



NGARRA ABORIGINAL CORPORATION

Submission to the Productivity Commission

Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap 2026

A frontline Aboriginal community-controlled perspective on shared decision-making, community control, family safety, prevention, neurodevelopmental healing, data, accountability and sustainable investment

Submitted by
Role
Organisation
Location

Racheal Dungay
Founder & Operations Manager
Ngarra Aboriginal Corporation
Worimi Country – Raymond Terrace, NSW

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Acknowledgement of Country

Ngarra Aboriginal Corporation acknowledges the Worimi people as the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we work across the Hunter Region of New South Wales.

We pay our respects to Worimi Elders past and present, and honour their continuing connection to Country, culture, waterways, kinship and community.

We recognise the strength, resilience and leadership of Aboriginal people and remain committed to strengthening Aboriginal men, families and communities through culturally grounded healing, accountability and connection.

Executive Summary

Ngarra Aboriginal Corporation welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Productivity Commission's 2026 Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

This submission focuses on the areas where Ngarra has direct experience as an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation working at the frontline in the Hunter Region of New South Wales. Consistent with the Productivity Commission's Call for Submissions, Ngarra has not attempted to answer every question. Instead, we respond to the areas where our organisational development, frontline practice, partnerships, participant experiences and emerging evidence can make a practical contribution.

Our submission concentrates on shared decision-making; strengthening the community-controlled sector; funding and commissioning; community-led and place-based responses; transforming government; family safety and men's accountability; prevention; justice intersections; culturally grounded and neurodevelopmentally informed practice; workforce development; data capability; and the connection between Priority Reforms and real outcomes for Aboriginal people.

Ngarra's experience has reinforced one central lesson: people live whole lives. A man entering a behaviour-change program may also be dealing with Community Corrections, housing instability, alcohol and other drug use, unemployment, trauma, mental-health concerns, disability or developmental needs, family breakdown and limited contact with his children. Government systems often separate these issues. Community does not experience life that way.

For Ngarra, this is why Closing the Gap cannot be achieved through individual programs or targets alone. The systems surrounding Aboriginal people also need to change.

One important example is Ngarra's culturally grounded and neurodevelopmentally informed practice approach. It strengthens accessibility, self-awareness, emotional regulation, accountability and safer decision-making without reducing responsibility for harmful behaviour.

Ngarra's contribution to this review is the principle that accountability is strengthened when services are culturally grounded, accessible and responsive to how people understand and apply learning.

This approach is not diagnosis. It does not excuse violence or reduce responsibility. Ngarra's detailed curriculum, facilitation methods, participant tools and implementation methodology remain internal.

This submission draws on that experience, alongside Ngarra's broader organisational growth, case management practice, partnerships, de-identified participant journeys and developing data capability, to identify what we believe is enabling progress, what continues to create barriers, and what governments could do differently.

Ngarra evidence at a glance

Ngarra's 2025-2026 final impact reporting provides an evidence base for the frontline lessons in this submission.



Aggregate results from Ngarra's 2025-2026 Healing Strong final impact reporting. Ngarra treats completion, employment and referral figures as evidence of engagement and broader participant outcomes, not as standalone proof that violence has ceased or that Healing Strong caused every reported change.

What Ngarra is asking the Review to change

Ngarra's frontline experience points to six practical areas where implementation of the National Agreement can be strengthened.

What Ngarra is seeing	What needs to change
Aboriginal organisations can be consulted after key decisions have already been made.	ACCOs should be involved before policy, program, funding and evaluation settings are finalised, with genuine influence over priorities, design, resources and measures of success.
Funding can focus on visible program activity while the full cost of safe community-controlled delivery remains under-recognised.	Funding arrangements should recognise case management, supervision, governance, administration, data, evaluation, workforce development, transport, technology and organisational infrastructure as legitimate delivery costs.
Referral, attendance and completion can be reported as success even when they do not show meaningful change.	Outcome frameworks should distinguish activity from change and include participant outcomes appropriate to the intervention.
Participants often move between systems that operate separately.	Governments should strengthen cross-system coordination and recognise intensive case management, advocacy and navigation where people face interconnected barriers.
One-size-fits-all communication and teaching does not work for every participant.	Services should be able to adapt communication and support for different learning, cognitive, developmental and neurodevelopmental needs while maintaining accountability and safety.
Data can be collected mainly for upward reporting rather than local improvement.	ACCOs should be supported to use their own data for participant support, continuous improvement, community accountability and local decision-making.

Public evidence and Ngarra's program materials

This submission deliberately distinguishes public evidence from Ngarra's internal program materials. It provides enough information to demonstrate delivery experience, outcomes and practice principles while withholding the original curriculum, session content, facilitation sequence, staff training materials, participant resources, assessment tools, internal case-management design and CSnet configuration. Ngarra retains ownership of its original program materials.

Evidence provided with this submission

Supporting paper	Document	What it demonstrates
1	Healing Strong - Public Evidence & Outcomes Overview	Documents program reach, completion, employment, specialist referrals, cultural delivery, frontline lessons and evidence boundaries without publishing the internal model.
2	Ngarra Neurodevelopmental Practice - Public Evidence Statement	Explains the frontline evidence and policy relevance of accessible, culturally grounded and neurodevelopmentally informed practice without publishing Ngarra's internal framework.

1. About Ngarra Aboriginal Corporation

Ngarra Aboriginal Corporation was established in response to complex challenges affecting Aboriginal men, families and communities, including domestic and family violence, intergenerational trauma and substance misuse.

Our purpose is to support Aboriginal men to understand trauma, strengthen emotional regulation, take responsibility for their behaviour and build respectful relationships and stronger families.

Our values are Culture First, Accountability, Healing, Strength and Community.

Ngarra's Strategic Plan 2026–2029 identifies five interconnected strategic pillars: Healing Strong Behaviour Change; Neurodevelopmental Healing; Forensic Psychology Counselling; Alcohol and Other Drugs Support; and Partnerships, Systems and Organisational Strength.

Ngarra identified a local gap in Aboriginal community-controlled men's behaviour-change support and developed Healing Strong as a local response. Our experience has reinforced the importance of culturally grounded behaviour-change work being connected with appropriate individual support, service coordination and follow-up.

That experience informs the responses in this submission.

2. Shared Decision-Making

Productivity Commission focus: genuine influence over priorities, decisions and resource allocation

From Ngarra's perspective, there is an important difference between being consulted and sharing decision-making authority.

Consultation matters. Having Aboriginal organisations in the room matters. But attendance at a meeting does not automatically mean power has been shared.

If government has already determined the problem, designed the program, established the eligibility criteria, determined the funding available, decided what outputs are required and created the reporting framework before Aboriginal organisations enter the conversation, then many of the most important decisions have already been made.

That is consultation. It is not genuine shared decision-making.

Ngarra believes Aboriginal organisations need greater involvement before the framework is built. This means having influence over what the problem actually is, what community says is needed, what response should be developed, how resources should be allocated, who is best placed to deliver the response, what flexibility is required locally, what success should look like and how that success should be measured.

The principle of shared decision-making must become more visible at local level, including in the allocation of resources.

Governments also need mechanisms for hearing directly from smaller, emerging and locally based ACCOs. Peak bodies and larger Aboriginal organisations have an important role, but their contribution should not replace local frontline knowledge.

Local ACCOs can often see emerging problems before they become visible through formal datasets. We see where people repeatedly fall between systems, which referral pathways work, where eligibility criteria exclude people with genuine need, and when a service model does not translate well into community.

Community should not have to wait until an issue becomes a crisis statistic before local knowledge is taken seriously.

3. Building the Community-Controlled Sector

Productivity Commission focus: funding, sustainability, capacity, workforce and shared accountability

Ngarra's experience is that governments cannot build a strong community-controlled sector by funding only the visible program activity.

Governments appropriately expect ACCOs to demonstrate strong governance, safeguarding, financial accountability, reporting, data systems, workforce capability, insurance, policies, compliance and evaluation. All of these requirements have costs.

Short-term program funding can create a situation where an organisation is expected to operate like a mature and sustainable service system while being funded only for a narrow set of program outputs. A two-hour group session is visible. What may be less visible is the work surrounding it: intake and assessment, risk management, case planning, one-to-one support, case notes, advocacy, referrals, follow-up, staff supervision, training, data entry, outcome measurement, financial administration, governance, compliance, transport, technology, insurance and reporting.

Ngarra's Strategic Plan deliberately identifies governance, workforce capability, sustainable funding, partnerships, CSnet and data reporting as components of organisational strength.

These are not separate from service delivery. They are what make safe, accountable and sustainable service delivery possible.

Building an ACCO is itself part of Closing the Gap.

A sustainable ACCO creates Aboriginal employment, develops local leadership, builds community-owned capability, retains organisational knowledge, strengthens referral networks, grows local data capability and leaves infrastructure in community beyond the life of one grant.

4. Intensive Case Management

One of the clearest lessons from Ngarra's frontline work is that complex behaviour change cannot always be separated from the circumstances surrounding a person's life.

Men may present while experiencing homelessness or sleeping in vehicles, post-custody transition, Community Corrections requirements, substance dependence, mental-health issues, disability or developmental needs, unemployment, financial hardship, legal matters, limited contact with children and family breakdown.

If a man is trying to address violent or harmful behaviour while sleeping in his car, navigating legal processes, dealing with addiction and attempting to maintain engagement with multiple services, a frontline worker cannot always simply tell him to return for the next scheduled group.

That does not mean behaviour-change services should become housing, legal, AOD and employment services all at once. It means effective services need the capacity to identify those needs, provide appropriate case management and connect participants into other systems.

A referral does not necessarily end the role of the ACCO. Sometimes it begins another piece of coordination.

Ngarra recommends that governments recognise intensive case management, advocacy, system navigation and referral coordination as legitimate components of complex behaviour-change work.

5. Transforming Government

Productivity Commission focus: engagement and shared decisions across policy development, delivery and evaluation

Ngarra believes Aboriginal organisations need influence throughout the policy cycle.

At development, ACCOs should help identify the problem and determine what community says is needed.

At delivery, ACCOs should have influence over how the response operates locally and what flexibility is required.

At evaluation, ACCOs should help determine what success looks like, what evidence should be collected and how results should be interpreted.

Too often Aboriginal organisations have significant responsibility for delivery but considerably less influence over what happens before and after delivery.

If governments expect ACCOs to accept responsibility for outcomes, ACCOs need meaningful influence over how the intervention and its outcomes are designed.

6. Community-Led and Place-Based Responses

Productivity Commission focus: locally determined priorities, authority and solutions

Ngarra's own development provides a practical example of a locally identified response. We identified a gap in Aboriginal community-controlled men's behaviour-change support and developed Healing Strong in response.

Sometimes community sees the problem first.

A locally identified response should not have to wait until government creates a funding category that perfectly describes it.

Governments need mechanisms that allow promising community-led responses to develop, be appropriately tested, evaluated, improved and, where evidence supports them, sustained.

Local flexibility also matters. Geography, transport, workforce, culture, existing relationships, service availability, community history and how people learn all affect delivery.

Ngarra believes governments should maintain strong accountability for outcomes while allowing greater local flexibility in how those outcomes are achieved.

7. Family Safety, Men's Accountability and Prevention

Ngarra believes work with men who use violence must form part of the prevention conversation. Women and children's safety must remain central. Supporting victim-survivors is essential. At the same time, governments must invest in stopping the behaviour that causes harm. These are not competing priorities.

Ngarra considers men's behaviour change to be prevention. It can be prevention for a current partner, a future partner, children, further justice-system involvement and, potentially, future generations.

Children experience the relationships around them. They experience conflict and instability. They observe how adults communicate. They learn what behaviour is accepted and whether violence is normalised or challenged.

When a father learns to recognise escalation, regulate emotions, communicate differently and take responsibility for harmful behaviour, the potential impact extends beyond that individual man.

That does not mean a behaviour-change program can claim every subsequent family outcome. It means prevention policy needs to recognise that working with adults who influence children's environments is also relevant to children's futures.

8. Ngarra's Neurodevelopmental Healing Approach

Ngarra contributes a culturally grounded and neurodevelopmentally informed perspective to this review. This is a practice lens that shapes accessibility, engagement and accountability; it is not a public description of Ngarra's Healing Strong operating model.

At a principle level, Ngarra recognises that people differ in how they process information, regulate responses, understand consequences and apply learning under stress. Services can maintain clear expectations for behaviour while also ensuring communication and learning are accessible.

Understanding does not mean excusing

Trauma, disability, developmental needs, substance use, mental-health concerns or disadvantage do not excuse violence or harmful behaviour. Understanding barriers to engagement matters because accountability is more meaningful when a person can understand what is expected and apply safer choices.

Ngarra does not suggest that community workers diagnose participants. The policy point is that one-size-fits-all service design can exclude people whose learning, communication or regulation needs differ from standard program assumptions.

This principle has relevance across behaviour change, justice, Corrections, AOD, education, employment and family services. Ngarra supports culturally safe, accountable and responsive approaches without publishing its internal curriculum, sequencing, facilitation tools, staff training or participant resources.

9. Justice, Corrections and Breaking Cycles

Ngarra's work intersects with justice and Community Corrections pathways.

Our experience is that justice involvement frequently sits alongside family violence, AOD issues, housing instability, unemployment, trauma, mental-health concerns and developmental needs.

This makes prevention and effective community-based intervention particularly important. Ngarra sees an important difference between compliance and change.

A participant may attend a mandated program, complete a required number of sessions and comply with an order. Those things matter. But they do not automatically demonstrate that he can respond differently during a high-stress situation outside the program.

The stronger question is whether program participation has translated into meaningful, sustained change outside the service setting.

Evaluation should look beyond compliance and attendance to whether participants demonstrate greater accountability, safer decision-making and the ability to use learning in real-life situations. This is where accessible behaviour-change practice, accountability and justice prevention intersect.

10. What Meaningful Change Can Look Like

Ngarra's 2025-2026 final impact reporting recorded four Healing Strong cohorts, 40 Aboriginal men commencing, 30 completing the program (75%), 26 participants reporting full-time employment during or following participation, 14 participants referred to specialist services, and 20 Out on Country cultural days. These figures demonstrate reach, engagement and broader participant outcomes; they are not presented as proof that program participation alone caused every change.

Ngarra's existing frontline evidence includes de-identified participant journeys that demonstrate why outcomes need to extend beyond program completion.

De-identified participant experience has shown why outcomes need to extend beyond program completion. Participants may enter with instability across housing, family relationships, employment, justice and other areas, and meaningful progress can involve improved stability, service engagement and reconnection with family alongside behaviour-change work.

Ngarra has also observed participants move from guarded or disengaged presentation toward greater reflection, accountability, service engagement and family reconnection. These examples illustrate the breadth of change that may matter; they do not disclose Ngarra's intervention sequence or facilitation methods.

Ngarra does not present these stories as proof that Healing Strong caused every positive change in these men's lives. That would overstate the evidence.

Behaviour change occurs within a life, not within a program timetable.

Housing matters. Employment matters. Relationships matter. Culture matters. Emotional regulation matters. Case management matters. Service connections matter. Having somebody remain engaged while a participant navigates those circumstances can matter.

11. Measuring Change, Not Just Activity

Productivity Commission focus: who determines success and how outcomes are measured

Ngarra strongly supports accountability. But measurement needs to distinguish between activity, outputs and outcomes.

A referral tells us someone was referred. Attendance tells us somebody was present. Completion tells us somebody reached the end of a program. None of these measures alone tells us whether behaviour changed.

Ngarra's outcome-development work focuses on meaningful change rather than activity alone, including accountability, participant goals, wellbeing, service engagement and practical stability where appropriate to the work undertaken.

For neurodevelopmentally informed practice, Ngarra is developing measures that test whether learning is accessible and usable without publishing internal assessment tools, scoring or program methods. Over time, Ngarra wants its evidence to show whether participants are making meaningful progress across relevant outcome domains, while remaining clear about what the available evidence can and cannot prove.

We also recognise the limits of self-report. A participant saying he has changed is not, by itself, evidence that a woman or child is safer.

Our reporting approach therefore recognises the importance of combining quantitative information with responsible, de-identified qualitative evidence and being clear about what the evidence can and cannot demonstrate.

12. Priority Reform 4: CSnet, Data and Community Control

Productivity Commission focus: data access, use, governance and local decision-making

Ngarra is currently building this capability.

Ngarra is implementing CSnet as its case-management and outcomes system to support consistent records, participant monitoring, service coordination, outcome measurement and de-identified reporting. The system will support Ngarra's developing measurement framework while detailed field design, workflow configuration, assessment tools and reporting logic remain internal.

This is important because Ngarra does not want a data system that simply counts participants. We want to be able to see the work occurring around participants and distinguish between activity and outcomes. Frontline data should help Ngarra understand demand, engagement, service barriers, participant progress and areas for improvement, while protecting privacy and Ngarra's internal practice architecture.

Government funders are entitled to appropriate information about performance, outcomes and the use of public funds. Participant privacy must also be protected. Where appropriate, aggregate and de-identified reporting can help meet those obligations without unnecessarily exposing sensitive information.

Aboriginal organisations should not collect data only so that information can travel upwards to government.

The organisation and community from which the data comes should also benefit from it. That is how Ngarra understands Aboriginal-led data at the frontline.

13. Aboriginal Workforce Development

A strong community-controlled sector requires a strong Aboriginal workforce.

Ngarra believes workforce development needs to be considered as an outcome in itself, not simply as an operational issue for individual organisations.

Developing Aboriginal workers requires time, qualifications, supervision, mentoring and opportunities to learn organisational systems, case management, administration, facilitation, reporting, data, governance and leadership.

Ngarra's Strategic Plan identifies workforce growth, staff development, CSnet implementation and future specialist capability as part of the organisation's staged development.

Short-term funding can undermine this. An organisation may invest heavily in developing a worker only to face uncertainty about whether the position can continue beyond the funding period.

Longer-term investment would allow ACCOs to build workforce pathways rather than repeatedly rebuilding positions.

If Closing the Gap intends to strengthen Aboriginal community control, it also needs to strengthen the Aboriginal people who will lead, govern and deliver that work.

14. What Government Transformation Should Look Like

Priority Reform 3 cannot only mean Aboriginal people becoming better at navigating government systems.

Government systems also need to become better at working with Aboriginal people.

From Ngarra's frontline perspective, transformed government practice would mean Aboriginal organisations being involved before policy is designed; frontline knowledge being treated as evidence; funding models recognising the real cost of community-controlled delivery; government agencies communicating clearly and accessibly; greater coordination between systems; different learning and neurodevelopmental needs being recognised; communities receiving feedback about what happened after consultation; and governments being accountable for explaining why community recommendations were or were not acted upon.

An Aboriginal organisation should be able to see how Closing the Gap changes the way a department engages with it.

A community should be able to see how its knowledge influenced a decision.

An ACCO should be able to see how funding arrangements changed to support community control.

Otherwise, structural reform risks remaining something described in national documents rather than something experienced locally.

15. Recommendations

Ngarra asks the Productivity Commission to translate the following frontline lessons into practical recommendations for governments and Agreement partners.

1. Strengthen genuine shared decision-making by involving ACCOs before policy, program, funding and evaluation frameworks are finalised.
2. Share influence over resource allocation, not only consultation about programs that have already been designed.
3. Provide longer-term, flexible and full-cost investment in ACCOs where governance, community need and appropriate outcomes can be demonstrated.
4. Recognise organisational capacity as part of Closing the Gap, including governance, administration, data, evaluation, supervision, technology, transport, workforce development and compliance.
5. Recognise intensive case management and system navigation as core components of complex interventions, particularly where participants face multiple interconnected barriers.
6. Increase investment in Aboriginal community-controlled prevention and early intervention, including culturally grounded men's accountability and behaviour-change responses.
7. Support culturally grounded and neurodevelopmentally informed approaches where appropriate, while maintaining clear responsibility for harmful behaviour and keeping women and children's safety central.
8. Move away from one-size-fits-all service delivery by allowing appropriate adaptation for different learning, communication, cognitive and developmental needs.
9. Improve coordination across family violence, justice, Corrections, AOD, housing, mental health, education, employment and family services, recognising that people frequently interact with several systems at once.
10. Invest in Aboriginal workforce development and leadership, including qualifications, supervision, mentoring and specialist capability.
11. Work with ACCOs to determine meaningful outcome measures, rather than relying predominantly on referral, attendance and completion.
12. Support Aboriginal-led data capability and Indigenous Data Governance, ensuring ACCOs can use their own information for service improvement and local decision-making.

13. Create clearer pathways for Aboriginal-led innovation to move from community identification to development, implementation, evaluation and longer-term investment where evidence supports effectiveness.
14. Strengthen reciprocal government accountability by reporting back on what was heard through consultation and shared decision-making, what changed as a result, and why recommendations were not adopted where they were declined.

16. Closing Statement

Ngarra Aboriginal Corporation supports the intent of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. But ultimately its success cannot be judged only by the existence of strategies, partnerships, meetings, reports or funding programs.

It must be judged by whether Aboriginal people's lives are changing: whether children are safer; whether families are stronger; whether fewer Aboriginal people enter and return to the justice system; whether people receive support before crisis; whether Aboriginal organisations are stronger; whether Aboriginal workers have genuine careers and leadership opportunities; whether community knowledge influences decisions; whether Aboriginal communities can use their own data; and whether Aboriginal people increasingly have the authority and resources to determine the responses needed in our own communities.

Ngarra's experience has taught us that community-controlled organisations can do more than deliver services. We can identify gaps, design responses, build trust, develop Aboriginal workers, connect systems around people, build evidence, learn from what does not work and create approaches that may not have emerged from government systems alone.

Ngarra's neurodevelopmentally informed practice is one example of Aboriginal-led service innovation. Its public contribution is the principle that culturally grounded, accessible learning can strengthen accountability. The detailed Healing Strong model and supporting materials remain internal to Ngarra and are not disclosed through this submission.

For family violence work, women and children's safety must remain central. For justice reform, accountability must remain central. For Closing the Gap, Aboriginal self-determination and community control must remain central.

People live whole lives. Our systems must become better at responding to the whole person. Governments cannot expect Closing the Gap to occur simply by asking Aboriginal people to become better at navigating systems that were not designed with us.

The systems themselves must change.

Closing the Gap cannot only be something governments do for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It must increasingly become something Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have the authority, resources and opportunity to lead ourselves.

That is where Ngarra believes the next phase of Closing the Gap must go.

Supporting Evidence

Two public evidence papers accompany this submission. Together they provide proof of Ngarra's delivery experience, emerging outcomes and practice position while deliberately excluding the internal curriculum, framework and implementation methodology.

Supporting paper	Document	Purpose
1	Healing Strong - Public Evidence & Outcomes Overview	Provides documented aggregate delivery and outcome evidence, frontline lessons and clear evidence boundaries without disclosing the Healing Strong operating model.
2	Ngarra Neurodevelopmental Practice - Public Evidence Statement	Provides the evidence and policy rationale for accessible, culturally grounded and neurodevelopmentally informed practice without disclosing Ngarra's internal framework.