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Dear Commissioners,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this submission to the review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

This submission reflects our experiences as an ACCO, and our observations of the implementation of the National Agreement at local, regional and national levels. It focuses on the practical factors that enable or hinder genuine partnership, community-led decision-making, and improved outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

While the National Agreement established an important framework for shared decision-making and structural reform, significant challenges remain in translating its commitments into practice. Our submission highlights areas where current arrangements could be strengthened, including the operation of partnerships, support for community-led solutions, accountability mechanisms, recognition of diverse First Nations organisations, and the resourcing required to achieve sustainable change.

We strongly support the objectives of the National Agreement and the principle that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples must be central to the design, delivery and evaluation of policies, programs and services that affect their lives. We hope the insights and recommendations contained in this submission assist the review and contribute to strengthening the effectiveness and impact of Closing the Gap reforms.

This submission also includes matters and examples which could be perceived as confidential. There are other matters we have not included at this time. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss these with the Commissioners at a later date.

Thank you for your consideration of this submission. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss any aspect of our feedback further.

Yours sincerely,

Jane Vadiveloo
Chief Executive Officer
Children's Ground

Submission - Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap 2026

Children's Ground
Submission to the Productivity Commission's Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap 2026 – October 2026

Introduction

Children's Ground welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Productivity Commission's Second Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap 2026. We support the Australian Government's commitment to Closing the Gap and to overcoming the entrenched inequality faced by too many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, so that their life outcomes are equal to those of all Australians.

At Children's Ground we 'don't just want to close the gap, we want to prevent the gap'. For too long, state, territory and federal governments have implemented initiatives, programs, and top-down solutions. While there are some incremental changes, largely the status quo prevails. These business-as-usual approaches have failed to deliver the change communities need and are unlikely to achieve Closing the Gap targets. Instead, long-term, generational, First Nations-led, community-designed solutions are needed that address the causes of disadvantage before they emerge.

Closing the Gap will only succeed when First Nations communities hold genuine decision-making authority over the design, delivery and evaluation of services. We must not forget that Elders, families and recognised cultural leaders hold the knowledge. It's time they were given an opportunity to deliver a series of programs and initiatives that work.

This submission draws on the experiences, views and research of Children's Ground's First Nations community leaders and staff. It also draws on the Australian Government's independent evaluation of the Children's Ground Approach by Allen + Clarke Consulting, which found that the Approach aligns with leading practice for First Nations-led design, and with all four Priority Reforms and 10 Closing the Gap outcomes.

About our approach

Children's Ground is a First Nations organisation led by culture, language and First Nations knowledge systems. We exist to reform, and where needed replace, systems that too often perpetuate harm, with systems that value, centre and sustain safety, culture, self-determination and opportunities for our children, young people and families. We want our children to grow up proud of their culture, safe and secure, free from harm and able to walk confidently and benefit from a global world. Our place-based, whole-of-community approach connects the key cultural, social and economic determinants in a service system, designed, led and delivered by community.

The Children's Ground Approach is designed as an evidence-based 25-year strategy for intergenerational change. It recognises that a child's development and safety are shaped by family relationships, cultural identity, material security, and the systems surrounding them. Community governance and local employment are integral to the approach.

Questions about the governance of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap

1. Effective relationships

- ***How effective are the governance bodies established to oversee progress towards the Agreement?***
- ***How do Joint Council, the PWG and other governance bodies support effective relationships between governments, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities? Where are these relationships working well, and what contributes to their success?***
- ***To what extent do governance arrangements build trust, respect and shared responsibility among parties?***

The governance bodies established under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, including the Joint Council, policy partnerships and jurisdictional partnerships, have created important structures for First Nations participation in decision-making. However, their effectiveness has been limited by uneven implementation, inadequate resourcing, inconsistent accountability mechanisms and the continuation of government-led decision-making processes.

While partnership structures exist, they do not consistently provide genuine power sharing or enable First Nations communities to exercise authority over decisions that affect them. Effective governance requires communities to be involved not only in consultation but in the design, governance, implementation and evaluation of policies and programs.

A significant concern is the extent to which governments have come to rely on the Coalition of Peaks and other peak bodies as the primary voice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Agreement governance. Many peak bodies do important work representing broad sector and community interests, and that role should be valued. However, peak bodies do not replace the full voice of community. Their formal role in Agreement governance is established through partnership agreements and government funding, rather than conferred directly by the communities affected by its decisions. That role, however important, is not a source of cultural authority and cannot stand in for the Elders, families and communities in whom that authority rests.

Our governance comes from the people. Authority is held through Country, law, kinship and culture, and is exercised by communities on their own terms. Joint decision-making under the Agreement cannot be achieved by replacing our governance. Western governance structures cannot replace First Nations governance. Boards,

committees, incorporated bodies and peak organisations, including Children's Ground's own corporate structures, are shaped by government and corporate requirements. They can support community decision-making, but they cannot substitute for the cultural governance systems through which First Nations people have made decisions and held responsibility for thousands of years.

The current arrangements have also concentrated considerable power, influence and funding in a small number of peak organisations. Many peaks use their position and responsibilities to represent their sectors well. However, any concentration of influence carries risks that must be actively managed: that positions may be used to build power and influence, to diminish the legitimacy of First Nations organisations and community governance structures outside the peak system, or to exclude groups that are not members or hold different views. There is also a risk that public servants may feel pressure to make funding decisions based on peak representation, rather than on community priorities, evidence and fair process. Without clear safeguards, these risks raise serious questions about transparency, administrative fairness and government funding processes, and could distract from the interests of communities, create division and undermine administrative justice. Governments must not outsource their obligation to engage directly with communities. Joint decision-making must be built upward from community and cultural governance, not downward from government and peak structures.

Evidence from Children's Ground's experience suggests that governance arrangements are most effective when they are community-led, place-based and supported by long-term investment. Governance bodies have had some success in elevating First Nations voices and establishing mechanisms for collaboration, but progress towards the Priority Reforms has been slower than anticipated because government institutions have not fundamentally changed how they share power, resources and decision-making authority. As a result, many communities continue to experience consultation rather than genuine partnership. This in turn still leads to decisions being made for communities, rather than by communities.

To achieve the intent of the Agreement, governance arrangements must move beyond representation towards genuine community control, with First Nations people holding decision-making power over priorities, funding and outcomes.

Governance grounded in obligations enables communities to set their own priorities and mobilise the people and resources required to achieve positive outcomes and progress.

2. Shared decision-making in Agreement governance

- ***To what extent do governance arrangements enable genuine shared decision-making?***
- ***How much influence do Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives have over priorities, decisions and resource allocation? How do governance bodies hear and respond to community priorities, concerns and feedback?***
- ***How are disagreements negotiated and resolved?***
- ***Are all parties held accountable for commitments made through governance processes?***
- ***What would strengthen shared authority and mutual accountability?***

While governance arrangements established under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap have created important avenues for First Nations participation and dialogue, the extent of genuine, shared decision-making remains limited because governments continue to retain primary control over funding, policy priorities, implementation decisions and accountability mechanisms. Where shared decision-making does occur, it has

largely taken place between governments and peak bodies, rather than with the communities whose lives are directly affected.

Involvement does not necessarily mean shared authority. At Children's Ground, we know that genuine shared decision-making requires First Nations people to have decision-making power in the design, governance, delivery and evaluation of policies and services, rather than being consulted on decisions that have largely already been determined by government. Equally, the participation of peak bodies is not the participation of communities, and should not be treated as a proxy for community voice or consent.

Children's Ground's experience of community-led governance shows that decision-making is most effective when it is locally governed, community-controlled and supported by long-term investment. Where communities hold authority over priorities and implementation, services are more responsive to local needs and better aligned with the aspirations of First Nations people. However, many existing governance arrangements remain constrained by government systems, short-term funding cycles, limited mechanisms to hold governments accountable for sharing power, and a growing reliance on peak bodies as intermediaries between governments and communities.

Too often, community voice, self-determination, solutions and requests for government response are not responded to. This includes community-led solutions to address safety, risk and opportunity for children, young people and families.

We recommend funded local governance arrangements that reflect the community's own cultural structures. Women, Elders, young people, men and people with lived experience should have safe and supported opportunities to participate, design and lead. Regional and remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives must be included on their own terms. Participation should be paid, with language support and arrangements that respect cultural obligations. These community governance structures must have direct standing in Agreement governance.

Shared decision-making agreements should specify what communities can decide, how governments will respond, the relationship with peak bodies, how resources will be allocated, how conflicts of interest will be declared and managed by all parties, and how disputes will be resolved. Community leadership must carry practical authority. Governments should publish the decisions made through these arrangements and report back to communities in accessible forms, without disclosing sensitive information.

Effective partnership arrangements are founded on trust, clearly defined decision-making processes and genuine shared authority. While many partnerships seek to operate through consensus, power imbalances can limit the ability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partners to influence outcomes where governments retain ultimate control over resources and policy decisions. Power imbalances also exist among First Nations parties. Where peak bodies hold the only formal seat at the table, communities and organisations outside the peak system, or holding different views, often have limited access to information, no representative voice in those forums and no clear avenue to review or contribute to decisions.

Shared authority is strengthened when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations hold genuine decision-making power over policies, programs and resources that affect their communities. Mutual accountability is strengthened when governments are held to the same standards of transparency, reporting and performance that they require of communities and service providers. The same standard must apply to peak bodies participating in Agreement governance, which should be transparent about their mandate, how they engage communities, and the funding and influence they receive through Agreement processes.

Trust and improved outcomes are most likely where authority, responsibility and accountability are shared with communities fully.

3. Accountability to communities

- ***How are governance bodies accountable to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities?***
- ***How are decisions communicated back to communities?***
- ***What would strengthen accountability to community-level priorities and aspirations?***

Significant improvements can be made in how governments share information and decisions with communities. At present, communities often have limited information about how governments make the decisions that affect their lives, decisions are not consistently communicated back to the communities they affect, and communities are not always included in the processes through which those decisions are made.

Governance bodies are accountable to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities when they maintain transparent and legitimate decision-making processes, and provide regular opportunities for engagement, feedback and review.

While governance bodies established under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap are intended to be accountable to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through shared decision-making structures, representation by First Nations organisations, and commitments to partnership and transparency, accountability is often indirect and inconsistent, with limited mechanisms for communities to influence decisions, monitor performance, or require governments to act on agreed priorities.

Accountability measures are weakened where community-level governance bodies have limited authority and insufficient resourcing. They can also be weakened where the partners governments engage with have limited connection to the local communities affected by their decisions. Both undermine legitimacy and trust, which are key pillars of successful relationships.

While bodies such as policy partnerships and jurisdictional partnerships provide opportunities for First Nations participation, accountability frequently flows upwards to governments and funding agencies rather than downwards to communities. This also applies to peak bodies, whose formal role in Agreement governance is established through partnership agreements and government funding, rather than conferred directly by communities.

There is limited feedback or transparency about how decisions are made, who is making them and who has been involved. In our experience, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities can learn of decisions through press conferences and media announcements, rather than through direct communication. Accountability would be strengthened by formal, regular communication from governments to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations that transparently sets out the decisions under consideration, who the decision-makers are, the relevant processes and opportunities for input, and the implications for communities.

At Children's Ground we argue that genuine accountability requires governance arrangements that are community-led, culturally informed and responsive to local priorities, with communities having a direct role in setting objectives, monitoring progress and evaluating outcomes.

We have seen firsthand that accountability is strengthened when local First Nations governance structures oversee planning, implementation and evaluation, and when decisions are made by those directly affected by them. This creates clearer lines of accountability between governance bodies and the communities they serve.

To ensure effective accountability, communities need to have access to information, data and decision-making processes. Consistent with the Priority Reform on shared access to data, communities should be able to assess whether governments and institutions are meeting their commitments under the Agreement. Where governments retain control over data, funding and decision-making, accountability to communities is weakened.

The former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) offers important lessons. Its regional councils were elected by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, providing local representation that was designed to be visible, accessible and directly accountable to community, with a clear pathway from regional to national representation. The lessons of ATSIC's regional structure should be revisited. However, ATSIC was still a Western governance structure. Any future model should evolve to better recognise local, Country-based governance, with representation grounded in language groups and communities and in the cultural authority that sits with them. There is a need to re-establish a national structure that provides community and regional representation, elected by and accountable back to community.

4. Independent mechanisms

- ***What is affecting progress towards establishing independent mechanisms to support and monitor transformation?***
- ***What lessons can be learned from existing independent oversight arrangements?***
- ***What conditions are necessary for these mechanisms to be viewed as credible and legitimate by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations?***

In the communities we work with, Closing the Gap policy, practice, implementation and evaluation remain distant from daily life and do not resonate at a day-to-day level. Communities continue to live with the same stressors, oppression, injustice and challenges, especially in the Northern Territory, which has among the highest number of targets showing no change or going backwards. Establishing independent mechanisms to support and monitor transformation requires genuine engagement with the lived experiences and truth from the ground, not only with reporting and data held by governments.

Progress towards establishing independent mechanisms to support and monitor transformation has been affected by the slow pace of government reform, limited transfer of decision-making authority, fragmented funding arrangements, and barriers to accessing data and evidence.

While the National Agreement provides a framework for shared accountability, genuinely independent monitoring requires sustained investment in First Nations-led community governance, transparent access to data, and mechanisms that enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to assess government performance against agreed priorities. Without these foundations, accountability risks remaining focused on reporting rather than driving the systemic transformation envisioned by the Agreement.

Lessons from existing oversight arrangements, independent evaluations and community-led approaches show that effective accountability relies on genuine independence, transparent reporting, robust access to data and meaningful First Nations leadership. They also show that monitoring progress against targets alone is insufficient. Oversight mechanisms must assess whether governments are implementing the structural and institutional changes required under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. Accountability is strongest when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are empowered to define success, monitor progress and hold governments to their commitments.

Independent mechanisms will only be viewed as credible and legitimate by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations if they are First Nations-led, genuinely independent, fully representative with strong grassroots representation from communities, transparent and accountable to the people they serve.

Genuine independence means these mechanisms cannot be devolved to peak bodies or any other party to Agreement governance. Because peak bodies participate in Agreement governance and receive funding through it, asking them to act as independent scrutineers of that same system would create a clear conflict of interest. Independent mechanisms should also monitor how conflicts of interest are declared and managed by all parties, including governments, peak bodies and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations. This is particularly important where a party that influences policy or funding decisions also receives funding, or represents members who do.

Independent mechanisms must be empowered to assess both government performance and progress towards the Priority Reforms, while reflecting community-defined priorities and aspirations. Credibility also depends on access to reliable data, meaningful community engagement, public reporting and stable long-term resourcing.

Ultimately, legitimacy will be determined by whether these mechanisms strengthen self-determination and can influence governments to deliver the systemic and institutional changes envisaged under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

5. Embedding the Agreement

- **How could the Priority Reforms be better integrated into broader governance systems?**

The Priority Reforms could be better integrated into broader governance systems by embedding their principles across all areas of government policy, funding, performance and accountability. Rather than operating as a distinct Closing the Gap initiative, the reforms should become a core requirement of how governments engage with First Nations peoples and communities.

This includes strengthening community-led governance, aligning funding with long-term community priorities, expanding shared access to data, and holding government agencies accountable for institutional transformation. Lasting progress will depend on governments adopting the Priority Reforms as a whole-of-government approach rather than a discrete policy commitment.

Siloed funding is not fit for purpose for communities. Families do not experience their lives in portfolios, yet funding continues to be divided across separate departments, programs and levels of government, each with its own priorities, guidelines, timeframes and reporting requirements. Communities and organisations are left to piece together fragmented funding to respond to needs that are interconnected. The Agreement should drive genuine cross-government coordination of funding, so that investment is pooled, aligned and directed to community-determined priorities rather than to the requirements of individual agencies. At present, the approach remains top down: funding structures determine policy and programs, and communities are expected to fit within them. This must be reversed, so that community priorities shape policy and funding follows.

Questions about shared decision-making through formal partnerships

1. Building successful partnerships

- ***What lessons can be drawn from partnerships established under the Agreement?***

- ***To what extent do partnership arrangements reflect genuine power-sharing? Where do partnership arrangements fall short of their intended purpose?***
- ***How have relationships between government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partners changed over time? What has helped build trust, legitimacy and shared ownership?***
- ***What would strengthen the ability of partnership arrangements to support self-determination?***

Partnerships can provide an important foundation for shared decision-making between governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. However, as outlined in our response to the questions about the governance of the Agreement, current partnership arrangements face significant challenges. These include the limited transfer of power to communities, reliance on peak bodies as a proxy for community voice, and weak transparency and accountability back to communities. The most significant lesson is that partnership structures alone do not guarantee reform. Effective partnerships require genuine power sharing, strong community governance, adequate resourcing, transparent accountability and long-term commitment to funding and delivery.

In Children's Ground's experience, outcomes are strongest when First Nations communities have authority over decisions that affect them. Future reforms should focus on strengthening these conditions to ensure partnerships deliver meaningful and lasting change.

While partnership structures have improved engagement and representation for some groups, others remain outside them, particularly smaller, regional and remote organisations and communities that are not represented through peak bodies. Partnerships that are in place are also at risk of falling short of their intended purpose because governments continue to hold final authority over priorities, funding and implementation. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partners are too often involved in discussion but not in the decisions that matter most.

Relationships have evolved from consultative engagement to more formal partnerships. However, there is still a disconnect between these arrangements and a meaningful relationship in which communities are empowered to design, govern, deliver and evaluate the solutions that affect them. Trust, legitimacy and shared ownership are built when governments make long-term commitments, follow through on community decisions and act as partners, rather than directors of change.

The ability of partnership arrangements to support self-determination would be strengthened by transferring greater decision-making authority, resources and accountability to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities. This includes strengthening local community governance, improving the accountability of governments and supporting First Nations-led service delivery, so that partnership arrangements align with the Agreement's vision of shared decision-making and self-determination.

2. Partnership decisions and influence

- ***How are policy and place-based partnerships embedding shared decision-making?***
- ***How are diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices included in decision-making processes?***
- ***How can policy and place-based partnerships coordinate with and learn from other partnerships and advisory bodies?***

Policy and place-based partnerships should embed shared decision-making by creating formal opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to participate in governance, policy development and implementation. The strongest examples are place-based partnerships that enable communities to identify priorities, guide investment and oversee delivery in ways that reflect local aspirations and cultural authority.

However, shared decision-making remains constrained where governments retain control over funding, policy settings and implementation decisions. To fully realise the intent of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, partnerships must move beyond consultation towards community-led governance, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples exercising genuine authority over the decisions, resources and outcomes that affect their communities. Effort is required to ensure the voices of local communities, Elders, young people, women and remote communities are consistently reflected in decision-making.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have sustained systems of learning and knowledge transmission for more than 65,000 years, making them among the oldest continuous education systems in the world. Closing the gap will not succeed without listening to the Elders and knowledge holders who carry these systems and this lived experience.

Case study: The MK Turner Report and Roadmap to Reform

The MK Turner Report (2023) was developed through Children's Ground with Utyerre Apanpe, the national network of First Nations cultural educators, Elders and knowledge holders. It sets out a First Nations-led design for education, with six recommendations, including the establishment of a First Nations education system grounded in culture, language and Country. The MK Turner Alliance, a national alliance of First Nations and partner organisations, has since built on the Report with a Roadmap to Reform, submitted to the First Nations Education Policy consultation in 2026. In July 2026, more than 100 First Nations educators, cultural leaders and knowledge holders from 36 Nations gathered at the Utyerre Apanpe National Forum to advance this vision.

This is a roadmap for reform that comes from community. To date, however, there has been limited opportunity to engage the Department of Education in a policy discussion about this reform. Responses have generally referred back to the current Western education regulatory framework as the basis for education delivery. This is despite Australia's endorsement of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Article 14 of which affirms the right of Indigenous peoples to establish and control their own education systems and institutions, providing education in their own languages and in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning. Genuine partnership requires governments to engage with the solutions communities have developed. The Closing the Gap targets for education and languages, including children being developmentally on track (Target 4), Year 12 attainment (Target 5) and the strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages (Target 16), will not be met by continuing the same approaches. If we are going to succeed, governments must embrace the education solutions that First Nations communities have developed.

Strengthening community voice in policy development and decision making and governance would help ensure the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives is genuinely reflected in government decisions and reform processes.

Policy and place-based partnerships can coordinate with and learn from other partnerships and advisory bodies by establishing formal mechanisms for collaboration, sharing evidence and aligning efforts around community-defined outcomes. Effective coordination requires stronger links between local, regional and national decision-making processes, ensuring that place-based knowledge informs policy development and implementation.

Partnerships should also draw on the expertise and evidence of community-led approaches such as those from Children’s Ground.

Questions about building the community-controlled sector

1. Prioritising funding and supporting service transition

- ***How are governments and ACCOs working together to reform funding arrangements and support service transition?***
- ***What aspects of funding arrangements strengthen or undermine reciprocity, trust and shared accountability between governments and ACCOs?***
- ***How are governments and their partners reforming systems and processes to prioritise funding for ACCOs and build transition pathways?***
- ***Are there examples where actions are effectively supporting ACCOs to take on a higher proportion of service delivery? What can we learn from them?***

Governments and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations are increasingly working together to reform funding arrangements through partnerships, co-design processes and commitments under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap to strengthen the community-controlled sector. These efforts recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations are best placed to design and deliver services that reflect community priorities.

Progress towards service transition remains constrained by short-term and fragmented funding, limited transfer of decision-making authority, and insufficient investment in organisational capacity and infrastructure. Progress is also shaped by who is included at the table. In our experience, discussions about funding reform and service transition have largely taken place between governments, a limited number of peak bodies and larger organisations. Many community-based and First Nations-led organisations, particularly smaller, regional and remote organisations and those outside peak membership, are often not included in these discussions, despite delivering services and holding the trust of their communities. Inclusion in reform processes must be transparent and based on community connection, service delivery and outcomes, rather than on peak membership alone.

Strengthening long-term, flexible and outcomes-focused funding arrangements, while supporting the growth of community-controlled organisations, would better enable ACCOs to lead service delivery and advance self-determination.

Government funding and commissioning processes have, at times, placed First Nations organisations in competition with one another for limited resources. In this environment, the definition of an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation can be used to question the legitimacy of other First Nations organisations, rather than to strengthen community control. Governments should apply the definition agreed under the National Agreement consistently and fairly, and ensure public servants understand it, so that funding and partnership decisions are based on community connection, governance and outcomes rather than on competing claims about legitimacy.

Funding arrangements strengthen reciprocity, trust and shared accountability when they are long-term, flexible, co-designed and focused on achieving community-defined outcomes. They are most effective when they support Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to exercise leadership, build capability and participate as equal partners in decision-making.

Long-term funding establishes the platform for generational change. On the other hand, short-term, fragmented and highly prescriptive funding arrangements can undermine trust by reinforcing power imbalances, limiting local decision-making and prioritising government accountability requirements over

community aspirations. To support the intent of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, governments should increasingly adopt funding models that enable genuine partnership, strengthen the community-controlled sector and share accountability for achieving long-term outcomes.

Governments and their partners are reforming systems and processes through commitments to strengthen the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector, increase co-design, and support the transition of services to ACCOs. These reforms reflect growing recognition that community-controlled organisations are best placed to deliver services that respond to local priorities and support self-determination. However, progress remains constrained by uneven funding arrangements, limited transfer of authority, and insufficient investment in organisational capability and infrastructure. To accelerate service transition, governments should adopt long-term, flexible and outcomes-focused funding models, reduce administrative barriers, and invest in the governance, workforce and systems required for ACCOs to lead service delivery and achieve sustainable community outcomes.

There are examples where governments are effectively supporting Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to take on a greater proportion of service delivery.

Our own experience at Children's Ground demonstrates that when communities are empowered to design, govern, deliver and evaluate services, positive outcomes can be achieved across multiple Closing the Gap priorities. Key lessons include the importance of long-term and flexible funding, strong community governance, investment in organisational capability, integrated service delivery and the transfer of decision-making authority alongside funding. These examples show that sustainable progress is most likely when governments invest in community-controlled solutions and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations as leaders of system reform rather than simply as service providers.

Case study: The Australian Government's independent evaluation of Children's Ground

In 2024, the Australian Government Department of Health, Disability and Ageing commissioned Allen + Clarke Consulting to independently evaluate the Children's Ground Approach and make recommendations to inform the Government's consideration of future funding. The final report, delivered in August 2025, found that the Approach aligns with leading practice for First Nations-led design. It also found that Children's Ground has "highly effective community decision-making and community governance structures", and that its activities align with all four Priority Reforms and 10 Closing the Gap outcomes. The evaluation identified inadequate and partial funding as a key barrier to implementing the full Approach. Its primary recommendation was that the Australian Government commit to a comprehensive, multi-departmental, long-term funding approach for an initial period of seven years, overseen by an inter-agency governance group.

More than a year later, the Government has not committed to the recommendations of its own independent evaluation. This delay sends a concerning signal about governments' readiness to transfer service delivery to ACCOs, resource them adequately and work in genuine partnership. When governments commission independent evidence and then do not act on it, trust is eroded and the Priority Reforms the Agreement is meant to deliver are undermined.

Authority sits with the people, the land, Elders, kinship systems, law and culture. ACCOs are critically important vehicles for community action, but they are not the origin of that authority. Governments should fund and strengthen community governance first, with organisations acting in service of community-led visions, priorities and decisions. The critical outcome is not organisations that are empowered, but whether communities are empowered and able to direct the systems and services that affect their lives.

Community vision, aspirations, plans and leadership must come first. Organisations, including ACCOs, should be accountable and responsive to those community-defined priorities and support their implementation. The role of organisations is service, facilitation and resource mobilisation, not the replacement of community authority. When governments fund organisations without strengthening the underlying cultural and community governance systems, they risk reinforcing institutional authority over community authority. Lasting change occurs when communities lead and organisations follow; when cultural governance determines priorities and services align behind them; and when the authority of Country, kinship, culture and community remains at the centre of decision-making about children, families and community wellbeing.

2. Sector strengthening

- ***How are governments and the community-controlled sector working together to strengthen the capacity, workforce, leadership and sustainability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations?***
- ***What lessons can be drawn from implementing the first set of sector strengthening plans under the Agreement?***
- ***How are parties monitoring the outcomes of sector strengthening efforts? What accountability mechanisms are needed to support continuous learning and improvement?***
- ***Who determines what success looks like? How are ACCOs involved in developing measures, monitoring performance and interpreting results?***

Governments and the community-controlled sector are working together to strengthen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations through workforce development, leadership initiatives, governance support and organisational capacity-building. However, progress remains constrained by short-term funding, workforce challenges and insufficient investment in organisational capability and infrastructure. Consistent with the points above, sector strengthening must also invest in the community and cultural governance that organisations serve, not only in organisations themselves.

The first sector strengthening plans show that sustainable growth of the community-controlled sector requires more than increased funding. Key lessons include the importance of long-term and flexible investment, strong community governance, workforce and leadership development, place-based approaches and the transfer of decision-making authority alongside resources.

Stronger accountability arrangements are needed to support continuous learning, including community-defined measures of success, independent oversight, shared access to data and transparent public reporting. Accountability should extend beyond measuring organisational performance to assessing whether governments are fulfilling their commitments to strengthen the sector and transfer authority, resources and decision-making power.

Success should be defined by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities through their own governance, with governments and ACCOs supporting communities to determine what outcomes matter and how progress is assessed. ACCOs are critical partners in developing measures, monitoring performance and interpreting results because they bring community knowledge and direct accountability to the people they serve. This requires community-defined indicators, shared access to data and independent evaluation, so that communities shape not only what is measured, but how success is understood. Ultimately, success should be judged by whether communities are experiencing greater self-determination, stronger cultures, improved wellbeing, improved opportunities, less racism and increased control over the decisions that affect their lives.

Questions about transforming government organisations

1. Cultural safety and responsiveness

- ***What actions are governments taking to address institutional racism and improve cultural safety and responsiveness in government organisations and the services they fund?***
- ***Are there examples where communities have experienced meaningful improvements in their interactions with governments and funded services? What can we learn from these?***
- ***How are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people involved in defining and designing what culturally safe services and institutions look like?***

While governments are taking steps to address institutional racism and improve cultural safety, including efforts to transform government organisations, strengthen partnerships, increase investment in the community-controlled sector and improve cultural capability across the public sector, structural barriers remain.

Institutional racism is sustained through systems, funding arrangements and decision-making processes that continue to limit First Nations authority and influence. Lasting change will require governments to transfer greater power and resources to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations, embed cultural accountability throughout institutions, and measure success by the extent to which government systems support self-determination, cultural safety and equitable outcomes.

Communities have experienced meaningful improvements in their interactions with governments and services where approaches are community-led, place-based and culturally grounded. In our experience at Children's Ground, when communities are empowered to govern, design and deliver services, engagement increases and trust grows, and we see improvements in areas such as early childhood development, health, employment and community participation. The lessons are clear: trust is built through long-term relationships and tangible action; community control strengthens cultural safety and responsiveness; and governments must be willing to reform systems, funding arrangements and decision-making processes to support self-determination.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people define and design culturally safe services through community governance structures, ACCOs, partnership arrangements and community-led evaluation, identifying what cultural safety means in their local context and shaping services that reflect their languages, cultures, knowledge systems and aspirations. Strengthening community control and decision-making authority will ensure that institutions and services are not only culturally responsive, but genuinely shaped by and accountable to the people they are intended to serve.

2. Delivering in partnership and increasing transparency

- ***How are governments working with communities to design and deliver mainstream services in partnership?***
- ***What changes have strengthened trust between communities and government institutions? What can be learned from these examples to inform broader system reform?***
- ***What systems would improve transparency around funding and decision-making?***

Governments are working with communities to design and deliver mainstream services through co-design processes, place-based partnerships, community governance arrangements and collaboration with ACCOs. While this may be occurring in some communities, it is not being seen broadly, and genuine partnership remains limited where governments retain primary control over funding, commissioning and decision-making. Two clear processes are needed. The first is improving mainstream services so that they are culturally safe,

responsive and accountable to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The second is implementing new systems and approaches that centre First Nations ways of being and doing, and First Nations standards and practice. Progress on the second has been limited, as the MK Turner case study illustrates. Without it, assimilation remains an ongoing risk, cultural safety is compromised, and effective First Nations solutions are not being supported. Our experience demonstrates that the strongest outcomes occur when communities define priorities, govern services, build local workforces and evaluate outcomes.

Trust grows when governments support community-led governance, follow through on community decisions and recognise the importance of culture, language and local knowledge. As our case studies show, trust is eroded when community-developed reform is not engaged with, and when independent evidence is not acted on. Broader system reform should focus on genuine power-sharing, sustained investment, stronger community control and greater accountability of government institutions.

Transparency around funding and decision-making would be strengthened through public reporting of funding flows, shared access to data, transparent governance processes, independent oversight, community-led evaluation and the formal communication of decisions to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations recommended earlier in this submission. Communities and organisations should be able to see how funding decisions are made, who makes them, where resources are directed and whether commitments under the Agreement are being delivered.

Questions about shared access to data and information

1. Access and use of data

- ***How have governments improved the availability and accessibility of data that is relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities?***
- ***Are communities able to access and use data in ways that support local decision-making? What supports or hinders this?***

Governments have taken some measures in relation to the availability and accessibility of data through commitments under Priority Reform Four, increased public reporting on Closing the Gap outcomes, and efforts to support regional data sharing. These reforms represent an important step towards greater transparency and community participation in decision-making. However, improvements still need to be made in addressing the limited access to government-held datasets, insufficient local-level information, and unequal capacity to analyse and use data.

Communities' ability to use data for local decision-making remains constrained by limited access to government-held information, a lack of local-level datasets, insufficient data capability and the continued dominance of government-defined performance measures. Data must support community-led planning, monitoring and evaluation, and be accompanied by genuine decision-making authority. Future reforms should strengthen Indigenous Data Sovereignty, improve access to local and government-held data, invest in community data capability, and ensure communities can define what success looks like and use information to shape their own futures.

2**. Collection and governance of data**

- ***How are parties working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities to determine what data is collected and shared? What does this look like in practice?***

- ***How are parties working to incorporate Indigenous Data Governance into government data collection and management? How might these approaches be strengthened?***

Governments and their partners are working with some communities to determine what data is collected and shared through co-design, community governance structures, place-based partnerships and ACCOs. In practice, this involves communities helping to identify meaningful indicators, design monitoring and evaluation frameworks, participate in data governance and interpret results in ways that reflect local context. However, progress remains uneven, and communities have limited opportunities to control how information is collected and used.

Indigenous Data Governance is increasingly recognised through improved data-sharing arrangements and greater involvement of ACCOs in monitoring and evaluation. However, progress remains constrained by limited access to government-held datasets, insufficient community control over data decisions and uneven investment in data capability. Strengthening Indigenous Data Governance will require governments to embed Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles across data systems, transfer authority to communities over the collection and use of data, invest in First Nations-led data capability, and be accountable for doing so.

Questions about how governments are developing and delivering policy with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

1. Engaging and sharing decisions across the policy cycle

- ***How should government agencies engage and share decisions across the development, delivery and evaluation of policies, programs and services?***
- ***What approaches are being used to involve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in decision-making across the policy cycle?***
- ***What changes are needed to government systems and processes to enable and support this?***
- ***Where have you seen good examples of genuine engagement, co-design or co-governance? What supported their success?***

Government agencies should engage and share decisions with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across the full policy cycle, from policy development and program design to implementation, monitoring and evaluation. This requires more than consultation; it requires shared authority, community-led governance and mutual accountability. Communities should be involved in identifying priorities, designing solutions, delivering services, defining success and evaluating outcomes, with governments acting as enabling partners rather than primary decision-makers.

This will require governments to transform institutional practices, including siloed funding and centralised decision-making, so that communities are not simply consulted on decisions but are empowered to make them, monitor them and hold governments accountable for delivering on their commitments.

Good examples of genuine engagement, co-design and co-governance are found in community-led and place-based approaches where communities have meaningful authority over decision-making, implementation and evaluation. Our experience demonstrates that outcomes improve when communities govern initiatives, determine priorities and monitor progress. Success has been supported by long-term investment, strong community governance, local leadership, flexible funding, cultural authority and mutual accountability.

2. **Building capability to deliver the Agreement**

- ***What is needed to build public service capability to deliver the Agreement?***
- ***How can governments better support staff to engage and work in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations?***
- ***What approaches support mutual learning and joint capability-building between government agencies and the community-controlled sector?***

In our experience, where First Nations people hold key leadership positions in government, there is a deeper understanding of community strengths, barriers and cultural truth. Building public service capability to deliver the Agreement requires increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership across the public sector, alongside skills in shared decision-making, community engagement, place-based governance, Indigenous Data Governance, outcomes-focused commissioning and community-led evaluation. It also requires a sound understanding of First Nations community and cultural governance, and of the agreed definition of an ACCO, so that public servants can make fair and transparent decisions. However, the bureaucracy continues to be constrained by high staff movement, resulting in lack of continuity in institutional, sector and cultural knowledge.

Priorities are too often driven by broader government policy, budget constraints and election cycles rather than by community. Governments should align performance frameworks with implementation of the Priority Reforms. Lasting progress depends not only on strengthening community capability, but on transforming government institutions, funding systems and organisational cultures.

Governments can better support staff to work in partnership by embedding cultural accountability, investing in long-term relationship building, improving understanding of community-controlled models and reforming organisational systems that constrain partnership. Performance frameworks should reward collaboration, trust and implementation of the Priority Reforms. Public servants need systems, incentives and leadership that enable them to share power, respond to community priorities and work alongside communities as equal partners.

Mutual learning and joint capability-building are best supported through shared governance arrangements, place-based partnerships, collaborative evaluation, staff exchanges and stronger implementation of Indigenous Data Governance. Governments and ACCOs each bring valuable expertise and should learn from one another as equal partners, supported by sustained investment in partnership structures and leadership development across both sectors.

Questions about how parties are enabling community-led efforts to close the gap

1. Place-based partnerships

- ***What has been the impact of place-based partnerships?***
- ***How have these arrangements strengthened local authority, ownership and decision-making? How have they affected outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities?***
- ***What factors have contributed to success or limited progress?***

- ***What resourcing and system supports (including funding, staffing, technical capability, data access and administrative flexibility) are needed to maintain and strengthen place-based partnerships over time?***

Place-based partnerships have had a positive impact where they have created opportunities for communities to participate directly in governance, planning and implementation, to shape priorities and investment, and to develop locally responsive solutions grounded in culture. They have improved service responsiveness, supported local leadership and created more integrated approaches to complex challenges. However, their impact is constrained where decision-making power, funding and accountability remain largely within government systems.

Place-based partnerships offer the greatest opportunity for reform and impact. In reality, however, we have found them difficult to achieve with government. Children's Ground has a strong evidence base, an independent government evaluation, clear and consistent representation by community to government, and a structural approach that embeds place-based community governance within a 25-year system reform. Despite this, we continue to struggle to secure the conditions that place-based partnerships need to succeed. As our case studies show, this includes a lack of funding security and scale, and constant funding risk, despite the recommendations of the independent evaluation; and a lack of government engagement in systemic reform that is led and designed by community and places First Nations governance, structures, and systems of practice and knowledge at its heart.

In our experience, success is driven by strong community leadership, long-term investment, integrated service delivery, local workforce development and culturally grounded approaches. Our evidence shows that outcomes improve when communities are empowered to govern, design and deliver initiatives that affect their lives. Progress has been limited by short-term and siloed funding, limited transfer of decision-making authority, bureaucratic barriers, insufficient investment in community capability and unequal access to data. The Australian Government's independent evaluation by Allen + Clarke Consulting identified inadequate and partial funding as a key barrier to implementing the full Children's Ground Approach.

Maintaining and strengthening place-based partnerships requires long-term, flexible and coordinated cross-government funding, investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and workforce, strong organisational capability, improved access to local and government-held data, and greater administrative flexibility. Place-based partnerships are most likely to succeed when governments create the conditions for communities to lead change over the long term, rather than managing change through short-term programs and centralised decision-making.

2. Community authority

- ***How can place-based partnerships and community data projects strengthen community influence over policies, programs and services?***
- ***How can governments better support locally determined priorities and solutions?***
- ***How should accountability operate between communities, governments and other partners?***

Community authority and local governance are the foundation of Closing the Gap, and the most critical elements of this Agreement. For Children's Ground, they are everything. Authority, talent and vision sit in community. People want to make the decisions that affect their lives, want to work, and want a different future for their children. They have the solutions. They are best placed to know what works, and to deliver flexibly to meet both immediate and long-term priorities. Every other reform under the Agreement depends on recognising and supporting this.

Place-based partnerships and community data projects strengthen community influence when communities hold both the governance and the evidence. Place-based partnerships provide the structures through which communities can shape investment and service delivery. Community data projects matter because when communities own their data, they are empowered. They are more fully informed, can tell their own story on their own terms, and can influence policies, programs and services from a position of knowledge, rather than relying on governments' interpretation of their lives. Community-owned data also enables communities to monitor progress and hold governments to account for their commitments.

As outlined in our response on place-based partnerships, governments can better support locally determined priorities and solutions by transferring decision-making authority, resources and accountability to communities, and by responding in a timely way to the solutions communities develop. Because communities know what works, funding and program settings must also give them the flexibility to respond to immediate needs while pursuing long-term, generational change.

Accountability should operate as a system of mutual accountability between communities, governments and other partners. Communities should be empowered to define priorities, monitor progress and evaluate outcomes, while governments should be accountable for implementing the Priority Reforms, sharing decision-making authority and reforming institutions and funding systems. As set out in our response on accountability to communities, accountability must flow back to communities, not only upward to governments.

3. Local governance

- ***What role does local government play in community-led initiatives?***
- ***How do relationships between local government, communities and other Agreement parties affect outcomes?***
- ***What governance arrangements create stronger local accountability and collaboration?***

Local community governance is the primary driver of change. At Children's Ground, governance by Elders, families and community members determines priorities and guides the design, delivery and evaluation of our work, with local employment integral to the approach. The Australian Government's independent evaluation confirmed the strength of this model, finding that Children's Ground has "highly effective community decision-making and community governance structures", and that its activities align with all four Priority Reforms and 10 Closing the Gap outcomes. Where local governance is resourced and respected, people are mobilised: community members lead, work in their own services and drive change for their children and families.

Local government can play an important enabling role by supporting local community governance, coordinating partnerships, sharing local data and advocating for community priorities. Its contribution is most effective when it works in partnership with communities and community-controlled organisations, respects local decision-making authority, and aligns planning and investment with community-defined priorities.

Relationships between local government, communities and other parties to the Agreement play a critical role in the success of community-led initiatives. Strong relationships support trust, coordinated action, shared accountability and alignment with local priorities. Relationships characterised by limited power-sharing, fragmented decision-making and short-term engagement undermine trust and constrain progress.

Governance arrangements create stronger local accountability and collaboration when they are community-led, place-based and supported by genuine shared decision-making authority. Effective arrangements empower communities to determine priorities, oversee implementation, monitor outcomes and hold governments and service providers accountable, supported by joint governance structures, integrated planning and shared access to data. If we are to close the gap, governments must create and resource the

structures that mobilise and support community authority, talent and vision, transferring authority, resources and accountability to communities while supporting coordinated action across governments, ACCOs and other partners.

Questions about how actions will impact on the SEOs and targets

1. System enablers and barriers

- ***What are the most significant enablers or barriers affecting progress towards the socio-economic outcomes?***
- ***What changes are needed to improve impact?***

The Closing the Gap data is frightening. Past the halfway point of the Agreement, the Productivity Commission's 2026 Annual Data Compilation Report shows that only one of the 19 targets has been met and three are on track. Four are worsening: children developmentally on track, children in out-of-home care, adult imprisonment and suicide. The Northern Territory is among the jurisdictions with the highest number of targets showing no change or going backwards, and in many areas outcomes for First Nations people in the Northern Territory are amongst the worst in the country.

Behind these numbers is an immense impact on people's lives every day. In the communities we work with, families are attending funerals far too often, living in severely overcrowded homes and raising children in education systems that are failing them. Children, young people and families live with serious and ongoing risks to their safety. This is urgent and serious. The evidence shows that more of the same will not close the gap. It points to the need to transform the way Closing the Gap is embedded, from community up, so that community priorities, solutions and authority drive policy, funding and services, rather than the other way around.

The most significant enablers of progress towards socio-economic outcomes are community-led governance, a strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector, long-term investment, integrated place-based approaches, local workforce development and the recognition of culture as a foundation for wellbeing and development.

Progress is constrained by the limited transfer of decision-making power, siloed and fragmented funding, slow implementation of the Priority Reforms, institutional barriers within government systems, restricted access to data and insufficient investment in community capability and infrastructure.

Improving impact will require governments to fully implement the Priority Reforms and accelerate the shift to community-led decision-making. This includes transferring authority and resources to communities and their organisations, providing long-term, flexible and coordinated funding, investing in workforce and leadership, improving access to data and strengthening accountability for government reform. Lasting improvements will depend on governments moving beyond program delivery towards genuine power-sharing, prevention-focused investment and support for self-determination.

A major barrier is that governments continue to operate in an ongoing cycle of crisis. Short-term responses, siloed programs and service systems built on Western models deal with problems one at a time, often after harm has occurred. They do not reflect how families live, they do not address social, cultural, structural and economic determinants underpinning injustice and disadvantage, and they leave communities managing the

consequences of fragmented, changing and short-lived services. This cycle is itself a barrier to progress against the targets.

Closing the gap requires a fundamental shift: from crisis to prevention, from silos to integration, and from Western service models to systems that are culturally centred and governed by First Nations people, supported by long-term investment. First Nations knowledge systems already hold these principles. They are integrated, preventative, local, responsive and place-based, and they reflect what is recognised as leading practice.

The independent evaluation of Children's Ground found that our Approach aligns with leading practice for First Nations-led design and provides learnings that can support broader sector reform. What is needed now is for governments to trust, respect and back First Nations knowledge systems and solutions, with investment that matches the generational change they are designed to achieve.

2. The role of the Agreement

- ***To what extent are partnership and sector strengthening initiatives contributing to improved outcomes?***
- ***What are examples of successful approaches and what can we learn from them?***

Sector strengthening is being achieved in part. In our observation, investment in capacity and in policy and coordination roles has flowed mainly to sectors with established advocacy structures. This investment has value. However, it has not yet translated into broader sector reform. Most service systems remain largely unchanged, and many communities and community-based organisations have seen little difference in how services are designed, funded and delivered. Impact also remains constrained by the slow pace of structural reform, limited transfer of decision-making authority, fragmented funding and uneven growth of the community-controlled sector.

Successful approaches show that the strongest outcomes occur when communities lead the design, governance, delivery and evaluation of policies and services, supported by long-term and flexible funding, integrated service delivery, investment in local workforce and leadership, and genuine power-sharing.

3. From reform to outcomes

- ***How are governments and regional or local partners translating reform commitments into action?***
- ***Are the socio-economic outcomes and targets appropriately defined and measured?***
- ***Are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities able to determine how outcomes are pursued?***
- ***What accountability mechanisms are there for improving outcomes? Are they helping or hindering progress?***
- ***What governance and partnership arrangements appear most effective in improving outcomes?***

Reform commitments are not yet consistently translating into action on the ground. Where progress is occurring, it is largely through place-based partnerships and community-led service delivery. As outlined above, however, most service systems remain unchanged, and progress is constrained by siloed funding, limited transfer of decision-making authority and the slow pace of institutional reform. Commitments must be embedded in everyday policy, funding and service delivery, with power, resources and accountability shifting to communities.

The socio-economic outcomes and targets provide an important framework for measuring progress, but the focus must extend beyond short-term outputs and outcomes to long-term, generational impact. An increase in

service activity or a movement in a single target does not, on its own, show that the underlying conditions affecting people's lives have changed or that communities have greater authority over their futures. The targets should therefore be complemented by community-defined indicators of sustained impact, including cultural strength, language, safety, wellbeing, community control, governance and implementation of the Priority Reforms. Evaluation should ask not only what was delivered and what outcome was recorded, but whether systems have transformed, harm has been prevented and children, families and communities are experiencing lasting change. Communities must define what long-term impact looks like and influence how it is measured.

Communities are often engaged in planning and implementation, but are rarely able to determine how outcomes are pursued, because governments retain control over funding, policy settings, commissioning and accountability frameworks. As our case studies show, community-designed solutions and independent evidence are too often not acted on by government. Outcomes improve when communities have authority to determine priorities, govern services, allocate resources, define success and evaluate progress.

Accountability mechanisms, including target reporting, Priority Reform monitoring, partnership structures and independent reviews, have improved transparency. However, they hinder progress where accountability falls on communities and service providers for outcomes, rather than on governments for implementing the Priority Reforms and acting on community decisions and independent evidence.

The most effective governance and partnership arrangements are built on community and cultural governance, and supported by long-term investment, integrated service delivery and the genuine transfer of decision-making power and resources to communities.

Conclusion

Real change and lasting progress on Closing the Gap depends on shifting authority, resources and accountability to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Authority comes from the people, Country and culture. It cannot be replaced by government structures, peak bodies or organisations, and Agreement governance must be built upward from community and cultural governance.

Genuine self-determination requires governments to move to genuine shared decision-making, coordinated long-term funding, transparent communication of decisions, and independent mechanisms that are representative of and accountable to communities.

Ultimately, Closing the Gap will only be achieved when First Nations people are recognised not as stakeholders in government systems, but as leaders and decision-makers in designing the systems that affect their lives.