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ABORIGINAL EMBASSY

Closing the gap: Roles for Local Government

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Executive summary

A new National Agreement on Closing the Gap on Indigenous disadvantage was agreed between all Australian Governments and the Coalition of Peak Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations in July 2020. Previously, there had been no such involvement of the people that were the subject of the Agreement.

The emphasis in the new National Agreement on Closing the Gap is on structural and systemic reform, with all of the signatories required to produce Implementation Plans by July/August 2021.

This Paper provides an overview of origin of the Closing the Gap agenda and the lack of progress over the first ten years of the initial intergovernmental agreement, how a new National Partnership evolved between all levels of government and the Coalition of Peak Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations to develop a new National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

The paper briefly outlines the key commitments entered into in the New National Agreement and then examines each of the Implementation Plans prepared by each of the Parties to the Agreement and their expectations of local governments contributions to Closing the Gap.

The paper concludes with a discussion of local government's long-standing commitment to reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities and its record of local agreement making on matters of common concern, including native title agreements, and some observations on further actions that local Councils can take in their areas on both local and regional levels

1. Introduction

The fact that the new National Agreement on Closing the Gap was developed in partnership with the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations is a very significant development and a step in the right direction. It is consistent with the right to self-determination in the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (which Australia endorsed in 2009).

The objectives of Closing the Gap are just as important at the local scale as they are at the national scale. The new National Agreement is fundamentally about changing relationships and the way governments work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their community-controlled organisations. Local government has a key role to play, principally because local Councils set the tone of their local community in terms of whether their citizens, regardless of race, find their community to be welcoming and inclusive.

The issues associated with closing the gap of Indigenous disadvantage are not new to local government. Local government has a long and well-established record of working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on matters of common concern. For example, in the 1990s and early 2000s, local governments played a key role in local reconciliation circles under the auspices of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation and used local agreements as a way of developing good working relations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in their area to achieve a more harmonious community and to better meet the needs of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples living in their catchment area.

It is in this context that this paper explores the Closing the Gap agenda and how local government's roles and functions are viewed in the new National Agreement and the full suite of Implementation Plans that flow from it.

2. The origin of Closing the Gap

In 2005, the then Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Tom Calma, in his annual *Social Justice Report for 2005*, urged Australian governments to commit to achieving equality for Indigenous people in health and life expectancy within 25 years.

Non-government agencies responded to the Social Justice Commissioner's appeal, developing a National Indigenous Health Equality Campaign in 2006, and launching a Close the Gap campaign in 2007. This rights-based awareness campaign later gave rise to a National Close the Gap Day, which helped inspire cross-government action.

In March 2008, government and non-government delegates to a National Indigenous Health Equality Summit signed a *Close the Gap Statement of Intent* to work together to achieve equality in health status and life expectancy between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians by 2030. The Close the Gap Statement of Intent is a compact between Australian governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples which embodied a human rights-based approach to achieving health equality referred to as the 'close the gap approach'.

In November 2008, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), representing all three tiers of government, agreed to the National Indigenous Reform Agreement (NIRA) which included a commitment to meet six targets aimed at Closing the Gap on Indigenous

disadvantage, including to close the life expectancy gap within a generation. The NIRA recognised that overcoming Indigenous disadvantage would require a long-term, generational commitment with major effort to be directed across a range of strategic platforms or 'Building Blocks', including early childhood, schooling, health, economic participation, healthy homes, safe communities, and governance and leadership. The NIRA referred to this commitment as the Closing the Gap Strategy.

3. Ten years of 'Closing the Gap'

In December 2016 as the tenth anniversary of the Closing the Gap Strategy was approaching and realising that many of the targets in the original strategy would not be met by the time the strategy was due to expire in 2018, *COAG* committed to working in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to refresh the agenda.

In February 2018, a *Special Gathering* of prominent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was held to coincide with a scheduled *COAG* meeting. The Special Gathering agreed the next phase of the Closing the Gap agenda must be guided by the principles of empowerment and self-determination as articulated in the 2008 *Close the Gap Statement of Intent* and in the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, to which by this time Australia had become a signatory. The Special Gathering noted that the best progress over the last ten years has been in areas where the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community has led the design and implementation of programs from the beginning. The statement issued by the *Special*

Gathering called for the next phase of Closing the Gap to be guided by the principles of empowerment and self-determination, and deliver a community-led, strengths-based strategy that would enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to move beyond surviving to thriving.

In 2018 the *Close the Gap Campaign* delivered a *10-year-review* which found that:

- Governments had failed to coherently implement the Closing the Gap Strategy, including failure to appropriately fund policy commitments and undertake the required systemic reform.
- Governments had effectively abandoned the Closing the Gap Strategy after five years.

The *Review* concluded that in the past ten years, Australian governments have behaved as if the *Close the Gap Statement of Intent* was of little relevance to the Closing the Gap Strategy when in fact it should have fundamentally informed it. It is time to align the two. A refreshed Closing the Gap Strategy must

focus on delivering equality of opportunity in relation to health goods and services, especially primary health care, according to need and in relation to health infrastructure (an adequate and capable health workforce, housing, food, water). This should be in addition to the focus on maternal and infant health, chronic disease and other health needs. The social determinants of health inequality (income, education, racism) also must be addressed at a fundamental level.

The *Review* warned that a refreshed Closing the Gap Strategy must be founded on implementing the existing *Close the Gap Statement of Intent* commitments and that without a reset, the targets would continue to measure nothing “but the collective failure of Australian governments to work together and stay the course”.

In December 2018, *COAG* committed to a strengths based framework which prioritises intergenerational change and the aspirations and priorities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across all Australian communities, to be agreed through a formal partnership.



Photo: Ed Wensing

4. National Partnership Program 2019-2029

The National Partnership Agreement 2019-2029 is an historic agreement because it ‘embodies the belief of all its signatories that shared decision making with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled representatives in the design, implementation and monitoring of the Closing the Gap framework is essential to achieve their shared goal to close the gap in life outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians’.

The objectives of the Partnership Agreement are to:

1. Enhance outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as a result of the Closing the Gap framework by ensuring their full involvement in its development and implementation;
2. Share ownership of, and responsibility for, a jointly agreed framework and targets and ongoing implementation and monitoring of efforts to close the gap in outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in line with each Party’s responsibilities;
3. Enhance the credibility and public support of Closing the Gap over the next ten years by ensuring full participation by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives in its development and implementation; and
4. Advance Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander involvement, engagement and autonomy through equitable participation, shared authority and decision making in relation to Closing the Gap.

The Partnership Agreement recognises that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination is the key to achieving changes in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

It is also the first time that Local Government is an official signatory to such a partnership agreement.



5. Joint Council on Closing the Gap

At its meeting in December 2018, *COAG* agreed to the establishment of a Ministerial Council on Closing the Gap with representation from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through their representatives, to be known as the *Joint Council on Closing the Gap*.

The Partnership Agreement clarifies that the Joint Council will include one Minister from each jurisdiction with responsibility in policy areas fundamental to Closing the Gap to be chosen by their respective governments and a representative from ALGA, and at least equal representation from the Coalition of Peaks who will nominate twelve representatives. These representatives will have broad geographic and subject matter coverage. The Joint Council is to be chaired by the Minister for Indigenous Affairs and the Lead Convenor of the Coalition of Peaks. This arrangement has been agreed between the parties to ensure a fair partnership and shared decision making by consensus.

The *Joint Council* will have an ongoing role in monitoring performance and implementation of all parties' actions under the jointly agreed National Agreement, including progress by the Parties against their Implementation Plans.

The Commonwealth provides secretariat support to the Joint Council and the governance architecture that sits underneath it, including the officials-level Partnership Working Group, Drafting Group and subject-matter specific working groups (Figure 1). The Commonwealth's role is to support the Joint Council to have effective meetings and a forward agenda that is well organised, purposeful, and supports delivery of the commitments under the National Agreement.



FIGURE 1: CLOSING THE GAP GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE

Source: Commonwealth Closing the Gap Implementation Plan 2021:5

6. New National Agreement on Closing the Gap

On 3 July 2020, the Joint Council agreed to the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, and endorsed it to be presented to First Ministers of all Australian governments, the Lead Convener of the Coalition of Peaks and the President of ALGA. On 27 July 2020, upon agreement and signature of these parties, the National Agreement came into effect.

The objective of the National Agreement is to overcome the entrenched inequality faced by too many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people so that their life outcomes are equal to all Australians. What is different about this Agreement, is that it is based on a genuine partnership between all Australian governments (including the ALGA) and the Coalition of Peaks.

The new Agreement reflects the needs and expectations of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from across Australia. It was developed following *extensive engagements* with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across Australia carried out by the Coalition of Peaks. Over 2,300 people attended nearly 70 face-to-face meetings in capital cities, regional towns and remote communities between September and December 2019, with an online survey at the same time getting nearly 1,700 responses. A summary of what was heard and incorporated into the National Agreement can be found *here*.

The National Agreement is built around *four agreed priority reform targets* and *17 socio-economic outcomes and targets* in areas including education, employment, health and wellbeing, justice, safety, housing, land and waters, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages.

The **four priority reforms** are:

- 1. Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision Making**
Genuine partnership is critical to accelerating policy and place-based progress towards Closing the Gap. Governments commit to sharing decision making with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations.
- 2. Building the Community-Controlled Sector**
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled services usually achieve better results, employ more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and can be given preference over mainstream services. Governments commit to building formal Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sectors to deliver services to support Closing the Gap.
- 3. Transforming Government Organisations**
Effective mainstream organisations should understand and recognise what is happening in communities; recognising and understanding the skills that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people hold. Governments commit to systemic and structural transformation of mainstream government organisations to improve accountability, and to respond to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- 4. Shared Access to Data and information at a Regional Level**

Access to disaggregated data and information is critical for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities. It provides a more comprehensive

picture of what is happening in their communities and supports better decision making about their futures. Governments commit to enable shared access to location-specific data and information for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations.

These Priority Reforms are central to the National Closing the Gap Agreement, and will change the way governments work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.



The seventeen socio-economic targets:

1. Aboriginal people enjoy long and healthy lives.
2. Aboriginal children are born healthy and strong.
3. Aboriginal children are engaged in high quality and culturally appropriate early childhood education in their early years.
4. Aboriginal children thrive in their early years.
5. Aboriginal students achieve their full learning potential.
6. Aboriginal students reach their full potential through further education pathways.
7. Aboriginal youth are engaged in education or employment.
8. Strong economic participation and development of Aboriginal people and communities.
9. Aboriginal people secure appropriate, affordable housing that is aligned with their priorities and need.
10. Aboriginal people are not overrepresented in the criminal justice system.
11. Aboriginal young people are not overrepresented in the criminal justice system.
12. Aboriginal children are not overrepresented in the child protection system.
13. Aboriginal families and households are safe.
14. Aboriginal people enjoy high levels of social and emotional wellbeing.
15. Aboriginal people maintain a distinctive cultural, spiritual, physical and economic relationship with their land and waters.
16. Aboriginal cultures and languages are strong, supported and flourishing.
17. Aboriginal people have access to information and services enabling participation in informed decision-making regarding their own lives.

7. Implementation Plans

In the National Agreement, the Parties committed to developing their own Implementation Plans to support the achievement of the National Agreement’s objectives and outcomes in their respective jurisdictions. The Implementation Plans are in addition to the partnership actions and data development actions.

The Parties agree to demonstrate in their Implementation Plans a commitment to undertake all actions in a way that takes full account of, promotes, and does not diminish in any way, the cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The Implementation Plans are seen as living documents to be reviewed and revised over time as progress is made (or not) towards Closing the Gap.

The Commonwealth, states and territories because of their significant roles and responsibilities in achieving the outcomes and targets under the Agreement are required to prepare an Implementation Plan using an agreed format, as follows:

1. be whole-of-government plans, covering government agencies and statutory bodies
2. be developed and delivered in partnership between governments, the Coalition of Peaks, and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partners
3. set out how existing policies and programs will be aligned to the Agreement
4. set out actions to achieve the Priority Reforms and partnership actions
5. set out actions to achieve the agreed outcomes and targets

6. for transparency, include information on funding and timeframes for actions
7. include the approach to annual reporting, including when they will release their public report
8. include information on how the states and territories will work with local government to implement this Agreement (state and territory Implementation Plans only).

The Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) and the Coalition of Peaks, because of their different roles, responsibilities and circumstances are not required to adopt an agreed format, but must still develop and provide an Implementation Plan to the Joint Council on Closing the Gap within twelve months of the Agreement.

The Australian Local Government Association Implementation Plan will:

1. ensure local governments understand the Agreement and its commitments, and encourage its adoption by local governments
2. assist the state and territory governments to work with local governments in the implementation of this Agreement
3. support strengthened shared decision-making at the local level, supporting local governments to be part of partnerships with the Commonwealth, state and territory governments and local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

The Coalition of Peaks Implementation Plan will:

1. be developed and delivered by all Coalition of Peaks members
2. set out actions to communicate this Agreement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, community and organisations
3. set out actions to build Closing the Gap policy and program delivery expertise amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, community and organisations
4. set out actions to build understanding and ownership of this Agreement by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations
5. include timeframes for action.

All governments, the ALGA and the Coalition of Peaks have recently finalised their *Closing the Gap Implementation Plans*.

What follows is an examination of each of the Parties’ Implementation Plans and the extent to which they address Local Government’s roles in implementing the National Agreement in their respective jurisdiction. The analysis shows that the level of involvement of the relevant State/Territory Local Government Association was variable across the jurisdictions, which is reflected in the scope and number of local government specific commitments in each of the jurisdictional plans. All of the Local Government Associations are constrained by the fact that they cannot direct their members, but their leadership and commitment to the Closing the Gap outcomes is crucial to the reform process.

7.1 Commonwealth (Cth)

The *Commonwealth's Implementation Plan* sets out the actions the Commonwealth will be taking to drive and embed real and positive change and how the Commonwealth will contribute to realising the ambition of the National Agreement. The Commonwealth's Plan is the outcome of collaboration across the Commonwealth, with each agency identifying how it will embed the Priority Reforms and align its programs and policies to achieving the targets and outcomes for which each agency is responsible.

To develop and monitor its Implementation Plan, the Commonwealth established a Joint Working Group (Figure 2).

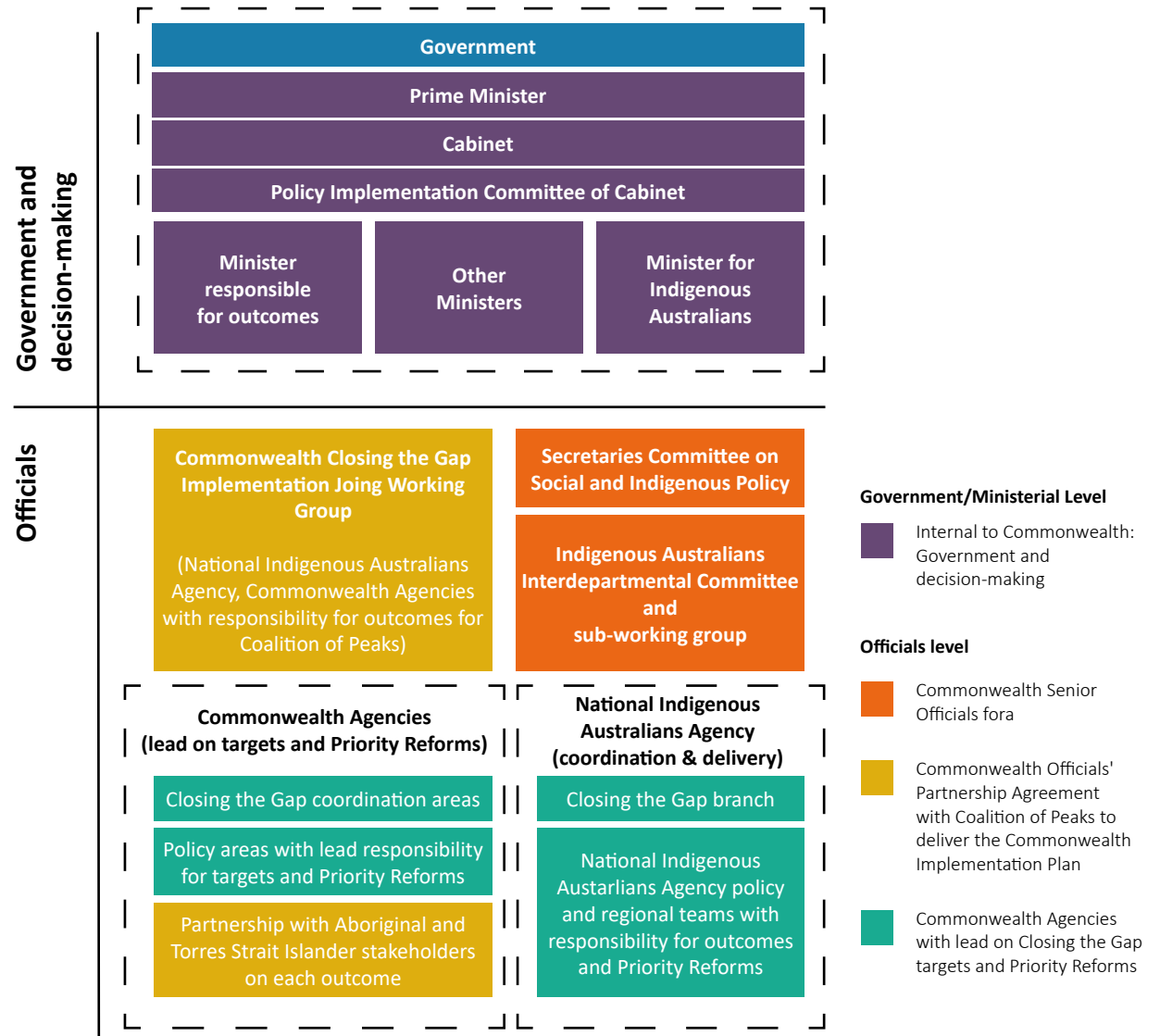


FIGURE 2: COMMONWEALTH JOINT WORKING GROUP OF OFFICIALS - GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE

Source: Commonwealth Closing the Gap Implementation Plan 2021:7

The Joint Working Group comprises of the Coalition of Peaks and deputy secretaries of Commonwealth agencies with lead responsibility for targets. Through the Joint Working Group, senior Commonwealth officials and the Coalition of Peaks will be able to discuss priorities for Commonwealth action each year, work together to design actions and monitor progress with implementation. Portfolio ministers and their agencies are also developing portfolio-specific partnerships, where they do not already exist, to drive target-specific actions in their respective portfolios.

The Commonwealth’s Implementation Plan includes chapters on each Priority Reform and on each of the socio-economic targets, and outlines the actions that Commonwealth agencies will undertake to contribute to achieving the outcomes in the National Agreement, including existing and new actions. There are also dedicated Action tables that list in detail the effort and investment the Commonwealth is making that contribute to each Outcome. Some actions have been included under several sections in recognition of the interconnectedness of outcomes.

Specifically in relation to the 17 socio-economic outcome areas, targets have been developed to measure these outcomes. The key drivers for achieving each target have been identified in the National Agreement, as well as indicators which will help measure whether efforts are making inroads on the things that will help achieve the targets. Together, they sharpen the focus of all parties to direct effort and investment to what matters. Figure 3 summarises the outcomes and targets framework established under the National Agreement.

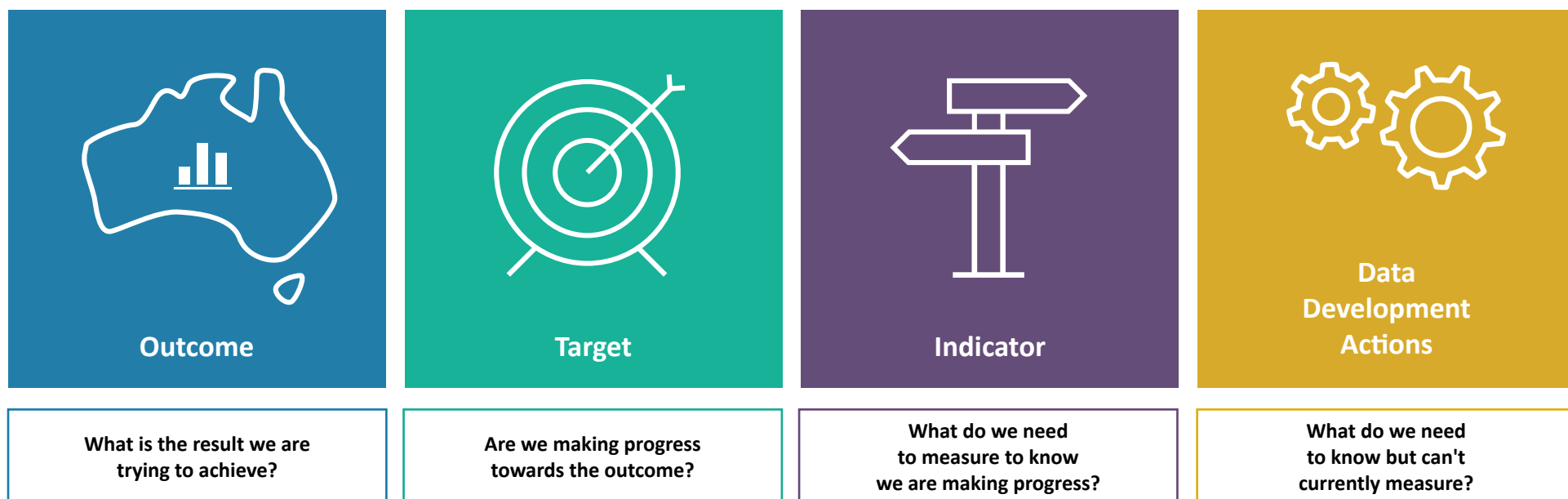


FIGURE 3: CLOSING THE GAP OUTCOMES AND TARGETS FRAMEWORK FOR CLOSING THE GAP

Source: Commonwealth Closing the Gap Implementation Plan 2021:22

There are only two specific contexts in which a role for local government is mentioned in the Commonwealth's Implementation Plan.

The first is in relation to the establishment of six place-based partnerships to focus on implementation of the National Agreement at the regional or local level (p.10). The selection of these locations will occur through jurisdictional shared decision-making processes including relevant states or territories, local government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, as well as the Commonwealth through NIAA Regional Managers. Locations will be considered by Joint Council by November 2021 with partnerships to be in place by 2024. Most likely building on existing place-based approaches that align with community aspirations.

The second is in relation to NBN Co upgrades to deliver access to higher speed wholesale broadband services over the NBN to households and businesses in regional and remote areas of Australia (p.70).

The Commonwealth's Implementation Plan also makes reference to the Indigenous Voice proposal that emerged from the *The Uluru Statement from the Heart*, which called for a First Nations Voice to be enshrined in the Constitution, while the Commonwealth's proposal is that the mechanism will be established by legislation and will not be enshrined in the Constitution. The Commonwealth's proposal is that the Indigenous Voice comprise of two parts – Local and Regional voices and a National Voice working together to share information, consult, and provide advice. Under the proposals, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will have a greater say in decisions that affect their daily lives, with mechanisms that support working in partnership with all levels of government including at the local and regional level, and providing advice to the Australian Parliament and Commonwealth at the national level

about programs, services, policies, and laws that impact communities.

The Commonwealth is also supporting local shared decision-making models to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can participate in the development, delivery and evaluation of programs and services that affect them. For example, it is investing in partnership arrangements to support shared decision-making processes across Empowered Communities sites. This initiative supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders as they work with their communities and partners to progress local priorities. In *Empowered Communities* regions, partnerships with governments and joint decision-making processes are continuing to evolve, with local communities guiding funding decisions and strategies to address critical issues impacting their lives.

7.2 Coalition of Peak's (CoP)

The *Coalition of Peaks* is a representative body of over seventy Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled peak organisations and members that came together as an act of self-determination to be formal partners with Australian governments on Closing the Gap. The Coalition of Peaks' approach in preparing its Implementation Plan is to bring together the voices, expertise and experiences of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled services sectors from across the country and to ensure the legitimacy of its activities, actions and representations.

The Coalition of Peaks has several responsibilities to bring to life the commitments in the National Agreement and in holding governments to account for the commitments they have made in the National



Photo: Ed Wensing

Agreement. The Coalition of Peaks' Implementation Plan sets out how the Coalition will share the commitments of governments in the National Agreement with communities and organisations across Australia, and thereby enable more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities to benefit from the commitments in the National Agreement.

Specific commitments include:

- Communicating the Agreement to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, community and organisations;
- Building understanding and ownership of the Agreement;
- Building Close the Gap policy and program delivery expertise amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, community and organisations;
- Monitoring and influencing progress across the partners.

7.3 Australian Local Government Association (ALGA)

ALGA's *Closing-the-Gap-Implementation-Plan* seeks to:

1. ensure local governments understand the Agreement and its commitments and encourage its adoption by local governments;
2. assist the state and territory governments to work with local governments in the implementation of this Agreement; and
3. support strengthened shared decision-making at the local level, supporting local governments to be part of partnerships with the Commonwealth, states, and territory governments and local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities.

The focus of ALGA's Implementation Plan is on the Four Priority Reform areas in the National Agreement because they focus on changing the ways that Governments work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and are aimed at embedding long term systemic change and supporting the achievement of the socio-economic outcomes and targets.

1. Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision-Making

1.1 ALGA and each state and territory local government association to work with the state and territory governments to identify any legislative impediments to joint decision making on Closing the Gap.

1.2 The state and territory local government associations and individual councils (where relevant) to be involved in any stocktake and/or health check of existing partnerships being undertaken by state and territory governments and the relevant Aboriginal Partnership Organisation.

1.3 ALGA and state and territory local government associations to identify principles relevant to (and case studies if appropriate) effective partnerships involving local governments that builds on successes seen through the stocktake and health check process. These principles should be made publicly available and build upon the characteristics of shared decision making outlined in the National Agreement (at clause 32c).

1.4 The state and territory local government associations will be engaged in the relevant policy partnerships at a jurisdictional level whilst ALGA will engage at the national level.

1.5 The relevant local governments to actively participate in the place-based partnerships with support from the state and territory government and their local government association. This may include identifying and developing appropriate governance arrangements for the involvement of the relevant councils.

1.6 ALGA and the state and territory local government associations to promote local governments participation in priority reform 1 partnerships and report annually. Best practice to be publicly recognised.

2. Building the Community Controlled Sector

2.1 ALGA and state and territory local government associations to participate in the development and implementation of Sector Strengthening Plans as appropriate.

2.2 State and territory local government associations to work with state and territory governments to review procurement policies and guidelines to facilitate greater ACCOs participation in council tenders for goods, services, and construction/maintenance contracts.

2.3 As part of the 2021 Local Government Skills and Capability Project being led by ALGA with the state and territory local government associations, consider issues associated with employment and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and opportunities for joint training and development with ACCOs

3. Transforming Government Organisations

3.1 State and territory local government associations to work with their respective jurisdictional governments to facilitate council access to toolkits (or the equivalent) and cultural awareness training to support a culturally capable and confident workforce.

3.2 ALGA and state and territory local government associations to encourage all councils to develop and implement a Reconciliation Action Plan that aligns with Closing the Gap objectives.

3.3 ALGA and state and territory local government associations to showcase councils with Reconciliation Action Plans and/or undertaking other activities that improve the cultural appropriateness of council services.



4. Shared Access to Data and Information at a regional Level

4.1 ALGA and state and territory local government associations to encourage councils who are involved in the six Community Data Project Sites to capture their learnings so that these can be collated and made available to all local governments to inform their deliberations on relevant data collection and sharing.

4.2 ALGA will alert state and territory local government associations to critical issues that would benefit from improved reporting that are raised at the Joint Ministerial Council meetings, to assist them and state and territory jurisdictions to improve information to be collected and shared.

7.4 Australian Capital Territory (ACT)

Although the ACT is not a local government, it nevertheless performs all of the functions of a local government throughout the ACT and the *ACT Government's Implementation Plan* is included for completeness of the national picture.

The ACT Government's contribution to the National Agreement is demonstrated through its commitment to working in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Canberra region and in establishing, under legislation, the *ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body*.

The ACT Implementation Plan was developed in partnership with the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body* in its role as the ACT Member of the Coalition of Peaks. The legislation establishing the Elected Body was amended to allow for national

representation and to participate in the Coalition of Peaks' activities in contributing to the development of the National Agreement. The Elected Body is also represented at the Strategic Board Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Committee and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Inter-Directorate Committee of the ACT Government. These are whole of government senior officials committees with responsibility for providing strategic leadership on all aspects of both the ACT and National Closing the Gap Agreements.

The ACT Government had a pre-existing *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Agreement*, which had already been renewed in 2019. While many of the Core and Significant Focus Areas in the ACT Agreement align with the Priority Reforms and Socio-economic Target areas in the National Agreement, *concerns have been raised* that some key issues have been overlooked in the Implementation Plan.

7.5 New South Wales (NSW)

The *NSW Government's Implementation Plan* establishes:

- a Joint Council between the State Government and the *NSW Coalition of Aboriginal Peaks* (NSW CAPO) to oversee the Plan's implementation;
- a *NSW Partnership Group* (NSW PWG) comprising the head of the Premier's Dept, NSW CAPO, the *NSW Aboriginal Land Council* (NSWALC) and the *NSW Coalition of Aboriginal Regional Alliances* (NCARA) to monitor performance, endorse key deliverables and processes to develop the plan in the context of stakeholder needs; and

- a NSW Officer-level Working Groups (OLWGs) with similar membership as the NSW PWG to provide subject matter expertise and to progress actions under the Plan towards meeting the Priority Reforms and 17 socio-economic targets.

It is anticipated that *Local Government NSW* (LGNSW) will also be represented on these governance arrangements.

The NSW Government states that it intends to build on the principles of OCHRE. OCHRE stands for Opportunity, Choice, Healing, Responsibility, Empowerment and is symbolic of Aboriginal communities' deep connection with Country. OCHRE principles underpin the NSW Government's approach to building strong working partnerships that have at their heart respect for local Aboriginal culture, leadership and decision-making. The NSW Government also has place-based partnerships with regional Aboriginal Alliances through its Local Decision Making (LDM) program, with seven Accords formalising agreements on improving local service delivery that also reflect Closing the Gap outcomes.

Under Priority Reform 1, the NSW Government is committing to a stocktake and health check of all existing partnerships. To begin this process, the NSW Government and NSW CAPO work in partnership with the NSW Coalition of Aboriginal Regional Alliances (NCARA), the peak body for Local Decision Making (LDM) Alliances, to bring together existing partnership arrangements and new actions to achieve Priority Reforms and targets.

Baseline mapping work, led by NCARA, began in early 2021 and will be shared with the partnership. The intention is to review these arrangements in partnership with NSW CAPO to align with Closing the Gap, where agreed in accordance with national Closing the Gap agreement and NSW Closing the Gap Governance arrangements. The extent to which local government could be involved in any of these place-based processes remains unclear.

While local councils in NSW are committed to reconciliation and Closing the Gap, a key action under the Implementation Plan over the next 12 months will be to capture the existing work of local government that will support achieving the Priority Reforms and socio-economic targets in NSW.

The NSW Government has committed to applying the principles of consultation, communication and collaboration in its *Intergovernmental Agreement* between the Premier of NSW and the President of Local Government NSW to drive better outcomes for Aboriginal communities in NSW, in partnership with NSW CAPO.

The NSW Implementation Plan includes a small number of very specific mentions of local government being involved in specific actions. For example, in relation to the Aboriginal Communities Water and Sewerage Program (ACWSP). The ACWSP Provides a pathway for water utilities to apply for funding to train and employ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as Water and Sewerage Operators to support and improve service delivery for the ACWSP. Funding covers Aboriginal Affairs NSW project management costs and salary to local government. Salary costs are fully covered for the first 3 years and split 50/50 between state and local government for the last two.

7.6 Northern Territory (NSW)

The *Local Government Association of the Northern Territory* (LGANT) was integrally involved in the development of the *NT's Government's Implementation Plan*. The NT Government, the *Aboriginal Peak Organisations of the NT* (APO NT) and LGANT have committed to addressing the four priority reforms and the disparity in the life outcomes experienced by Aboriginal Territorians. LGANT states that in the NT Plan that it 'supports the Agreement's commitment to set out a future where policy making that impacts on the lives of Aboriginal people is done in full and genuine partnership.'

The NT's Implementation Plan establishes a NT Executive Council on Closing the Gap/Aboriginal Affairs and LGANT has been invited to join. The Implementation Plan also includes several specific actions which LGANT will be a lead agency or others where it will be a partner with other agencies. Actions LGANT will undertake and encourage local councils to also undertake include for example:

- review of procurement policies with the objective of encouraging greater Aboriginal business involvement;
- review of employment policies to remove barriers to employment of Aboriginal people;
- prepare and implement Reconciliation Action Plans.

7.7 Queensland (QLD)

The *Queensland Government's Implementation Plan* establishes a Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnership Committee (QATSIC) to design, develop and coordinate Queensland's implementation of the National Agreement. *The Local Government Association of Queensland* (LGAQ) is a member of QATSIC. The Plan also commits the Queensland Government to a partnering with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders through Queensland's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Councils and other First Nations organisations across a range of initiatives. Queensland's remote and discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander local government areas account for seven of the top ten most economically and socially disadvantaged locations in Australia (p.45).

The *Human Rights Act 2019* (Qld) requires Queensland Government departments and agencies, local councils, and organisations providing services to the public on behalf of the state government to act and make decisions which are compatible with the rights it protects, and to properly consider human rights when making decisions. This includes Aboriginal peoples' and Torres Strait Islander peoples' distinct cultural rights, including the right to practice their beliefs and teachings, use their languages, protect and develop their kinship ties, and maintain their relationship with the lands, territories, coastal seas and waterways.

In August 2020, the Queensland Government committed to continuing the *Path to Treaty* and *Local Thriving Communities* (LTC). The Queensland Government is progressing the establishment of place-based partnerships as part of the LTC reform. Through LTC, the Queensland Government seeks to build on a community's strengths; embracing existing leadership structures including community leaders and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander councils to enable Local Decision Making Bodies (LDMBs) that will:

- influence and co-design delivery of services;
- ensure investment makes their community stronger;
- maximise opportunities from local service and industry partnerships.

The Queensland Government is engaging with each remote and discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, including councils, to share information about the reform and to listen to local leaders about how LTC might work for their community. While recognising that each community is different, the Queensland Government is working with communities in an iterative co-design approach, building community and government capacity and capability to create the necessary conditions that will enable local decision-making in Queensland.

7.8 South Australia

The *SA Government's Implementation Plan* establishes a partnership between the SA Government and the *South Australian Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation Network* (SAACCON), a network of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) in South Australia.

The SA Implementation commits the SA and SAACCON to working together to engage with local government representatives and mechanisms, with a view to establishing and/or strengthening relationships and sharing expertise and knowledge. This work will be undertaken both at the South Australian Local Government Association leadership level and at the local and regional level, with an initial focus on local government areas that will participate in place-based initiatives and/or those with larger Aboriginal populations.

The South Australian Government and SAACCON will work together to engage with local government representatives and mechanisms, with a view to establishing and/or strengthening relationships and sharing expertise and knowledge. This work will be undertaken both at the South Australian Local Government Association leadership level and at the local and regional level, with an initial focus on local government areas that will participate in place-based initiatives and/or those with larger Aboriginal populations.

In relation to place-based partnerships, the SA Implementation Plan commits the SA Government and SAACCON to nominating a regional location to develop a place-based partnership in regional SA and implementing the partnership, along with Commonwealth and local governments, by July 2024. In relation to building Data Capability, Data SA is SA Government's Open Data Registry and contains links to over 1,600 data sets including some local government community profiles (Port Adelaide Enfield and Onkaparinga local government areas for example). In the first instance, SA Government could support ACCO's to build capability in using and interpreting data by providing training which assists ACCO's to

identify, access and use data sets already available via Data SA. In addition, SAACCON, in partnership with the Department of Premier and Cabinet, Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation and the Office of Data Analytics will identify relevant agency and ACCO representatives (who will work with Commonwealth and local government representatives if they wish), to lead community engagement required to inform potential site nominations.

7.9 Tasmania (Tas)

The *Tasmanian Government's Implementation Plan* commits the Tasmanian Government and the Tasmanian representative on the Coalition of Peaks, the *Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre* (the Partners) to implement the National Agreement in consultation and partnership with Tasmanian Aboriginal people and Aboriginal community controlled organisations in Tasmania. The Implementation Plan commits the Partners to establishing Policy Partnership, a joined up approach to the policy priority areas in the National Agreement.

The Implementation Plan includes a commitment that the Partners will engage with the Local Government Association of Tasmania and relevant Local Councils on progress in implementing relevant actions in the Implementation Plan and the Australian Local Government Implementation Plan. In particular, a Local Government audit will be undertaken to capture the existing work of local government to ensure alignment with the four Priority Reforms and existing and new Key Targets. This information will be used to inform existing and future partnerships and identify, inform and establish priority work aligned to the Implementation Plan.

7.10 Victoria (VIC)

The *Victorian Government's Implementation Plan* must be viewed alongside its broader commitment to treaty, working with the *First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria* (Assembly); and to truth telling through the *Yoo-rrook Justice Commission*, as well as its existing *Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework* (VAAF). The VAAF 2018-23 is Victoria's overarching framework for Aboriginal affairs which commits the Victorian Government to advancing Aboriginal self-determination through an ambitious, forward-looking agenda while also acknowledging that the best outcomes for Aboriginal Victorians are achieved when policies and programs are based on their knowledge, expertise and priorities. In implementing the National Agreement, the Victorian Government has stated that it will continue to be driven by the right to self-determination and existing commitments under the VAAF.

Whilst Victoria is in the early stages of transferring power, decision-making and resources to the Aboriginal community-controlled sector and Aboriginal communities, the Victorian Government's Closing the Gap Implementation Plan 2021-2023 recognises these elements are central to developing a new relationship between the State and Victoria's First Peoples.

The Victorian Government has worked in close partnership with the *Aboriginal Executive Council* (AEC) other key Aboriginal partnership forums and Aboriginal community-controlled organisations (collectively referred to throughout the Plan as Victoria's Implementation Partners) to develop the Plan. The AEC is the Victorian Government's partner in Closing the Gap implementation. The AEC was established in 2017 to provide sector-specific advice on whole of government self-determination reform. AEC meets jointly with the Secretaries' Leadership Group on Aboriginal Affairs (SLG), to set self-determination reform priorities, and the Senior Officers' Group on Aboriginal Affairs (SOG), to operationalise these. AEC also meets independently of government.

Acknowledging local government's critical and potential role in contributing to Closing the Gap and driving positive change in Victoria, the Victorian Government appointed a State Ambassador for Closing the Gap (State Ambassador), who actively engaged and advocated with local councils to strengthen shared decision-making at the local level with Aboriginal communities. Local Government's role in implementing the Closing the Gap National Agreement will continue to evolve, as the *Victorian Aboriginal and Local Government Action Plan* is currently under *review*.

The Implementation Plan does however include a commitment to provide guidance to local councils and Aboriginal organisation on inclusion of Aboriginal voices in council strategic planning processes.



7.11 Western Australia (WA)

The *WA Government's Implementation Plan* was developed in partnership with the Aboriginal Advisory Council of WA and the Aboriginal Health Council of WA.

Until 2021, WA did not have a formal, whole-of-government strategy to guide the WA Government's efforts to promote better outcomes for Aboriginal people. While individual agencies have their own strategies, frameworks, policies and plans, these generally focussed on the activities of that agency without a clear connection to a broader strategic vision across the government as a whole.

Since 2017, the WA Government state has been working across government and with Aboriginal people and organisations to develop a strategic policy framework for Aboriginal affairs. A discussion paper, *A Path Forward: Developing the WA Government's Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy* was released for public comment in December 2019 and work commenced on developing a draft Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy prior to the development of the National Agreement. In August 2021, the WA Government released its *Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy 2021-2029*. The Strategy sets out how the WA Government will direct its efforts towards a future in which all Aboriginal people, families and communities are empowered to live good lives and choose their own futures from a secure foundation. The policy approach emphasises empowerment and building strong futures from strong foundations. It embeds shared-decision making and accountability in the way WA Government agencies work, aligning well with the spirit of systemic reform within the National Agreement.

The WA Government's key strategic partner in Closing the Gap is the *Aboriginal Advisory Council of WA*. The Aboriginal Advisory Council is established by statutory authority (the *Aboriginal Affairs Planning Authority Act*



1972 (WA)) and provides advice to the WA Government on matters relating to the interests and wellbeing of Aboriginal people in Western Australia.

The Coalition of Peaks has one member based in WA – the *Aboriginal Health Council of WA* (AHCWA). The Chair of AHCWA is also a member of the Aboriginal Advisory Council of WA. In 2019 prior to signing the National Agreement, the WA Government developed a new funding commitment and partnership with AHCWA to develop the ACCO sector in recognition of AHCWA's expertise as a peak sector organisation and Aboriginal-led entity to advise the WA Government on what is needed for Closing the Gap in WA.

The WA Implementation Plan is divided into two parts. Part A contains a selection of system-level actions the WA Government intends to progress to address the Priority Reforms. Part B provides information on specific activities, programs and services relevant to each of the Priority Reforms and socio-economic targets.

In relation to working with Local Government, the State Government's relationship is predominantly overseen by a *State-Local Government Partnership Agreement* recognising the complementary strengths of each level of government, and acknowledging that in a large and

diverse state, working together is necessary to address challenges and realise opportunities, and promoting the effective and efficient use of public resources.

It is envisaged that a new partnership agreement with *Western Australian Local Government Association* (WALGA) will be finalised during 2021. As part of the new agreement, actions to implement the National Agreement on Closing the Gap will be included in the new partnership agreement, including identifying a forum for regular collaboration and engagement on Closing the Gap.

At the regional level, the WA Government will work within existing structures, such as Regional Development Commissions, regional offices of WA Government agencies, District Leadership Groups and local governments to ensure that Aboriginal organisations and communities are substantially represented, and are equal partners in this process, and will also be informed by developments under the *National Indigenous Voice* process.

The WA Implementation Plan also includes several specific actions for local government. Of particular relevance is the *Integrated Planning and Reporting Framework and Guidelines*, require local governments establish local priorities and link these to operational functions. The WA Government has committed to undertaking a review of the Integrated Planning and Reporting framework and guidelines in 2021 to ensure Closing the Gap priorities and targets are adequately addressed. Local governments will also have the opportunity to provide information on their activities in relation to the Closing the Gap outcome areas through their Compliance Audit Return.

7.12 Implementation Plans - Summary Comments

The level of involvement of State/Northern Territory Local Government Associations (LGAs) in the development of Implementation Plans was variable. This is reflected in the fact that in some jurisdictions the State/Territory LGA is already included in the joint governance arrangements to oversee the implementation of the Plans from the outset, whereas in others, the relevant State LGA is yet to be invited to be part of the governance arrangements.

There is a growing expectation that local governments need to see their relations with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in their LGA as core responsibilities and serving their interests in the same way as local Councils serve all citizens of the LGA. It follows therefore that individual local governments should be fully aware of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' needs and aspirations by integrating them into Council's local community strategic plans and other corporate planning and governance documents so these matters are not treated separately as 'specialised' or 'unusual'. As a corollary, it also follows that better ways of effectively linking Aboriginal community governance with conventional forms of local government need to be developed.

Notably, the WA Implementation Plan includes a commitment to review the *Integrated Planning and Reporting* framework and guidelines under the *Local Government Act 1995 (WA)* to ensure Closing the Gap priorities and targets are adequately addressed, and thereby also enabling local Councils to provide information on their activities in relation to the Closing the Gap outcome areas through their Compliance Audit Return.

The Local Government Act 2008 (NT) includes a provision whereby Aboriginal peoples' rights and interests as enshrined in land rights and native title

laws are to be recognised and the delivery of local government services must be in harmony with those laws.

The Implementation Plans of other jurisdictions could have also included similar changes to better integrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' needs and aspirations into local Council place-based corporate and strategic planning documents. The involvement of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and/or community-controlled organisations could also open up opportunities for place-based partnerships or local agreement making to address local Closing the Gap objectives and targets. Such subtle changes to key frameworks and guidance documents for local government would not have placed onerous expectations on local Councils.



Photo: Ed Wensing

8. Local Government's long-standing record of agreement-making with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities

The objectives of Closing the Gap are just as important at the local scale as they are at the national scale. The new National Agreement is fundamentally about changing relationships and the way governments work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their community-controlled organisations. Local government has a key role to play, principally because local Councils set the tone of their local community in terms of whether their citizens, regardless of race, find their community to be welcoming and inclusive.

Indeed, Local government has a long and well-established record of working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on matters of common concern. During the term of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, local Councils hosted many local reconciliation circles in their local communities across Australia. At the height of the emotive national debate about native title following the High Court of Australia's decision in *Wik Peoples v State of Queensland* ([1996] HCA 40; 187 CLR 1. 23 December 1996), ALGA through a partnership with the former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) and the National Native Title tribunal (NNTT) and undertook the development of the Working out Agreements Guide and the Working with Native Title Guide. At that time, Local Government was the only sphere of government that was advocating negotiation and local agreements as the preferred approach to resolving native title matters.

Local Councils throughout Australia used local agreements to develop good working relations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in their area and to achieve a more harmonious community than may have been the case in the past. A local agreement is an important way of showing leadership and can assist in building strong links between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and Council. They can also help to increase cultural

awareness and understanding, and to involve citizens who identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander in the processes of local governance. Local agreements can help find new directions and solutions, and they can be positive instruments that can resolve community discord. And they can be tailored to meet the needs of the local community that develops them. Indeed, it is at the local scale that people have an ongoing relationship, whether it be on the local football field, at the local shopping centre, in the workforce or at the local church.

9. Reconfiguring local relationships

Because of its place-based responsibilities, local government is often seen as the level of government that is closest to the people and, as a result, is considered to have the best potential to reconfigure the relationship at a local scale. Local government is in a unique position to implement structural and systemic reforms which other levels of government are not able to do, and which can make valuable contributions to Closing the Gap for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in terms of quality of life and life outcomes at the local level. Some of these actions are canvassed in the *WA Local Government Review Panel's Final Report* and were discussed in an earlier LGiU policy Brief - *Law, culture and local government engagement with indigenous communities, published 23 September, 2020*.

A recent paper on *Indigenous-Municipal Legal and Governance Relationships* by Doug Anderson and Alexandra Flynn and published by the *Institute on Municipal Finance and Governance* at the University of Toronto in Canada, provides some pertinent advice that is equally applicable in the Australian context. Anderson and Flynn advise that 'relationships' implies a mutually beneficial arrangement between parties, not a one-sided model that only benefits one party. Relationships

between local governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples can include several measures, including meaningful consultations on matters that affect them, having Indigenous representation on relevant governing bodies, and entering into protocols and agreements on matters of mutual concern. Including in our major cities and regional centres where most of Australia's First nations peoples live.

10. Reconciliation Action Plans - a good place to start

If Council has not already done so, developing and implementing a *Reconciliation Action Plan* (RAP) is a good place to start. Reconciliation Australia's RAP Framework provides organisations with a structured approach to advance reconciliation. There are four types of RAP that an organisation can develop, progressing from 'safe' to 'brave' in terms of the level of understanding and commitment to reconciliation, commencing with Reflect, Innovate, Stretch and then Elevate as the highest level. Each type of RAP is designed to suit an organisation at different stages of their reconciliation journey. A local Council's RAP could include local priorities for improving and achieving the socio-economic outcomes and targets aligned with the Closing the Gap objectives. There are 537 local governments around Australia, however, only 10 per cent of Councils currently have an active RAP (26 per cent are Reflect RAPs, 54 per cent are Innovate RAPs and 19 per cent are Stretch RAPs).

The City of Sydney's CEO Monica Barone noted the value to council in developing a RAP in a recent *LGiU Global Local panel*. It provides a framework for organisations to support the national reconciliation movement, while also providing a way for an organisation such as the City of Sydney to show its values and commitment.



11. Practical local actions

There are also several very practical things that local governments can do, are doing, and should be doing, both locally and regionally, to assist in progressing the Closing the Gap reform objectives. These include :

- Developing a local place-based partnership arrangements with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations with a view to joint decision making on matters of mutual interest or concern
- Applying the principles of shared decision making in Clause 32 of the National Agreement by participating in local and regional shared decision-making models with Aboriginal community controlled organisations and regional organisations of councils
- Reviewing Council's key corporate planning and management documents with a view to enabling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people a greater role in Council corporate planning and management processes that affect them
- Undertaking a review of Council services and activities to assess their cultural appropriateness to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- With the permission of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, using local languages in Acknowledgment of Country, opening of Council meetings, and including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language books in local libraries
- Requiring cultural awareness training for elected members and staff to support a culturally capable and confident Council and workforce
- Amending Council's procurement policies and guidelines to facilitate greater use of Aboriginal community-controlled organisations or businesses to participate in council tenders for goods, services, and construction/maintenance contracts
- Adopting recruitment and employment policies to ensure Council is able to recruit and retain Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff
- Working collaboratively with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations to explore joint training and development opportunities
- Including local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in local naming committees
- Documenting your experiences and share with other Councils and communities.

12. Concluding Observations

As noted in the Introduction, the fact that the new National Agreement on Closing the Gap was developed in partnership with the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations is consistent with the right to self-determination in the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, which Australia endorsed in 2009. Perhaps this could be the beginning of a new era, where relations between governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are based on genuine partnership rather than assimilation and coercion.

There is a growing expectation that local governments need to see their relations with the Aboriginal peoples of the LGA as core responsibilities and serving their interests in the same way as local Councils serve all citizens of the LGA. It follows therefore that individual local governments should be fully aware of Aboriginal peoples' rights and interests by integrating them into Council's local community strategic plans and other corporate planning and governance documents so these matters are not treated separately as 'specialised' or 'unusual'. As a corollary, it also follows that better ways of effectively linking Aboriginal community governance with conventional forms of local government need to be developed.

Nevertheless, there is enormous scope for local Councils to make valuable contributions to implementing the new National Agreement on Closing the Gap. In addition to instigating actions at the local level as discussed above, there are also likely to be opportunities for engaging with a Local and Regional Indigenous

Voice. The *Indigenous Voice Interim Report-2020* states that the current Australian Government's proposals are designed to complement and build on existing structures and arrangements for shared and local decision making. The Interim Report also envisages that a Local and Regional Voice would undertake community engagement, provide advice to governments and other stakeholders, undertake and facilitate shared decision making with governments, and engage with the National Voice. The breadth of functions will be decided by each Local and Regional Voice based on their preferences and capacity.

While our systems of democratic governance are highly complex, research in Australia and overseas has found that engagement with Indigenous peoples works best in a framework that respects their input and decision making and accommodates their needs and aspirations. Early engagement to enable sharing of ideas, concerns and aspirations, and the development of shared goals and outcomes, is crucial to success. The most significant challenges for local governments will be understanding the opportunities presented by the new National Agreement on Closing the Gap and the Local and Regional Indigenous Voice proposal, and committing to being involved from the outset.

