

RESPONSE TO THE ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER-LED REVIEW OF THE NATIONAL AGREEMENT ON CLOSING THE GAP

Joint Council on Closing the Gap

MAY 2026



CLOSING THE GAP

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

- 1 The Joint Council acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands, waterways and skies now known as Australia, and pay respects to their Elders past and present. The Joint Council acknowledge the strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in sustaining the world's oldest living culture. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their cultures have prevailed and endured despite too many experiencing entrenched disadvantage, political exclusion, intergenerational trauma and ongoing institutional racism.
- 2 We also acknowledge the strength, leadership and deep knowledge of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector — a vital force in advocating for change, delivering services, and shaping a better future for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- 3 The Coalition of Peaks embodies the principle of self-determination, bringing together more than 80 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled peak and member organisations that work every day to improve the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Their leadership in developing this response reflects the core commitment of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap: that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must be at the centre of decision-making on the policies and programs that affect them.

SCOPE OF RESPONSE

- 4 The Joint Council on Closing the Gap (**Joint Council**) welcomes the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led Review**), received in June 2025.
- 5 Under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (**Closing the Gap Agreement**), Joint Council is required to respond to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led Review within six months of receipt (clause 129).
- 6 The Closing the Gap Agreement provides (clause 130) that the response considers:
 - recommendations to amend the Closing the Gap Agreement
 - comments on the progress of jurisdictions
 - suggestions for future approaches.
- 7 At its meeting in June 2025, Joint Council agreed the response should also draw on the findings of the first Productivity Commission Review of the Closing the Gap Agreement (**Productivity Commission Review**), as well as consider progress toward implementing the Priority Reforms in accordance with commitments in the Closing the Gap Agreement that this be done in 2025.
- 8 From June to October 2025, all Parties were engaged in the development of a response to meet this scope. In particular, the Coalition of Peaks organised a series of workshops which asked representatives of all parties to reflect on the outcomes of the reviews, and to come together on what is needed to drive and sustain change.

- 9 Further negotiations between the parties occurred from November 2025 to May 2026 to reach consensus on the response to the **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led Review**.
 - 10 The following sets out the Joint Council response that will now be put for consideration to First Ministers, the President of the Australian Local Government Association (**ALGA**) and the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations (**Coalition of Peaks**) as signatories of the Closing the Gap Agreement.
 - 11 This response acknowledges that jurisdictions are at different stages of progress in implementing the Closing the Gap Agreement. It recognises the need for an approach to implementation that supports each jurisdiction on its journey toward sustained reform.
 - 12 In agreeing this response, Joint Council notes that work to implement the recommendations made by the Productivity Commission in its Closing the Gap review completed in January 2024 is underway in many areas. This response is intended to build on that work.
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WHAT WE HAVE HEARD

- 13 The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led Review and the Productivity Commission Review (**the reviews**) both recognised the Closing the Gap Agreement as a landmark framework — ambitious in scope, grounded in the four Priority Reforms, and designed to deliver a structural shift in the way governments work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- 14 Governments and the Coalition of Peaks agree that this level of ambition is essential if the persistent inequalities in health, education, employment, justice and wellbeing are to be overcome. The challenge now lies in meeting that ambition through consistent, coordinated implementation.
- 15 Both reviews affirmed that the Closing the Gap Agreement is fundamentally sound. It provides a strong foundation for change. The Priority Reforms continue to be strongly backed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the key enablers of real and lasting progress. Importantly, the Closing the Gap Agreement marked the first time Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, through their community-controlled organisations, became formal signatories alongside governments — embedding self-determination into its very design.
- 16 Evidence highlighted by the reviews shows that the Closing the Gap Agreement is making a difference in some areas. Positive developments are being driven where governments have genuinely partnered with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, particularly in strengthening the community-controlled sector and involvement from the outset in policy making. These “pockets of transformation” demonstrate the potential of the Closing the Gap Agreement when its commitments are honoured in practice.
- 17 At the same time, both reviews are clear that progress has been uneven. Implementation of the Priority Reforms has been partial, inconsistent, or treated as an overlay to business-as-usual rather than a driver of systemic change. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led Review noted community frustration, that change is constrained by governments not wanting to change their ways of working and failing to match the efforts of the community-controlled sector.

Change is happening

- 18** Where governments have genuinely leaned into their commitments and the transformative potential of the Closing the Gap Agreement, progress has been made and positive outcomes are being achieved.

Elevating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander insights

- 19** The Closing the Gap Agreement has raised Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander insights in policymaking like never before:
- a** New community-controlled peaks have been established in sectors such as education and housing, where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander expertise were previously fragmented or excluded.
 - b** Underfunded peaks in areas such as languages, and social and emotional wellbeing are now recognised and better resourced.
 - c** In the Northern Territory, Aboriginal community-controlled organisations are working alongside government to shape major investment decisions impacting communities for the first time since the Intervention.
 - d** A landmark partnership agreement between the Commonwealth, NT Government, Land Councils, and Aboriginal Housing NT has enabled shared decision-making on a new ten-year, \$4 billion investment in remote housing that includes homelands.
 - e** Mainstream intergovernmental agreements in health, education, housing, skills, and training now explicitly require governments to deliver better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in accordance with the Priority Reforms of the Closing the Gap Agreement.
 - f** New regional community-controlled governance structures are being built across the country.
- 20** These changes have been underpinned by the unprecedented collaboration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations through the Coalition of Peaks, creating a powerful platform for collective leadership and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination.

Power is shifting to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations

- 21** We are also seeing real steps to shift power to community control in some sectors and jurisdictions:
- a** Out-of-home care is transitioning to Aboriginal community-controlled organisations.
 - b** More than 30 health services across the country are moving to community control.
 - c** Funding under the Commonwealth's Indigenous Advancement Strategy is now 75% Aboriginal-delivered, up from 35%.
 - d** Language centres are receiving much more targeted support.

Lives are beginning to change

- e** More people are accessing culturally safe services delivered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations.
- f** More jobs are being created, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people increasingly employed in Aboriginal community-controlled organisations.
- g** Aboriginal Registered Training Organisations are being recognised for the important contribution they can make.

- h** More people are beginning to live in safer, more suitable housing, with homelands in the NT being recognised and supported.
 - i** Early childhood services are being better coordinated, helping Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families access the support they need. Australian Early Development Census data has stabilised for the first time in decades.
 - j** Work to revive and maintain languages is gaining momentum.
- 22** Evidence from the Closing the Gap Information Repository maintained by the Productivity Commission is that four targets are on track to be met, and another seven are improving. The Information Repository is a vital and transparent tool for monitoring progress.
- 23** However, Joint Council agrees that Parties can do more to identify and share the positive transformations underway because of the Closing the Gap Agreement — to build momentum for the scale of reform that is required, and to share learnings. This was a message that came through clearly in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led Review.

Partnership Action 1

Over the next twelve months, **Joint Council will work to revitalise communications** including building community and public awareness of the Closing the Gap Agreement's purpose, benefits, and outcomes.

The Coalition of Peaks will be appropriately resourced to lead, in collaboration with governments, the development and implementation of a new joint communications strategy.

The strategy will share stories of how the Closing the Gap Agreement is changing the way governments work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, highlight community-controlled leadership, and show how activities link to the Priority Reforms.

Importantly, the strategy will raise awareness of governments' specific commitments under the Priority Reforms, so that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities understand what they can expect from governments — and can use this knowledge to strengthen their own engagement and advocacy for local Closing the Gap outcomes.

- 24** The next sections of the response respond to the key findings of the reviews, consider progress that has been made, and set out what could be done to strengthen delivery of the Priority Reforms.

Greater and sustained efforts are needed

- 25** In responding to the findings and recommendations of the reviews, Joint Council agrees and affirms:

A The Closing the Gap Agreement remains the right framework for change

The architecture of the Closing the Gap Agreement is sound. Governments and the Coalition of Peaks are committed to working together in partnership to deliver the commitments we have made.

B Priority Reforms are the pathway to transformation

The Priority Reforms are the key levers for improving life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and are strongly supported by all Parties.

The Priority Reforms continue to be strongly supported by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations across the country, and a greater focus on bringing them to life in every jurisdiction is needed.

C **Strong accountability measures are needed to support implementation**

While transformation has begun, many commitments under the Priority Reforms have not been fully implemented by governments.

Strong accountability mechanisms are already in place under the Closing the Gap Agreement and they must be fully used and upheld. Governments must demonstrate genuine ownership of their commitments and be held to account for meeting them. Strengthening how these existing measures are applied will enable governments to sustain and lift their efforts to deliver the structural changes required to truly Close the Gap.

D **Structural reform takes time**

Embedding shared decision-making, strengthening the community-controlled sector, and transforming government systems are long-term reforms that require sustained commitment and continuity of effort. The challenge now is to maintain momentum, avoid complacency, so these reforms are fully embedded and enduring, rather than treated as short-term initiatives. Frequent policy changes risk undermining progress and leaving communities in uncertainty.

E **Closing the Gap is for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people**

Guided by the Priority Reforms, the Closing the Gap Agreement is intended to benefit all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Its focus is not limited to certain service systems or locations. Rather, it requires all governments to work differently, across all policy areas and jurisdictions, so much needed change is achieved. Joint Council agrees that more effort is needed so Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations understand the Closing the Gap Agreement and are able to hold governments to account for changing their ways of working.

Strengthening accountability for delivery

26 The Parties agree that strong accountability is essential to governments delivering on their commitments under the Closing the Gap Agreement. This was a central theme to the findings and recommendations of both reviews.

27 The way that we work together is key to enhanced accountability for better outcomes.

Partnership Action 2

The Parties **commit to review governance arrangements for the Joint Council and the Partnership Working Group** — including the Terms of Reference, membership, annual meeting plans and reporting arrangements — to support shared accountability for Closing the Gap across government agencies and Ministers and support focused and strategic discussions on implementation.

Partnership Action 3

Joint Council also collectively agree to strengthen regular reporting to First Ministers, the President of ALGA and the Coalition of Peaks, particularly with respect to issues for decision on the implementation of the Closing the Gap Agreement.

Partnership Action 4

Joint Council further commits to **enhanced transparency of funding and resourcing outcomes associated with the Closing the Gap Agreement** through annual jurisdictional Closing the Gap reporting on funding provided to ACCOs for the purposes of Clause 45, 55a and 55b, and 118d.

Partnership Action 5

Not agreed and remains in negotiation between parties to the National Agreement.

- 28 At a jurisdictional level, Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments agree to the following measures to enhance accountability.

Partnership Action 6

The Commonwealth and State and Territory Governments commit to **review public service values and behavioural frameworks** to strengthen public service capability to implement the Priority Reforms. Government parties will also consider embedding the Priority Reforms within public service legislation, employment and governance frameworks.

Partnership Action 7

Not agreed and remains in negotiation between parties to the National Agreement.

- 29 The reviews also highlighted that greater efforts are needed by local governments to actively engage with Closing the Gap Agreement.

Partnership Action 8

ALGA commits to working with its members to **lift understanding and capabilities within the local government sector** on the Closing the Gap Agreement and will work closely with Coalition of Peaks to undertake this work.

Strengthening delivery of the Priority Reforms

- 30 In response to the reviews, Joint Council has also considered progress on the implementation of the Priority Reforms in accordance with the terms of the Closing the Gap Agreement.

PRIORITY REFORM ONE

- 31 Priority Reform One commits governments to building and strengthening partnerships that empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to share in decision-making on matters that have a significant impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- 32 Government Parties have partially delivered on the agreed Jurisdictional Actions and current Partnership Actions for Priority Reform One:
- the agreed five priority policy partnerships involving all jurisdictions have been established
 - formal partnership structures are in place at a State or Territory level in all jurisdictions
 - some new and enhanced sector partnership structures have also been established in some jurisdictions (though coverage is variable).
- 33 However, both reviews found that, in practice, progress towards implementing Priority Reform One has been limited — creating frustration, and undermining trust.
- 34 The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led Review in particular reflected that while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have embraced the vision of Priority Reform One, governments have not fully shared or lent into this vision.

- 35 It noted that governments must reframe their role and fully commit to shared leadership if true partnership is to work — including having clearly defined and agreed roles and responsibilities, and more equitable resourcing to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives to engage as partners.
- 36 Joint Council acknowledges that a range of reviews are underway on the progress of the five policy priority policy partnerships, and notes that this provides a good opportunity to both strengthen and achieve better consistency across these partnerships and develop an understanding of best practice that can inform the design of future policy partnerships.
- 37 Government Parties affirm their commitment under clause 35 to establishing policy and place-based partnerships within jurisdictions to respond to local priorities.

Partnership Action 9

Not agreed and remains in negotiation between parties to the National Agreement.

Partnership Action 10

Parties commit to consider establishing a new **Domestic and Family Violence Priority Policy Partnership** by 2027.

Partnership Action 11

Not agreed and remains in negotiation between parties to the National Agreement.

Partnership Action 12

Joint Council commits to develop and share a **best practice model for adequately and efficiently resourcing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives in formal partnerships**.

PRIORITY REFORM TWO

- 38 Priority Reform Two is a commitment from governments to build and strengthen the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector. Priority Reform Two recognises that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and community-controlled organisations are best placed to deliver culturally safe services and supports to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to Close the Gap.
- 39 Under Priority Reform Two, new community-controlled peaks are being established, and governments are working towards the community-controlled prioritisation policies in line with the Closing the Gap Agreement, meaning more services and supports for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are being delivered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations. Sector Strengthening Plans have also been agreed and are in place for early childhood care and development, housing, health, and disability.
- 40 However, progress in increasing the proportion of services delivered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations (clause 55) is not able to be measured because governments are not reporting against the agreed targets and indicators for PR2.
- 41 Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (**ACCOs**) continue to face structural barriers around short-term, insecure and inflexible funding. Both reviews reflected that these barriers limit capacity for the long-term planning and workforce development that is needed.

- 42 Going forward, governments need to do more to deliver longer term and flexible funding to the ACCO sector, alongside improving workforce parity and funding system and data transparency.
- 43 This includes developing pathways towards fully resourcing existing commitments, including the delivery of Sector Strengthening Plans and developing capacity-building initiatives that enable community-controlled organisations to lead change.

Partnership Action 13

Not agreed and remains in negotiation between parties to the National Agreement.

Partnership Action 14

Not agreed and remains in negotiation between parties to the National Agreement.

PRIORITY REFORM THREE

- 44 Priority Reform Three is a commitment from governments to systemic and structural transformation of mainstream agencies and institutions and the services they fund to be more responsive to the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and ensure they are safe and make a much bigger contribution to Closing the Gap — including by identifying and eliminating racism.
- 45 Government Parties are taking some steps to implement the transformation elements outlined in clause 59, including through training and capacity-building measures.
- 46 However, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led Review found that progress on delivering Priority Reform Three remains minimal, with limited evidence of genuine transformation. Racism continues to be a key structural issue, and approaches to embedding cultural safety are compliance-driven and transactional.
- 47 This is evident across multiple sectors — including aged care, where cultural safety and systemic transformation remain critical priorities in line with the findings of the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety. The Royal Commission highlighted that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to experience poorer access, culturally unsafe care, and services that fail to meet their needs, underscoring the urgent need for governments to embed cultural safety as a core feature of all systems and service delivery.
- 48 The findings of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led review build on those of the Productivity Commission Review, which considered that governments have not fully grasped the scale of change required to their systems, culture, operations and ways of working.
- 49 This is evidenced by the lack of progress amongst Government Parties in identifying, developing or strengthening an independent mechanism to hold governments accountable for delivering on Priority Reform Three (as required by clause 67 of the Closing the Gap Agreement). The exceptions to this are the Australian Capital Territory, where the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body is funded for this role, and Victoria, which has recently passed legislation through the Victoria Parliament to establish a new independent mechanism (Nginma Ngainga Wara) as part of its Statewide Treaty Bill 2025.

Partnership Action 15

Parties affirm that **independent mechanisms (clause 67) are a critical accountability measure needed to Close the Gap and that this commitment will be progressed as a priority**. Priority implementation had already been agreed to by the Joint Council in response to the Productivity Commission Review with evidence expected of progress in 2026.

- 50 The review of Joint Council and Partnership Working Group arrangements outlined above will also support further progress on Priority Reform Three.

PRIORITY REFORM FOUR

- 51 Priority Reform Four commits governments to share data and information with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations, and to make that data and information available in an accessible way so that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations can make more informed decisions about their development priorities and actions to support improved life outcomes.
- 52 Some progress has been made on delivering the Jurisdictional Actions and Partnership Actions for Priority Reform Four, including the locations of the six community data projects and establishing a Closing the Gap Data Policy Partnership.
- 53 However, both reviews found that the broader intent of Priority Reform Four is not yet being met. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led Review in particular found that lack of progress on data access and capability undermines self-determination. It noted that governments need to do more to change the way they think about and manage data to better support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people — including enabling more accessible data, with clear background information so that communities can make sense of it.
- 54 Both reviews noted that the imbalance of power between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and governments over the collection, management and use of data remains a key issue, and both reviews supported Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles being embedded by governments across the data lifecycle.
- 55 Reflecting on progress, Joint Council affirms that data sharing is central to enabling genuine partnership and self-determination, and agrees that more needs to be done to build community data capability and infrastructure.

Partnership Action 16

Parties agree to **investigate how the Closing the Gap Information Repository** could be strengthened with the inclusion of disaggregated data (where appropriate) and stories from **the survivors of the Stolen Generations**.

This data could then inform discussions and decision-making in the priority policy partnerships, including around access to housing, health and social wellbeing, workforce participation, and supports and services for survivors.

- 56 Joint Council also affirms that the establishment of a community-controlled Indigenous Data Bureau would be a valuable addition to the Closing the Gap framework and notes that this is under active consideration by the Data Policy Partnership.

Partnership Action 17

Not agreed and remains in negotiation between parties to the National Agreement.

NEXT STEPS

- 57 The response will now be put for consideration to all parties as signatories to the Closing the Gap Agreement.

Partnership Action 18

A meeting of all Parties to the National Agreement on Closing the Gap is convened in 2026, with the Coalition of Peaks and ALGA in attendance, to discuss progress on the Closing the Gap Agreement (Clause 131).

It is also envisaged that if the Closing the Gap Agreement needs to be updated in response to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led Review, that amendments also be considered by the parties.

Any new version of the Closing the Gap Agreement will then be made public and formally tabled in the Commonwealth Parliament. State and Territory Governments will do the same, reinforcing shared transparency and accountability.

Jurisdictions will implement the agreed Partnership Actions in a manner that reflects their local context, and in partnership with relevant jurisdictional peak bodies. This includes discussions on the appropriate scope and application of actions, including alignment of implementation timeframes with existing initiatives and budget processes.

Implementation activities and progress are to be reflected through established reporting and engagement mechanisms, including, but not limited to, annual reports and implementation plans.





CLOSING THE GAP