Advancing Closing the Gap in Yarra Ranges: Local Progress, Partnerships and Priorities

Executive Summary

The Yarra Ranges municipality spans the Yarra Valley and Dandenong Ranges, forming a unique interface between urban and rural communities in Melbourne's north-east. It is also home to the historic Coranderrk Aboriginal Station, a place of profound cultural significance and a powerful symbol of Aboriginal resilience, self-determination and advocacy.

This report outlines Yarra Ranges Council's contribution and Officers experience with regard to Closing the Gap through local evidence, partnerships and progress across the four Priority Reforms. The local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population is young and growing, with improving education and employment outcomes and strong community connection. However, continuing inequities in community safety, health, disability, housing, cost of living and access to culturally safe services demonstrate the need for sustained, place-based action.

Yarra Ranges experience shows that progress is strongest when Aboriginal people share decision-making from the outset, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations are supported as trusted delivery and governance partners, and government organisations embed cultural safety and accountability. The Yarra Ranges Innovate Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) Evaluation identified progress through cultural learning, stronger leadership commitment and greater organisational accountability, while also highlighting the need for continued community-defined measures, Aboriginal participation in evaluation and improved cultural safety monitoring.

The report recommends long-term investment in Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, formal and accountable partnerships with Traditional Owners and Aboriginal communities, culturally safe and responsive council services, and shared access to locally relevant data. These actions will strengthen self-determination and help ensure that Closing the Gap implementation reflects community priorities, including safety, housing security, environmental stewardship, connection and economic opportunity.

Community Context

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population of Yarra Ranges has a median age of 25 years compared to 40 years across the broader municipality. Household incomes, mortgage costs and rental costs are broadly consistent with the wider Yarra Ranges community. However, Aboriginal households are larger on average, with a median

household size of 3.2 persons compared to 2.7 persons for all residents, and housing overcrowding is becoming increasingly prevalent.

While many socio-economic indicators demonstrate improvement, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to experience disproportionate challenges relating to health, disability, housing suitability, justice outcomes, community safety and service access.

Importantly, the priorities identified by Aboriginal residents indicate that Closing the Gap efforts must extend beyond service provision alone to address safety, opportunity, community wellbeing and self-determination. Aboriginal residents consistently place significant importance on feeling safe, protecting the natural environment, strengthening community connections and creating pathways to economic participation and opportunity.

Priority Reform 1 - Sharing decision-making through formal partnerships

1. Understanding Community Priorities

Effective relationships require governments and institutions to understand what matters most to Aboriginal communities.

Community engagement data highlights that Aboriginal residents in Yarra Ranges place significantly greater emphasis on:

- Feeling safe (87% compared with 74% of non-Aboriginal residents).
- The natural environment (75% compared with 61%).
- Affordable and decent housing (56% compared with 42%).
- Sense of community (49% compared with 43%).
- A lack of road congestion (55% compared with 37%).
- Opportunity for all (27% compared with 13%).
- Good job prospects (25% compared with 13%).

These findings suggest that successful partnerships must extend beyond cultural recognition and actively contribute to safety, environmental stewardship, housing, employment and local decision-making outcomes.

The evaluation of Yarra Ranges Councils RAP demonstrated that relationships are strongest when engagement moves beyond consultation and enables Aboriginal voices to influence planning, strategy development and implementation. This was evident

through partnerships with Traditional Owners across environmental management, landscape design, heritage planning and community development initiatives.

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2. Shared Decision-Making in Agreement Governance

Our experience suggests that shared decision-making is most effective when Aboriginal people are involved from the earliest stages of policy development and project design.

The development of the ngurrak-ba wurrung balit - Country Voice Strong Indigenous Design and Engagement Protocols demonstrates a practical example of moving beyond consultation towards genuine partnership. The protocols establish clear pathways for Traditional Owner participation, recognise cultural authority and support shared decision-making throughout project lifecycles.

Community aspirations also support greater Aboriginal participation in local governance. Strong preferences for community connection, environmental stewardship, opportunity and safety highlight the importance of Aboriginal voices influencing decisions about local priorities and service design.

Shared decision-making becomes particularly important given the youthfulness of the Aboriginal population. With a median age of 25 years, long-term outcomes will depend on ensuring younger generations are represented within governance arrangements and local decision-making structures.

Yarra Ranges Council partnership with Oonah Health and Community Services Aboriginal Corporation demonstrates how shared decision-making can operate in practice. Rather than government agencies solely determining priorities and service responses, Aboriginal community-controlled organisations bring community voices, cultural authority and lived experience into planning, implementation and evaluation processes. These partnerships help ensure that decisions reflect community aspirations and strengthen Aboriginal self-determination

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3. Community Safety as a Measure of Accountability

For many Aboriginal Yarra Ranges residents, community safety represents a key measure of government effectiveness.

Community views research found that:

- 69% identified law and order as one of their three most important issues.
- 67% identified cost of living pressures.
- 24% identified fuel costs.

- 19% identified drug and alcohol abuse.
- 19% identified household or personal debt.

Law and order concerns were almost twice as high among Aboriginal residents compared with the broader Yarra Ranges population.

These findings suggest accountability frameworks should assess whether governance arrangements are delivering tangible improvements in safety, wellbeing and economic participation, rather than focusing solely on outputs and activities.

The RAP Evaluation identified opportunities to strengthen accountability through:

- Community-defined success measures.
- Improved cultural safety monitoring.
- Stronger evaluation frameworks.
- Enhanced Aboriginal participation in performance reporting.

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4. Data and Evidence

The Yarra Ranges community profile highlights the importance of Aboriginal-led oversight and independent monitoring.

While Aboriginal residents in Yarra Ranges experience lower overall hospital admission rates than Aboriginal Victorians generally, several significant disparities remain.

Compared with non-Aboriginal residents, Aboriginal people are more likely to experience:

- Mental health conditions (16.6%).
- Asthma (14.2%).
- Diabetes (5.0%).
- Kidney disease.
- Other long-term health conditions.
- Disability (9.6% compared with 5.4%).

Disability rates are particularly elevated among children aged 5-14 years and older Aboriginal residents.

The Aboriginal population in Yarra Ranges demonstrates several positive Closing the Gap trends:

Closing the Gap Target 5: Education

The proportion of Aboriginal people aged 20-24 years attaining Year 12 or equivalent increased from:

- 66.3% in 2011
- 79.3% in 2016
- 79.5% in 2021

Closing the Gap Target 6: Post-School Qualifications

The proportion of Aboriginal people aged 25-34 years holding a Certificate III qualification or above increased from:

- 51.9% in 2011
- 59.2% in 2016
- 69.3% in 2021

Closing the Gap Target 7: Education, Employment or Training

The proportion of Aboriginal young people aged 15-24 years fully engaged in education, employment or training increased from:

- 70.2% in 2016
- 72.3% in 2021

Closing the Gap Target 8: Employment

Employment among Aboriginal people aged 25-64 years increased from:

- 66.4% in 2016
- 70.1% in 2021

These improvements demonstrate that progress is occurring and highlight the value of local data in informing decision-making and measuring outcomes.

These findings demonstrate why independent monitoring mechanisms must consider not only population-level averages but also underlying inequities that remain hidden within broader statistics.

The RAP Evaluation similarly identified a need for community-defined indicators alongside traditional government reporting measures.

Priority Reform 2 - Building the Community-Controlled Sector

1. The Importance of Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations

Council recognises that Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) are fundamental to achieving the objectives of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

ACCOs represent one of the strongest expressions of Aboriginal self-determination. They are governed by Aboriginal communities, accountable to Aboriginal communities and are uniquely positioned to provide culturally safe, place-based and community-led services. Through their governance structures, cultural authority and deep understanding of community priorities, ACCOs deliver services that are responsive to local needs while strengthening community control over decision-making.

Our experience demonstrates that Closing the Gap initiatives are most effective when designed and delivered through Aboriginal-led organisations with established cultural legitimacy and community trust.

2. Partnership with Oonah Health and Community Services Aboriginal Corporation

A significant example is Council's long-standing partnership with **Oonah Health and Community Services Aboriginal Corporation**, an Aboriginal Community-Controlled Health Organisation that provides culturally safe health, wellbeing and community services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across the Outer Eastern region.

Through a formal partnership funding agreement and collaborative project delivery, council Officers work alongside Oonah to support Aboriginal health, wellbeing, family support, community participation and cultural connection outcomes.

This partnership demonstrates the value of investing in Aboriginal-led organisations that have established relationships with local Aboriginal communities and can deliver services in ways that are culturally appropriate, community-informed and strengths-based.

We have observed that Aboriginal people are often more likely to engage with services that are delivered through trusted community-controlled organisations where cultural identity is recognised, respected and valued. These organisations provide not only service delivery but also advocacy, cultural connection, community leadership and pathways for self-determination.

3. Lessons for Closing the Gap

Our experience suggests that government investment should continue to prioritise ACCOs and ACCHOs as preferred partners for the design and delivery of services intended for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Key lessons include:

- Community-controlled organisations are best placed to understand local community needs and aspirations.
- Aboriginal governance strengthens accountability to community.
- Cultural safety is enhanced when services are delivered through Aboriginal-led organisations.
- Community trust improves engagement and participation.
- Aboriginal-led approaches better support self-determination and long-term community outcomes.
- Sustainable funding arrangements enable ACCOs to build workforce capability, leadership capacity and organisational sustainability.

4. Strengthening the Community-Controlled Sector

To support Priority Reform 2, governments should:

- Increase direct investment in ACCOs and ACCHOs.
- Prioritise Aboriginal-led organisations when commissioning services for Aboriginal communities.
- Support long-term partnership agreements rather than short-term project funding.
- Invest in organisational capability, infrastructure and workforce development.
- Recognise ACCOs as key partners in local and regional governance arrangements.
- Support local government partnerships with ACCOs as an effective mechanism for implementing Closing the Gap at a place-based level.

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5. Community-Controlled Solutions

Our experience working alongside Oonah Health and Community Services Aboriginal Corporation reinforces the principle that community-led solutions are often the most

effective and sustainable. Aboriginal communities are best placed to identify local priorities, develop culturally appropriate responses and determine what success looks like for their communities.

The growing evidence base supporting Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations aligns strongly with our local experience. Community-controlled service delivery not only improves access and participation but also strengthens cultural identity, community leadership and local decision-making.

Recommendation

The Federal Government should expand investment in Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations, recognising them as critical partners in delivering Priority Reform 2 and advancing Aboriginal self-determination. Long-term funding arrangements should support organisational sustainability, workforce growth, leadership development and place-based partnerships between ACCOs, Traditional Owners and local government.

Priority Reform 3 - Transforming Government Organisations

Cultural Safety and Service Responsiveness

Improving outcomes requires more than increasing access to services. Services must also be culturally safe, responsive and capable of addressing identified community priorities.

The health profile demonstrates that Yarra Ranges Aboriginal residents continue to experience disproportionate rates of:

- Mental health conditions.
- Asthma.
- Diabetes.
- Kidney disease.
- Disability.

Hospital admissions are also higher for:

- Diseases of the respiratory system.
- Diseases of the nervous system.

- Injuries and poisoning.

These outcomes emphasise the importance of Priority Reform 3 and of embedding cultural safety in government agencies. Cultural safety is fundamental to service accessibility for Aboriginal people because access is shaped not only by whether a service is available, but also by whether community members feel culturally respected, understood and safe when seeking information, support or assistance. Culturally safe practice can reduce barriers to engagement, strengthen trust and enable services to respond more effectively to Aboriginal community needs.

The Yarra Ranges Council RAP Evaluation showed that we have made progress in growing cultural safety through cultural learning, stronger leadership commitment and increased organisational accountability. These foundations have improved our capacity to engage respectfully and effectively with Aboriginal communities and to embed Indigenous Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing in policy and service delivery. The evaluation also reinforces that cultural safety requires sustained effort, ongoing accountability and continued partnership with Aboriginal communities so that improvements translate into more accessible, responsive and trusted services.

Priority Reform 4 - Shared Access to Data and Information

Certainly. For a Productivity Commission submission, a shorter version will often be stronger and more readable.

Priority Reform 4 - Shared Access to Data and Information

Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Community Knowledge

Closing the Gap is not only about sharing data, but about ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a meaningful role in determining what information is collected, how it is interpreted and how it is used to inform decisions.

Indigenous Data Sovereignty recognises that data about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is a valuable asset that should be governed in ways that support self-determination. It seeks to ensure Aboriginal people have influence over the collection, ownership, access and use of information about their communities.

For us, Indigenous Data Sovereignty is important because data alone does not tell the full story. While local data shows encouraging improvements in educational attainment and employment, it also highlights ongoing challenges relating to health, disability, housing and community safety. Community knowledge and lived experience are essential to understanding these trends and identifying effective responses.

Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs), such as Oonah Health and Community Services Aboriginal Corporation, play an important role in this process. Through their community governance structures and strong relationships with Aboriginal people, ACCOs provide critical insights into community priorities, strengths and aspirations that may not be captured through government datasets alone.

Approaches that strengthen Aboriginal leadership in data governance, including partnering with ACCOs, Traditional Owners and local communities to determine what success looks like, how outcomes should be measured, and how data can be used to drive local decision-making and accountability need to be supported.

Ultimately, Indigenous Data Sovereignty is about ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a voice not only in decisions that affect their communities, but also in how progress is defined, measured and reported. Strengthening Indigenous Data Sovereignty will support more effective policy, stronger accountability and better alignment between Closing the Gap initiatives and community aspirations.

Recommendation: The Federal Government should support Aboriginal-led data governance by partnering with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), Traditional Owners and communities to determine what data is collected, how success is measured and how information is used to inform policy and investment. This includes recognising community knowledge, lived experience and cultural perspectives as critical sources of evidence alongside quantitative data.

Housing and Community Wellbeing

Housing remains an emerging area of concern.

While most Yarra Ranges Aboriginal households continue to live in appropriately sized dwellings, overcrowding has increased.

Between 2016 and 2021:

- Households living in appropriately sized dwellings declined from 92.1% to 90.6%.
- Households requiring additional bedrooms increased from 94 to 143.

This trend has important implications for health, family wellbeing and children's educational outcomes.

Community-led approaches that support locally informed housing solutions should be considered an important contributor to Closing the Gap outcomes.

Progress Towards Socio-Economic Outcomes

Key Strengths

Yarra Ranges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities demonstrate significant strengths, including:

- Rising educational attainment.
- Improving employment outcomes.
- Strong community participation.
- High levels of caregiving and family responsibility.
- Strong connection to community and environment.
- Growing opportunities for Aboriginal leadership through local partnerships.

Continuing Challenges

Despite these strengths, challenges remain in:

- Community safety and justice outcomes.
- Chronic disease prevalence.
- Disability.
- Mental health.
- Housing overcrowding.
- Cost-of-living pressures.
- Long-term economic participation.
- Preservation and revitalisation of Aboriginal languages.

The proportion of Aboriginal residents reporting use of an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language declined from 2.2% in 2016 to 0.8% in 2021, highlighting the importance of supporting cultural revitalisation initiatives alongside socio-economic reform.

Recommendation

Future Closing the Gap implementation should place greater emphasis on community-defined measures of success, including safety, connection to community, environmental stewardship, housing security and opportunity, as these issues were consistently

identified by Yarra Ranges Aboriginal residents as the factors that most influence wellbeing and quality of life within Yarra Ranges.