Brotherhood of St Laurence
Working for an Australia free of poverty

Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap 2026

Brief comment submission to the Productivity Commission

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Summary

The Brotherhood of St. Laurence (BSL) welcomes the opportunity to provide this brief comment to the Productivity Commission.

Recommendations

The Federal Government should:

1. Commit to sustained, long-term funding.
2. Embed flexibility in service funding contracts.
3. Facilitate transitions, the Commonwealth Government needs to guide and support the transition of funds and programs to Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) with clear communication adequate transition resourcing and clear commencement timelines.
4. Facilitate local control and ownership of data to enable local community leaders to make evidence-based decisions at a place-based level.
5. Enable greater local commissioning of services along with accountability for outcomes and flexibility to adapt to lessons learnt.

1 The Brotherhood of St. Laurence and support for children and families

The Brotherhood of St. Laurence (BSL) is a social justice organisation working towards an Australia free of poverty. Our purpose is to advance a fair Australia through our leadership on policy reform, our partnerships with communities and the quality of our services. Our approach is informed directly by people experiencing disadvantage and uses evidence drawn from our research, together with insights from our programs and services, to develop practical solutions that work.

BSL has been delivering family and parenting services for decades and has supported the delivery of the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY) in Australia for the last 27 years. The program is delivered in up to 100 locations across Australia with half of the programs being focussed on First Nations children and families. Most recently BSL has been working with Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) and local First Nations organisations and community leaders to transition the First Nations focused sites from non-government organisations to First Nations organisations. We draw on this experience to respond to selected discussion questions below.

Questions about building the community-controlled sector

Prioritising funding and supporting service transition

What aspects of funding arrangements strengthen or undermine reciprocity, trust and shared accountability between governments and ACCOs?

Government commit to sustained, long-term funding: Programs that already deliver high quality, evidence-based outcomes within their communities should be funded long-term to reduce 'churn' in programs that finish because short-term funding ends. There is well established evidence[1] that waves of successive short-term programs are disruptive to communities, inefficient in achieving their intended outcomes, and can lead to a breakdown in trust between community members, government and service providers. There is little need to reinvent the wheel: there are already a large number of culturally responsive, evidence-based programs ready for sustained or scaled investment.

Government embed greater flexibility in service funding contracts: Funding needs to be made more flexible, to enable programs to adapt to local needs and respond to families where they may require

[1] For example: Department of Social Services 2024, 'Not-for-profit Sector Development Blueprint', DSS, Canberra. Viewed 16 September 2026.

tailored or additional support., An enabler of this flexibility would be the implementation of formal relational contracting[2] or outcomes contracting.

How are governments and their partners reforming systems and processes to prioritise funding for ACCOs and build transition pathways?

To facilitate transitions, the Commonwealth Government needs to guide and support the transition of funds and programs to ACCOs with clear communication adequate transition resourcing and clear commencement timelines. Transition Frameworks should be developed by First Nations organisations and endorsed by government to ensure that the frameworks support cultural authority and self-determination.

BSL has undertaken a large-scale transition of First Nations HIPPY sites from mainstream organisations to First Nations organisations. A discussion paper outlining lessons from this transition can be accessed on the BSL website.[3] This transition has contributed to the process of restoring cultural leadership and governance of HIPPY to local First Nations organisations and communities across Australia.

BSL's work with ACCOs to transition HIPPY sites has shown the role of mainstream organisations and government must be to step back, share power and walk alongside community with humility and cultural accountability. This approach recognises that the expertise and lived experience required to support First Nations people sits with First Nations organisations and communities and not with the mainstream community sector or government.

Where mainstream organisations hold funds and deliver programs identified for First Nations families, they must develop a clear transition strategy that centres cultural accountability, transfers power, resources and decision-making to ACCOs, and aligns with the Closing the Gap Priority Reforms and self-determination. The role of the mainstream provider is that of an ally and partner.

BSL's experience is that the transition to ACCO delivery can feel uncertain, unsupported – and at times, unfunded – within government service funding contracts. This is not a reflection of local ACCOs but a reflection of an unclear process. To accelerate transition and remove the risk borne by non-First Nations organisations in the transition, the Commonwealth Government should do more

[2] University of Melbourne 2026, 'Relational Contracting and Service Commissioning', Australian Welfare and Work Lab, University of Melbourne. Viewed 17 September 2026.

[3] 'The five-stage transition methodology proved effective in balancing accountability with flexibility and in recognising the emotional, organisational and practical complexity of change. Preparation, community consultation, provider selection, handover and establishment all played a vital role in minimising disruption to families, while supporting both incoming First Nations organisations and outgoing NGOs … Taken together, the lessons from this project demonstrate that meaningful transition is not a single event but an ongoing commitment to listening, learning and transforming systems so that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families are supported through services led by, and accountable to, their communities.' Brotherhood of St. Laurence 2026, *Lessons from the transition of HIPPY to local First Nations organisations*, discussion paper, Brotherhood of St. Laurence, Fitzroy, Vic.

to establish clear communication, endorse First Nations transition frameworks, provide adequate transition resourcing and clear timelines.

A major impact of the ACCO transition has been the growth in local workforce participation. In sites that have transitioned to ACCO delivery, more parents are now employed as tutors and the proportion of First Nations staff in HIPPY has increased from 19% in 2024 to 54% in 2026.

Shared access to data and information

Access and use of data

Are communities able to access and use data in ways that support local decision-making?

Government facilitates local control and ownership of data to enable local community leaders to make evidence-based decisions at a place-based level: Improving outcomes on complex social issues like child safety and child protection, housing and health requires more than better data. BSL recommends that government resource and enable local leadership groups to manage data analysis and decisions about the way to meet local community needs. Our experience of running the National Youth Employment Body (NYEB) has shown that if community leadership groups are provided access to data along with an investment in user capability and support, they are better equipped to understand local challenges, make evidence-informed decisions and drive coordinated, collaborative place-based responses.

Case study: the Compass Project, an initiative of the National Youth Employment Body: putting data, and data capability, in the hands of community

The Compass Project is a place-based initiative designed to improve how stakeholders use data to address youth unemployment. Led by the Brotherhood of St. Laurence (BSL) in partnership with members of the National Youth Employment Body (NYEB), the project is testing how access to data, combined with strengthened data capability and literacy, can support more effective, evidence-informed local action.

The project has developed customised 'Compass' data dashboards for ten communities across Australia. These tools bring together publicly available data on employment, education and training into a single, locally tailored platform to support decision-making. The project is also embedding co-design, capability-building, and collaborative sensemaking processes to ensure that data is not only accessible, but meaningful and usable.

This approach is particularly relevant to First Nations communities where leaders are clear about the ways to solve problems but have limited access to data relevant to their local areas to direct investment or monitor outcomes. Many government-funded First Nations providers are required to collect data and upload it into government systems but then have limited access to the data once it has been submitted. Providing access to data in a way that allows for local integration and analysis would allow progress to be measured and help understand whether service design and resource allocation on a local level have positive outcomes. Local control and ownership of data enables

community leaders to make evidence-based decisions at a place-based level. We acknowledge the importance of supporting Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Maiam Nayri Wingara[4] principles.

Enable greater local commissioning of services, along with accountability for outcomes and flexibility to adapt to lessons learnt: Currently, service design and commissioning arrangements tend to be controlled at state or national level. This approach results in contract management and accountability for outcomes happening without local control or input. Organisations that win contracts can prioritise government requirements over accountability to the local community in which they are operating. If services do not improve outcomes there are few mechanisms for local community members to change the contract or use the resources to implement another solution. Enabling commissioning and adaptation at a local level will enable greater local accountability, tailoring of programs to meet local needs, and better direction of investment to local priorities.

[4] https://www.maiamnayriwingara.org/