8 October 2026

Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap 2026
Submission to the Productivity Commission

Perspective and the focus of this submission

Victoria Daly Regional Council welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap 2026.

As Chief Executive Officer, I am responsible for delivering Council services across some of Australia's most remote communities. Our staff maintain roads, airstrips, waste facilities, community buildings, parks and essential infrastructure. We provide aged care services, support community activities and work with others to address local priorities.

This submission draws on that everyday experience. People in our communities need services to work, infrastructure to be maintained and their communities to be safe and liveable. Separate funding programs and organisational responsibilities should help achieve those outcomes, rather than make them harder to deliver.

We support the Agreement's commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination and shared decision-making. Council's contribution is as a local service delivery, employer and infrastructure partner. It complements the authority and work of Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations; Council does not speak on their behalf.

Our concern is straightforward. Communities need services, but the organisations expected to provide them do not always have the staff, resources or funding to do the work. A new building or a funded program cannot deliver a service on its own.

This submission addresses the review's questions about local government, community-led decisions and the barriers that prevent investment from improving people's lives. It draws on Council's experience of delivering services. The recommendations identify where changes to partnerships, funding and government programs could help put the Priority Reforms into practice.

Shared decisions need practical local partnerships

Victoria Daly Regional Council works alongside Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, Land Councils, government agencies and community leaders. There is a strong shared interest in healthier and safer communities, better educational outcomes, stronger local economies and opportunities for Aboriginal people.

However, funding, planning and project delivery too often occur separately, even where organisations operate in the same community and are pursuing similar outcomes. Planning can focus on the next funded project rather than the community's longer-term priorities and the services needed to support them.

Regional councils bring practical knowledge of infrastructure, service delivery, emergency recovery and ongoing operating costs. Involving Council early can help identify whether a proposed service has the workforce, equipment, housing and maintenance arrangements it needs to succeed.

That involvement must support Aboriginal community authority. Local Authority meetings and elected member engagement provide useful ways to hear local priorities, but consultation alone is not the same as sharing decision-making authority. Partnership arrangements should make clear how communities influence priorities, service design, resources and the assessment of results.

We see an opportunity for community-led planning that brings together Aboriginal organisations, land councils and relevant funders before decisions are finalised. It should identify shared priorities, agree responsibilities, resolve dependencies between services and explain decisions back to communities. Councils with adjoining boundaries and shared service interests should also be able to participate where this would improve delivery.

Council's infrastructure and practical capability can also support Aboriginal community-controlled services. These partnerships should strengthen Aboriginal organisations and respect their leadership. They require continued investment in the community-controlled sector, consistent with Priority Reform 2.

Workforce pathways must connect employment opportunities with community needs

One of our clearest lessons is that funding alone does not guarantee a service. Council regularly advertises positions multiple times. In some cases, there are no applications. Housing, isolation, travel distances and competition for skilled workers all affect recruitment and retention. These pressures also affect Aboriginal organisations, health providers and other services working in the same communities.

Timber Creek: an aged care facility without the workforce needed to deliver services

Council has purchased and fully refurbished an aged care respite centre at Timber Creek. The facility is intended to support older people in Timber Creek and surrounding Aboriginal communities and homelands.
Council has been advised that approximately 14 older Aboriginal people are seeking services, including meals on wheels, home support, transport and respite care. Despite having the facility, Council has been unable to recruit the workforce needed to deliver the requested services.

We have advertised repeatedly through conventional recruitment channels, held culturally appropriate sessions to encourage and support applicants, promoted roles through elected members and Local Authority meetings, and used social media and local posters. Subsidised housing has been offered for the team leader and zone manager roles. Despite these efforts, the vacancies remain unfilled.

Council previously delivered the Commonwealth-funded Community Development Program (CDP). This gave us direct connections with local Aboriginal job seekers and referrals into Council employment. Council no longer holds that contract. Since the transition to the Remote Australia Employment Service (RAES), Council has not received referrals from the current provider.

Our previous experience tells us there are local people seeking employment. It does not establish that those people are immediately available, qualified or supported to undertake aged care work. People may need training, mentoring, transport, flexible arrangements and support to meet the requirements of these roles.

The opportunity is to connect local people with real jobs that meet a real community need. Council, the employment service provider, aged care funders, training organisations and Aboriginal community representatives need a practical, locally designed workforce pathway. Advertising alone has not been enough.

RAES is intended to help job seekers build skills and access training and mentoring to take up employment opportunities. The absence of referrals to Council raises a practical question about the connection between employment support and local vacancies. It does not, by itself, establish that the provider has failed to meet its contractual obligations. We know there are job seekers in our communities. We don't know why they are not applying for our available jobs.

For this review, the issue is how government-funded systems work together. An employment service supports people into work. An aged care service needs people to deliver care. When those systems are not effectively connected, opportunities to improve both employment and access to care are missed.
At Timber Creek, the facility is there and the need has been identified. A supported workforce pathway is needed to turn that investment into services.

A funded education program that Council could not staff

A separate Commonwealth-funded program was intended to help children attend school and engage in education in Yarralin. Council supported its purpose, advertised the positions repeatedly, offered housing and promoted the opportunities locally and externally. We were unable to recruit suitable staff.

The program also carried substantial governance, reporting and compliance obligations. Council ultimately made the difficult decision to hand it back because there was no realistic prospect of filling the roles required to deliver it.

The program was intended to support children's education, consistent with Outcome 5. Before a program is funded, there needs to be a realistic assessment of who will deliver it. Funders and providers also need to agree what happens if recruitment fails, so communities are not left without support.

Waste management and environmental health

In one very remote community, Council leases the land used for the waste facility from a Land Council and pays compensation associated with operating the landfill at an annual cost of around $40000. The revenue available to support all municipal services including staff costs and operating expenses in the community is circa $100000 a year.

The community experiences flooding and drought. Council previously kept equipment there to support service delivery. Equipment was damaged and vandalised, and without a secure compound to protect it, Council ultimately had to remove it.

During the dry season, staff now travel approximately two hours each way from another community once a week, bringing the equipment needed for rubbish collection, waste facility management and other municipal work, including airstrip maintenance. Four or five staff may spend an entire day travelling and delivering these services.

The example shows how land arrangements, asset security, workforce availability and operating funds interact. Waste management supports environmental health, community safety and wellbeing. A sustainable response requires coordinated planning of the service and its supporting infrastructure. The purpose is to identify a workable arrangement, rather than attribute blame.

Airstrip training: an essential cost that limits other staff development

Council maintains airstrips across most communities in our region. They support emergency medical evacuations, CareFlight operations, boarding school transport, visiting health professionals, police access and emergency response. They also provide a connection for supplies and support when roads become inaccessible to the road trains serving community stores.

Our Aboriginal staff need specific training and current qualifications to maintain these airstrips safely and meet Council's contractual obligations. This year, Council applied for a grant to support that training. The grant required Council to contribute 50% of the cost.

Council funded its contribution from our small learning and development budget. While this enabled staff to complete the required airstrip training, it reduced the funding available for other essential training and development.

This is a barrier governments can address. Removing co-contribution requirements for essential training or providing access through Commonwealth or Northern Territory Government arrangements at no cost or a significantly reduced cost, would help Council meet its obligations while supporting the broader development of our Aboriginal workforce.

Supporting Aboriginal employment requires more than filling positions. Staff also need access to the training that enables them to do their jobs safely, maintain their qualifications and build their skills.

New assets create continuing responsibilities

A recent Northern Territory Government investment provided a new ablution block at an evacuation centre in one of our remote communities. Council welcomes the investment and the benefit it provides to the community.

However, the responsibility for maintenance, utilities, repairs, compliance and eventual replacement effectively falls to Council, without accompanying ongoing operational funding.

As CEO, I must ensure Council remains financially sustainable. Before Council accepts continuing responsibilities for new assets, there needs to be a realistic way to meet those costs throughout their life. Otherwise, new investment can draw resources away from existing services on which communities already depend.

The review's consideration of government policy design and funding should examine whether communities and delivery partners are involved early enough to agree ownership, responsibilities and whole-of-life funding. Success should be assessed through continued access to a useful, safe and functional facility, as well as completion of construction.

Recommendations

Council asks the Commission to consider the following recommendations, drawing on the experiences outlined in this submission. Aboriginal communities and organisations should be involved in deciding how these changes are put into practice.

Recommendation	Practical change	Review alignment
Strengthen community-led local partnerships	Include councils in place-based planning where their infrastructure and service responsibilities are relevant. Establish clear shared decision-making arrangements that respect Aboriginal community authority, agree responsibilities and report decisions back to communities.	Priority Reform 1; community-led efforts and local governance
Support complementary delivery partnerships	Enable councils, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, Aboriginal corporations and Land Councils to combine capability and resources around community priorities, while supporting the leadership and sustainability of the community-controlled sector.	Priority Reforms 1 and 2; community-led efforts
Connect employment services with actual vacancies	Support locally designed partnerships between remote employment providers, employers, Aboriginal representatives, training organisations and service funders. Agree practical referral arrangements, supported training, mentoring and retention support.	Priority Reform 3; policy delivery; Outcomes 8 and 1
Test workforce feasibility before funding services	Assess recruitment, housing, training, relief and retention requirements when programs are designed. Provide for review and alternative delivery arrangements where vacancies prevent access to services.	Priority Reform 3; system barriers to outcomes
Fund infrastructure throughout its life	Agree asset ownership and operating responsibilities before construction or handover. Include realistic funding for operations, maintenance, utilities, compliance and replacement, together with trained staff, equipment and secure depots or storage.	Priority Reform 3; policy design, funding and delivery
Reform co-contribution requirements	Remove or substantially reduce cash co-contributions for regional and remote councils where fiscal capacity and community benefit justify this. Remove barriers to essential compliance training and recognise appropriate in-kind and joint contributions.	Priority Reform 3; resourcing and system barriers

Conclusion

Across our region, Aboriginal organisations, community leaders, governments and Council staff work hard every day for their communities. That effort needs to be backed by arrangements that help them deliver services and keep those services running.

Council wants to work more closely with Aboriginal land councils and organisations, share resources and contribute to stronger local delivery. We also need funding and program arrangements that reflect the realities of remote Australia.

For the people we serve, Closing the Gap needs to mean that care is available, local people can take up jobs and essential services keep working. Communities need a real say in those decisions. The organisations doing the work need the means to follow through.

Yours sincerely,

Jennifer Marston
Chief Executive Officer
Victoria Daly Regional Council

PO Box 19
Katherine NT 0851
Telephone: 08 8972 0777
admin@vicdaly.nt.gov.au