

# **COAG STATEMENT ON THE CLOSING THE GAP REFRESH**

**12 December 2018**

## **THE CLOSING THE GAP REFRESH**

In December 2016, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed to refresh the Closing the Gap agenda ahead of the tenth anniversary of the agreement and four of the seven targets expiring in 2018. In June 2017, COAG agreed to a strengths-based approach and to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were at the heart of the development and implementation of the next phase of Closing the Gap.

In 2018, a Special Gathering of prominent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians presented COAG with a statement setting out priorities for a new Closing the Gap agenda. The statement called for the next phase of Closing the Gap to be guided by the principles of empowerment and self-determination and deliver a community-led, strengths-based strategy that enables Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to move beyond surviving to thriving.

Since the Special Gathering identified priorities, all governments have worked together to develop a set of outcomes and measures for inclusion in the Closing the Gap Refresh. COAG has now agreed draft targets for further consultation to ensure they align with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities' priorities and ambition as a basis for developing action plans.

## **PARTNERSHIPS WITH ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER AUSTRALIA**

COAG recognises that in order to effect real change, governments must work collaboratively and in genuine, formal partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as they are the essential agents of change. This formal partnership must be based on mutual respect between parties and an acceptance that direct engagement and negotiation will be the preferred pathway to productive and effective agreements. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples must play an integral part in the making of the decisions that affect their lives – this is critical to closing the gap.

COAG will ensure that the design and implementation of the next phase of Closing the Gap is a true partnership. Governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will share ownership of and responsibility for a jointly agreed framework and targets and ongoing monitoring of the Closing the Gap agenda. The refreshed Closing the Gap agenda recognises and builds on the strength and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.

## **CLOSING THE GAP – A VISION FOR THE FUTURE**

Closing the Gap requires us to raise our sights from a focus on problems and deficits, to actively supporting and realising the full participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the social and economic life of the nation. COAG recognises there is a need for a cohesive national agenda focussed on important priorities for enabling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, children and communities to thrive.

COAG has listened to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and stakeholders. COAG has heard there is a need to focus on the long term and on future generations, to strengthen prevention and early intervention initiatives that help build strong families and communities, and to prioritise the most important events over the course of a person's life and the surrounding environment.

COAG acknowledges Closing the Gap builds on the foundation of existing policies and commitments within the Commonwealth and each state and territory. Closing the Gap does not replace these policies, but provides a people and community centred approach to accelerate outcomes.

## **COMMUNITY PRIORITIES FOR THE NEXT TEN YEARS**

The Special Gathering Statement to COAG in February 2018 recommended the priority areas for the next phase of Closing the Gap:

- Families, children and youth
- Housing
- Justice, including youth justice
- Health
- Economic development
- Culture and language
- Education
- Healing
- Eliminating racism and systemic discrimination.

All priority areas are important and interconnected, and COAG is committed to achieving positive progress in all areas.

The Commonwealth, states and territories have consulted widely on these priorities. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities, peak bodies, service providers, technical experts and members of the public had the opportunity to provide their views on the future of Closing the Gap.

In considering where to set targets, there was a focus on the priority areas that lend themselves to the design of specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound targets. This focus on evidence and data enables COAG to effectively track progress over time.

## **CROSS SYSTEM PRIORITIES**

Governments must deepen their relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This means understanding what matters to communities and continuing to build capability for genuine collaboration and partnership, acknowledging the differing priorities and challenges in different places across urban, regional and remote Australia.

All Australian governments are committed to working cooperatively in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and their communities, to positively transform life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

COAG recognises that progress reports over the past decade confirm that closing the gap in remote Australia requires particular focus, recognising the rich cultural strengths as well as the need for targeted approaches to address disadvantage in these areas.

COAG acknowledges that culture is fundamental to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' strength and identity. COAG further acknowledges the impacts of historical wrongs and trauma faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and families.

All Australian governments recognise the need to address intergenerational change, racism, discrimination and social inclusion (including in relation to disability, gender and LGBTIQ+), healing and trauma, and the promotion of culture and language for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. These will be taken into account as cross system priorities for all policy areas of the Closing the Gap agenda. Cross system priorities require action across multiple targets.

## **REFRESHED TARGETS**

The Commonwealth, states and territories share accountability for the refreshed Closing the Gap agenda and are jointly accountable outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. COAG commits to working together to improve outcomes in every priority area of the Closing the Gap Refresh.

The refreshed Closing the Gap agenda will commit to targets that all governments will be accountable to the community for achieving. This approach reflects the roles and responsibilities as set out by the National Indigenous Reform Agreement (NIRA), and specified in respective National Agreements, National Partnerships and other relevant bilateral agreements.

While overall accountability for the framework is shared, different levels of government will have lead responsibility for specific targets. The lead jurisdiction is the level of government responsible for monitoring reports against progress and initiating further action if that target is not on track, including through relevant COAG bodies.

The refreshed framework recognises that one level of government may have a greater role in policy and program delivery in relation to a particular target while another level of government may play a greater role in funding, legislative or regulatory functions. Meeting specific targets will require the collaborative efforts of the Commonwealth, states and territories, regardless of which level of government has lead responsibility. Commonwealth, state and territory actions for each target will be set out in jurisdictional action plans, and may vary between jurisdictions. COAG acknowledges that all priority areas have interdependent social, economic and health determinants that impact the achievement of outcomes and targets.

Through a co-design approach, jurisdictional action plans will be developed in genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, setting out the progress that needs to be made nationally and in each jurisdiction for the targets to be met. Action plans will clearly specify what actions each level of government is accountable for, inform jurisdictional trajectories for each target and establish how all levels of government will work together and with communities, organisations and other stakeholders to achieve the targets. Starting points, past trends and local circumstances differ, so jurisdictions' trajectories will vary and may have different end-points.

COAG recognises that promoting opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to be involved in business activities contributes to economic and social outcomes for families and communities, and has committed to publishing jurisdiction specific procurement policies, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment and business outcomes annually.

## **PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY**

Closing the Gap is a whole-of-government agenda for the Commonwealth and each state and territory. To provide direct accountability to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the Australian public as a whole, each jurisdiction will report publicly each year on its Closing the Gap strategy. The Prime Minister will make an annual statement to parliament.

Governments will engage with the community to develop a meaningful framework for transparently tracking and reporting progress with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders.

## **INDEPENDENT REVIEW**

The Productivity Commission's Indigenous Commissioner will conduct an independent review of progress nationally and in each jurisdiction every three years. All governments will provide input into the Productivity Commission's review, taking into account differences between urban, regional and remote areas.

The Closing the Gap targets may be subject to refinement, where appropriate, through the review of the NIRA and periodic Productivity Commission reviews.

## **WHERE WE ARE GOING FROM HERE**

A new formal partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, through their representatives, will be established by the end of February 2019.

Building on the work undertaken to date, working through this new partnership, the Commonwealth, and states and territories, will by mid 2019:

- finalise all draft targets;
- review the NIRA; and
- work with the Productivity Commission's Indigenous Commissioner to develop an independent, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led approach to the three-yearly comprehensive evaluation and review of progress nationally and in each jurisdiction.

One of the lessons governments have learned over the last ten years is that effective programs and services need to be designed, developed and implemented in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We must place collaboration, transparency, and accountability at the centre of the way we do business with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia. Working in genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is fundamental to Closing the Gap.

All governments are committed to broadening and deepening their partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities over the lifetime of the refreshed agenda. This includes strengthening mechanisms to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have an integral role in decision making and accountability processes at the national, regional and local levels, building on existing arrangements and directions within different jurisdictions.

To guide the development of Commonwealth, state and territory action plans by mid-2019, COAG has endorsed a set of *Implementation Principles* informed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities:

**Shared Decision-Making** – Implementation of the Closing the Gap framework, and the policy actions that fall out of it, must be undertaken in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Governments and communities should build their capability to work in collaboration and form strong, genuine partnerships in which

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples can be an integral part of the decisions that affect their communities.

**Place-based Responses and Regional Decision Making** – Programs and investments should be culturally responsive and tailored to place. Each community and region has its own unique history and circumstances. Community members, Elders and regional governance structures are critical partners and an essential source of knowledge and authority on the needs, opportunities, priorities and aspirations of their communities.

**Evidence, Evaluation and Accountability** – All policies and programs should be developed on evidence-based principles, be rigorously evaluated, and have clear accountabilities based on acknowledged roles and responsibilities. Governments and communities should have a shared understanding of evidence, evaluation and accountability.

**Targeted investment** – Government investments should contribute to achieving the Closing the Gap targets through strategic prioritisation of efforts based on rigorous evaluation and input from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, especially as it relates to policy formation, outcomes and service commissioning.

**Integrated Systems** – There should be collaboration between and within Governments, communities and other stakeholders in a given place to effectively coordinate efforts, supported by improvements in transparency and accountability.

## **WHERE WE HAVE COME FROM – TEN YEARS OF CLOSING THE GAP**

In 2008, COAG agreed to the NIRA to implement the Closing the Gap agenda. In signing the agreement, governments acknowledged that a concerted national effort was needed to address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage in key areas.

At the time, Closing the Gap was the most ambitious commitment ever made by governments to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. However, the agreement was negotiated with little to no input from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and without an adequate understanding of the mechanisms and timeframes needed to deliver lasting change. It also perpetuated a deficit-based view that framed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy as a series of responses to disadvantage and inequality, and under-emphasised the strength and agency of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

While some progress has been made to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with respect to life expectancy, child mortality, educational achievement, employment and early childhood education, only three of the seven current targets were on track at the agreement's ten-year anniversary in 2018. There is a shared view among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the broader Australian community and Australian governments that we must do better.

## **PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT**

Public engagement on the Refresh has been led by the Commonwealth at the national level, and by states and territories at the local and regional levels.

**COAG Public Discussion Paper and Consultation Website:** In December 2017 the COAG public discussion paper and Closing the Gap Refresh consultation website were launched, with the website open for feedback and submissions from the public until the end of April

2018. Feedback from the website, including over 170 major submissions, was collated and used to inform the technical workshop process and COAG's consideration of target areas for the next phase of the agenda.

**Special Gathering of Prominent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians:**

In February 2018, COAG leaders agreed that the priority areas identified in the statement of the Special Gathering would form the basis for remaining community consultations on the Refresh. The Special Gathering priority areas were tested in the national roundtables and other engagement processes led by the Commonwealth from February 2018 and have been strongly supported by stakeholders.

**Consultations:** The Commonwealth held 18 national roundtables in state capitals and regional centres across the country, ending with a national peaks workshop in Canberra in April. Roundtables sought feedback from participants on the priorities identified in the Special Gathering statement. Over 1,000 people were directly engaged through the meetings and roundtables hosted by the Commonwealth in this first phase of public engagement.

In May and June 2018 the Commonwealth hosted a series of technical workshops to develop potential targets and indicators for the refreshed agenda. The workshops brought together academics, business and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community experts and data custodians with Commonwealth and state officials in a co-design process structured around the Special Gathering priority areas. The first technical workshop in May was attended by officials from all jurisdictions and over 70 subject matter experts, including representatives from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities, academics and practitioners. A similar number attended the second technical workshop in June, which had a stronger emphasis on data issues and technical design.

A second series of national roundtables were conducted to test the analysis arising from the initial consultations, submissions and technical workshops. This phase of consultation sought to return to stakeholders who had previously been engaged in the process or lodged submissions to the public consultation website, including members of the Redfern Alliance, national peak bodies, national service providers, and other individuals and organisations. The outcomes of this phase of consultations were fed into discussions between governments in the lead up to the COAG meeting in December 2018.

States and territories held consultations over the same period to ensure views from across the country were heard and incorporated into the Refresh.

All governments remain committed to engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and other stakeholders to finalise and implement the Closing the Gap Refresh.