MARNINWARNTIKURA

WOMEN'S RESOURCE CENTRE

WOMEN BUILDING BELONGING

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

Marninwarntikura Women's Resource Centre (Aboriginal Corporation)

22 October 2026

Fitzroy Crossing, Western Australia

Executive summary

Marninwarntikura Women's Resource Centre (MWRC) is a women-led Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO) in the Fitzroy Valley. We provide connected family safety, legal, refuge, outreach, therapeutic and early childhood services, alongside cultural, healing and economic participation work. Our submission concentrates on the four Priority Reforms and what they require of governments in a remote region. We speak from our organisational experience and do not claim to represent every Fitzroy Valley Community or cultural authority.

Our central proposition is that Closing the Gap depends on shifting authority and resources, as well as changing the everyday systems through which governments design, fund and judge services. Aboriginal women, children, families and communities are rights holders. Their rights to safety, culture, participation and self-determination must shape the decisions, not merely appear in the language of a program after its settings have been fixed. This is consistent with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the intent of the National Agreement. [1, 2]

The Productivity Commission's 2024 review found that governments had largely not fulfilled their commitments and called for power sharing, Indigenous Data Sovereignty, transformation of government systems and stronger accountability. The 2025 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led review likewise identified an imbalance of responsibility and resources and called for funding reform and independent accountability. The 2026 data compilation reports that, of 19 national targets, one has been met, three are on track, five are improving but off track and four are worsening. The report also identifies targets showing no change or for which an assessment is unavailable. Our evidence adds a remote ACCO perspective on how those system problems appear in the practical work of keeping women and children safe and supporting families. [3–5]

We ask the Commission to recommend a set of linked actions. They should be assessed together: a partnership cannot share power if government fixes the funding and outputs in advance; a service cannot exercise Community control if it lacks the resources to retain staff or govern its information; and a government cannot claim transformation simply because an ACCO adapts to its unchanged systems.

Recommendations

1. Require shared decision-making before policy priorities, service models, budgets and procurement pathways are settled, with Aboriginal parties able to set agendas and influence resources.

2. Make long-term, indexed, flexible and full-cost funding the normal approach for ACCOs, including governance, workforce, infrastructure, data capability and the real costs of remote delivery.

3. Report transparently on Aboriginal-specific and relevant mainstream funding reaching ACCOs, and agree practical, resourced transition pathways where services for Aboriginal people remain with mainstream providers.

4. Resource place-based Aboriginal governance with decision-making authority over connected investments, including housing, family safety, early childhood, workforce and economic participation.

5. Require each government to publish and implement changes to its commissioning, contracting, mainstream service and assurance practices, with named agency responsibility and measures of progress.

6. Embed Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Governance in agreements, evaluations and data systems, and give communities timely, locally useful information and resources to use it.

7. Create Community-visible, independent accountability for government delivery of the Priority Reforms, with corrective action when commitments are missed.

About MWRC and the scope of our evidence

MWRC's Strengthening Families work brings together Family Violence Prevention Legal Services, refuge, outreach, safety planning, Community prevention, social work and therapeutic support. Baya Gawiy provides Aboriginal Community-controlled early childhood education and family engagement. Other MWRC work spans healing, research and cultural enterprise. These activities are not offered as a claim that one organisation can or should resolve structural disadvantage by itself. They show how connected needs meet funding and government systems that are commonly divided by portfolio, agency and program.

Our examples are practice observations and organisational experience, rather than an independently evaluated estimate of impact. We distinguish existing service activity from proposed place-based investment and ask the Commission to test the mechanisms involved. We welcome a discussion with the review team about the evidence and, where appropriate, further information that can be shared safely.

1 Shared decisions need to include authority over resources

Priority Reform One promises formal partnerships and shared decision-making. The National Agreement describes strong partnerships as having Aboriginal representatives selected through their own structures, equal access to information, the ability to set the agenda, and clear roles, decision scope and dispute processes. [2] These principles are practical tests. If government has already set the program, funding envelope, eligibility rules, output measures and preferred delivery model, an ACCO may be consulted but has little power to shape the decision.

In remote regions, a decision made at a national or state program level can determine what a local service can offer for years. A narrow family violence grant may allow a specified number of contacts but leave the organisation seeking other funds for court support, transport, housing advocacy, interpreting or therapeutic work. Separate procurement may then reward an external provider for one component of the same family pathway. The cumulative effect is that local organisations are asked to coordinate a system over which they have limited authority.

MWRC recommends that major Aboriginal-specific policy and funding initiatives record when Aboriginal parties entered the process, what decisions were genuinely shared, which proposals changed as a result, and how dissent was resolved. A formal local governance agreement should specify authority over priorities, commissioning, evaluation and use of data. It should fund the time, independent advice and administrative capacity needed for Aboriginal parties to participate on equal terms. Agreement at a national table must be able to influence decisions made in a place such as the Fitzroy Valley.

2 Fund the Community-controlled sector as enduring infrastructure

Priority Reform Two commits governments to strong and sustainable ACCOs, preference in funding decisions and effective service transition. [2] In MWRC's experience, the real cost of delivering in a remote region includes governance, finance and assurance, clinical and cultural supervision, staff wellbeing, professional development, vehicles, long-distance travel, interpreting, technology, capital maintenance and workforce housing. Some of these costs are treated as overheads or left across restricted grants even though they make safe delivery possible.

Short funding horizons and inflexible line items make it harder to plan a local workforce and maintain service continuity. Pay gaps between ACCOs and government or larger providers can remove skilled people from Community-controlled services. Remote accommodation shortages constrain recruitment even where a funded position exists. Standard population-based formulas can miss the costs of travel to outlying communities, specialist service complexity and scarce infrastructure. These are not incidental inefficiencies to be solved by a smaller organisation. They are features of the delivery context that funding must recognise.

Longer agreements can help. MWRC's five-year legal assistance funding horizon provides a basis for planning, while separate program conditions and reporting still require coordination

across the organisation. Funding duration is therefore one element of reform. We recommend a default of at least five years where appropriate, adequate indexation, pay parity, flexible use across agreed outcomes, capital access and full-cost budgets. Governments should coordinate assurance across related programs, while preserving necessary safeguards and the professional independence and confidentiality of legal services.

The Commission should ask each jurisdiction to report the amount and proportion of expenditure for Aboriginal-specific services that reaches ACCOs, as well as relevant mainstream investments and the decisions made under ACCO preference policies. The figures should distinguish direct grants from subcontracting, identify contract duration and full-cost provision, and explain planned transitions. Where an ACCO is not yet resourced to take on a service, government should agree a transition plan with the relevant Aboriginal organisations, including capability, capital and workforce investment, rather than treating present capacity as a permanent reason to bypass Community control.

3 Connected family needs expose the limits of program silos

A woman seeking safety may need independent legal advice, a safe place to stay, transport, income, support for children, housing, and assistance with health and child protection systems. These needs do not arrive in the sequence of government funding streams. MWRC's integrated family safety model allows trusted relationships and coordinated work across refuge, outreach, legal and therapeutic functions. It also requires careful information barriers so that integration never compromises legal confidentiality or a woman's choice.

We offer this as an example of the conditions under which Community control can respond to connected needs, not a quantified claim that our model has caused changes in national targets. Fragmented commissioning can force repeated assessments and disclosures, require workers to fit a family's circumstances into narrow outputs, and leave agencies debating which program pays for coordination. A funding system that counts contacts but leaves housing or court access outside the funded response can record activity without showing whether a woman and her children gained safety and stability.

Our recent submission on the Our Ways First Action Plan argues for joined-up commissioning across family violence, legal assistance, housing, health, justice and child protection. This review should recommend cross-agency arrangements that fund coordination and allocate responsibility for the parts of a pathway no single ACCO controls. Evaluations should ask whether people receive timely help, maintain choice, avoid repeated storytelling and can access a safe home and legal protection. [6]

4 Government transformation must be observable in routine decisions

Priority Reform Three requires government organisations to change their cultures, systems and practices, address institutional racism, promote cultural safety and increase transparency. [2] Training and statements of intent can support that work, but ACCOs encounter the reform

through procurement, contract variations, reporting requests, service referrals, agency turnover, timelines and decisions about what evidence is accepted.

The Commission's 2024 review called for fundamental government change rather than relabelling established practice. [3] MWRC asks the 2026 review to examine concrete decisions: whether ACCOs can propose different service models; whether contracts fund the actual cost of Aboriginal governance; whether several agencies can accept common evidence; whether mainstream providers and government services have clear responsibilities; and whether officials can respond to a local priority without forcing it into a pre-existing program category.

We recommend a public transformation plan for each relevant agency, with senior accountability, a timetable and evidence of changed commissioning and service practice. Agency annual reports should disclose major Aboriginal-specific funding decisions, the role of Aboriginal parties, progress on ACCO preference and transitions, and changes to complaints and cultural safety processes. Independent Aboriginal-led assessment should test what communities and ACCOs experience, rather than relying only on an agency's description of its own activities.

5 Data must flow back to communities under Aboriginal governance

Priority Reform Four is about access to locally relevant information for Aboriginal decision-making. [2] ACCOs report service activity into multiple systems, often using different definitions and deadlines. The resulting information is frequently more useful for a contract acquittal than for local planning. Meanwhile, data on housing, child protection, justice, health and early childhood may be held by different agencies and released too slowly or at a scale too broad to guide a Fitzroy Valley decision.

Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Governance require more than a promise to share a dashboard. Data agreements should establish who determines purpose and collection, who may access and interpret information, how consent and cultural restrictions are respected, where records are held, how findings are returned, and what can be published. Organisations need funding for data roles, secure systems, analysis and Community discussion. The Commission and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led review have both emphasised this need. [3, 4]

We recommend that governments co-design a small, useful regional information set with local Aboriginal organisations, supported by safe access protocols and regular feedback in forms communities can use. Service reporting should use common definitions and proportional requirements across related funders. Local people and organisations should help decide whether an apparent change reflects real improvement, a shift in access, or a change in recording. Client stories and cultural knowledge should never be treated as free inputs for external evaluation.

6 Place-based investment in the Fitzroy Valley

Fitzroy Valley family safety cannot be separated from housing, income, employment, transport, early childhood access and the local workforce. A shortage of safe housing can prolong crisis accommodation and limit a woman's choices. A lack of staff accommodation can leave funded positions vacant. Travel distances and limited transport can interrupt legal assistance or early childhood engagement. These relationships explain why a collection of sound programs may still fail to provide a workable pathway for a family.

MWRC and partners are developing a Fitzroy Valley economic inclusion case study with the Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee. This work is examining housing, local employment and enterprise, early childhood and family violence, and Community-controlled governance and funding reform as connected areas for investment. It is an emerging approach. Its development depends on local validation and Aboriginal cultural authority, and its outcomes have not yet been evaluated.

This work offers a practical question for the Commission: can governments join investment across portfolios under a locally authorised Aboriginal governance arrangement, with capital and recurrent funding, shared data and a long enough horizon to assess results? MWRC supports such an approach, provided Aboriginal people determine the governance and scope, agencies retain responsibility for their statutory functions, and funding does not simply shift coordination costs onto an ACCO. The investment should be assessed against outcomes chosen locally, alongside agreed indicators of safety, housing, children's wellbeing, jobs and economic participation.

7 Make government accountable for implementation

An ACCO can face detailed milestones, acquittals and audit requirements for individual grants. Communities have fewer practical ways to see whether governments have honoured the larger promises to share decisions, transfer resources, transform agencies and return data. The National Agreement provides for public reporting and reviews. [2] The 2024 Commission review and 2025 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led review both called for stronger independent accountability. [3, 4]

The Commission should recommend public implementation schedules that name a responsible minister and agency, funding, decision point, date and measure for each material reform commitment. Reports should show both the action taken and its effect on local authority and service conditions. They should identify delays and the corrective decision, rather than treating a missed commitment as an opportunity to reset a timetable without explanation. An independent mechanism with Aboriginal leadership should be accessible to regional communities and able to examine government practice across jurisdictions.

For the present review, the Commission could request a consistent set of evidence from each jurisdiction. For Priority Reform One, this would include partnership terms, records of decisions genuinely shared, the timing of Aboriginal involvement and evidence of changed priorities or

allocations. For Priority Reform Two, it would include expenditure by service area and provider type, the basis for ACCO preference decisions, contract lengths, full-cost and capital provision, and agreed transition plans. For Priority Reform Three, it would include independently tested changes to commissioning and mainstream service practice, as well as the government decision and officer accountable for each change. For Priority Reform Four, it would include the local datasets made available, conditions of access, Indigenous governance arrangements, the resources for local analysis and examples of decisions informed by the data.

These measures should be interpreted with Aboriginal parties. A count of partnership meetings does not show what authority was shared. A higher aggregate amount paid to ACCOs may conceal short contracts or unfunded obligations. A data portal does not show whether communities can access and use information safely. The review should report both government-wide patterns and what changes in places, including remote regions, while avoiding comparisons that penalise communities for differences in need or data quality.

The test MWRC would apply is concrete: can an Aboriginal woman and her children obtain trusted help early, legal protection, safe accommodation and continuing support while remaining connected to family, culture, learning and Country? The answer depends on governments delivering their own responsibilities as much as on an ACCO's performance. Closing the Gap will be credible when authority, investment, data and accountability change together.

Submitted on behalf of Marninwarntikura Women's Resource Centre (Aboriginal Corporation)

Emily Carter AM
Chief Executive Officer

Vivienne Gordon
Chairperson

David Couri
Executive Officer

References

[1] United Nations, Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), particularly articles 3, 18, 19, 22, 23 and 31. https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/638370

[2] National Agreement on Closing the Gap, current online text, Priority Reforms One to Four. https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement

[3] Productivity Commission, Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, Study Report (2024). https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries-and-research/closing-the-gap-review/report/

[4] Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led Review of Closing the Gap, Final Report (2025), Coalition of Peaks. https://www.coalitionofpeaks.org.au/independent-review-of-closing-the-gap

[5] Productivity Commission, Closing the Gap Annual Data Compilation Report (July 2026). https://www.pc.gov.au/closing-the-gap-data/annual-data-report/2026/

[6] MWRC, Submission on the Our Ways First Action Plan 2027–2031 (25 September 2026). MWRC organisational document.