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

ABS Contribution to Closing the Gap Priority Reform 4

Executive Summary

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has long supported Priority Reform 4 through the collection, stewardship and dissemination of high-quality data and statistics. This enduring role provides governments, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities with information to support planning, service delivery, accountability and decision-making.

Since the 2024 Productivity Commission review, the ABS contribution has continued to evolve. While maintaining its core statistical functions, the ABS has built on existing efforts to expand access to data, strengthen data capability, and implement improved Indigenous data governance. Through enhanced engagement, Return of Information and Census dissemination activities, improved data access pathways and implementation of Indigenous Data Governance principles, the ABS is supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, communities and organisations to access, understand and use data to support their own priorities and decision-making.

This work is taking place within a broader program of reforms under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, including implementation of the APS Framework for the Governance of Indigenous Data (the Framework) and the establishment of the Data Policy Partnership (see *ABS Submission: DPP*). Together, these reforms are supporting a more coordinated approach to data development, improving access to locally relevant data, strengthening data capability and advancing ABS' commitment to Priority Reform 4.

Looking ahead, the ABS sees opportunities to continue strengthening its contribution through improved access to integrated data, ongoing support for Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, continued implementation of the APS Framework for the Governance of Indigenous Data, and the development of more accessible and community-informed data products.

The evolving ABS contribution to Priority Reform 4

The ABS contributes to Priority Reform 4 through a coordinated program of work focused on:

- improving access to data and information
- strengthening capability to understand and use data
- Improving data and developing new data sources
- advancing the Governance of Indigenous Data.

Together, these activities reflect the continued development of the ABS contribution to Priority Reform 4, building on the organisation's longstanding role as Australia's national statistical agency while responding to the priorities and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and organisations.

Improving access to data and information

Longstanding contribution

Supporting access to data and information has been a core ABS function for many years. Through the Census, surveys and statistical collections, the ABS has provided information about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities to support policy development, service planning and Closing the Gap reporting.

The ABS has also undertaken Return of Information activities[1] to ensure information collected from communities is shared back in accessible and meaningful ways.

Evolution since the 2024 Review

Since the 2024 review, the ABS has continued to strengthen access to data and information by improving how information is shared, presented and made available to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, communities and organisations.

An important area of development has been the expansion of Return of Information activities through the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Engagement Management Unit.[2] Through ongoing engagement and relationship-building, communities and organisations are increasingly able to access information derived from ABS collections in ways that reflect local priorities and contexts.

The release of the *2022-23 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey (NATSIHS) Storybook* illustrates this approach. Developed with support from the Engagement Management Unit, the Storybook presents health and wellbeing information in a format designed to support broader understanding and use of survey results. This work has been complemented by tailored presentations and the publication of the first *Closing the Gap NATSIHS Data Specifications Guide*, providing greater transparency around the use of survey data in Closing the Gap reporting.

The ABS has also developed the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 2026 Census Dissemination and Return of Information Strategy*, following extensive engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders. The Strategy embeds ABS' commitment to Priority Reform 4 in the design and dissemination of Census products and seeks to improve access to locally relevant information through more community-informed dissemination approaches.

[1] The ABS is committed to returning statistical information to the communities that provided the data in our surveys and the five-yearly Census. For the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, this includes tailored products, such as storybooks and pamphlets, as well as training, engagement, and working with communities and researchers to find appropriate data for their needs.
[2] The ABS has Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander engagement staff based in our State and Territory offices throughout Australia to support meaningful engagement with their local communities on ABS work.

Access to integrated and administrative data has continued to expand through enhanced DataLab arrangements, such as new accessibility permissions for Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and ongoing work to improve access pathways through the Person Level Integrated Data Asset (PLIDA).

By creating opportunities for Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to access data through established ABS arrangements, this work supports community-led planning, service delivery and decision-making.

The ABS has recently worked with the National Indigenous Affairs Agency to pilot a customised administrative data solution for a specific remote Aboriginal community collective in partnership with a university research partner. The ABS has worked in partnership with the community organisation to extract and analyse community-level PLIDA data to tailor a data solution that would not be available by other means. This Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community data access pilot is exploring how integrated data can better support community-led decision-making and local priorities.

Future opportunities

Looking ahead, there are opportunities to continue improving community access to data through implementation of the 2026 Census Dissemination and Return of Information Strategy, access and use of integrated data, and ongoing support for Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.

Strengthening capability to understand and use data

Longstanding contribution

The ABS has long supported data literacy and statistical capability through training, guidance and stakeholder engagement activities. This includes tailored training to help people use ABS tools, like the Tablebuilder product, to quickly access the data they need. These efforts help users understand statistical concepts, navigate ABS products and apply data to planning and decision-making.

Evolution since the 2024 Review

Since the 2024 review, the ABS has continued to build on this foundation by placing greater emphasis on supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, communities and organisations to engage with and use data effectively.

Consistent with the intent of Priority Reform 4, the ABS recognises that communities require both access to locally relevant data and the capability to use that information to pursue their priorities and drive their own development. Recent work has therefore increasingly focused on linking improved access to data with practical capability-building activities.

For example, through the Centre of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Statistics and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Engagement Management Unit, the ABS continues to invest in statistical training, data literacy support, TableBuilder training, tailored information sessions and ongoing engagement activities.

The Centre of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Statistics (CoATSIS) leads and coordinates national statistical activity and data collection relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It is dedicated to early and ongoing conversations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

peoples to bring community perspectives into ABS statistical collections and outputs. An example of this is the regular discussions with the ABS Roundtable on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Statistics (the Roundtable) to improve engagement and responses to the 2026 Census of Population and Housing.

A key feature of this work has been ongoing engagement with communities and organisations to better understand their priorities and data needs. This has helped ensure capability-building activities remain responsive to local contexts and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and organisations to use data to inform decisions and achieve their priorities.

Alongside this work, the ABS is delivering the pilot Life Course Data Initiative (LCDI), a four-year initiative running from 2023-24 to 2026-2027. A key component of the LCDI is the Community Data Liaison Officers, who work with communities across Australia to improve access to and use of data. To date, the team has supported over 30 Aboriginal Controlled Community Organisations, providing access to over 700 publicly available datasets covering a wide range of social, economic and community topics. The LCDI has also delivered a range of materials to help communities including the Service Accessibility Explorer.

Through this work, the LCDI has supported the implementation of Closing the Gap Priority Reform 4 by strengthening community access to local and small-area data, while also building data literacy and capability through tailored support and workshops.

Future opportunities

Future opportunities include expanding community-led capability-building activities, strengthening support for data interpretation and application, and increasing opportunities for Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to develop and sustain their own data capability. There is also scope to further align capability-building activities with expanding data access initiatives to ensure organisations are well supported to use the growing range of available data assets.

The ABS is exploring opportunities to extend the LCDI work beyond the pilot phase, recognising the strong demand from communities and the value of ongoing support to help communities access, interpret and apply data to support local decision making.

Improving data and developing new data sources

Longstanding contribution

The five-yearly Census of Population and Housing remains an important collection for Closing the Gap and Priority Reform 4 data needs. It provides numerators for a number of socioeconomic indicators and underpins the population estimates used for denominators. It is also a component of life expectancy estimates and life tables for the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander population. It remains the collection with the greatest coverage and granularity for measuring outcomes for this cohort, as well as the best source for local and regional data.

The ABS has also contributed data through its dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and social survey program. Future surveys are not currently on the ABS' forward work program, however, work is underway to develop options to fill these data gaps.

The Roundtable provides an important mechanism for collaboration and engagement on data development, helping ensure ABS priorities, products and services are informed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives.

Evolution since the 2024 Review

The ABS has an ongoing commitment to improve the quality and coverage of the Census for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Improving the undercount was also highlighted in the Census Statistical Independence Assurance Panel recommendations from the 2021 Census. To improve the count for the 2026 Census, the ABS worked collaboratively with the Roundtable to improve key aspects of the Census enumeration processes, including community engagement and communication campaigns, recruitment of Census staff, and Census content design.

The ABS achieved strong representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff employed in Census operations, with more than 6% of the field workforce identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander in 2026. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff made up more than 40% of the workforce working in remote communities. All of the remote Census Engagement Managers (approx. 20) were Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff.

To improve language outputs from the Census, the ABS worked closely with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) to update the Australian Statistical Classification of Languages (ASCL) to better reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. Sixty-two new standalone languages were created, 45 of which were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages.

Future opportunities

A number of Closing the Gap targets and supplementary indicators rely on data from ABS Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander household surveys (see Attachment A). With no Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander household surveys currently on the ABS forward work program, gaps in the evidence base for monitoring and reporting on these measures are expected to emerge over time. The ABS is exploring options to address these gaps, including data integration, user-funded surveys, and combining administrative and Census data.

Data integration or administrative data has also been explored to increase the frequency of some data outputs, such as employment data.

As we move to better leverage administrative and integrated data assets, the ABS is working also to improve the coverage and statistical robustness of these data sources in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, researchers, and organisations. For example, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community data access pilot mentioned above is helping to assess when, and to what extent, administrative and integrated data can meet community data needs at the local level.

Advancing the Governance of Indigenous Data

Longstanding contribution

The ABS has long recognised the importance of appropriate stewardship and governance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander data. This has included engagement with stakeholders and consideration of cultural and ethical issues in statistical practice and data management.

Evolution since the 2024 Review

Since the 2024 review, the ABS has continued to strengthen its approach to the Governance of Indigenous Data through commencing implementation of the APS Framework for the Governance of

Indigenous Data. This work reflects a growing focus on supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander involvement in decisions about how data is collected, accessed, used and shared.

In the first two years of implementation, the ABS has completed the following GID activities:

- appointed a dedicated Indigenous Data Champion, supported by external advisors from the ABS Roundtable;
- agreed on an operational definition of Indigenous data and an approved approach for classifying Indigenous data into tiers;
- developed and commenced a process to flag Indigenous data in the ABS Data Asset Inventory to improve knowledge of data assets;
- progressed guidance material to support culturally responsible reporting practices, including approaches that avoid Blaming, Aggregated, Decontextualised, Deficit and Restricted (BADDR) reporting and promote strengths-based, contextualised reporting;
- as part of our current compilation of our 2027 Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP), the ABS will be incorporating cultural safety as an outcome and considering methods to monitor and evaluate cultural safety within our workplaces.

The ABS is also in the process of revising the Terms of Reference for the ABS Roundtable on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Statistics to create stronger links to ABS governance mechanisms, and our internal community of practice on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Statistics. These improvements more clearly incorporate Governance of Indigenous Data principles and the Closing the Gap Priority Reforms.

As part of improving our governance of administrative and integrated data, the ABS is continuing to trial an internal Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Review Panel to assess incoming research projects seeking access to Indigenous status in PLIDA and BLADE.

Beyond its internal work, the ABS contributes to broader national reform through participation in the external APS Governance of Indigenous Data Working Group. The ABS is also the co-chair of the Data Policy Partnership. The Partnership provides an important mechanism for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives and governments to work together to progress Priority Reform 4, address barriers to data access, and support Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Indigenous Data Governance.

Future opportunities

Opportunities exist to further embed Governance of Indigenous Data principles across ABS programs, strengthen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in governance processes and continue building organisational capability. As part of Framework implementation, the ABS has a seven-year plan for transforming the way it deals with Indigenous data across the statistical lifecycle.

There is also potential to strengthen partnerships across governments, communities and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to support broader implementation of Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles across Australia's data system.

Closing remarks

The ABS has long contributed to Priority Reform 4 through the collection, stewardship and dissemination of data and statistics.

Since the 2024 Productivity Commission review, the ABS has continued to build on this foundation through enhanced Return of Information activities, improved access pathways, support for Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, implementation of the APS Framework for the Governance of Indigenous Data, and participation in broader national reform initiatives such as the Data Policy Partnership.

Together, these activities demonstrate an evolving contribution that increasingly focuses on supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, communities and organisations to access, understand and use data to pursue their priorities and drive their own development. Looking ahead, continued progress will depend on strong partnerships, practical initiatives that improve access to and use of data, and ongoing advancement of Indigenous Data Governance and Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles.

Attachment A – CTG Targets and Indicators previously measured by ABS household surveys

Outcome area (CTG)	Target (CTG)	Indicator	Measures	Data source/s used [3]
1. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people enjoy long and healthy lives.	Close the Gap in life expectancy within a generation, by 2031.	Indicator SE1d: Health risk factors Type: Driver	1. Rate of daily smoking 2. Rate of lifetime risky alcohol consumption 3. Rate of illicit substance abuse 4. Rate of people overweight and obese 5. Rate of adequate daily vegetable intake 6. Rate of adequate daily fruit intake 7. Rate of sufficient daily physical activity	NATSIHS NATSISS NATSINPAS
9. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children secure appropriate, affordable housing that is aligned with their priorities and need	By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in appropriately sized (not overcrowded) housing to 88%	Indicator SE9e: Acceptable standard of housing Type: Contextual information	1. Proportion of households living in housing of an acceptable standard 2. Proportion of households living in dwellings with no major structural problems 3. proportion of households living in dwellings with access to working facilities by separate facility type	NATSIHS NATSISS

[3] National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey (NATSIHS), National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS), National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nutrition and Physical Activity Survey (NATSINPAS).

13. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and households are safe	By 2031, the rate of all forms of family violence and abuse against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children is reduced at least by 50%, as progress towards zero	Target 13: All forms of family violence and abuse against women and children is reduced Type: Target	1. Number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander females aged 15 years or over who experienced physical harm and/or face-to-face threatened physical harm in the last 12 months where the perpetrator was a family member	NATSIHS
14. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people enjoy high levels of social and emotional wellbeing.	Significant and sustained reduction in suicide of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people towards zero.	SE14d: Psychological distress Type: Contextual information	1. Number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (aged 18 years or over) reporting high/very high psychological distress, according to the Kessler 5 score scale	NATSIHS
14. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people enjoy high levels of social and emotional wellbeing.	Significant and sustained reduction in suicide of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people towards zero.	Indicator SE14e: Barriers accessing health services Type: Contextual information	1. Proportion of people reporting they did not visit a health service provider when needed in the previous 12 months by type of service (GP/clinic doctor, counsellor, dentist, other health professional, hospital) 2. Proportion of people reporting a specific type of barrier(s) to accessing a health service provider by type of service (general practitioner (GP)/clinic doctor, counsellor, dentist, other health professional, hospital)	NATSIHS

15. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people maintain a distinctive cultural, spiritual, physical and economic relationship with their land and waters.	By 2030, a 15% increase in: Australia's land mass subject to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's legal rights or interests (Target 15A) Australia's sea waters subject to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's legal rights or interests (Target 15B).	SE15i: Proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who recognise and live on homelands/traditional country Type: Contextual information	1. Proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 18 or over who recognise their homelands/traditional country 2. Proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 18 or over who live on their homelands/traditional country 3. Proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 18 or over that do not currently live on their homelands/traditional country and are allowed to visit, by how often they visit homelands	NATSIHS
16. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and languages are strong, supported and flourishing.	By 2031, there is a sustained increase in number and strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages being spoken.	SE16d: Proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who speak an Indigenous language Type: Driver	1. Proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who use an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language at home. 2. Proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who speak Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander words or languages 3. Proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are learning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander words or languages	NATSIHS
17. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have access to information and services enabling participation in informed decision-making regarding their own lives.	By 2026, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have equal levels of digital inclusion.	Target 17: People have equal levels of digital inclusion Type: Target	1. Number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years and over who have personally used the internet in the past three months	NATSIHS

17. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have access to information and services enabling participation in informed decision-making regarding their own lives.	By 2026, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have equal levels of digital inclusion.	Indicator SE17e: Using the internet to access government services Indicator type: Driver	1. Number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years and over who have personally used the internet in the last three months to access government services or information about government services	NATSIHS