Australian Association of Gerontology (AAG) submission to Productivity Commission Closing the Gap Review 2026

About AAG:

AAG's aim is to improve the experience of ageing by connecting gerontological research, policy and practice. We are an independent and impartial member-based organisation working to facilitate collaboration between researchers, policy makers and practitioners to build the evidence base for best practice programs and policies that enable all Australians to age well. We have over 1,300 members across every State and Territory in Australia, with a broader reach of 12,000 individuals. We have well established Divisions in every State and Territory of Australia.

Key messages:

Genuine partnership requires Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination to be embedded from the outset. AAG's experience in gerontology and engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members and stakeholders echoes this message whether it be in research, policy or practice. While the Closing the Gap targets do not specifically measure aged care, our work shows aged care is intertwined with health care and the Four Priority Reforms apply equally to ageing as they do all other areas of policy and research.

Brief overview of submission:

We are submitting our forthcoming discussion paper *Knowing and Doing Better: Delivering stronger collaborations in First Nations Health and Ageing* (AAG, 2026) to the Productivity Commission Closing the Gap review as well as this supporting statement.

This discussion paper explores how ageing research involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples can move beyond consultation towards genuine self-determination, community control and shared decision-making. This message is relevant not only within the ecology of research but holds lessons and insights for government departments and agencies in how to engage genuinely with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, communities and organisations.

This paper is informed by discussions from the 2024 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ageing Advisory Group (ATSIAAG) pre conference workshop, a panel of leading researchers and Elders, and feedback from the 2026 NSW Aboriginal Aged Care Forum, as well as broader research. The paper aligns with previous Productivity Commission findings that note improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples requires more than increased engagement. It requires shifting power; and we make it clear that in research settings this means Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities and organisations guide, govern and evaluate research from inception to completion. There are strong corollaries with policy and program implementation which also benefit from genuine co-design and partnership.

Parallels between policy and research governance:

The paper highlights persistent challenges within mainstream research systems, including deficit-based approaches, limited recognition of Indigenous knowledge systems, tokenistic partnerships, inflexible funding structures and inadequate attention to the impacts of colonisation and racism. Again, these findings are not solely contained to research and extend to all forms of government priority setting and delivery. Lessons shared with AAG while drafting this paper emphasise the importance of valuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing, including the central role of spirit, culture, community and Country (AAG, forthcoming 29 October 2026).

Examples of promising practice demonstrate that research can support self-determination when communities set priorities, hold governance authority, shape methodologies and benefit directly from outcomes. Key recommendations include embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership at every stage of research, strengthening pathways for Indigenous researchers, investing in community-led governance structures, allowing flexible timelines, adopting trauma-aware approaches and ensuring findings are returned to communities in accessible ways.

In the realm of policymaking and program delivery there are significant parallels, we note the sustained advocacy and dedication not only of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Organisations, but peak bodies such as the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ageing and Aged Care Council (NATSIAACC). We share their frustrations that during the aged care reforms there has not been a consistent and systematic effort to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, communities and representative bodies which is inconsistent with Priority Reform 1, *parties sharing decision-making through formal partnerships*.

AAG's recent submissions to inquiries regarding the transition to Support at Home and the broader Support at Home Program (AAG 2026, March 17; 2026, August 14) make clear a number of our concerns with the assumptions and implementations of the aged care legislative reform program. Moreover, NATSIAACC has made clear that the aged care agenda is being designed and implemented in a way that is largely antithetical to the National Agreement. For instance, in terms of the Integrate Assessment Tool and methodology it is hard to see how this aligns with the National Agreement Priority Reforms. As NATSIAACC has stated:

> The IAT and the methodology through which assessments are undertaken do not adequately recognise the cultural dimensions necessary to understand a person's needs and provide dignified, culturally safe care. Culture, kinship, family and community circumstances, connection to Country or Island Home and cultural obligations cannot always be understood through a standardised assessment process, particularly where assessments may be undertaken remotely or over the telephone. (NATSIAACC, 2026)

While the Closing the Gap National Agreement does not have any specific aged care targets, it is clear that a culturally safe, accessible, quality aged care system is required to meet a number of the health-related targets; including (but not limited to) 1. Life Expectancy, 8. Economic Participation, 13. Family Safety, 14. Social and Emotional Wellbeing and 17. Access to information. Ultimately, the discussion paper calls for systemic changes to Australia's research

ecosystem so that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, knowledge and priorities are recognised as central to ethical, effective and equitable ageing research. We submit that these changes are equally as cogent in policymaking and implementation, especially with respect to the aged care reforms.

References:

Australian Association of Gerontology. (2026, March 17). AAG submission: Transition to Support at Home. https://aag.asn.au/libraryviewer?ResourceID=382

Australian Association of Gerontology. (2026, August 14). AAG Senate inquiry submission: Support at Home Program. https://aag.asn.au/libraryviewer?ResourceID=395

Australian Association of Gerontology (2026). AAG Discussion Paper. Knowing and Doing Better: Delivering stronger collaborations in First Nations Health and Ageing. [forthcoming]

National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ageing and Aged Care Council (NATSIAACC). (2026, August 21). *Media release: Recognition of IAT failures must now lead to action*. https://natsiaacc.org.au/news/media-release-recognition-of-iat-failures-must-now-lead-to-action/