PUBLIC SKILLS AUSTRALIA

Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap 2026

Public Skills Australia Submission

October 2026

Acknowledgement of Country

Public Skills Australia would like to Acknowledge the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation as the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which our office is located. We pay respects to their Elders past, present and emerging, and extend our respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from all nations of this land. We thank them for their continuing role as caretakers of land, water and Country.

Introduction

Public Skills Australia is the Jobs and Skills Council (JSC) for the Public Safety and Government industry, comprising Correctional Services, Defence, Federal, State/Territory and Local Government, Fire and Emergency Services and Police industry-sectors. It actively supports employer and employee bodies under four key functions including workforce planning, training product development, implementation, promotion and monitoring and industry stewardship. Public Skills Australia also works in partnership with the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) and other JSCs to give effect to broader Ministerial and government priorities.

Public Skills Australia welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Productivity Commission's Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (the Agreement) 2026.

Progressing the priority reforms under the Agreement was identified as a Ministerial priority for JSCs. To give effect to this, Public Skills Australia undertook research into and consulted with the Public Safety and Government industry to better understand current workforce experiences, challenges and opportunities for First Nations[1] people working within the Public Safety and Government industry. Findings and insights from this work have informed this submission, which is structured around the guidance questions provided by the Productivity Commission as follows:

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?

The Public Safety and Government industry plays a critical role in creating employment pathways and advancing First Nations inclusion across the Australian labour market. First Nations people comprise approximately 3 per cent of the Public Safety and Government workforce (approximately 913,500 employees),[2] a comparatively higher proportion than the 2 per cent represented across the Australian national workforce.[3]

[1] Please note, 'First Nations people' will be used throughout to represent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. When citing a data source the terminology of the data source will be used to maintain accurate data representation.
[2] ABS, 'Census of Population and Housing, 2021', ABS, Canberra, 2022, accessed via JSA Atlas Pro, accessed 20 April 2026.
[3] ABS, 'Census of Population and Housing, 2021', ABS, Canberra, 2022, accessed via JSA Atlas Pro, accessed 20 April 2026.

Industry insights indicated that cultural safety remains a key consideration in the attraction, retention and career progression of First Nations employees. The Public Safety and Government industry has established several strategies, initiatives and/or programs to embed cultural safety, mentoring and employment pathways which may improve workforce outcomes. Examples include:

- **Barring Djinang First Peoples' Workforce Development Framework 2024-2028** (Victorian State Government) seeks to strengthen cultural capability, workplace inclusion, career development and leadership pathways while creating more culturally safe and inclusive public sector workplaces.
- **New South Wales Police Aboriginal Employment Engagement Strategy 2024-2026,** includes a dedicated pillar on Aboriginal Cultural Safety and aims to embed respectful and inclusive workplaces, strengthen employee networks and improve workforce experiences for First Nations employees.
- **Queensland Police Reframing the Relationship Plan 2024-2027** includes cultural mentoring networks, cultural capability training, leadership pathways and initiatives designed to create culturally safe workplaces and support networks.
- **Department for Correctional Services Stretch Reconciliation Action Plan 2024-2027** (South Australia) seeks to build culturally safe and inclusive workforces through cultural capability initiatives, anti-racism practices, leadership development and stronger partnerships with First Nations communities.

The Public Safety and Government industry is also investing in First Nations leadership development and advisory structures to increase First Nations voices in decision-making. Programs such as the **Aboriginal Career and Leadership Development Program** (New South Wales Government) and the **Kigaruk and Lookrukin Aboriginal Leadership Development Program** (Northern Territory Government), amongst others, are supporting greater representation of First Nations people in leadership and management roles across the public service. These approaches contribute to workplaces that are inclusive, culturally responsive and equipped to attract and retain First Nations employees.

Questions about how government is developing and delivering policy with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

2. Building capability to deliver the Agreement: What is needed to build public service capability?

Building public service capability through employment and skilling pathways for First Nations employees has been an ongoing focus for the Public Safety and Government industry. These industry-sectors have particularly focused on attracting and retaining First Nations employees, strengthening knowledge in culturally safety in the workplace and providing vocational education, training and mentoring which may create meaningful employment outcomes.

The Public Safety and Government industry-sectors are currently delivering a range of strategies, initiatives and programs that incorporate qualifications, training and mentoring to improve First Nations workforce participation, including:

- **Indigenous Pre-Recruit Program** (Defence): A six-week residential program delivered prior to Initial Military Training (IMT) that aims to increase First Nations recruitment into the Australian Defence Force (ADF), improve readiness and success in IMT and enlistment requirements, develop a confident, job-ready pipeline of candidates and enhance diversity and cultural capability across the ADF.
- **The Indigenous Fire and Rescue Employment Strategy (IFARES)** (Fire and Emergency Services) has supported more than 90 First Nations people through a culturally safe recruitment pathway into firefighting careers, with approximately 60-70 per cent of program participants progressing into permanent firefighter positions. Established in 2014, the program was designed by First Nations staff within Fire Rescue NSW (FRNSW) and has strong ongoing organisational commitment.
- **First Nations Pathways Program** (Police): This 12-month structured pathway program aims to increase First Nations employment and representation within the Australian Federal Police (AFP), providing a structured entry pathway into careers in law enforcement and support roles.

Questions about how actions will impact on socio-economic outcomes

1. System enablers and barriers: What are the most significant enablers or barriers affecting progress towards the socio-economic outcomes?

Examination of current workforce data shows that significant progress is being made in attracting First Nations employees into Public Safety and Government industry workforces. Younger cohorts of First Nations employees are increasingly represented, suggesting that targeted recruitment initiatives and entry pathways are generating positive results.[4] Building a pipeline of First Nations leaders is a particularly important enabler in progressing socio-economic targets given the influence leadership positions have across development, delivery and evaluation of policies and programs.

Considerations

Drawing from insights gathered through engagement with the Public Safety and Government industry across Public Skills Australia's work, the following considerations are offered:

Consideration 1: Strengthen employment pathways that integrate training and skill development

Programs that combine skills development, mentoring and employment opportunities deliver stronger outcomes than stand-alone training initiatives. Governments, employers and training providers should be supported to continue investing in integrated pathways that connect qualifications with meaningful employment and long-term career opportunities.

Consideration 2: Increase focus on retention and progression outcomes

Workforce participation may be complemented by greater attention to retention and leadership development pathways. Further support for Governments, employers and training providers to enact and maintain these programs should be considered.

Consideration 3: Improve workforce data collection and reporting

More consistent workforce reporting and stronger integration between workforce and skills datasets would lead to improved data that could strengthen evaluation, accountability and workforce planning and help identify which interventions are contributing most effectively to the Agreement outcomes.

[4] ABS, 'Census of Population and Housing, 2006-2021', TableBuilder, accessed June 2026.