

FROM COMMITMENT TO OUTCOME

A Delivery Systems Analysis Perspective on the
National Agreement on Closing the Gap

**Submission to the Productivity Commission
Second Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap**

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September 2026

Purpose and standing of this submission

This submission offers a developing systems and delivery perspective. It does not speak for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, does not claim to evaluate lived experience, and does not propose Delivery Systems Analysis as a substitute for Indigenous knowledge, Indigenous research methodologies, community authority or the independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led review. Its narrower purpose is to examine how institutional architecture, coordination, capability, accountability and measurement may affect the conversion of agreed commitments into outcomes.

Executive summary

The 2026 review asks a question that is fundamentally about implementation: how is the architecture of the National Agreement operating, how are parties actioning their commitments, and how do actions across multiple layers of the system influence outcomes? The Productivity Commission also notes that previous reviews identified limited system-level transformation, weak accountability and continuing challenges in genuine power-sharing.

This submission proposes that these questions can be examined through a complementary delivery systems lens. Complexity Decoded is an emerging interdisciplinary research programme. Its methodology, Delivery Systems Analysis (DSA), is designed to observe, map, measure and evaluate how institutions, governance arrangements, resources, capabilities and relationships collectively convert public intent into realised outcomes. The framework is developing and has not been empirically validated as an established theory.

Core proposition: policy commitments, funding and organisational capability create potential for delivery; realised outcomes depend on how effectively capability is coordinated, converted and held accountable across the full delivery system.

Applied cautiously to Closing the Gap, this perspective suggests that review should examine not only whether individual commitments have been actioned, but also the interfaces between commitments: who holds decision rights, how funding and information move, where responsibilities cross institutional boundaries, whether community-defined priorities survive implementation, and whether measures reveal conversion from reform activity to sustained outcomes.

The submission makes five recommendations. They are intentionally methodological rather than prescriptive. They seek to strengthen implementation of the existing Agreement, not redefine the outcomes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities pursue.

- Map selected Closing the Gap outcomes as end-to-end delivery systems, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authority and shared decision-making explicit in the architecture.
- Add interface accountability to organisational accountability, so responsibilities at critical hand-offs are visible rather than falling between institutions.
- Measure conversion from commitment to outcome, not activity alone, while ensuring communities help determine what success means and how it is measured.
- Use place-based delivery diagnostics to identify locally specific constraints, capability and enabling conditions rather than assuming a uniform national delivery pathway.
- Pilot the approach on a small number of outcomes or places, independently evaluate it, and retain it only if it adds explanatory and practical value beyond existing methods.

1. Why this submission is relevant to the 2026 review

The National Agreement is deliberately different from a conventional intergovernmental programme. It is built around four Priority Reforms: formal partnerships and shared decision-making; building the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector; transforming government organisations; and shared access to data and information. The Productivity Commission's proposed methodology asks whether governance and accountability are enabling implementation and whether actions are supporting community-led and shared decision-making.

The Commission's call is particularly relevant to delivery systems research because it asks, in direct terms, how the 'architecture of the Agreement' is operating. It also states that the review will examine how actions across multiple layers of the system interact to influence outcomes and will assess the policy architecture established under the Agreement.

The 2026 Annual Data Compilation Report provides a reason for disciplined inquiry, not a causal conclusion. Of the 19 targets, one had been met, three were on track, five were improving but not on track, and four were worsening. Those results do not demonstrate that coordination failure is the cause. They do demonstrate the importance of understanding which combinations of governance, capability, resourcing, partnership, data and implementation are associated with better or worse progress.

2. The analytical perspective: Delivery Systems Analysis

Delivery Systems Analysis is being developed within the Complexity Decoded research programme as a structured interdisciplinary methodology for examining the architecture, coordination, governance, capability, performance and outcomes of complex delivery systems. It integrates insights from systems thinking, project and programme management, implementation science, institutional analysis, public policy evaluation and systems engineering.

Its analytical philosophy is diagnosis before prescription. It begins with the intended outcome, identifies the system and participating institutions, maps how responsibilities and decision rights are distributed, examines critical interfaces and constraints, evaluates existing measures, and only then considers possible interventions.

DSA question	Application to the Agreement
1. What outcome is intended?	Begin with outcomes and community defined meanings of success, not agency activity.
2. What system produces it?	Define the national, jurisdictional, regional and local delivery architecture relevant to the outcome.
3. Who participates?	Map governments, ACCOs, community representatives, service providers, local government and other relevant actors.
4. How are responsibilities distributed?	Make decision rights, obligations, funding responsibilities and accountability explicit.
5. Where are the critical interfaces?	Identify hand offs where authority, information, funding or implementation crosses boundaries.
6. What constrains delivery?	Test barriers rather than assume them: capability, funding, workforce, infrastructure, process, trust, data or governance.
7. How is performance measured?	Distinguish activity, outputs, conversion and outcomes; include community-led measures of success.
8. What intervention may improve delivery?	Recommend change only after evidence supports the diagnosis.

This methodology is not offered as a replacement for Indigenous research methodologies. The Commission has grounded its review in relationality, respect, reciprocity, responsibility and relevance. DSA can only be useful here if it is subordinate to those requirements when analysing matters affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and if Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people retain authority over the definition and interpretation of community outcomes.

3. Coordination without centralisation

A central proposition of Complexity Decoded is that complex public outcomes are often produced by networks rather than single organisations. In such settings, coordination is a system capability: the ability of distinct participants to align decisions, information, resources and timing around an outcome.

For Closing the Gap, that proposition must be stated carefully. Better coordination must not become a rationale for recentralising authority in government. The Agreement explicitly seeks shared decision-making, stronger community controlled capability and self-determination. A better coordinated system can therefore be more distributed, not less: community authority can be strengthened while the surrounding government system becomes clearer about what it must enable, fund, disclose and deliver.

Coordination should be tested by whether it strengthens community authority and improves delivery, not by whether it concentrates control.

4. Accountability across institutional boundaries

The 2024 Productivity Commission review identified accountability weaknesses, including unclear responsibilities, limited consequences for inaction and gaps in monitoring and evaluation. The 2026 call again asks whether all parties are held accountable for commitments and how accountability should operate between communities, governments and other partners.

Delivery systems research suggests a useful distinction between organisational accountability and interface accountability. Organisational accountability asks whether each institution performed its assigned function. Interface accountability asks whether the hand-off between institutions worked: whether a jointly made decision was funded, whether funding reached delivery capability, whether data reached the people entitled to use it, whether a national commitment could be implemented locally, and whether feedback altered subsequent decisions.

This distinction matters because every organisation can report activity while the overall outcome still fails to materialise. A review of selected commitments could therefore map critical interfaces and ask: who owns this interface; what evidence shows that it functions; what happens when it fails; and who has authority to require correction?

5. Measurement: from activity to conversion to outcome

Measurement is not neutral. What is counted shapes what is visible and therefore what can be managed and held accountable. The Agreement appropriately includes socio-economic outcomes and targets, while the 2026 review also asks whether outcomes and targets are appropriately defined and measured and who determines what success looks like.

The Complexity Decoded housing research distinguishes intermediate activity from final delivery. A funding commitment is not an occupied home; an approval is not construction; a commencement is not completion. The same analytical caution can be generalised: an announced reform, partnership meeting, funding allocation, policy change or training activity may be necessary, but should not automatically be treated as evidence that the intended outcome has been achieved.

A complementary measurement layer could therefore track conversion: the rate, time, reliability and conditions under which commitments and capabilities become usable services or sustained outcomes. This should not displace the Agreement's targets or Indigenous Data Governance. It should help explain the pathway between reform activity and outcomes.

6. A proposed commitment to outcome map

For a selected outcome or place, the review could test the following generic sequence. It is deliberately a diagnostic scaffold rather than a claim that all Closing the Gap delivery is linear.

Community-defined priority and outcome	What matters, to whom, and who has authority to define success?
Shared decision and commitment	What has actually been agreed and by whom?
Resourcing and institutional responsibility	Are responsibilities, funding and capability aligned with the commitment?
Local implementation conditions	What infrastructure, workforce, data, procurement, service or regulatory conditions enable or constrain delivery?
Delivery and service experience	What is actually received by people and communities?
Outcome and community-defined evaluation	Did the action create the intended result, and how is that interpreted locally?

Learning and adaptation	Does evidence change decisions, resources or delivery design?
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At each transition, the analysis should examine authority, accountability, information, capability, resourcing, timing and evidence. The value of the map is not the boxes themselves. Its value is making visible where a commitment loses clarity, authority, resources or delivery capability before an outcome is realised.

7. Housing as a limited worked example

Housing is one of the 17 socio economic outcome areas and is also the principal applied case in the Complexity Decoded research programme. The July 2026 Closing the Gap data reported that 81.4% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people lived in appropriately sized housing, while no data was available in the Commission's summary figure for households receiving essential services.

The housing research treats housing as enabling infrastructure because appropriate, secure and well located housing can influence participation in education, employment, health care and community life. This proposition should not be read as claiming that housing alone causes those outcomes; rather, housing interacts with other systems and can enable or constrain them.

A place based housing DSA could start with a community defined housing outcome and trace the delivery pathway through decision authority, land and tenure where relevant, infrastructure and essential services, funding, procurement, design, construction or acquisition, allocation, occupation, maintenance and connection to services. The exact pathway should be determined with the relevant community and delivery organisations, not imposed as a national template.

This approach also changes the role of modern construction methods. Modular, prefabricated or other industrialised methods may be useful delivery capabilities in some locations, but they are not a policy answer in themselves. Their value depends on local need, cultural and design requirements, infrastructure, logistics, approvals, maintenance capability, procurement and community choice. This submission therefore makes no recommendation that a particular construction method should be preferred.

8. Five recommendations for the review

Recommendation 1 - Pilot end-to-end delivery system mapping

For a small number of selected commitments, outcomes or places, map the pathway from community-defined priority through governance, resourcing and implementation to outcome. Make decision rights, critical interfaces and evidence visible. Co-design the mapping process with relevant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities.

Recommendation 2 - Add interface accountability

Alongside existing organisational and jurisdictional accountability, identify critical cross-boundary interfaces and specify who is responsible for ensuring each interface functions. Where accountability is shared, make the mechanism for resolution and correction explicit.

Recommendation 3 - Measure conversion, not activity alone

Retain the Agreement's outcome measures, but complement them with indicators that show whether commitments, resources and reforms are converting into usable delivery and sustained outcomes. Measures should be developed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partners and consistent with Indigenous Data Governance.

Recommendation 4 - Strengthen place-based diagnostic capability

Use local delivery diagnostics to distinguish national policy settings from place-specific constraints and capabilities. This can help avoid treating different communities as if they face identical delivery conditions and can support locally determined priorities and solutions.

Recommendation 5 - Evaluate the method before scaling it

Treat Delivery Systems Analysis as a research proposition. Pilot it, compare its explanatory value with existing evaluation and systems methods, seek independent and Indigenous-led critique, and scale it only if evidence shows that it improves understanding or implementation.

9. What this submission does not claim

Professional credibility requires clear limits. This submission does not claim that coordination is the dominant cause of underperformance under the Agreement. It does not claim that a single national delivery architecture can represent the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. It does not claim that better measurement substitutes for power-sharing, adequate resourcing, cultural safety, action on institutional racism or community-controlled capability.

Nor does it present Complexity Decoded or Delivery Systems Analysis as established scientific theory. The framework is developing. Its propositions require empirical testing, competing explanations and independent review. The appropriate question for this review is therefore not whether DSA should be adopted as doctrine, but whether a carefully governed pilot could add useful evidence about how commitments are converted into outcomes.

10. Suggested pilot research questions

- Where, in selected Closing the Gap delivery pathways, are decision rights clear and where are they ambiguous?
- Which interfaces most strongly affect the conversion of commitments and resources into locally experienced outcomes?
- Where do community defined priorities change, weaken or become delayed as they move through government systems?
- Which forms of shared decision-making are associated with faster, more reliable or more legitimate implementation?
- Which accountability mechanisms produce learning and correction rather than reporting activity alone?
- What measures can distinguish capability, implementation activity, conversion and final outcomes without undermining Indigenous Data Sovereignty?
- How do place-based delivery conditions alter the effectiveness of national or jurisdictional reforms?
- What competing explanations better account for observed performance, and how can they be tested?

Conclusion

The National Agreement is an ambitious attempt to change not only outcomes but the way governments work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The 2026 review is therefore right to examine architecture, governance, accountability, capability, shared decision-making and the interaction of actions across multiple layers of the system.

A delivery systems perspective may offer one complementary way to make those interactions more visible. Its contribution is modest but potentially useful: begin with the outcome as defined with communities; map the system responsible for producing it; examine authority and relationships before assuming solutions; distinguish capability from realised performance; measure conversion across critical interfaces; and recommend reform only after diagnosis.

The test is practical and empirical: does examining the delivery system help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and Agreement parties understand why commitments do or do not become outcomes, and does that understanding support better implementation?

If the answer is yes, the method may warrant further development. If not, it should be revised or rejected. That is the standard an emerging research framework should meet.

References

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Author note

Enzo Guarino is the founder of the Complexity Decoded research programme, a developing interdisciplinary programme examining how complex delivery systems convert institutional capability and public intent into outcomes. Housing is the programme's principal applied case. The work is currently in a validation and research-development phase.

A previous LYV Modular Closing the Gap Commitment Statement was prepared in October 2025 as a corporate commitment concerning housing delivery, Aboriginal participation, cultural safety and employment pathways. This 2026 submission is separate in purpose and scope: it is a research contribution concerning implementation architecture and does not seek to promote a commercial product or construction method.