms**

Consider how existing frameworks under the National Agreement and the National Apology can be used to amplify the visibility of Stolen Generations stories. This includes reviewing event programming, messaging and ceremonial priorities to ensure cultural space is made available for survivor recognition and truth-telling.

#### **Embedding Stolen Generations visibility in cultural, data and policy structures**

Parties should consider:

1. Strengthening clause 21 of the National Agreement by explicitly recognising the cultural repair and intergenerational healing needs of Stolen Generations survivors.
2. Prioritising the disaggregation of data about stolen generation survivors under clause 93 and ensuring that relevant data collection and analysis includes information on survivor experiences and outcomes, as part of a broader rights-based and trauma-informed approach.

**Parties:** Commonwealth Government, State/Territory Governments, Local Government, Coalition of Peaks, State/Territory Peak coalitions and councils, ACCOs

### **b) Strengthen the relationship between the Policy and Place-Based Partnerships**

The relationship between Policy Partnerships and Place-Based Partnerships would benefit from a clear commitment by the Parties to ensure that they work in concert with one another. This would involve clarifying their respective roles and establishing mechanisms for ongoing coordination.



## Priority Reform Findings

In addition to the key findings, below are the findings specific to each Priority Reform area.

Priority Reform One Shared Decision-Making	Priority Reform Two Building Community Controlled Sector	Priority Reform Three Transforming Government Organisations	Priority Reform Four Shared Access to Data and Information
When done right, formal partnership structures do create the partnerships outcome Priority Reform One envisages.	Funding cycles are inadequate and overly burdensome. Despite clause 45 of the National Agreement, short term funding and reporting requirements are placing undue strain on ACCOs. A cohesive strategy that details sustainable investment is needed.	Priority Reform Three is not progressing due to a lack of systemic approaches, widespread inconsistency or structured approaches to implementation.	The core commitment to shared data partnerships is not yet being fulfilled. There is a need for data to be more accessible and to provide more contextual information beyond existing dashboards. The community is calling for greater opportunities to interpret, interrogate and govern data.
It's time to come into 'right relationship'. This calls for a reconception of the relationship between governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to include shared authority and mutual recognition.	Greater efforts are needed across cross-cutting sectors – housing, disability, justice.	Racism is the core issue: Governments are yet to begin to address the identification and elimination of racism in any substantive way.	Lack of progress on data access and capability is undermining self-determination. Timely, disaggregated and community level data are needed. A failure to achieve this limits the ability of communities to influence decision-making.
Introspection on the part of all Parties is needed to identify inhibitors to progress. Communities have told this Review that shared decision-making, and the relinquishment of government control is needed across all areas.	Self-determination is being stifled by a lack of respect and sustained government investment. An over-emphasis on reporting shows a lack of trust in ACCOs. Targets and timeframes are focused on government rather than community agendas.  A nationally consistent definition of ACCO's is needed to ensure organisations are initiated and governed by as well as accountable to the communities they serve.	Shifting from cultural safety tick a box to meaningful systemic change requires moving beyond basic levels of competency at the individual level to embracing the need for change across a continuum, including across systems and behaviours.	Structural and systemic barriers persist to prevent effective data sharing and collaboration. Structural and cultural shifts are needed within government to transform the role of data in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Priority Reform One Shared Decision-Making	Priority Reform Two Building Community Controlled Sector	Priority Reform Three Transforming Government Organisations	Priority Reform Four Shared Access to Data and Information
<p>Shared decision-making depends on equitable resourcing. ACCOs are currently operating at reduced capacity while governments control funding streams and timeframes. Staffing, funding, governance and other supports are needed.</p>	<p>Accountability is two-way and must occur beyond annual reporting. Enhanced accountability mechanisms are needed to ensure improved transparency and progress.</p>	<p>ACCOs and Peaks are Holding up the sky: There are imbalances in responsibilities, commitments and resourcing. There is a lack of sustained investment and coordinated action on the part of governments.</p>	<p>Indigenous data sovereignty must be embedded across systems, from collection and storage to interpretation and use. This should become the standard for ethical and inclusive governance rather than a ‘niche’ concern.</p> <p>A Bureau of Indigenous Data that is indigenous led is a step in the right direction.</p>
<p>The vision isn’t shared in practice. Clarity is needed on what shared decision-making looks like as well as the distinct roles and responsibilities of all parties across the Agreement.</p>	<p>Workforce reform is needed across all sectors and particularly remote areas. There must be an emphasis on long term career opportunities over short term contracts. A strategy devised by the Coalition of Peaks is needed to address the emergence of new entities in the space to ensure adequate accreditation and culturally safe care.</p>	<p>Service delivery partnership is moving at a glacial pace, and positive movements are not visible. Transformation is being held back by a systemic lack of investment, whole of government engagement and inconsistent approaches.</p>	<p>Community capability is uneven and under-resourced. Training resources, culturally appropriate methodologies and Indigenous-led data governance are essential to the effective adoption of Indigenous data sovereignty principles.</p>
<p>COVID ways of working need broader application. The efforts of the Aboriginal health sector were regularly pointed to as best practice that must become standard ways of working with and across all sectors.</p>	<p>Combined national and jurisdictional efforts are lacking. The three levels of government rarely work in unison to support ACCOs, with very limited efforts being report about local government.</p>	<p>Current accountability approaches are not sufficient for systemic transformation. Independent accountability mechanisms are urgently needed.</p>	<p>The quality and scope of available data is a critical gap. Aggregation must occur beyond state and territory levels to reflect what is happening and why at the rural, regional and remote level.</p> <p>This level of disaggregation can better assist to determine levels of need and service access to those communities most in need.</p>
<p>Lack of communication is causing distrust and confusion at the local level. This must occur regularly and transparently to ensure local communities are kept informed of progress.</p>	<p>ACCOs are leading the way and have adapted their governance, administrative and programmatic initiatives at their own cost to meet the needs of their communities under the National Agreement.</p>	<p>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people want to be able to function with full cultural identity with increased support from governments.</p>	<p>Whole-of-Government commitment is still missing. Inconsistent, siloed and risk averse practices are limiting progress against Priority Reform Four. A unified rather than piecemeal approach is needed.</p>

Priority Reform One Shared Decision-Making	Priority Reform Two Building Community Controlled Sector	Priority Reform Three Transforming Government Organisations	Priority Reform Four Shared Access to Data and Information
<p>The linkages between the policy and place-based partnerships need better articulation and maintenance. A more co-ordinated system of shared decision-making will ensure national priorities are better informed by local realities.</p>		<p>Community led, not just informed engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and not substituted by consultation or information provision.</p>	
		<p>There is a lack of information about Closing the Gap and the National Agreement that is contributing to negativity and perceived slow progress, and limited awareness of positive outcomes or work being undertaken beyond peoples' immediate areas of expertise. This is a result of both government approaches to communicating with First Nations communities and a siloed approach to seeking information by community-controlled organisations.</p>	
		<p>The age-old problems of siloed approaches and lack of successful inter-governmental approaches continue to plague Closing the Gap implementation. Strong leadership is required to address these issues and implement solutions.</p>	
		<p>A lack of political bipartisanship on Indigenous Affairs is impacting the long term and sustainable success of Closing the Gap. Strong and sustained political leadership is required in addition to that from the bureaucracy if positive outcomes are to be achieved.</p>	



# SECTION 1

## The Beginning and the Middle



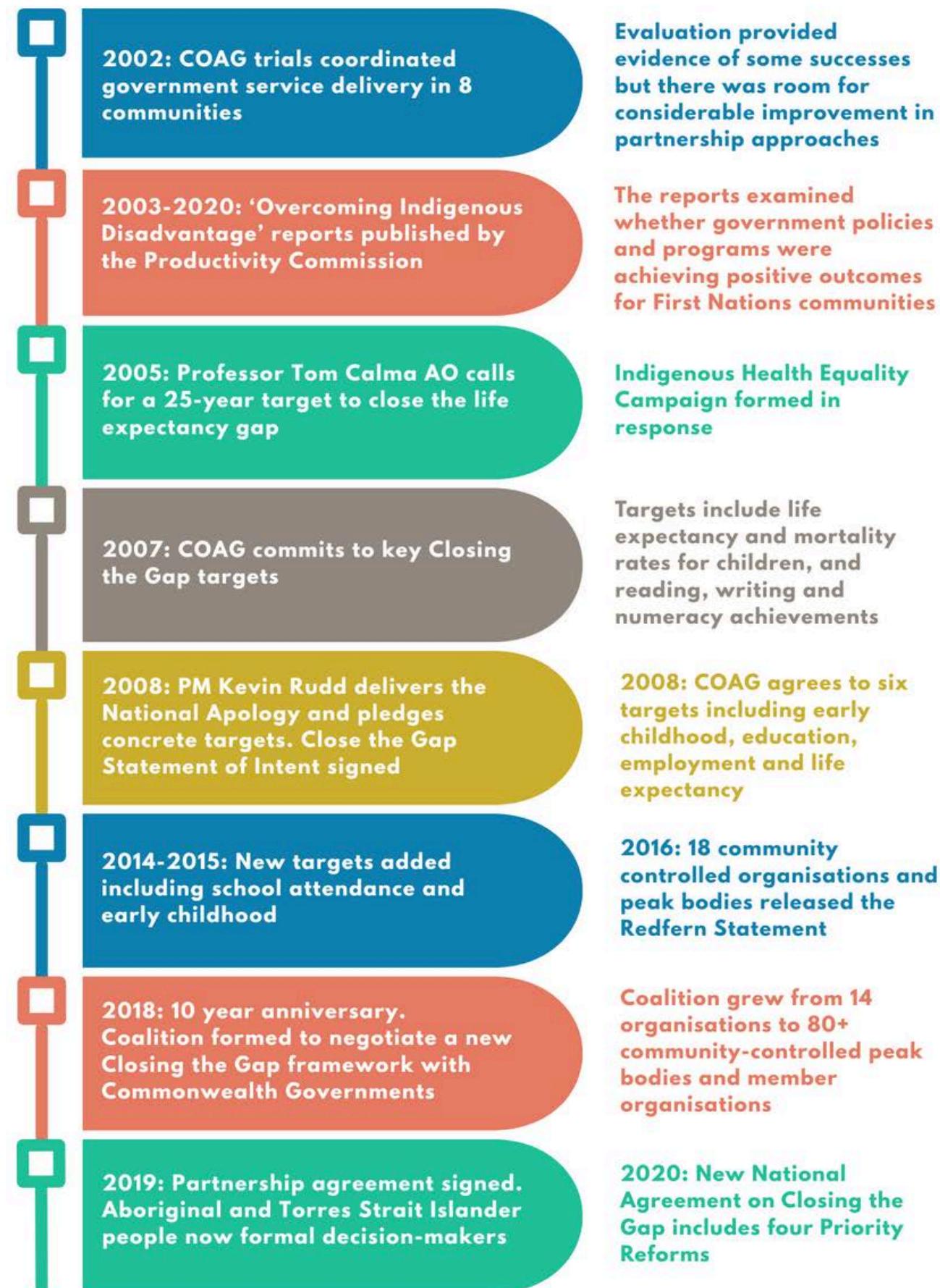


## 1.1 The promise of Closing the Gap

The introduction of Closing the Gap was a response to the call from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Professor Tom Calma AO, in the 2005 Social Justice Report, for Australian governments to commit to achieving equality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in health and life expectancy within 25 years. This followed years of community advocacy. Professor Calma recommended the setting of benchmarks and targets with the full participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, at the national, state/territory and regional levels.<sup>[1]</sup> At this point, data from 1996-2001 estimated a difference of approximately 17 years between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life expectancy and that of non-Indigenous people.<sup>[2]</sup> As a result, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) formed the Indigenous Health Equality Campaign, urging the closing of the life expectancy gap.

Diagram One below provides a summary of the Closing the Gap milestones. A detailed explanation follows.

## Diagram One: Closing the Gap milestones



In 2002, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) initiated trials of coordinated government to find new ways to work together on service delivery approaches in eight Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Evaluation provided evidence of some successes but noted there was room for considerable improvement in partnership approaches with community. Specifically, that government agencies needed to improve their capabilities to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and coordination across agencies.<sup>[3]</sup> The same year, COAG established the Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision supported by the Productivity Commission to commence reporting on indicators of Indigenous disadvantage. The Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators report series began in 2003 until 2020, examining whether government policies and programs were achieving positive outcomes for First Nations communities.<sup>[4]</sup>

In 2007, the Council of Australian Governments pledged to close key life expectancy gaps, halve the mortality rate gap for children and halve the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievements for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The 2008 National Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples (the Apology) by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd focused on the laws and policies of successive governments that had resulted in the forced removal of First Nations children from their families between 1910 and 1970 – known as the Stolen Generations. This dark history impacted an estimated 1 in 3 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and resulted in 'inflicted and profound grief, suffering and loss'<sup>[5]</sup>. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and the Commonwealth Government were intent on the Apology leading to meaningful change in the lives of Indigenous peoples and communities to ensure 'the great symbolism is accompanied by an even greater substance'<sup>[6]</sup>. The startling life expectancy gap was a wake up call that business-as-usual approaches toward Indigenous Australians were not working.

In his address to Parliament for the Apology, the Prime Minister said:

*Our challenge for the future is to ...embrace a new partnership between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians...The core of this partnership for the future is closing the gap ... on life expectancy, educational achievement and employment opportunities. This new partnership on closing the gap will set concrete targets for the future: within a decade to halve the widening gap in literacy, numeracy and employment outcomes and opportunities for Indigenous children, within a decade to halve the appalling gap in infant mortality rates between indigenous and non-indigenous children and, within a generation, to close the equally appalling 17 year life gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous when it comes to overall life expectancy.<sup>[7]</sup>*

One month later, the Prime Minister and Opposition Leader signed the Close the Gap Statement of Intent at the Close the Gap Campaign's National Indigenous Health Equality Summit. This committed the Commonwealth to the following actions:

- Develop a comprehensive, long-term plan of action, targeted to need, evidence based and capable of addressing the existing inequalities in health services, in order to achieve equality of health status and life expectancy between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians by 2030, and
- Ensure the full participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their representative bodies in all aspects of addressing their health needs.<sup>[8]</sup>

In November that year, COAG approved the National Indigenous Reform Agreement (the NIRA), which set out six Closing the Gap targets to:

- Close the life expectancy gap within a generation
- Halve the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five within a decade
- Ensure access to early childhood education for all Indigenous four year olds in remote communities within five years
- Halve the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievements for children within a decade
- Halve the gap for Indigenous students in Year 12 attainment rates by 2020, and
- Halve the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a decade.[9]

This was a historic commitment at the time, representing a new way of governmental working for the Commonwealth and State/Territory Governments supported by unprecedented inter-jurisdictional co-operation. In 2014 COAG agreed to the addition of a target on school attendance, and the following year the addition of an early childhood target.

But efforts did not lead to the change needed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. In her address to the 2025 Assembly Forum hosted by the Coalition of Peaks, Joint Council Co-Chair and Convenor of the Coalition of Peaks, Aunt Patricia Turner AM said:

*Instead, over the next decade we saw governments attempting to take action to Close the Gap that was underpinned by a framework focused on our disadvantage rather than our strengths, and where others were making decisions about us and the policies and programs we needed.[10]*

In 2016, ahead of four of the seven targets expiring, COAG committed to a Closing the Gap framework refresh, and to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In June that year, 18 community-controlled organisations and peak bodies released the Redfern Statement including:

- National Congress of Australia's First Peoples
- First Peoples Disability Network (FPDN)
- National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (NATSILS)
- National Aboriginal Community-controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO)
- National Family Violence Prevention Legal Services (NFVPLS) Forum
- Secretariat for National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC)
- Australian Indigenous Doctor's Association (AIDA)
- Congress of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nurses and Midwives (CATSINaM)
- Indigenous Allied Health Australia (IAHA)
- Jaanimili Aboriginal Services & Development Unit – Communities, NSW & ACT
- National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers Association (NATSIHWA)
- National Association of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Physiotherapists
- NGAOARA – Child and Adolescent Wellbeing
- The Healing Foundation
- The Lowitja Institute
- Victorian Aboriginal Community-controlled Health Organisation (VACCO)
- Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health Service, and
- Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Protection Peak (QATSICCP).[11]

The Redfern Statement called on the Federal Government to retain and establish national representation to facilitate meaningful engagement and improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander outcomes in health and justice.[12]

Between 2017 – 2018, the Commonwealth Government hosted 29 national roundtables and a series of meetings and informal discussions with over 1,200 people.[13] In February 2018, marking the tenth anniversary of Closing the Gap, a Special Gathering of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders agreed that the next phase of the agenda ‘must be guided by the principles of empowerment and self-determination’.[14]

In February 2018, a Special Gathering of Aboriginal and Torres Strait leaders met to coincide with the first COAG meeting of that year. The Special Gathering called out that the best progress over the previous ten years had occurred in those target areas where Aboriginal and Torres Strait led design, and implementation had been included from the beginning. The Special Gathering, considering the refresh, also pointed out the absence of clear accountability mechanisms for targets that would enable a meaningful role for Aboriginal and Torres Strait peoples to monitor progress. The Gathering agreed that the existing six targets be retained and critically reviewed and additional targets on the following areas be included:

- families, children and youth
- housing
- justice, including youth justice
- health
- economic development
- culture and language
- education
- healing, and
- eliminating racism and systemic discrimination.[15]

In their public Statement, the Special Gathering called for the next phase of Closing the Gap to be ‘guided by the principles of empowerment and self-determination as articulated in the 2008 Closing the Gap Statement of Intent’ and be ‘a community led, strength based strategy’.[16] In December 2018, Commonwealth Governments committed to developing a genuine, formal partnership with the community-controlled sectors, and through this, a new Closing the Gap policy would be agreed.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities considered the government consultations undertaken by the Commonwealth Government superficial, seeing many of their recommendations ignored. Commitments from governments to work differently with them had not been backed by meaningful change, and no specific actions were being discussed that they could see would make positive changes to their lives and those of their communities. Importantly, they were concerned that governments would walk away from the intergovernmental arrangements that had brought the national integrated policy strategy needed to address outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait peoples.

By late 2018, 14 community-controlled organisations had mobilised to push for a genuine partnership that went beyond just consultation. The organisations included:

- Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association (AIDA)
- Congress of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nurses and Midwives (CATSiNAM)
- Central Land Council (CLC)
- New South Wales Land Council (NSWALC)
- The National Native Title Council (NNTC)
- The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers Association (NATSIHWA)
- Northern Land Council (NLC)
- The Healing Foundation
- National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services
- Aboriginal Medical Services Northern Territory (AMSANT)
- Indigenous Allied Health Australia (IAHA)
- The Victorian Federation of Traditional Owners
- National Aboriginal Community-controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO), and
- National Congress of Australia's Peoples (which had been established and funded in 2010 under the Gillard Government but defunded by the Abbott Government in 2013 and by this point was operating on residual funds only and subsequently disbanded).

The group of peaks had earlier been galvanised by a June 2017 COAG Communique stating that COAG leaders wanted to work in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. [17]

The initial 14 organisations grew to almost 40 as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled bodies came together and created, for the first time, a formal Coalition to negotiate a new Closing the Gap framework with Commonwealth Governments. The Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations (Coalition of Peaks) now has a membership of more than 80 community-controlled peak bodies and member organisations representing some 800 local, community-controlled and focused organisations.[18]

It should be acknowledged that the Coalition of Peaks was formed and negotiates on behalf of their membership and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities as the national peak body representing community-controlled organisations focused on improving service delivery and transforming mainstream services to address community needs through Closing the Gap. The 2004 abolition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) had seen the transferral of responsibility for programs and services to 'mainstream' Commonwealth agencies.

Other colonial-settler nations have bodies for Indigenous peoples chosen by Indigenous communities including but not limited to:

- Sámi Parliaments in Norway, Sweden and Finland
- Inuit Circumpolar Conference (ICC): an international representative organisation for Inuit people in circumpolar regions including Canada, Greenland, Russia and the USA.
- Assembly of First Nations Canada (AFN)
- New Caledonia Customary Senate
- New Zealand Māori Council
- South African National House of Traditional Leaders
- Maine State Legislative three non-voting Native American members representing the Penobscot since approximately 1823, the Passamaquoddy since 1842 and the Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians since 2012[19], and
- National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) in the USA.

A number of international legislature provisions are also made for Indigenous or ethnic minority representation including reserved seat systems in Taiwan, New Zealand, India and Slovenia; ethnic candidate quotas in Singapore; the ‘Best Loser’ system in Mauritius designed to ensure all minority groups are represented in parliament; and geographically-based minority representation in Canada’s Territory and Quebecois.[20]

At the national level, Australia has had previous elected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representative bodies as follows:

- National Aboriginal Consultative Committee (NACC) (1973 – 77)
- National Aboriginal Conference (NAC) (1977-85)
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) (1989-2005), and
- National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples (2009-19).[21]

There are examples at the state/territory level that currently include:

- ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body (ATSIEB)
- First Peoples’ Assembly of Victoria
- First Nations Voice to Parliament (SA)
- Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA) (Commonwealth Government Statutory Authority), and
- Aboriginal Shire Councils in Queensland (QLD) and Northern Territory (NT) all Aboriginal councils (local governments in remote Aboriginal communities).

A Partnership Agreement on Closing the Gap was negotiated and came into effect in March 2019. This was the first time in the 11 years of Closing the Gap that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were formally part of decision-making with governments on developing, implementing and monitoring and reviewing Closing the Gap. This was also the first time that local government became a party to a Closing the Gap agreement through the national peak body – Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) - as a COAG member.

A new ten-year National Agreement on Closing the Gap was then negotiated, with a set of priority reforms to change the way governments work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the basis. These Priority Reforms are based on what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been saying for decades are needed to improve life outcomes. The Coalition of Peaks tested the Priority Reforms and how they should be actioned through extensive engagement with community nationally. The result was overwhelming support for the three proposed priority reforms, plus an additional, fourth priority reform on shared access to and use of data to support decision making.[22]

These engagements themselves constituted a new approach to Closing the Gap. While Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had been active over decades telling government that they wanted to be listened to, this was the first time a process had been put in place that enabled them to be heard. Through those engagements, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across the country continued to tell the story of what is needed to improve their lives, drawing on their strengths, and demonstrating their support for the Priority Reforms.

The final Priority Reforms are:

- Priority Reform One: Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision-making
- Priority Reform Two: Building the Community-Controlled Sector

- Priority Reform Three: Transforming Government Organisations, and
- Priority Reform Four: Shared Access to Data and Information at a Regional Level.[23]

## 1.2 Story of the Review

### National Agreement

By the final 2020 Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Report, the Working Group overseeing it included three representatives from Coalition of Peaks. This final report identified a series of common characteristics that appeared successful in improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people:

- addressing racism and discrimination in the Australian community, through structural changes, and building knowledge and providing education
- enabling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to share in decision-making about things that affect them
- addressing laws, policies, and practices that operate to the detriment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- ongoing government investment, collaboration and coordination, and
- ensuring access to effective culturally safe services, at the right time and suited to the local context. [24]

That year, former Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, acknowledged that the NIRA – a government document developed without any input from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and their organisations – had not listened to community and failed to follow a partnership approach:

*Despite the best intentions...Closing the Gap has never really been a partnership with Indigenous people. We perpetuated an ingrained way of thinking, passed down over two centuries and more, and it was the belief that we knew better than our Indigenous peoples. We don't. We also thought we understood their problems better than they did. We don't. They live them. We must see the gap we wish to close, not from our viewpoint, but from the viewpoint of Indigenous Australians before we can hope to close it and make a real difference, and that is the change we are now making, together with Indigenous Australians through this process.[25]*

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap (the National Agreement), signed in July 2020, represents an historic commitment by all governments—federal, state and territory, and local—and the Coalition of Peaks. It seeks to address long-standing inequalities between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and other Australians. This partnership aims to transform how governments work with Indigenous communities, committing partners to systemic transformation. It moves beyond goals and targets toward forming a different relationship where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people lead the change and governments listen, act and are accountable for their actions.

It also relies on strong partnerships with the Coalition of Peaks and community-controlled organisations and Indigenous-led monitoring of its effectiveness. It marked a significant shift from past approaches, moving from government-driven targets to partnerships based on the principles of self-determination and shared decision making. By prioritising structural reform, the National Agreement acknowledges that meaningful change requires addressing systemic inequality and racism, not merely improving service delivery.

The National Agreement commits all partners to new ways of working, a shift from doing things to or for communities, to doing things with communities. It was designed to be a genuine partnership, led by a new set of priority reforms and associated targets for Closing the Gap. Accountability is a key feature, with the need for clear mechanisms that guarantees progress that is not simply performative, but meaningful and measurable.

The overarching goal of the Agreement is to “overcome the entrenched inequality faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people so that their life outcomes are equal to those of all Australians.”[26] This includes addressing disparities in areas such as life expectancy, education, employment, and housing, while fostering cultural preservation and empowerment.

The four Priority Reforms seek to drive structural change in the relationship between governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. They are as follows:

*Diagram Two: Four Priority Reforms Outcomes and Actions*

Priority Reform One Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision-Making	Priority Reform Two Building the Community- Controlled Sector	Priority Reform Three Transforming Government Organisations	Priority Reform Four Shared Access to Data and Information at a Regional Level
<b>Outcome:</b> Partnerships between governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations are developed and maintained to improve policy and program outcomes.	<b>Outcome:</b> Indigenous-led organisations deliver services that are more effective, culturally appropriate, and empowering for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.	<b>Outcome:</b> Government agencies and institutions actively work to eliminate systemic racism and embed cultural safety.	<b>Outcome:</b> Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities can access, use, and leverage data to inform local decision-making and hold governments accountable.
<b>Action:</b> Governments commit to enabling shared decision-making at the national, state and regional levels through formal partnership arrangements.	<b>Action:</b> Governments will fund and build the capacity of Aboriginal Community- Controlled Organisations to deliver key services.	<b>Action:</b> Governments will embed reforms to make public institutions and policies accountable for improving outcomes for Indigenous Australians.	<b>Action:</b> Governments will improve the availability, quality, and transparency of data shared with Indigenous communities.

Source: Commonwealth of Australia, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (2020) National Agreement on Closing the Gap

The Agreement includes 17 socioeconomic targets across critical areas such as health, education, economic participation, housing, and justice. Key examples include:

- Reducing rates of child mortality and incarceration.
- Increasing school attendance and attainment levels.
- Closing gaps in employment and life expectancy.[27]

In 2022, two additional socioeconomic targets were agreed upon Community Infrastructure and Inland Waters and Sea Country.[28]

## **Sector Strengthening Plans**

Under clause 49 of the National Agreement Parties are committed to identifying sectors for joint national sector strengthening focus every three years. The first sectors are:

- Early Childhood Care and Development
- Health
- Housing, and
- Disability.

Each area has a Sector Strengthening Plan aligned with the community-controlled sector elements in the Agreement:

- Sustained capacity building and investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations
- Dedicated and identified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce (that complements a range of other professions and expertise) with wage parity
- Strong governance and policy development influencing capability supported by a Peak Body, and
- A dedicated, reliable, and consistent funding model.[29]

The Sector Strengthening Plans developed were led by each national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak body with their corresponding Commonwealth department and include practical outcomes over the three years.[30]

## **Monitoring and accountability**

The Agreement emphasises transparency and accountability, with clause 67 committing Government Parties to 'each identify, develop or strengthen an independent mechanism to support, monitor and report on government transformation' by 2023.[31]

The National Agreement requires a series of reporting requirements, including:

- A publicly available dashboard updated at least annually to inform progress on Closing the Gap (Section A, clauses 116-117),
- annual reports on progress by each Party (Commonwealth, States/Territories, Local Governments and Coalition of Peaks) (Section 9B, clauses 118-120), and
- the Productivity Commission to undertake a three yearly progress review of progress against the priority reforms, targets, indicators and trajectories (Section 9C, clauses 121-124).[32]

Section 9D (clauses 125-128) also calls for an independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Led Review to be undertaken within twelve months of each three-yearly Productivity Commission review of progress review of progress against the priority reforms, targets, indicators and trajectories.[33]

The Joint Council is then required to provide a formal response to each review within six months of receiving them (Section 9E, clauses 129 and 130). Each of these publicly available responses from Joint Council can recommend amendments to the National Agreement, comment on jurisdictional progress and make suggestions for future approaches.[34]

### **Governance structures**

In December 2018, COAG agreed to the establishment of a Ministerial Council on Closing the Gap *“with representation from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through their representatives.”*[35] This was a direct action to support the Partnership Agreement on Closing the Gap signed in 2019.

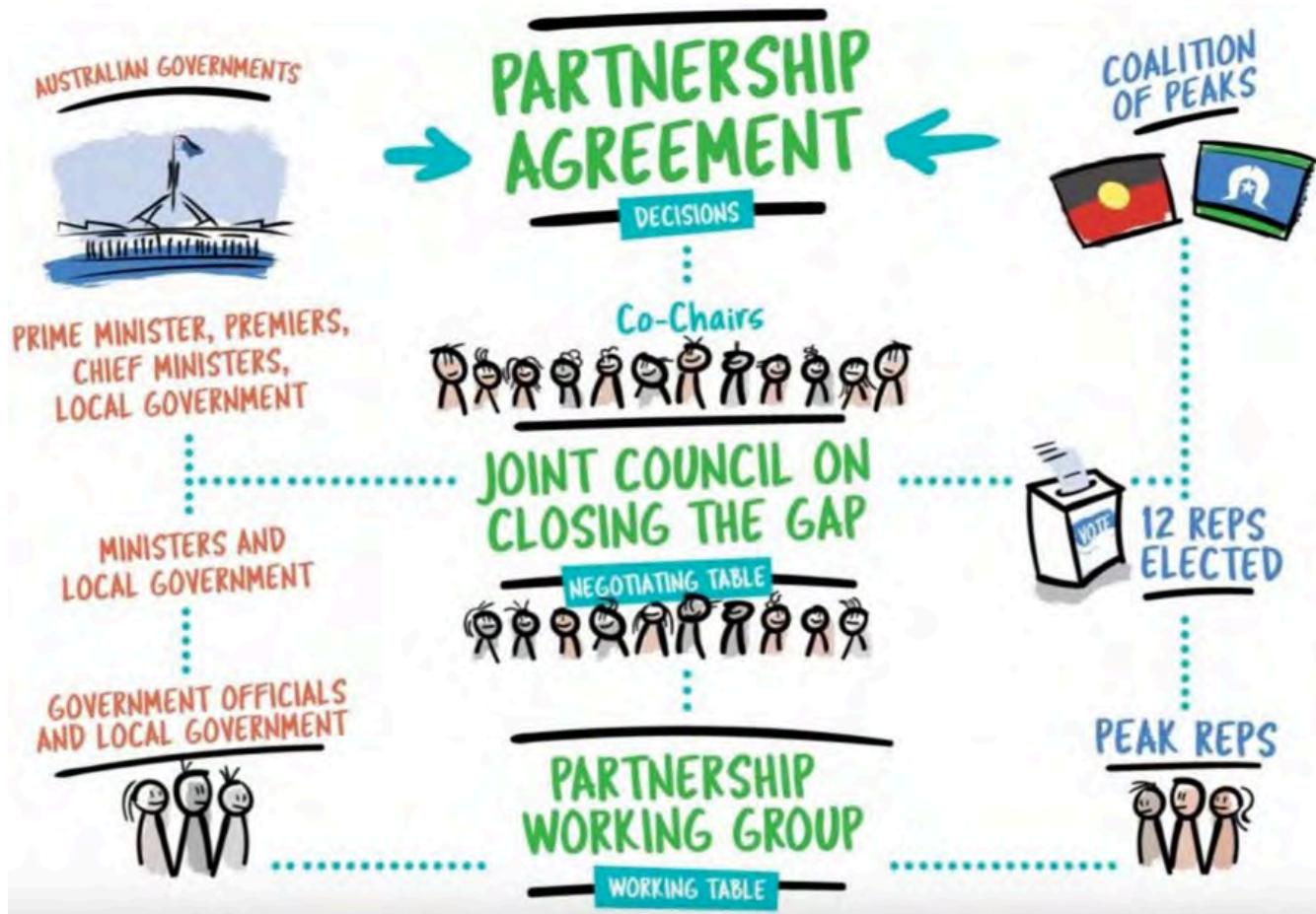
This became the Joint Council on Closing the Gap which is co-chaired by the Commonwealth Minister for Indigenous Australians and a representative from Coalition of Peaks. Its membership is made up of one minister from each jurisdiction, a representative from the ALGA, the Chair and 12 representatives from Coalition of Peaks. Joint Council meets two to three times per year and is responsible for monitoring implementation of the Agreement and its progress.[36]

The Partnership Working Group (PWG) supports Joint Council and includes senior government officials from each jurisdiction, ALGA and Coalition of Peaks representatives. It is co-chaired by a senior official and the lead convenor of Coalition of Peaks. PWG meets regularly – every six to eight weeks. It is responsible for the negotiated delivery of action based on the Joint Council workplan, supporting Joint Council through developing policy positions, papers and provision of advice, resolving issues and responding to Joint Council requests.[37]

A drafting group is comprised of government officials and Coalition of Peaks representatives supports PWG through the preparation of papers. The National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) is the secretariat for both Joint Council and PWG. Both bodies are able to form working groups on specific issues or areas of work.[38]

Diagram Three below maps these structures of the National Agreement. However, the National Agreement also includes two additional structures to support partnership actions: Policy Partnerships, to promote a comprehensive approach to agreed policy priority areas (Clause 38) and Place-Based Partnership to support local initiatives in six locations (Clause 39).

Diagram Three: Mechanisms of the Partnership Agreement



Source: Coalition of Peaks, Members Portal, [National Agreement, Governance](#), accessed 10 February 2025

### 1.3 Scope and purpose of the Review

In late December 2024, Jumbunna Research, the research arm of the Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research (Jumbunna) at UTS, was engaged to undertake the inaugural Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led independent review of Closing the Gap (the Review) as directed by the National Agreement under Section D (Clauses 125 - 128).

The aim of the Review is, for the first time, to report on the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities who have been engaged in the implementation of the National Agreement by all governments, particularly its Priority Reforms.

In line with Section D, the scope for the Review was as follows:

- Assessing the extent to which people and communities have shared in decision-making on policies and programs that have a significant impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and incorporating their perspectives on:
- The extent to which they are aware of the National Agreement and what it seeks to achieve
- Whether power is being shared between governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, governance arrangements and communities as equal partners (and enablers and challenges to doing so)
- How all governments and community-controlled organisations, including peak bodies, have adapted to new ways of working together as required by the Agreement

- The level of alignment between expectations and reality regarding the new way of working
- The impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities of these new ways of working.
- Assessing changes in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives from the original engagements that informed the National Agreement and Priority Reforms
- Highlighting the findings and recommendations of the Productivity Commission Review and how this relates to the lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- Providing recommendations on additional actions that are necessary for Parties to accelerate progress on the Priority Reforms – these recommendations to inform consideration by parties to the Closing the Gap Agreement in 2025 of additional partnership actions required to deliver on the Priority Reforms (clauses 41, 57, 68 and 77 of the National Agreement)
- Providing any other recommendations or the Joint Council to support ongoing implementation of the Agreement, and
- Testing preliminary findings and recommendations with delegates at the Assembly.

## Review Governance

A Closing the Gap Review and Assembly Steering Committee (the Steering Committee) was established to primarily oversee the convening of the Coalition of Peaks' facilitated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Assembly on Closing the Gap (the Assembly) which was required under clause 127 of the Agreement. The Steering Committee was also tasked with ensuring the Assembly was linked with the Review in the way envisaged under the National Agreement. The Steering Committee was made up of representatives of the following parties to the National Agreement - Coalition of Peaks, the Commonwealth Government and the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA).

## Limitations

The most significant limitation for the Review was the five month timeline provided by Joint Council to undertake what is, realistically, at minimum, a 12-18 month process. Time constraints limited the Review from inception and planning stages through to final reporting. This impacted in a number of ways, most importantly:

- The ability for Jumbunna to spend an appropriate and respectful length of time raising awareness of the Review among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander bodies and communities.
- The level of reach that could be delivered under those circumstances and the ability to listen to people's experiences was impeded across all the policy areas.

Every effort was made within the timeframe provided to apply the methodology designed on national First Nations ethical guidelines, but there was an impact on the number of people able to participate in the Review. However, cultural protocols and traditional techniques such as deep listening take time and future consideration must be given for the timeframe provided to future Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander independent reviewers.

Time constraints also meant that what is included here should be read as illustrative and not exhaustive of all experiences and views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Testing preliminary findings and recommendations with delegates at the Assembly as part of the Review scope could not occur due to the timeline of the Review activities and when the Assembly was held. However, as with the Review proper, there was very strong correlation across the data collected and this was able to be considered against the Assembly data. Preliminary findings were instead tested with the Steering Committee and the Partnership Working Group.

This is the first time an independent, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Review of Closing the Gap has taken place. This report should be considered a starting point and a tool to raise awareness of, and interest in, the next Review in three years.

## **About Jumbunna**

Jumbunna's Indigenous-led work is guided by one central belief: that it should be driven by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and contribute to their strengths, sustainability, and wellbeing, and focused on the principles of self-determination, impact for change, transformation to address historic structural problems and barriers, being Indigenous-led, and using research methodologies designed to incorporate cultural values and protocols and prioritising Indigenous voices.

## **1.4 Approach and Methodology**

The fundamental difference between the two Closing the Gap reviews required under the National Agreement is the opportunity provided for this independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led review to capture and elevate the lived First Nations experiences of the Closing the Gap implementation.

Jumbunna's use of Indigenous Research Methods and the foundational centring of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experiences and insights as part of this approach is fundamental to ensuring the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led review is not simply a replication of the work of the Productivity Commission. Where the Productivity Commission's review offers a robust analysis from the perspective of non-Indigenous institutions employing non-Indigenous approaches, this review was the opportunity to add deep qualitative research to explore and understand lived experience of those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.

This review should not, however, be considered a comprehensive account of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander views and experiences of Closing the Gap. As outlined above at Limitations, the constraints of the five month period provided to undertake and complete the Review meant that not everyone who should have been involved has been able to be. Budget limitations also meant that face to face listening at the community level was confined to the six Place-Based Partnership communities. However, the combination of the Assembly Forum of 200 delegates from across Australia and a targeted engagement process has meant an appropriate representative sample of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and experiences sit at the heart of this Review. The establishment of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led independent review is itself indicative of the broader structural issues raised here, and is another example of systems prioritising government-led approaches, demonstrating structural bias wherein Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander processes and perspectives are marginalised, and how this permeates structures, resourcing and processes.

As outlined in more detail below, this Review privileges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives as directed by the scope, and should be read with that in mind. For some, this may mean it reads as polemic. That is not the intent. The sole intention was for the Review to focus on strengths that can make genuine impacts, changes and outputs, and honours the central role of Story and the power of narratives prioritising community voices of Indigenous sovereignty, strength and vitality. The Review acted as a tool for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to voice their experiences and knowledge about the National Agreement, and how Parties are adapting to the changes required by the Priority Reforms, and how they are working together. This required calling out the barriers and blockages, and pointing to solutions for how to move forward.

## **Approach**

Jumbunna's approach to consultation meant the process was culturally appropriate, empowering, and respectful, and targeted to generating outcomes that are reflective of and beneficial to the community. The methodology was designed to be culturally responsive and grounded in principles that honour what was said, experiences shared, and aspirations highlighted by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The notion of objectivity was addressed in the development of the Jumbunna approach to the Review and draws on the work of esteemed experts such as Distinguished Professor Aileen Moreton-Robinson emphasising an ethics in research that challenges the myth of 'objectivity' as though non-Indigenous groups such as governments could be independent or unaffected by their own formed views of First Nations peoples.[39]

Jumbunna used a lens of Indigenous Standpoint Theory and reflexivity methods during the Review to regularly examine at the individual level, each researcher's personal world view (their standpoint) and what that meant in terms of how they saw the world in relation to the Review – consciously or unconsciously. At the collective level, processes were in place for the Review team to regularly discuss how researcher standpoint and reflexivity might be operating within the project in a non-judgemental way. Ultimately, the Review participants responses to the research questions, conversations and observations become the data for analysis and interpretation, and it is their voices that are centred here.

The following approaches and techniques guided the Review:

### **Strengths-Based Approach**

This Review has used a strengths-based approach emphasising the inherent strengths, resilience, and capabilities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Rather than focusing solely on deficits or challenges, the methodology sought to:

- Highlight existing community assets, knowledge systems, and cultural practices
- Empower participants by centring their stories of success and opportunities for growth, and
- Foster a collaborative environment that built on these strengths to inform actionable outcomes.

### **Self-Determination Framework**

The Review is underpinned by a Self-Determination Framework, recognising that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are best positioned to identify and address their needs and priorities and that:



- Community ownership and leadership was present in shaping and co-designing the engagement process wherever possible in the timeframe
- Respect for the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to have control over decisions affecting their lives, and
- Co-design principles, where the community actively contributes to shaping recommendations and solutions through the engagement activities.

### **Deep Listening**

The Jumbunna team used deep listening techniques, inspired by traditional practices of profound respect for listening and being present which involved creating a safe and culturally supportive environment for open and honest dialogue, and allowing time and space for participants to share their experiences and perspectives without interruption or judgment.

### **Methodology**

The Review methodology was designed to anticipate that a largely qualitative approach would complement the quantitative and outcome-based information identified by the Productivity Commission report. Jumbunna designed a five stage, multi-modal methodology (Inception, Development, Discovery, Data Collation and Analysis and Reporting) instilling a comprehensive approach to data collection, making every effort within the timeframe to capture diverse perspectives and the process was as inclusive as possible and tailored to community needs.

The following methods were used:

## OVER 500 PEOPLE TOOK PART IN THE REVIEW

A rapid synthesis DESKTOP REVIEW of existing documentation

TARGETED PRELIMINARY CONVERSATIONS with key Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders

Six Place-Based Partnership COMMUNITY VISITS

27 WRITTEN SUBMISSIONS provided

40 people took part in 21 individual or group DEPTH INTERVIEWS

125 national ONLINE SURVEYS completed

200 delegates during the three day ASSEMBLY FORUM in Canberra

### Participants

From every state and territory, across urban, regional and remote areas and a wide range of policy areas

Desktop review helped contextualise the Review process

Preliminary conversations informed context, shaped engagement process and discussion questions to ensure cultural and contextual relevance

### PBP locations

Maningrida (NT), Doomadgee (QLD), Tamworth (NSW), Morwell (VIC), Adelaide Western Suburbs (SA), East Kimberley (WA)

### Submissions break down

9 National Peak Bodies  
6 State or Territory Peak Bodies  
1 Non-Indigenous Peak Body (party to the Agreement)  
1 ACCO  
2 First Nations Closing the Gap Advisory Bodies  
4 First Nations-led Government Advisory Bodies  
4 Submissions from Non-Indigenous Individuals

### Depth interview participants

Joint Council  
PWG  
National Peaks  
State/Territory coalitions of peaks and individual peak bodies  
Members of policy partnerships  
ACCOs  
Local government

## Ethical Framework

Ethics approval was granted by both the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) and UTS Human Research Ethics Committees (HRECs).

The entire engagement process was designed to adhere to national First Nations ethical guidelines, which emphasise:

- Respect for Cultural Protocols: Engaging with communities in a manner that honours their cultural practices and traditions.
- Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC): Ensuring participants understand the purpose, scope, and potential outcomes of the consultation, and freely choose to participate.
- Transparency and Accountability: Clearly outlining how the information shared will be used and ensuring it remains aligned with the community's expectations, and
- Confidentiality and Anonymity: Safeguarding the privacy of participants and the sensitive nature of their contributions.

## Community Researchers

Jumbunna engaged local Indigenous Community Researchers in five of the six Place-Based Partnership communities. On advice from the Aboriginal Peak Organisations of the Northern Territory (APONT), a Community Researcher was not engaged for Maningrida because the Governance Board was the most culturally appropriate body to advise on how to meet with the local community.

The use of respected local community researchers provided the following advantages:

- an established trust platform among the local communities
- a local touchpoint
- pre-engagement work to build a level of understanding
- interest in and trust of the Review and its outcomes
- the ability to achieve a representative demographic spread
- a point for feedback across the life of the Review, and
- a mechanism to disseminate the Review findings to community to ensure they have access to and fully understand the outcomes of their engagement and sharing of stories and experiences.

## 1.5 A note on the 2024 Productivity Commission Review

This Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led independent Review sits alongside and builds upon the work of the Productivity Commission's 2024 Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. We acknowledge the Productivity Commission's significant contribution in assessing implementation progress and naming critical systemic failings, including the lack of genuine partnership, the need for clearer accountability, the failure to shift power, and the burden placed on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to drive change within a system that resists transformation. As engagement was undertaken for this review, many participants have welcomed the Commission's clear identification of these longstanding systemic issues.

This Review complements this by offering a community-grounded perspective, preferencing the perspectives, lived experiences, and priorities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It draws directly on the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are engaging with the Agreement at every level.

Where the Productivity Commission was tasked with evaluating system performance, this Review holds space for community reflection, insight and direction. In centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives, it asks: What does progress look and feel like when viewed through an Indigenous lens?

Taken together, the two reviews provide a more holistic understanding of the state of the Agreement. They speak to its achievements, its limitations, and the changes required to fulfil its promise. The alignment in themes across both reviews reinforces the urgency of systemic reform and the need to centre Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge, governance, and decision-making at the heart of future implementation.



## **1.6 Structure of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Led Independent Review report**

Jumbunna designed the Review to address three key questions about the National Agreement as well as examining the four Priority Reforms. The report has been structured to mirror oral traditions of storytelling and intentionally elevates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices and perspectives.

Section 1: The story of how we arrived at the inaugural Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Led Independent Review report as the starting conditions and foundational elements of Closing the Gap and the National Agreement

Section 2: Experiences of the four Priority Reforms, barriers to success, examples of where work is progressing and solutions for moving forward

Section 3: Review findings/outcomes - Core themes, key findings and recommendations - the outcomes and findings, and lessons for learning.

The following table provides an overview of the report structure.

*Table One: Structure of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Led Independent Review report*

#	SECTION	CONTENTS
1	The beginning and the middle	Background on the development of Closing Gap, the National Agreement and componentry and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Led Independent Review Scope, purpose of, and approach to, the Review
2	Priority Reforms	Priority Reform One Priority Reform Two Priority Reform Three Priority Reform Four
3	Review Outcomes	Overview of Productivity Commission 2024 Review findings Core themes Key findings Recommendations
4-6	Report Information	References Terminology and Abbreviations Disclosure of Interests
7	Appendices	A. Review Submission Process Terms of Reference B. Jurisdictional Agreements C. Place-Based Partnerships Structures



# SECTION 2

## The Priority Reforms



The Priority Reforms lie at the heart of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. They were developed, considered and agreed to by governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people via national engagement conducted by the Coalition of Peaks. These four Priority Reforms are the tangible recognition of the overall support for Closing the Gap as well as what was required from the refresh. They are the framework that was missing in the original architecture.

The Priority Reforms are not peripheral commitments, but the foundation necessary to enable and equip a westernised system to work for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Each Priority Reform targets a critical lever for systemic transformation - how decisions are made, who holds power, how services are delivered, and how information is produced and shared. Collectively, they represent a shift away from top-down approaches and toward partnerships grounded in respect, self-determination, and cultural strength.

*Diagram Five: Priority Reform Areas*



While each has been examined independently to clarify the specific challenges and opportunities within it, fragmenting the Priority Reforms or pursuing them selectively risks tokenism, delays transformation, and undermines the systemic change the Agreement is designed to achieve.

The chapters that follow on each of the Priority Reform areas vary in length, reflecting the differing quantity of feedback each topic generated during the review process. As shared decision-making is central to the success of all four Priority Reform areas, this received particular attention. This speaks to the significance of self-determination to the success of the National Agreement and the urgent need to bring the parties into a relationship that genuinely reflects this.



# CASE STUDY

## STOLEN GENERATIONS



Nearly every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family was impacted by the systemic removal of children from their families up until the 1970s and 1980s. The National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families was a groundbreaking process of truth-telling in Australia, where survivors' voices were elevated, and the intergenerational impacts of their experiences of removal were heard across the nation. The impacts of the inquiry's Bringing Them Home 1997 report were wide ranging and helped inform the broader Australia population of the truths, experiences of, and impacts on, those removed and their families and communities.

The subsequent decade of advocacy for formal parliamentary apologies and the work that culminated in the original Closing the Gap framework are forever intertwined. Former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd inextricably linked the Stolen Generations with Closing the Gap in his address to Parliament for the National Apology when he said:

*...unless the great symbolism of reconciliation is accompanied by an even greater substance, it is little more than a clanging gong. It is not sentiment that makes history; it is our actions that make history. Today's apology, however inadequate, is aimed at righting past wrongs. ..Our challenge for the future is ... to embrace a new partnership between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians — embracing, as part of that partnership, expanded Link-Up and other critical services to help the stolen generations to trace their families if at all possible and to provide dignity to their lives. But the core of this partnership for the future is the closing of the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians on life expectancy, educational achievement and employment opportunities.[40]*

But somewhere in the past 17 years of Closing the Gap implementation, it appears that the Stolen Generations slipped off the radar. This Review was told by participants that survivors, their descendants and organisations, despite participating in consultations on Closing the Gap from inceptions, are not seen in the National Agreement nor represented as a unique cohort with associated targets or measures, despite the documented increase in socio-economic disadvantage created by forced removal.

Bringing Them Home [41] provided 83 recommendations to address intergenerational trauma and improve outcomes. In making these recommendations, the report noted that these experiences of forced removal contributed to ongoing social and economic challenges, such as those targeted in the Closing the Gap framework.

# CASE STUDY

## STOLEN GENERATIONS CONT.



Only five of these have been clearly implemented in the almost 30 years since. Successive data analyses by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare shows a ‘gap within the gap’ – that Stolen Generations survivors and their descendants are more likely than the general Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population to experience poorer outcomes across the range of Closing the Gap targets.[42]

In 2025, the Healing Foundation, the national organisation elevating the voices and lived experiences of Stolen Generations survivors, their families, and their communities, released a report addressing this unfinished business and prompting actions for better outcomes from across the National Agreement targets. Named for the horrifying belief of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that governments are simply waiting for survivors to die to solve these issues, *Are you waiting for us to die?: The unfinished business of Bringing Them Home* made recommendations to across six key areas:

- **Reparations:** Nine of the eleven recommendations relating to reparations have not been implemented and Queensland and Western Australia have still had no reparation scheme for survivors.
- **Rehabilitation and research:** Governments have failed to adequately fund services to support survivors, recognise the importance of supports delivered by community-controlled organisations, or invest in specialised healing focused research.
- **Records, family tracing and reunions:** Almost half of the recommendations have not been implemented, with investment urgently needed to ensure culturally appropriate access to family history information.
- **Acknowledgements and apologies:** These recommendations are only partially implemented, and there remains an ongoing need for formal acknowledgement and memorialisation as part of community, state, and national truth-telling.
- **Education and training:** Just under a quarter of recommendations have been implemented. Stolen Generations survivors’ stories need to be told, and the impacts of forced removals taught across all education levels, with professional requirements for educators and professions who work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in health and aged care.
- **Monitoring and accountability:** There has been no nationally coordinate mechanism to monitor the implementation of the Bringing Them Home recommendations.[43]



# Presence is not power sharing

## Priority Reform One: Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision Making

*Government needs to be far more upfront about their processes and what will happen. Governments do listen to Aboriginal voices, but they do not hold the same weight... governments aren't set up to let other voices shape the process so we always get turned away at a certain point, or other interests can take precedence. [Survey response]*

*“Overall, government partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people remain inconsistent, transactional, and vulnerable to regression. Too often, partnership is treated as optional or symbolic, with poor internal coordination, limited accountability, and a failure to equip agencies with the guidance or authority to work differently.’ [Survey response]*

### 2.1.1 A wrong relationship made right

Shared decision-making is not something that Governments traditionally think of as being part of their ‘business as usual’. The Westminster system, upon which most former British colonial governments are modelled, is founded on hierarchical decision-making, ministerial responsibility, and executive control. It is a system designed to centralise authority, not disperse it. Legislative, policy and

budgetary control and ministerial directives all reinforce this concentration of power. Shifting this is not just a matter of policy or process, it requires a cultural and structural transformation. It requires rethinking deeply embedded philosophies of governance and the way authority and power is organised to make room for shared authority, collective leadership, and negotiated decision-making with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Coupled with this are the colonial assumptions upon which the Australian settler state was founded. The legal fiction of terra nullius and the absence of Treaty have rendered Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people either invisible to government, or too visible, in ways that have caused great harm. Racist assumptions have positioned First Nations people as problems to be surveilled and controlled - leading to over policing, the disproportionate removal of children, punitive welfare measures, and burdensome scrutiny of community organisations.

The cumulative effect has been to cast Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as problems to be managed, rather than partners to be respected. Throughout Australian history, they have been treated as subjects of the state, rather than sovereign polities to negotiate with. In such a position, power is wielded, not shared. It is a fundamentally unequal starting point - one that expects compliance rather than negotiation and collaboration – and runs counter to the very premise of shared decision-making.

This dynamic is still felt today. As one participant explained,

*"I'm probably going to be very frank and very blunt here, but shared decision making, the only way I could explain it, it's like when you're a 5-year-old kid and your parents tell you you've got a choice, right, but you really don't actually have a choice. That's how it is at times. So I think that shared decision-making is tokenistic at best. It is often demonstrated in a very appeasing manner." [Depth interview]*

This represents the foundational issue that the National Agreement is grappling with: while there is an agreed and sound framework, its implementation continues to falter due to the unresolved tension between two fundamentally different worldviews. One is a state-centric vision that seeks to incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples into systems and structures not of their making - systems grounded in settler values, where inclusion often equates to assimilation, and where resistance is met with marginalisation, coercion, or exclusion. The other is a vision grounded in collective self-determination - a desire for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations to live, lead, and speak on their own terms. To hold and exercise sovereignty. This is not about improving the way First Nations peoples are positioned within settler systems. It is about redistributing power and reshaping the system itself.

The problem lies in the inability or unwillingness of the settler state to unravel its sense of itself. It struggles to make space for worldviews that do not mirror its own. It resists the idea that governance could be relational rather than hierarchical, negotiated rather than imposed.

This reluctance to decentre itself renders it ill-equipped to enter into genuine partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Yet embracing and centring First Nations governance approaches offers not a threat, but a pathway toward a more just, inclusive, and representative politics for all.

The implementation challenges that have emerged through the National Agreement are expressions of this deeper conflict. Government is being invited to reimagine itself. To reconsider the very shape of Australian democracy. Not as a British transplant, fixed in colonial assumptions, but as something that can be informed and transformed by the presence and authority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. As Sana Nakata describes;

*“Australia’s democracy... will never be complete without the full and meaningful participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. And by full and meaningful participation, I do not simply mean voting or standing for parliament or being consulted by senior bureaucrats who mean well. By full and meaningful participation in Australian democracy, I mean: knowing it, challenging it, theorising it, changing it. I mean renewing it.*

*...The difficult politics that our Indigenous bodies produce for the state is perhaps not a question at all, but the defining condition of our nation. We make Australia what it is.”[44]*

This inability to grapple with the core problem – that Government is not engaging in the job of reimagining itself – means that where mechanisms for shared decision-making exist on paper, the balance of power remains firmly with government. Structures may be labelled as partnerships, but the experience of the parties does not reflect this. One survey respondent articulated it this way:

*“Too often, what is presented as partnership is experienced as tokenism. As one respondent observed, “Our members see themselves treated as informants, asked to speak, but not to steer”. [Submission]*

Clear within these comments, and those of respondents to this review more generally, is an understanding and expectation that Priority Reform One is a mechanism through which self-determination is embedded in the National Agreement. This is consistent with findings of the Productivity Commission's review which noted that Priority Reform One is ultimately about self-determination and that a *“focus on shared decision-making that does not include self-determination as the ultimate objective, perpetuates the power imbalance between governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.”*[45] It is a commitment to put the parties into right relationship with one another – a relationship grounded in mutual respect, accountability, and the recognition of distinct authority and sovereignty.

As the late Dr Charles Perrurle Perkins AO, stated,

*“Our land, our pride and our future has been taken away from our us and our people buried in unmarked graves. We wander through Australian society as beggars. We live off the crumbs of the White Australian table and are told to be grateful.”*[46]

Priority Reform One, alongside the three other Priority Reform areas and their intended interaction with one another, responds to the deep and enduring injustices experienced by 52 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by structurally embedding self-determination in

the heart of the relationship between First Nations peoples and the governments of Australia. They express a clear understanding that partnership is not just about inviting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to the table. It is about transforming the table itself: rebalancing power, establishing shared authority, and shifting from consultation to negotiation.

### **Coming into ‘right relationship’**

Coming into ‘right relationship’ refers to the process of building respectful, just, and accountable relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous institutions, including governments. It involves recognising the sovereignty, rights, and knowledge systems of First Nations peoples, addressing historical and ongoing injustices, and shifting power dynamics to support genuine partnership. Right relationship requires deep listening, mutual respect, transparency, and a commitment to walking together in a way that honours Indigenous leadership, self-determination, and cultural authority.

As one participant explained, this requires governments to “*shift their thinking about the National Agreement - from consultative engagement to an agreement between two polities, two distinct groups. ACCOs and peaks are not arms of government service provision, they are their own distinct service system, and negotiation needs to happen on that basis.*” [Depth interview]

This reframing of the terms of engagement is critical to embedding self-determination into the implementation of the Agreement.

“*First Nations peoples know what happens when this kind of relationship hasn’t been established. Harmful and exploitative decisions are made on their behalf. As one participant warned, “If we aren’t at the table, we are on the menu.”* [Assembly Delegate]

Priority Reform One is intended to realise a renewed relationship between Australian governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, one that responds to the failed, yet enduring policy logics that settler governments “*knew better than our Indigenous peoples*”[47] towards establishing a relationship grounded in mutual recognition, respect, and the acknowledgment of First Nations as sovereign peoples.

### **2.1.2 Presence is not power sharing**

Understanding the need to move toward a relationship grounded in mutual recognition of authority, Priority Reform One outlines a framework for doing this through genuine partnership. The National Agreement commits all parties to establishing partnerships that operate on an equal footing - governed by formal agreements and grounded in shared decision-making between governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. These commitments reflect an understanding that partnership is more than just a symbol. It is structural and requires deliberate effort to build and sustain the conditions under which trust, respect, and co-existence can flourish.

There are encouraging examples of genuine partnership beginning to emerge. However, many participants in the Review have spoken about inconsistency in the way that shared decision-making is being implemented across jurisdictions and policy areas. Where these principles are not upheld in practice, or where they are only partially applied, the potential of Priority Reform One to reset the relationship is significantly undermined, and again, government policy is enacted without free, prior and informed consent absent of partners with a shared stake, and a shared future. To build a strong foundation for long-term transformation, it is essential to understand the conditions that make partnership work and the consequences when those conditions are absent.

In speaking about Closing the Gap, Review participants highlighted several key features of shared decision-making and strong partnership.

Participants described the actions needed to build strong and successful partnerships:

1. Establish a shared vision
2. Clarify roles and responsibilities
3. Demonstrate mutual respect and uphold mutual accountability
4. Establish clear mechanisms for shared decision-making
5. Build trust and address power imbalances
6. Ensure resourcing is equitable
7. Foster a resilient partnership



## 1. Establish a shared vision

One of the most uniform themes was the absence of a consistent and shared vision between governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The National Agreement on Closing the Gap has established a shared vision, however Review participants repeatedly noted that while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have embraced that vision, many governments and government officials seem either unaware of this or unable to progress it in this context. This imbalance is not a matter of differing technical interpretations; it reflects a deeper legacy of unequal relationships and a fundamental misalignment in the understanding of the role of government.

This is in direct contradiction of the level of understanding and practical application governments regularly apply to overlapping or intersecting authority between the Commonwealth and States/Territories.

To engage in shared decision-making in good faith, governments must be willing to reconceive not just their relationship with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, but their role in the system itself. They must shift from being the sole authority to becoming one of two parties in negotiation. This change requires cultural, structural, and institutional transformation. As one participant noted,

*“Governments have not shifted their thinking in terms of shared decision making. They believe that co-chairing and co-production is the equivalent of co- design and/or shared decision-making.”* [Survey response]

By contrast, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders have demonstrated clarity and consistency in articulating what they expect from the relationship. Their calls for power-sharing, influence over outcomes, and recognition of cultural governance have been remarkably unified across sectors and jurisdictions. It is this coherence and unity that anchors the National Agreement’s vision. It is essential that this be met with equal clarity and commitment from governments if genuine partnership is to be realised.

## 2. Clarify roles and responsibilities

Alongside a shared vision, Review participants have spoken about how essential it is that all parties understand and respect their distinct roles and responsibilities. Many people have described a fundamental disconnect in this area: that shared decision-making does not mean being consulted after the fact, nor simply occupying a seat at the table. It means having real influence over outcomes, shaping agendas, and holding decision-making power.

*“(P)resence is not power sharing. Being in the room is not the same as shaping the agenda.”* [Submission]

In too many instances, government retains control over key levers, while claiming to be working in partnership. This contradiction undermines trust and reinforces the legacy of power imbalance that Priority Reform One seeks to address.

*“Indigenous voices are still advisory rather than authoritative, meaning governments retain control over funding, policy priorities, and implementation.”*  
[Submission]

*“While the frameworks and language suggest partnership and co-leadership, in practice, senior political power frequently overrides good process, cultural authority, and ethical engagement... Until power is genuinely shared, and systems are safe for truth to be told without consequence, shared decision making will remain superficial.”* [Survey response]

Clarifying roles and responsibilities also means recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations as part of a distinct service system, not merely an extension of government’s business as usual approach. Yet several participants noted that government agencies continue to treat Aboriginal community-controlled organisations as contractors or advisors rather than equal and self-determining partners.

*“There remains a lack of shared understanding of concepts such as partnership and co-design. Stakeholders within the sector such as ACCHOs... receive myriad requests to join advisory groups, boards, and to attend regular meetings. While it is important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations to ‘have a seat at the table’, many departments and agencies continue to work on short notice rather than planning well in advance to secure sector engagement. There continues to be the perception that consultation is partnership and that partnership equals endorsement.”* [Survey response]

Without clarity, expectations become mismatched, accountability is blurred or non-existent, and partnership risks becoming performative rather than transformative. True clarity means governments must move beyond symbolic inclusion and take responsibility for changing how decisions are made, how authority is shared, and how systems operate.

### **3. Demonstrate mutual respect and uphold mutual accountability**

Participants spoke about the need for mutual respect that goes beyond politeness or goodwill and is expressed through cultural safety, deep listening, and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being, and doing. Several people emphasised the importance of two-way learning and culturally grounded protocols for decision-making.

*“(A)adaptation also requires cultural humility from Government. It means acknowledging that the current approach is not working, and that meaningful partnership cannot be built on departmental timelines and bureaucratic logic alone. It means seeing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People not just as service recipients, but as cultural leaders, decision-makers, and custodians of systems that pre-date Western Care frameworks.”*  
[Submission]

These factors are not optional additions to partnership work; they are essential to its legitimacy and health. There is proof that this is possible:

*“COVID-19 was an early, strong example of working in genuine partnership. The Advisory Group was briefed on major government strategies and actions. They had access to decision makers across different areas to assist with discussions. Any barriers in implementation were quickly addressed through the government representatives on the Advisory Group. Most importantly, federal and state and territory governments listened to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experts.”* [Submission]

Another submission response praised the way governments worked during COVID-19:

*“The success of the regional response demonstrates what is possible when Aboriginal people, communities and organisations are empowered and trusted to lead. Public health control measures were developed and implemented with urgency, cultural relevance, and a deep understanding of local needs.”* [Submission]



Participants also highlighted that the success of this approach lay not only in the effective collaboration between NACCHO and the Department of Health, but equally in the fact that all relevant peaks were activated simultaneously.

*“What was different about COVID was every single sector was given the opportunity to step up simultaneously and government really didn’t have any choice but to get out of the way. So, for example, the Child and Family Services swung in and made their services available for vaccines. They acted as conduits to government information. They relayed real time information about what was stopping people from getting into the vaccination hubs. That enabled the government to respond to crises as they emerged within the community... Aboriginal media... were able to immediately translate that information into language that resonated with communities.”* [Depth interview]

One participant summed up the longer-term impact of that period:

*“Genuine co-design of services and community input into policy was unimaginable four years ago, but not anymore.”* [Depth interview]

Participants also spoke about collaborative efforts, during floods and other environmental crises, that have kept the community safe. This was particularly the case for members of the community-controlled sector who spoke to us from Western Australia (WA) and expressed frustration that while these approaches were possible, they were not the norm:

*“So, what would be really great is if, and we saw it during COVID, it all was working. You know, we’re very good in emergency situations, but when it comes to day-to-day, everyone just goes back to their silos apart from us...”* [Depth interview]

*“During the cyclones, they bring all of these governance structures together where we’re all sitting at a table that should be standard practice, you know, not just when we’ve got to deal with an emergency situation. So that’s where I think the challenge lies.”* [Depth interview]

*“There is movement in the right direction, but there is a lot to do, particularly transforming governments, recognising our ways and our governance and protocols.”* [Assembly Delegate]

In the absence of a global or local crisis event involving the non-Indigenous community to force collaboration, however, participants spoke of government processes that continue to prioritise government convenience over respect, and compliance over collaboration. Short consultation timeframes, last-minute engagement, and decisions that don’t align with community feedback were raised repeatedly. These practices reflect an imposition of Western governance systems over Indigenous governance systems, where relationships are treated as transactional rather than reciprocal. They are based in performative consultation to provide the appearance of involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, rather than genuinely valuing and enabling their input into decisions that affect them.

*“When consultation is carried out, unrealistically short timelines are often given.”*  
[Submission]

Even where a partnership had been developed with care, people spoke about governments defaulting to old habits and prioritising their political interests over good processes and policy. As one participant shared,

*“An example is a government department we had been working closely with in partnership, towards the end of a project not letting us see a document they were sending to their minister. They were very obstinate about us not seeing the document (which was not confidential)... (they) couldn’t see that this breached their commitment to shared decision-making and shared access to information which are central parts of the partnership.”* [Survey response]

Mutual respect must also be paired with mutual accountability. While implementation mechanisms under the National Agreement are intended to provide strong oversight of Closing the Gap, the national and jurisdictional Independent Mechanisms are not yet in place. Review participants emphasised that, even once established, accountability cannot be limited to reporting frameworks - it must be embedded in the day-to-day practices of each partnership. This includes having clear accountability mechanisms, genuine power-sharing arrangements, and sustained investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led initiatives.

#### **4. Establish clear mechanisms for shared decision-making**

Review participants consistently called for clear, agreed mechanisms through which decisions are made and power is shared, including frameworks for co-design, joint planning, and shared governance. These mechanisms are essential to ensuring that all voices are heard, priorities are set together, and outcomes are shaped by both parties, not predetermined by one.

When done well, co-design shifts engagement from consultation to collaboration. It invites Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into the process from the outset, empowering them to shape the direction, substance, and implementation of decisions that affect them. An example of this in practice can be seen in New South Wales (NSW), where NSW CAPO has recently undertaken a Cross-Portfolio Closing the Gap budget submission process with NSW Treasury. Together, they oversaw preparation of the budget submission for partnership initiatives seeking funding under Closing the Gap - demonstrating shared priority setting and collaboration in action. The ultimate decision maker in this scenario is the NSW Cabinet, however, this is also an example of shared decision making implemented at different levels of governance arrangements.

Unfortunately, these pockets of good practice are still too limited. Many stakeholders noted that the use of co-design language often does not reflect practice on the ground.

*“On a practical level, ‘co-design’ remains largely cosmetic.”* [Submission]

Participants described continued government resistance to relinquishing control, a lack of transparency in how feedback is used, and an absence of sustained resourcing to support meaningful participation.

*“There needs to be a fundamental change in the way Government partners and shares decision-making powers with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The Government needs to relinquish some control to enable genuine partnerships and shared decision-making. The department must engage more transparently to ensure it is clear how feedback is incorporated, and decisions are made, and provide guaranteed, adequate and sustainable resourcing for partnerships.”* [Submission]

A number of Assembly Delegates also noted that genuine shared decision-making requires two-way transparency and mechanisms for reciprocal communication, not just between government and peaks, but between peaks, ACCOs, and the communities they represent.

*“Grassroots people know what's going on, yet we're overlooked. And we're still today fighting for our own rights here in our own organisations on anything and everything about what's right for our people. And that's what I find struggling, because for me, I'm being undermined, right?”* [Yarning Circle participant]

*“They're not building rapport with us. So, you know, the first step is that they need to have an engagement strategy and policy to understand our needs and how they can better service us.”* [Yarning Circle participant]

## **5. Build trust and address power imbalances**

Trust is foundational to any strong partnership, but Review participants noted that efforts to actively build and maintain trust remain limited and inconsistent. Governments continue to favour advisory functions over genuine shared decision-making, and in some jurisdictions are not utilising the mechanisms in place.

*“As yet, the current NT Government has not used Northern Territory Executive Council Aboriginal Affairs as a mechanism to engage in meaningful shared decision-making, as required under Priority Reform One. We refer to recent reforms put in place by the Northern Territory Government (citing examples in child protection, justice and cultural heritage) where amendments were made with little notice, little to no changes made based on received feedback and/or non-compliance with the intent of the National Agreement and fulfilment of its outcomes.”* [Submission]

This failure to engage meaningfully has real consequences. It reinforces existing distrust, limits the effectiveness of agreed mechanisms, and signals that power remains concentrated within government. As one depth interviewee explained,

*“We're sitting at the table, but then when the real decision-making (happens), we're locked out. So it's at the very basic level that there needs to be a strong awareness and appetite for a relationship that means actually addressing the power dynamic in place... If they're really wanting to do that.”* [Depth interview]

Without a deliberate commitment to address power imbalances, the promise of partnership remains hollow. This requires governments to critically reflect on how they hold power and what structural changes are needed to enable more equitable relationships.

*“As governments retain control of almost all the resources (human, financial, policy, service provision) required to close the gaps, transformational change needs to occur within those systems to ensure shared decision-making and partnership are achieved.”*  
[Submission]

Participants stressed that shared decision-making must begin from the earliest stages - including decisions about who sets the agenda - and must be carried through all levels of governance. Yet in practice, power is often exercised unilaterally by governments, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partners left to react rather than co-create, and communities to deal with the impacts.

The burden of engaging in these flawed processes often falls heavily on Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and peak bodies, many of which are under-resourced and over-consulted. This creates a further imbalance, where:

*“Only those with power, networks or national peak affiliation can engage meaningfully.”*  
[Depth interview]

Survey responses reinforce this concern. When asked whether Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can exercise shared decision-making through the mechanisms established under Closing the Gap, more than half of respondents (53%) disagreed, including 21 percent who strongly disagreed. Only 23 percent partially agreed, and just 7 percent strongly agreed. A further 17 percent were unsure, highlighting widespread uncertainty and lack of clarity about how shared decision-making is functioning in practice.

## **6. Ensure resourcing is equitable**

Genuine partnership cannot exist without equitable resourcing. Review participants were clear: even where the structures and language of shared decision-making may be in place, they are undermined when financial resources, and control over those resources, remain firmly in government hands. Without a corresponding shift in the way resources are allocated, partnership risks becoming rhetorical rather than real. One survey respondent summed it up in the following way:

*“In essence, while the shared decision-making process has provided a platform for dialogue and collective problem-solving, it falls short when it comes to translating these discussions into tangible support. For shared decision-making to be truly effective, it must be accompanied by a commitment to resource distribution that reflects the value and success of the initiatives being developed. Without this, the potential for truly transformative change remains limited.”*  
[Survey response]

One participant reflected on the tension between being meaningfully included in decision-making and the absence of financial support to sustain that involvement.

*“My experience with shared decision-making has been both enlightening and challenging. On one hand, the process itself is designed to bring together diverse perspectives, ensuring that all voices are heard and collaborative solutions are developed. This approach has allowed our team... to contribute meaningfully, share our expertise, and advocate for evidence-based practices that benefit our community. However, despite our active participation and the positive outcomes we have achieved through shared decision-making, we have not received significant government funding. This lack of funding has been particularly disheartening, as it suggests a disconnect between collaborative policy discussions and the actual allocation of resources.”* [Survey response]

Others described a common pattern in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations take the initiative to establish the conditions for strong partnership - investing their own limited resources to build capacity and engage meaningfully - while governments follow, rather than lead, in resourcing these efforts.

*“(O)ur sector has taken the initiative to build our own capacity to facilitate and participate in partnerships. This includes investing in policy and project support so we can partner with governments as equals. While funding may have come from governments afterwards, it was our sector that provided the seed funding and laid the groundwork to get these partnerships off the ground. But resourcing of partnerships in line with the ‘strong partnership elements’ of the Agreement is essential to meaningful implementation.”* [Submission]

Where resourcing is provided, and partnerships are structured on principles of mutual respect and power sharing, participants pointed to more productive and respectful relationships.

*“With the National Agreement as an enabler and funding from the WA Government, the establishment of CASWA was an act of full self-determination of Aboriginal people in WA. CASWA maintains a professional and robust relationship with DPC as its funder and contract manager, but also as a partner (alongside AHCWA) in supporting the implementation of the National Agreement across the WA Government.”* [Submission]

## **7. Foster a resilient partnership**

Resilient partnerships are able to navigate disagreement and adapt over time. They invest in the capabilities required to work across difference, rather than expecting uniformity. They know that when power is shared, differences in perspective are expected and navigating them constructively is a sign of maturity, not failure. Yet Review participants described an environment where disagreement can be viewed as disloyalty or resistance, particularly when it comes from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders.

One participant noted that when their peak or local leaders:

*“...push back, they are sometimes accused of being uncooperative or ‘not working in partnership.’”* [Submission]

This dynamic suggests that many partnerships remain conditional - operating only so long as Aboriginal voices align with government preferences. True resilience requires a shift from expecting agreement, to embracing negotiation.

Despite Clause 32 (c) (iii) of the National Agreement outlining that shared decision making is where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives can speak freely without fear of reprisals or repercussions[48], participants also raised concerns about the personal and political consequences of speaking up,

*“We need to feel free to negotiate without fear of being ‘blacklisted.’” [Assembly Delegate]*

Resilience in partnership means building relationships strong enough to hold tension. It means being committed to ongoing learning, reflection, and adaptation. This kind of adaptability signifies strength in a partnership. As the National Agreement continues to be implemented, the strength of the partnerships within it will be measured not by how often they agree, but by how well they navigate disagreement, how deeply they listen, and how willing they are to change.



# CASE STUDY

## Self-determining body



The independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body (the Elected Body) in Canberra, ACT is an encouraging example of a self-determining First Nations organisation. Established by the ACT Legislative Assembly under the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Act 2008, the Elected Body was the first state or territory in Australia to have a democratically elected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander advisory body to a Parliament.

The Elected Body is a member of the Coalition of Peaks and is guided by the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Agreement 2019-2028, providing an avenue for the community to inform government and shape the future wellbeing and outcomes of community. Each term – a period of three years - key areas are scoped, with the most recent focus on: child protection, justice, community assets and community control, early childhood, education and health, and proportional funding.

The Elected Body works in partnership with government departments to develop a deeper understanding of its responsibilities and ensure it is equipped to meet the diverse needs of the ACT community. The Elected Body received a \$1.19 million funding allocation across three years in the 2024 ACT Budget to support their operations.[49]

The representative structure of the Elected Body consists of seven representative members who are democratically voted in by Canberra's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. Each is appointed for a three-year term on a part time basis, working one day a week. While representatives bring diverse professional experience and contribute directly to government portfolios, the scope, responsibility, and significance of the work suggest that it would be more appropriate for these to be full-time appointments.

Central to the Elected Body's work is its commitment to community voices shaping their advocacy and advice to government. One key mechanism for this is the two public hearings held during each three-year term. Two months prior to the public hearings, community questions are called for through social media and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander network. The Elected Body then review these questions as well as past hearing reports, recent audits and productivity reports to scope out the key themes to address across the three-day hearing. The Elected Body provides a briefing to selected directorates (similar to a parliamentary estimates process) and has the ability to delegate how much time is allocated to each respective topic area. This process seeks to ensure that questions are being addressed by the right parliamentarians, minimising the likelihood of questions being taken on notice and ensuring timely responses and action from government.

# CASE STUDY

## Self-determining body cont.



A unique aspect of the public hearings is that members of the community can attend either in person or online through a live streaming network, which is advertised through a published public-consultation calendar. By including a live streaming option, the public hearing process has had a substantial impact on increasing accessibility to community members and has created the opportunity for additional questions to be posed throughout the hearing. The public hearing process also allows for transparent visibility and accountability to community members. They can physically see and connect with those who are representing their community while holding governments accountable for their outlined agreements. The Elected Body also produces two hearing reports and two community consultation reports throughout the term to consistently track government progress on implementation of the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Agreement. The government also provides a response report to the Elected Body two to three months after these publications. All of these documents are made public and can be accessed by community members.

*The ability to bring the voice of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community to the decision making of Government is critical for progress. Our ability to also hold Government accountable on their commitments to the community is a genuine attempt at self-determination by allowing us to emphasise the things that matter most to our people.* – Chairperson Maurice Walker.

Over the past 16 years, the Elected Body has contributed to significant community outcomes, including lowering the housing eligibility age for older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to 50 and supporting the construction of 15 older persons units across Canberra. They have also influenced education policy to support children in kinship care, advanced Indigenous procurement policies, and played a key role in the Our Booris, Our Way review, which led to child protection reforms and the establishment of an independent oversight committee.

The Elected Body demonstrates what is possible when governments work in collaboration with representative First Nations bodies. It ensures that government has direct insight into the lived experiences and needs of First Nations people in the ACT. The Elected Body offers innovative advocacy to advance Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community voices in parliament, where lived experiences play a substantial factor in reporting on outcomes.

## 2.1.3 Community perspectives in detail

Under Priority Reform One of the National Agreement, there are commitments that have been made by Government parties and commitments made by the Partnership. The first commitment by Government parties relates to acknowledging the shared decision-making structures Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have already developed (the intention being to build on those successes).

Governments have committed to reviewing existing partnership arrangements by:

- conducting a stocktake
- reviewing and strengthening existing partnerships
- reporting on the number of partnerships, any changes made, and which elements of strong partnership are being met or remain unmet, and
- including the outcomes of the review in annual reports.

Governments have also committed to establishing policy and place-based partnerships to respond to local priorities.

In response to this commitment, Partners have agreed to:

- establish a joined-up approach between governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives in five policy priority areas (justice, social and emotional wellbeing, housing, early childhood care and development, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages). The purpose of the Policy Partnerships is to identify opportunities to work more effectively across governments, reduce gaps and duplication, and improve outcomes, and
- develop six new place-based partnerships.[50]

Reading these commitments together, it's clear that the role of government in this respect is to take action consistent with their commitments to enabling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representative structures such as policy and place-based partnerships, while the partnerships themselves must be jointly established and maintained by all parties. In practice, this means governments are responsible for creating the space, allocating resources, and removing barriers to partnership, while both governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partners work together to shape the structure, focus, and operation of each partnership. This approach means partnerships are not imposed but are co-designed, joined-up, and responsive to community-identified priorities.

### 1. Reviewing existing partnership arrangements

Across the country, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities engage in a wide range of decision-making arrangements with governments at the local, state and territory, and federal levels. These structures vary in formality, scope, and effectiveness, but collectively reflect the governance systems that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have established or co-developed in pursuit of self-determination.

At the **local level**, arrangements often include community advisory committees or Councils of Elders that work with local governments to inform service delivery and community planning. Some communities participate in co-management agreements over local assets and services, including health centres, cultural precincts, and land and water management initiatives. In some jurisdictions, local decision-making frameworks support communities to

work in partnership with local councils or service providers to design and deliver place-based responses. The only formal partnership arrangement with local government is the Mara Ngali-Tamworth Closing the Gap Partnership Agreement, signed in May 2025 by Tamworth Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (TACCO) and Tamworth Regional Council.

At the **state and territory level**, formal partnerships are often embedded within broader reforms. These may include Local Decision-making frameworks (as seen in NSW and the NT), justice reinvestment initiatives, or state-based treaty processes. Aboriginal-led organisations may co-chair policy working groups or be party to memoranda of understanding with government departments. In some cases, state governments have established statutory advisory bodies or councils with Aboriginal representation to guide strategic decision-making.

At the **federal level**, existing partnerships include those between the Commonwealth Government and national Aboriginal peak bodies, such as through the Coalition of Peaks' role in negotiating and implementing the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations also contribute to national strategies in areas such as health, early childhood, and employment but this is often still through formal advisory roles, consultation processes, and funding agreements that support regional and community governance.

Taken together, these structures demonstrate that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are already exercising governance and leadership across multiple domains. Priority Reform One calls on governments to recognise and support these structures, rather than creating parallel or duplicative systems. Strengthening and resourcing these partnerships, and ensuring they operate with genuine shared decision-making authority, remains critical to achieving the aspirations of the National Agreement.

Participants spoke extensively about the importance of shared decision-making and the conditions required for genuine partnership and provided many examples of where shared decision-making is either progressing well or not meeting expectations. For example, the Healing Foundation reported that:

*"Despite being an active member of the Department's 'First Nations Aged Care Governance Group' - which is tasked to co-design aged care reform, officials with the Aged Care Group [a recent departmental grants process] did not engage with, seek the advice of, or share information with the Healing Foundation as a key partner with deep experience, national remit and existing relationships with Stolen Generation survivors and organisations to ensure the best possible planning and design of this funding opportunity." [Submission]*

The limitations of this review means an exhaustive investigation of the experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across the range of partnership arrangements currently in place could not be conducted. Such an examination would likely offer additional insights regarding the status of the National Agreement and Priority Reform One in specific areas, as well as information about structures and procedures that enable, or inhibit, realising the intent of shared decision-making. Nevertheless, we have included a high level overview at Appendix B and incorporated case studies across the report to illustrate what shared decision-making can look like in practice.

## **Tamworth Mara Ngali-Tamworth Closing the Gap Partnership Agreement**

In May 2025 representatives from Tamworth Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (TACCO) and Tamworth Regional Council signed the first formal partnership to work together on Closing the Gap. The Mara Ngali-Tamworth Closing the Gap Partnership Agreement commits the two parties to work together to develop a local level implementation plan with actions.

Councillor Marc Sutherland, a Gomeroi man (and first and only First Nations representative on Tamworth Council), was one of the driving forces behind Mara Ngali (our two hands in Gomeroi) leveraged the locating of the NSW Place-Based Partnership and the work being undertaken by TACCO in Tamworth as the trigger for the development of the Agreement. It mirrors partnership arrangements at the national and state levels and the aim is to implement a regional plan in line with the four Priority Reforms and 17 target areas in the National Agreement to create real outcomes for the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.

The Tamworth Partnership Agreement initially allows for the establishment of the relationship between the Parties but importantly, will be part of the Council's reporting requirements under NSW mandatory annual reporting on local government on Community Strategic Plans. This also aligns with the current Closing the Gap reporting requirements for other levels of government, but as with other jurisdictions, does not include any capacity for community monitoring and accountability.



# CASE STUDY

## Co-design process



In WA, an initiative to improve access to emergency ambulance services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people over 50 and those in remote communities, provides evidence of progress toward genuine partnership under Priority Reform One.

The initiative is the result of a co-design process between the Aboriginal Health Council of Western Australia (AHCWA), Member Services, WA Country Health Services, St John Ambulance, the Office of the WA Minister for Health, which sought to address the ACCHS-specific recommendations made in the 2022 Delivery of Ambulance Services in Western Australia: Critical Condition, Report.

In 2021, the WA Legislative Council Standing Committee on Public Administration held an inquiry into the delivery of ambulance services in WA. In their submission to the Inquiry, AHCWA, the peak body for Aboriginal health in WA, and representative of 23 member ACCHOs observed,

*“One of the key barriers for Aboriginal people accessing ambulance services in WA is the high out-of-pocket costs for patients... It is important to recognise that, in many cases, refusing to call or accept ambulance services is not a choice; rather there is no choice, as ambulance services are not a financially viable option for many people. WA ACCHS report that Aboriginal patients who have used ambulance services across the state have accrued debts, which has compounded financial hardship, impacted their credit rating and, in some cases caused them to be summoned by the Court.”* [51]

The outcomes of the co-design workshop led to the implementation of the Ambulance Services Trial underway between 1 January and 30 September 2025 which waives emergency ambulance service costs for ACCHS-initiated emergency transports and reduces the age of concession from 65 years to 50 years for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, with the aim of improving access.

While this provides a positive example towards genuine partnership under the National Agreement, there remains barriers to wide-spread and systemic implementation of these ways of working which must be addressed. The barriers reported include instances of governments continuing to engage with Peak bodies and ACCHS on an ad-hoc basis falling short of genuine partnership, and in some cases engaging in ‘tick a box’ exercises which seek short turnaround feedback placing ‘time coercive pressures’ on ACCHS which limits meaningful feedback and restrains the ability for full engagement.

Reports also evidence instances where shared decision-making is not realised, due to processes not reflecting the principles of shared decision-making, such as where peak bodies are invited to participate after funding allocations and decisions have been made. Moreover, funding arrangements continue to ensure governments maintain authority over ACCHS, impacting significantly on enabling genuine partnership, as ACHWA observes,

# CASE STUDY

## Co-design process cont.



*“[a]s governments retain control of almost all resources (human, financial, policy, service provision) required to close the gaps, transformational change needs to occur within those systems to ensure shared decision-making and partnership are achieved.”[52]*

This example demonstrates shared decision-making and genuine partnership resulting in an initiative that seeks to respond to the needs and lived experiences of Aboriginal people in WA. While this is a strong example of genuine partnership, there are many barriers identified to be addressed to enable the principles of shared decision-making to be realised across processes in alignment with the National Agreement.



While there are diverse partnership arrangements in place, many participants in this review were focused on the relational aspects of their partnerships with governments. Respondents consistently emphasised that it is not enough for governments to establish or acknowledge a structure on paper. What matters most is how those partnerships operate in practice: whether Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are genuinely listened to, whether their authority is respected, and whether decisions are made together rather than imposed. This Review found that, even where formal agreements exist, many participants described relationships that lacked trust, transparency, and shared accountability.

*“There is a distinct lack of accountability and recourse mechanisms to ensure that our proposals are given due consideration by governments in the development of Implementation Plans. Many of the most substantive initiatives proposed have been disregarded, diluted and not allocated funding. This undermines the authority and trust of any formal partnership with governments and their commitment to the National Agreement” [Submission]*

This may, in part, explain the survey results: when asked if partnership agreements are in place, around half of respondents (52%) disagreed - including 24 percent who strongly disagreed - while only 3 percent agreed. A further 16 percent offered partial agreement, and 28 percent neither agreed nor disagreed.[53]

These findings highlight a disconnect that surfaced repeatedly, between the actions undertaken by governments, the perceptions governments have of those actions, and the lived experience and expectations of community in their interactions with government.

## 2. Establishing Policy and Place-Based Partnerships

Section 6 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap introduced two distinct but complementary forms of partnership: Policy Partnerships and Place-Based Partnerships. Together, Policy and Place-Based Partnerships are meant to create a system in which national policies are informed by lived experience and local contexts, and where local solutions are supported and scaled through strong national frameworks.

Their purpose is to drive community-led outcomes, enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives, communities and their organisations to negotiate and implement agreements to implement all Priority Reforms, support additional community-led development initiatives, and bring together all governments with communities to the collective task of Closing the Gap.[54]

**Policy Partnerships** were created under Clauses 30 – 31 of the Agreement to work on discrete policy areas. They are intended to support joined-up approaches to policy development, identify necessary changes and specific measures, strengthen inter-governmental collaboration, and support the implementation of the Agreement. The Policy Partnerships are also aimed at enabling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives, communities and organisations to negotiate and implement agreements with governments and drive community-led outcomes.

**Place-Based Partnerships (PBPs)**, by contrast, were designed to operate in a specific region, supporting communities within a place-based framework to address regional needs and priorities. They support communities to work directly with governments and service providers to co-design and implement solutions to local needs and priorities.

While the National Agreement defines Policy Partnerships and PBPs as two distinct forms of partnership, it can also be read as implying that they are intended to work in concert. Rather than treating them as separate or siloed mechanisms, Review participants sought closer alignment of the two. Specifically, people shared a desire for the Policy Partnerships to offer clearer direction, coordination, and support to the PBPs. Many participants called for more guidance around impact pathways, along with more transparent communication from the Policy Partnerships about opportunities to activate them.

*“PBPs do not mirror how the Policy Partnerships work at the national level in that they lack the people and the ability to have shared decision-making... Decisions can just be dismissed by government.” [Yarning Circle participant]*

The overall disconnect between the policy and place-based partnerships may, in part, reflect the relative newness of both models and the time it takes to build mature, interconnected systems of governance. In this light, the current limitations also represent an opportunity: with deliberate investment and attention in the coming years, there is significant potential to strengthen the relationship between policy and place-based partnerships, improving alignment across levels of government and delivering more coherent, community-led change.

### 3. Policy Partnerships

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap introduced Policy Partnerships as a mechanism to promote joint decision-making between governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partners in critical reform areas. These partnerships are intended to be co-chaired, jointly governed, and to deliver integrated, culturally informed policy solutions aligned with the Priority Reforms.

The first five policy areas identified – and partnerships established - were:

- Justice (Adult and Youth Incarceration), established in September 2021
- Early Childhood Care and Development, established in August 2022
- Social and Emotional Wellbeing (Mental Health), established in August 2022,
- Housing, established in December 2022, and
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages, established in December 2022.

Participants advised that work is underway to scope additional policy partnerships, including one focused on data, in line with Priority Reform Four.

When discussing their experiences with the policy partnerships, participants generally supported their existence and the opportunities they represent.

*“We are being asked more often to co-design, co-sponsor projects and co-chair committees.” [Survey response]*

Many expressed a strong desire to work with governments to improve the functioning of these partnerships, so they can serve as a genuine vehicle for shared decision-making. In this regard, participants identified several recurring issues, many of which echoed the broader concerns raised throughout the review about the state of shared decision-making between governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

*“This is the strongest area of the national agreement and the area I have seen the most change in terms of how my org works with government- there is a genuine commitment to working together to design and develop policies for our subject matter area. But still huge variation- some departments are better at it than others. Also there are still differences between how Aboriginal parties think about shared decision-making and what govt view of this is.”* [Survey response]

#### *Challenges and opportunities under the Policy Partnerships*

**Government control and influence:** Despite the stated intention of shared leadership, many Policy Partnerships still operate with government retaining ultimate decision-making authority. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partners frequently described participating in processes where their input was not reflected meaningfully in outcomes.

*“Governments may invite Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Organisations to participate in reform discussions, but those contributions are rarely reflected in the final shape of policies or programs.”* [Submission]

*“Consultations have increased, however the impact of this participation in shaping outcomes is limited.”* [Submission]

In response to this dynamic, participants highlighted the importance of having strong, well-resourced Co-Chairs in the Policy Partnerships to ensure meaningful progress. They contrasted the effectiveness across the Policy Partnerships and identified the importance of structuring their partnerships to tap into governance structures within governments. Where a strong and mature Aboriginal peak body exists, people noted a greater ability to engage on equal footing with government departments and drive outcomes.

**Whose worldview shapes the table?** The pervasiveness of government influence and control highlights a core theme impacting the implementation and overall evaluation of the Agreement – a mismatch in the worldviews of the Parties and how they see National Agreement commitments and their implementation. Participants noted, for example, that a non-Indigenous worldview is informing who is, and is not, included in policy discussions.

*“What is reflected is very much a non-Indigenous understanding of what social emotional wellbeing is rather than an encompassing, holistic perspective. We need those other agencies, those other influencers of the social determinants, cultural determinants, political determinants of social emotional wellbeing. We need those voices captured and attended to as well...”* [Depth interview]

When a Western lens is applied to concepts like social and emotional well-being, the interconnected determinants that shape the health and healing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples can be overlooked.

If policy processes were restructured to centre Indigenous worldviews, a wider range of agencies - including those focused on culture, land, justice, and kinship structures - would be present. This approach is not about inverting one worldview with another; rather, it's about rebalancing a system that has long privileged Western views over Indigenous ones. It acknowledges that culturally grounded approaches to wellbeing and community development achieve better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and it positions Western systems, tools, and resources in a supportive, rather than directive role.

Operationalising this shift requires a structural rethinking of who is engaged in decision-making processes. It means ensuring that the appropriate government representatives are engaged at the proper levels to ensure both cultural alignment and political authority. In this respect, participants raised concerns about the effectiveness of the Policy Partnerships in securing the right government voices and ensuring high-level engagement:

*“The Policy Partnerships, they have got huge improving that needs to happen. It needs to happen so quickly. Part of that improving is the jurisdictional government reps that sit at the Policy Partnerships. I don't have any confidence that they actually brief their Ministers. Or if they brief the Indigenous Affairs Minister so that that Minister then comes to Joint Council and has an understanding of the policy landscape because these Policy Partnerships are justice, housing, early childhood languages, social emotional well-being, they're all different Ministers. [Depth interview]*

*“We are on the partnership without the bodies, or the jurisdictional departments who we work with or who fund into our areas... I struggle to see and understand where the state and territory commitments occur.” [Depth interview]*

Beyond the people in the room, the format and structure of engagement were highlighted by Review participants as reinforcing siloed thinking and limiting the potential for systemic, joined-up policy development.

*“The collective policy partnership meetings are an avenue where some of that conversation gets to occur. But you know, there's still very brief meetings for how much would need to be covered. So I'm not sure that anything ever gets covered to the extent that is required because then everybody goes back off into our little siloed spaces. I think we could work in a different way under the National Agreement, but it needs buy in from all the stakeholders.” [Depth interview]*

Others reflected on how bureaucratic processes have been replicated, rather than disrupted, through the Closing the Gap architecture:

*“I think Closing the Gap has been a replication and extension of bureaucracy to be honest. I think that there have been positive things, but how do we build more rights-based frameworks and pieces into the document? There has to be more thinking around actually disrupting the process from who's actually in the meeting to how the meeting's conducted.” [Depth interview]*

Several partners described being engaged late in the policy cycle, with constrained timeframes and language that excludes meaningful participation. This approach necessarily erodes trust and leads people to conclude that a form of tokenistic engagement is at play.

*“None of us want to feel like we’re ticking boxes... like they’re ticking another government agenda off.”* [Depth interview]

Finally, participants spoke about the mindset governments bring to these spaces, often geared toward showcasing deliverables rather than working collaboratively. This highlights a need for governments to move away from a defensive posture - focused on presenting evidence of completed work - and instead embrace the opportunity to be in genuine relationship with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, listening and understanding the root causes and possible solutions. Governments must be willing to defer to the expertise of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and grapple with complex, systemic issues together. This involves shifting their thinking from barriers and hurdles to how their systems can be reconfigured to enable what works.

**Misalignment across levels of government:** There is currently no clear mechanism to hold governments accountable when their actions diverge from Policy Partnership commitments. Government continue to operate outside the Policy Partnership and National Agreement contexts, making it challenging to partner both with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, but also across jurisdictions.

As one submission noted:

*“Policy Partnerships often fail to take into account jurisdictional implementation contexts. National decisions are frequently made without regard to what’s already occurring at the state or local level, creating duplication or contradiction. The voices of jurisdictional ACCO partners are often missing, even when decisions made at the national level have significant consequences for state and territory implementation. This creates a disconnect between policy design and operational reality, placing Aboriginal partners in difficult positions when National decisions do not align with jurisdictional contexts.”* [Submission]

This disjointed approach can force Aboriginal peak bodies in the difficult position of managing the consequences;

*“(O)ften needing to explain or reconcile national decisions that they weren’t involved in shaping, or that conflict with priorities already agreed at the jurisdictional level.”* [Submission]

A key example lies with the Justice Policy Partnership. One submission advised;

*“The Justice Policy Partnership is intended to ensure progress toward justice Targets and accountability of relevant agencies work together in a way that aligns with the Priority Reforms, and which delivers integrated solutions. However, there is no mechanism by which to hold governments accountable when their decision-making at the jurisdictional level does not align with their commitments nationally.”* [Submission]

Another participant articulated what this experience looks like in practice:

*“They'll send info out to the members of the State Justice Partnership, but there's no discussion with us to say, “Do we agree with any of this?” [Depth interview]*

Promise was seen in the work underway resulting from Policy Partnerships, long standing relationships, jurisdictional Closing the Gap structures, or some combination of these. NSW CAPO highlighted:

*“The Aboriginal Legal Service NSW/ACT and the Department of Communities and Justice continue to work in partnership across a range of policy development projects relating to Aboriginal Throughcare, Therapeutic Pathways for Children and an Aboriginal specific Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Plan for NSW. These are the first policy projects completed in the NSW justice sector under the NSW CTG Partnership. An early process evaluation has found that the willingness of CAPO and NSW Government partners to do this work is a significant strength, while acknowledging there are ongoing improvements required to successfully embed the Priority Reforms and Strong Partnership Elements in the justice partnership.” [Submission]*

**Labour and burden:** A common theme that emerged through this review is the unfair balance of labour being carried by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This imbalance is evident in the Policy Partnerships where participants report that a significant amount of effort goes into educating governments on how to work differently and in ways that align with the principles of genuine partnership and good governance.

*“Much of the labour... is negotiating with and educating governments about how they can work differently.” [Survey response]*

Despite some promising examples of collaboration, the overall picture painted by this review of how the National Agreement is being implemented so far is one of inconsistency, fragmentation, and unrealised potential. This is consistent with the findings of the Productivity Commission Review released in 2024. Importantly, these challenges do not stem from flaws in the Agreement itself. The policy architecture is sound and offers a clear pathway toward structural reform. However, Policy Partnerships - while highly valued as a critical opportunity to craft policies in partnership - are not yet functioning as intended.

Participants described gaps in accountability, limited integration with Place-Based Partnerships, and a continued imbalance of power, where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partners carry much of the relational and educational labour. These concerns are reflected in the data: just 3 percent of survey respondents said the Policy Partnerships are working as expected, while 44 percent said they are not, and half were unsure.[55]

Strengthening these partnerships will require a deeper commitment from governments to shared decision-making and a willingness to transform how policies are developed, owned, and implemented across jurisdictions.

#### 4. Place Based Partnerships

*“While the Agreement talks a strong game - prioritising partnerships, community control, and accountability - what’s actually playing out on the ground doesn’t reflect that. There’s still a significant mismatch between what governments say they’re doing and what our communities are experiencing.” [Survey response]*

Under the Closing the Gap National Agreement at clauses 32-33, Place-Based Partnerships (PBPs) are defined as “partnerships based on a specific region, between government and Aboriginal representatives, and others by agreement, from those specific areas.”[56] The purpose of this definition - and of the PBP model itself - is to recognise the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and to develop local governance structures that reflect the unique needs and priorities of each place.

The National Agreement commits the parties to six initial PBPs. In July 2021, Joint Council agreed to the following partnership locations: Adelaide Western Suburbs, Morwell (VIC), Tamworth (NSW), Doomadgee (QLD), Maningrida (NT), and East Kimberley (WA). As part of this review, we visited each of the PBPs. Reactions to the PBPs ranged from excited to highly critical.

*“It’s in progress, the design phase was good. Lots of community consultation for the ... partnership, including Elders, and young people.” [Depth interview]*

*“It’s moving to the next phase of development.... We’ve streamlined the committee. We have... a co-chair... a couple of Elders, and a couple of kids. We have kids and community members that have come together and speak very highly of it and want to be involved.” [Depth interview]*



Some noted that it has just started, but were cautiously optimistic;

*“We’re gradually getting more and more community coming and attending those. And I think it’ll go good.” [Yarning Circle participant]*

Others noted that it has taken time to manage internal community conflict,

*“But the people that want the program to succeed are still at the table.” [Yarning Circle participant]*

While others expressed disappointment with progress to date:

*“Yeah, look... It’s not working as I would have expected it to in this, you know, five years down the track with Closing the Gap.” [Depth interview]*

When asked about the changes under the National Agreement, and the opportunity to influence policy and program development, one PBP site participant expressed excitement about the potential the partnership presented, but also hesitancy because it had yet to be formalised:

*“From my point of view, probably the Place-Based Partnership would probably be the biggest. I mean, it’s still in development, but the potential once the agreement is finalised and signed, the potential for what it can deliver... is fantastic.” [Yarning Circle participant]*



There were mixed reviews at another place-based site, given that it was still in its early development phase, which meant there had not been much time to talk about it within the community. Feedback was more positive from those more closely tied to implementation at each site, given the efforts to establish the mechanism and the work undertaken to consider governance and infrastructure. One depth interview participant saw the PBPs as an opportunity to “address some of the really big issues”, where others lamented the continued use of non-Indigenous services even while this process was being set up.

Insights about the PBP process in another part of the country saw the partnership as a positive step forward, but noted that it involved significant capacity to set up, without appropriate resourcing.

*“It's slower than what I thought. It's not happening as fast as what I would've liked to have seen it, but I also didn't realise there was going to be the amount of work... I'm actually like, personally on my level, I'm exhausted... it's taken me away from my everyday duties...I should be focused on what's happening in my workplace and what's going on. But urgent matters and urgent meetings with ministers come across ...and I know it takes time to get it up and running, but where are our employees to do that?” [Depth interview]*

Other participants reinforced the observation that progress has been slow, and people reported difficulty maintaining momentum due to insufficient resources. It should be noted here that place-based approaches are, by design, long-term local, community-led approaches to disadvantage and that a lengthy establishment phase is to be expected. Concerns were raised not about the length of time communities were taking in the set up of PBP governance, but about the roll-out being underfunded and poorly managed, with one interviewee noting,

*“Government uses ‘place-based’ as a buzzword without committing to the structural changes or funding it requires.” [Depth interview]*

Progress was also hampered by COVID-19 and the lack of clear and consistent communication. Communities described long periods without updates or support, often waiting for clarity on next steps.

At the same time, some participants felt rushed by government to make decisions quickly, without acknowledging the time needed to establish culturally grounded governance structures.

Several respondents warned that the term ‘place-based’ risks becoming hollow unless it is matched by genuine structural change and sustained investment. As one submission put it:

*“Place-Based Partnerships offer a critical opportunity to shift the relationship between government and Aboriginal communities — but this opportunity will be missed unless the model is taken seriously, backed properly, and scaled responsibly.” [Submission]*

#### *Governance models*

Broadly speaking, PBPs were viewed by participants as an opportunity to embed self-determination locally and to strengthen collaborative decision-making. We are already seeing that in practice in some of the governance arrangements that have been developed across the country.

APONT reported for example, that establishing the Governance Table in the Maningrida and Homelands Place-based Partnership,

*“...has allowed for a culturally-inclusive representation from Maningrida and its Homelands, across language and family groups.” [Submission]*

As you would expect given the differences in geography, history and experiences with government, each PBP has developed a governance model that meets the needs of the local community. Some communities have utilised existing structures and looked for unity in approach, while others have focused on ensuring representation by individual family groups. Community strongly reiterates the need for local based solutions, whether that be a regional spread, such as the East Kimberley or a town-based approach, such as Tamworth.

The map below and table at Attachment C illustrate the varied progress and nuanced approaches being taken in each location. While specific to each location, the examples may also offer pathways for other communities to consider.

*Diagram Six: Map of the Place Based Sites*



## *Early promise and significant uncertainty*

The survey data suggests that people are responding slightly more positively to the PBPs than they are to the Policy Partnerships. Eleven percent of survey respondents said the PBPs were working as expected, while 29 percent said they were not, and 60 percent were unsure. This is consistent with what participants from the PBP sites shared and seems to highlight both early promise and significant uncertainty about their implementation and future trajectory.[57]

When supported by clear, consistent communication and genuine collaboration, the PBPs can become powerful vehicles for embedding shared decision-making at the local level. Realising this potential will require governments to properly resource each site and honour the time it takes to build relationships and structures that are legitimate and locally driven.

### **2.1.4 Findings**

#### **Productivity Commission findings**

The Productivity Commission's review of the National Agreement found that shared decision-making was rarely achieved, with governments defaulting to familiar consultation and participation models that fall short of the power-sharing commitments enshrined in Priority Reform One.[54]

This aligns with what we heard from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders: many government-led processes continue to replicate historical power imbalances under a new guise. Rather than reimagining governance as a relationship of equals, governments have often framed partnership as the act of inviting First Nations people to the table, while retaining decision-making control.

Yet the evidence also shows that where the intent of Priority Reform One is fully embraced, shared decision-making can flourish. The following findings explore both the systemic challenges and the opportunities for genuine transformation.

#### **1. When done right, it works**

Priority Reform One envisions that formal partnership structures will empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to share decision-making authority with governments. There is evidence that this is the right policy setting and that when the parties are fully committed to shared decision-making, the partnership outcomes envisaged in Priority Reform One can be realised.

#### **2. It's time to come into 'right relationship'**

Realising the ambition of the National Agreement requires a fundamental rethinking of the relationship between governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This means moving beyond the colonial dynamic of the parent state managing its troublesome child (a dynamic marked by paternalism, infantilisation, and ongoing attempts at assimilation). Instead, it calls for a reconception of what right relationship could look like between the modern Australian nation-state and the sovereign Indigenous nations it displaced. This relationship must be one grounded in mutual recognition, respect, and shared authority rather than hierarchy.

### **3. Introspection is needed**

Governments continue to show reluctance in relinquishing control and shifting toward genuine shared decision-making with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities. Whether this stems from an unwillingness to change or a lack of understanding about how to get there remains unclear. What communities have made abundantly clear is this: consultation is not shared decision-making, and being at the table is not enough. Shared decision-making means relinquishing control over agendas, outcomes, data collection, funding approaches - and deciding together what these should look like. To reach this point, governments must take the time to reflect honestly on what is inhibiting progress. Without this work, they risk undermining the implementation of the National Agreement.

### **4. Shared decision-making depends on equitable resourcing**

Without equitable and sustained resourcing, attempts at shared decision-making will continue to fall short. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations are expected to engage in complex partnership processes with limited capacity, while governments often retain control over funding flows, timelines, and decision-making infrastructure. This creates an uneven playing field, where one party holds the resources and the power to set the pace, and the other is forced to keep up or miss out. Equitable resourcing is not just about money; it's about ensuring communities have the time, staffing, governance structures, and supports needed to participate on equal footing. Until this is addressed, the promise of shared decision-making will remain largely rhetorical.

### **5. The vision isn't shared**

There is currently no consistent or shared understanding of what genuine shared decision-making entails, nor a clear articulation of the distinct roles and responsibilities of each party. Even if the Policy and Place-Based Partnerships were functioning optimally, which is not yet the case, other partnership arrangements across portfolios would still benefit from a clearer roadmap for how power can be shared and decisions made together. In the absence of this, examples of good practice remain isolated, and systemic approaches to shared decision-making have yet to emerge.

### **6. COVID ways of working need broader application**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the health sector adapted rapidly and effectively, activating all peak bodies and placing trust in their knowledge of what would work best for communities. Review participants universally pointed to the excellent outcomes this produced. But as one submission noted, *“Promising progress in the health sector is not yet matched by other portfolios - such as housing, justice, language and culture.”* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are calling for more shared decision-making like they saw during COVID and don't want to wait for another global crisis to see this way of working applied more broadly.

### **7. Lack of communication is undermining the process**

A persistent challenge across the PBPs is the lack of clear, consistent, and culturally appropriate communication. Communities have reported long delays, minimal updates, and confusion about how the partnerships are unfolding on the ground. This undermines trust, stalls progress, and leaves communities feeling disconnected from processes that are

supposed to centre them. Parties operating at the national and jurisdictional levels must take active responsibility for ensuring that local communities are kept informed - not just occasionally, but regularly and transparently - and that information about the rollout of PBPs is delivered in ways that respect local communication preferences and protocols.

## 8. Strengthen the linkages

The relationship between Policy Partnerships and Place-Based Partnerships needs to be more clearly defined and actively maintained. At present, these mechanisms often operate in parallel rather than in concert, limiting their potential to reinforce one another. Strengthening the link between them would create a more coherent and coordinated system for shared decision-making; one where national priorities are better informed by local realities, and local efforts are supported by structural reform at higher levels. Without this alignment, opportunities for meaningful change risk falling through the cracks.

### 2.1.5 A new story

Priority Reform One calls for a fundamental rebalancing of the relationship between governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. While mechanisms for shared decision-making now exist, their implementation is often inconsistent, partial, or performative, echoing long histories of tokenism and control.

True transformation requires more than presence at the table; it requires structural shifts in who sets the agenda, who holds authority, and how decisions are made and enacted. Coming into right relationship means reckoning with a legacy of exclusion and domination and choosing instead to build a future grounded in mutual recognition, trust, and accountability. If this vision is to be realised, governments must do the deep work of rethinking how they show up in partnership. Not as custodians of power, but as co-stewards of a shared future.



# CASE STUDY

## Torres Strait Islander peoples



*“Obviously it is important trying to make it more culturally appropriate for our region because, as we always say that, you know, you have two First Nations people, so don’t put us all in the one basket.” [Depth interview]*

Torres Strait Islander peoples are recognised as a distinct part of the Indigenous population of Australia, each with their own unique cultural and historic origins that set them apart from Aboriginal peoples. Their experiences living between the stretch of ocean from the tip of Cape York Peninsula to Papua New Guinea, across some 17 islands further inform their unique cultural identities and way of life. While an estimated one in five people had moved from the islands to the mainland in 2016,[58] a significant proportion of Torres Strait Islander peoples live across the islands today. It is this relative isolation that informs the identity and worldviews of Torres Strait Islander peoples as well their experiences of policy initiatives such as Closing the Gap.

It is clear from the findings of this Review, that Torres Strait Islander people share many of the frustrations and opportunities presented by the framework of the National Agreement as their Aboriginal counterparts. In some cases, many of these are exacerbated.

Review participants from the region identified the importance of elevating the distinct needs of Torres Strait Islander peoples across the infrastructure and implementation of the National Agreement so that their experiences are adequately addressed and not simply grouped alongside those of the broader Aboriginal population. One of the key differences raised was about the significance and immediacy of climate change to the health and wellbeing of Torres Strait Islander peoples and as a matter not captured by the current National Agreement.

All communities in the Torres Strait region are highly vulnerable to multiple climate change impacts compounded by remoteness and severe disadvantage. For the Torres Strait communities, addressing these impacts needs to be guided by social equity and social justice as informing principles. The TSRA is calling for the inclusion of climate change in Closing the Gap targets, or at a minimum, reflected in the sub-indicators under relevant targets.

The Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA) has recently structured the key activities of its 2024-25 Corporate Plan against 16 of the 17 Targets. The National Agreement is one of the key national priorities considered in the development of the TSRA Development Plan 2023-2028, and the strategic priorities within it are mapped against the Priority Reforms.[59] There has also been a recent focus on Priority Reform Three and the broader analysis of regional progress.

# CASE STUDY

## Torres Strait Islander peoples cont.



However, some participants have indicated that the role of TSRA as a federal government agency is limiting within the architecture of the National Agreement, as it means they are not directly represented at either Joint Council or at the Coalition of Peak Organisations level:

*“We’re kind of out-of-reach, out-of-sight, out-of-mind. And we play a pivotal role to influence policy development that attracts investment and methodology of those investments, and how it gets delivered on ground. But because we’re a black voice hidden in an institution governed by Government, it kind of dismisses or disqualifies us to influence or be called to the table as equal partners to influence that investment into our communities. It’s like, how do we elevate First Nation voices and places around those important conversation and investment into our regions? It’s like we just sit there and watch this investment come and leave community.” [Depth interview]*

Throughout this Review, Torres Strait Islander participants identified their unique positioning as it relates to both the Queensland and Federal Government having an important impact on outcomes under Closing the Gap reforms. The constantly shifting nature of the government funding and policy landscapes, as well as poor communication with the communities across the Torres Strait were identified as key barriers to long term progress, with participants sharing:

*“Change of government. And people coming into that space have - there's no momentum, continuity, stability with key roles that develops policy in government... Our issues, challenges has gotten worser. We have dilapidated local infrastructure and community. And... our revenue base hasn't increased. It's gotten worser.” [Depth interview]*

*“Governments come and go. We've seen a lot of them. There's a lot of promises, still a lot of promises. We're only just grappling with the state government. Obviously this hasn't been any great things happening yet for Indigenous people...In QLD right now it's difficult and it's a reality of the new government after truth telling. So I think people are still walking softly.” [Depth interview]*

*“Look, I think...I've seen Government do better before to where it is now...I've actually seen it go the other way.” [Depth interview]*

# CASE STUDY

## Torres Strait Islander peoples cont.



Additionally, several of the challenges identified across the Review as a whole are also exacerbated for Torres Strait Islander peoples. This is particularly the case as it relates to data. Feedback to the Review identified the need for data capture for the Torres Strait to be disaggregated from the Aboriginal population, and particularly those data sets structured at a regional level grouping the island population with Aboriginal communities in Far North Queensland. This means that at present the needs and trends of Torres Strait Islander populations are being obscured by the ways in which data is collected and reported and that greater efforts are required by governments to share data to support identifying needs and solutions.

*“We did our own sums and we were getting like 21 years life expectancy gap for the Torres Strait and you can see it.” [Depth interview]*

Despite the efforts of TSRA, procedural and systemic blockages in jurisdictional data sharing is evident and highlights an important disconnect between policy and practice, presenting fundamental challenges to achieving the Priority Reforms in the Torres Strait. Responsibility for existing data obligations and new data development are split across multiple working groups and agencies at state and national level. Those who participated in the Review from the Torres Strait believe that this requires intervention at the ministerial and senior executive levels to ensure blockages are both understood and addressed, and what has been described as *“increased authority and mandates to share data is urgent”*. [Submission]



# Culture is our medicine

## Priority Reform Two: Strengthening the Community-Controlled Sector

*“The work that we all do is so important, but it's not disconnected to the work that's happened before. You know, we're all obligated to work for country and work for community. And whether that's in an urban community-controlled organisation or in local government, it's no different. You know, for me, it's not about us, and it's not about now. And that's a philosophy that's been held by our community for thousands of years. And it should be the basis in which local governments and all governments are making decisions on in the future.”* [Assembly Delegate]

*“The challenge that we've got with some of these government departments is ... they don't value the importance and the advice that we as Aboriginal community-controlled health services provide, they did during COVID ... but that should be how it operates.”* [Depth interview]

*“Accountability to community, not just to government processes. Communities should be able to hold systems to account through independent, community-led monitoring and evaluation.”* [Survey response]

## 2.2.1 By Us, For Us, With Us

The emergence of the community-controlled sector has its origins in the political and social advocacy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the 1960-70s.

Demands for greater rights to land, health care, wages and justice led to the development of the first Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and legal organisations in Redfern[60], Port Augusta[61], Melbourne[62], Brisbane[63] and Perth[64] in the early 1970s, and by 1978 there were at least 12 Aboriginal Medical Services operating across the country.

These services responded to the need for the provision of community designed and delivered health care and legal solutions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.[65] Unlike non-indigenous approaches, the beginnings of the community-controlled sector are built on acknowledging the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing. The emphasis on culturally safe service delivery and care, as well as their connection to prevention, advocacy and the need for holistic approaches are still critical components of the community-controlled sector today. The expertise of the community-controlled sector is not valued or respected.

Priority Reform Two recognises what First Nations people have long known to be true – that they know best about what works for their communities. The long history of advocacy and ingenuity that stretches back countless generations and has served Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people well has regularly been acknowledged through this Review. One participant summed this up,

*'Our ways of doing business pre-exist Closing the gap, and they will continue long after.' [Assembly Delegate]*

This sentiment is not distinct to the role of the community-controlled sector but rather exemplifies an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander approach in caring for Country and community for the benefit of current, but also future generations.

Despite the rhetoric of reform and the known value of delivering culturally safe services and responses, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector is not treated as a valued partner. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations (ACCOs) report experiencing significant burden under the new arrangements to deliver to a greater extent than has existed under previous iterations of the Agreement. This was encapsulated in the words of one community-controlled peak body, who highlighted that whilst their funding on the whole had been improved over the last five years, that their member organisations were still being 'extremely poorly resourced' and that traction with government on this issue was not forthcoming.

Review participants raised the extent to which the new arrangements amounted to a system of intense micromanaging, where they must advocate for basic needs funding while spending inordinate amounts of time reporting to government rather than focusing on programmatic objectives themselves aimed at 'closing the gap.' Some respondents reported spending as much as 50 and 90 per cent of their time simply on the reporting requirements of government, while others maintained that they could spend their entire job just focused solely on the needs of government and not those of the community.

In contrast to the stated objectives of the National Agreement, organisational submissions pointed to the fact that, in implementation, the increase in '*activities and bureaucratic processes' had not been matched by requisite funding to actually 'build the sector.'*' [Survey response] Indeed, the weight of responses to this Review generally indicated that the transition to the implementation of the Priority Reforms had resulted in a worsening of red tape from government as well as the financial and administrative burden placed on ACCOs. In this way, the community-controlled sector stressed that many of their organisations had reached 'maximum capacity' in this new environment, which required them to be increasingly available to provide advice, attend various Closing the Gap forums and continue to lead and certify best practice within expedited timeframes and narrow budgets.

Frustration with this approach has emphasised a renewed paternalism that is dominating interactions with government in place of enhanced efforts towards self-determination. There were regular references to governments not trusting ACCOs and giving 'lip-service' to a new way of working and 'community-led' approaches, but that this was not borne out in practice. Numerous ACCOs lamented the extent to which their expertise was not recognised, much less invested in, leading to relegation alongside non-Indigenous organisations. In addition to failing to recognise the unique cultural and professional expertise of ACCOs, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations identified having to compete against often better resourced non-Indigenous agencies for government funding to serve their own communities. The tendency to treat the First Nations sector as if they are akin to any other organisation where services can simply be 'outsourced' misses the point behind the Priority Reforms and the existence of ACCOs themselves.

This lack of trust in Indigenous ways of knowing and doing is exacerbated by what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people point to as the crushing weight of the burden of how the Priority Reforms are being implemented. One participant identified that the expectations placed on the ACCO sector are not mirrored in government interactions with other parties such as the non-government sector and indeed are having individual and collective effects across various sectors. As one survey response indicated:

*The community-controlled sector is so very disadvantaged and under resourced - but if we make one small error - my goodness, we are jumped upon, not assisted to grow. [Survey response]*

The rhetoric of supporting community control was generally devoid of the necessary capacity and capability building required to '*set a sector up for success*', [Submission] a factor which leaves Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations feeling overwhelmed and without the tools they need to feel supported to do the work that they do.

## **2.2.2 Community perspectives in detail**

### **1. Building or burdening?**

Throughout the Review, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations shared their efforts to adapt to the new ways of working under the Agreement, either aided or unaided by government. Several peak bodies emphasised the importance of not waiting for government but instead taking the initiative and advantage of whatever existing resources were available, to build the infrastructure necessitated by the new arrangements.

Arrente woman and CEO of SNAICC, Catherine Liddle identified the opportunity presented by the priority reforms to provide the tools to communities to ‘build their own tables.’<sup>[66]</sup> These were matched by views that it was incumbent on the community-controlled sector to lead in this space where government would not, and that the urgency of need in communities was such that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples simply cannot “*wait for government*”.  
[Assembly Delegate]

Similar efforts shared during the Review identified the work undertaken by the Aboriginal Peak Organisations in the Northern Territory (APONT), the Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Service (KAMS), the South Australian Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation Network (SAACCON) and NSW CAPO to build their own Closing the Gap regional and jurisdictional infrastructure to progress the ability of their sectors to respond. This may also be the case in other areas. This work was generally not funded by governments and, therefore, made possible through the financial and organisational capacity of the relevant organisations. APONT detailed the internal architecture they have put in place to support the transition to the arrangements under the National Agreement, including those which were also borne out of Commissions of Inquiry, such as the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory. In doing so, they identified the importance of creating infrastructure that was able to mirror those functions of the Coalition of Peaks Secretariat, which provided a decentralised mechanism that was designed to suit their needs in the Northern Territory. The KAMS likewise emphasised the extent to which they undertake every opportunity to improve their capacity at their own expense, whether at a policy or project levels to enable them to partner with governments as equals.

While some of the initiatives cited predate the National Agreement reforms, these developments have only been possible because of the seed funding and foundation provided by the sector to build momentum. Some of these initiatives include the Kimberley Health Evidence Data Platform (KHEDP) and the innovation of the Bourke community through the justice reinvestment work and the Maranguka project.

Of course, these examples were not widespread and there was broad acknowledgment that many of the gains able to be made by the larger peak bodies, are not able to be made by smaller organisations. This limited capacity is also evident in the ability of all community-controlled organisations, but particularly smaller organisations, to keep up with the level of non-resourced demand for their input that has arisen through the National Agreement. As one peak organisation has indicated to this Review, these agencies simply,

*“do not have [the] resources for policy, advocacy and engagement... or budget to participate in the various governance mechanisms that have arisen. This significantly limits the ability of those organisations with fewer resources to participate in fora where decisions are made or alternatively leaving ‘ACCOs ... to find internal resources in an at-capacity workforce, taking away from their limited resourcing to meet service demand.”*

[Submission]

According to one national peak body, the community-controlled sector has,

*"demonstrated adaptability, leadership and innovative practice, but are often burdened by bureaucratic processes and short term, inadequate funding cycles."* [Submission]

The provision of government funding has allowed some organisations to continue or expand operations, with some examples of greater workforce development. Feedback to this Review suggests that there has been a general uptick in funding, but that this has lacked a systemic approach and has been inconsistent across sectors and jurisdictions.

By and large, ACCOs report that efforts to fund them under Priority Reform Two has meant continuing existing operations, coupled with an intensified need to demonstrate that *'progress is being made.'* [Submission] The community-controlled sector expressed concern that governments will cease resourcing them if imposed funding targets are not satisfied. This weight of expectation places uneven pressure on the community-controlled sector that is not the case for government, who instead view, *"funding allocations as evidence of progress."* [Survey response]

Unless governments address the systemic issues imposed on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, money alone will do very little. There is a dire need for government to move beyond seeing progress as merely financial transactions where one party does all of the heavy lifting, without addressing the fundamental questions of leadership, investment and accountability.

## **2. Self-determination or offloading responsibility?**

The transactional and one-sided nature of government interactions with ACCOs fails to recognise the fundamental impetus behind the National Agreement – ‘the ultimate goal of self-determination.’[67] Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are not simply any other service provider within a government-led and administered system. They are uniquely and ideally placed to deliver for their peoples. The promise by government to a new era of investing in community-owned and led approaches is sorely lacking in implementation so far. It must be met by foundational changes to the nature of their relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, to establish adequate long-term funding and relinquish control over the nature and pace of change. Such action would demonstrate trust in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to deliver what is best for their communities.

This involves moving away from a system where the community-controlled sector feels that they exist at the whim of government, to one where government relinquishes control and allows organisations to do things for themselves. This is the essence of self-determination. From the perspective of both organisations and community, this translates to organisations being able to control their own priorities, funding and governance.

Unfortunately, ACCOs are largely still having to ‘ask permission’ within this new era of partnership and are effectively stifled in their efforts towards enhanced self-determination because governments continue to delay, deny or dictate the parameters. Several submission and survey responses to this Review spoke to this issue:

*“Despite claiming to build a strong and sustainable Aboriginal Community Controlled sector, governments continue to hold significant power in shaping priorities, allocating resources and deciding on the pace of reform.” [Submission]*

*“Need to recognise this isn’t about service delivery, but self-determination.” [Survey response]*

*“It’s very difficult dealing with government when they’re kind of set in their ways and their policies. Like, they’re saying it’s community-led, it’s a partnership, but it’s not. Like, they’re not willing to do it, like, our way... I guess just trying to deal with them, and then there was constant meetings every week and a bit of micromanaging on, you know, all that” [Yarning Circle participant]*

*“We have observed a pattern of unconscious bias in how Indigenous organisations are engaged by government, resulting in a level of scrutiny not applied to non-Indigenous providers. In many industries, there is a tolerance for trialling innovative approaches, with an understanding that failure can be a part of learning and growth. However, government agencies often demonstrate a limited risk appetite when it comes to Indigenous organisations...” [Submission]*

Part of the narrative of control and pressure coming from the community-controlled sector speaks to high expectations placed on them to solve complex issues, largely without any efforts from government beyond providing program funding. This begs the question of what the possibilities would be if there were more complementary efforts on the part of all governments.

A balance is needed between addressing the continued under-investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led approaches. It is not intended as an avenue for governments to abrogate their responsibility for the disproportionate burden of social determinants and systemic harms associated with current systems.

Promoting self-determination is an important objective that needs to occur cohesively and in a way that is supported through long term financial and cultural change. To date, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations have stressed the extent to which efforts to promote sector development have been patchy. The promise of self-determination cannot come at the price of government taking little to no responsibility for the citizenship and human rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. An approach that continues on the current trajectory, and which ignores the views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, risks holding ACCOs responsible for the slow pace of structural change.

Positive developments around self-determination have been less frequent but have been identified by the community-controlled sector as occurring within the context of the new arrangements under the National Agreement. This is seen in the number of peak bodies established across the country that simply did not exist, such as SAACCON and the Tamworth Coalition of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (TACCO).

The Council of Aboriginal Services in Western Australia (CASWA) point to their very existence as an act of 'full self-determination' for the Aboriginal people of WA. Other steps forward are evident in the transition of clinics to community control, of ACCOs picking up more services, and of the transition by agencies to working more closely in consortium with one another. Further information also indicates that they have worked with the Commonwealth Government to identify more than 30 programs to transition to the community-controlled sector and that presently, 20 of these are scheduled to move over by 2027.[68]

Progress in this sense is important but cannot be entirely attributed to the government. Despite a 40 percent increase in the amount of government funding flowing to the community-controlled sector, predominantly from funds previously earmarked under the Indigenous Advancement Strategy,[69] funding alone is not enough to address existing challenges. Indeed, it is the efforts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community to stand up areas of service delivery, policy and advocacy through the environment created by the National Agreement. This is where progress has been made and where it must continue.

More established organisations are well placed to progress the principles of community control given their growth and strength that has come after years of proven advocacy and service delivery. Progress in areas such as child welfare and health has meant that some sectors have been able to advance aspects of self-determination that are simply inconceivable elsewhere.

Arrente and Gurdanji woman and lead convenor of the Coalition of Peaks, Patricia Turner AM, referenced the transition of some out-of-home-care services to ACCOs in her remarks to the Assembly of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander delegates in Canberra in April this year.[70] For VACCA, many of the programs that include the transfer of authority normally exercised by the Victorian government and the provision of an expanded, wraparound family support system, predate the National Agreement. Nonetheless, these initiatives have enjoyed continued support through the commitments of the National Agreement and action on Priority Reform Two. The Nugel program, which means 'belong' in the Woiwurrung language, began in 2017 and enables VACCA to assume parental responsibility for Aboriginal children in court matters where the child welfare department would otherwise intervene.[71] Through the program, VACCA becomes responsible for key decisions about the best interests and wellbeing of Aboriginal children in their care; decisions that would otherwise be made by the Victorian government. The program cites improved child wellbeing, cultural connection, higher reunification rates and reduces the likelihood that children will return to the child protection system by as much as 78 percent.[72] According to VACCA CEO, Muriel Bamblett, there has been a 250 percent increase in funding, there are 800 Aboriginal children in the care of VACCA and she currently holds delegated authority for an additional 380 Aboriginal children in Victoria. [Depth interview]

The shift from government to community control in an area that is so significant in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is important and provides a blueprint for the future.

### 3. Service design and delivery

*“Funding needs to follow function. Long-term, flexible, needs-based funding—not project-based, competitive or conditional contracts.” [Survey response]*

Survey responses to this Review indicated that the National Agreement had started to move service design and delivery into the hands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.[73] Less than half of those that participated in the survey (46%) agreed with that view, while 30 percent did not agree and 23 percent did not express a view.[74]

These responses may explain some of the feedback from the ACCO sector that expressed frustration at the extent to which funding was still going to non-Indigenous agencies for services, the impact of *‘chronic’ and ‘historical underfunding’* [Submission] as well as the lack of funding flowing to all parts of the community-controlled sector. These are captured in some of the quotes below taken from the review survey, as well as some of the issues discussed further in this section:

*“We talk about building the community-controlled sector but unless its ongoing recurrent funding then its of little use. For example the organisation I work for has not received any additional funding to help us be involved in the process.” [Survey response]*

*“We continue to see non-Indigenous orgs funded to run Aboriginal programs too.” [Survey response]*

*“While there have been commitments to shift investment, the concern is primarily about the impact on non-Indigenous organisations currently funded to under-service our communities, rather than the benefits of change. This centres non-Indigenous interests. Governments also need to recognise that shift applies to them too, not just give NGOs - their policy development etc could be primarily moved to community, retaining a smaller coordinating footprint within government.” [Survey response]*

These perspectives reflect ongoing concerns that the shift toward a strong and sustainable community-controlled sector is not being fully realised in practice. While commitments have been made, funding remains fragmented, short-term, or disproportionately allocated to non-Indigenous providers. Participants emphasized that real transformation requires structural investment, not just in individual organisations, but across the entire Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled ecosystem. This includes ongoing, secure, and appropriately scaled funding that reaches across regions and sectors, as well as meaningful involvement in policy development and service design. Without this, implementation efforts to build a thriving community-controlled sector will fall short of the systemic change envisioned in the National Agreement.

#### 4. Workforce developments

*“...there has been a small uplift in supporting the workforce, but because our workforce is so far behind there is still a long way to go.” [Survey response]*

Improving the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce and building strong community-controlled sectors are a key part of Priority Reform Two.[75] Feedback throughout the Review indicates mixed progress on both fronts, and the need for much greater effort on the part of Governments now and into the future. Responses to the Review Survey demonstrate that 39 percent of people agreed that there had been increased efforts towards supporting growing the ACCO workforce. Contrastingly, 37 percent of respondents disagreed that this was taking place and at least 24 percent of responses neither agreed nor disagreed with this proposition. [76]

Despite some workforce investment across areas such as health, remote area jobs and child welfare, ACCOs generally report being underfunded and having to compete alongside non-Indigenous agencies for funding.

The 500 health sector traineeships announced in 2023 was identified as a major achievement by stakeholders, as was the injection of funding to the place-based partnership (PBP) taking place in Victoria. In the latter instance, VACCA has been able to employ an additional 2 staff across the region. This investment stands in stark contrast to workforce growth in the five other PBPs, which are at varying levels of development.

In Victoria, an example of the importance of an Aboriginal model of care and workforce within custodial settings, was shared with us. More information on this appears in the case study below.



# REPORT CASE STUDY

## Aboriginal Model of Custodial Healthcare Pilot Project



In Victoria, there is evidence of genuine partnership and shared decision making under the National Agreement, including the Aboriginal Model of Custodial Healthcare (Pilot Project) and the Victorian First Nations Vocational Education Training Alliance (VFNVA). These models highlight shifts in the way governments are working with community through formal partnerships and engaging in shared decision making. As a partner to these initiatives, the Victorian Aboriginal Community controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO), the Peak representation for the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people in Victoria representing 33 Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations, recognises, “[w]hile these examples are not perfect, as there were and still are flaws associated in the process in driving forward these initiatives, they have nevertheless underpinned great achievements that will make a difference in Victorian Aboriginal Communities.”[77]

Within Victoria, Aboriginal people continue to be overrepresented in the prison system.[78] In the 34 years since the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC), there have been over 600 Aboriginal deaths in custody nationwide.[79] In 1991 the RCIADIC found, “... *many system defects in relation to care, many failures to exercise proper care and in general a poor standard of care.*”[80] In the last three decades since the Royal Commission there have been calls across multiple reviews and inquiries to improve custodial healthcare for Aboriginal people, with recommendations for Aboriginal models of healthcare.[81] Recently, the Victorian Ombudsman, Deborah Glass, in the latest Ombudsman report into healthcare provision for Aboriginal people in Victorian prisons, stated, “*Aboriginal people and organisations told us that prisons need Aboriginal models of healthcare, led by Aboriginal organisations.*”[82]

In Victoria, there is a promising initiative in development, the Aboriginal Model of Custodial Health Care (Pilot Project), that seeks to address this issue through processes of genuine partnership and shared decision-making. The pilot initiative has been co-designed by VACCHO, the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service (VAHS), Bendigo and District Aboriginal Co-operative (BDAC), and the Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative in partnership with the Victorian Department of Justice Health. As described by VACCHO,

# REPORT CASE STUDY

## Aboriginal Model of Custodial Healthcare Pilot Project cont.



*“...the model serves as a vital interface between ACCOs and Aboriginal people in custody. Its core aim is to lead reform in custodial healthcare by addressing systemic health inequalities and ensuring culturally safe, community-led care.”[83]*

This initiative has the potential to effectively address critical issues experienced by Aboriginal people in custodial settings in Victoria who have ‘described feeling powerless to obtain the care they needed’,[84] and address recommendations made over the last 30 years. While indicating some promising action through this partnership in alignment with the National Agreement, such as the Department approaching VACCHO to lead the development of this model of care, there have been several issues identified and encountered which are barriers to ongoing development and implementation of the model of care and pilot project and challenge the partnerships ongoing alignment with the National Agreement. These issues include the Department’s failure to fully fund the project which has required more in-kind support from VACCHO than agreed, as well as Departmental actions that have sought to expand the scope of the project beyond the agreement. In addition, the Victorian Government has not guaranteed the sustained implementation of the pilot or model of care once developed.

The Aboriginal Model of Custodial Healthcare (Pilot Project) highlights a promising partnership under the National Agreement Priority Reform areas. However, there remains critical and inherent barriers to the full realisation of the partnership initiatives due to Government actions and/or inactions. This case study evidences the critical importance of ongoing and sustainable funding to support community organisations to engage fully in their work, as well as the importance of adhering to the scope of agreements. This case study shares an initiative that can respond to key target areas of Closing the Gap, however this work remains limited and constrained from reaching its full realisation and potential.

There is a significant need for workforce investment in areas such as Maningrida where the footprint of the local community-controlled health organisation is very small and very stretched. This is despite the significant health issues in the community such as rheumatic heart disease, acute rheumatic fever, and tuberculosis.[85] The Review was told that the impacts of the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) were still being felt and that issues such as lack of housing were impacting on the community health and wellbeing, including allowing these known health issues to worsen. In addition, we were also informed that training, employment and indeed health care opportunities are limited and often require community members to travel to other areas such as Alice Springs or Darwin.

Feedback from remote NT communities was that the 'homelands miss out' in favour of more populated areas in other parts of the territory. APONT reported that they were able to help secure some much-needed funding for the remote jobs program. While this is a positive development, it falls far short of what is needed, with only 3,000 jobs funded out of the 12,000 that were advocated for.

Despite this progress, and the place of workforce development across all sector strengthening plans, a lack of 'equitable investment' overall significantly curtails what organisations can achieve. Review participants shared that constraints placed on them often limited their capacity to attract and retain staff, and that building the workforce was not always as simple as funding positions. One organisation identified that filling positions was a key challenge due to the broader structural issues facing their community around poverty, lack of housing, conflicts of interest, police checks and the cost of living, particularly heightened in remote communities. Some Review participants believe these conditions are not appreciated by government but can limit the ability of ACCOs to fill vacancies from within and beyond the community.

*"So NIAA want us to do police checks and ... the people who cannot get police clearance, and that are not working with, they do not come in contact with children. These are the ones that are working. So I've got them, some of them have come out of juvie, some of them big boy gaol as well, so I think we've got four or five people on the books who couldn't get a job anywhere else." [Yarning Circle participant]*

Another organisation in a remote area (and the main employer in their small community) sought to employ as many local people as possible, which meant a general wage deduction across all staffing contracts. Participants from this community emphasised that they would have to move to a completely different location hours away from where they live to seek alternate employment.

Beyond the size of the workforce, participants stressed the importance that workforce building must also be about creating pathways for career development, growth and opportunity as well.

*"When Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are employed, it needs to be at every level and there needs to be pathways for people to grow and learn and develop. You know, like actual careers, not just low paid dead-end jobs" [Survey response]*

*"More Aboriginal people in senior management positions would make a hell of a difference" [Survey response]* 98

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who took part in this Review pointed to the growing impact of stress on community-controlled workforces, as a result of both funding arrangements and bureaucratic processes.

*“Some agencies are doing their share of employing more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers, however others seem to have a huge turnover. There is often not much career development for staff to grow into leadership roles.” [Survey response]*

*“From my perspective all it has created is an additional burden on community led organisations, resulting in decreased service delivery and increased staff turnover.” [Survey response]*

As is explained in the section below, stress on ACCO workforces is also compounded by being forced to compete with other employers who may be able to offer more in terms of wages and conditions to respective employees.



## 5. Black cladding and community control

Black cladding, as defined by Supply Nation, is the:

*“Practice of a non-Indigenous business entity or individual taking unfair advantage of an Indigenous business entity or individual for the purpose of gaining access to otherwise inaccessible Indigenous procurement policies or contracts. Unfair advantage involves practices and arrangements that result in the disadvantage or detriment to an Indigenous business, or that do not represent a genuine demonstrated level of equitable partnership and benefit.”[86]*

Challenges to growing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce across the community-controlled sector extend beyond funding. Feedback to this Review indicated frustration about the extent to which non-Indigenous agencies employ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff to 'black clad' their organisation so they can attract funding for their programs. A lack of appropriate funding for the community-controlled sector means that ACCOs are often not able to compete against bigger agencies, making wage parity (as outlined under Priority Reform Two in Clause 45(a) of the Agreement) or in other sectors critical. Addressing this is crucial for overall sector sustainability.

There are important implications for investing funding in organisations that are genuinely controlled by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. Various examples of this were shared with this Review, namely:

*"Now we see, the black cladding of organisations now people just put, or wear an Aboriginal shirt and all of a sudden they're meant to be culturally safe and appropriate, or they have a re-change their organisation name to an Aboriginal name." [Yarning Circle participant]*

*"Too much Black Cladding is happening with our ACCOs, Government again are only working with and supporting the ACCOs they see that will work with them without any issues or rocking the cart." [Survey response]*

Such organisations not only cut off legitimate agencies from delivering services but also deny Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people the opportunity to receive culturally appropriate services and supports. The matter fundamentally comes down to how the emergence of such organisations affects the health and wellbeing of the broader Indigenous population – the very point of the existence of the National Agreement. The North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency (NAAJA) has also shared that a lack of investment by the NT government resulted in a lack of culturally safe legal representation for Indigenous people in the jurisdiction given the tendency to 'funnel' resources into non-Indigenous agencies.

Further actions and examination are required to ensure organisations receiving funding to deliver services fully meet the definition of 'community-controlled.' This must ensure that 'community-control' extends to accountability structures involving community and not simply a board with some or majority Indigenous members.

Some participants were concerned about organisations who 'tick the box' then, upon receipt of funding, request assistance from local ACCOs on engaging with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. Additional concerns were also raised about the extent to which new agencies that are emerging in the space either through the Office of Indigenous Corporations (ORIC) or the Indigenous Procurement Policy (IPP), lacked the cultural authority and expertise to deliver culturally safe and appropriate services:

*"What we're seeing is these non-Indigenous organisations getting their black chairs and getting 51 percent on their board so that they can then hold their funding by transitioning to be an ACCO." [Depth interview]*

*“Black cladding” is prevalent: government-created or government-aligned Aboriginal subsidiaries are used to bypass accountability, shift funding without due process, and simulate community control. These practices protect institutions from scrutiny while displacing genuine cultural governance.” [Submission]*

*The main thing when I first started, there was fewer Indigenous staff in our organisation and I was quite shocked... I'd never been in an Aboriginal organisation that literally didn't have Aboriginal staff. And it looked like really old days.” ... “But now it's much better when people; when community come into our office, they're basically meeting their own people; people they know... The advantage, of course, is they know people, they know issues and the community and the area and so on.” [Yarning Circle participant]*

These concerns articulate a clear need for governments to better understand the impact that their policies are having and how they are being applied on the ground, through initiatives such as the Closing the Gap framework. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership within the Coalition of Peaks, and the jurisdictional peaks are well placed to respond to some of these concerns and devise a way forward with governments. This will contribute to enlivening the principles underpinning Priority Reform Two and carve out a pathway that allows new and existing ACCOs to continue to be appropriately supported.

## **6. Sector strengthening efforts**

*“No overnight successes, but planting seeds for change” [Assembly Delegate]*

Sector Strengthening Plans (SSPs) are a key mechanism aimed at identifying opportunities to build the capabilities of sectors in line with Priority Reform Two. SSPs are at varying levels of implementation, with some strides being made in the health and early childhood sectors whilst the areas of disability and housing require further attention. As with other elements of Priority Reform Two, across the SSPs, participants nominated areas nominated as reasons for optimism but, also, that much work remains to be done by all partners to realise current aspirations.

While expanded funding to the Health Sector Strengthening Plan (HSSP) was identified as a positive measure, one organisation advised the Review, in a submission, that a lack of follow through or sustained investment placed the programs they were able to undertake at risk. We were told that greater efforts are needed to realise the potential of sector strengthening plans, especially as it relates to funding to build the national workforce.

One submission welcomed the move towards prioritising the ACCO sector in commissioning and sector strengthening in their state. In doing so however, they identified the need for this focus to be matched with sustained investment by all levels, including the state government, whose efforts have been limited to short term grants only offered by competitive tender.

### **SNAICC Sector Strengthening Program**

The SNAICC SSP is part of the Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) Policy Partnership and aims to support ACCOs to deliver high-quality, culturally safe early childhood education and care. SNAICC’s program is focusing on sector strengthening through:

- Workforce development to build a culturally capable and appropriately qualified First Nations workforce
- Capital infrastructure addressing the need for adequate infrastructure to support ACCO service delivery
- Service delivery with clearly defined standards and requirements
- Governance including compliance with sector-specific regulatory systems
- Consistent funding model, and
- Peak body development to continue supporting ACCOs delivering services.[87]

SNAICC is the Community Partner for the Connected Beginnings program with national Departments of Health, Disability and Aged Care, and Education. The program is detailed further below. Connected Beginnings is a practical example of how working through genuine partnership is improving the availability and quality of universal services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. Key features supporting effectiveness include the embedding of the Priority Reforms in program governance, internal departmental frameworks that value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge, and shared decision-making throughout planning and implementation.

The Commonwealth's initial investment in SNAICC's Early Years Support (EYS) program has been instrumental in strengthening the ACCO early years sector nationally. The EYS program currently supports 37 ACCO integrated early years services. Additional Commonwealth funding allowed SNAICC to extend this support to states and territories beyond the original program footprint of New South Wales, Victoria and Western Australia. The independent evaluation of the program by Deloitte concluded that ACCO services that participate in the program believe SNAICC EYS has been successful in creating a positive impact: in fact, 79% of ACCO services agreed or strongly agreed that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children at their service have benefited from the service's engagement with SNAICC EYS.[88] Through the 2024-25 Mid-Year Economic Financial Outlook, SNAICC received extension funding to continue the EYS program until December 2025. Presently, there is uncertainty about the longevity of the EYS program as the Commonwealth has not shared its plans to fund EYS on an ongoing basis. This uncertainty prevents SNAICC EYS from planning ahead and responding to demand and interest from ACCO service providers in other jurisdictions. As demonstrated by the EYS evaluation, there is strong evidence and sector support for recurrent, long-term investment in this program with a dedicated focus on sector-strengthening.



## Disability Sector Strengthening Plan

**In Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disabilities continue to experience significant inequality and intersectional forms of discrimination embedded into contemporary policies and institutions. As the First Peoples Disability Network (FPDN) observes, "...[s]ince colonisation, First Peoples with disability and their families have been and continue to be amongst the most seriously disadvantaged and disempowered members of the Australian community".[89]**

**Ongoing barriers are experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disabilities in the current policy landscape, including under the current cross-cutting approach adopted in the Closing the Gap National Agreement. There is, of course, great merit in the cross-cutting approach, that requires systemic change, resources and advocacy, without which, "access, inclusion and disability become nobody's responsibility, rather than everybody's responsibility." [90]**

**Funding towards the Disability Sector Strengthening Plan (DSSP) has been important, but limited progress in this sector has meant that disability has been described by FPDN as a "gap within a gap". This renders invisible the voices, lived experiences and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disabilities, and their families and communities.**

**The failure to operationalise the First Nations Disability Forum (the Forum) - as recommended by the Disability Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability – reflects a significant gap in responding to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability. The Forum represents an opportunity to elevate issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability and additional effort is required to address this failure.**

**FPDN has identified the Forum as a critical component of the DSSP and as central to building the efforts of both governments and the community-controlled sector on disability. The submission process run by the Department of Social Services (DSS) is important,[91] but the lag between the completion of the Royal Commission recommendations and the establishment of the Forum has been too long. This has stalled progress that is urgently needed under the National Agreement.**

**Swift efforts must be made to prioritise this issue to ensure that disability is meaningfully embedded across the National Agreement and in genuine partnership with FPDN. Sustained investment in the Forum will provide a long overdue mechanism to address the gaps that currently exist, and the transformative change that can be realised through the National Agreement.**

The lack of progress across all four sector strengthening plans raises important questions about how to lift efforts across jurisdictions, including raising efforts and accountability beyond funding allocations and annual reporting. Such measures are an important way to keep all parties on track to deliver under the National Agreement and to help manage progress.

The push to expand SSPs to other priority areas such as justice, languages and family, domestic and sexual violence is understandable given the level of need across those areas. However, Assembly Delegates highlighted a need to heed feedback from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and to ensure greater coordination and investment across governments to drive sustainable reform.

## 2.2.3 Findings

### Productivity Commission Findings

The Productivity Commission's review found that progress on transferring service delivery to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and their own community-controlled organisations was slow, despite shared acknowledgement between Parties that such services achieve better results for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.[92] Instead, implementation has been limited to the delivery of services within settler-administered systems, using contracting and centralised policies to control the nature of those services while making Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and their organisations responsible for outcomes.

This finding reflects what we heard from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders: while there is broad agreement that community-controlled services deliver better outcomes, this agreement has not translated into the long-term, needs-based investment or systemic reform required to fulfil the ambition of Priority Reform Two.

The findings below explore how current approaches to funding and implementation are falling short, and what is required to support a strong and sustainable community-controlled sector.

#### 1. Funding cycles are inadequate and overburdensome

Despite the emphasis in Clause 45 of the National Agreement, reliable funding for the community-controlled sector is not yet occurring. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations note some increase in funding but stress that these efforts are undermined because they are often short in nature and involve burdensome reporting requirements. This environment places unnecessary pressure on the community-controlled sector, putting programs, staffing capacity and ultimately, outcomes at risk.

A cohesive strategy across jurisdictions is needed to ensure sustainable, rather than piecemeal investment. Many ACCOs also stressed that the needs-based funding outlined in Priority Reform Two was also not yet occurring.

#### 2. Greater efforts are needed across cross-cutting sectors

Improvements are needed across all sectors, but cross-cutting areas such as disability, justice and housing are of particular concern. Many participants to the Review noted that the various community-controlled sectors sit on a spectrum of development based on a range of

factors including the length of their existence and ability to receive investment via the National Agreement. Health and early childhood development and education and child welfare were regularly identified as strong sectors, which does not mean they are not without their own needs. What this has highlighted is the level of effort required to build up other areas. Housing, disability and justice were identified as areas where there was less momentum and commitment, but equally were areas that are vital and interrelated under the National Agreement.

### **3. Self-determination is being stifled by a lack of respect and sustained government investment**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations emphasised that their efforts towards program and service delivery are being hampered by overly bureaucratic processes, a lack of respect and sustained government investment. An over-emphasis on financial reporting is interpreted as disrespectful and based in a lack of trust, and does not appreciate the contextual reality that the community-controlled sector operates in. ACCOs pointed to the ways in which other sectors are not treated this way and given room to grow. They also stressed that the community-controlled sector is unique and should not just be treated like any other service provider but rather as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations best place to provide for their peoples. The imposition of targets and timeframes becomes about meeting government, rather community focused agendas, which erodes basic tenets of self-determination.

‘Black cladding’ is further exacerbating the situation. There is a need for a nationally consistent, community-led definition of ACCOs that goes beyond superficial indicators. Any definition needs to ensure organisations are initiated by, governed by, and accountable to the communities they serve.

### **4. Accountability must be two-way and occur beyond annual reporting**

Feedback repeatedly emphasised the importance of accountability, both back to and by government, but also in a format that reaches community. Greater accountability mechanisms can ensure improved transparency around progress and outcomes under Priority Reform Two. This can keep community informed of progress, but also governments and the community-controlled sector aware of how programs are tracking. Enhanced accountability will also provide greater transparency on progress across the various levels of government against the National Agreement.

### **5. Workforce reform is needed across all sectors**

There have been some steps to improve ACCO workforce development, but the extent of change required exceeds financial investment and must also look at developing long term pathways to ensure adequate growth. This must address improving the training and infrastructure in remote areas where very limited opportunities exist, to enabling ACCOs to provide long term career opportunities to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, rather than simply short-term contracts.

Workforce reform must also enable the Coalition of the Peaks to devise a strategy to address the emergence of new entities entering the sector and being funded under the National Agreement to deliver services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Such a strategy will ensure appropriate levels of accreditation, including providing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities with the best level of care and culturally safe service delivery available. Corporate governance is not cultural governance, and safeguards are needed to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are not simply viewed as a ‘business opportunity’ under the National Agreement.

## **6. Combined national and jurisdictional efforts are lacking**

Levels of governmental involvement for the National Agreement vary across sectors and jurisdictions. It is rare for all three levels of government to be actively supporting ACCO efforts. Where this is occurring, it is the exception and not the rule and provides examples of implementation as intended.

ACCOs regularly report working with either the Commonwealth or state/territory governments respectively, but not together. Very little reference was made by Review participants to efforts being made at the local government level. Significant work is required to ensure more responsibility sharing and collaboration across all areas of Priority Reform Two.

## **7. ACCOs are leading the way**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations have evolved to meet the new conditions under the National Agreement. This has included establishing their own governance, administrative, and programmatic initiatives at their own cost to continue to meet the needs of their communities.

### **2.2.4 A new story**

It is clear from the information provided to this Review that the community-controlled sector is holding considerable responsibility under the National Agreement implementation in its current state. They are doing so largely independent of governments, while navigating layers of administrative burden and contending with systems that neither trust nor invest in their expertise.

This continues a legacy that began in the 1970s with the creation of Aboriginal-led health and legal services in response to systemic exclusion and neglect. What has changed is the rhetoric of partnership; governments now speak of self-determination and community-led responses, yet this is not often being matched by action. The framework to realise this ambition exists within the National Agreement. What is missing is consistent and committed follow through. The promise of Priority Reform Two is not simply to acknowledge this sector, but to support it through long-term, flexible funding, reduced red tape, and a genuine redistribution of power.

The foundations of the community-controlled sector are grounded in cultural strength, collective wisdom, and generations of self-determined care. That legacy deserves not just respect, but adequate resourcing to sustain success. It is clear the impetus is with governments to act accordingly in how they implement Priority Two – by supporting, not stifling, the sector that is already doing the work.



# New ways, same old colony

## Priority Reform Three: Transforming Government Organisations

*“If institutions want to improve, they must sit with discomfort, take responsibility for harm, and redistribute power. Otherwise, it’s just window-dressing for the same old system.”*  
[Survey response]

### 2.3.1 The legacy of government interaction

*“The Closing the Gap framework does not confront the structures of colonial violence and systemic racism that underpin the disparities it seeks to address”* [Submission]

The relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and government has been marked by a dark history of policies and actions designed to control and forcibly assimilate communities. In recent decades, this has been followed by a gradual shift to policies that focus on reconciliation and self-determination.

Systemic and entrenched injustice and intergenerational harms have their origins in the prevailing logic and ongoing impacts of settler-colonialism. Perceptions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as ‘less than’ preceded invasion and the arrival of the British and British claims to possession over Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land. The original myth of ‘terra nullius’ described Australia as a land that was unoccupied, constructing colonial views at the expense of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and legitimising their dispossession, killing and removal. Australia’s history in this regard is not unique. What can now be described as a ‘coloniser’s handbook’ is seen in shared settler-colonial nations histories globally.

There is a ‘golden thread’ linking these early perceptions with how Australian government institutions have approached Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples over the past two centuries. As the Australian Human Rights Commission explains:

*“Race and racism have been central to the organisation of Australian society since European colonisation began in 1788. As the First Peoples of Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have borne the brunt of European colonisation and have a unique experience of racism. The process of colonisation, and the beliefs that underpin it, continue to shape Australian society today. Because settler-colonialism causes systemic, interconnected and ongoing harms to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, for solutions to be effective, they must be structural and holistic, address underlying causes, take a human rights approach and be consistent with the principle of self-determination.”[93]*

While policies under Closing the Gap were designed to alleviate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's disadvantage, until 2020, they remained primarily designed, implemented and evaluated by government on behalf of First Nations peoples. As such, policy initiatives largely continued to perpetuate the relations that produced the inequality in the first place, ultimately leading to the repeated failure of policies to achieve their stated aims of improving Indigenous wellbeing.[94]

The National Agreement seeks to change this approach, and Priority Reform Three - Transforming Government Organisations – focuses on transforming government institutions and organisations to improve accountability and responsiveness to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

*“Despite the language of genuine partnership, Government departments continue to operate in traditional ways, setting the agenda, controlling and extremely short timelines, and expecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Organisations to respond on their terms.”[Submission]*

While this Priority Reform represents a number of commitments to jurisdictional action on the part of all governments in Australia, to date government parties continue to operate with business as usual approaches and resist any genuine power sharing. This is not supporting the transformative elements of this Priority Reform, nor are wide-spread impacts emerging.

There are positive changes, but most often these are the result of decades of advocacy on the part of the community controlled sector, committed individuals in government, within certain departments, in particular sectors such as health, by some jurisdictions, and often based in long term relationships with an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak body or particular ACCOs or communities. The changes required to transform government institutions as a whole are not yet apparent in the implementation to date.

This is a complex area and participants in the Review identified a series of barriers to and opportunities for genuine transformation on the part of governments.

*“We’ve worked really hard over the past 15 years probably to get to the point where we’re at now. We have a really good relationship with (the Victorian) Government.” [Depth interview]*

Priority Reform Three involves intra- and inter-governmental commitments to a series of transformation elements to deliver systemic and structural changes to mainstream government to better serve First Nations communities. These are examined below.

The Priority Reform Three outcome is to improve mainstream institutions, governments and their organisations so they are accountable for Closing the Gap and are culturally safe and responsive to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including through funded services. The Target attached to this body of work is to decrease the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who experience racism.

*“Governments are fundamentally misunderstanding their responsibility to transform how they operate, and how they must be accountable for embedding the priority reforms in everything that they do.” [Survey response]*

Only 24 percent of people who took part in the Review’s national survey agreed that governments are transforming the ways they work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Of this group, only 3 percent strongly agreed and 21 percent somewhat agreed that transformation is underway. Fifty three percent either somewhat or strongly disagreed, and 22 percent neither agree nor disagreed.[95]

*‘Across most areas of government, Aboriginal voices continue to be sidelined.’ [Submission]*

Even in an environment where some shifts towards more genuine partnerships are being seen, Cabinet decisions can derail years of effort towards meeting Closing the Gap targets. In 2024, the rapid introduction of changes to bail laws for youth in NSW to address repeated alleged offences by young people aged between 14 and 18 years, especially within regional NSW, were cited by the NSW Government as necessary for community safety. The NSW Law Society believes the new requirements – extended in 2025 - are more stringent than those applied to adults and will mean increased incarceration of young people who are unlikely to be found guilty or unlikely receive a custodial sentence even if found guilty. [96] Experts raised concerns with disproportionate impacts on imprisonment of First Nations young people already over-represented in the justice system, and the NSW Law Society queried the extent to which this reform was consistent with the Priority Reforms.[97]

The legislation was tabled without consultation with the Aboriginal Legal Service NSW / ACT (ALS NSWACT), a key partner with the NSW Government on Closing the Gap implementation, or with NSW CAPO. In a statement to the media at the time, Palawa woman, Karly Warner, CEO of ALS NSWACT, said:

*"Premier, this is a betrayal of everything that you and the NSW Labor party said you would do in partnership with us under Closing the Gap and Aboriginal children are going to bear the consequences." [98]*



## 2.3.2 Community perspectives in detail

Under Clauses 58 to 60 in the National Agreement, the following commitments have been made by governments under Priority Reform Three:

- identify and eliminate racism
- embed and practice meaningful cultural safety
- deliver services in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, communities and people
- increase accountability through transparent funding allocations
- support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, and
- improve engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

### 1. Identifying and eliminating racism

*“Without directly confronting racism, no reform effort will be truly effective.” [Assembly Delegate]*

Racism was identified as a substantial, ongoing barrier to government transformation, with a significant majority of 66 per cent of survey participants agreeing that governments are not yet working to identify and eliminate racism, only 8 percent agreeing and 26 percent nominating that this may be the case.[99]

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, racism in its various forms is hardwired into why government interaction continues to be discriminatory. Racism remains an insidious and all too common aspect of life for Indigenous people in Australia. It is the ‘business as usual’ in the daily lives of First Nations people. Systemic change is lacking and the treatment of Indigenous peoples in government institutions such as schools, hospitals, by police and other public services still reflects bias against them.

Institutional or systemic racism must be addressed before any genuine improvements in this area will be seen. Many participants pointed to significant levels of goodwill among individuals within government, but pointed out that structures don’t change without people changing. Racism seemingly is a deeply rooted cultural problem within government, that all levels seem incapable of addressing, despite commitments under the National Agreement.

*‘There is no system-wide, whole of government strategy to transform government and address systemic and institutional racism and bias.’ [Submission]*

To attempt to meet this commitment, government agencies are defaulting to basic cultural awareness training, but this is neither creating impact at the staffing level nor addressing systemic racism.

*“Actions taken tend to suggest that racism is primarily understood interpersonally, not structurally. But the structures matter. Need to measure racism and discrimination better, and evaluate action/ progress. This should be in our hands, not government monitoring themselves.” [Survey response]*

## More than just a ‘no’ - The Voice Referendum

A consistent theme was the rise in and worsening of racism being experienced or witnessed and normalised during the Voice Referendum held on 14 October 2023. In May that year the eSafety Commissioner’s office announced a more than 10 per cent rise in the proportion of complaints of online abuse, threats and harassment towards First Nations people, and warned it would likely intensify closer to the referendum.[100] The First Peoples’ Assembly of Victoria went from blocking two people a day for racist cyber abuse to around 50 people per day during the campaign.[101] The online promotion of Call It Out, an independent register for all forms and levels of racism and discrimination experienced by First Nations peoples operated by Jumbunna and the National Justice Project, had to be suspended due to the level of racist responses.[102] Over the 2023-2024 period, nearly one in five of all reports to Call it Out specifically mentioned the Voice and/or the Referendum.[103]

Examples of structural racism on the part of jurisdictions (three to four years after the signing of the 2020 National Agreement) emerged. In QLD, the incoming government repealed the Path to Treaty Act 2023 (QLD) and abolished the Truth-telling and Healing Inquiry. The Northern Territory Government contravened obligations under the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child by lowering the age of criminal responsibility from 12 to 10 years in a move almost exclusively affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. In a similar vein, in 2024, the QLD Government introduced “adult crime, adult time” under the Making Queensland Safer Bill 2024 and overrode their own human rights legislation.[104]

*“Racism has increased dramatically after the fail[ure] of the Voice. There is an urgent need for non-Aboriginal people to be educated on the true history of Australia and how it has impacted the Indigenous people of Australia.” [Survey response]*

## Bipartisanship

The majority of people who took part in this Review believe there is a major regression in public discourse steeped in race-based division. A constant theme was a call for bipartisanship to be restored in politics and an end to the use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities as negative politically weaponised tools in political debate. Many participants nominated this as a major breakdown in relations between governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities at the parliamentary level over the past 30 years. This was raised repeatedly by those who took part in the Review, at both national and state/territory levels.

This is not aimed at the bureaucratic arm of government, but at the political. A return to bipartisanship at the political level was considered critical, and was a strong and recurrent theme. It would be easy to attribute this finding to the timing of the Review during a federal election, but examples provided by participants suggest it goes much deeper than mere timing.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants clearly said that if the divisive approaches taken in recent years continue, they pose a threat to the long term and sustainable success of Closing the Gap.

The recent changes in the QLD and NT governments were used by many as examples of elected leadership either shifting direction, putting an end to, or simply ceasing to properly engage on work under the National Agreement. For example, in QLD there has been no further Implementation Plans or Annual Reports since 2023.[105] Other examples included the progress and withdrawal of treaty and truth telling processes in some jurisdictions, outlined above.

*“Since the election of the current Northern Territory Government in August 2024, these failures have intensified. The insights, concerns and expertise of Aboriginal community controlled organisations (ACCOs) are not reflected in policy or legislative decisions. This exclusion is evident in the worsening over-representation of Aboriginal young people and adults in the justice system.’ [Submission]*

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants saw the worsening of racism and their experiences of racist and discriminatory behaviours as one result of highly divisive approaches to Indigenous Affairs.

The move away from bipartisanship came to a head during the referendum and Review participants firmly called for an end to division and a return to respectful, meaningful discussions that are solutions based and place community at the centre.

*“Issues within government reflect broader issues within Australia, including the racism of politicians and the failure of the Voice Referendum.” [Survey response]*

### **A note on terminology: What we mean by “Racism”**

**Racism is “...the process by which systems and policies, actions and attitudes create inequitable opportunities and outcomes for people based on race. Racism is more than just prejudice in thought or action. It occurs when this prejudice - whether individual or institutional - is accompanied by the power to discriminate against, oppress or limit the rights of others.” [106]**

**Racism and discrimination take many forms and can be direct and indirect, interpersonal, online and structural, systemic or institutional. Racism includes all the laws, policies, ideologies and barriers that prevent people from experiencing justice, dignity, and equity because of their racial identity. It can come in the form of harassment, abuse or humiliation, violence or intimidating behaviour. However, racism also exists in systems and institutions that operate in ways that lead to inequity and injustice.[107]**

### **Recognition, acceptance and understanding**

The need for governments to recognise, accept and understand racism in all its forms was raised by people regardless of where they were located in Australia. For those in remote communities, structural discrimination and racism was seen as integrated into every aspect of the government systems they interact with.

Everyday practicalities available to Australians in other parts of the nation were cited as issues of structural racism. This included the use of pre-paid metering for electricity access via power cards, the cost of groceries, severe housing shortages, the barriers to buying a home or generating wealth in remote communities, the failings and lack of autonomy in alcohol management plan approaches not encouraging sustainable attitudes to alcohol use, and issues with business establishment in the context of 99 year lease arrangements.

*“Racism needs to be named - we need to be able to talk about it in order to identify and eliminate it.” [Survey response]*

The imposition of ‘one-size fits all’ policies and programs that do not work for, or accommodate responsiveness to, local needs and recognising the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities was seen by many participants as a manifestation of systemic racism. This was particularly the case for remote communities who fail to see themselves in programs designed for their communities.

*“Not well. Not listening to the needs of local communities. Overarching strategies don’t work for Doomadgee.” [Yarning circle participant]*

The six PBP sites can provide the opportunity to see how community-led, culturally safe programs focused at the local level can potentially contribute to resolving this issue.

In response to being asked what it would look like if governments were effectively addressing racism, one survey participant said:

*“There would be recognition from Governments that racism exists in the first place. That the very structure of governments are inherently racist and colonialist and this is the starting place. In practice, there needs to be better accountability for when people call out racism in government agencies and we would see more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people being promoted into senior positions.” [Survey response]*

## **2. Embedding and practising meaningful cultural safety**

Cultural safety is not just about finding more acceptable and less harmful ways to exercise authority over Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, but to understand policy, service system design and delivery in ways that respect and reinforce Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authority and worldviews. Given this, there is no surprise that, given what has been summarised here already, there is a consistent lack of cultural competency throughout government and changes have been largely superficial so far. It should be noted, however, that shifting the culture of government is never fast moving and change is always incremental. The core issue participants have seen is that the incremental change is not structural and is stuck at the ad hoc, disjointed level found in pockets of meaningful and positive examples that are not driving any meaningful systemic change.

In the national survey Jumbunna conducted for the Review, 28 percent of respondents agreed that services and practices are becoming more culturally safe, however this included a breakdown of only one percent strongly agreeing this was the case, and 27 percent somewhat agreeing. Twenty eight percent neither agreed nor disagreed but 22 percent either somewhat disagreed and 23 percent strongly disagreed that this is the case.[108]

There was a very high level of correlation in participant views on cultural safety as one-off tick the box exercises not yet contributing to outcomes for embedding the practice of meaningful cultural safety across government institutions. Cultural competency was considered a necessary condition of employment for public servants. Approaches need to move beyond limited staff training to a continuum - from cultural awareness to competency to consciousness and away from superficial, short staff training exercises to enable governments to begin addressing attitudinal and systemic change.

*“Engaging with community and being culturally safe is about more than hanging a few dot paintings on the wall.” [Survey response]*

A significant number of people who took part in the Review also raised a reliance of governments on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants as bearing responsibility for government transformation. It should be noted here that the scope of the Review did not include engagement with governments, and thus this observation was raised by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander review participants outside government.

Participants were of one voice on this issue – that this cultural load is inappropriate and that it is not the responsibility of First Nations people to make government examine how it treats our communities and then fix it.

### **3. Service delivery in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, communities and people**

When asked if governments are working more effectively in partnership with communities, 29 percent of survey participants agreed, but only three percent of that group strongly believed this is the case. A further 24 percent neither agreed nor disagreed, but the largest group at 47 percent disagreed. While 25 percent of survey respondents see the National Agreement as an opportunity to change the way they work with government, 34 percent sit at maybe and 41 percent did not agree that this is the case.[109]

*“Again, there's a lack of an overarching strategic view from a whole of government point of view around what needs to be done.” [Depth interview]*

More closely aligned were survey participants who could see a shift to governments engaging with ACCOs on service design and delivery at 31 percent with a further 35 percent disagreeing, and 34% responding that this may be the case.[110]

Those closest to the implementation of the National Agreement, mainly people associated with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak bodies at national and state/territory level, were most able to articulate the development of service delivery partnership arrangements.

However, there are stark imbalances in responsibilities, commitments and resourcing. Much of this work is a result of years of peak bodies or ACCOs developing relationships with government counterparts, proving themselves as a ‘safe’ choice for service funding, or because particularly committed individuals or teams within agencies are open to working with ACCOs in a form of partnership. This again speaks to the lack of systemic, whole of

government approaches, including the absence of any structured funding approaches. It also highlights the unequal balance of commitment and responsibility resting with ACCOs and peaks to undertake the work required to get government to a point where they are willing to consider transformative work.

*“This is not simply a failure of process. It reflects a deeper systemic issue in the Northern Territory. The internal systems and behaviours of government have not shifted in line with the National Agreement. Without structural change, partnerships like the NTJPP cannot fulfil their intended role and are not contributing positively to closing the gap targets”*  
[Submission]

It must be noted that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations operate on a tiny percentage of resourcing compared to that of governments but are being expected to function at the same strategic and planning levels under the current implementation approaches being used for the National Agreement. This comes with a serious warning that while these organisations are bearing more than their fair share of the work, this ‘holding up of the sky’ cannot last forever without serious consequences for individuals, communities and their organisations, and ultimately, the shared goals of the National Agreement itself. If peaks and ACCOs do begin to crumble under the weight of Closing the Gap and the National Agreement, many fear it will be the now, time-old story of blaming the victims.

*“Government agencies want the Peaks to do a vast majority of the heavy lifting on the intellectual and strategic work required to explain to government what they need to do to change while doing effing zero work themselves to transform.”* [Survey response]

*“The level of support and engagement from government agencies has been disappointingly minimal. There's been ongoing resistance to actually doing the work that's required to quantify and support that work to be led by peaks or by community controlled organisations.”* [Depth interview]

The process of establishing this Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led, independent review, and the significantly reduced timeframe and resources allocated to it, is itself indicative of the broader structural issues raised here. It is another system prioritising government-led approaches and the structural bias that continues to marginalise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander processes and perspectives; shaping the processes, resourcing structures meant to support. In addition, this is also an example of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Parties to the National Agreement being forced to advocate strongly for things governments have already agreed to.

## The gap in Aged Care

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are living longer since the original intent that informed Closing the Gap and its targets. Between 2011 and 2021, the number of older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 65 years and over almost doubled, and over the next decade, this is expected to increase by another 67 percent.<sup>1</sup> However, as outlined in the Final Report of the Interim First Nations Aged Care Commissioner in 2024, the aged care system was never designed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older people and communities in mind.[111]

The aged care system is accountable to the requirements and commitments under the National Agreement, yet this remains a sector area in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are excluded from policy development and there is an unacceptable disparity in access to aged care expected to widen with the introduction of co-payments under Support at Home from 1 July 2025.

The interim Commissioner, appointed in 2024, has already undertaken and reported on extensive consultations with older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities finding that the National Agreement has fallen short of its commitments from an aged care perspective.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people described the current aged care system as largely culturally unsafe, compounded by institutionalised and systemic racism, unsupportive of cultural wellbeing and needs, alienating, difficult to understand and challenging to access.

Despite various frameworks, recommendations, pathways, strategies and visions put to government there remains a significant and unaddressed gap in the rates of access and experiences of older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples interacting with the aged care system. In short, there is no overarching plan articulating how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander aged care policy can move forward to a rights-based state capable of meeting the unique and complex aged care needs of communities.

Review participants with expertise in this area called for investment in critical funding to implement the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety and commitments under the Priority Reforms to ensure Elders and other older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can age with dignity.

They raised the inclusion of aged care targets in the National Agreement that could bring greater monitoring and accountability to ensure Elders and other older people are able to access culturally safe, high quality aged care services.

#### 4. Increasing accountability through transparent funding allocations

*“Despite... repeated efforts at calling out government inaction, or worse – deliberately political acts that undermine the intent and goals of the National Agreement – there is no accountability by state and federal governments to change how they operate. Governments’ implementation plans and annual reports include long lists of actions but often do not explain how they will improve outcomes. There is inconsistency in how actions are tracked across agencies and they do not stick to the reporting requirements set out in the Agreement.” [Submission]*

Clause 67 in Priority Reform Three commits Government Parties to identify, develop or strengthen an independent mechanism/s by 2023 to support, monitor and report on transformation. As outlined in the 2024 Productivity Commission Review findings and their Recommendation 3[1], to date this any work undertaken so far has not resulted in an operating model. Parties are required to meet in 2025 to consider progress and make additional partnership actions if needed. Review participants were clear and of one voice that the establishment of independent monitoring and evaluation must be of the highest priority.

*“But nothing hold government to account. In 2025 still having conversations about independent mechanisms.” [Depth interview]*

There is an outstanding need for accountability in Closing the Gap. Governments must be held accountable through transparent reporting and evaluation mechanisms, and accountability processes must be built into the models. The NSW Auditor-General’s performance audit on National Agreement governance in the state released in May 2025 found that “the Premier’s Department has not used the governance arrangements to ensure that all NSW Government agencies are accountable for the adoption and implementation of the Priority Reforms of the National Agreement.”[112] In short, “existing governance arrangements in NSW are not providing adequate oversight of delivery”.[113]

*“When targets are not met, there are often limited consequences or transparency around performance.” [Submission]*

Participants were clear that these independent mechanisms abide by the requirement in Clause 67 and be recognisable for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, be culturally safe and engage with community to listen and respond their concerns about institutions and agencies. Many Review participants nominated that mainstream institutions must be more than culturally aware - they must be accountable to communities as well. Improving these institutions means moving beyond superficial change and addressing the deep systemic bias, resistance to truth-telling, and embedded power structures that continue to harm Aboriginal peoples.

*“Accountability is not sufficient for systemic transformation.” [Multiple submissions]*

A very high level of participants pointed out that while ACCOs must be transparent and accountable, governments do not at this point have the same monitoring and reporting requirements. This lack of government accountability for the implementation of the National Agreement was juxtaposed against the community-controlled sector being answerable to, and monitored in a range of ways by, their communities as well as to governments.

## 5. Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures

Participants want to be able to function in their full cultural identity, supported by the pride many Australians have in the oldest continuous culture in the world.

*"(I)t's a form of assimilation, they want us to do things the white Australia way and don't let us do it our way." [Yarning Circle Participant]*

A very strong call for increased support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures on the part of Australian governments came from participants. Much of this centred on better community education on aspects of culture – for example, the importance of maintain ceremony and racism awareness to help deepen cultural understanding of and pride in the oldest continuous culture in the world.

*"It is unthinkable that a national framework built around self-determination, power-sharing, and cultural resilience has overlooked the very people who uphold and sustain these principles. Without Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People, there is no lived connection to Country and/or Island Home, no authoritative voice in decision-making, no continuity of traditions that has survived over 65,000 years. To not recognise this as a critical failure is to willingly allow the erosion of the world's oldest living culture through policy neglect and bureaucratic inertia. This mistake is not just an abstract policy flaw, it is a direct threat to the survival of cultural identity, leadership, and governance structures within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities." [Submission]*

For government institutions specifically, building support for cultures was focussed on encouraging the practice of self-reflection to address unconscious bias, educating staff to understand their own privilege, and build greater awareness of racism and cultural humility – a step beyond cultural awareness.

*"Closing the Gap offers hope on paper - as does Ochre [NSW Government's community-led plan to strengthen the relationship between government and community] and others - but in the implementation it gets lost as Governments seek the 'low hanging fruit' and segregate our cultural identity to meet their own short-term outcomes." [Survey response]*

The experience of the majority of people who discussed support for cultures was that, while the National Agreement and its language and commitments leans heavily into cultural support, the reality of implementation has meant that governments and their institutions still have limited or no understanding of how to actualise these intents. Leaning into the need for holistic approaches across the interconnected Priority Reforms, until safe systems are in place that are trusted and create environments for cultures to be both accepted in principle and in practice, much of what needs to be delivered under the National Agreement is unachievable.

*“While the frameworks and language suggest partnership and co-leadership, in practice, senior political power frequently overrides good process, cultural authority, and ethical engagement. Decisions are often shaped behind closed doors, and once finalised, community is brought in to endorse—not co-design—the outcome.” [Survey response]*

The need for formal truth telling processes was one of the most common themes raised around supporting cultures. The shared view of participants was that truth telling matched with substantive actions is required as a foundation to growing a better understanding of shared history, the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and the importance and centrality of their cultures. In turn, this greater understanding will help address the limited institutional knowledge.



## A note on truth telling

**Truth telling was raised by a majority of people taking part in the Review, across a range of areas discussed. This cannot be a surprise given the length of advocacy for historical truth telling approaches by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, their leaders and organisations over many years.**

**Truth telling was seen as a foundation piece, required for any genuine and substantive changes across all four Priority Reforms and the Closing the Gap targets.**

**Many participants see a deep reluctance from government, including political decision-makers, to engage in truth-telling processes, particularly when it challenges internal narratives, exposes systemic failure, or reveals harmful behaviours. The repealing of treaty and truth telling processes in some jurisdictions after changes of government and the experience of the referendum is underpinning the strong call from participants in this Review for a return to bipartisanship on Indigenous Affairs in Australia.**

- **The QLD, SA, VIC, TAS, NT and ACT government have all committed to some form of formal truth telling process but following changes of government in QLD, NT and SA, all work was stopped and legislation repealed. After another Labor Government was reelected in SA legislation has reconstituted the implementation of the Uluru Statement in full. Victoria is the most progressed jurisdiction and the Yoorrook Justice Commission as Australia's first formal truth telling process in 2021.**
- **In 2021 the Tasmanian Government started work on mapping out a pathway to treaty and truth telling and agreed to a process but to date no formal response or confirmed date of commencement has been announced.**
- **Elected in 2023 with a commitment to a treaty process (including truth telling), the NSW Labor Government has, since the 2023 Voice Referendum, has commenced a consultation process but will not progress any further until after the next election.**
- **The WA Government has no truth-telling process in place but has been in partnership with the Whadjuk, Noongar and greater Aboriginal communities for the Wadjemup (Rottnest Island) Project, one of the first large-scale truth telling works in Australia so far.**

There is precedent in the Australian context of the effectiveness of truth telling in moving understanding at the population level. The 1997 Bringing Them Home Report resulting in the landmark investigation into the forced removal of First Nations children from their families, marked a pivotal moment not by providing acknowledgement for Indigenous people. It was the first time a formal report had been produced on what had happened as a result of government policies. While government responses are still considered by many (in what is a familiar refrain) as 'insufficiently documented, poorly coordinated and insufficiently targeted to meet the needs of the Stolen Generations'[114], over time the report shifted public perceptions and attitudes and led to a better understanding of both this dark history and First Nations communities and their rights. A broader truth telling process is simply the next step.



## 6. Improving engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

*“[NSW] Government keeps looking to us to explain to them what they need to do to transform and then at the same time tell us that we don’t understand government processes, despite the fact that many of our colleagues have worked in the public service and the public sector at different levels and layers and with the public sector, for, you know, many years, for many years.” [Depth interview]*

Overwhelmingly the Review was told that government engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must be community led, and not just informed. There are examples of programs contributing to improving engagement. Connected Beginnings is a place based program jointly funded by the Australian Departments of Education and Health and Aged Care in 50 sites nationally to integrate and strengthen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ access to childhood education, maternal and child health and family services to support children’s school readiness. SNAICC and NACCHO are partners in the program, providing national leadership, advice and advocacy, and program support with cultural authority, awareness and safety. They co-chair the Advisory Group which aims to strengthen how the Priority Reforms are embedded within the program.

The 2023 mid-term evaluation found that Connected Beginnings is positively contributing to all four Priority Reforms.[115] The review also found that Connected Beginnings is an example of two-ways learning, encouraging government as well as communities to develop their capacity and skills.[116] Connected Beginnings teams are engaging broadly with communities, with community voice embedding by most to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.[117] In particular, the evaluation found that ‘communities have particularly welcomed the opportunity for aspects of the program to be Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led.’[118]

Lessons from the program evaluation useful for broader government understanding of how to engage with First Nations communities include, but are not limited to:

- Understanding the service environment in the early phases to help identify areas for collaboration, minimise duplication, and fill gaps
- Bringing community voice into programs to ensure activities are relevant and responsive to community’s needs and aspirations
- Ongoing communication require open lines of communication and regular meetings and opportunities for collaboration
- Supporting flexible, place-based programs, and
- Ensuring the ability for communities to lead and shape programs, including directing funding, activities, and resources, as a critical component for success.[119]

A number of people and community-controlled organisations nominated experiences engaging with governments during the COVID-19 pandemic as examples of government being able to engage positively during an emergency. At the national level, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group on COVID-19 formed in early 2020 at the start of the pandemic.

It was co-chaired by NACCHO and the Australian Department of Health. The immediate engagement with the community-controlled health sector at the national level to work in partnership with governments around the country led a highly effective response and engagement with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander COVID-19 Advisory Group was a key factor in the low case numbers and zero deaths in the early stages of the pandemic.[120] The highly collaborative partnership approach is now embedded in the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC). However, NACCHO points out that while there was a strong partnership approach at the national level, this was not the case in all jurisdictions.[121]

Despite positive examples such as those discussed here, in general, there is still not a strong belief that governments are responding on the whole to the new ways of working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to meet their National Agreement obligations. Engagement most often occurs at the jurisdictional level with peak bodies. Many people see governments using consultation instead of genuine engagement, and attribute service duplication and funding waste as a result. The end result is seen as a continued failure by governments to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, despite the solid and supported foundation of the Agreement.

This is seen across all levels of interaction with governments. The Healing Foundation, a member of the Coalition of Peaks and the Social and Emotional Well Being Policy Partnership working across a number of policy areas relevant to the Agreement, and an active member of the Department of Health and Aged Care's First Nations Aged Care Governance Group, was recently made aware of the Department's Grant Opportunity 7396 Care Leavers, Stolen Generations and First Nations Forgotten Australians via GrantConnect and their request for a briefing were denied on the basis of 'probity' – despite clear examples of other Australian Government entities engaging in more open and transparent approaches to market and in contradiction of Department of Finance probity principles and the Priority Reforms themselves.[122]

#### Inter and intra-jurisdictional experiences

*Often the coming together of governments ends up focused on the lowest common denominator, rather than being courageous and ambitious and urging reluctant partners along and holding them accountable to their commitments, individually and collectively.” [Survey response]*

Participants identified major challenges in the way governments operate across different levels. They spoke about siloed ways of working that continue to undermine the coherence and effectiveness of efforts under the National Agreement – an issue first identified in 2008 when Closing the Gap was established. This issue was particularly evident in the data space, where agencies not only face difficulties sharing information with one another but often encounter internal barriers to data sharing within their own departments.

Participants also pointed to persistent interjurisdictional issues, where jurisdictional priorities fail to align with national commitments, resulting in delays or the derailment of progress.

While some instances of this were attributed to changes in the political leadership of state and territory governments, others reflected a deeper, systemic reluctance, or inability, to shift established ways of working in line with the expectations of the National Agreement. As one participant put it:

*“The state and territory governments are not doing enough. The Federal Government is relying way too heavily on the NIAA when all Commonwealth agencies need to be doing the heavy lifting.” [Survey response]*

This comment reflects a broader frustration with the uneven distribution of responsibility and accountability across jurisdictions. When alignment does occur, the benefits are evident. In South Australia (SA) alignment with the national framework has enabled the incorporation of Closing the Gap commitments into Chief Executive performance agreements, embedding a greater level of accountability within and across agencies, as well as sustained interaction with SAACCON. Similarly, in NSW, framework alignment has resulted in more advanced progression as a result of how NSW CAPO and the NSW Government are working than some other jurisdictions. This progress is tempered by the NSW Auditor-General’s performance audit report on governance of the National Agreement in NSW which has found that the governance arrangements are not operating effectively nor ensuring accountability for the delivery of initiatives.[123] The report also found that:

*“While both the NSW Premier’s Department and NSW CAPO ‘have attempted to establish a working relationship for the governance of the National Agreement, but a genuine partnership, as described in the National Agreement and the NSW Partnership Agreement, has not been achieved. There is disagreement between the Premier’s Department and NSW CAPO about their respective roles and responsibilities, what working in genuine partnership means in practice, how funding for partnership work should be administered, and how to align existing NSW Government policies and programs with the National Agreement. These disagreements detract from a focus on the effective governance of the National Agreement.”[124]*

Opportunities are being missed at the local level due to a lack of engagement, inadequate resourcing, and, in some instances, an unwillingness to participate on the part of governments. Despite being responsible for delivering and maintaining a wide range of community infrastructure and essential services, playing a central role in community engagement, and being well placed to coordinate government services locally, local governments appear to be absent from key conversations and planning processes.

*“I think there’s a perception that local governments do not deal in closing the gap.” [Assembly Delegate]*

Another participant noted:

*“Few state CTG implementation plans include local governments. Only the Northern Territory notably involved its local government association from the outset.” [Submission]*

Overall, there is a clear need to strengthen linkages across all three levels of government. One participant summed up the situation bluntly:

*“Federal Govt are too benign. State Govt are too distracted and inept. Local Govt are too obstructive.” (Survey response)*

Operating at the jurisdictional level, peak bodies and their coalition arrangements are able to see across and into governments and shared that changes are ad hoc and piecemeal and that siloed approaches continue to contribute to inconsistency.

While NSW is still considering an Aboriginal-led Independent Mechanism model based on the proposal presented by NSW CAPO, NSW is now three years into its Indigenous Expenditure Report, the only the only state/territory jurisdiction to do so.

Juxtaposed against this is the COVID-19 pandemic response which showcased how governments can move quickly and agilely and in partnership with communities. The Victorian Government also established a COVID-19 Aboriginal Community Taskforce to support the coordination of a comprehensive, culturally safe response. Part of the responses was the \$10 million COVID-19 Aboriginal Community Response and Recovery Fund. ACCOs were able to access funding to develop local responses based on community needs over 2020-2021. This self-determined funding approach was groundbreaking in Victoria, and supported 81 ACCOs and Traditional Owner groups provide immediate support through a range of community-led responses including emergency relief, outreach and brokerage including wraparound housing supports and outreach to vulnerable cohorts such as Elders and young people disengaged from school, social and wellbeing initiatives, cultural strengthening and events on Country and virtual community connections.[125]

While the majority of participants were silent on local government, when spoken of, and with the exception of a very minority of councils, local government was singled out by many participants as the level of government not yet engaging in any impactful way. Relationships with government differ at the three levels, but the overwhelming view is that Local Government is not yet invested in the Closing the Gap process.

In the majority of local governments, the lack of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation at elected or staff levels is seen as a major issue. There are opportunities for the local government sector to do much more under Closing the Gap, particularly in regional, rural and remote areas.

*“...the Shire (local government) has very few Aboriginal people, and therefore isn’t representative of the community.” [Yarning Circle participant]*

*“Yeah, better you get down on your hands and knees if you want something from them (the local council).” [Yarning Circle participant]*

# CASE STUDY

## Local Government



There is clear intent that local governments participate National Agreement, reflected in the role of ALGA as a Party. ALGA is a federation of the seven local government associations and operates as the national voice representing 537 councils including the 17 Aboriginal Shire Councils in QLD, and in the NT where nine of the 17 councils have majority Aboriginal councillors and four are entirely Aboriginal elected members[126] ALGA does not have the ability to influence or direct the actions of local governments, creating a unique situation where, while some councils are undertaking work in line with the Priority Reforms, most are not. This is reflected in the advice provided by those who took part in this Review, where most were silent on local government activities.

The ability of local governments to raise revenue is derived from state/territory legislation allowing for revenue through rates and other charges and through Financial Assistance Grants from the Australian government. From the mid-1970s, these Grants have been paid as tied grants through the jurisdictions distributed on a per capita basis for general purpose and a local road component distributed according to fixed historical shares.[127] The National Principles directing the general purpose allocation includes that “financial assistance shall be located to councils in a way, which recognises the needs of Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples.”[128]

The role of local government has expanded and they now deliver expanded services and infrastructure. This, along with challenges with the application of Financial Assistance Grants, results in financial pressure on local governments nationally. ALGA and their members point to systemic and structural resourcing issues impacting the ability of local governments to fully engage in National Agreement commitments, and their ability to support their members. However, there has been a historic reluctance on the part of local government to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities who remain underrepresented at that level. As the Productivity Commission Review found:

*“While resource constraints are real, this will always be available as a reason not to act. To progress truth telling, what is most important is that individual local governments engage with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations. This is not necessarily a costly exercise, and much can be done within existing resources to develop stronger relationships and to build trust with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.”[129]*

# CASE STUDY

## Local Government cont.



There is a lack of clarity around the role of local government in Closing the Gap and a need for clearer guidance on expectations and meaningful engagement, a responsibility both for ALGA and their members, and local councils themselves.

Currently, most – but not all – local government jurisdictional peaks have some type of network, forum or gathering process for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander councillors and mayors. The Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) has prioritised collaboration with Ngaweyyan Maar-oo to reinvigorate local council engagement and progress towards their commitments under the National Agreement. This is being done through a comprehensive range of actions which focus on both the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce within local government, as well as the communities they serve. Ngaweyyan Maar-oo and local governments are also exploring avenues to strengthen existing partnerships and build new ones with local ACCOs and TOCs to support the implementation of the National Agreement in local areas.

Only two jurisdictional Closing the Gap implementation plans include local government as signatories – NT and NSW. An early outcome in NSW is the current drafting of a Local Government Closing the Gap Toolkit by LGNSW and funded by Aboriginal Affairs NSW but it is unclear if Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experts with experience in local government are involved.

The main barriers to local government participation are:

- Lack of recognition of local councils as genuine partners to implementation plans as a result of misinterpretation of Clause 55 in the Agreement that ‘other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations’ does not include the QLD Aboriginal Shire Councils and majority Aboriginal Councils in the NT.
- Provision for increased involvement of Aboriginal councils and elected officials in implementation at the local and regional levels
- Lack of resourcing dedicated to Closing The Gap delivery, and
- Guidance on strengthening engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Communities.

*“In addition to clear leadership and direction – which can and should be done within existing resources – local governments are likely to require a range of other supports from state and territory governments in order to fulfill their intended role as partners in the Agreement. Most notably, they may require both human and financial resources.”*[130]

## 7. Lack of accessible communication from the Parties

The lack of accessible information at the community level on Closing the Gap is a symptom of inappropriate engagement. The Review has found low levels of awareness of Closing the Gap and the National Agreement at community level and limited levels among ACCO staff involved in implementation. There is a desire for parties to share and publish on their engagement approaches, consistent with the transformation elements.

While Joint Council, PWG, governments and peak bodies do provide Closing the Gap resources and communications, they are often delivered in dense and highly bureaucratic language and not through communication channels preferred by communities at the local level. In addition, and in contrast to government, directed resourced to fund communications efforts is irregular across Coalition of Peaks, peak bodies and ACCOs, further compounding the issue. However, there is a need for the community-controlled sector to be able to share and access ‘community of practice’ type information across and within sectors, as well as promote outcomes to the communities they serve.

*“There’s just little information on what the state government is actually doing on Closing the Gap.” [Yarning circle]*

### 2.3.3 Findings

#### Productivity Commission Findings

The Productivity Commission’s review found that governments have not articulated a clear vision for what transforming their organisations actually entails, nor how they will measure progress.[131] Instead, actions have tended to focus on increased Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation and staffing, and the cultural capabilities of non-Indigenous institutions, which, while important, reinforces and seeks to legitimise settler-colonial institutions. The Commission recommended that non-Indigenous systems and organisational culture need to be rethought, and stronger accountability was required, including the establishment of the multi-jurisdictional independent mechanisms required under the National Agreement.

This was echoed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants in this review, who called for greater accountability by governments to community, and described a lack of systemic action to address the deeper cultural and institutional changes required. In particular, participants highlighted racism as a core barrier to transformation; embedded not only in policies, but in the unspoken assumptions, power dynamics and operational norms that govern public institutions.

The findings that follow explore the absence of substantive progress and the structural issues that must be confronted if governments are to genuinely transform their systems in line with the intent of Priority Reform Three.

#### 1. Priority Reform Three is not progressing

Despite examples of good practice and early outcomes, there is an overall lack of systemic approaches aimed at substantive change or progress in alignment with Priority Reform Three. Participants described widespread inconsistency across jurisdictions, a lack of structured approaches to implementation, and limited evidence of genuine transformation.

## **2. Racism is the core issue**

Racism continues to be a defining issue preventing progress under Priority Reform Three. Governments are yet to begin to address the identification and elimination of racism in any substantive way, including the structural and systemic nature of racism that is part of government structures in Australia. Review participants referred to efforts to eliminate racial inequity as fragmented, under-resourced, and often surface-level.

## **3. Shifting from tick a box to meaningful systemic change**

Participants overwhelmingly described cultural safety initiatives as transactional, compliance-based exercises that fail to lead to meaningful or sustained change. Meaningful cultural safety has to move beyond basic levels of cultural competency and awareness training for government staff. There is a need to look at cultural safety as a continuum from awareness, to competency, to consciousness, to embedding cultural safety in systems and behaviours.

## **4. Holding up the sky**

There are stark imbalances in responsibilities, commitments and resourcing between Parties to the National Agreement. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander bodies are carrying the heavier load with significantly less resourcing compared to government. This is not a reflection of the National Agreement's design, but of the lack of coordinated government action to uphold its commitments. The weight of implementation is not being shared equitably.

## **5. Service delivery partnership is moving at a glacial pace**

There is some positive movement in service delivery partnership but this is still in early stages and only really being seen by those closest to implementation of the National Agreement and its mechanisms. As detailed in Priority Reform Two, the lack of systemic investment, consistent approaches, and whole-of-government engagement continues to hold back the transformation needed to deliver on the promise of shared service delivery.

## **6. Current accountability approaches are not sufficient for systemic transformation**

There is an urgent and outstanding need for independent accountability structures as required under the Agreement. Until these are in place, governments are not operating in any transparent or accountable ways. This is in line with the finding of the Productivity Commission that governments are not consistently adhering to and sometime contravening the Agreement. Accountability in the context of the National Agreement also must include the ability for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to see measures of cultural accountability and improvements can be mapped over time.

## **7. Our culture is everything**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people want to be able to function in their full and unique cultural identity, supported by the pride many Australians have in the oldest continuous culture in the world. This will require increased support from governments in the form of broad community education and formal truth telling processes to address current limited levels of understanding.

## 8. Community led, not just informed

Engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities must be community led and not misplaced by consultation or information provision. This requires governments to shift away from traditional ways of doing business within the bureaucracy, and there are good examples of this taking place already.

Local Government is the level of government not yet engaging in any impactful way. Apart from a small number of positive examples, local government as a whole is absent from Closing the Gap even though there are opportunities for the local government sector to be actively involved. While there are some compounding issues around resourcing, as the Productivity Commission have pointed out this is not a reason not to act.

## 9. Communities are calling for better communication

There is a lack of information about Closing the Gap and the National Agreement that is contributing to negativity and perceived slow progress, and limited awareness of positive outcomes or work being undertaken beyond peoples' immediate areas of expertise. This is a result of both government approaches to communicating with First Nations communities and the limitations faced by community-controlled organisations in how they are resourced to provide communications and limited workforce capacity and availability.

## 10. Intra/inter government issues

The age-old problems of siloed approaches and lack of successful inter-governmental approaches continue to plague Closing the Gap implementation. Despite commitments to joint working and shared accountability, many participants described fragmented efforts, inconsistent engagement across agencies, and duplication of services. Without genuine whole-of-government alignment, reform efforts risk remaining piecemeal and short-lived.

## 11. Bipartisanship and the need for strong leadership

A lack of political bipartisanship on Indigenous Affairs is impacting the long term and sustainable success of Closing the Gap. While public sector leadership plays an important role, it cannot substitute for the clear, consistent, and united political will required to drive lasting reform. Real progress depends on leadership that transcends electoral cycles and commits to upholding the shared commitments of the Agreement over the long term.

### 2.3.4 A new story

*“The Government, that is Local, State and Commonwealth need to orchestrate that they fully endorse the United Nations Declaration on the rights of Indigenous Peoples in Australia.” [Survey response]*

Priority Reform Three is possibly the largest piece in the National Agreement. The framework is laid out in the Agreement and the work sits with governments to look inwards, and reflecting on the ongoing influence of colonial structures and institutions and how they interact with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are still impactful today. As with all four Priority Reforms, this requires more than just ‘business as usual’ ways of working for governments Parties to the Agreement. It will require deep systemic change, attitudinal shifts and a framework to guide how to both make a start and implement changes.

This is no easy or quick fix. Changing the ways governments work is slow work. But five years into this National Agreement there are only pockets of positive examples, and much of these sit at the peak to jurisdiction level and are invisible more broadly.

Governments are able to change. Attitudinal and policy shifts over the past 60 years to bring women into the heart of government has happened in Australia across every jurisdiction. Women are now represented in the bureaucracy, in its senior leadership, in parliaments and at Executive level. Their needs and priorities are now part of how governments create policies and operate. Highly successful partnership work during COVID-19 between some governments and peak bodies are a further example. But Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will never be more than fifty percent of the population, nor should they hang on for emergencies and global pandemics.

Transformational change is possible. It required strong leadership, accountability and the will to do what can be difficult work. In the long run, these transformations by governments in how they work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can only benefit the broader community and contribute to rebuilding faith in government and at time this is diminishing.



# CASE STUDY

## Making Tracks Together



### Queensland's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Equity Framework

Co-designed and released in partnership by the QLD Government and the Queensland Aboriginal and Islander Health Council (QAIHC) in 2021, the Health Equity Framework is underpinned by new legislation governing the public health system to improve health and wellbeing outcomes and access to care across the health system. The work is based on the QLD Government's commitments under the National Agreement. The guiding principles underpinning the Framework are partnerships, cultural respect, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health is everyone's business, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community control of primary health care, evidence-based and accountable, and community engagement and participation in decision-making.

Aligning with Closing the Gap priorities, Health Equity Framework has five priority areas:

1. Actively eliminate racial discrimination and institutional racism within the service
2. Increasing access to healthcare services
3. Influencing the social, cultural and economic determinants of health
4. Delivering sustainable, culturally safe, and responsive healthcare services, and
5. Working with Aboriginal people, Torres Strait Islander people and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations to design, deliver, monitor and review health services.[132]

Hospitals and Health Services (HHSs) are now required to satisfy requirements in three legislative instruments when co-designing and co-implementing First Nations Health Equity Strategies: the *Hospital and Health Boards Act 2011*, the *Hospital and Health Boards Regulation 2012* and the *Health Service Directive 053:2021*. These legislative requirements are largely centered on the reporting, the need to engage (including mandatory consultation practice standards), agree on key performance measures and set out actions that will be taken as well as strategic alignments.

The Framework is supporting by a Monitoring and Evaluation Framework published in 2024, again co-designed by QAIHC and the state government. This Framework supports monitoring, reporting and reviewing requirements embedded into individual HHS governance agreements.

# CASE STUDY

## Making Tracks Together cont.



In less than 12 months from mid-2022 to early 2023, all 16 HSSs across QLD have published their inaugural Health Equity Strategies and commenced initial three-year implementation cycles. However, only three – Children’s Health Queensland HHS and Cairns Hinterland HHS and Sunshine Coast HHS had also released their implementation plans.[133]





# Data shapes the story

## Priority Reform Four: Shared Access to Data and Information at a Regional Level

*“Engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities at every stage - from designing research questions to analysis and dissemination. This approach builds trust and ensures that data reflects community priorities and perspectives, rather than external agendas.” [Survey response]*

### 2.4.1 Data as a tool for harm

Data collection by governments about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people has long been used as a tool of surveillance, control, and harm. Colonising forces have never used data neutrally. This legacy means that the mere mention of ‘data’ is often associated with some of the most traumatic, intergenerational experiences at the hands of government including records being used to justify the forced removal of children, the pathologisation of families, the infantilisation of adults, and the entrenchment of racist stereotypes that have shaped public policy and perception. As one participant noted,

*“Data is (still) being used as a tool of control, not empowerment.” [Survey response]*

This history of data misuse strongly informs the way Priority Reform Four is being implemented and experienced. Communities continue to express deep concern about how governments collect and use personal information. One participant described it this way:

*“In order to access playgroup funding, full names and other personal information of parents had to be submitted to the Department’s Data Exchange. Not surprisingly, few parents were willing to attend. The fear of how this data might be used - now or in the future - was too great.” [Submission]*

These fears are based on the legacy of harm that Priority Reform Four seeks to redress. They are compounded by the deep mistrust stemming from a relationship in which data has long been used to control rather than support. That mistrust is only intensified by the ongoing reality that data continues to be collected and interpreted through a government lens - serving institutional priorities rather than community wellbeing.

*“Right now, most data serves governments - not mob,” one person shared. “It measures what systems value, not what our communities define as success.” [Survey response]*

The Closing the Gap targets, too, have been criticised for reflecting a deficit-based approach focused on fixing Indigenous people rather than resourcing Indigenous solutions. One participant described the,

*“lack of humanisation and statistical narrative written by academics and chosen by people disconnected, not inclusive of community.” [Submission]*

As with each of the reform areas, Priority Reform Four spotlights a deeper tension that arises throughout the National Agreement: two fundamentally different worldviews colliding. On one hand, there is a system grounded in Western approaches to measurement, objectivity, and control. Born of a worldview that prioritises the quantifiable – statistical outputs, neat categories, and universal benchmarks. On the other hand, there are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, which are holistic, relational, and deeply embedded in place and kinship. Here, knowledge is not abstracted from life, it is woven throughout it. It is carried through story, ceremony, observation, and connection. The inherent challenge for Priority Reform Four is that the Western system has long positioned itself as superior and – by controlling a broader narrative about what is valued in the world – has sought to determine what counts as data, who interprets it, and what it is used for.

In this context, Indigenous Data Sovereignty (IDS) is essential to restoring balance in the relationship between governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It challenges the long-held assumption that governments alone should define what knowledge matters and how it is used. Instead, IDS asserts the rights of Indigenous peoples to govern the data that affects their lives, in ways that reflect their priorities, values, and worldviews. It is a practical expression of the National Agreement’s broader intent: to move beyond symbolic inclusion and toward real power-sharing. Parity cannot exist while one party controls all the information.

To give effect to this, Indigenous Data Governance (referring to the systems, protocols, and decision-making processes through which Indigenous peoples exercise their data sovereignty) is critical. Together, Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Indigenous Data Governance call on governments to relinquish control and walk alongside communities, centring Indigenous perspectives in decisions about what data is collected, how it is interpreted, and how it is used. It prompts questions such as:

What stories does the data need to tell? How do those stories get told with dignity, respect, and truth? It also requires a shift toward community-led definitions of wellbeing and success, grounded in cultural values and priorities. As one survey participant noted, “*Data shapes the story.*”

First Nations people implicitly understand that questions of how data is collected and used, go to the heart of justice, partnership, and cultural survival. One participant expressed it in this way:

“*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations should have control over how data is collected, interpreted, and shared, ensuring it aligns with community priorities and values.*” [Survey response]

Without this control, without a deliberate effort to humanise data and reflect cultural realities and community priorities - including the use of qualitative, narrative, and place-based methods - there is a continued risk that data will distort rather than illuminate, disempower rather than enable.

“*Government lacks the cultural sensitivities of collection processes, (is) untrustworthy and demonstrates misguided policies aligned to the weaponising of Indigenous data.*” [Survey response]

Changing that will require more than a new policy setting or reporting format. It’s not just a technical fix; it’s a cultural reckoning. One that begins with truth-telling and with placing the principles of IDS at the heart of this reform.

## 2.4.2 Redressing the harm

The work of Priority Reform Four is not simply about improving data systems, it is about rebuilding trust and restoring power in the wake of long-standing harm. The reform redresses the fact that for too long, governments have controlled how information about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is collected, interpreted, and used. Often in ways that have caused harm rather than healing.

As one community member observed,

“*Right now, data is being used to maintain power, proximity, and privilege. Until government stops using data to manage narratives and starts sharing control, we will continue to see outcomes manipulated rather than transformed.*” [Survey response]

For too long, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been expected to share their stories, their culture, and their solutions to help governments design better programs and deliver more effective services without any reciprocity or access. The experience has been described like this:

“*We spill our guts on the way that they should operate in the community... And when we do go and ask for the information to make informed decisions: ‘Oh no, we can’t give you that. It’s confidential’. You know, so I think that needs to change.*” [Depth interview]

## **A note on terminology: What we mean by “Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Governance” and “Data”**

In 2018, the delegates at the Indigenous Data Sovereignty Summit endorsed the following foundational statements in pursuit of an Australian set of Indigenous Data Governance protocols.

- In Australia, ‘Indigenous Data’ refers to information or knowledge, in any format or medium, which is about and may affect Indigenous peoples both collectively and individually.
- ‘Indigenous Data Sovereignty’ refers to the right of Indigenous peoples to exercise ownership over Indigenous Data. Ownership of data can be expressed through the creation, collection, access, analysis, interpretation, management, dissemination and reuse of Indigenous Data.
- ‘Indigenous Data Governance’ refers to the right of Indigenous peoples to autonomously decide what, how and why Indigenous Data are collected, accessed and used. It ensures that data on or about Indigenous peoples reflects our priorities, values, cultures, worldviews and diversity.[134]

In this chapter, we have used the word data to refer to a wide range of information. The types of data referred to include:

- Outcome data used to measure progress against Closing the Gap targets
- Service delivery data collected by ACCOs and government agencies to monitor and report on programs and services
- Internal administrative data used by departments for policy design and funding decisions, and
- Community-centred data, which reflects lived experience, cultural knowledge, and locally relevant forms of evidence valued by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

As the following sections demonstrate, community concerns and aspirations are related to all types of data. For Priority Reform Four to succeed, each must become more accessible, relevant, and governed in ways that align with community priorities and IDS principles.

### **Shared decision-making requires shared access to information**

Despite the establishment of formal partnerships and data-sharing forums under the National Agreement, many communities continue to report that what is being shared is insufficient. Public-facing data is often polished and incomplete, failing to reflect the realities on the ground. Meanwhile, internal departmental data - which may contain the deeper insights communities need - is withheld.

*“Aboriginal people are not in control of their data, the data is not relevant to community and it is not being shared at a national, state or local level.” [Survey response]*

This disconnect undermines the intention of Priority Reform Four and perpetuates mistrust in government processes. Where data has begun to improve – for example, in Vocational Education and Training data - progress is noted but still limited. Additionally, the data remains of little practical use if communities cannot access or interpret it to guide local decision-making.

*“For us to be on a level playing field, we need that information to make the informed decisions... In the end, it goes back to that data.” [Submission]*

The lack of meaningful community-centred and service delivery data hampers the ability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations to make informed choices and advocate for community needs. Furthermore, the absence of Indigenous perspectives in the construction and interpretation of data sets leads to poor service design and delivery outcomes.

It cannot be underestimated that getting this reform right is fundamental to the success of Closing the Gap overall. Enabling communities to access, own, and interpret the data that shapes their lives, is critical to the realisation of true partnership.

### **2.4.3 Community perspectives in detail**

Under the National Agreement, the following commitments have been made under Priority Reform Four:

1. Governments will share available, disaggregated regional data with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities
2. Governments will establish partnerships with community to improve collection, access, management and use of data
3. Governments will make data more transparent by telling First Nations People what data they have and how it can be accessed
4. Governments will build the capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities to collect, and use data
5. Partners will create six data projects around the country so community can access and use location-specific data on the Closing the Gap outcome areas (where the projects will support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to analyse and use regional specific data to help drive their own development and discussions with governments on Closing the Gap, enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations to collect and access other data which they consider important and are covered by localised agreements, consistent with Priority Reform One, between the governments and participating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations in the region).[135]

#### **1. Governments will share available, disaggregated regional data**

Despite the commitments made under Priority Reform Four, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities report little meaningful progress when it comes to accessing government-held data.

*“Data sharing is only occurring where First Nations people/orgs are demanding it; most government agencies are not doing anything at all.” [Survey response]*

Community-controlled organisations continue to face regular barriers when requesting data from departments. Access is often delayed, denied, or limited to partial information. This has left many questioning the usefulness, and integrity, of the data provided.

*“Most data is sanitised and controlled by white institutions. I have been told not to release data many times because it ‘doesn’t make us look good.” [Survey response]*

Government data is frequently described as fragmented, outdated, and lacking the cultural context needed to make it meaningful. In addition, many argue that the definitions and indicators used by government do not reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander worldviews, priorities, or measures of success. The impact of this is clear: data that should support equity and accountability ends up obscuring the truth. As one participant shared:

*“When you look around the table... you can see the Aboriginal people shake their heads because they know what happens in their schools and in their communities. So they know what the true story is... Government just doesn’t wanna look bad.” [Depth interview]*

Much of the national data currently available to communities is drawn from census collections, making it infrequent, outdated, and insufficiently localised. Key employment, health, and education datasets are often unavailable at the community level and lack the nuance needed to inform effective program design.

*“Strong employment related data is not readily available to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Key national employment data is captured every 5 years as part of the Census. Regular labour market reporting does not capture Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander information. Where information is captured, it rarely is at the community level, or presented in a way in which communities can access and utilise it to advance their own objectives. Employment program data is also limited, and presented through a government frame, which may limit its usefulness to communities.” [Submission]*

Consistent with clause 59(d) of the National Agreement, there was also a strong call for transparency around access to data around government investment and expenditure. Communities want to understand how much is being spent, where, and to what end. Without this level of detail, participants argue, efforts toward accountability will continue to overlook those most in need.

*“We want to hear why - what's happening? Where there are not good stories? What's going on?” [Assembly Delegate]*

Many participants called for a different kind of data.

*“What we need is really the story behind the data... the ‘why’ data,” one person explained. “...if we had the ‘why’ data, then what we can then do is put into practice... things that would improve.” [Depth interview]*

Survey responses echo these sentiments. When asked whether the National Agreement had led to better access to useful data, over half disagreed or strongly disagreed. Similarly, 63 percent of people either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the proposition that 'data is sufficiently clear to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to make better decisions about their own futures.'[136]

Across the board, communities are asking for systems that are more transparent, responsive, and grounded in their lived realities. As one person said,

*"Data systems across government need to be improved so data is easy to access. Data that is collected must be meaningful and relevant to Aboriginal people—reflect our priorities, not just tick [the] system's boxes." [Survey response]*

## **2. Governments will establish partnerships with community**

Across the country, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are calling not just for access to data, but for genuine partnerships that reshape the entire data lifecycle - from what is collected to how it is interpreted, governed, and used.

Communities consistently stress that the current approach lacks cultural grounding. The data being requested from community-controlled organisations is often shaped by bureaucratic requirements, not by what matters locally.

*"Stop asking ACCOs to collect meaningless data, rather allow the organisation to measure what matters to their community." [Survey response]*

This sentiment reflects a broader demand: that data systems be co-designed from the ground up - respecting different value sets, embedding IDS principles, and recognising that Aboriginal ways of knowing and doing require different metrics, methods, and governance.

There is support for empowering ACCOs to compile and manage their data collectively. This highlights the need to resource data collection adequately and speaks to the desire for community control over the systems and stories that shape policy decisions. That includes deciding what data is collected, who collects it, how it's gathered, and how it is ultimately used and presented. This shift is needed not only at the local level, but also at the jurisdictional and national levels. Many well-established Aboriginal peak bodies now have policy and analytical capability and are ready to take on greater leadership in shaping and interpreting data to inform systemic reform.

While some forums have been established to support data partnerships, participants report that these often fall short of meaningful collaboration. Too often, the data shared in such spaces is highly polished, selective, and fails to invite critical analysis or truth-telling.

*"To make data collection truly useful and relevant for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, governments must embed the principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty - not just reference them in documents." [Survey response]*

Communities want to see Indigenous governance structures actively shaping data design, collection, storage, interpretation, and presentation. As several submissions and participants emphasised, Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles must be embedded throughout every aspect of the data process, not treated as an afterthought.



# CASE STUDY

## Embedding data sovereignty and governance at every level



NSW CAPO reports that it has entered into a partnership arrangement with the NSW Government to actively embed Aboriginal Data Sovereignty and Governance at every level of the system.

A community-led process has led to the design of a six-step reform roadmap that includes:

- Shared access to government-held data — with standards, legal clarity, and practical tools
- Shared decision-making over data priorities, assets and projects — through structured, resourced governance groups
- Truth-telling and capacity building to strengthen community and government readiness
- Investment in Aboriginal-owned data infrastructure, including culturally safe platforms
- Local and category-based Aboriginal data governance groups, grounded in community authority, and
- A future sustainable model of Aboriginal Data Sovereignty that puts communities in control of how their data is governed, used, and protected.

### **NSW CAPO reports;**

This approach is unique to NSW: it does not stop at sharing data — it pushes toward self-determined control, community ownership, and the ability to interpret and act on data in ways that reflect Aboriginal priorities, values, and protocols. [Submission]

### **What it looks like in practice**

In 2023, the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research and the Aboriginal Legal Service, representing NSW CAPO, partnered to establish a First Nations-led data governance structure for the justice sector.

Through a co-design process facilitated by an Aboriginal consultant, participants emphasised the importance of bringing forward data needs and questions from the community level - ensuring that the evidence base reflects lived experience and community priorities. This work led to the creation of the Aboriginal Governance of Justice Data Group, which aims to improve data quality, promote self-determination, and guide ethical governance in line with Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Governance principles. The initiative also acknowledges the important distinction between data governance and data sovereignty.

To build on this positive example of embedding Priority Reform Four commitments within government practice, the next critical step is to embed this approach across other key sectors that significantly impact justice outcomes, such as health, disability, housing, education, and economic development.

### 3. Governments will tell First Nations people what data they have and how it can be accessed

As outlined earlier, the legacy of data misuse continues to cast a long shadow over Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and act as a trigger. For generations, information has been gathered about communities without consent, without context, and often with harmful consequences. Informed by racist prejudices, data was used to surveil, control, and justify discriminatory policies. In this context, transparency is not just a technical goal - it is a vital act of redress. It signals a shift from secrecy to accountability, from control to partnership. It also lays the groundwork for communities to exercise their right to self-determination, grounded in access to the information they need to make informed decisions.

A key commitment is for governments to inform Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities about what data exists and how it can be accessed. Yet many participants report that this basic commitment is far from being realised.

#### Poor data sharing

Data remains difficult to access, and often irrelevant, sanitised, or incomplete when it is made available. Several community organisations described being told that requested data could not be released, or worse, that it simply didn't exist - despite knowing it had been collected.

*"We are still getting complete pushback from departments. Sorry, we can't release that data. Sorry, we don't have that data. So they ask us to collect more and replicate and we say, 'No, you've got it.'" [Depth interview]*

The way data is shared impacts trust and usability. Communities want the opportunity to sit with data, reflect on it, and work collaboratively with partners. Presenting data briefly in a meeting - with no opportunity to take it away, interrogate it, or respond - falls far short of the intent of this reform. One participant described it as follows,

*"What we need is time and space to respond meaningfully - not a quick look and move on." [Submission]*

#### Capability issues within government

Participants highlighted not just an unwillingness within government to share data, but a broader capability issue that also hinders progress. Participants noted that many departments lack the internal data literacy and coordination required to manage, share, and make meaningful use of the information they hold. As one submission observed,

*"Sharing within their own department and knowing what they've got is challenging for them... they don't know what sources they have even though they've got lots of data." [Depth interview]*

This lack of capability leads to duplication, inefficiency, and misplaced requests for community organisations to collect data that already exists. It also contributes to risk-averse behaviours.

*“Data blockages are often not behavioural, but structural and procedural. Broad data literacy across Commonwealth and State governments is so low that the lack of capacity to understand how to work with data flows onto risk aversion in decisions where data sharing is concerned.” [Submission]*

In this context, it is encouraging to see that the Commonwealth Government’s *Framework for Governance of Indigenous Data* identifies capability building within government agencies as a key requirement, under Guideline 2: Build data-related capabilities. Embedding this focus across the APS will be essential if governments are to move from data custodianship to meaningful partnership.[137]

#### **Data gaps and deficit framing**

In some areas, the issue is not just how data is handled, but the fact that it barely exists. Key intersecting issues - such as disability - are underreported or entirely missing from available datasets.

*“We are really begging for the absolute scraps when it comes to disability data.” [Depth interview]*

In addition to calls for more inclusive and disaggregated data, some participants emphasised the importance of tracking progress over time and understanding the broader context that shapes outcomes.

*“To effectively track progress over time, implement longitudinal data collection mechanisms. Combined quantitative data with qualitative insights will offer a richer understanding of how various factors impact outcomes, providing the necessary context to drive meaningful change.” [Survey response]*

These concerns are further compounded by the way data is often framed. Rather than providing a balanced or strengths-based picture, data is frequently presented through deficit lenses - devoid of cultural or community context and shaped to preserve government narratives. While there are some exceptions, such as *Closing the Gap Annual Data Compilation Report*[138] produced by the Productivity Commission - which attempts to include contextual and reform-focused data - much of the data landscape remains narrowly focused on outcomes, with limited visibility of community strengths.

*“So much data that's presented back to communities is so deficit-lensed that for a community to actually deal with a government department that's transparent at the forefront is very, very unique.” [Submission]*

#### **Encouraging examples**

Despite the many barriers, there are bright spots. The federal Department of Education was highlighted for its exemplary transparency in its work with SNAICC on the Connected Beginnings program. One participant described the Department’s willingness to share budgets, show working drafts, and genuinely partner with community as “incredible flexibility... very, very unique.” These moments illustrate what’s possible when transparency is treated not as a risk but as a foundation for partnership.

Reflecting similar principles of accessibility and partnership, the NSW Data Connector Service - a pilot initiative launched in 2023 by the NSW Government in partnership with NSW CAPO. Designed to provide Aboriginal communities with a single, streamlined point of contact to access government-held data, the service supports cross-agency access and coordination. It responds directly to community calls for stronger data linkages and integration across sectors such as health, education, housing, and employment. As one participant explained,

*“Currently, the available data is not sufficient to close the gap. To fully understand and address the multifaceted issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, we require robust data linkages. Linking datasets across different sectors - such as health, education, housing, and employment - will enable us to study the effect of each factor comprehensively. This integrated approach is crucial to identify root causes and develop holistic, evidence-based solutions. [Survey response]*

Through the Service, NSW Data Connectors - comprising both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff - work across agencies to help communities identify, request, and interpret data aligned to their needs. NSW CAPO reports that some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations have already experienced improved access to more useful government-held data as a result, however the pilot was not resourced to operate at full scale. An independent evaluation of the Service and the broader Priority Reform Four work program is underway, with the aim of informing how the model can be expanded in the next implementation period to ensure consistent, community-wide access to useful data.

Other jurisdictions have begun taking steps to address structural barriers to data access. In WA, for example, the Government has introduced Privacy and Responsible Information Sharing (PRIS) legislation that references Aboriginal data sovereignty. However, Aboriginal stakeholders remain cautious:

*“While Aboriginal stakeholders were consulted on the development of the legislation, it is not clear how PRIS will prioritise Aboriginal people as custodians of their own data in reality.” [Submission]*

Across the board, community feedback is clear: governments must be transparent about the data they hold, how it is used, and how communities can access and interpret it.

#### **4. Governments will build community capabilities around collection and use of data**

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to meaningfully engage with data, the necessary capabilities must be in place - not just within government, but within community-controlled organisations. As many participants emphasised, the path to IDS cannot be realised without targeted, long-term investment in data literacy, governance, and infrastructure at the community level.

Currently, many ACCOs are collecting and working with service-delivery data with minimal or no government support.

*“Orgs try their best to collect their own data,” one person explained. “But it’s mostly off their own backs. Actual government support for this is still lacking.” [Depth interview]*

Additionally, the capacity to analyse, interpret, and present data in ways that reflect community priorities is uneven and under-resourced. *“Appropriate resourcing of data sharing and capacity building for communities is required,”* one participant stated.

Several participants expressed that the push toward IDS, while welcome, can feel out of step with the on-the-ground reality of organisational capacity.

*“Sometimes we just need very simple, administrative data sets and access to that and analysis,”* one person shared. *“We don’t have the kind of researchers who can undertake that work within our organisation so we have to procure it.”* Another put it more bluntly: *“The push to Indigenous Data Sovereignty is sort of skipping where some of our organisations are at... there’s been some ridiculous money thrown at weird things.”* [Depth interview]

This disconnection points to the need for a staged, responsive approach - one that strengthens foundational skills, supports the development of Indigenous data governance structures, and recognises the diversity of capacity across regions and organisations. That includes investing in infrastructure, funding positions, and providing training tailored to the needs of ACCOs, particularly in data interpretation and use. It is critical to note that community organisations are not resisting this work - they are ready and eager to deepen their capabilities. As one survey response stated, *“Involve us, upskill us to interpret.”* The barrier to progress doesn’t sit with community, but with the lack of structural support to make that learning possible.

Participants were also clear that community capabilities must be built in ways that reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing and doing.

*“If governments were serious about data sovereignty, they’d invest in building community capacity to lead data work. That includes recognising Indigenous methodologies like yarning, privileging lived experience, and making space for community-led indicators of success. And they’d stop using data as a mirror for what’s broken and start using it as a tool for what’s possible.”* [Survey response]

Underlying all of this is the persistent issue of mistrust. Several people noted that the service delivery data governments request from ACCOs often feels disconnected from the work they actually do, and in some cases, undermines service delivery.

*“Our services, the data that is collected on our services, and this includes the KPIs, do not reflect the work. And therefore where you need to invest your dollars is missing because we don’t have data sovereignty.”* [Depth interview]

In short, participants told us that if IDS is to be more than a principle on paper, governments must invest in the skills, tools, and cultural practices that allow communities to lead. That means resourcing ACCOs not just to report against government metrics, but to define and pursue their own success, on their own terms.

# CASE STUDY

## Data platform



Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Service (KAMS) was established in 1986 to provide culturally safe, comprehensive primary community health and wellbeing services, and since 2014, regional renal services to the Kimberley Aboriginal communities of regional Western Australia. KAMS also supports and represents the interests of eight Kimberley ACCHOs.

The Kimberley Aboriginal Health Planning Forum (KAHPF) began work in 2018 to identify regional health and wellbeing priorities aligned to the needs of Kimberley Aboriginal communities. This led to the development of 21 regional indicators to track progress and identify service gaps. The indicators are anchored in the KAHPF Strategic Plan and KAHPF members agreed in principle to contribute to data collection and share accountability for reporting. A mechanism was needed to support this collaboration and KHEDP was created, aligned with all four Priority Reforms.

KHEDP is a secure, regionally controlled health data platform that links primary health care and regional hospital data across the Kimberley. It is delivered through KAHRA, with KAMS as the auspice organisation. The platform is supported by the Medical Research Future Fund and in-kind contributions from non-government partners.

If KHEDP was supported and resourced to meet its full potential, it would meet Priority Reform Four actions by:

- providing de-identified matched data across services and jurisdictions
- enabling longitudinal analysis and health planning
- reducing duplications and improve quality,
- providing a governed platform for health planning and research, and
- identifying service gaps to inform future needs assessment.
- 

The KHEDP model of community directed data could have substantial impact in ensuring that there is transparent access to data and information across all national, state and local levels. This access to data across all jurisdictions will be essential towards improving the health and wellbeing outcomes of community.

# CASE STUDY

## Data platform cont.



By establishing a mechanism to support shared access to data at both local and regional levels, service delivery and advocacy can be amplified to ensure essential community health and wellbeing needs are being appropriately addressed. For it to be fully operational in the long term, there are several factors needed to be addressed including:

- sustained funding to support platform development, maintenance and training
- guaranteed full access to relevant, de-identified regional data with continued cross-jurisdictional data sharing
- building data literacy for Aboriginal staff across the region to engage with the data and ensure local voices determine what data is collected, how its used and how its interpreted
- policy settings to support place-based planning, and
- the sustainable upholding of Indigenous Data Sovereignty.

KAMS and KAHPF are already noting outcomes including incremental but meaningful change including a stronger culture of collaboration across the region, early success in developing shared renal indicators and real progress toward a scalable, community – led data platform.



## 6. The Partnership will establish six data projects around the country

Under Priority Reform Four, the Partnership is required to 'establish data projects in up to six locations across Australia to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations to access and use location-specific data on the Closing the Gap outcome areas.'[139]

The data projects are to be covered by localised, shared agreements and their scope includes:

- supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to analyse and use regional specific data to help drive their own development and discussions with governments on Closing the Gap, and
- enabling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations to collect and access other data which they consider important.

In its recent review, the Productivity Commission Review found that the Community Data Projects were behind schedule[140] and Joint Council subsequently embedded the Maiam nayri Wingara IDS principles into the projects.

The six Community Data Projects (CDPs) are at varying stages of development.

**NSW:** The most advanced CDP is the Western Sydney Data Project based in Blacktown as a collaborative effort between the Australian Government, NSW CAPO and the Maiam nayri Wingara Indigenous Data Sovereignty Collective. Workshops were run in 2023 to identify community perspectives on data priorities and requirements for informed community decision-making. NSW CAPO has conducted community surveying and engagements in partnership with Aboriginal Affairs NSW and Closing the Gap. The AIHW and DSS have been working on a data portal incorporating the identified community data priorities.

**SA:** Co-located with the PBP in Adelaide Western Suburbs, SAACCON and the SA Government are taking a partnership approach, and the Office of Data and Analytics will have a lead role in data sharing. A data working group was established in 2023 reporting to the SA Partnership Committee on Closing the Gap. SAACCON is leading engagement and a series of community data events and workshops to identify community priorities were run in 2024. From 2023, the ACCO Growth Fund has been supporting ACCO capability and capacity building for participation in both the PBP and CDP.

**NT:** Maningrida and surrounding Homelands communities are the co-located CPD/PBP site, with significant focus to date on ensuring the project is community-led. Time has been invested in building a strong governance structure across the various language groups as part of establishment. Maningrida leaders have articulated local data priorities around education, justice, cultural wellbeing, young people, housing, economic development and people living with disabilities and/or chronic health conditions. They are looking to build a community data portal as a tool to inform decision making and advocacy for funding direction for community approaches to local issues.

**QLD:** Doomadgee is the location for both CDP and PBP projects and Doomadgee CDP participants have consulted to determine their data collection priorities. Backbone organisation Gunawuna Jungai has entered discussions with QLD Department of Seniors, Disability Services and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships.

**VIC:** The Gippsland region is hosting the combined PBP and CDP. VACCA is taking the lead on both and led a scoping exercise focused on the Priority Reforms and Target 12[141] looking at numerous solutions to reduce the overrepresentation of children in out of home care. The CDP will enable the Aboriginal community and ACCOs to access and use data specific to their region to inform decision-making, identify data gaps and support measuring outcomes. It will include a monitoring and evaluation framework for the PBP with a particular focus on building community capacity in use of data. The CDP will sit across the overall PBP, support partners to identify and use data to inform decision making, identify data gaps and design outcomes measurement.

**WA:** The Kimberley was proposed as the site by the AHCWA supported by the Aboriginal Advisory Council of WA as data limitation has been identified as an earlier barrier to progressing work responding to a 2019 Coronial inquest into the deaths of 13 children and young people in the region. WA Government has allocated \$150,000 for developing a scoping proposal and they are considering their next steps. WA Country Health Service (WACHS) also received funding from the WA Government to complete a scoping proposal for a Kimberley Data Project, focused on data relevant to the issues of suicide, mental health and self-harm. This was to provide a basis for development of a data set and framework to be tested at a regional level.

At the time it was noted that the Kimberley Data Project was occurring at the same time as other data initiatives, many of which were also in response to PR-4. KAHRA, under the auspice of KAMS, received funding from the MRFF to develop the KHEDP (\$1m over 3 years 2021–2024).

The scoping for the Kimberley Data Project concluded in 2023, and KAMS has advocated that the WA State Government should re-scope this (as their commitment to a Community Data Project under the National Agreement) and provide funding for the KHEDP as an opportunity to demonstrate how Indigenous data sovereignty can be meaningfully enacted at a regional level.



## 2.4.4 Findings

### Productivity Commission Findings

The Productivity Commission found that progress under Priority Reform Four has been slow, with limited shared understanding across governments about what the reform is intended to achieve. Changes to data systems and practices to enable accountability and good governance had not progressed, and most actions had focused on improving access to government-held data, rather than building community-led data systems or embedding IDS. [142] The Commission recommended that IDS should be recognised and supported, including through the establishment of a ‘Bureau of Indigenous Data’.

Review participants echoed this concern, emphasising that data continues to be controlled, interpreted, and governed by government institutions. Participants stressed that without access to timely, disaggregated, and community-relevant data, and the infrastructure and capability to use it, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities cannot meaningfully influence decisions or enact self-determined priorities.

The findings that follow explore how the promise of shared data partnerships is yet to be fulfilled, and what remains necessary to build data ecosystems that reflect Indigenous values, governance, and priorities.

## **1. The core commitment to shared data partnerships is not yet being fulfilled**

The National Agreement commits all parties to establishing data partnerships that improve the collection, access, management, and use of data to support shared decision-making. The architecture outlined in the Agreement is sound and offers a strong foundation for reform. However, community feedback makes it clear that this commitment is not yet being realised in practice.

Review participants report that data continues to be primarily controlled, framed, and interpreted by government. While the Productivity Commission's Closing the Gap Dashboard represents progress - making data more accessible and providing contextual information - respondents reported limited opportunity for community-led interpretation, interrogation, or governance of the data.

## **2. Lack of progress is undermining self-determination**

Community feedback consistently indicates that insufficient progress on data access and capability is hindering broader goals of self-determination and shared decision-making. Many expressed frustration that while the principle of self-determination is embedded in the National Agreement, the practical tools required to enact it - such as timely, disaggregated, and community-relevant data - remain out of reach.

Without access to disaggregated data and the capability to use it effectively, communities are unable to lead or influence decisions in meaningful ways. It also reinforces the invisibility of specific groups within communities - such as people with disabilities, women in custody, and older people - whose experiences are often missing from national datasets and reporting frameworks.

## **3. Structural and systemic barriers persist**

Communities and ACCOs highlighted persistent systemic issues that prevent effective data sharing and collaboration. These include:

- Fragmented and outdated datasets
- Risk-averse privacy policies
- Low data literacy across government agencies to manage, share, and make meaningful use of the information they hold, and
- Structural reluctance to relinquish control.

As a result, even when data is technically available, it is often withheld, sanitised, or presented without context, undermining its usefulness. Progress on establishing community data portals remains unclear, and digital inclusion efforts remain patchy across jurisdictions.

Transforming the role of data in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lives requires not only structural reform, but a cultural shift within government – of the kind articulated in Priority Reform Three - towards truth and cultural integrity over control and institutional self-protection.

#### **4. Indigenous data sovereignty must be embedded across systems**

There is strong and widespread support for embedding IDS principles throughout all stages of data governance - from collection and storage to interpretation and use. Community members emphasised that IDS is not simply a set of values to be referenced, but a foundational requirement for building trust and enabling local leadership.

A dedicated Indigenous-led Bureau of Indigenous Data, as recommended by the Productivity Commission, has been welcomed as a step in the right direction. Once established, this Bureau offers hope that policy and program design can be increasingly shaped by Indigenous-led data and governance structures.

Community members cautioned against treating IDS as an add-on or isolated stream, warning that governments may see it as relevant only to “Indigenous data.” This risks creating a fragmented system—some datasets governed by Indigenous principles, others shaped by mainstream power structures. Embedding IDS across all data systems affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples affirms it not as a niche concern but as a standard for ethical, inclusive governance.

#### **5. Community capability is uneven and under-resourced**

While many ACCOs are eager to deepen their data capabilities, they are doing so with limited or no support. Data collection efforts are often carried out informally, with little funding for analysis or infrastructure. Participants also expressed concern that data demands from government can actually undermine service delivery where the data collected on the services does not reflect the work itself.

There is a strong appetite among ACCOs and peak bodies to lead data work, but capability varies, particularly across regions. Some organisations now have policy and analytical teams, while others are still developing foundational systems. Participants stressed that building capability must be a long-term, staged process that reflects where organisations are starting from and what they need. Resourcing for training, culturally appropriate methodologies, and Indigenous-led data governance, are essential to the effective adoption of IDS principles.

#### **6. The quality and scope of available data is a critical gap**

Participants reiterated the significance of the Government’s commitment under the Agreement to share disaggregated regional data - moving beyond state and territory aggregates to reflect the vastly different realities of rural, regional, and remote communities. Without this level of disaggregation, efforts to determine funding needs or service access risk overlooking the communities most in need. There are also calls for needs-based funding requirements, rather than relying solely on population size or jurisdictional boundaries.

In a similar vein, communities and peaks expect a shift away from narrow, quantitative data that focuses solely on what is happening, toward deeper, qualitative insights that also explore why. There is also a strong push to expand indicator sets to more accurately reflect the lived experiences of groups often rendered invisible in national data collections - including people with disability, Elders and older people, and women in custody.

## 7. Whole-of-Government commitment is still missing

Despite some encouraging initiatives at the program level, communities and peaks report a lack of consistent, coordinated commitment across all levels of government to fully implement Priority Reform Four. Progress remains uneven across jurisdictions, and data-sharing arrangements are often hindered by inconsistent policies, siloed systems, and risk-averse departmental practices. In some cases, departments are unaware of the data they already hold, or unable to share it across agencies, let alone with communities.

Participants expressed concern that without a unified approach, key commitments such as community data portals, digital inclusion initiatives, and the use of Indigenous-led indicators will stall or be implemented in piecemeal fashion. Delivering on the intent of this reform will require not just technical coordination, but a cultural shift across all of government - from viewing data as a risk to be managed, to a relationship to be shared.

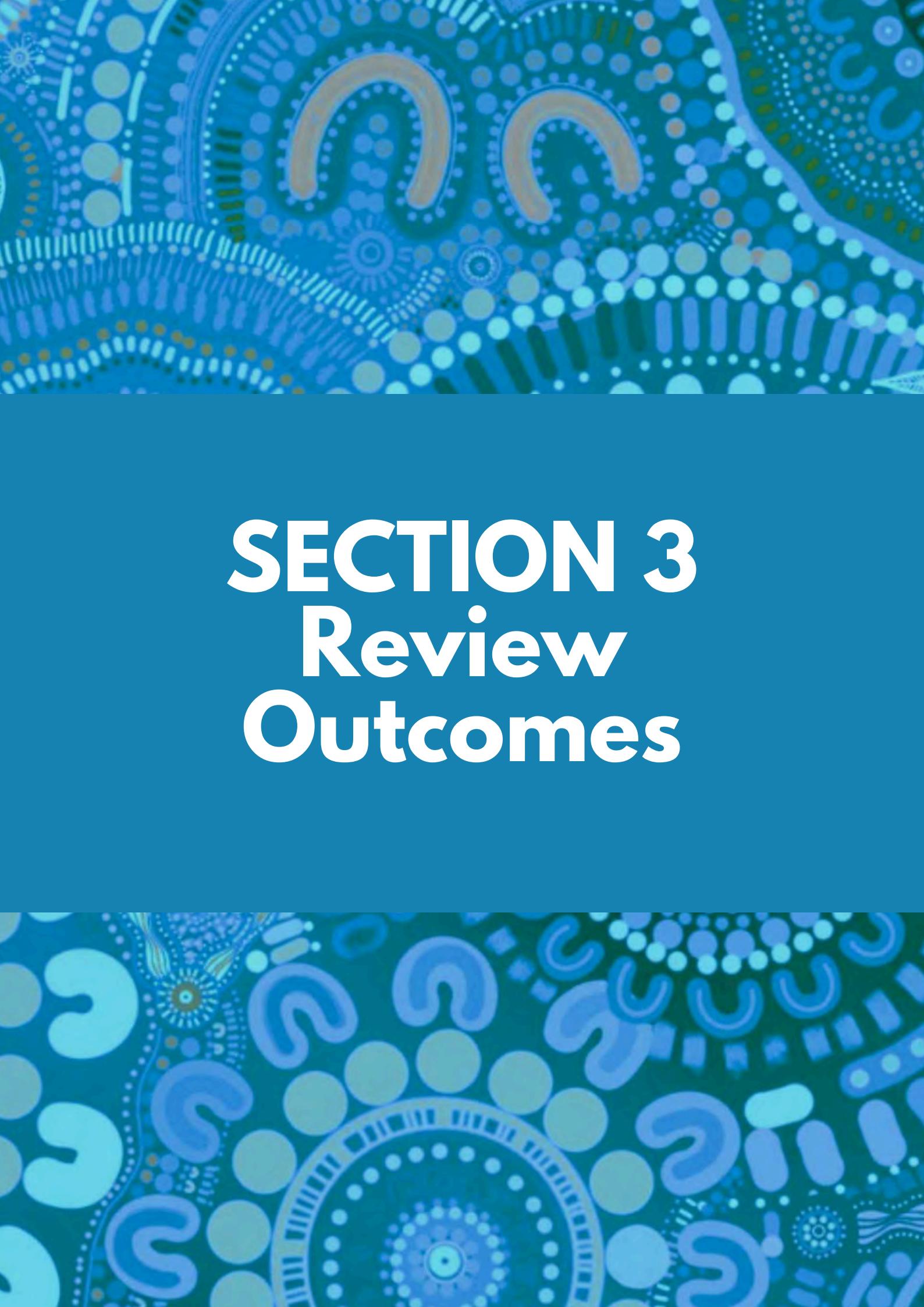
### 2.4.5 A new story

At its heart, Priority Reform Four is about transforming a relationship long marked by control, harm, and exclusion into one grounded in truth-telling, partnership, and justice. The misuse of data has been a central tool of colonisation - used to surveil, pathologise, and disempower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Reversing that legacy requires more than policy commitments. It demands systemic change: in who controls data, how it is used, and what it is used for.

Communities are clear about what they want. They want to lead, but they need the tools, access, and resourcing to do so. They want data that reflects their realities, respects their knowledge systems, and supports their aspirations. They are not asking to be invited to someone else's table, they are building their own.

Done well, Priority Reform Four offers the chance to turn data from a source of harm into a tool of empowerment. It offers a pathway to restore trust, uphold self-determination, and create a new data future - one where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the storytellers, the stewards, and the sovereign holders of their knowledge.





# SECTION 3

## Review Outcomes

The scope for this Review included highlighting the findings and recommendations of the Productivity Commission Review and how they relate to the lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. There was strong correlation in the outcomes of the two reviews. However, this Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led Review has centred the perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. In doing so it has deepened, and in some instances, diverged from some of the Productivity Commission.

### **3.1 Key Questions of this Review**

In undertaking this Review, Jumbunna set out to answer three Key Questions to identify the strengths, challenges, and opportunities in the current implementation of Closing the Gap. Much of what participants shared was based on those things not working as intended, as well as opportunities for action and change. Accordingly, this Review provides a roadmap for Parties to the National Agreement to change course and deepen their commitment in areas where reform is not yet taking hold.

#### **How are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and governments managing systems, policies and programs aligning to the Priority Reforms?**

There is limited evidence governments are making any systemic changes to meet commitments under the National Agreement. This has resulted in a lack of transformational change across all services and systems, policies and programs aligned to the Priority Reforms. A significant contributing factor to this is the lack of governmental knowledge about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of being, knowing and doing necessary to comprehend the work required.

Limited opportunities to shape systems, policies and programs persist and where they are available to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, are ad hoc and overly burdensome. The sector remains inadequately resourced, not only to meet administrative funding requirements, but also to participate fully as equal partners in National Agreement processes. This reflects a continued imbalance in understanding, resourcing, and capacity between governments and ACCOs.

This is compounded by a perceived lack of trust towards the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sector, who feel over-monitored, while governments themselves are not subject to the same levels of transparency or accountability to communities. This environment continues to hinder systemic transformation under the Priority Reforms, emphasising the urgent need for independent accountability mechanisms.

Governments have been slow on attitudinal and systemic change, despite some evidence of individuals and teams within government that are championing reform. An overreliance on this has created an unsustainable cultural load.

Though not widespread, there have been some positive developments such as greater partnerships between services and First Nations community members, and more invitations to ACCOs to co-design policies and projects.

## How are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and governments adapting to new ways of working under the National Agreement?

Governments are not substantively adapting to the new ways of working under the National Agreement and this constrains the ability of both Parties to achieve the changes intended by the Priority Reforms. Most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people involved in this Review do not feel that the changes sought by the Priority Reforms are on track.

There are positive aspects that can act as potential levers for change throughout the National Agreement including:

- increased visibility on the issues of importance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the starting point for creating momentum for real and lasting change, and
- advocacy opportunities to remind governments of community expectations and is resulting in some increases in collaboration between ACCOs, peaks and communities, and governments resulting in some better outcomes.

Overall, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations are coming to the Agreement willing to work to achieve the stated outcomes, but this effort is not being matched by governments at all levels. Jurisdictions were not taking the necessary steps required under the Agreement, namely under Priority Reform Three: Transforming Government Organisations, and this is hampering the creation of new ways of working and leading to unequal responsibility sitting with community-controlled organisations. Ultimately this is all contributing to an undermining of the the intent of the National Agreement and its implementation.

Working in silos, not following through on or ignoring commitments altogether are major limitations to achieving the goals set by the Priority Reforms. Despite pockets of good work delivered by committed groups, a lack of collective national effort is inhibiting transformative change. This means the National Agreement is not being meaningfully felt at the community level, with most decisions still made at the national or state level via interaction between national and state peaks or coalition bodies.

Greater consideration is needed by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sector as to whether their own adaptations under the National Agreement are being felt as a shift towards Western bureaucracies and away from cultural ways of working. Reflection is needed on how more successful peak bodies are operating and how they are supporting the sector more broadly. Across policy areas, consideration must also be given to adopting solutions-based approaches and how to tackle cross-sectoral areas where outcomes are moving backwards, including but not limited to disability, justice and child protection.

## Is the National Agreement working in the way you anticipated? How well is it working? What changes, if any, should be made?

The National Agreement is not yet working as was anticipated by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations, apart from disjointed, ad hoc examples that are not part of a joined-up approach to implementation.

A major issue continues to be lack of alignment of jurisdictions with the National Agreement. This means there is a disconnect between policy decisions and the National Agreement, making it harder to achieve the change in the Priority Reform areas. More work is needed to adopt the Priority Reforms across all tiers of government. Achieving cohesion between the levels of government and having mechanisms to ensure that this is maintained is essential.

For the National Agreement to work effectively there are several key areas where a shift in approach is needed:

#### **Accountability**

- An adherence mechanism is needed to ensure that government policies and legislation are not contrary to the Agreement, including those decisions that are directly harmful to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities made outside a department or agency and Closing the Gap implementation structures.
- Peaks and ACCOs must be able to call government to account when it does not adhere to the Agreement without fear of funding repercussions.

#### **Funding reform**

- Long term, sustainable funding is required at the Peak, ACCO and community levels
- Short-term and one-off grants are major barriers to systemic change. Shifting toward long-term, sustainable funding will enhance programs, initiatives and the translation of national objectives into local solutions. Funding must be timely, flexible and accompanied by clear, consistent guidelines to support responsive, community-led work.

#### **Self-determination and genuine partnership**

- Self-determination is essential to transformation, and without it, progress will be hindered and slow, with too much business as usual from governments.
- Governments need to deeply listen to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and their representatives to understand community priorities, and solutions to difficult problems and barriers.

#### **Transforming Governments, applying a cultural lens**

- Policies and programs continue to be developed without a culturally informed lens, forcing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of being into Western systems.
- A shift toward community-defined success measures and incorporation of cultural knowledge will play a significant role in applying a cultural lens.
- A significant burden still falls on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sector to educate governments on how to work differently under the National Agreement.

### **3.2 Core themes**

Across all the feedback, there was general agreement that the framework of the National Agreement and the Priority Reforms is sound. Three core themes strongly emerged as essential to the success of Closing the Gap. Two go to the heart of the National Agreement – self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities, and the capability building required of all parties to support the ability to work in genuine partnership. The third core theme – governance building – is a framework that supports self-determination and enables Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and their organisations to be on equal footing with government in Closing the Gap structures and implementation.

## **Self-determination**

Self-determination must become a lived principle in the way the Agreement is implemented. Review participants across the country have been clear in their advice that they want a shift away from deficit-based models. Instead, they are calling for the activation of the commitment under the National Agreement to self-determination and a fundamental shift to a strengths-based approach – on community leadership, resilience, existing capabilities, service delivery and cultural continuity.

This requires a shift in the narrative on Closing the Gap. Too often, Western methods of measuring success and failure dehumanise communities and fail to reflect First Nations priorities. Communities are calling for a mixed methods approach – complementing quantitative data with qualitative methods that speak to Indigenous approaches - using relational and holistic frameworks, recognising experiential knowledge, and emphasising intergenerational and community accountability. Closing the Gap needs to focus not just on what is being measured, but on how and why circumstances are as they are.

The National Agreement sought to bring about this shift. While change is underway, the full expression of self-determination continues to be constrained by colonial systems and ways of working and the inability – or unwillingness - of governments to make space for worldviews that do not mirror their own. Until this core issue can be addressed, a mismatch in the overarching vision of the Priority Reform areas will persist, and implementation challenges will continue.

## **Capability building of all the Parties**

To realise the full potential of the National Agreement, all parties must build their capability to work in partnership.

For First Nations communities, this means being adequately resourced to engage in government processes as equal partners. From Coalition of Peaks to community level, the Indigenous Sector is operating while being under resourced. Many communities are doing this work on limited budgets, without the institutional infrastructure or support that governments take for granted.

While many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have worked in government and have an expert understanding of how government operates, this is not universal across the Indigenous Sector. Sustained investment in building Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander skills more broadly is needed - not just in program delivery, but in governance, leadership, data use and a range of other skills.

Bureaucratic approaches, shaped by Western frameworks, most often do not reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of how authority is organised and enacted. These two worldviews sit diametrically opposed. It is not the responsibility of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, communities, their organisations or only Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants to transform Australian governments. This is a process for government itself to undertake. For all levels of government in Australia, this means a significant strengthening of their own capabilities to partner with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in ways that honour their authority, culture, and decision-making processes.

This requires more than cultural awareness training or inclusion targets. It calls for first, a learning process that has been absent in Closing the Gap to date to genuinely understand Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing. Then it requires the structural change: of fundamentally shifting mindsets, relinquishing control and personal or agency power, and embedding practices of listening deeply, reciprocity, and accountability.

Too often, government systems default to consultation over shared decision-making, and technical compliance over cultural legitimacy. Building true partnership capacity means rethinking policy cycles, timelines, and success measures, making space for Indigenous practices and perspectives. It means recognising that community-controlled organisations hold cultural authority and deep local knowledge and ensuring all parties understand each other's worldviews and have the ability to find ways to work together towards success under Closing the Gap.

### **Governance building framework**

Closely linked to the principles of self-determination, Indigenous governance-building is the process by which Indigenous peoples strengthen governance, cultural identity, economic independence, and collective capacity to make decisions. The National Agreement on Closing the Gap creates a pathway for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to rebuild, and communities are calling for this.

This work might not always resemble nation-building models tied to formal recognition of Traditional Owner groups or land-based governance structures. It must also reflect the lived realities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today - in urban, regional, and remote contexts; in kinship networks that don't map neatly onto colonial boundaries; in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities doing the slow work of rebuilding from generations of disruption.

The opportunities within Closing the Gap underpin the need for a decolonisation process and finding a new way forward after more than 230 years of failed government approaches to working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The opportunity lies in supporting these efforts – adequately resourcing First Nations to further design their own structures, restore decision-making power and strengthen community capacity in ways that are culturally grounded and locally relevant. When fully realised, the Agreement becomes more than a reform agenda. It becomes a foundation for rebuilding strong, self-determined communities able to meet governments on an equal footing across the diversity of Indigenous Australia.

## **3.3 Key Findings**

### **Key Finding 1: The Closing the Gap architecture is broadly sound but is inhibited by inaction**

The architecture under Closing the Gap and the 2020 National Agreement is broadly sound and provides a solid framework supported by all Parties, but the implementation challenges identified in both this Review and the 2024 Productivity Commission Review reflect a deeper tension between fundamentally different worldviews: a state-centric approach grounded in settler governance structures, and a First Nations vision rooted in human rights, self-determination and sovereignty. The Priority Reform areas provide a roadmap for elevating the latter.

To achieve this, governments must rethink what genuine partnership entails; moving beyond inclusion within existing systems and toward reimagining those systems. This transformation continues to be constrained by the state's reluctance to de-centre its authority. Forgoing power in favour of partnership is urgently needed. There is an existing roadmap for governments in pre-existing commitments to international human rights instruments.

### **Key Finding 2: A clear imbalance of responsibilities and resourcing is impeding implementation**

Success beyond current ad hoc examples is limited by implementation issues. Much of the burden for that success rests too heavily on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parties, while government parties carry a lighter responsibility. The Peaks, ACCOs and communities are doing the heavy lifting while at the same time being under resourced in comparison with governments. This will continue to impact successful implementation under each Priority Reform and the associated Targets and Outcomes.

### **Key Finding 3: Progress across the Priority Reforms is interdependent**

The Priority Reforms must be understood and implemented as a coherent, interdependent framework, not as standalone initiatives. Each reform reinforces the others. Genuine shared decision-making (Priority Reform 1) cannot occur without strong, well-resourced ACCOs (Priority Reform 2), and ACCOs cannot thrive if government systems remain unchanged (Priority Reform 3). Finally, partnerships are impossible without transparent, accessible data that communities control and trust (Priority Reform 4).

When approached holistically, the Priority Reforms provide a roadmap for rebalancing power, embedding cultural authority and achieving long-term, community-led outcomes, which in turn, will 'close the gap'.

Despite this, implementation too often considers the Priority Reforms in isolation, or not at all, in the pursuit of the socio-economic Targets. It is the combined impact of the Priority Reforms implemented well that holds the greatest potential for sustained success, including with respect to the socio-economic Targets.

### **Key Finding 4: The cultural load is heavy**

The successes achieved through the National Agreement rely heavily on dedicated individuals and teams across the Commonwealth and State and Territory Governments rather than any systemic approaches to delivering on commitments under Closing the Gap. Linked to this is the reliance of governments on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants as bearing responsibility for government transformation.

### **Key Finding 5: Communication and education on Closing the Gap is inappropriate and insufficient**

The absence of appropriate and targeted communication and education about Closing the Gap progress has led to community negativity and perceived slow progress on targets vs actual progress. While people are not required to hold intricate knowledge of the Agreement or its mechanisms, there is a general lack of knowledge about Closing the Gap, the Agreement and outcomes. Appropriate communication strategies and resources that are accessible in a range of ways, and disseminated in the communication channels communities prefer, is needed to raise awareness and understanding.

## **Key Finding 6: Governments have yet to commence any genuine transformative work**

Governments continue with business-as-usual approaches that are inconsistent with their commitments under the National Agreement and are not yielding widespread impact. Government remains ignorant of the cultural side of transformation required by their own systems. Governments must look to structural reforms, improvements and power shifts as essential – there is mixed effectiveness, uneven influence, resourcing and power across the mechanisms of Closing the Gap and positive steps and outcomes are often the result of committed individuals and teams within government. Local Government has not yet commenced any quantifiable work as a Party to the Agreement, despite a small number of positive examples driven by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people or their organisations.

This limited commitment to the new ways of working under the National Agreement is the barrier to transformative change and the realisation of the human rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. A human rights-based approach that truly relinquishes total governmental control and adequately invests in community-controlled solutions as the new normal is part of governments' responsibility to addressing this deficit. This is not a new requirement, but rather the fulfilment of Australia's existing human rights obligations to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

## **Key Finding 7: Accountability and transparency are critical**

Accountability, and transparency is critical and must be introduced as a matter of priority under the National Agreement. The need for multi-jurisdictional independent accountability mechanisms is urgently needed to provide oversight and monitoring of government efforts. Implementing these mechanisms will ensure greater action across agreed priority areas, reduce the strain and frustration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and bring the partnership into true equilibrium.

Independent mechanisms must be adequately resourced and designed with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and their organisations to reflect the needs and priorities of their respective jurisdictions.

## **Key Finding 8: Funding reform is needed**

Funding reform is required to provide for sustainable, long term security to the community-controlled sector. This includes a rethink of competitive procurement funding models – shifting the purpose away from competition for service delivery, to a response to the social determinants associated with poor individual and community outcomes. In such a model, decisions about who manages services are grounded in equity and local authority, with legitimacy coming from local people, not from a central government. Under the current funding system, the complexity and volume of reporting requirements make it difficult for Aboriginal organisations to meet their core business requirements of delivering services to close the gap.

Governments must reconsider how they pursue their interest in efficiency and accountability. This requires reducing unnecessary administrative burdens so organisations can focus on achieving meaningful outcomes for their communities.

## **Key Finding 9: Expanded efforts are needed by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector**

The strength and unity of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector is a fundamental requirement for achieving progress under the National Agreement and in turn improving the lives of Indigenous Australians. However, realising this vision means that the community-controlled sector must continue to be strengthened and adapt to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Greater sector collaboration requires resourcing on top of existing arrangements to foster the growth, capability and capacity building that is needed.

There is a need for the sector to consider and improve on the ways in which engagement and information sharing currently occurs with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities at the ACCO, peak and jurisdictional levels. Current efforts are not sufficient and this effort must also extend to the relationship between the Coalition of Peaks and the broader community-controlled sector. A strong feedback loop will go a long way to improving outcomes across all areas of the National Agreement, including the levels of awareness and action on what is possible.

Focusing on these broad areas will ensure that the lessons learned from the growth and maturity in some sectors can be shared, that cross-sectoral areas are strengthened and that the community-controlled sector engages in an ongoing process of improvement.

## **Key Finding 10: Racism is not being addressed**

Racism is a core foundational issue that sits across every aspect of Closing the Gap and any potential long-term, sustainable successes. Racism - in its myriad forms - is impacting on the effective implementation of all four priority reform areas. Despite the National Agreement commitment to identifying and eliminating racism, no systemic steps have been taken despite, or perhaps because, racism is a deeply rooted problem that was baked into government institutions from their very inception of this country.

## **Key Finding 11: A return to bipartisanship at the political level is critical**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities cannot be used weaponised political tools if long term and sustainable success of Closing the Gap is to be attained. Strong and sustained political leadership is also a key component in delivering positive outcomes in the long-term.

## **Key Finding 12: The National Agreement is grounded in principles of global human rights standards, including self-determination and non-discrimination.**

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap should be understood as a nationally co-created policy platform for realising justice, equity, and dignity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. While not tied to a single international human rights instrument, the Agreement is grounded in principles that resonate strongly with global human rights standards, including self-determination and non-discrimination.

Importantly, it also responds to the denial of basic citizenship rights experienced by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people: the right to live safely, to access culturally safe services, to be healthy, educated, housed, and heard. In this sense, the National Agreement is not only about embedding self-determination in structures of governance, but also about fulfilling the basic promises of Australian citizenship. Self-determination cannot come at the price of government taking little to no responsibility for the citizenship and human rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Embedding a human rights approach requires taking active steps to address structural racism, uphold the right to self-determination, and ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are equal partners in decisions that affect their lives. A shared vision for Closing the Gap must therefore be grounded in these principles, while also reflecting a transformational understanding of the role of governments and their obligations to First Nations peoples.



### 3.3 Priority Reform Findings

In addition to the key findings, below are the findings specific to each Priority Reform area.

Priority Reform One Shared Decision-Making	Priority Reform Two Building Community Controlled Sector	Priority Reform Three Transforming Government Organisations	Priority Reform Four Shared Access to Data and Information
When done right, formal partnership structures do create the partnerships outcome Priority Reform One envisages.	Funding cycles are inadequate and overly burdensome. Despite clause 45 of the National Agreement, short term funding and reporting requirements are placing undue strain on ACCOs. A cohesive strategy that details sustainable investment is needed.	Priority Reform Three is not progressing due to a lack of systemic approaches, widespread inconsistency or structured approaches to implementation.	The core commitment to shared data partnerships is not yet being fulfilled. There is a need for data to be more accessible and to provide more contextual information beyond existing dashboards. The community is calling for greater opportunities to interpret, interrogate and govern data.
It's time to come into 'right relationship'. This calls for a reconception of the relationship between governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to include shared authority and mutual recognition.	Greater efforts are needed across cross-cutting sectors – housing, disability, justice.	Racism is the core issue: Governments are yet to begin to address the identification and elimination of racism in any substantive way.	Lack of progress on data access and capability is undermining self-determination. Timely, disaggregated and community level data are needed. A failure to achieve this limits the ability of communities to influence decision-making.
Introspection on the part of all Parties is needed to identify inhibitors to progress. Communities have told this Review that shared decision-making, and the relinquishment of government control is needed across all areas.	<p>Self-determination is being stifled by a lack of respect and sustained government investment. An over-emphasis on reporting shows a lack of trust in ACCOs. Targets and timeframes are focused on government rather than community agendas.</p> <p>A nationally consistent definition of ACCO's is needed to ensure organisations are initiated and governed by as well as accountable to the communities they serve.</p>	Shifting from cultural safety tick a box to meaningful systemic change requires moving beyond basic levels of competency at the individual level to embracing the need for change across a continuum, including across systems and behaviours.	Structural and systemic barriers persist to prevent effective data sharing and collaboration. Structural and cultural shifts are needed within government to transform the role of data in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Priority Reform One Shared Decision-Making	Priority Reform Two Building Community Controlled Sector	Priority Reform Three Transforming Government Organisations	Priority Reform Four Shared Access to Data and Information
<p>Shared decision-making depends on equitable resourcing. ACCOs are currently operating at reduced capacity while governments control funding streams and timeframes. Staffing, funding, governance and other supports are needed.</p>	<p>Accountability is two-way and must occur beyond annual reporting. Enhanced accountability mechanisms are needed to ensure improved transparency and progress.</p>	<p>ACCOs and Peaks are Holding up the sky: There are imbalances in responsibilities, commitments and resourcing. There is a lack of sustained investment and coordinated action on the part of governments.</p>	<p>Indigenous data sovereignty must be embedded across systems, from collection and storage to interpretation and use. This should become the standard for ethical and inclusive governance rather than a 'niche' concern.</p> <p>A Bureau of Indigenous Data that is indigenous led is a step in the right direction.</p>
<p>The vision isn't shared in practice. Clarity is needed on what shared decision-making looks like as well as the distinct roles and responsibilities of all parties across the Agreement.</p>	<p>Workforce reform is needed across all sectors and particularly remote areas. There must be an emphasis on long term career opportunities over short term contracts. A strategy devised by the Coalition of Peaks is needed to address the emergence of new entities in the space to ensure adequate accreditation and culturally safe care.</p>	<p>Service delivery partnership is moving at a glacial pace, and positive movements are not visible. Transformation is being held back by a systemic lack of investment, whole of government engagement and inconsistent approaches.</p>	<p>Community capability is uneven and under-resourced. Training resources, culturally appropriate methodologies and Indigenous-led data governance are essential to the effective adoption of Indigenous data sovereignty principles.</p>
<p>COVID ways of working need broader application. The efforts of the Aboriginal health sector were regularly pointed to as best practice that must become standard ways of working with and across all sectors.</p>	<p>Combined national and jurisdictional efforts are lacking. The three levels of government rarely work in unison to support ACCOs, with very limited efforts being report about local government.</p>	<p>Current accountability approaches are not sufficient for systemic transformation. Independent accountability mechanisms are urgently needed.</p>	<p>The quality and scope of available data is a critical gap. Aggregation must occur beyond state and territory levels to reflect what is happening and why at the rural, regional and remote level.</p> <p>This level of disaggregation can better assist to determine levels of need and service access to those communities most in need.</p>
<p>Lack of communication is causing distrust and confusion at the local level. This must occur regularly and transparently to ensure local communities are kept informed of progress.</p>	<p>ACCOs are leading the way and have adapted their governance, administrative and programmatic initiatives at their own cost to meet the needs of their communities under the National Agreement.</p>	<p>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people want to be able to function with full cultural identity with increased support from governments.</p>	<p>Whole-of-Government commitment is still missing. Inconsistent, siloed and risk averse practices are limiting progress against Priority Reform Four. A unified rather than piecemeal approach is needed.</p>

Priority Reform One Shared Decision-Making	Priority Reform Two Building Community Controlled Sector	Priority Reform Three Transforming Government Organisations	Priority Reform Four Shared Access to Data and Information
<p>The linkages between the policy and place-based partnerships need better articulation and maintenance. A more co-ordinated system of shared decision-making will ensure national priorities are better informed by local realities.</p>		<p>Community led, not just informed engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and not substituted by consultation or information provision.</p>	
		<p>There is a lack of information about Closing the Gap and the National Agreement that is contributing to negativity and perceived slow progress, and limited awareness of positive outcomes or work being undertaken beyond peoples' immediate areas of expertise. This is a result of both government approaches to communicating with First Nations communities and a siloed approach to seeking information by community-controlled organisations.</p>	
		<p>The age-old problems of siloed approaches and lack of successful inter-governmental approaches continue to plague Closing the Gap implementation. Strong leadership is required to address these issues and implement solutions.</p>	
		<p>A lack of political bipartisanship on Indigenous Affairs is impacting the long term and sustainable success of Closing the Gap. Strong and sustained political leadership is required in addition to that from the bureaucracy if positive outcomes are to be achieved.</p>	



# RECOMMENDATIONS



What is apparent from the outcomes of this Review is that there is a single point of focus for consideration by the Parties to the National Agreement: the nature of the relationship between State and First Peoples and the need for a respectful re-examination of what this relationship should be. In considering that fundamental relationship, there needs to be a commitment to self-determination in action, as well as the transformation of structures and abilities for all Parties. Despite the deficit nature of the wording, “Closing the Gap” is an attempt to move from assimilationist policy towards policy based in self-determination for First Nations peoples.

The spirit in which this Review was undertaken was to create safe and culturally supportive environments to listen deeply and give voice to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities on their experiences of implementing the National Agreement.

Not surprisingly, there is strong correlation with the findings of the Productivity Commission Review from last year. This Review has been able to delve deeper into the experiences of First Nations people, including why, in their experience, areas are slow or not progressing and what is required to break through the barriers.

The following key recommendations aim to provide feedback for all Parties and highlight that there are roadmaps to success for working together positively and constructively. The recommendations are provided as insight into how to move forward on those sticking points and barriers, directly from the people who need the National Agreement to work for their communities.

As required by the National Agreement, this Review has focused on priority areas where greater collective effort by the Parties is needed and advice on potential changes. The Review has purposefully not provided detailed, actionable recommendations, as these can often unintentionally reinforce the siloed nature of government and the current approach to the implementation of the Priority Reforms. Instead, the recommendations are provided as a lever for internal reflection, examining current relationships and what they have been built on, and as an invitation to all Parties to challenge themselves to rise to the ambition of the Review and the National Agreement.

## Recommendation One: Initiate a dialogue to align the visions of the Parties

The mismatch of visions between the Parties sits at the heart of many implementation challenges being experienced by the Parties. Without deliberate action to bridge these differences, efforts to implement the National Agreement will be fragmented and misaligned. A shared understanding of purpose and direction is essential to move forward together.

### a) Align the visions

The Joint Council should initiate a dialogue to align the visions of the Parties as they implement Closing the Gap. This process should be grounded in truth-telling, cultural respect, and a commitment to right relationship.

The shared vision should be clearly articulated, co-owned, and regularly revisited to guide decision-making, resourcing and accountability across all levels of implementation.

**Parties:** Joint Council

## Recommendation Two: Drive genuine transformation within governments through systemic and structural changes

Realising the transformational intent of the National Agreement requires sustained cultural and structural change across all levels of government. The following recommendations lay the groundwork for more effective, respectful and enduring implementation.

### a) Embed systemic change into leadership contracts and KPIs

The commitments under the National Agreement must be reflected in the key performance indicators (KPIs) and employment contracts of departmental Secretaries and agency heads, and flow through to senior executives and relevant staff. Position descriptions and performance development plans should explicitly include responsibilities for progressing structural reform, upholding genuine partnership, and delivering the Priority Reforms. Without this, cultural change across the system cannot be sustained.

**Parties:** Commonwealth Government, State/Territory Governments, Local Government

## b) Address the cultural load

The load carried by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector in relation to governments must be examined and areas of imbalance addressed.

Governments must recognise and understand the unique burden placed on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants who are often expected to carry cultural, relational and representational responsibilities on top of their formal roles. This includes addressing the emotional and cultural labour associated with navigating colonial systems while advocating for community. Agencies should co-design and implement specific supports and make sure workloads and expectations are realistic, not extractive.

Without addressing this cultural load, retention, wellbeing, and the effectiveness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership within government and the community-controlled sector will continue to be undermined.

**Parties:** Commonwealth Government, State/Territory Governments, Local Government

## c) Recognising First Nations' worldviews as separate from Western worldviews

In their *interpretation* and *implementation* of the National Agreement, Governments need to undertake a cultural and relational exercise, recognising First Nations' worldviews as separate from Western worldviews. This fundamental shift is required to gain a more holistic approach that emphasises the importance of living well across all stages of life. Greater interconnectedness and workable structures, particularly of those 'cross-cutting' areas, are urgently needed to guarantee the functioning of the Agreement reflects the lived experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

**Parties:** Commonwealth Government, State/Territory Governments, Local Government

## d) Local Government needs to step up to their Closing the Gap commitments under the National Agreement

There is an argument to be made for consideration of existing jurisdictional funding allocations dedicated to local government for recognising the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities so they are resourced to meaningfully contribute to the implementation of the National Agreement. Until sustained funding is provided, many local governments will remain unable to step into their responsibilities as genuine partners.

At the same time, local governments must strengthen their capability and cultural competence to engage respectfully with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. This includes building relationships, improving accountability, identifying and addressing all forms of racism, and embedding the Priority Reforms in local planning and decision-making processes. For local government peak bodies and many local governments, this will require examination of how to undertake this work in the absence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elected representatives or staff.

**Parties:** Commonwealth Government, State/Territory Governments, Local Government national and state/territory peak bodies, Local Government

## Recommendation Three: Reform funding systems

Structural reform will not occur without addressing the persistent under-resourcing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and the disproportionate accountability burden they carry. The following recommendations speak to the changes needed to realise this.

### a) Resource Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations equitably to deliver on shared outcomes

Funding must match the scope of responsibilities expected under the National Agreement. This includes core and sustainable funding that goes beyond short-term project delivery and supports long-term planning, governance, and workforce development. Governments should revise procurement and grant-making models to prioritise community control and localised decision-making, recognising that competition for funding undermines collaboration and self-determination.

**Parties:** Commonwealth Government, State/Territory Governments

## Recommendation Four: Implement the existing roadmap on monitoring and accountability

Strengthening accountability is essential to ensuring that implementation of the National Agreement is both transparent and transformative. Current approaches remain overly transactional and compliance driven. The following recommendations are necessary steps to redressing this.

### a) Implement the Independent Mechanisms

Prioritise the overdue work required under Clause 67 of the National Agreement that Government Parties each identify, develop or strengthen an independent mechanism to support, monitor and report on the transformation of mainstream agencies and institutions.

**Parties:** Commonwealth Government, State/Territory Governments, Coalition of Peaks, State/Territory Peak coalitions and councils

### b) Shift from transactional to relational accountability

Accountability processes should reflect genuine partnership. This means investing in relationship-building, feedback loops, and two-way learning, rather than relying solely on bureaucratic compliance mechanisms.

This also means that where possible, shared monitoring and evaluation should be guided by Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles and informed by community-led definitions of success.

**Parties:** Commonwealth Government, State/Territory Governments

## Recommendation Five: Initiate a community- controlled sector-led self-evaluation

The success of the National Agreement depends not only on government reform, but also on the continued strength and integrity of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector. As the sector grows in scale and responsibility, space must be made for reflection on whether its current structures, systems, and ways of working continue to reflect community priorities. The following recommendations will support this process.

### a) Undertake a self-evaluation process

The community-controlled sector should lead a self-reflective process to assess whether current structures, governance models and internal cultures continue to reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of working and community aspirations, or whether they have become overly aligned with mainstream government systems.

**Parties:** Coalition of Peaks, State/Territory Peak coalitions and councils, ACCOs

### b) Strengthen unity

Invest in efforts to strengthen unity and collective purpose across Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and their representative organisations, supporting shared strategy, trust-building, and coordinated advocacy.

**Parties:** Coalition of Peaks, State/Territory Peak coalitions and councils, ACCOs

### c) Build capacity and capability

Peaks should be resourced to strengthen the capability of their member organisations, particularly in relation to data use, infrastructure and evidence-informed policy engagement. This includes investing in community-controlled data systems in the absence of the proposed Bureau of Indigenous Data.

**Parties:** Coalition of Peaks, State/Territory Peak coalitions and councils, ACCOs

### d) Support cross-sector collaboration

Develop or strengthen peak body cross-sectoral structures to elevate intersecting policy areas including justice, child protection and disability, and to enable holistic, coordinated responses.

**Parties:** Coalition of Peaks, State/Territory Peak coalitions and councils

## **Recommendation Six: Improve how information about Closing the Gap and the National Agreement outcomes are communicated by all Parties**

Improving communication is critical to restoring trust, supporting accountability, and ensuring communities can meaningfully engage with the National Agreement. Clauses 97, 134, 135 and 136 of the Agreement all reference a communication strategy that has yet to be fulfilled in a meaningful way.

The following recommendations focus on building clear, accessible and culturally responsive communication pathways to achieve that.

### **a) Communicate regularly**

To restore trust and enable meaningful engagement, clear, consistent, and culturally appropriate communication about the National Agreement must reach the people and communities it is intended to benefit.

Parties must take responsibility for regularly communicating up to date information about the National Agreement, including what it is, what it seeks to achieve, how implementation is progressing and available mechanisms for engagement.

**Parties:** Commonwealth Government, State/Territory Governments, Local Government, Coalition of Peaks, State/Territory Peak coalitions and councils, ACCOs

### **b) Communicate in ways preferred by community**

A range of channels, including Indigenous media, community radio, visual materials, local leaders, and face-to-face engagement should be utilised to meet people where they are.

**Parties:** Commonwealth Government, State/Territory Governments, Local Government, Coalition of Peaks, State/Territory Peak coalitions and councils, ACCOs

### **c) Communication must not be one-way**

People need clear and visible entry points to engage with what is happening under the Agreement in their region and see how their voices and experiences are shaping decisions. Without this, there is a risk that the reforms will bypass the very communities they are meant to empower.

**Parties:** Commonwealth Government, State/Territory Governments, Local Government, Coalition of Peaks, State/Territory Peak coalitions and councils, ACCOs

## Recommendation Seven: Action Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Governance principles

Transforming data practices is central to achieving genuine partnership and self-determination under the National Agreement. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples must be supported to govern, interpret and use data in ways that reflect their priorities and ways of knowing. The following recommendations focus on the actions that are necessary to realise this.

### a) Embed and action Indigenous Data Sovereignty

Similar to the Productivity Commission Review recommendations, Governments must embed and action Indigenous Data Sovereignty (IDS) principles across the entire data lifecycle - from collection to use - and treat data as a core pillar of self-determination.

**Parties:** Commonwealth Government, State/Territory Governments, Coalition of Peaks, State/Territory Peak coalitions and councils, ACCOs

### b) Build community data capability and infrastructure

Resource and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations to understand and define what data matters to them, govern how it is used and build their own data infrastructure.

**Parties:** Commonwealth Government, State/Territory Governments, Coalition of Peaks, State/Territory Peak coalitions and councils, ACCOs

### c) Share data as a matter of priority

Governments must share access to regional and local data as a matter of equity and in a timely manner to enable informed, community-led participation. Data access must also be used to empower, not extract from, communities.

**Parties:** Commonwealth Government, State/Territory Governments, Coalition of Peaks, State/Territory Peak coalitions and councils, ACCOs

### d) Simplify and demystify data

Priority Reform Four implementation must meet ACCOs and communities where they are. This means simplifying processes, demystifying data and building data literacy through education and culturally grounded support.

**Parties:** Commonwealth Government, State/Territory Governments, Coalition of Peaks, State/Territory Peak coalitions and councils, ACCOs

## **Recommendation Eight: Examine areas for future inclusion in the National Agreement**

While Closing the Gap targets were developed to be purposefully staged, there is a strong argument to include areas that are of immediate importance, but which are not currently reflected in the National Agreement.

### **a) Elders and older people target**

There is a growing lack of interface between closing the life expectancy gap and services for Elders and other ageing community members. A 'whole of life' approach to targets could alleviate some areas becoming urgent during the life of ten year Closing the Gap agreements. In particular, the Parties should consider whether the inclusion of aged care targets, similar to the focus on primary health targets within the National Agreement, would assist in bringing greater monitoring and accountability to ensure our older people are able to access culturally safe, high quality aged care services.

**Parties:** Commonwealth Government, State/Territory Governments, Local Government, Coalition of Peaks, State/Territory Peak coalitions and councils, ACCOs

### **b) Climate change**

Since the original drafting of Closing the Gap, climate change has become increasingly present and impactful for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Consideration is required on the inclusion of targets to address urgent matters related to climate change based on community priorities.

## Recommendation Nine: Consider opportunities for strengthening the National Agreement

To realise the full intent of the National Agreement, greater attention must be paid to strengthening underdeveloped areas of implementation. In particular, the following two areas should be prioritised by the Parties.

### **a) Strengthen the visibility and recognition of Stolen Generations survivors**

All Parties to the National Agreement should take steps to ensure that the histories, experiences and ongoing needs of Stolen Generations survivors are made visible across implementation. This includes:

#### **Freeing up space within national narratives and commemorative platforms**

Consider how existing frameworks under the National Agreement and the National Apology can be used to amplify the visibility of Stolen Generations stories. This includes reviewing event programming, messaging and ceremonial priorities to ensure cultural space is made available for survivor recognition and truth-telling.

#### **Embedding Stolen Generations visibility in cultural, data and policy structures**

Parties should consider:

1. Strengthening clause 21 of the National Agreement by explicitly recognising the cultural repair and intergenerational healing needs of Stolen Generations survivors.
2. Prioritising the disaggregation of data about stolen generation survivors under clause 93 and ensuring that relevant data collection and analysis includes information on survivor experiences and outcomes, as part of a broader rights-based and trauma-informed approach.

**Parties:** Commonwealth Government, State/Territory Governments, Local Government, Coalition of Peaks, State/Territory Peak coalitions and councils, ACCOs

### **b) Strengthen the relationship between the Policy and Place-Based Partnerships**

The relationship between Policy Partnerships and Place-Based Partnerships would benefit from a clear commitment by the Parties to ensure that they work in concert with one another. This would involve clarifying their respective roles and establishing mechanisms for ongoing coordination.



# **SECTION 4**

## **Terminology and Abbreviations**



## TERMINOLOGY

Term	Definition
Colonialism	<p>Australia's modern history is a complex one built on colonisation, domination and misappropriation of land, culture and knowledge systems. The persistent social, cultural, economic and political disempowerment of First Nations peoples in settler-colonial systems is reinforced and perpetuated by policy regimes, programs and government practices (Rigney, Bignall, Vivian, &amp; Hemming, 2022). Such systems continue to disempower Indigenous peoples when they 'maintain decision-making agency and authority over Indigenous affairs' (Rigney, Bignall, Vivian, &amp; Hemming, 2022, p. 9).</p> <p>In a colonial system, two legacies are evident: the construction of the colonised as 'less than', based on race, and the construction and maintenance of structures to govern administration (Bhabha, 1983).</p> <p>Enduring colonial structures continue to shape the experiences of First Nations peoples in Australia. First Nations Australians have resisted colonial oppression through warfare and political activism to achieve self-determination and equality (Dudgeon &amp; Walker, 2015).</p> <p>Understanding First Nations perspectives of the history of colonisation is fundamental to decolonisation (Smith L. T., 1999) as is reclaiming knowledges and culture (Hughes &amp; Fricker, 2024). Truth telling is also a critical component of understanding the history, context and response to racism in Australia (Payne &amp; Norman, 2024).</p>
Commonwealth	<p>The term 'Commonwealth of Australia' is used to describe the federation of six state and two territory governments governed by the central Australian Government (also called federal or national government). The Australian Constitution sets out the basis for relations between the jurisdictions.</p>
Culture	<p>The term 'culture' is used in two ways here. Firstly, it refers to the traditional practices, beliefs and social structures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples that pre-existed invasion and the establishment of the settler-colony in Australia. The second use of 'culture' used refers to bureaucratic culture which is a type of organised culture characterised by formal, hierarchical structures, adherence to rules and procedures and focussed on efficiency and predictability. Wherever possible when referring to bureaucratic culture, the authors have attempted to make that distinction from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture.</p>
Cultural Accountability	<p>Cultural accountability is the requirement to be answerable and taking ownership for actions within a group or organisation, especially related to its values and norms. In the context of state to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, it requires the state to be accountable in the context of community values and norms.</p>
Cultural Authority	<p>Cultural authority is the recognition and respect granted to groups based on their knowledge, wisdom or expertise within a particular culture.</p>
Cultural Load	<p>The Australian Public Service Commission recognised the definition of cultural load provided by Diversity Council Australia as is the (often invisible) additional load borne by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at work, where they are the only Indigenous person or one of a small number of Indigenous people.</p>

Term	Definition
<b>Cultural Safety</b>	<p>Cultural safety was originally conceptualised in the context of health care for First Nations people as a process that moved beyond cultural awareness and cultural sensitivity to consider the experiences of recipients of care or services (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2018, pp. 4-5). This concept has now been more broadly applied and adopted in other sectors to create anti-racist environments which support First Nations and other staff with lived experience of racism and racial discrimination in workplaces, as well as the delivery of culturally appropriate, safe services. It is noted that the National Anti-Racism Framework recommends that a nationally recognised definition of First Nations cultural safety be developed, with minimum standards, for application across sectors.</p>
<b>Indigenous Sector</b>	<p>The Indigenous sector refers to the network of organisations, institutions, peak bodies, and community services established by and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Grounded in principles of self-determination, cultural integrity, and community control, these entities operate across a wide spectrum of areas including health, education, housing, legal services, land and cultural management, disability, child and family support, and economic development. They are governed, staffed, and guided by First Nations peoples, and are designed to respond to the needs, aspirations, and priorities of their communities.</p>
<b>Joint Council</b>	<p>The Council of Australian Governments agreed to establish the Joint Council on Closing the Gap in December 2018. It is the first National Cabinet Council that has formal non-government membership. Members include 12 members of the Coalition of Peaks (elected by the Coalition), the Indigenous Affairs Minister from each government, and the President of the Local Government Association. It is co-chaired by a representative of the Coalition of Peaks and the Commonwealth Minister for Indigenous Affairs.</p>
<b>National Congress</b>	<p>The National Congress of Australia's First Peoples was established in 2010 by funding by the Gillard Government. It was the national representative body for First Nations Australians until 2019 after being defunded by the Abbott government in 2013. In 2019, the Congress had about 10,000 members and 180 affiliated community organisations.</p>
<b>Partnership Working Group (Closing the Gap)</b>	<p>The Partnership Working Group (PWG) is the main body established to drive implementation of the Partnership Agreement and the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. It supports the workplan of the Joint Council. The PWG reports to the Joint Council. It is co-chaired by a representative of the Coalition of Peaks and a government official. Members include representatives of the Coalition of Peaks and nominated senior officials from each jurisdiction.</p>
<b>Right Relationship</b>	<p>Coming into 'right relationship' refers to the process of building respectful, just, and accountable relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous institutions, including governments. It involves recognising the sovereignty, rights, and knowledge systems of First Nations peoples, addressing historical and ongoing injustices, and shifting power dynamics to support genuine partnership. The phrase is to come into 'right relationship', rather than 'a right relationship' which implies there's one correct or fixed way to be in relationship. 'Right relationship' refers to what is ethically and relationally appropriate in context.</p>

Term	Definition
<b>Self-determination</b>	<p>Self-determination refers to the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to make decisions about their own lives, communities, and futures. It means having control over policies, services, and systems that affect them, and being recognised as the rightful decision-makers in matters relating to their lands, cultures, and wellbeing.</p> <p>Articles 3 and 4 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples affirm and assert Indigenous peoples' right to self-determination.</p> <p><i>Article 3: Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.</i></p> <p><i>Article 4: Indigenous peoples, in exercising their right to self-determination, have the right to autonomy or self-government in matters relating to their internal and local affairs, as well as ways and means for financing their autonomous functions.</i></p>
<b>Strengths-based</b>	<p>In preparing this report, a strengths-based approach has been adopted. This means shifting away from deficit-based narratives that focus solely on disadvantage, dysfunction, or gaps, and instead recognising the strengths, resilience, leadership, cultural knowledge, and community-led solutions that exist across Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.</p> <p>A strengths-based approach acknowledges that while systemic inequities must be named and addressed, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are not defined by these inequities. It centres Indigenous voices, honours self-determination, and places value on cultural practices, governance structures, and lived experience as key sources of insight and capability.</p>
<b>Systemic, institutional or structural racism</b>	<p>Systemic racism is the way a society or institution's cultural norms, laws, ideologies, policies, and practices result in inequitable treatment and outcomes. Systemic racism involves entire systems, for example, legal, healthcare, and criminal justice systems, and the various institutions and structures that support their operation. Systemic racism can also happen without specific laws, policies, or practices that keep it in place, where the legacy of those norms, laws, policies, and practices persists in systems long after they have ended (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2024, p. 36). Institutional and structural racism are forms of systemic racism.</p> <p>Institutional racism is closely linked to systemic racism. It exists when racism is normalised within an organisation or institution. It includes the policies and practices that guide how organisations and institutions run.</p> <p>Structural racism describes the inequalities and barriers that prevent equal access to opportunities. It refers to racism that is deep within the structures of society. This includes in laws, policies, and cultural norms.</p> <p>The terms systemic, institutional, and structural racism, while distinct, are often used to refer to similar phenomena and are sometimes used interchangeably.</p>

Term	Definition
<b>The Apology</b>	<p>On 13 February 2008, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd delivered a formal National Apology on behalf of the Australian Parliament to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, with a particular focus on the Stolen Generations. The Apology acknowledged the profound grief, suffering, and loss inflicted by these actions and recognised the need for healing, justice, and reconciliation.</p>
<b>The Redfern Statement</b>	<p>The Redfern Statement was issued in 2016 by a coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak organisations across health, justice, disability, children and families, and other sectors. It was a unified call for urgent government action to reset the relationship with First Nations peoples and ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices are central in the design and delivery of policies and services that affect their lives.</p> <p>Launched ahead of the 2016 federal election, the Statement called for a genuine commitment to self-determination, properly funded community-controlled services, and a national reform agenda co-designed with Indigenous leaders. It highlighted that despite decades of policy attention; many outcomes had not improved because governments continued to make decisions <i>for</i> rather than <i>with</i> Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.</p>
<b>Yarning Circle</b>	<p>A yarning circle is a culturally grounded practice used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to share knowledge, deepen understanding, and build respectful relationships. It is a structured yet informal way of communicating that values deep listening, speaking from lived experience, and allowing all voices to be heard without interruption or hierarchy. In the context of policy development and research, yarning circles offer an Indigenous methodology that centres cultural protocols and affirms Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing and being.</p>

## ABBREVIATIONS

Acronym or abbreviation	Definition
<b>ACCO</b>	Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation/s
<b>ACCHO</b>	Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation/s
<b>ACCHS</b>	Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Service
<b>ACT</b>	Australian Capital Territory
<b>AFN</b>	Assembly of First Nations Canada
<b>AHPPC</b>	Australian Health Protection Principal Committee
<b>AIDA</b>	Australian Indigenous Doctor's Association
<b>AIHW</b>	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
<b>ALGA</b>	Australian Local Government Association
<b>ALS NSW/ACT</b>	Aboriginal Legal Service NSW / ACT
<b>AHCWA</b>	Aboriginal Health Council of Western Australia
<b>AHPPC</b>	Australian Health Protection Principal Committee
<b>AIATSIS</b>	Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
<b>AM</b>	Member of the Order of Australia
<b>AMSANT</b>	Aboriginal Medical Services Northern Territory
<b>APONT</b>	Aboriginal Peaks Organisation Northern Territory
<b>APS</b>	Australian Public Service
<b>ATSIC</b>	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission
<b>ATSIEB</b>	ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body
<b>AWAN</b>	NSW Aboriginal Women's Advisory Network
<b>BDAC</b>	Bendigo and District Aboriginal Co-operative

Acronym or abbreviation	Definition
<b>CASI</b>	Computer Aided Self-Interview
<b>CATSINaM</b>	Congress of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nurses and Midwives
<b>CASWA</b>	Council of Aboriginal Services Western Australia
<b>CAWI</b>	Committee On Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Water Interests
<b>CDP</b>	Community Data Project
<b>CEO</b>	Chief Executive Officer
<b>CLC</b>	Central Land Council
<b>Coalition of Peaks</b>	The Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations
<b>COVID/COVID-19</b>	Coronavirus disease of 2019
<b>CTG</b>	Closing the Gap
<b>DSS</b>	Department of Social Services
<b>DSSP</b>	Disability Sector Strengthening Plan
<b>DPC</b>	Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet
<b>COAG</b>	Council of Australian Governments
<b>ECCD</b>	Early Childhood Care and Development
<b>EYS</b>	Early Years Support
<b>FPDN</b>	First Peoples Disability Network
<b>FPIC</b>	Free, Prior, and Informed Consent
<b>FNEDIA</b>	First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group
<b>FPDN</b>	First Peoples Disability Network
<b>HHS</b>	Hospital and Health Services (QLD)
<b>HSSP</b>	Health Sector Strengthening Plan

Acronym or abbreviation	Definition
IAHA	Indigenous Allied Health Australia
ICC	Inuit Circumpolar Conference
IDS	Indigenous Data Sovereignty
IFNACC	Office of the Interim First Nations Aged Care Commissioner
Jumbunna/ Jumbunna Research	Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research at University of Technology Sydney
KAHPF	Kimberley Aboriginal Health Planning Forum
KAHRA	Kimberley Aboriginal Health Research Alliance
KAMS	Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Service
KHEDP	Kimberley Health Evidence Data Platform
LGNSW	Local Government NSW
MAV	Municipal Association of Victoria
NAAJA	North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency
NAC	National Aboriginal Conference
NACC	National Aboriginal Consultative Committee
NAAJA	North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency
NAATSIHWP	National Association of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers and Practitioners
NACCHO	National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation
National Congress	National Congress of Australia's First Peoples
Ngaweyyan Maar-oo	Ngaweyyan Maar-oo Closing the Gap Partnership Forum Victoria
NATSIHWA	National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers Association
NATSILS	National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services
NCAI	National Congress of American Indians

Acronym or abbreviation	Definition
<b>NIAA</b>	National Indigenous Australians Agency
<b>NIETA</b>	National Indigenous Employment and Training Alliance
<b>NIRA</b>	National Indigenous Reform Agreement
<b>NFVPLS</b>	National Family Violence Prevention Legal Services Forum
<b>NGOs</b>	Non-Government Organisations
<b>NLC</b>	Northern Land Council
<b>NNTC</b>	National Native Title Council
<b>NSW</b>	New South Wales
<b>NSWALC</b>	New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council
<b>NSW CAPO</b>	New South Wales Coalition of Aboriginal Peak Organisations
<b>NT</b>	Northern Territory
<b>NTER</b>	Northern Territory Emergency Response
<b>NTJPP</b>	Northern Territory Justice Policy Partnership
<b>PBP</b>	Place Based Partnership
<b>PWG</b>	Closing the Gap Partnership Working Group
<b>PRIS</b>	Privacy and Responsible Information Sharing
<b>QLD</b>	Queensland
<b>QAIHC</b>	Queensland Aboriginal and Islander Health Council
<b>QATSICCP</b>	Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Protection Peak
<b>RCIADIC</b>	Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody
<b>SA</b>	South Australia
<b>SAACCON</b>	South Australian Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations Network

Acronym or abbreviation	Definition
<b>SCRGSP</b>	Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision
<b>SEWB</b>	Social and Emotional Well-being
<b>SNAICC</b>	Secretariat for National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care
<b>SSP</b>	Sector Strengthening Plan
<b>TACCO</b>	Tamworth Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation
<b>TAS</b>	Tasmania
<b>TSRA</b>	Torres Strait Regional Authority
<b>UNDRIP</b>	United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
<b>USA</b>	United States of America
<b>UTS</b>	University of Technology Sydney
<b>VACCA</b>	Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency
<b>VACCHO</b>	Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation Inc.
<b>VAHS</b>	Victorian Aboriginal Health Service
<b>VFNVA</b>	Victorian First Nations Vocational Education Training Alliance
<b>VIC</b>	Victoria
<b>WA</b>	Western Australia



# SECTION 5

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## **Disclosures of interest**

Jumbunna disclosed all potential conflicts of interest to the Coalition of Peaks and to the AIATSIS Human Research Ethics Committee and disclosed these to all relevant parties.

Professor Lindon Coombes has recently concluded a two-year term on the NIAA Audit and Risk Committee. His last meeting of this committee was on 27 November 2024, prior to the commencement of the Review.

Professor Paul Gray advises that he is a participant in a number of elements of the National Agreement, in particular the national Early Childhood Care and Development and Social and Emotional Wellbeing Policy Partnerships. While he is not a formal Party to the National Agreement as such, his direct involvement in the Review was in an advisory capacity only.

Associate Professor Kirsten Gray is a Director of The Healing Foundation, which is a member of the Social and Emotional Wellbeing Policy Partnership of the National Agreement. Given her lack of direct involvement with the National Agreement, she played a key role in the development and delivery of the report.



Professor Cecilia Anthony is a Board Director of social enterprise Yilabara Solutions which is an Indigenous employment and training social enterprise solely owned by NSW Aboriginal Land Council. NSWALC is part of the NSW Council of Aboriginal Peak Organisations and houses the secretariat.

As neither Associate Professor Gray or Professor Anthony are Parties to the National Agreement, both played key roles in the development and delivery of the report. They did not take part in work on the Review that involved SEWB or employment and training in case of any actual or perceived conflict.

Jumbunna receives funding from various sources to undertake research and other work, including from the Australian Government, State and Territory Governments, as well as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak bodies and other community-controlled organisations.



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# SECTION 7

## Appendices

## Appendix A: Submission Terms of Reference



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### Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Led, Independent Review of Closing the Gap

#### About the Review

In line with Section D (Clauses 125 to 128) of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, the inaugural independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led review of Closing the Gap is being conducted. Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) (Jumbunna) was appointed by the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations (Coalition of Peaks) to undertake the Review in December 2024.

The Review will capture and report on the lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities that have been engaged in the implementation of the National Agreement by all governments, particularly its Priority Reforms.

Jumbunna is due to present its final report to Coalition of Peaks and the Joint Council by 31 May 2025.

Jumbunna invites submissions from any Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander individual, group, nation or organisation that have been engaged in the implementation of the National Agreement by all governments, particularly its Priority Reforms, that you think would like to contribute to the inquiry.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities, nations and organisations are invited to make written submissions addressing any or all aspects of the Terms of Reference below.

The closing date for submissions is 16 April 2025.

#### Jumbunna contact:

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#### Terms of reference

- (1) That Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) (Jumbunna) is appointed by the Joint Council on Closing the Gap to conduct the independent, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led independent review of Closing the Gap inquiring into, documenting and reporting on the lived experiences of



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Submissions should include your name, phone number, and postal address so that we can contact you if we need to.

***Requests for confidentiality***

Submissions will not be published. If Jumbunna wishes to use any traditional or cultural knowledge, or information you have provided which may identify you inadvertently, in the final report, we will contact you to seek your informed consent before including the information.

If you have concerns about confidentiality or questions about the submission process, please contact Joshua Gilbert at Jumbunna.

## Appendix B: Jurisdictional Agreements

### NSW

[2022-2024 NSW Implementation Plan for Closing the Gap](#) is the second NSW implementation plan.

2 years: 2022-2024

5 priority reforms:

Four Priority Reforms + additional priority reform on Employment, Business Growth, and Economic Prosperity.

PARTNERSHIP ARRANGEMENTS	GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE	ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS
<p>The <a href="#">NSW Partnership Agreement</a> exists between NSW CAPO, the NSW Government and Local Government NSW and was signed in January 2024.</p> <p>With the NT it is one of only two partnership arrangements that has local government as a signatory.</p>	<p>NSW Joint Council (NSWJC), (Co-chaired by NSW Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, NSW CAPO, NSWALC and AbSec), (Members include All NSW CAPO Members, Secretary, NSW Premier's Department)</p> <p>NSW Partnership Working Group, (NSW Government senior executives across relevant departments, NSW CAPO members, Representatives from the National Indigenous Australians Agency, Local Government NSW, NSW Coalition of Aboriginal Regional Alliances).</p> <p>The NSW Audit Officer released a <a href="#">performance audit report</a> on the governance arrangements on 29 May 2025. The report found that the governance arrangements are not operating effectively.</p> <p>Legislative protection: Policy-driven but nothing legislated in terms of the governance structures.</p>	<p><a href="#">Annual reports</a> tabled in NSW Parliament, CTG National Agreement Dashboard, Annual Productivity Commission Compilation Report.</p> <p>The most recent report was <a href="#">2022-2023</a> from November 2023.</p> <p>An Independent Mechanism has not yet been established, however NSW CAPO has designed <a href="#">a recommended model for an Independent, Aboriginal-led Government Accountability Mechanism in NSW</a>.</p>

**ACT**

10 years: 2019-2028

**Closing the Gap Jurisdictional Implementation Plan**

Phase-based implementation: The ACT Implementation Plan is structured in phases, with each phase serving as a regular review point over the ten-year period of the agreement.

PARTNERSHIP ARRANGEMENTS	GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE	ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS
<p>The ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Partnership) Agreement 2019-2028 was signed between the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body (ATSIEB or The Elected Body) in 2019.</p>	<p>ACT government in partnership with legislated ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body (ATSIEB or The Elected Body), also the ACT Coalition of Peaks representative.</p> <p>Legislative protection: The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body (ATSIEB) is established under the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body Act 2008 (ACT).</p>	<p>Co-designed, human rights-based Outcomes Framework. In addition to government reporting, the Elected Body holds public hearings attended by the community.</p>

**NT**

The Closing the Gap NT Implementation Plan 2023-2024 is a two year framework covering territory and local government level implementation in partnership with APONT NT.

Partnership agreement, 10 years: 2019-2029

Implementation plan, 2 years: 2023-2024

PARTNERSHIP ARRANGEMENTS	GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE	ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS
<p>Implementation plan also signed by Local Government NT (LGANT). Representing the first time that Local Government is an official signatory to Closing the Gap.</p>	<p>The 2019 Partnership Agreement on Closing the Gap 2019-2029 is between Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory (APO NT), the Northern Territory Government (NT Government) and LGANT, the peak body for local government councils in the NT.</p> <p>Legislative protection: There is no dedicated legislation in the Northern Territory to protect APO NT as a statutory body or governance structure. While APO NT is a powerful advocacy alliance, it exists without formal legislative protection.</p>	<p>Joint annual report produced by the NT Government, Aboriginal Affairs, APO NT, and LGANT.</p>

**QLD**

Implementation Plan, 2023

Focus on place-based partnerships, starting in Doomadgee with Goonawoona Jungai Ltd as the interim local decision-making body.

Other place-based initiatives:

Logan Together with Gunya Meta Inc

Gladstone Region Engaging in Action Together with Nhulundu Health Service

Cairns South Together (Yidinji nation)

PARTNERSHIP ARRANGEMENTS	GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE	ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS
<p>No evidence is available of a signed partnership arrangement in QLD. There is a <a href="#">2023 Partnership Stocktake</a> document which indicates that the QLD government is considering a partnership agreement in alignment with CTG PR1. The Implementation Plan was developed in partnership with QATSIC.</p>	<p>The Queensland Government funds QATSIC to deliver on the National Agreement and the 2023 Implementation Plan states, "Queensland's Closing the Gap new governance arrangements are being finalised in consultation with key stakeholders to elevate the focus, coordinate efforts and shared decision-making, and to enhance accountability." (p.4)</p> <p>Legislative protection: There is no legislation in QLD that protects QATSIC as a governance body and QATSIC is only recognised as a partner in implementation of the CTG plan as there is still no partnership agreement, so at this stage QATSIC is a consultative body rather than an actual partner.</p>	<p>The Queensland government produces its own <a href="#">Annual Closing the Gap Report and Snapshot Report</a>. The most recent for both was 2023.</p> <p>There does not seem to be any independent oversight of these reports.</p>

**TAS**

There have been two Implementation Plans in Tasmania negotiated between the Tasmanian Government and TAC to date -[2021-2023 and the current 2025 - 2028](#)

While the second Implementation Plan is considered by TAC to be an improvement on the first, their view is that it contains gaps that need to be addressed to achieve outcomes for community.

PARTNERSHIP ARRANGEMENTS	GOVERNANCE MECHANISMS	ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS
<p>No partnership agreement.</p>	<p>There is no evidence of a formal partnership agreement between the Tasmanian Government and TAC that is backed by legislation.</p>	<p><a href="#">Annual reports</a> tabled in the Tasmanian parliament. There does not appear to be any independent oversight of these reports. The TAC annual report has a paragraph on CTG but no specific reporting.</p>

**WA**

The [second WA Implementation Plan 2023-2025](#) was released in 2023.

2 years: 2023 – 2025

Phase 1 was 2021-2022, which was a development and planning phase, this second phase intends to deliver on the plans developed during phase 1.

CTG implementation plan is further supported by the WA government's Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy (2021-2029) which was developed in partnership with the Aboriginal Advisory Council of Western Australia (AACWA). The Aboriginal Advisory Council, established under the Aboriginal Affairs Planning Authority Act 1972, is a peer-nominated Aboriginal leadership body.

PARTNERSHIP ARRANGEMENTS	GOVERNANCE MECHANISMS	ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS
No formal partnership agreement however key partners to implementation include the Aboriginal Advisory Council WA (AACWA), the Aboriginal Health Council of WA (AHCWA) and the newly formed (2023) ACCO Peak Body, Council of Aboriginal Services WA (CASWA).	<p>The WA government in consultation with the Aboriginal Advisory Council WA (AACWA) and the Coalition of Peaks jurisdictional partner, the Aboriginal Health Council of WA (AHCWA).</p> <p>This consultation would have taken place prior to the incorporation of CASWA as an ACCO Peak Body.</p> <p>Legislative protection: The Aboriginal Advisory Council (generally known as the Aboriginal Advisory Council of Western Australia or AACWA) is established under Section 18 (1) of the Aboriginal Affairs Planning Authority Act 1972 to advise the WA Government.</p> <p>AHCWA's work intersects with the Health Services Act 2016 (WA).</p> <p>CASWA is also not legislated, but it was formally established in 2023 with funding from the WA Government under Priority Reform Two of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.</p>	<p><a href="#">Annual reports</a> tabled in the WA parliament. Nine across-government Partnership Planning Groups have been established as part of the CTG implementation to address the 17 socio-economic targets in WA. These groups are responsible for ensuring that the relevant targets are met and that progress is regularly reported.</p> <p>There does not seem to be any independent oversight of these reports.</p>

**VIC**

Initial Implementation Plan, 3 years: 2021-2023, extended until June 2025

Makes reference to the transfer of power, decision-making and resources to ACCOs and Aboriginal communities.

Supported by the Victorian government's commitment to Truth-Telling through the Yoorrook Justice Commission and Treaty in partnership with the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria (Assembly).

PARTNERSHIP ARRANGEMENTS	GOVERNANCE MECHANISMS	ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS
<p>The <a href="#">Victorian Partnership Agreement</a> was signed in by the Victorian Government and Ngaweeyan Maar-oo representing 13 elected ACCO sector representatives and Aboriginal Governance Forums.</p>	<p>The <a href="#">Closing the Gap Partnership Forum</a> is a group that oversees Victoria's action on the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. The Forum's Koorie Caucus is Ngaweeyan Maar-oo consisting of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- 14 Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO) representative</li><li>- 8 Aboriginal governance forum delegates.</li></ul> <p>The AEC and the Victoria Government's Secretaries' Leadership Group on Aboriginal Affairs holds responsibility for development, oversight and review of Victoria's CTG Implementation Plan. Final endorsement for the Implementation Plan was given by both entities prior to sign off by the Victorian Cabinet.</p> <p>Legislative protection: There is no legislation protecting the AEC or the Ngaweeyan Maar-oo Koorie Caucus (Caucus).</p>	<p>The Partnership Agreement includes a Partnership Governance model across four elements: Aboriginal Leadership; Equity; Systems Transformation; and Self-Determination.</p> <p>The Implementation Plan Action List provides funding details, due date and government personnel responsible for implementation.</p> <p>Each partner must provide an <a href="#">annual report</a>. Currently the Victorian government reports on CTG implementation under the Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Report (VGAAR), the VGAAR report is subject to review by the AEC and tabled in parliament.</p> <p>As well, the Partnership Agreement directs that Victoria's independent accountability mechanism will be progressed through Victoria's Treaty process in partnership with the Partnership Forum and the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria.</p>

**SA**

The [South Australian Implementation Plan 2024-2026](#) was signed between SAACCON and the SA Government in November 2024.

2 years: 2024-2026

Partnership and Shared Decision-Making: SAACCON and the South Australian Government have established the SA Partnership Committee (SAPC) as the central governance mechanism for the implementation of CTG initiatives.

PARTNERSHIP ARRANGEMENTS	GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE	ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS
<p>The <a href="#">South Australian Partnership Agreement</a> was signed by SAACCON and the SA Government in November 2022.</p> <p>Aboriginal people hold equitable participation, shared ownership and shared responsibility under the agreement, and full recognition and respect is given to the cultural authority, sector experience and lived experience of SAACCON and its members.</p>	<p>The SA <a href="#">Partnership Committee (SAPC)</a> has been established to implement the Agreement.</p> <p>SAPC has established co-chairs and membership will include equal representation from SAACCON and the SA Government to ensure a fair partnership and shared decision making by consensus. Once the PBP is established, there will be a direct line of oversight to the SAPC.</p> <p>Legislative protection: The SA Partnership Committee (SAPC) was established as a joint governance mechanism but is not protected by legislation.</p>	<p>The plan includes mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation, but this is still in the very early stages.</p> <p><a href="#">Annual reports</a> are provided.</p>

## Appendix C: Place-Based Partnerships

### TAMWORTH

What people told us: Community felt that things had progressed slower than expected with the PBP, but also acknowledged that,

*“...often when you've got a large group of people and you're trying to get group consensus on how to run things, it takes a lot of time to talk through and work through things because there's differences in opinion on how to do that.”* [Yarning Circle participant]

GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE	PRIORITIES	OF NOTE
<p>The Tamworth PBP has used existing organisational infrastructure to partner and support a new agreement between Indigenous organisations and the local government, Tamworth Regional Council.</p> <p>Established through a partnership of the seven local community-controlled organisations, TACCO was formally established in July 2024 and has a goal to “jointly commit to supporting and fostering the social, economic, and cultural wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living locally”.</p>	<p>In addition to the formation of the partnership between the seven Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), TACCO has recently developed a Community Development Plan to identify the clear actions needed to address their common goal. There are four key focus areas of the draft plan:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Strengthening partnerships</li><li>• Enhancing decision-making</li><li>• Capacity building</li><li>• Cultural understanding principles.</li></ul>	<p>An agreement between TACCO and Tamworth Regional Council was signed in May 2025, with a partnership entitled <i>Mara Ngali or two hands</i>. This agreement was founded on the appointment of the first Aboriginal Councillor for the Tamworth Regional Council, Marc Sutherland. In 2022, he put forward a notice of motion committing Council to commit resources for a local Closing the Gap strategy and implementation plan.</p>

## EAST KIMBERLEY WA

What people told us:

*“...the place-based partnership would probably be the biggest [change I’ve noticed]. I mean, it’s still in development, but the potential once the agreement is finalised and signed, the potential for what it can deliver in the East Kimberleys, it is fantastic. There’s, we’ll have a table where we’ll have a, an equal voice.”* [Depth Interview participant]

GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE	PRIORITIES	OF NOTE
<p>The East Kimberley PBP approach, Binarri-binyja yarrawoo Aboriginal Corporation (BBY), was built around the Empowered Communities model to create “enduring and effective Aboriginal-led reform, which transfers power and responsibility to Aboriginal people and creates opportunity for the social, cultural and economic development of our children and families”.</p> <p>As an Empowered Communities site, BBY acts as a backbone organisation, using a place-based collective impact model to create change across the East Kimberley region.</p>	<p>BBY has developed six social norms for Aboriginal Organisations to commit to and promote if they wish to opt-in to the BBY reform agenda. These six social norms are as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• We care for children, old people and vulnerable people</li><li>• Children go to school and are ready to learn</li><li>• We listen to the old people to strengthen culture, country and language</li><li>• Adults go to work and are in training</li><li>• People look after their homes and pay rent</li><li>• People take personal responsibility and do not commit crimes.</li></ul>	<p>The governance of BBY comprises the 30 member organisations, with each member organisation’s Chair and CEO invited to participate in the Local Management Committee, which in turn advises the six Board members to make decisions. The Board is also responsible for meeting with the Regional Partnership Table, including Local, State and Federal governments, to incite locally based solutions. To support these conversations, BBY have developed an Aboriginal Development Framework or theory of change to articulate and guide the change needed across the region.</p>

## DOOMADGEET, QLD

What people told us:

*“Felt better for me as a community person, working with GJ, now able to promote that space as well to others who might be a bit hesitant”. [Depth interview]*

GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE	PRIORITIES	OF NOTE
<p>The Doomadgee community have adopted a family-based representative model, electing representatives to address the family groups from across the Doomadgee township. Or, as the PBP organisation, Gunawuna Jungai (GJ), states, GJ “is cultural democracy in action—ensuring we, the people of Doomadgee, have the authority to lead our own future”.</p> <p>The family representative approach is described as the “dartboard process”, ensuring all family groups are equally represented within the organisation and that decisions can reflect the community’s values, knowledge, and aspirations. The organisation’s vision is to “create a thriving, independent, sustainable and culturally strong community in Doomadgee for future generations”.</p>	<p>GJ was founded in 2022 as the first QLD-based PBP and was endorsed by the Doomadgee Aboriginal Shire Council as the key representative under the PBP. GJ’s theory of change is built around:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Establishing a common agenda for the community</li><li>• Implementing a shared measurement system</li><li>• Engaging in mutually reinforcing activities</li><li>• Fostering open and continuous communication</li><li>• Providing backbone support.</li></ul>	<p>GJ partners with Government and local service providers to create change at the ground level, often being the go-to organisation to act as the glue and address any areas without attention.</p>

## ADELAIDE (WESTERN SUBURBS) SA

What people told us:

A PBC steering committee has been established and recently held a workshop to develop a work plan. Opportunities for community feedback will be created as the workplan rolls out. Given this, it is not surprising that many review participants felt unclear about what Closing the Gap means on the ground; *“Where’s the information sharing coming from?... should there be one place you can go and just find out everything you need to know?”* [Yarning Circle participant]

GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE	PRIORITIES	OF NOTE
The South Australian Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation Network (SAACCON) was established in 2019 to work with all levels of government on Closing the Gap. It currently has twenty-five ACCO members, is led by a nominated lead convenor and co-convenor, and is supported by an organisational secretariat.	In 2021, SAACCON and the SA Government signed a Joint Implementation Plan, including priority reforms regarding: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Shared decision-making authority</li><li>• Building the community-controlled sector</li><li>• Improving mainstream institutions</li><li>• Aboriginal-led data.</li></ul>	SAACCON have a relationship with the SA Government and work together to address Closing the Gap at a Local Government Area and regional level. SAACCON also has equal representation with government agencies on the South Australia Partnership Committee (SAPC) for making strategic decisions and monitoring progress against the formal Partnership Agreement. SAACCON and the SA Government formally agreed to a second Implementation Plan in November 2024, which outlines a joint plan for 2024-2026.

## MANINGRIDA, NT

What people told us:

*“It has taken time to establish but worth the wait as has involved bringing together 15 language groups across 20 homeland sites. Getting to this point has taken 2 years and three meetings but ‘baby steps’ are important as a ‘sprint’ would not have worked for the community”* [Depth interview participant]

GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE	PRIORITIES	OF NOTE
Maningrida and the surrounding homelands in the NT were nominated as the site of place-based partnership in December 2021.  A Governance Table made up of culturally inclusive representation across 15 language and family groups has taken almost 2 years to establish.	A formal PBP agreement for Maningrida is not yet in place but may reflect some of the priorities identified in the LDM agreement signed by community representatives last year.	A local decision-making (LDM) agreement was signed by 7 Aboriginal organisations and the NT government in 2024 to progress both the LDM and place-based partnerships priorities in May 2024.

## MORWELL (GIPPSLAND REGION), VIC

What people told us:

*“... we've only been in place just over 12 months, so we've only just started. So the fact that we've got a fully established ... young people group, that we've got an Elders council ... and that they're meeting ... regularly so. We're gung ho.” [Depth interview]*

*“Community members that have come together and speak very highly of it and want to be involved.” [Depth interview]*

GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE	PRIORITIES	OF NOTE
<p>A place-based partnership in Morwell is being led by the Victorian Aboriginal child Care Agency (VACCA), together with the Aboriginal community in Gippsland and the Victorian government. The site has been running for just over 12 months.</p> <p>The Victorian government's commitment to the Aboriginal community of Inner Gippsland has enabled 90 people to be employed across the region delivering a range of child and family services.</p>	<p>The Morwell PBP will focus on two key areas – early years and youth justice to identify practical solutions for reducing the number of children in out-of-home care across the Gippsland region (Target 12). A number of workshops were held in 2024 to enable the community to have their voices heard on this issue and to develop local Aboriginal governance structures.</p> <p>VACCA has facilitated an Aboriginal-led process with Community, undertaking consultations over 4 days. A local Aboriginal Executive Leadership Group (AELG) was established to lead the project with representation from Elders, Community including young people and Police. Working groups have also been established with Elders, Young people and Community to support the development of the business case, which meet monthly.</p> <p>The PBP is also strengthened by through participation of Senior Officers from across portfolio areas of Treasury, Justice, Education, Health, Child Welfare.</p>	<p>The decision-making process was described as follows: “We went over four days of what we want ... on data ... from VACCA, about kids being in trouble, not in trouble, the justice system, not attending school, health systems, not knowing how to be a kid in general. And that was quite good. And out of the whole four days, there was voting... And at the end of it, there was a passion for a hub, for community, for kids to go where they felt safe and supported, where they could have spent time... We set up a leadership group of two community members to chair it. We had a couple of Elders that would sit as mentors/chairs as well in the Elder's group. We had a couple of youth, again, boy, girl. That were going to be the chairs and they want to go and talk to community kids and say, <i>‘What do you want? How do you want this to work?’</i>” [Depth interview]</p>