Closing the Gap

The National Agreement, its Priority Reforms, and what it means for your organisation

A shared national commitment

Closing the Gap is the commitment made by all Australian governments to work in genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to improve life outcomes. It began in 2008, when governments first agreed to national targets in areas such as life expectancy, child mortality, education and employment. For more than a decade, progress was measured against these targets, but the framework was designed and delivered largely by governments alone.

In July 2020 the commitment was renewed as the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. For the first time, the Agreement was developed in formal partnership with the Coalition of Peaks, a representative body of more than eighty Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled organisations. This was a significant shift. It moved Closing the Gap from something done for communities to something shaped and led with them.

The National Agreement is built on self-determination. It recognises that the strengths, knowledge and solutions needed to improve outcomes are already present in communities, and that the role of government is to partner with and resource those communities, not to direct them.

The four Priority Reforms

At the heart of the National Agreement are four Priority Reforms. These change the way governments and communities work together, and the evidence shows they are the engine that drives progress on the targets. Where outcomes are improving, the Priority Reforms are almost always visible in the background.

1. **Formal partnerships and shared decision making:** First Nations peoples share genuine decision making with governments on the policies, programs and services that affect their lives, backed by real authority and resources.
2. **Building the community controlled sector:** Strengthening and properly resourcing community controlled organisations so communities can deliver services to their own people, in their own ways.
3. **Transforming government organisations:** Mainstream agencies commit to becoming culturally safe, responsive and accountable, and to identifying and addressing racism within their systems.
4. **Shared access to data and information:** Communities have access to the data they need to set local priorities and track progress, guided by Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles.

The targets, and how progress is measured

The National Agreement sets 19 socio-economic targets across areas including health and wellbeing, education, employment, housing, justice, land and waters, and culture and language. These targets are practical and measurable, and they give everyone a shared picture of what success looks like.

Progress is measured independently. The Productivity Commission maintains a public Closing the Gap dashboard that reports against each target, and it conducts a regular review of how governments are tracking against their commitments. The Coalition of Peaks and community controlled organisations also report on progress from a

community perspective. Independent measurement matters, because it keeps the focus on real outcomes rather than good intentions.

The evidence is clear that the targets are achievable, but only where the Priority Reforms are genuinely in action. A strong community controlled sector, real shared decision making, culturally safe services and shared data are the conditions under which outcomes improve.

What this means for your organisation

Every organisation that employs, partners with, or delivers services to First Nations peoples has a part to play in Closing the Gap. You do not need to be a government agency to contribute. The Priority Reforms offer a practical framework for any workplace that wants to make a genuine difference.

In practice, this can mean partnering with community controlled organisations rather than only consulting them, and directing procurement toward Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses. It can mean building a culturally safe workplace, examining your own systems for barriers, and setting workforce and reconciliation goals that connect directly to the Priority Reforms. Above all, it means sharing decision making and letting communities lead on the things that affect them.

This work aligns naturally with a Reconciliation Action Plan, a workforce strategy or a grant application. When you frame your goals as SMART goals with measurable outcomes that reflect community priorities, you turn a statement of commitment into practical action.

Questions to reflect on

- Which of the four Priority Reforms is most relevant to the work your organisation does?
- Where does your organisation consult, and where could it genuinely share decision making?
- How could your procurement, workforce or reconciliation goals connect to a Closing the Gap target?

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ✓ Closing the Gap began in 2008 and was renewed in 2020 in formal partnership with the Coalition of Peaks.
- ✓ The four Priority Reforms change how governments and communities work together and are the key to progress.
- ✓ There are 19 socio-economic targets, measured independently by the Productivity Commission.
- ✓ Every organisation can contribute through partnership, procurement and culturally safe practice.

Reference material

- **National Agreement on Closing the Gap and the Priority Reforms**
  closingthegap.gov.au
- **Productivity Commission, Closing the Gap data dashboard and review**
  pc.gov.au/closing-the-gap-data
- **Coalition of Peaks**
  coalitionofpeaks.org.au
- **National Indigenous Australians Agency**
  niaa.gov.au

How Emus Talking can help

Emus Talking is a proudly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander owned business. We help organisations build culturally safe workplaces and strong partnerships, delivered remotely and virtually right across Australia, or in person by arrangement.

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