

Closing the Gap Review
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Regarding: Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap - Draft report

First Languages Australia (FLA) is the national peak body working to ensure the strength of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. Funded by the Australian Government, we support a network of language centres, community programs and industry partners covering the whole of Australia. Our efforts are designed to have both immediate and longstanding impacts on the security and future of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages.

- 1. FLA is pleased with the introduction of Target 16 under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (CtG).** We firmly believe in the important role that languages have in strengthening and supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities to meet their greatest challenges and achieve their respective aspirations.
- 2. FLA welcomes the Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap and considers its findings integral to informing and guiding the strategic growth and development of the National Languages Policy Partnership (LPP).** As the national peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, FLA has taken on the responsibility of supporting the LPP. The LPP itself is a key mechanism and exercise of Priority Reform 1: Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision Making, tasked with establishing a joined-up approach between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and language experts, and all governments, to develop policy and recommendations for achieving progress under Target 16.

FLA recognises the LPP has been established and operates within the authorising environment under the CtG National Agreement, with its strong partnership elements particularly relevant. As a newly established policy partnership (the first LPP meeting was held in March 2023, with the second meeting held in June 2023), it is important for FLA and the LPP to engage in sharing and learning practice across the CtG landscape, including its evaluations and reviews.

- 3. FLA agrees with the initial review findings that while there are pockets of good work and progress, overall, government partners have not taken up the priority reforms in the ways they must to enact and achieve true transformation and change.** FLA recognises that immediate and significant progress harnessing the CtG priority reforms and the power of partnerships is required to succeed in meeting the targets and Closing the Gap.

First Languages Australia is a national organisation working with community language programs around the country to support the continued use and recognition of Australia's first languages.

4. **FLA offers our work with the Australian Government Office for the Arts (OFTA) as a positive example of partnership.** Whilst the LPP has only formally met twice so far, we feel confident in attesting to the positive relationship we have developed and maintained with our Commonwealth counterpart, OFTA. At its core, this is a relationship grounded in mutual respect, transparency, and accountability. Our relationship with OFTA has been built up over many years and has been greatly strengthened by our recent collaboration in 2022 to establish and support the Directions Group for the International Decade of Indigenous Languages. We are now working alongside each other in co-chairing the LPP, including forming co-secretariats to support the partnership.

Our relationship with OFTA has been driven by individual staff on both sides, which presents a risk if key staff were to leave. This risk is currently being mitigated by embedding the prerequisite principles of mutual respect, transparency, and accountability into the organisational culture. This has been greatly helped by the LPP, which has elevated our relationship with OFTA to the Deputy Secretary level, where there is the capacity to make such cultural changes. FLA feels confident that our partnership with OFTA is positive and progressing in the right direction. We look forward to harnessing our collaborative power and partnership with OFTA and the parties of the LPP moving forward.

5. **Another collaboration we consider to be encouraging and productive is our relationship with the Australian Government Department of Education, which has developed with the assistance of OFTA.** We have partnered with the Department of Education to ensure that the First Languages Education Initiative (a 2022 election commitment) achieves real outcomes for language communities. This relationship has significantly benefited from an OFTA staff member familiar with FLA being seconded to the Department of Education. This is an example of how OFTA are embedding their understanding and experience of partnership within their agencies and across the APS. It also highlights how work from disparate departments and agencies can be mutually supportive and reinforcing in achieving the objectives of Target 16.
6. **The prerequisite principles of mutual respect, transparency, and accountability are negatively impacted by Government processes and the role of central agencies.** Restrictive budget processes and cabinet-in-confidence requirements impede the work being done by community-controlled organisations. These processes need to be fixed. At times, the line between Government and community is purposefully blurred by First Nations-specific agencies such as NIAA and AIATSIS. Decisions made by an “Indigenous Government Agency” or where internal consultation has taken place with “Indigenous APS staff” cannot replace actual partnership.

First Languages Australia connects language communities often isolated by vast distances to share their knowledge, experiences, resources, and skills. The organisation takes a leading role in targeting issues that impact our languages. It shares critical communication from language communities with the Government and key non-government agencies to bring about change. These changes impact the future strength of our languages – those spoken strongly today, the languages proudly being revived or those that haven't been heard for many years.

Together with the network of language centres and programs, and through its work with the LPP, First Languages Australia is working toward a future where all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are valued for the strength and richness they bring to all areas of life and work, and that languages communities have the full support of governments and organisations in living, speaking and sustaining their languages. FLA looks forward to working with CtG partners to strengthen its approach and work to this end.

Warm regards

Beau Williams