

Elders, ageing and aged care in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap

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

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In this photo: Aunty Z is a respected Jinibara Elder and dedicated advocate for Caring for Country on the Sunshine Coast, Queensland.

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Meaningful Ageing Australia acknowledges the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of this nation and the traditional custodians of the lands where we conduct our work. We pay our respects to ancestors and Elders, past, present and emerging. We recognise their unique relationships to the land and waters and are grateful for their spiritual resilience and cultural wisdom.

Meaningful Ageing Australia supports person-centered care that is inclusive for all people. The intersex-inclusive Progress Pride flag is a reflection of recent conversations around inclusivity underneath the broader umbrella of the Silver Rainbow.

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Meaningful Ageing Australia
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Executive summary

Meaningful Ageing Australia recommends that the National Agreement on Closing the Gap include a dedicated socio-economic outcome for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders, older people, ageing and aged care, supported by measurable targets and indicators developed through First Nations-led processes.

Ageing well encompasses more than access to services or clinical outcomes. It includes identity, relationships, meaning, purpose, emotional and spiritual wellbeing, connection and belonging. Meaningful Ageing Australia's work on holistic, person-centred spiritual care reflects this broader understanding of quality of life. ESWOP - the book identifies psychological and spiritual wellbeing and social inclusion as relevant dimensions of quality care and emphasises the importance of meaningful relationships and connection.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders, these matters should be understood within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander frameworks of wellbeing and under the leadership of Elders, communities and community-controlled organisations.

Meaningful Ageing Australia recommends that an outcome for Elders, ageing and aged care:

- be developed through genuine shared decision-making with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and organisations;
- recognise the interconnected nature of physical, social, emotional, cultural and spiritual wellbeing;
- distinguish between access, experience and outcomes, rather than relying on measures of service activity alone;
- recognise connections to Country or Island Home, family and kinship, community, culture, spirituality and ancestors where these are important to the Elder;
- recognise that disruption to connections central to an Elder's identity, meaning and belonging may be experienced as spiritual distress;
- draw on First Nations-developed approaches to defining and measuring wellbeing, including Good Spirit Good Life where First Nations stakeholders determine this is appropriate;
- apply the four Priority Reforms and principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Governance; and
- establish transparent accountability for progress.

The purpose is not simply to add an aged-care target. It is to ensure that the experiences and outcomes of Elders and older people are visible within Closing the Gap and that progress is assessed against outcomes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people themselves determine are meaningful.

About Meaningful Ageing Australia

Meaningful Ageing Australia (MAA) is a national organisation focused on spiritual care and emotional wellbeing for older people receiving aged care.

Its work promotes holistic, person-centred care that recognises identity, relationships, meaning, purpose, hope and connection. MAA's research and resources emphasise understanding each person's beliefs, practices and important connections and responding to spirituality through relationship and engagement rather than reducing it to a numerical assessment.Hampton, I., Egan, R. (2025).

MAA's National Guidelines for Spiritual Care in Aged Care recognise the importance of culture in spiritual care. In relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the Guidelines recognise that spirituality is intertwined with land, life-force and culture and identify cultural safety as important to spiritual care.

MAA's The HEART Model further develops its approach to holistic, person-centred spiritual care, including through Guideline 6 on Diversity and Inclusion.

MAA are proud affiliate members of NATSIAACC is the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ageing and Aged Care Council.

Through this submission, MAA does not seek to define ageing well for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Rather, MAA submits that the National Agreement should establish an accountability framework through which Elders and communities can determine what matters, how progress should be measured and what governments and service systems should be accountable for achieving.

1. The case for an explicit ageing outcome

The National Agreement addresses outcomes across the life course. MAA submits that the wellbeing and care of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and older people should be separately visible within that accountability framework.

This is important because aged-care performance cannot be adequately understood through service provision or clinical measures alone.

MAA's work recognises quality of life as extending beyond health status to psychological and spiritual wellbeing, social inclusion, important relationships and personal beliefs. ESWOP - the book

MAA's National Guidelines for Spiritual Care in Aged Care DIGITAL similarly recognise that the spiritual wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people needs to be considered in relation to culture and cultural safety.

For the purposes of the National Agreement, this suggests a need to distinguish between three dimensions:

- Access: whether an Elder can obtain appropriate care and support.
- Experience: whether that care is culturally safe, respectful and responsive.
- Outcomes: whether care supports the dimensions of wellbeing that the Elder identifies as important.

A measure concerned only with service activity would not adequately capture all three dimensions.

2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social and Emotional Wellbeing

MAA acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social and Emotional Wellbeing framework as an important First Nations foundation for considering wellbeing across the life course.

The framework describes seven interconnected domains:

- connection to body;
- connection to mind and emotions;
- connection to family and kinship;
- connection to community;
- connection to culture;
- connection to Country; and
- connection to spirituality and ancestors.

These domains provide an important conceptual basis for considering ageing because they recognise that physical, emotional, social, cultural and spiritual dimensions of wellbeing are interconnected.

MAA submits that this framework should inform consideration of an ageing outcome under Closing the Gap. Its translation into outcomes, indicators or targets should, however, be led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

In particular, Elders, communities and relevant First Nations organisations such as NATSIAACC should determine:

- which outcomes are important;
- how concepts of wellbeing apply in different communities and contexts;
- what information should be collected;
- which measures are culturally appropriate; and
- how results should be interpreted and reported.

This distinction is important. MAA's frameworks can contribute expertise in holistic aged care but should complement, rather than replace, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander understandings and frameworks of wellbeing. Out intention is to co-develop a compendium of The HEART Model with NATSIAACC and First Nations organisations.

3. Diversity, inclusion and culturally responsive care

MAA's HEART Model positions Diversity and Inclusion as integral to holistic, person-centred spiritual care.

Diversity and inclusion should not be treated as supplementary considerations applied after aged-care services have been designed. They are relevant to how a person is known, how identity and culture are recognised, how meaning and purpose are supported, whether a person experiences connection and belonging, and whether care is culturally safe and responsive.

This approach is consistent with MAA's established spiritual-care framework. Its National Guidelines for Spiritual Care in Aged Care recognise the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander spirituality, land, life-force and culture and the importance of culturally safe care.

For the purposes of Closing the Gap, The HEART Model should be understood as complementary to, rather than a substitute for, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander frameworks of wellbeing such as SEWB and GoodSpirit, GoodLife.

4. Connections that support wellbeing

For some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders, wellbeing may include connections to:

- Country or Island Home;
- family and kinship;
- community;
- culture;
- spirituality and ancestors;
- language;
- stories and storytelling;
- music, song and dance;
- ceremony and cultural practices; and
- roles and obligations within family, kinship networks and community.

The significance and expression of these connections will differ between individuals, families, communities and Nations. Governments and service providers should therefore not presume their importance or treat them as a standardised set of cultural activities.

MAA's framework supports care that responds to an individual's life story, culture and circumstances. Its National Guidelines identify the close relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander spirituality, land and culture. National Guidelines for Spiritual Care in Aged Care.

The policy issue extends beyond whether an aged-care provider offers particular cultural activities. A more meaningful consideration is whether an Elder can sustain the relationships, places, practices and responsibilities that they identify as important to their identity and wellbeing.

5. Disconnection and spiritual distress

Ageing, declining health or mobility, and changes in living arrangements may affect an older person's ability to maintain important relationships and connections.

MAA's work understands spirituality broadly through relationships, meaning and important connections and recognises that substantial health and lifestyle changes associated with ageing and receiving care may affect older people's wellbeing. ESWOP - the book

Where an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Elder identifies connections to Country or Island Home, family and kinship, community, culture, spirituality or ancestors as central to identity, meaning and belonging, disruption to these connections may be experienced as spiritual distress.

Similarly, an inability to participate in a practice or fulfil a cultural, family, kinship or community obligation identified by the Elder as important may affect spiritual wellbeing.

This submission does not suggest that spiritual distress should be inferred from an Elder's circumstances. Its existence and significance should be understood from the Elder's perspective and, where the Elder wishes, with the involvement of family, kin, community or culturally recognised people.

This distinction is consistent with MAA's broader approach to spiritual care, which focuses on understanding and responding to the person's important connections. ESWOP - the book

For policy and measurement purposes, consideration could consequently be given to whether aged-care arrangements:

- **enable important relationships and connections to be maintained;**
- **support connection to Country or Island Home where this is important to the Elder;**
- **support cultural and spiritual expression;**
- **respect family, kinship and community relationships; and**
- **identify and respond appropriately where an Elder experiences loss or disconnection.**

6. Good Spirit Good Life and culturally appropriate measurement

First Nations-developed approaches should inform consideration of how wellbeing and quality of life for Elders are defined and measured.

Good Spirit Good Life is relevant to this discussion as Aboriginal ageing research concerned with quality of life among older Aboriginal people.

Its relevance to Closing the Gap is principally methodological. It illustrates the importance of beginning with culturally grounded understandings of quality of life rather than assuming that mainstream aged-care indicators necessarily capture the outcomes Aboriginal older people consider important.

The relevant policy question is therefore:

> ***What do Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and communities identify as ageing well, and which First Nations-led approaches can appropriately measure progress towards those outcomes?***

More broadly, caution is required before applying general spiritual-care approaches in a First Nations context. Spiritual Assessment in Healthcare Resource Guide_Ross L and McSherry W 2025 emphasises consideration of cultural factors, values and individual preferences in spiritual assessment.

Any use of Good Spirit Good Life or another First Nations-developed measure within Closing the Gap should occur under appropriate First Nations leadership and governance and should respect the purpose and integrity of the measure.

7. Proposed socio-economic outcome

MAA recommends that the Productivity Commission consider the development of a dedicated socio-economic outcome concerning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders, older people, ageing and aged care.

As a starting point for First Nations-led co-design, the intent could be expressed as:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and older people age well, with dignity and self-determination, sustaining the connections that support their wellbeing, including connections to Country or Island Home, family and kinship, community, culture, spirituality and ancestors, with equitable access to culturally safe, high-quality care and support when and where they need it.

This formulation is proposed for consideration and co-design. It is not intended to prescribe a definition of ageing well.

The final outcome, targets, indicators and trajectories should be developed through genuine shared decision-making with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders, communities, community-controlled organisations and relevant First Nations ageing and aged-care bodies.

8. Recommendations

Meaningful Ageing Australia recommends that the Productivity Commission:

Recommendation 1: Establish an explicit outcome for Elders, ageing and aged care

Recommend that the National Agreement include a socio-economic outcome addressing the wellbeing and care of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and older people.

This would provide explicit visibility of ageing and aged-care outcomes within the Closing the Gap accountability framework.

Recommendation 2: Ensure First Nations leadership in outcome and target development

Recommend that the outcome, targets, indicators and trajectories be developed through shared decision-making with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders, communities, community-controlled organisations and relevant First Nations ageing and aged-care organisations.

This process should provide First Nations partners with authority in determining:

- what ageing well means;
- which outcomes should be measured;
- what information should be collected;
- how progress should be interpreted; and
- what constitutes success.

Recommendation 3: Ground the outcome in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander understandings of wellbeing

Recognise the seven interconnected domains of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social and Emotional Wellbeing: connections to body; mind and emotions; family and kinship; community; culture; Country; and spirituality and ancestors.
In developing ageing measures, provide for culturally determined dimensions of connection and expression where Elders and communities identify these as important.

Recommendation 4: Measure access, experience and outcomes

Develop a focused set of indicators addressing:

- equitable and timely access to appropriate care and support;
- cultural safety and quality as experienced by Elders;
- holistic wellbeing and connection, using First Nations-led measures;
- capacity to maintain culturally important relationships, practices and responsibilities; and
- self-determination and community control in service design and delivery.

Recommendation 5: Distinguish outcomes from system activity

Ensure the outcome framework distinguishes between measures of government and provider activity and outcomes experienced by Elders.

Outcome measures should be strengths-based and reflect dimensions of wellbeing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people identify as important.

Recommendation 6: Include cultural safety as an outcome

Develop measures addressing whether Elders experience services as culturally safe, respectful and responsive.

Where identified as important by the Elder, measures could consider whether care supports cultural identity and expression, family and kinship relationships, community connection and connection to Country or Island Home.

Recommendation 7: Recognise the implications of disrupted connections

Recognise that disruption to connections an Elder identifies as central to identity, meaning and belonging may contribute to spiritual distress.

Policy responses should be determined with Elders and communities and should not assume that cultural or spiritual wellbeing can be addressed through a standardised mainstream intervention.

Recommendation 8: Draw on First Nations-developed measurement approaches

Prioritise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-developed and culturally appropriate approaches to understanding and measuring wellbeing.

Good Spirit Good Life provides one relevant example for consideration. Any use of First Nations-developed measures within the National Agreement should occur with appropriate First Nations leadership, governance and agreement.

Recommendation 9: Apply the Priority Reforms and Indigenous Data Sovereignty

Apply the four Priority Reforms to the development and implementation of the outcome. Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Governance should inform the design, collection, analysis, interpretation and reporting of ageing and aged-care data.

Recommendation 10: Establish transparent accountability and policy alignment

Report transparently against the outcome and associated targets through the Closing the Gap accountability framework.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partners should share authority in interpreting results, identifying where progress is off track and determining appropriate responses.

Implementation should complement existing First Nations aged-care policy and reform while maintaining a clearly identifiable line of Closing the Gap accountability for outcomes experienced by Elders and older people.

Conclusion

Ageing is an important component of a life-course approach to Closing the Gap.

Ageing policy and aged-care performance should not be assessed solely through service access, utilisation or clinical outcomes. Identity, relationships, culture, meaning, connection and belonging are also relevant to quality of life. MAA's work in spiritual care supports this holistic understanding. ESWOP - the book National Guidelines for Spiritual Care in Aged Care DIGITAL

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders, the content and measurement of wellbeing should be determined within First Nations frameworks and under First Nations leadership.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander *Social and Emotional Wellbeing* framework provides an important conceptual foundation through its recognition of interconnected connections to body; mind and emotions; family and kinship; community; culture; Country; and spirituality and ancestors.

First Nations-developed work such as *Good Spirit Good Life* provides a further basis for considering culturally grounded approaches to quality of life and outcome measurement.

Meaningful Ageing Australia therefore recommends that the Productivity Commission support the inclusion of **Elders, ageing and aged care as an explicit component of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, supported by First Nations-led, culturally appropriate, measurable and accountable outcomes and targets.**

The objective should be to ensure that **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and older people are visible within national accountability arrangements and that progress is assessed against outcomes Elders and communities themselves determine are meaningful.**

Meaningful Ageing Australia
23 October 2026

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