

# CLOSE THE GAP

**AGENCY, LEADERSHIP, REFORM:**  
ENSURING THE SURVIVAL, DIGNITY AND WELLBEING  
OF FIRST NATIONS PEOPLES



## **CLOSE THE GAP CAMPAIGN REPORT 2025**

A report prepared by Lowitja Institute for the Close the Gap Campaign Alliance Group

**MARCH 2025**



## Acknowledgements

This report is a collaborative effort of the Close the Gap Campaign Alliance Group. Funding for the report was provided by the Alliance Group.

The terms 'our' and 'we' are used throughout this report to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including the Indigenous Leadership Group of the Close the Gap Campaign. We note we use those terms because we are a part of that collective identity rather than asserting ownership. The report also refers at times to the wider Close the Gap Campaign, which includes non-Indigenous organisations.

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Wayne Quilliam is an award-winning Aboriginal photographer, and his book *Culture is Life* won the 2022 National Photographic Portrait Prize. The cover photo is of a Yolngu child during a cultural performance at the Garma Festival that takes place each year in northeast Arnhem Land. During the festival, children join women and men from their clan group to perform traditional dance (bunggul), sharing stories and songlines that have been performed for millennia.

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WARNING: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be aware that the Close the Gap report may contain images, names and voices of people who are deceased.



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# Foreword

**This year's themes of agency, leadership, and reform highlight how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and communities have worked to embed the four Priority Reform Areas in the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap (National Agreement)*.**

As we release our annual report, we want to thank our 53 members and supporters who have walked with us to advocate for the improved health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

We are privileged to feature ten organisations who have worked to advance the rights and aspirations of First Nations peoples across the country. Through the lens of self-determination, these organisations have shared how they successfully drive outcomes in and across communities, work with and for their mob, and advocate for transformative systemic change. We are proud to feature leaders, innovators, and cultural knowledge holders who work to provide solutions and drive holistic reform.

In sharing these stories, we are not blind to the realities nor the lived experiences of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. As it stands today, too many of our peoples experience disproportionate and unjust but preventable inequalities.

Each year when we release our report, we balance the success of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-led solutions with calling out governments regarding their inability to comprehensively deliver the objectives of the *National Agreement*.

Despite government inaction regarding comprehensive reform, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and communities are creating successful initiatives that ensure the survival, dignity, and wellbeing of our peoples. It is their dedication, knowledges and work — often at significant personal and emotional cost — that creates the changes our families and communities need.

Four years on from the revised *National Agreement* we are deeply disappointed that very little meaningful reform has been implemented. For almost two decades some iteration for the Closing the Gap strategy has been in place and yet comprehensive departmental and agency reform is seriously lacking.

In recognition of this, the four Priority Reform areas are the focal point of our 2025 report. It focuses on shared decision-making, strengthening and building the community controlled sector, transforming government organisations and shared access to data. The report highlights what is possible when we create the enabling environment for systemic reform to be implemented. Through this lens, the case studies highlight how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agency and leadership are key elements for successful reform.

By design, the *National Agreement* is the most comprehensive policy initiative to deliver improved outcomes across health and wellbeing indicators. All state and territory governments are a signatory to the *National Agreement*. They are responsible for its deliverables and must be held accountable for its progress or lack thereof.



Our recommendations are clear. We have called on Commonwealth, state, and territory governments to fulfil their commitments in and to the *National Agreement*. Divisive state and territory policies that are in direct contradiction to the *National Agreement* further complicate not just progress across the target areas but the policy environment in which the targets are supposed to be achieved.

The stagnating and declining progress across critical socioeconomic targets, has real consequences. An inability to implement the *National Agreement*, directly translates to an inability to improve the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The shocking truth is that the extreme inequities that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience are entirely preventable.

#### **Commissioner Kate Kiss**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner – Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC)



A critical component of our report is providing tangible solutions to close the gap. Our work provides a roadmap on how to implement and support community agency. It uplifts the voices of leaders who are sharing their expertise and creating change, and it showcases our success when we have the resources and tools to drive reform and effect change.

We want to acknowledge the work and insights of the people and organisations featured and thank them for their leadership and commitment to ensuring the survival, dignity, and wellbeing of First Nations Australians.

In solidarity, we journey together.

#### **Co-Chairs – Close the Gap Campaign**

#### **Mr Karl Briscoe**

CEO, National Association of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers and Practitioners (NAATSIHWP)



# Executive Summary

Over the past 12 months, we have seen both progress and challenges towards achieving better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Coming off the back of the 2023 Referendum, our communities are still reeling from the result. However, if 2024 has demonstrated anything, it is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' resilience and commitment to pushing for equity and healing for our peoples, continuing to make strides despite the setbacks and barriers we continue to face.

This year's annual report from the Close the Gap Campaign Alliance Group shares stories of communities' tireless work to delivering outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The themes of this year's report are **Agency and Self-determination, Leadership and Solidarity**, and **Reform and Transformation**. These are explored through nine case studies, which elevate the voices and experiences of our communities and organisations, showcasing the work of those that are contributing to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led change, decision-making and initiatives, both locally and nationally, and that support our fight in ensuring the survival, dignity and wellbeing of our people.

This report also covers a year in review, highlighting some of the key issues and developments from the last 12 months, including updates under the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap (National Agreement)*, progress or lack thereof towards Treaty and Truth-telling processes, justice and economic self-determination. We also celebrate and acknowledge the new appointments of Interim Nations Aged Care Commissioner, Ms Andrea Kelly, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Ms Katie Kiss, and the Acting National Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People, Ms Lil Gordon. The year in review, themes and case studies, help to inform the recommendations in this report.

## Themes of the report

The themes of this report are underpinned by the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)*, which is the most comprehensive tool Australia has to advance and protect the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. UNDRIP is a statement of principles based on the fundamental rights of:

- self-determination
- participation in decision-making
- respect for and protection of culture
- equality and non-discrimination.

The foundational principles and expressed rights in the UNDRIP shaped the *2020 National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, informed the inclusion of the four Priority Reform Areas, and frame the implementation process.

***'The only way to ensure that we close the gap is by creating genuine systemic reform. Embedding the Four Priority Reform Areas is essential to creating the holistic infrastructure needed to meet the socio-economic targets. Without it, the socio-economic targets are not likely to be met within the timeframes outlined in the National Agreement, if at all.'***

– Karl Briscoe, CEO of NAATSIHWP and Co-Chair

It is in recognition of this that we explore how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are driving the Priority Reforms in their organisations, work, and communities. The themes of this report speak to different elements of the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, with the case studies representing action being taken to address the four priority reform areas.

Under 'Agency and Self-determination', we focus on local decision-making and truth-telling initiatives. This theme highlights organisations and services that have implemented formal partnerships and shared decision-making, with the First Nations Eye Health Alliance working towards driving equitable eye care that is inclusive of, and led by, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and knowledges. Palm Island Community Company is an example of a place-based initiative underpinned by self-determination and community leadership, while Yindjibarndi Aboriginal Corporation demonstrates how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can participate and lead in the transition to a clean-energy future.

The 'Leadership and Solidarity' theme provides examples of organisations which, through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership or in solidarity with allies, build Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled services to deliver on closing the gap, and work to transform mainstream organisations in line with Priority Reform 3. Justice Reinvestment Network Australia's case study shares its work towards self-determined solutions to address the over-incarceration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and adults through Aboriginal-led, place-based justice reinvestment initiatives designed to empower and keep our people out of the criminal justice system. Wunan Foundation's collaborative efforts to build and strengthen partnerships and increase the number of Aboriginal community controlled organisations (ACCOs), and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ageing and Aged Care Council's members' activities, demonstrate the need for ACCOs and strong and meaningful partnerships to ensure Elders and older people can access culturally safe, trauma-aware, and healing-informed care.

This report's third theme, 'Reform and Transformation', highlights organisations, programs, and services that engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to transform government organisations in their respective sectors, with a particular focus on identifying and eliminating racism; and addressing how data is collected and used to inform local and shared decision-making to deliver on closing the gap. Case studies on Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia, Ngaweeyan Maar-oo, and the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (Ahpra) each highlight how strong partnerships can lead to meaningful change, with Gayaa Dhuwi sharing its work towards ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices are heard in policy-making and reform relating to social and emotional wellbeing, and Ahpra's cultural safety strategy directly contributing to eliminating racism and addressing barriers to culturally safe healthcare for our peoples. Ngaweeya Maar-oo, in its case study, provides an example of addressing data gaps and transforming how the Victorian Government collects data necessary for closing the gap.

***'A critical element of our report is to demonstrate that genuine reform for the betterment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples must be grounded in our rights as First Peoples. Our respect for and desire to protect our lands, seas, and cultures shapes who we are and how we exist in the world. It permeates our being and drives the initiatives we put forth to ensure the survival, dignity, and wellbeing of our peoples.'***

**– Commissioner Katie Kiss**

This report makes 44 recommendations, sending a clear message to governments that we will continue to hold them accountable to their commitments under the *National Agreement*.

We call on Australian governments to implement all recommendations outlined in this report and empower our communities and organisations to lead in the solutions that affect our peoples and our futures.



# Recommendations

## National Agreement on Closing the Gap

Implementation of the four Priority Reform Areas lacks consistent national coordination and is impeding progress to meet the objectives in the *National Agreement*. To ensure that governments are upholding their commitments to achieve progress across target areas, we call on the Australian Government to:

1. Implement, in full, the recommendations of the Productivity Commission's 2024 *Closing the Gap Review*.
2. Prioritise the full implementation of the four Priority Reform Areas in the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*.
3. In collaboration with the Coalition of Peaks, establish an independent mechanism before the next *Closing the Gap Review* is undertaken.
4. By no later than December 2025, to increase accountability and transparency of government departments and agencies, the Australian government establish a human rights-based reporting framework, underpinned by the *UNDRIP*, that reports progress against the Priority Reform Areas and targets, to the independent mechanism.
5. Commit adequate resourcing for the implementation of the *National Agreement* to ensure that governments and the Coalition of Peaks have sufficient resources, capability and capacity to work effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities to operationalise the *National Agreement*.
6. Invest in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led data development, including specific budget allocations to enable the establishment of Indigenous Data Governance (IDG) and Indigenous Data Sovereignty (IDS) in Priority Reform 4.
7. Adopt the National Anti-Racism Framework and implement in full its recommendations; and allocate appropriate level of funding to the Australian Human Rights Commission to develop, as a priority, an implementation plan specific to First Nations people's experiences of racism.

We call on state and territory governments to:

8. Reaffirm their commit to the *National Agreement*, its targets and Priority Reform Areas.
9. Ensure legislation and policy are consistent with the intent of the *National Agreement* and are consistent with human rights obligations.
10. Adopt a strengths-based approach to their implementation plans, to drive their commitment to strengthening and building structures that empower First Nations peoples to share decision-making authority with governments.

## Progressing Voice, Truth and Treaty

National leadership is required to create a process and, the social and political environment to enable the full realisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's rights, including through Voice, Truth and Treaty.

We call on the Australian Government to:

11. Establish a national framework to deliver Voice, Truth and Treaty, including the establishment of a national independent Truth-telling and Healing Commission.

We call on state and territory governments to demonstrate their genuine commitment to First Nations peoples by:

12. Advancing Voice, Truth and Treaty mechanisms in their jurisdictions by:
  - a. establishing representative structures that facilitate self-determination, participation in decision making, respect for culture, equality, and non-discrimination
  - b. establishing genuine partnerships and shared decision-making mechanisms to develop solutions to address the disparities and inequities experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
  - c. supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in their efforts to conduct truth-telling processes, including facilitating access to records and information held by government departments and agencies
  - d. developing state level treaties that provide frameworks, mechanisms and funding to drive practical solutions to close the gap.



We encourage Australians to:

13. Walk with First Nations peoples and engage with truth-telling processes within their communities, organisations and professions.

### **United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)**

Australia must fully embed its human rights obligations into domestic law and policy through a national human-rights legislative framework, including the *UNDRIP*, to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's rights are recognised, protected and reinforced in policy and in practice.

We call on Australian governments to:

14. Implement the recommendations by the Australian Human Rights Commission under the Free and Equal Reform Agenda for Federal discrimination laws, to enact a legislated national human-rights framework.
15. Adopt and fully implement the 2023 recommendations made by the Joint Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Inquiry into the application of the *UNDRIP* in Australia.

### **Health workforce and cultural safety**

Governments, agencies, and service providers must actively work to improve standards of care experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in hospitals and create culturally safe services.

We call on Australian governments to work with the National Indigenous Health Leadership Alliance and National Aboriginal and Community Controlled Health Organisations to:

16. Invest in the development of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce as outlined in the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan 2021-2031*.
17. Strengthen the National Safety and Quality Health Service (NSQHS) Standards with further cultural safety indications.
18. Develop indicators to inform local strategies to eliminate racism in the provision of health services and build the capacity of the Australian health workforce to provide culturally safe health services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

19. Actively engage in the implementation of the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce Framework and Implementation Plan* at the local health district level.
20. Develop Commonwealth guidelines and standards for cultural safety to ensure the Australian healthcare system is responsive to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; where institutional racism is acknowledged, measured, and addressed; cultural safety training is undertaken regularly and valued as an important step in closing the gap.

### **Aged care**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people face a range of unique and complex challenges regarding quality and accessibility of aged care. The right to quality care is essential for ageing well, promoting dignity, respect, and improved health outcomes.

We call on Australian governments to:

21. Increase funding and support to the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Flexible Aged Care Program.
22. Provide high-quality, flexible, and culturally safe aged care services, First Nations-led and delivered in urban, regional, remote settings.
23. Commit to the permanently establish the First Nations Aged Care Commissioner role.

Recent data from the AIHW estimates one or two in every ten older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people eligible for aged care is a Stolen Generation Survivor, yet we know there is an issue of inequitable access to essential aged care services. In recognition of the high number of Stolen Generations Survivors entering the aged care system, and their preference for care delivered at home or through community settings, we call on the Australian Government to:

24. Implement the recommendations outlined in the *Final Report of the Interim First Nations Aged Care Commissioner* and invest in a dedicated aged care response to the needs of Stolen Generations families.<sup>1</sup>
25. Ensure survivors and their families do not face unaffordable out-of-pocket costs as the new Support at Home program is implemented.

26. Work in partnership with the Interim First Nations Aged Care Commissioner, The Healing Foundation and NAATSIAC to inform the urgent roll out of a minimum cultural safety training for all workers in the aged care system
27. Prioritise funding and providing services within, or close to, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations to maximise opportunities for people to remain on, and maintain connection with, their Country, communities and families.

### **Suicide prevention**

28. Strengthen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led suicide prevention and postvention programs by providing sustained, needs-based funding to community-controlled organisations to deliver culturally safe, trauma-informed, and healing-centred care.
29. The government must ensure the full implementation of Priority 10 of the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2020-2031* by embedding culturally safe, community-led, and trauma-informed approaches in all suicide prevention, postvention, and social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) policies and programs.

### **Justice**

To address the ongoing socioeconomic disparities that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples experience, Commonwealth, state and territory governments must implement, in full, the recommendations provided by the following inquiries and reports outlined below. As signatories to the *National Agreement*, Commonwealth, state and territory governments have a responsibility to meet their commitments in the *National Agreement*.

### **Youth justice**

We call on governments to:

30. Fully implement the recommendations from the National Children's Commissioner's report, *'Help Way Earlier!'*<sup>22</sup> (Australian Human Rights Commission 2024), specifically:
  - a. elevating children's rights at the national level with a 'Cabinet Minister for Children, with responsibility for the human rights and wellbeing of children in Australia'
  - b. 'Australian Governments resource the redesign of services to be place-based and informed by evidence and local community priorities, in line with Priority Reform 1 of the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*'.
31. Support the development of the Justice Policy Partnership Implementation Roadmap to ensure a nationally coordinated response to reduce the rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth detention and adult incarceration.
32. Increase the age of criminal responsibility to at least 14 years of age, consistent with international human rights conventions relating to the rights of children and youth justice.
33. Actively implement alternative solutions to youth detention including consideration of remand out of custody, alternative safe housing solutions, and recidivism programs.
34. Invest in and cohesively implement justice reinvestment initiatives that incorporate culturally safe alternatives to youth detention.
35. For those that are already incarcerated, provide culturally safe programs and support to rehabilitate and reintegrate; and reduce contact with the criminal justice system and recidivism rates.
36. Comprehensively reform the child welfare systems to decrease the number of children in out-of-home care, mitigating the potential for them to transition into the youth justice system.

## Stolen Generations

We call on governments to:

37. Prioritise the implementation of our modernised recommendations from the new The Healing Foundation report, *'Are you waiting for us to die?' The unfinished business of Bringing Them Home*.
38. Provide all Stolen Generations Survivors with access to a national/state/local truth-telling process.
39. Queensland and West Australian governments to implement reparation schemes for Stolen Generations Survivors.

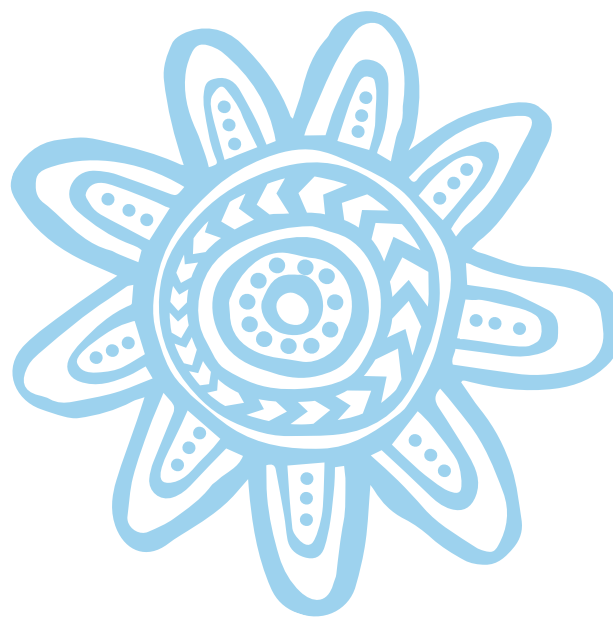
## Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC)

We call on the Australian Government to:

40. Establish an independent body to monitor and report on the status of the implementation of the RCIADIC. This role should be overseen by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner.
41. Ensure the Justice Policy Partnership (JPP) Implementation Roadmap actively works to address the recommendations in the RCIADIC report.
42. In collaboration with the Justice Policy Partnership members, develop a national reporting framework to ensure progress across identified areas are being incorporated throughout implementation.
43. Ensure that the JPP Implementation Roadmap is flexible, responsive, meets the needs identified by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities, and incorporates IDS and IDG monitoring and evaluation.

We call on state and territory governments to:

44. Strengthen accountability and improve coordinated jurisdictional actions to ensure adherence to their commitments in the *National Agreement*, and ensure policies and practices are consistent with the recommendations from the Royal Commission.



# Introduction

Since 2009, the Close the Gap Campaign has delivered an annual report to follow the Australian Government's *Closing the Gap Report*. In 2019, the campaign shifted to publishing a strengths-based, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led analysis, emphasising shared responsibility and genuine partnership, using Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander narratives that challenge the deficit discourse surrounding our peoples. Each report now highlights priority themes with relevant case studies showcasing Blak excellence. The 2025 report continues this strengths-based approach, sharing stories of transformation, self-determination, and leadership through the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations.

Over this past year, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have had to grapple with multiple, overlapping challenges. Despite the setbacks and challenges we may face, our communities are resilient and strong, and we remain focused on finding new opportunities for growth and innovation to develop solutions that work for our peoples.

This *Close the Gap Report 2025* commends the strength and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who are working towards health equity and equality, based on their inherent rights to self-determination; participation in decision-making; respect for and

protection of culture; and equality and non-discrimination, as set out in the *UNDRIP*. Through its elaboration of existing global human rights standards and fundamental freedoms, the *UNDRIP* is an effective tool to eliminate socioeconomic inequities, as they apply specifically to the circumstances of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. As such, it serves as the bedrock of our key themes and its founding principles are embedded throughout this report.

The outcome of the 2023 Referendum has undoubtedly been a moment of profound disappointment for many; yet it highlights the enduring strength and resilience of our people. Since colonisation, we have navigated immense challenges with unwavering determination, preserving our cultures, languages, and connections to Country that have survived over 65,000 years. This resilience is a testament to our leadership, collective spirit, and ability to inspire hope and action in the face of adversity. As we continue to advocate for self-determination, health and social justice, our strength remains a powerful force for unity and change across Australia.

Closing the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous people requires a concerted effort, grounded in the three themes of this report: **Agency and Self-Determination**; **Leadership and Solidarity**; and **Reform and Transformation**.



**Agency and Self-Determination**



**Leadership and Solidarity**



**Reform and Transformation**



This report marks a commitment to celebrate the ways in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples continue to advocate for our inherent rights, and exercise our agency, leadership and self-determination, to build relationships, exercise our power, and embed decision-making processes. In particular, it demonstrates how the Aboriginal community controlled sector works to support the social, emotional, physical, and cultural wellbeing of our people, and in doing so, create solutions that work for our communities.

We particularly honour the work of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health leaders and commend the dedication, openness, and willingness for mainstream organisations and all levels of government to work in genuine partnership. In so doing, we aim to redefine and equalise power relations that enable self-determination for our community as a critical aspect of improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health outcomes.



# A year in review

## National Agreement on Closing the Gap

The *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* continues to be a key and unrelenting focus for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders, who hold governments accountable for their commitments and promises. The *National Agreement* remains critical to improving the health and wellbeing of our people. However, progress towards implementing the Priority Reforms has been inconsistent, disjointed, and slow. Without significant transformation and concerted effort to embed the Priority Reform areas, the socioeconomic targets are not likely to be met within the timeframes outlined in the *National Agreement*. Four years into the *Agreement*, the focus has shifted strongly to holding governments accountable for their commitments and promises, with our communities, organisations, and leaders working tirelessly to this end.

## Productivity Commission Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap

The Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations (Coalition of Peaks) and all Australian governments jointly entrusted the Productivity Commission to review progress and make recommendations on the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*.

The Productivity Commission's overall assessment was one of insufficient progress, highlighting that governments are not adequately delivering on their commitments. The Commission's overarching finding was that there has been no systematic approach to determining what strategies need to be implemented to disrupt all levels of governments' business-as-usual approaches.

The Commission noted that the commitment to shared decision-making is rarely being achieved in practice, government policy does not

reflect the value of the community controlled sector, governments are not enabling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led data, and that the effective transformation of government organisations has barely begun.

In response, the Commission made four recommendations<sup>3</sup> that are required to achieve change:

1. Power needs to be shared
2. Indigenous Data Sovereignty needs to be recognised and supported
3. Mainstream systems and culture need to be fundamentally rethought
4. Stronger accountability is needed to drive behaviour change

## Policy partnerships

All five policy partnerships have been established: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages, Early Childhood Care and Development, Housing, Justice, and Social and Emotional Wellbeing.

The Australian Government committed \$9.7 million over three years to establish a Languages Policy Partnership, \$10.2 million over three years to establish the Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership, and another \$1 billion to the Housing Policy Partnership over four years. This funding will go towards improving housing outcomes, preventing homelessness and ensuring housing services are culturally appropriate and meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The Australian Government has provided \$18.3 million in funding from 2021-2022 to 2027-28 to establish and operate the Justice Policy Partnership (JPP). In 2023-2024, the JPP began implementing its Strategic Framework through a number of initiatives. These include the development and delivery of detailed recommendation on bail reform, with a focus on addressing rising rates of remand; the establishment of a Justice Impact Assessment process; the finalisation of an Implementation Roadmap outlining key priorities; the delivery of the National Justice Reinvestment and Central Australian Justice Reinvestment Programs; and the Age of Criminal Responsibility Working group. In March 2024, the JPP agreed to undertake a three-year review to identify areas for improvement and provide recommendations to strengthen its capacity to justice reform goals.<sup>4</sup>

In September 2023, in alignment with the *National Agreement*, the Federal Government committed to developing a First Nations Economic Partnership with the Coalition of Peaks and other organisations. This was followed by a national engagement process on scoping a policy partnership on First Nations economic development in May 2024.

In July 2024, a Data Policy Partnership was agreed to by the Joint Council as an interim measure in response to the Productivity Commission's review recommendation to establish a Bureau of Indigenous data. This partnership will consider the logistical scope, roles, and responsibilities to support Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Closing the Gap data development.

## Closing the Gap Dashboard

The Closing the Gap Dashboard was released in March 2024, demonstrating the need for urgent, committed, and sustained changes by governments in the way they work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The dashboard provides access to available data on the targets and indicators agreed as part of the *National Agreement*. The data indicates that only five out of 19 targets are currently on track to be met, emphasising the need for transformational change and significant needs-based investment and commitment from governments to meet all necessary targets.

Targets that are on track and meeting targets are:

- Target 2: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander babies with a healthy birth weight
- Target 3: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children enrolled in preschool
- Target 8: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment
- Target 15A and Target 15B: Land mass and sea waters covered under Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's legal rights and interests.

## Other key developments on Closing the Gap

- \$4 billion Commonwealth investment for housing in remote communities.
- \$737.7 million Commonwealth investment in Northern Territory public schools from 2025 to 2029.
- \$62 million funding from the Australian, Queensland, and local governments will improve drinking water security in remote communities.
- \$7.7 million in funding over three financial years (2024–2027) for the establishment and first two years' operation of a National FV Peak Body, with commitment to establishing the body by 1 July 2025.
- \$11.7 million over two years to extend the First Nations Family Dispute Resolution pilot to deliver culturally safe family dispute resolution services.

## Family violence response

The *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* – Target 13 aims to reduce the rate of all forms of family violence and abuse against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children by at least 50 per cent, with progress towards 0 per cent by 2031<sup>5</sup>. Recognising domestic violence as a national priority, the Australian Government has ramped up investment in women's safety, under the *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children* (2022–2032), which helps provide the national framework to meet Closing the Gap Target 13.

The *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan* (2023–2025) was developed under the National Plan, with genuine partnership with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Council on family, domestic, and sexual violence.

In 2024, the Commonwealth Government opened public consultation on the design of a standalone *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Family Safety Plan* (Family Safety Plan). A National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Family Safety Steering Committee (the Steering Committee) was established to guide the development of the Safety Plan. This public consultation invited Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with lived experience of family violence, experts, the community controlled sector, and community members to inform the development of the Safety Plan, addressing key priorities, challenges, and solutions that address the rates of gender-based violence in our communities.

Stages within the *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children (2022-2032)* underway include:

- The first 5-year Action Plan (2023-2027)
- The second 5-year Action Plan (2028-2032)
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan (2023-2025)
- Outcomes Framework

These reports will underpin and inform the development of the Family Safety Plan and be informed by genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, the Steering Committee, the ACCO sector, and federal, state and territory governments.

Coupled with the 2024 Federal Budget investment of \$952.2 million over five years to permanently establish the Leaving Violence Program, these developments are key initiatives to support the aims of the National Plan (2022-2032) to end violence in one generation. We also welcome the \$11.7 million over two years to extend the First Nations Family Dispute Resolution pilot to deliver culturally safe family dispute resolution services<sup>6</sup>.

## Out-of-home care

In September 2024, major child and family care organisations, under the umbrella organisation *Allies for Children*, committed to transition control of out-of-home care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to Aboriginal community controlled organisations. This follows years of advocacy from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak groups who have pushed for governments and non-government organisations to listen to the evidence and invest in community-led solutions. The peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, SNAICC – National Voice for Our Children, worked with Allies for Children to create the policy change. The commitment includes ensuring the effective reunification of children with community, avoiding competition for government funding, and prioritising referrals to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations. This commitment is a key step in addressing systemic issues highlighted in the Closing the Gap Priority Reforms, particularly Target 12, which by 2031 aims to reduce the rate of over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care by 45 per cent.

## Strengthening the community controlled health sector

In 2024 alone, 120 Aboriginal community controlled health organisations (ACCHOs) delivered healthcare to more than 410,000 people in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across the country, underscoring their critical role in achieving better health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. ACCHOs, which are a cornerstone of Australia's health system, have gained vital certainty to plan through four-year rolling funding agreements which commenced on 1 July 2024. Through a \$300 million funding boost, these arrangements will enable ACCHOs to retain skilled staff and ensure continuity of culturally appropriate care tailored to the health needs and priorities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. For the past decade, ACCHOs have faced short-term grant funding agreements lasting only one to three years, with future funding often confirmed just six months before grant expiry, creating significant uncertainty in the delivery of healthcare programs and the workforce. From July 2024, this instability has been significantly reduced, providing ACCHOs with the reliability needed to plan and deliver healthcare services that contribute to closing the health gaps between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians. This funding, delivered under the Australian Government's Indigenous Australians' Health Programme, represents a transformative step towards equitable and sustainable healthcare for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.<sup>7</sup>



## Progressing Voice, Truth, Treaty

### Voice

#### South Australian Voice to Parliament

In 2024, South Australia became the first jurisdiction to create a legislated First Nations Voice to Parliament whereby Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people could engage directly with the State Parliament and State Government on critical laws and policies.

Through the Voice, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have their say at the highest level of decision-making in South Australia, including to Parliament, on policies, laws, and matters that affect them. The Voice has two levels: 1) a Local First Nations Voice, and 2) a State First Nations Voice, with varying responsibilities. Voters went to the polls on 16 March to elect their Local Voice representatives.

On Wednesday 27 November 2024 the First Nations Voice reached a major milestone, presenting its first address to State Parliament.

Addressing Parliament was Leeroy Bilney, a Marlinyu Ghoorlie, Wirangu, Kokatha, Mirning, Noongar, and Barngala man, who outlined the ongoing impacts of racism, the results of the intergenerational trauma of colonisation, and the challenges the Voice faces.

There were 18 Local Voice meetings, three State Voice meetings, a Member briefing, and an annual meeting of Local Voices in 2024. The State Voice held one meeting with Cabinet and one meeting with agency CEOs. Additionally, The Voice has been actively engaging with the Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence to ensure the voices, stories, and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in South Australia are heard. They have also provided advice on four Bills that have a benefit or impact on our people, including the Preventative Health Bill and Office of Early Childhood Development Bill. Encouragingly, changes were made to both Bills based on their advice.

*'We are determined to prove you wrong, because we believe in a better future, a future where we can each put our differences aside and work together constructively ... We seek to advise on laws and policies in a way that empower us. If this is done our children will flourish. They will walk in two worlds and the First Nations foundations from which our culture and peoples stand proudly will be a gift to all South Australians.'*

– Leeroy Bilney, Presiding Officer of South Australia's First Nations Voice to Parliament

### Truth-Telling

#### Yoorrook Justice Commission

The Yoorrook Justice Commission is the first formal truth-telling process into historical and ongoing injustices experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Victoria. Led by five Commissioners, of whom four are Aboriginal, Yoorrook is tasked with examining past and ongoing injustices experienced by Aboriginal peoples in Victoria across all areas of life since colonisation, to establish an official record of the impact of colonisation, develop a shared understanding among Victorians of the impact of colonisation, and make recommendations for healing, systemic reform, policy change, and treaties.

So far, the inquiry has laid bare the rapid and destructive nature of colonisation across the state of Victoria. In mid-2023, the Yoorrook Justice Commission released its *Report into Victoria's Children Protection and Criminal Justice Systems*<sup>8</sup>, providing 46 recommendations in total. Disappointingly, the Victorian Government supported only six of these recommendations in full. In 2024, the Yoorrook Justice Commission moved onto its inquiries into land, sky, waters, health, housing and education, and economic prosperity, as the next stage of its truth-telling process. We look forward to their findings and commend their exceptional efforts in deconstructing colonial impacts throughout all areas of wellbeing.

## Treaty

### Treaty negotiations in Victoria

Statewide treaty negotiations began in Victorian between the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria and the Victorian Government on 21 November 2024. The First Peoples' Assembly was established in 2018 to represent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Victoria on the journey to treaty. The first round of negotiations with the Victorian Government will focus on securing a strong foundation that recognises the unique relationship between the State and First Peoples to generate practical change. It will be overseen by the Independent Treaty Authority, based on the rules set out in the Treaty Negotiation Framework, and work towards structural measures to support reconciliation, truth, education, and health disparities between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Victorians.

We look forward to the first round of Treaty negotiations that will focus on securing a strong foundation that recognises the unique relationship between the State and First Peoples and generate practical change.

### Path to Treaty and Truth-telling Inquiry abolished in Queensland

The Queensland Government's decision to abolish the state's Truth-telling and Health Inquiry and repeal its *Path to Treaty Act* (2023) marks a significant step backwards for the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Legislation was introduced into Queensland Parliament on 28 November 2024 to repeal the *Path to Treaty Act*, abolish the Inquiry, and remove the Members from office, after newly elected Queensland Premier, David Crisafulli, announced his government would follow through with their election promise to repeal the Path to Treaty legislation and rescind support for the Treaty-telling and Healing Inquiry, if elected. Treaty and Truth-telling is what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have long called for and this decision has disappointed many who say it was not made in consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.<sup>9</sup>

### New South Wales commitment to consultations towards pursuing Treaty

The NSW Government has committed to a 12-month consultation process with Aboriginal people across the state, to hear from communities about their desire for a treaty or other formal agreement making. To ensure independent process, three Treaty Commissioners have been appointed to design and lead the consultations, they are: Aden Ridgeway, Dr Todd Fernando and Naomi Moran. These Commissioners will aim to give all Aboriginal people in NSW an opportunity to participate and are likely to begin in early 2025.<sup>10</sup>

## National First Nations appointments

### Interim First Nations Aged Care Commissioner

In a move to address the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety, Ms Andrea Kelly, a highly respected Warumungu and Larrakia woman, was appointed as the Interim First Nations Aged Care Commissioner. Between 5 February and 21 June 2024, Commissioner Kelly led an extensive national consultation process to hear from older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, their families, carers, communities, and providers about their experiences accessing and engaging with the aged care system. During this time, Commissioner Kelly held more than 135 in-person consultations across all jurisdictions and received 36 written submissions from individuals, community groups, organisations, and peak and representative bodies.

*'The creation of this role, and that of the permanent First Nations commissioner for aged care will enable the voices of First Nations people to be heard and acted on.'*

– Andrea Kelly, Interim First Nations Aged Care Commissioner

## Newly appointed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner

The Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) welcomed new Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Katie Kiss. Commissioner Kiss is a proud Kaanju and Birri/Widi woman who grew up in Rockhampton, Central Queensland, on the lands of the Darumbal People. Commissioner Kiss brings to this role a wealth of experience, cultural knowledge, and a steadfast commitment to advocating for the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Her appointment signifies a renewed focus on addressing systemic inequities and fostering meaningful change within the AHRC and more broadly.

This includes:

- conducting research and education projects to promote respect for and the enjoyment and exercise of human rights by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- supporting the realisation of tangible outcomes through the closing the gap agenda
- supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the advancement of truth-telling and treaty processes nationally and across the jurisdictions.

This role is pivotal in promoting and protecting the human rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and provides a platform to highlight critical issues such as health inequities, justice reform, and self-determination. In a time when the nation continues to grapple with the legacies of colonisation, and the result of the 2023 Referendum, Commissioner Kiss's leadership is poised to drive vital reforms.

## Newly appointed Acting National Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People

In 2024, the Commonwealth Government announced there would be the appointment of a National Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People. This position was created following data collected by the Productivity Commission that showed that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are 12.1 times more likely to be removed from their homes and family than non-Indigenous young people, and 29 times more likely to be in youth detention. In January 2025, Ngemba woman Lil Gordon was appointed as Acting National Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People, tasked with working to ensure that governments are upholding the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.<sup>11</sup>

## Justice

### Raising the age of criminal responsibility

The Northern Territory, Victorian, and Queensland governments' decisions to back pedal on commitments to increase the age of criminal responsibility in their respective jurisdictions is a disappointing setback in the fight to protect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people from entering the criminal justice system. These decisions will disproportionately impact Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, who are already incarcerated at significantly higher rates compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts.<sup>12</sup> To meet Closing the Gap Target 11, to reduce the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people (aged 10-17) in detention by at least 30 per cent by 2031, governments must listen to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, health and justice experts, and international conventions, and raise the age of criminal responsibility to at least 14 years old.<sup>13</sup>

## The Gathering 2024

In September 2024, over 100 people from Stolen Generations organisations came together in Garramilla (Darwin) to create collective knowledge and connect with those working across Australia to support ageing Stolen Generations Survivors. The group of 19 organisations reaffirmed its commitment to the *Bringing them home* report and its recommendations, calling on governments, NGOs and churches to respond. The collective called for:

‘adequate and sustainable funding for Stolen Generations organisations to continue to provide services and support to survivors, their families and communities

the continuation of the important truth-telling process Stolen Generations and the *Bringing them home* report commenced, until all Australians know the truth and reparations have been made

the collective and intergenerational nature of our healing is recognised. Our young people must be at the centre of all we do, we can only be healed when our families and communities are strong in their culture and identify.’<sup>14</sup>

## Economic Self-determination

### Inquiry into Economic Self-Determination and Opportunities for First Nations Australians

On 27 March 2024, the Joint Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, chaired by Mutthi Mutthi and Wamba Wamba woman, Senator Jana Stewart, commenced an *Inquiry into Economic Self-determination and Opportunities for First Nations Australians*. Despite the deliberate economic exclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people stemming from colonisation, our people have had unwavering resilience and unbroken knowledge as traders, innovators, entrepreneurs.

This inquiry looked at enablers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ engagement in training, employment, and business development, and how to scale up those enablers and remove barriers to community-led economic growth. The Inquiry’s Terms of Reference included the economic and social infrastructure required to support job creation, workforce retention and business success; Indigenous cultural and intellectual property; and partnership structures that embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as long-term, equal, economic partners.

The report confirmed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses’ significant contribution to the Australian economy and to the economic empowerment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses contribute positively to the wider Australian economy. Data findings suggest that this sector generates more than \$16 billion in annual revenue and employs over 115,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, paying \$4.2 billion in wages. The Inquiry also found that with every \$1 invested in an Aboriginal business, a social and economic value of \$4.41 is generated.<sup>15</sup>

The Inquiry noted that there are structural barriers and systemic disadvantages that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses face compared to non-Indigenous businesses. This includes limitations on starting and sustaining viable businesses, challenges in accessing capital and finance, and negative risk stereotyping of investments. Often, these limitations prevent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses from generating long-term wealth and equity.

The Inquiry calls on all levels of government to act as enablers of economic prosperity and invest in, support, and remove barriers. The report made 22 recommendations to government designed to address the economic disempowerment faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.<sup>16</sup>

*‘If governments and investors act as enablers – investing, supporting and removing barriers – First Nations peoples can transform their economic destiny’*

– Senator Jana Stewart, Muthi Muthi and Wamba Wamba



## First Nations Disability Policy

Over 2024 we have seen a concerning increase in the medicalisation of disability policy, particularly in regard to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). In line with the Australian governments commitments under Australia's Disability Strategy 2021-2031 and our obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disability, it is essential that the medicalisation of disability policy, programs and services is addressed, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples access to programs and services is improved.

In steps to uphold governments commitment under Australia's Disability Strategy 2021-2031, in early 2025, the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) launched the First Nations Strategy 2025-30. This strategy was co-developed by the NDIA and the NDIA First Nations Strategy Working Group, which comprised Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander NDIS participants, carers, providers, partners, peak bodies, non-government organisations, academics, and advocates. It respond to the concerns outlined in The Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, the NDIS Review, and the Productivity Commission's review of the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*.

Despite this, Governments action to ensuring that First Nations peoples with disabilities are represented and that their voices are heard in the development of First Nations disability policy is inadequate. To ensure compliance with commitments under Australia's Disability Strategy or the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, governments must ensure that First Nations peoples with disabilities continue to be appointed to leadership positions and that non-Indigenous providers are not given preference. First Nations disability policy development must be led by First Nations people with a disability<sup>17</sup>.

## National Anti-Racism Framework: A Roadmap to Eliminating Racism in Australia

Following an extensive process of community and sector consultations over several years, the *National Anti-Racism Framework: A Roadmap to Eliminating Racism in Australia* was published by the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) in November 2024. It serves as a roadmap for governments, business and community organisations to address all forms of racism in Australia. The framework contains 63 recommendations for a whole-of-society approach to eliminating racism, with proposed reforms across Australia's legal, justice, health, education, media, and arts sectors, as well as workplaces and data collection. Serving as a foundational document to The National Anti-Racism Framework, the *Anti-Racism Framework: Voices of First Nations Peoples* was also published by the AHRC. Extensive consultations with over 496 contributors from metropolitan, remote, and regional Australia highlighted a complex and pervasive landscape of challenges faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. This includes but is not limited to systemic racism; unconscious bias; historical and ongoing impacts of colonisation; over-policing and incarceration; and government accountability. To address this, several recommendations were put forth, including:

- implementing anti-racism legislation with clear accountability mechanisms
- developing and enforce robust mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating anti-racism policies
- implementing comprehensive and standardised cultural safety education across all sectors, linked to professional standards and regulatory requirements
- developing a dedicated anti-racism framework focused on the unique needs and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

# Special contribution – The Healing Foundation

## The Stolen Generations are still waiting for justice and healing — a generation on

By Shannan Dodson, CEO of The Healing Foundation

At the age of nine, Uncle David Wragge, a Wakka Wakka man, was forcibly removed from his family in Cherbourg, north-west of Brisbane, where he was confined as a 'dormitory boy' for six years until 1973 under Australia's Stolen Generations policies.

As Uncle David has said:

*'I am the living reminder of a time when our people were rounded up into missions and reserves, the men and women sent off to work only to have their wages stolen and the children sent away elsewhere.'*

Almost 30 years ago, my gugu (father) Mick Dodson, the former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, co-led the landmark *Bringing them home* inquiry which gave voice to the pain felt by the Stolen Generations from cruel and racist policies that 'permanently scarred their lives'.

That scarring continues.

Research has found 'a gap within a gap', where the impact of these policies continues to contribute to significantly poorer health and wellbeing outcomes for Stolen Generations survivors and their descendants compared to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Thus, the ongoing impact of the Stolen Generations policies are of course deeply intertwined with efforts to close the gap.

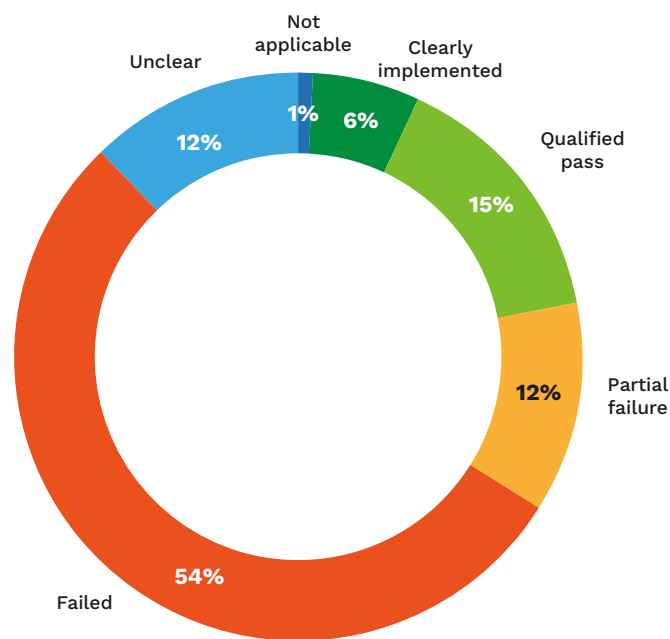
Yet action by successive governments and other responsible parties to address that gap, to recognise the harm, and to implement the recommendations of the *Bringing them home* report, has been agonisingly slow and incomplete.

Last month, The Healing Foundation released a new report based on analysis by the University of Canberra on the implementation of the *Bringing them home* report's initial recommendations<sup>18</sup>. The report calls for a comprehensive National Health Package that includes 19 updated recommendations.

It confirmed what we all knew and experience every day on the ground, in our communities, the trauma still being felt.

As evidenced in the report, only five of the 83 *Bringing them home* recommendations have been clearly implemented, 12 are categorised as a qualified pass, ten as a partial failure and 45 as full fails. The status for ten is unclear and one no longer applies.


The analysis found there has been 'no systematic government response to the needs and rights of Stolen Generations survivors and their descendants'.



Status of report recommendations based on the 'Are you waiting for us to die?' *The unfinished business of Bringing Them Home* report

It concluded:

*'Whilst the Bringing them home report and the testimonies of the Stolen Generation survivors left an enormous legacy, progress against its recommendations has been woeful. It is hard to conceive that gross human rights violations, documented and bravely retold by survivors in public forums, can be met with systematic inaction in so many areas. Yet that is the confronting reality that exists in Australia.'*



The Healing Foundation's CEO Shannan Dodson interviews her father and former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Professor Mick Dodson AM, about the *Bringing them home* report

These are big and profound failures. They include the failure by Queensland and Western Australian governments to yet introduce any reparations scheme for Stolen Generations.

They include the failure of governments, agencies and not-for-profit organisations to invest adequately and holistically in cultural safety, healing programs, language and cultural facilities and research, to provide fair and urgent access to records and to enable flexible funding for family reunions, funeral support and grave restoration.

And the urgency to address this failure is driven not just by moral imperative but also by the need to act swiftly to provide redress and other support to Stolen Generations survivors, given their age and often poorer health, and the knowledge that ongoing failures have exacerbated their trauma, causing more pain and distress.

So how do we move forward, to prioritise the changes needed most by ageing survivors, to ensure they live the rest of their days with dignity and get the justice that they deserve?

Last year The Healing Foundation brought together a group of Stolen Generations survivors, descendants and organisations in Garramilla on Larrakia land.

'The Gathering', was a long-awaited opportunity to come together, to yarn, to laugh and to cry — and to reflect on the priority actions needed to fully reckon with the harm caused over generations from the forcible removal of tens of thousands of children from their families, culture, language, Country, and communities.

As we move towards the 30th anniversary of the *Bringing them home* report, The Gathering, the work of the University of Canberra, and previous consultations and reports have informed four key priorities that we are urging governments, NGOs, churches and others to act on:

1. Funding and policy in place to support culturally safe and survivor led aged/Elder care – that means
  - survivors can choose when, where and how they are cared for as they age and are not retraumatised
  - their physical, spiritual and cultural needs are met
  - they are held with respect and able to pass on their knowledge and experiences
  - descendants are able to support survivors with adequate funding for family carers and support at home packages
  - the culturally based healing workforce provided by Stolen Generations organisations like Link-Up services is recognised and supported by adequate training and resources that recognise the weight of vicarious trauma and the value of specialist knowledge and healing work being done.



2. All institutions, organisations and individuals holding records relating to the forced removal of Stolen Generations survivors, public and private, to provide prioritised and open access and act on handing them back to survivor and descendant led groups.
3. Equitable redress for all survivors, particularly in WA and Queensland but including to revisit and extend redress schemes in other jurisdictions.
4. Sustainable, adequate funding for Stolen Generations organisations to provide wrap-around services such as healing, Elder care, culture and language, education and youth engagement including training, that acknowledges the need for support also for a workforce that walks daily with the trauma of decades of forced removals.

It's no coincidence that I have followed my father into this work, into this fight for justice. I am, like so many mob, personally connected to the Stolen Generations and feel a huge responsibility to pursue their rights.

My aunties were taken. And as a child, I saw my father's distress at hearing their stories of pain, paying witness to a truth that had been so long denied in this country, that is tragically yet again being denied in the wake of the Voice Referendum and dismantling of truth-telling processes.



Stolen Generations survivors and organisations gather in Garramilla in September 2024

We need to strip away the politics and division, to understand this is a rights issue. We need a whole of community approach, across governments, sectors and specialties, across state and territory borders. We need mob and we need allies.

It is time to ensure the recommendations are implemented fully — not in five years, not in ten years, or 20 or another generation, but now.

Shannan Dodson, Yawuru woman and CEO of The Healing Foundation







# Agency and Self-Determination


*'The UNDRIP sets out the individual and collective rights of the world's Indigenous peoples. It provides a "universal framework of minimum standards for the survival, dignity and wellbeing of Indigenous peoples". The Declaration talks to our collective right to self-determination, it provides a guide – for us to assert our rights – and for governments and others to respect and deliver on them.'*

## **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Katie Kiss**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agency and self-determination have been long overlooked; yet they are primary mechanisms for our peoples to take control of our lives and amplify our voices. To achieve this, governments and mainstream service providers must engage in genuine, meaningful partnerships and shared decision-making strategies that ensure the specific and localised needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are addressed. ACCOs must lead these partnerships, providing much needed cultural safety and knowledge, but within the context that mainstream health services and government are ultimately accountable for, and must be responsive to, the needs of Aboriginal peoples across regions and communities.

When we think about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led decision-making, we need to think of transformative systems that are grounded in and driven by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being, and doing. These transformative systems must address both structural systems – infrastructure, systems design, processes – and behavioural systems, and in our minds, thoughts, and approaches. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices, perspectives, and leadership are essential to enabling transformative system change.

Our organisations and communities hold the solutions that best work for our community. The design and delivery of policies, services, and governance structures are most likely to achieve success when shared decision-making and self-determination are upheld. While the *National Agreement* has its place in driving reform across government and agencies, a key measure of its success should be in providing the enabling environment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled organisations to succeed. This is how we actively shape the future of our communities and ensure the survival, dignity, and wellbeing of our peoples.



Largely, governments have failed to build and strengthen formal partnerships and shared-decision-making structures to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are exercising their agency, embedding their ownership, responsibility, and expertise to close the gap. This failure impedes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' ability to fully exercise their right to self-determination and establish formal partnerships at every level (national, state, territory, regional) based on equal power dynamics. The legacy of colonisation has influenced how mainstream funders and services recognise and embrace Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and decision-making. The deficit-approach has reigned far too long, resulting in neglect of the wisdom gained over 65,000 years in this country.

Today, it is more important than ever that the wisdom embedded within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations are enshrined in good practice principles for partnership and shared decision-making.

This theme reflects on the value of good, meaningful partnerships, that support and raise up our communities. Case studies therein demonstrate that genuine partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations can enable information-sharing, community advocacy, share lived experience and build momentum for reform in all areas of wellbeing. Most notably, this theme demonstrates the need for self-determination and agency and is a reminder to governments to trust in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to lead the way.



# First Nations Eye Health Alliance

The creation of the landmark First Nations Eye Health Alliance (FNEHA) by passionate First Nations eye health professionals across Australia is building hope for real change to address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander eye health inequity.

‘For the first time ever, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural knowledge and perspectives are getting greater visibility, with non-Indigenous agencies in this space able to engage with the leadership shift to drive greater health outcomes for First Nations people,’ Mr Shaun Tatipata said.

Mr Tatipata, who is Co-Chair of the FNEHA Board and a proud Ngarrindjeri and Wuthathi man, said these perspectives are driving change in the planning, operational capability, and advocacy efforts of the sector.

A great example is the transition of the annual National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander eye health conference, previously convened by the Indigenous Eye Health Unit at the University of Melbourne, into FNEHA’s leadership.

This year’s conference – NATSIEHC25 – will be held in Boojar (Perth) on Whadjuk Noongar Country at the University of Western Australia, led for the first time by an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled agency.

‘There is such pride and excitement over the winds of change in First Nations eye care with the establishment of FNEHA,’ said CEO Ms Lose Fonua, a proud Wiradjuri woman, descendant of the Tubba-gah people of Western New South Wales and of the South Pacific Islander people of Tonga.

‘There’s still a long way to go with transitioning current funding agreements to community controlled agencies, but excitement is growing across the sector about now being on a journey of change.’

‘Hope has been a characteristic of this change, where mob feel connected and empowered to support the necessary transition through work and targets that are led by mob for mob.

‘We have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agencies and a host of sector agencies signing onto membership categories to contribute and support our work. Together we are building tangible activities and outcomes that strengthen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander eye care.’

In Australia today, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience vision impairment and blindness at rates significantly higher than non-Indigenous Australians, disproportionately limiting opportunities, hindering quality of life, and disrupting future health and wellbeing.

In 94 per cent of cases, the causes – refractive error, cataract, diabetic retinopathy, and trachoma – are conditions that, with timely intervention, are preventable.

With population estimates of First Nations people expected to reach over one million by 2030, there will be increased workforce and service delivery gaps in eye care, widening the current health gap in preventable vision loss for First Nations people, unless action is taken urgently.

That concern led to the formation of FNEHA in 2023, to embody the community’s hope and vision for equitable eye care – ‘Our Vision, Our Way’ – to build community led solutions, utilise traditional and contemporary knowledges and pathways, and be the principal voice for First Nations eye care.

FNEHA’s work contributes to outcomes under the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, Australia’s National Preventative Health Strategy, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan, and National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Workforce Strategy.

‘Our establishment is a celebration of the commitment of the eye care sector to centring First Nations voices and cultural knowledge as necessary to supporting preventable vision loss and blindness in for Indigenous people,’ Ms Fonua said.

In eye care, best practice for Closing the Gap Priority Reform Area 1, acknowledges that building partnerships and embedding shared decision-making processes require an equal footing between all parties and a genuine commitment by government to invest in the capability and sustainability of First Nations organisations.





‘Building Our Vision Our Way’, First Nations Meeting, 2024 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Eye Health Conference, nipaluna country, lutruwita (Hobart, Tasmania)

However, difficulty in obtaining sustainable resourcing was highlighted as a key concern in the First Nations workshop at the 2024 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Eye Health conference (*Taking Action Report, 2024*)<sup>19</sup>. The Alliance is concerned also at some mainstream resistance to transitioning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agencies such as FNEHA.

‘Having to operate in an underfunded environment will lead to continued eye health inequities that widen the gap in health and wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people,’ Mr Tatiipata said. ‘We need our allies to stand with us in helping to foster these necessary changes to support the self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and our communities.’

Over the last year, FNEHA have been actively advocating to the Australian Government and broader eye care sector stakeholders to support, for the very first time, a First Nations-led Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander eye health plan.

‘This movement is part of a broader picture of self-determination where First Nations perspectives, and ways of knowing, being, doing and belonging, are honoured, respected, and contribute to the bigger picture of health and wellbeing where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have the capability to thrive,’ Ms Fonua said.

However, that self-determination has been undermined by the rejection of a constitutionally embedded Voice by a majority of Australians in the 2023 Referendum, which has had ‘a profound emotional and cultural impact on many First Nations people,’ she said.

The Referendum result has also led to a difficult political climate with worrying implications for Closing the Gap commitments, said Jaki Adams, FNEHA Co-Chair and a proud Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander woman with ancestral links to Yadhagana, Wuthathi, Gurindji, Kungarakan, Torres Strait, and Warlpiri (Yuendumu).

‘Just as the Queensland Government is rolling back truth telling, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agencies have experienced withdrawal of investment support and with building formal partnerships and shared decision-making.’

***‘Racism continues to be an ever-present problem – even more so post referendum.’***

Ms Fonua says that it is not easy to ‘live in the shadow of a “No” vote’ and is a reminder of the challenges First Nations people and communities still face.

But, she said, ‘it also galvanises us to push forward. We remain committed to advocating for real change, and we invite all Australians to stand with us in this journey.’

# Palm Island Community Company



Palm Island Community Members, Mislam Sam (Jnr) and Jada Kyle

With its deep, place-based commitment to strengthening the social, cultural, and economic fabric of its community, the Palm Island Community Company (PICC) is leading a new model of Indigenous community capacity building – the Bwngcolman Way – that is making a real difference in the lives, health, and wellbeing of the people it serves.

PICC is a unique not-for-profit, community controlled organisation, serving Palm Island (Bwngcolman), 70km off the coast from Townsville, that is home to one of the largest Aboriginal communities in Queensland – around 3,000 strong.

Nearly a third of Palm Islanders are aged 14 years or younger, compared to 19 per cent of the broader Queensland population, and just three per cent are aged 65 years and over, versus 15 per cent for the whole of Queensland.

‘In the rest of Australia, the social services system is geared up to meet the needs of an increasingly ageing, non-Indigenous population. On Palm Island, however, the demographics are different, and the cost of living is high, and therefore the community’s needs are very different,’ said Rachel Atkinson, Chief Executive Officer, Palm Island Community Company.

While its primary focus is on health and community services, PICC is also strongly involved in supporting socioeconomic development on Palm Island, understanding the enormous role that education and employment can play in improving social, emotional and health outcomes. As well as employing clinical, health support and community services staff, PICC generates jobs for people in social enterprise roles such as baristas at the coffee shop, mechanics, cleaners, transport officers, accommodation and logistical support staff, and also runs and employs staff in a regional call centre.

‘The way we contribute to employment opportunities and business growth on the island has created jobs which were previously non-existent here before,’ said Ms Atkinson.

‘We are very proud to support the people of Palm Island and in leading the way in the development of a new model of Indigenous community capacity building that has demonstrated success.’

PICC was formed in 2007 and, significantly, became an ACCHO on 1 July 2021.

Since then, PICC has seen exponential growth in its workforce and exceptional staff recruitment and retention rates, employing more than 200 staff. Its multi-sector local employment initiatives include the PICC Telstra Call Centre – fully operated by PICC and staffed by local Palm Islanders, developed in partnership by PICC, Palm Island Council, TAFE, Government and Telstra.

PICC also has an agreement with the Townsville Hospital and Health Service to deliver primary health services on the island, alongside a range of visiting specialist services. It also maintains a strong allied health workforce with the assistance of CheckUp Australia.

Ms Atkinson said that PICC forms partnerships with organisations who view its business and workforce as essential agents for change in the advancement of closing the gap and can work from a strengths-based perspective.



PICC staff, Rachel Ryan, Winnie Obah, Dianne Foster, Nadine Foster and Tanessa Hunter

‘We form strategic partnerships, always ensuring they meet place-based needs and that we have shared vision and goals, mutual trust, open communication, transparency, and flexibility. Crucially, we also share accountability for the outcomes produced and support each other to meet shared goals and objectives.’

The priority reforms of the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* form part of PICC’s strategic vision and operational development planning, with a commitment to ensuring programs and services are delivered in a community-led, culturally safe, and respectful way.

‘Working from a strengths-based perspective, the foundation of the Palm Island model of care centres on empowerment, self-determination, and placed-based principles, which align to the needs of the Palm Island community,’ Ms Atkinson said.

‘Applying this philosophy enables us to initiate and implement services centred on Closing the Gap priority reforms that support community-led initiatives and strengthen the collective capacity and capability to make a real difference and to close the gap.’

Self-determination and community control are at the heart of PICC’s work and mission. Its Board is comprised of local Palm Islanders to ensure it develops and advances strategic goals that are relevant to the community.

PICC also consults with and supports a local Elders group whose members discuss and raise awareness about local issues affecting community and services and advise on solutions.

The predominantly local home-grown workforce comprises 203 staff, 87 per cent First Nations people with 76 per cent being local Palm Islanders, this helps to ensure services meet the needs of the local community and are delivered in a culturally safe and respectful way while supporting strong shared decision-making structures.

Ms Atkinson said there are many challenges and barriers in the work that PICC does – ‘logistics, geography, unreliability of funding and the costs to deliver services on Palm are prohibitive’.



‘It is also unfortunate that we continue to experience other barriers when dealing with mainstream services such as fear of racism, judgement, inequity and disrespect, this list goes on...,’ Ms Atkinson said.

Among the structural changes that PICC would like to see are funding of services that is consistent with the actual costs of service delivery and contracts that extend more than five years, as short funding periods hinder sustainability.

‘Longer funding agreements would help to better plan, develop and consolidate systems and services and sustain the work we do,’ said Ms Atkinson.

To further support and strength organisational autonomy, PICC is also advocating to be funded in future through the Indigenous Australians Health Programme, like other ACCHOs, rather than through the Queensland Health Townsville Hospital and Health Service.

While there are many barriers, from racism through to funding constraints, PICC and its workforce overcome the issues through strong leadership and governance, forward planning and resilience.

‘The way we address inequity is through delivering services the Bwgcolman Way – this includes the local development of programs and services implemented, monitored and evaluated by local people.’

The defeat of the 2023 Voice Referendum was ‘a major setback’, Ms Atkinson said.

‘However, PICC’s mission, vision and values have not changed. We will continue to serve the community through the strength and resilience of the organisation and its people.’

# Yindjibarndi Aboriginal Corporation

As one of Australia's largest Indigenous-led renewable energy initiatives, Yindjibarndi Energy Corporation (YEC) is proud to be developing large-scale renewable energy projects to decarbonise mining and industrial operations in the Pilbara in north-west Western Australia.

Formed in 2023, YEC is a partnership between Yindjibarndi Aboriginal Corporation (YAC) and international renewable energy company ACEN Corporation. It aims to develop up to 3GW of wind, solar, and energy storage projects within 13,000 square-kilometres of the Yindjibarndi Native Title Determination Areas – producing more energy than is currently generated by WA's largest coal-fired power station.

The Pilbara mining region is home to some of the largest industrial energy users globally, many of which have explicit commitments to decarbonise their operations.

The YEC partnership has been hailed as setting 'a new benchmark for meaningful participation by Indigenous Australians in the country's transition to a clean energy future'.

It's another exciting development for the Yindjibarndi community, which is pursuing self-determination through a strategy centred on its unique '3C' approach – community, culture, and commerce.

'What's needed to build any nation is a program and a system that moves towards self-determination,' said Michael Woodley, YAC CEO and a Yindjibarndi man. 'There needs to be a pathway of growing people into those opportunities and jobs and being a contributor to the nation building model.'

'Our structure is aimed at delivering benefits to all Yindjibarndi people,' he said.

Mr Woodley said the agreement with ACEN means that the Yindjibarndi people can actively participate in Australia's renewable energy transition in a significant way that provides them with long-term economic benefits while ensuring they can protect and preserve all areas within Yindjibarndi Ngurra (Country) that are of cultural, spiritual, and environmental significance to them.

Survey team walking through the proposed site for the Jinbi solar farm



'The partnership will also create sustainable, long-term training and employment opportunities on country for our people, generating benefits now and for generations to come,' he said.

Under the partnership with ACEN, Yindjibarndi people are the drivers of development and have a say every step of the way. That includes Yindjibarndi approval of all proposed project sites on Ngurra (Country), Yindjibarndi equity participation of 25-50 per cent in all projects, preferred contracting for Yindjibarndi-owned businesses, and training and employment opportunities for Yindjibarndi people.

YEC's plans include an initial Stage 1 target of 750MW of combined wind, solar, and battery storage to be in construction within the next few years, representing an investment of more than \$1 billion. Stage 2 will target a further 2GW-3GW of combined wind, solar, and battery storage.

The partnership has invested over \$11 million in project development to date, with more than \$1 million in 2024 directed to the Yindjibarndi community and associated businesses, including heritage and environmental surveys conducted by community members. It has consulted closely with Yindjibarndi board members on what will be involved in building wind turbines, solar arrays and battery storage, the types of roads needed and how much concrete will be required for each wind turbine pad.

This has allowed members to see first-hand the Ngurra that will host these developments and the sensitive areas that will be protected, Mr Woodley said.





Yindjibarndi Elders and community taking part in surveys on Yindjibarndi Ngurra in 2024

‘Community members have been actively engaged in renewable energy project activities that have enriched them culturally and spiritually, and they have gained insights into how they and their family members might participate in the management of the renewable energy projects in the future,’ he explained.

‘As a result – unlike activities such as mining which greatly impact Ngurra – we see the renewable energy business as being very positive for strengthening culture and also generating the types of jobs that community members will value.’

The heritage surveys for the Jinbi project conducted in mid-2024 involved community members walking a line through Ngurra to scan for artefacts and sites of significance. In more rugged Country, members flew in a helicopter to access Ngurra.

Being part of these surveys engendered a great sense of pride and connection for those involved. ‘I feel happy coming out here’, Yindjibarndi man Colin Darrell said.

Yindjibarndi Ranger Charley MacDonald further added that he had learned a great deal about his ancestors’ deep connection to the Jinbi Ngurra: ‘The evidence we found proved they came regularly here and stayed for a while. It wasn’t one-off. The bailer shells are evidence of trade with coastal people’, he said.

During the surveys, the team members also engaged directly with heritage consultants to give instructions on how sites should be protected.

Mr Woodley said the defeat of the 2023 Voice Referendum was a disempowering experience for the Yindjibarndi community. However, he said the community is very resilient and has had to deal with far-greater challenges including extensive mining and destruction of Ngurra, over which it has Exclusive Native Title Possession, without its consent.

In a long-running dispute, YAC has said the Fortescue Metals Group set out on a ‘deliberate strategy’ to divide the Yindjibarndi community to facilitate its development and extraction of more than \$50 billion of iron ore at the mining giant’s Solomon Hub.

Despite such challenges and setbacks, the community manages to move forward with its ambitious, self-determined agenda, looking to partner with developers that have a track record of acting respectfully and professionally towards Traditional Owners, Mr Woodley said.

Knowing that its Ngurra is well located for renewable energy development, YAC made the decision early to lead the way and set out to find a partner with the right capabilities and values. That led it to ACEN which had good results in dealing with an Aboriginal community on Australia’s east coast.

‘A fair settlement with any developer of our Ngurra is at the heart of our pursuit of self-determination,’ Mr Woodley said.

# Leadership and Solidarity


Promoting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership is essential for sustainable outcomes and systemic change. Critical structural reforms prioritising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership requires shifting power from external authorities to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, enabling culturally grounded solutions informed by unique governance structures and lived experiences. Leadership in this context emphasises self-determination and the involvement of individuals and organisations closely connected to the issues they address.

The growth and development of the Aboriginal community controlled sector has been and remains critical to development Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, a profound expression of nation-building and cultural resurgence. For over 50 years, ACCOs have demonstrated how culturally informed, community-led services improve health and wellbeing. By placing decision-making and service delivery in the hands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, these organisations highlight the importance of grassroots leadership and restoring agency to communities. Their success underscores the value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership in addressing complex social challenges through culturally informed, effective solutions, and demonstrates the unique role of allyship and partnerships in driving meaningful reform.

A thriving community controlled sector ensures Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices guide decision-making. Solidarity among communities strengthens collective advocacy for systemic reform, sharing knowledge to build resilience and drive change. Solidarity between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous people and organisations is vital for effective change because it fosters mutual understanding, amplifies our voices, and strengthens collective advocacy for critical reforms. This requires a commitment from all stakeholders to work together in solidarity, valuing cultural knowledge, and prioritizing community-driven solutions. Sustainable progress depends on embedding these principles into every aspect of program design, delivery, and governance. Solidarity between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous people and organisations is vital for effective change because it fosters mutual understanding, amplifies our voices, and strengthens collective advocacy for systemic reform.

A thriving community controlled sector plays a pivotal role in closing the gap services by fostering culturally safe and locally driven approaches. These initiatives go beyond service delivery; they restore community agency, build resilience, and emphasise holistic wellbeing. Central to these efforts are decision-making processes grounded in cultural protocols and community-defined governance structures.





Achieving systemic change and closing the gap requires empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices, expertise and leadership, and fostering authentic partnerships.

However, significant barriers persist. Government rhetoric often fails to translate into meaningful action, with siloed frameworks, short-term funding cycles, and bureaucratic practices undermining community autonomy and progress. Communities express frustration with consultative processes that lack transparency, accountability, and transformative power. Sustainable, long-term approaches are essential for dismantling entrenched power dynamics and fostering enduring partnerships between communities and governments. Without such approaches, inequities persist, leaving grassroots communities to bear the burden of change with limited decision-making power or consistent support.

Leadership and solidarity in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled sector are not abstract concepts but practical strategies for systemic change. By centring our voices, these organisations demonstrate the transformative potential of collective action to secure the future of their communities. Through leadership, community and ally solidarity, self-determination and cultural continuity, these efforts build a future where our communities lead the way in closing the gap and achieving long-term health and wellbeing outcomes.

*'Data clearly demonstrates that where ACCOs are embedded in communities, health and social and emotional wellbeing outcomes are vastly improved across a range of indicators. Our leaders, our communities, aren't sitting around waiting for something to happen. We are listening to our people and driving reform. Government needs to meet us where we are, relinquish their strangle hold on our innovation, and let us lead and thrive.'*

**- Karl Briscoe, CEO of NAATSIHWP and Co-Chair**





Families at Jilkminggan Community, Northern Territory

## Wunan Aboriginal Corporation

A unique East Kimberley organisation is showing how Aboriginal and non-Indigenous groups can work in authentic partnerships that respect Aboriginal leadership, understand power imbalances, demonstrate solidarity and value the cultural determinants of health and wellbeing.

The Wunan Foundation was established in 1997 by respected Gija leader Ian Trust AO. Based in Kununurra in remote Western Australia, it delivers services and programs to community across education, employment, leadership, housing, health, and commercial activities and investment.

Elizabeth Cox, a Gija-Walmajarri woman who is General Manager of Early Years at Wunan, said the organisation is dedicated to driving transformative socioeconomic change for Aboriginal people. Its name, Wunan, reflects the traditional cultural practice from East Kimberley of fair trade, care, and sharing – Aboriginal currency.

Wunan’s vision is to empower Aboriginal people by driving sustainable opportunities, building a future in the East Kimberley where Aboriginal people can enjoy stronger, more-independent lives and delivering measurable outcomes to achieve Closing the Gap targets, she said.

Its strength lies in its long-lasting partnerships with community members, the business sector, and government agencies.

Yet, while it sees progress, still too often it finds governments insist on trying to put ‘a square peg through a round hole’ in their funding for Aboriginal organisations, applying parameters and restrictions that don’t always align with community needs or aspirations.

At the same time, non-Indigenous organisations can bring a host of assumptions to partnerships, including the notion of ‘we’re good at this part, and you’re good at that part’.

‘Aboriginal team members bring a wealth of knowledge about culture, history, language, and non-verbal communication, but also understand the business and operational needs and know how to bring people together to get a good outcome,’ Elizabeth said.

‘Aboriginal leadership to me means that I can walk in both worlds,’ she said.

In recent years, Wunan was invited by the Department of Social Services to apply for a grant to increase the involvement of ACCOs in the delivery of services in the child and family sector, under the *Stronger ACCOs, Stronger Families* project. Part 1 of the project was successfully delivered by SNAICC, which undertook significant research and consultation to explore barriers for ACCOs in accessing government funding.

Wunan delivered Part 2 of the project across 12 locations around Australia, where non-ACCOs were delivering early childhood programs to communities that have significant participation from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

Wunan’s project team, led by Elizabeth and Elise O’Sullivan, conducted workshops between ACCO and non-ACCO partners to help them map out shared values, visions, activities, and ways of measuring impact, aiming to either share delivery or transition services over to the ACCO partner.

It saw countless examples of strong Aboriginal leadership, from big, well-established ACCOs in metro locations to small, emerging ACCOs in extremely remote locations.



One strong example of this was, in the middle of a workshop in Adelaide (Kurna Country), some of the more-established Aboriginal organisations offered start-up funds to support the smaller, emerging ACCOs to get on their feet. This was a powerful expression that followed months of advocacy for government to support internal capacity building funding for emerging ACCOs.

The program also welcomed solidarity from non-ACCO partners, demonstrated through their commitment to ‘reducing any power imbalances that might be in play between themselves and their ACCO partner, to preferencing the knowledge and practices of their ACCO partner, and ensuring their own practices were delivered in a culturally safe manner’.

In some locations, the partners built agreements to co-deliver (and subsequently transition) the early childhood programs that were previously delivered by the non-ACCO partner and integrated the ACCO partner into the governance model to enable more power and voice in decision-making.

In others, stronger partnerships have been forged by the boards and senior leadership teams of the non-ACCO partners spending time out on Country, listening to the stories of staff, getting to know community and ultimately better understanding the irreplaceable role that ACCOs play.

‘One of the most important outcomes of this work is having all members of the partnership come to fully understand that there is a quality that can’t be replicated when services are delivered by community, for community,’ Elizabeth said.

For Elise, Wunan’s General Manager of Community Services, who is of Polish and Irish heritage, one of the key lessons for non-Indigenous leaders is ‘knowing when to take a step back’.

‘It took me some time to realise that the ways of working I’d always leant on – leading work myself

and then checking it with my team for feedback and input – isn’t the best approach in the community space,’ she said.

‘Working with Elizabeth and other Aboriginal leaders has taught me that each part of the process needs to be done in partnership – it’s not enough to just consult and then move to the next step. It’s a much more collective way of working, rather than the individual way I was used to. It’s about bringing people together and taking yourself out of the equation but knowing where your skills and capabilities can add value to elevate the voice of your colleagues or community.’

Both Elizabeth and Elise talk about the devastation and shock that the Voice Referendum result wrought on the local community and those they worked with on *Stronger ACCOs, Stronger Families*.

It felt like ‘a death in the family’, although ultimately Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people ‘did what we always do’, Elizabeth observed. ‘We picked ourselves up, dusted ourselves off and got on with it.’

In doing so, they have witnessed strengthened resolve from Aboriginal organisations and leaders – a shared sense of ‘if government can’t help us, we’re going to have to do this on our own’.

But that needs authentic partnership and solidarity from non-Indigenous organisations, Elizabeth said.

‘Change needs to start from the top for any organisation or community, with boards and senior leadership teams working closely together – and with community.’

‘Aboriginal and non-Indigenous people alike need to be leaders and advocates for our community. We need allies and the onus shouldn’t just be on Aboriginal people to make change – we need to work together to do it in partnership.’

Group workshop with Nyalka Women’s Aboriginal Corporation in Milingimbi, Northern Territory



# Justice Reinvestment Network Australia

Justice Reinvestment Network Australia (JRNA) is working to radically change how First Nations communities come together to self-determine solutions, particularly for addressing the disproportionate incarceration of children and adults.

JRNA's powerful national work comes at a challenging time, with true change held back by 'business as usual' approaches by governments to closing the gap and harmful and misinformed public discourse that undermines the true strength and power of communities.

In the wake of the Voice referendum, JRNA's Co-Chair Ms Aysha Kerr says that deficit discourse is shifting critical policies. Jurisdictions like Queensland and the Northern Territory are moving towards punitive criminal justice system responses, including reducing the minimum age of criminal responsibility to ten years, tightening bail laws, and applying 'adult time for adult crime' for children.

'This shift has been felt deeply by our communities, and its impact cannot be understated,' Ms Kerr said. "However, it has also lit the fire in our bellies that our ancestors and Old People have handed down to reclaim control of our power, resources and decision-making'

JRNA was incorporated last year as a community controlled organisation after working as a collective on justice reinvestment initiatives for nearly a decade, helping to empower First Nations communities to advance local solutions to keep people out of the criminal justice system. Its collective work has been instrumental in shaping and informing the focus of the National Justice Reinvestment Program so that it looks towards a holistic understanding of what brings First Nations people into contact with the justice system and what's needed to strengthen community responses to local social, emotional, and cultural wellbeing.

Maranguka was the first Aboriginal-led place-based model of justice reinvestment in Australia, established in Bourke in north-west New South Wales in 2011. It is the founding member of JRNA and has, since its inception, reduced youth crime and improved community wellbeing in Bourke. A KPMG Impact Assessment in 2018 highlighted several key outcomes from 2016 to 2017:

- 38 per cent reduction in charges across the top five juvenile offence categories
- 23 per cent reduction in reported incidents of domestic violence
- 31 per cent increase in the retention rate for Year 12 students.

KPMG estimated that the gross impact of the changes in Bourke in 2017 was worth \$3.1 million, mostly associated with the justice system and five times greater than Maranguka's operational costs that year.

Many more outstanding Justice Reinvestment initiatives have been established across the country, from a grassroots initiative by the Martu Justice Reinvestment Tribal Council in Newman, Western Australia to the Justice Reinvestment Partnership led by the Minjerrabah Moorgumpin Elders-in-Council in the Quandamooka region of Queensland.

'Justice Reinvestment is more than a program,' JRNA Co-Chair Devon Cuimara said.

'It is a way of working that shifts power, resources and decision-making to First Nations communities to self-determine long-term responses that improve justice outcomes.

'These responses include culturally informed community-governance models, sustainable economic initiatives, community-led research and evaluation, and community-led collaborative partnerships that uphold data sovereignty and the protection of our old ways of working.'

JRNA is a national community controlled organisation, with a fully First Nations Board and membership drawn from grassroots communities which are leading justice reinvestment approaches. Its aim is to elevate members' voices into calls for systemic and structural change and its directors chair Communities of Practice meetings to ensure their work remains collaborative, transparent, representative, and accountable, and they continue to hold the trust of the communities they represent.

JRNA says that its communities may not use the formal language of Closing the Gap Priority Reform 1, but they have been consistently calling for, and working on, the critical shift in power that is required to ensure structural and systems change.

'We're finding the ways for governments to meet directly with our grassroots members to advance self-determined solutions to our concerns, so grassroots people do not have to ask others to speak on their behalf, and so that grassroots voices do not get lost in the bureaucracy,' Mr Cuimara said.





Martu Justice Reinvestment Tribal Council in Newman, Western Australia

However, while relationships are strengthening with some governments, communities still face barriers in all jurisdictions to realising full self-determined community control.

JRNA says its members' experiences echo last year's Productivity Commission finding that Australian governments have generally failed to take meaningful and transformative action on the comprehensive and complex systems change necessary to meet Closing the Gap targets, including Targets 10 and 11 that focus on reducing incarceration of First Nations people.

It's a failure, that 'continues to lay responsibility at the feet of our communities', when systems change 'cannot be the responsibility of our local grassroots communities without access to the tables, forums and partnerships where decisions are being made about us, without us.'

Among the multiple barriers is that governments continue to fund justice reinvestment work on short-term siloed grants funding cycles. Lack of progress towards shared decision-making has resulted in partnerships with communities that are primarily consultative and 'attach no accountability or transparency to government around the decisions that are made and how they cause harm to communities'. Progress is also needed on Priority Reform 4 on data-sharing with communities.

'Old ways of doing business are being upheld through reporting requirements within many government-funded initiatives that actively undermine the data sovereignty and cultural and intellectual property rights of communities,' Mr Cuimara said. 'That comes along with a lack of commitment to embedding community-defined measures of success.'

'Together this sets up communities to fail when actions beyond their control measure their success, when the government does not adequately share data, power, resources and decision-making, and when the actions taken and decisions made by the government hold limited transparency and accountability to the communities they are obligated to serve.'

'Greater respect is needed for grassroots community voices closest to the issue, knowing what works for their communities, and having the most investment in the outcome,' Ms Kerr said.

'We envision self-determining First Nations communities with the resources, power, and decision-making at the grassroots level. Led by the grassroots people, we aim to create healing, restoration, well-being, and collective strength as true justice our way.'

'Best practice for us would be to step beyond "shared decision-making" to enable genuine self-determination according to each community's own community cultural governance structures and protocols, connected to expressions of nation-building.'

# National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ageing and Aged Care Council

‘Aboriginal people have the solutions to their own challenges; they just need support to navigate systemic barriers.’

That’s the key message from Western Desert Nganampa Walytja Palyantja (Purple House) in Mparntwe/Alice Springs.

Purple House is a landmark service that has led huge improvements to survival rates on dialysis in Central Australia over the past two decades with a model of care based around family, Country and compassion.

It is also one of 50 members of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ageing and Aged Care Council (NATSIAACC), the national peak body for First Nations ageing and aged care – an independent voice set up to improve the care that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and older people receive.

Launched in 2022, NATSIAACC works with its members across Australia to ensure Elders and older people can access support and care that is culturally safe, trauma-aware and healing-informed, and recognises the importance of their personal connections to community and Country and/or Island Home.

NATSIAACC’s work is critical and timely, in the absence of a Closing the Gap target on ageing, particularly now that all Stolen Generation Survivors are over 50 years of age and therefore all eligible for aged care services. ‘Now more than ever, it is paramount that aged care service providers deliver care that enables dignity, self-determination and healing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people,’ said NATSIAACC Chief Executive Officer Lisa Orcher.

This is a major challenge, given NATSIAACC’s members and their communities view care and leadership differently than governments and many mainstream services.

Decisions are made as a collective, with leadership rooted in unity, connection, trust, identity, understanding and self-determination, where First Nations voices are respected and uplifted.



NATSIAACC Founding Board of Directors at Parliament House, Canberra

They know that solidarity involves working towards a common goal, supporting each other through challenges and times of change, reconciliation, cultural respect and recognition to ensure traditional values and practices are honoured, and that collaborations and partnerships strengthen community networks.

‘By working as a collective, communities are stronger,’ said Ms Orcher.

At Purple House, for example, Aboriginal leadership is embedded in all levels of operations in what is a family environment, steeped in community.

It has processes in place to safeguard Aboriginal knowledge and culture, offers an incentive for staff who are language speakers, and its Indigenous engagement officer oversees cultural matters to ensure services align with community needs.

As well as supporting patients to return to Country for cultural events, Purple House provides strong support to Elders and older people who are knowledge holders, cultural translators, educators and community leaders.

Another member, the Central Desert Regional Council, also seeks to be grounded in community, with an Indigenous strategy director leading a team of outreach workers, all of whom are recognised people from community.

The Council, which works with communities north of Mparntwe, holds local authority meetings within community, recruits staff from local communities and ensures they have strong career pathways to follow, including through an emerging leaders’ program and mentoring of youth who may become aged care workers in their communities.



Lisa Orcher, Chief Executive  
Officer of NATSIAACC,  
presenting at the 2022 launch



Queensland-based member Pinangba has been developing a cultural governance framework, led and facilitated by First Nations staff, and will be establishing community reference groups to lead care service development – self-determination in action.

All of this is a challenge in and for mainstream systems, meaning NATSIAACC's members must act as a bridge between two ways of thinking and working – community ways and government ways – to ensure First Nations Elders and older people receive the care they want and need.

While governments view aged care as care for an individual, 'it is within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture to look after each other and provide holistic care, and this includes making sure people around an older person are okay,' said Ms Orcher.

'Our members assist community members with a variety of issues, such as housing, food, financial security, family and social support, cultural responsibilities and language barriers.'

However, too often still, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities must conduct business in ways determined by governments, rather than governments adjusting to how communities work.

'We should not have to always fit government moulds,' said Ms Orcher.

NATSIAACC's members have sought to change that by following community ways and translating this into government requirements. For example, at Pinangba's Star of the Sea Aged Care Facility on Thursday Island, when conducting room visits to get feedback from residents, visits are provided in language and follow community gender protocols.

Workforce shortages are a challenge for members, particularly those in rural and remote areas. A shortage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

health workers and practitioners, clinicians, and Traditional Healers limits access to culturally appropriate care, leading to an unsustainable reliance on transient and expensive contract workers who are often non-Indigenous.

Central Desert Regional Council commits to investing in the local workforce, by recruiting and mentoring community members. Purple House focuses on staff retention by providing flexibility, staff support groups (enabling trust and autonomy) and induction and training in working with community for new staff (including learning Pintupi Luritja).

But systemic change is needed, with members urging that they be able to deliver services according to their local community's customs and culture, with those communities leading and determining the care they receive.

Members are calling for:

- stronger investment and support for ACCOs
- increased flexibility in service provision and reporting requirements
- improved data sovereignty, data access and data management, to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to be in control of and understand what is happening/what is needed in their communities
- recognition of lived experience when recruiting staff
- ongoing professional development opportunities for staff
- improved communication between service providers.

With no Closing the Gap targets specific to ageing, there is a risk that the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and older people are subject to political whims depending on the government in power.



## Reform and Transformation

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across the country are leading the way in transforming systems and developing solutions, policies, and programs that improve the health and wellbeing of communities. This is despite the severe and ongoing impacts of racism, which continue to generate significant risks to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's health and futures.

Across Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples continue to advocate for the full implementation of the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* and its four Priority Reforms. Our communities continue to fight for reform and transformation of mainstream systems and structures, in line with Priority Reform 3, which commits parties to 'systematic and structural transformation of mainstream government organisations to improve accountability and respond to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples'.<sup>20</sup> Addressing data gaps and improving collections, access, management, and use of data, in line with the principles of data sovereignty, is imperative for transforming how government collects, disaggregates, distributes and shares the data that is necessary to inform local and shared decision-making in delivering closing the gap services.

Transforming systems to identify and eliminate racism, embed and practice meaningful cultural safety and increase accountability across the board, is critical to not only meaningfully addressing the impacts of racism on health and wellbeing of our peoples, but also in addressing the plethora of challenges facing our communities, such as climate change and youth justice.

*'Transforming systems means changing the way that governments work with our people, organisations, and communities. It means listening to us, embedding our ways of knowing, being and doing, and actively unlearning process, systems and ideologies that were designed to hold us back. Equally importantly, embedding and practising cultural safety is central to any good partnership, co-design, or engagement practice. It must be woven through the design and implementation of health policies, structures, and programs that affect our people.'*

– **Paul Stewart, Lowitja Institute CEO**



Alongside cultural safety there must also be a commitment to truth-telling. The urgent need for truth-telling was evident during the Referendum campaign in 2023, with misinformation and disinformation running rampant about the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*. Truth-telling is required now more than ever, and it is not only an essential ingredient to transformation and reform, but also to healing. We continue our fight for the *Uluru Statement* and its three pillars, Voice, Treaty and Truth. Despite the Referendum outcome, our communities continue to strive to reinforce these pillars by keeping the fire burning.

This theme and its case studies demonstrate why effective transformation and reform is necessary to close the gap, and highlights how organisations, programs, and services work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, in respectful partnerships, to transform government organisations. They demonstrate positive and strengths-based reform, highlight the role and the importance of accurate data collection, information sharing, and the need to eliminate racism across health and other social and emotional wellbeing services – all necessary reforms to progress closing the gap.





# Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia

Gayaa Dhuwi has been making great strides over the past year in mainstream agencies and services towards better understanding what social and emotional wellbeing is, and how fundamental it is to reform the Australian mental health system.

Gayaa Dhuwi is the peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing, mental health, and suicide prevention. It is charged with leading work under the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* on Outcome 14 – that ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people enjoy high levels of social and emotional wellbeing’ – and the target for significant and sustained reduction in suicide of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people towards zero.

‘That’s strong cultural work for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, but it involves challenging and transforming government organisations and policies’, said Rachel Fishlock, a proud Yuin woman and Gayaa Dhuwi Chief Executive Officer.

‘Getting people to understand that social and emotional wellbeing isn’t ‘just’ mental health is also a challenge we face,’ she said. ‘We tackle this by developing resources, building on relationships we have with mainstream stakeholders, and reiterating the whole of person concept that is social and emotional wellbeing.’

‘The cornerstone of our work is about ensuring an appropriate balance of clinical and culturally informed mental health system responses, including by providing access to cultural healing in mental health.’

‘The widescale systemic change that this requires will result in a massive transformation of mainstream organisations.’

Priority Reform 3 of the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* calls for the transformation of mainstream institutions so that governments, their organisations and their institutions are accountable for closing the gap and are culturally safe and responsive to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including through the services they fund.

Ms Fishlock said progress is slow on Outcome 14, but Gayaa Dhuwi has seen a general acceptance and the start of understanding from government on the importance of social and emotional wellbeing and of culturally safe and appropriate mental health services.

That, for example, is to be seen in the Federal Government’s welcome determination to move forward with and launch the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Strategy* (NATSISPS) while the mainstream *National Suicide Prevention Strategy* goes through further consultation.

‘The NATSISPS is an example of how our work will have significant impact on all determinants of wellbeing for our people,’ she said.

Gayaa Dhuwi was founded on the back of the extensive work of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership in Mental Health (NATSILMH).

Its work is guided by the tenets of the *Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Declaration*, developed by NATSILMH, which states that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander concepts of social and emotional wellbeing, mental health and healing should be recognised across the Australian mental health system.

As a member of the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations, Gayaa Dhuwi co-chairs the Closing the Gap Social and Emotional Wellbeing Policy Partnership, with Professor Pat Dudgeon AM at the helm. The policy partnership approaches social and emotional wellbeing in a broad and holistic way, looking at prevention, protective factors, mental health, suicide prevention and support after suicide.

This is critical transformative work, with the partnership bringing all jurisdictions together with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parties to share decision-making.

‘They are not roundtables or advisory groups – they are an opportunity to work in true partnership to achieve the outcomes outlined in the *National Agreement*, changing the way that government organisations work by transforming the power imbalance and ensuring all voices are heard,’ Ms Fishlock said.

‘Decision-making is by consensus which, again, is transformative and is a large-scale shift from the previous ways governments have made decisions on behalf of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.’



Social Emotional Wellbeing Policy Partnership Group meeting on Kaurna Country (Adelaide, South Australia)

Ms Fishlock said the *Gayaa Dhuwi Declaration Framework and Implementation Plan*, designed to translate the principles of the declaration into practical, impactful actions, and the refresh of the NATSISPS, are two great examples of the transformation of mainstream organisations being driven by Gayaa Dhuwi and the SEWB Policy Partnership.

They also speak to the great strides made over the past 12 months by Gayaa Dhuwi, which was able, through building relationships, to convene an expert advisory group to provide input and guidance into the plan from relevant state and federal agencies. That helped to ensure its actions were ‘realistic, achievable according to governments, and appropriate according to community’, she said.

Similarly, when developing the NATSISPS, government stakeholders were engaged through the SEWB Policy Partnership and the Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Senior Officials Group. Gayaa Dhuwi also worked with the National Suicide Prevention Office to ensure the National Suicide Prevention Strategy aligned with the NATSISPS.

Through the 2023 Voice Referendum process, Gayaa Dhuwi sought to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were given proper social and emotional wellbeing attention, resources and expertise.

However, the ‘increase in misinformation, disinformation and hate speech against our people during the campaign had a significant impact on the social and emotional wellbeing of our communities’, Ms Fishlock said.

‘This caused distress and difficulties, but we recognise the resilience, strength, and wisdom of Indigenous cultures and knowledge systems that can support intergenerational healing and wellbeing.’

During and after the campaign, Gayaa Dhuwi developed resources to support social and emotional wellbeing and, alongside Black Dog Institute and other organisations, launched the *Good Yarn Guidelines* and *Respectful Referendum Pledge*. It hosted two webinars after the vote, to reflect on mental health and wellbeing impacts.

Looking ahead, Ms Fishlock said Gayaa Dhuwi faces big challenges in leading change in the way governments work with mob, particularly where governments want to do things ‘the way they’ve always been done’. However, she said the relationships built through the SEWB Policy Partnership will help drive the necessary transformation.

‘We leverage the relationships we’ve built and our understanding of the ways in which the machination of government works to influence decision-making and ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices are heard,’ she said.

‘What would help going forward is simple and clear: ‘ongoing and secure funding for all community controlled organisations and consistency of those in government positions with whom we work’.

# Ngaweeyan Maar-oo

Transformation of government structures and processes is at the heart of the work being undertaken in Victoria by Ngaweeyan Maar-oo, recognising the urgent need to embed long-term funding, community leadership, cultural safety, and data collection and management in a volatile and worrying political climate.

Ngaweeyan Maar-oo, which means ‘voice of and from the people’ in Gunditjmara dialect, is the Victorian Government’s formal implementation partner on the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*.

Established in 2021, it comprises representatives across 14 sectors, delegates from eight of Victoria’s Aboriginal Governance Forums and is headed by co-chairs Nerita Waight, CEO of Victorian Aboriginal Legal Services, and Michael Graham, CEO of Victorian Aboriginal Health Services.

A key part of Ngaweeyan Maar-oo’s work is to work in partnership with the Victorian Government to transform the practices, policies and processes under which the machinery of government operates.

‘This includes working closely with departments to identify where ACCOs can be involved in the development of budget bids and policy submissions from the beginning,’ Ms Waight said.

‘Ngaweeyan Maar-oo is hopeful that this work will result in a change to the process through which bids and policies are developed to ensure that at all stages, governments are strongly engaged with ACCOs and communities.’

The group also hopes that strengthened partnership models developed in line with Priority Reform 1 of the *National Agreement* will enable cultural safety, culturally informed processes and community-led decision making to be systemically embedded in how governments do business.

Work is underway to develop the next *Victorian Closing the Gap Implementation Plan*. Following extensive consultation, Mr Graham reflects that ‘Ngaweeyan Maar-oo wants better outcomes for our communities and to make sure that these outcomes are measured appropriately and supported by robust evidence and data.’

As part of this work, the Victorian Department of Health and Department of Government Services has partnered with Ngaweeyan Maar-oo and its members to address specific data gaps around life expectancy in Victoria, he said.

‘This work, while in early stages, is intended to form the blueprint for addressing other data gaps, including in relation to suicide data and supporting collection for the new inland waters target. It’s also important for transforming how government collects data more generally in relation to Aboriginal people and communities,’ he said.

By centring culture as a protective factor, Ngaweeyan Maar-oo aims to ensure policies and programs are not only culturally informed but also led by Aboriginal communities. ‘We want to do more than close the gap. We want to set higher aspirations to build generations of strong, proud Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.’

While efforts under Priority Reform 3 have improved cultural safety within government structures, more work is needed to dismantle colonial systems that were established to disenfranchise, dispossess, and disadvantage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Ms Waight emphasises, ‘Transforming individual roles within government is a start, but we must change the structures designed to disenfranchise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.’

Mr Graham said Ngaweeyan Maar-oo is optimistic that this work, will centre not only culture, but the importance of Country, community and language to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

However, following the outcome of the Voice Referendum national momentum has slowed. ‘Victoria is often seen as a leader in driving effective, equitable and strengths-based policy and investment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, but we still need the support and increased commitment from the Australian Government towards implementation the *National Agreement*,’ he said.

Ngaweeyan Maar-oo is also deeply concerned at the discourse and misinformation surrounding the Voice that has led to many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities and organisations facing overt racism and discrimination.





2024 Victorian Closing the Gap Partnership Forum with Minister Natalie Hutchins held at the 2nd established ACCO in Australia – Victorian Aboriginal Health Service 'Charcoal Lane'

'We have seen governments wind back of commitments, such as increasing the minimum age of criminal responsibility in Victoria, which has a direct and disproportionate impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Victorians,' Ms Waight said.

There is also a risk that changes in government, both nationally and in Victoria, might significantly change the policy and funding landscape for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities and organisations.

Ngaweeyan Maar-oo and its members are exploring ways to 'future proof' the progress made so far and minimise any impacts that a change of government might have.

'This includes cementing long-term funding, urging bipartisan support of key policy commitments and demonstrating the economic and social benefits of ACCOs, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and culture to shift from the deficit narrative to one of strength,' Mr Graham said.

To strengthen Ngaweeyan Maar-oo's organisation, alliances, and the broader community it serves, it has outlined five key areas needing attention and investment:

- **Secure and sustainable funding:** without guaranteed financial resources, ACCOs can't plan and implement projects with the stability needed for lasting impact. Sustainable and stable resourcing would allow it to plan and execute policy and service delivery across the short-, medium- and long-term.

- **Greater decision-making power and autonomy:** while the group and its members have deep expertise and a strong connection to community, many decisions affecting its work are made by government with varying levels of consultation. This can result in delays and compromises, where community insights and priorities are not fully integrated into programs and policies. While there are marked improvements in Victoria with formal partnership arrangements in place, significant barriers remain.
- **Strengthening government relationships and support:** Ngaweeyan Maar-oo said varying levels of readiness and commitment among federal, state, and local governments are a barrier to consistent progress and meaningful change. To address this, it has prioritised building strong relationships with key stakeholders across all levels of government and with mainstream advocacy bodies, tailored to the different jurisdictions and working to 'ensure our voice is heard in decision-making processes'.
- **Community-led solutions and empowerment:** strengthening community ties and ensuring that initiatives are community-led is critical. Empowering local leaders, community organisations, and families to take ownership of initiatives fosters pride and agency, and ensure solutions are culturally appropriate, sustainable, and directly address the needs and aspirations of the community.
- **Research and data-driven decision-making:** high-quality data is critical to understanding community needs, tracking progress, and advocating for the resources and policy changes required to address systemic inequities.

# Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency

In 2023, a Canberra-based non-Indigenous doctor was banned for 12 months from providing any health service in a landmark anti-racism case brought by the Medical Board of Australia (MBA) to the ACT Civil and Administrative Tribunal.

The Tribunal found that ‘offensive and discriminatory’ behaviour by the doctor towards Indigenous ophthalmologist Associate Professor Kristopher Rallah-Baker constituted professional misconduct.

The banned doctor admitted his conduct towards Associate Professor Rallah-Baker, a Yuggera, Warangoo and Wiradjuri man and former president of the Australian Indigenous Doctors’ Association (AIDA), was culturally unsafe, insulting, and offensive.

It was the first case brought in Australia under critical world-first legislative reform to the Health Practitioner Regulation National Law, which is overseen by the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (Ahpra) and governs the National Registration and Accreditation Scheme under which most members of the health workforce are registered.

The latest medical training survey from 2024 found 54 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander trainees and 44 per cent of interns had experienced or witnessed bullying, discrimination, and harassment, which included racism.

Ahpra and the National Boards set the standards required across 16 regulated professions, including dental, medical, nursing and midwifery, allied health, and paramedicine.

The ACT ruling was welcomed by the co-chairs of Ahpra’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Strategy Group – Birri-Gubba and South Sea Islander woman, Associate Professor Carmen Parter and Kuku Yalanji man, Karl Briscoe, CEO of the National Association of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers and Practitioners.

‘It sends a clear message that racism and discrimination towards fellow professionals will not be tolerated,’ they said.

Former Ahpra CEO Martin Fletcher echoed their words.

‘These reforms are underpinned by undisputed evidence that racism in all its forms – systemic, institutional and interpersonal – is harmful,’ he said.

‘The tribunal’s finding further highlights that racist and discriminatory behaviours will not be tolerated in Australia’s health system.’

The outcome was vindicating for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples whose experiences of racism in healthcare settings, as a consumer or practitioner, are minimised or refuted entirely, said Jayde Fuller, Gamilaroi woman and National Director of Ahpra’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Strategy Unit.

‘It also shows that transformative change is possible when Indigenous voices are not just heard but centred,’ she said.

Significant anti-racism work within Ahpra has been led over recent years by its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Strategy Group, a strategic partnership between the National Scheme and the National Health Leadership Forum (now known as the National Indigenous Health Leadership Alliance) and its four key national Indigenous health workforce organisations.


The Strategy Group began advocating to health practitioner colleges, accreditation agencies and Boards on the need to use the levers within the National Scheme to enact change and address racism in the health professions. Collectively it pushed for a cultural safety definition and implementation within the National Scheme, which led to the close working relationship that now exists.

The National Scheme’s *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health and Cultural Safety Strategy 2020-2025* includes a guiding principle that contributes to the elimination of racism. It also aligns to Priority Reform 3 of the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* on the transformation wanted in government institutions to address the barriers to delivery of culturally safe health care.

One of the strategy’s key deliverables is the Culturally Safe Notifications Project, which aims to improve the cultural safety of the notifications or complaints process for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

It is overseen by the Culturally Safe Notifications Working Group, established in 2022, comprised of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Scheme members, and currently chaired by Kabbi Kabbi woman, Paramedicine Board member and lawyer Linda Renouf.





Members of the Culturally Safe Notifications Working Group presenting about the project at the Indigenous Allied Health Association (IAHA) Conference in 2023

To inform that work, an evaluation of the existing notifications or complaints process was undertaken last year by Yardhura Walani, the National Centre for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health and Wellbeing Research at the Australian National University. The evaluation involved a scoping review and interviews with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples who had sought to make complaints.

In essence, the evaluation report provided four key recommendations and indicators to support culturally safe notifications for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples:

- Improve engagement with the notification process (for example, raising awareness among patients, increasing accessibility, and taking feedback from notifiers about the process).
- Make the notifications systems culturally safe (including employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and providing cultural safety advice and support to notifiers).
- Establish systems to reduce colonial load (for example, through organisational responsibility and cultural safety and awareness training for all).
- Increase transparency and accountability guided by the principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Governance (such as improving data quality and reminding practitioners of their obligations under legislation).

In recognition of the need for self-determination, Ahpra has also established culturally safe decision-making committees of the Medical Board and the Nursing and Midwifery Boards of Australia including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as members. These committees are instrumental in centring Indigenous knowledge and lived experience within regulatory processes.

Ahpra and the National Boards also partnered with PricewaterhouseCoopers Indigenous Consulting for the delivery of Moong-moong-gak cultural safety training to 1,800 of its regulatory administrators the first of its kind globally, and which has now been brought in-house at Ahpra to build a sustainable and iterative delivery model.

At this point in time, Ahpra understands that transformative work in the sector is far from over but believes that the process of change to date provides a clear pathway.

‘Systemic reform requires ongoing evaluation, sustained allyship, and unwavering commitment to equity,’ Ms Fuller said. ‘By embracing Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing, regulatory bodies can move beyond performative gestures to create systems that are truly inclusive and safe. As regulators, practitioners, and communities, we must seize this moment to build a healthcare system where racism has no place, and cultural safety is the norm.’



## Conclusion

This report demonstrates the critical work of our communities and organisations and sends a clear message to governments that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, leaders, organisations, and our allies will continue to hold them to account for their progress, or lack thereof, towards meeting their commitments under the *National Agreement*. Ensuring the survival, dignity and wellbeing of our people requires significant action, reflected within the case studies.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have the knowledge and solutions required to close the gap. The case studies herein are examples of the meaningful and empowering work being done to improve the lives, wellbeing, and futures of our peoples. They exemplify Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership towards eliminating racism, holding governments to account, and empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led reform and transformation. This report also shares developments in the fight towards Voice, Treaty, and Truth, and the ways in which our peoples are pushing forward despite the outcome of the 2023 Referendum. These examples send a clear message to governments: that we will not rest until we achieve justice and healing for our peoples and will work relentlessly to transform the systems and processes that hold us and our communities back.

We urge governments to implement all recommendations outlined in this report and call on allies and all Australians to support us in our efforts towards self-determination.





# Acronyms

**ACCOs:** Aboriginal community controlled organisations

**ACCHOs:** Aboriginal community controlled health organisations

**ACCHSs:** Aboriginal community controlled health services

**AHPRA:** Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency

**AHRC:** Australian Human Rights Commission

**NAATSIHWP:** National Association of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers and Practitioners

**NATSIAACC:** National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ageing and Aged Care Council

**NATSILMH:** National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership in Mental Health

**NATSISPS:** National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Strategy

**NDIA:** National Disability Insurance Agency

**NDIS:** National Disability Insurance Scheme


**PICC:** Palm Island Community Company

**RACGP:** Royal Australian College of General Practitioners

**UNDRIP:** United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

**YAC:** Yindjibarndi Aboriginal Corporation

**YEC:** Yindjibarndi Energy Corporation



# Close the Gap Campaign Alliance Group Members

1. Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council of New South Wales
2. Aboriginal Health Council of South Australia
3. Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTAR)
4. Australasian College for Emergency Medicine
5. Australian College of Midwives
6. Australian College of Nursing
7. Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine
8. Australian Council of Social Service
9. Australian Healthcare and Hospitals Association
10. Australian Human Rights Commission
11. Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association
12. Australian Indigenous Psychologists' Association
13. Australian Medical Association
14. Australian Physiotherapy Association
15. Australian Student and Novice Nurse Association
16. Beyond Blue
17. Black Dog Institute
18. Cancer Council of Australia
19. Community Mental Health Australia
20. Congress of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nurses and Midwives
21. CRANaplus
22. Expert Adviser – Alcohol and other drugs, Professor Pat Dudgeon
23. Expert Adviser – Epidemiology and public health, Professor Ian Ring
24. First Peoples Disability Network
25. First Nations Eye Health Alliance
26. Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia
27. Healing Foundation
28. Heart Foundation Australia
29. Indigenous Allied Health Australia
30. Indigenous Dental Association of Australia
31. Indigenous Eye Health Unit, University of Melbourne
32. Kidney Health Australia
33. Lowitja Institute
34. National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ageing and Aged Care Council
35. National Association of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers and Practitioners
36. National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation
37. National Association of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Physiotherapists
38. National Family Violence Prevention Legal Services Forum
39. National Heart Foundation
40. National Rural Health Alliance
41. NSW Aboriginal Land Council
42. Oxfam Australia
43. Palliative Care Australia
44. Perinatal Wellbeing Centre
45. Public Health Association of Australia
46. Reconciliation Australia
47. Royal Australian College of General Practitioners
48. SBS, the home of National Indigenous Television
49. The Fred Hollows Foundation
50. The Pharmacy Guild of Australia
51. Thirrili - Suicide and Postvention Service
52. Tom Calma AO – Campaign founder and former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner – National Coordinator, Tackling Indigenous Smoking
53. Torres Strait Regional Authority
54. Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation
55. Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health and Community Services



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