

## Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap

6th October 2023

### About Ngaweeyan Maar-oo

*Ngaweeyan Maar-oo is the Koorie Caucus of the Victorian Closing the Gap Partnership Forum – the implementation body for Closing the Gap in Victoria. Ngaweeyan Maar-oo is made up of 13 Aboriginal Community Controlled Sector (ACCO) representatives from 14 sectors and delegates from the Aboriginal Governance Forums. The Ngaweeyan Maar-oo Co-Chairs are Michael Graham, CEO – Victorian Aboriginal Health Service and Aunty Lisa Briggs, Director of Strategy and Performance – Aboriginal Housing Victoria.*

### Response to the draft report

The Ngaweeyan Maar-oo Koorie Caucus (Caucus) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the Productivity Commission (PC) on the review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

Caucus members have been frustrated by the delays and slow progress of implementation, as outlined in the draft report. While there is positive movement in several areas, members are hampered by rigid government structures that do not align with the foundational value of self-determination.

Implementation of the four priority areas has been delayed in Victoria. Despite the best efforts, innovation and commitment throughout ACCO sectors, the Victorian government has prioritised Treaty negotiations and the administration of the Yoorrook Justice Commission, which has delayed progress on Closing the Gap initiatives. Treaty must not be the default mechanism for discussions related to Closing the Gap and action in this area must not be delayed as Treaty and Truth processes are resolved. Closing the Gap must be prioritised equally with these important reforms, to ensure steady progress across the board.

The Victorian Closing the Gap Implementation Plan does not align with the National Agreement Priorities. Priorities 1 – 4 of the National Agreement are far broader than what is included in the current Implementation Plan, which has made establishing governance mechanisms and measuring progress and performance measures difficult.

The New South Wales Government's submission<sup>1</sup> to this review provides examples of strengths and potentially adoptable mechanisms to support Victoria's progress across the four priorities.

- NSW Governance for Closing the Gap encompasses a whole-of-government approach, with responsibilities embedded into each division across the public sector. These are monitored and evaluated to ensure outcomes are achieved.
- Shared decision making is a priority within Governance architecture, for example:
  - NSW Joint Council as a key decision-making group
  - NSW Partnership Working Group monitors performance, endorses key deliverables of the NSW implementation plan and is held accountable by Caucus and members
  - 13 Officer Level Working Group includes subject matter expertise to develop and progress action towards National Agreement priorities and outcomes

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<sup>1</sup> 2023 June NSW Government Submission – Australia Government Productivity Commission review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap  
(/https://www.pc.gov.au/\_\_data/assets/pdf\_file/0009/363726/sub032-closing-the-gap-review.pdf)

Our members welcome the PC's recommendations to embed responsibility for driving action on Closing the Gap within the public sector. Clear accountability measures are needed for departments, departmental Secretaries and individual Ministers, with consequences for inaction. It will be important to ensure that any monitoring and accountability mechanisms that are introduced do not additionally burden already overstretched ACCOs.

Caucus members agree with the Coalition of Peaks' position, as put forward in their submission<sup>2</sup> to the PC's review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, that:

- governments need to change the way they work with our people and engage in genuine partnership for meaningful progress against the Closing the Gap targets
- overall progress against the National Agreement is positive but slow
- additional efforts must be concentrated on the areas impeding Priority Reforms.

We also support the submissions from our members, acknowledging their expertise and knowledge in their respective sectors. See [Appendix A](#) for a list of Ngaweeyan Maar-oo sector representatives.

We further support the following recommendations included in the New South Wales submission:

- Ensuring an open and direct line with appropriate Ministry staff, potentially through biannual meetings with Cabinet and Koorie Caucus representatives
- Secretary and Deputy Secretary involvement in and attendance at Partnership Forum
- Department of Treasury and Finance to be involved at a senior level and have greater involvement with decision making and planning
- Partnership Review Assessment Processes to be implemented as levers of change both nationally and at a state and territory level

We ask that the PC consider the following in their final report:

- how the success of the draft recommendations are measured
- clarity on who is responsible for taking the recommendations forward
- resourcing for the additional work that will stem from implementation of the draft recommendations
- are these recommendations taking into consideration the capacity of the many smaller organisations without large policy or advocacy teams.

Further commentary on selected sections of the draft report is below.

### Effectiveness of policy partnerships

Policy partnerships can provide accountability measures to address change, but there must be consistent engagement and feedback from government stakeholders. We are concerned that there is insufficient resourcing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations to provide meaningful engagement across the policy partnerships.

### Shifting service delivery to ACCOs

The [Beautiful Shaw Project](#) is an example of good practice in transferring service delivery from mainstream to ACCOs. A collaboration between VACCHO and Breast Screen Victoria, working groups made up of cancer experts, ACCO sector representatives, Community members and VACCHO staff

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<sup>2</sup> Coalition of Peaks' submission to the Productivity Commission review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, [year], [https://www.pc.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/358772/sub031-closing-the-gap-review.pdf](https://www.pc.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/358772/sub031-closing-the-gap-review.pdf)

came together to find ways to address barriers to taking part in preventative breast cancer screenings, and came up with the idea of the Beautiful Shawl Project.

There were two key components of the project: mobile access to breast screening services and culturally appropriate shawls to increase safety and motivation to take part. Funding supported sending breast screening vans to different ACCOs and Health Services across Victoria and to commission artworks from artists from the areas being targeted.

- 12 ACCOs took part in the project
- 11 distinctive shawl artworks were developed
- 219 screens were provided to Aboriginal clients aged 50+ through the first year of the project (and an additional 149 non-Aboriginal clients, predominantly family members and ACCO staff). Of those 219, 54 were overdue for their screen and 76 had never taken part in a breast screen.

The Beautiful Shawl Project continues to provide culturally safe and accessible breast screenings to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women across Victoria.

### Addressing obligations in service delivery contracts

Caucus members call for stronger accountability measures for Government. Embedding accountability mechanisms from the early stages, via service delivery contracts is one avenue to strengthen accountability. As an example, this could include establishing performance indicators for departments and mandating regular progress updates in contracts.

Service delivery contracts must be structured to support the unique needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service users. Clauses such as mandated cultural safety training for staff involved in service delivery, remunerated consultation with ACCOs and accountability and reporting measures could be considered. Community-led solutions and ensures that actions are culturally sensitive and relevant and should be necessities from the earliest stages of contract design.

### Indigenous data sovereignty

Changes to priority reform 4 to explicitly include Indigenous Data Sovereignty will require significant structural and cultural changes across governments. While priority reform 4 promotes shared access and partnerships between governments and Communities to guide collection, access and management of data, this is not what is broadly considered to constitute Indigenous Data Sovereignty.

The current framing of Clause 71(d) in the National Agreement suggests Community needs the support and aid governments to effectively manage their own data; this deficits-lens undermines the concept of self-determination and a strengths-based approach. It is also necessary to define 'meaningful' data collection to ensure there is a shared understanding of data collection priorities.

Clause 76 does include provision for the Coalition of Peaks to develop criteria for some data works, but without clarity on the scope and the accountability measures it is difficult to ascertain whether it is sufficient to meet the self-determined aspirations of Community.

### Performance reporting tools

Caucus members note the difficulties in compiling data from across departments, many of which report to different standards. Inconsistent definitions contribute to challenges in data comparison and analysis, while also raising concerns about the integrity of the data being used. There must be consistent methodologies and a common glossary of terms to count and report data, to provide greater accuracy of progress and the need within communities.

## Feedback on draft recommendations

### Appointing an organisation to lead data development under the Agreement

Caucus members support the recommendation with the following caveats:

- any organisation appointed to lead data development must be an ACCO, or at least have the remunerated support and consultation in an ongoing capacity by Community
- Community organisations must design data development processes, goals, and outcomes.

### Designating a senior leader or leadership group to drive jurisdiction-wide- change

Caucus members support the need for specific leadership to drive change. Further to this, we recommend:

- this role must be a new position that is an advertised, Identified role that sits within a Secretariat or the Coalition of Peaks, which would better support self-determination
- state and/or regional leaders must have regular mandated meetings with the leadership group
- these roles must be remunerated and resourced accordingly.

### Embed responsibility for improving cultural capability and relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into public sector employment requirements

Cultural safety and capability must be mandated for all services providing for or working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. To strengthen this requirement, additional requirements should be considered, such as a requirement for all public health service staff to attend mandated and regular cultural safety training.

Caucus members expect the national Closing the Gap program to look to Victoria as a leader within this space and to take on the expertise of our organisations to ensure standards are upheld nationally.

### Central agencies leading changes to Cabinet, Budget, funding and contracting processes

Caucus members are supportive of central agencies driving changes in government processes to improve Closing the Gap outcomes. We would like to see clearer accountability measures and consultation frameworks implemented between the central agencies and Ngaweeyan Maar-oo.

## Conclusion

Ngaweeyan Maar-oo continues to advocate for additional and necessary resourcing for its members. The immense workload for executive staff at chronically underfunded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services leads to lower engagement levels in this work, which is counter to the spirit of shared decision making. Without additional supports, ACCOs are not able to dedicate the time necessary for meaningful engagement and action.

There is significant commitment to Closing the Gap in Victoria. We are dedicated to Closing the Gap, and will continue our work, in spite of the barriers being faced across Australia. We look forward to the PC recommendations being implemented, to bring about necessary change to the current Closing the Gap architecture.

## Appendix A – Ngaweeyan Maar-oo Koorie Caucus Members

<b>Sector</b>	<b>Representative organisation</b>
<b>Social and emotional wellbeing</b>	Victorian Aboriginal Health Service
<b>Education and skills</b>	Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc.
<b>Economic development and employment</b>	Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations
<b>Housing</b>	Aboriginal Housing Victoria
<b>Justice and Youth Justice</b>	Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service
<b>Child and family services</b>	The Victorian Aboriginal Childcare Agency
<b>Family Violence</b>	Djirra
<b>Land and waters</b>	Federation of Traditional Owners Corporations
<b>Culture and languages</b>	Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages
<b>Disability</b>	Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative
<b>Youth</b>	Koorie Youth Council
<b>Elders and aged care</b>	Aboriginal Community Elders Services Inc.
<b>Early Childhood care and development</b>	Bubup Wilam Aboriginal Child and Family Centre Incorporated
<b>Health</b>	Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation Inc.