



# Strong Culture, Strong Youth: Our Legacy, Our Future



## Close the Gap Campaign Report 2023



**CLOSE**THEGAP

Prepared by Karabena Publishing for the  
National Close the Gap Alliance Group  
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**Warning:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be aware that this Close the Gap report may contain images, names and voices of people who are deceased.

## Professional disclosure statement

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# Foreword



**When this Alliance Group (formerly Steering Committee) started its journey in 2006, initiated by then Social Justice Commissioner Tom Calma's report,<sup>1</sup> Close the Gap was the only independent national rights-based campaign fighting for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health equity and equality. Today, Close the Gap has mobilised representatives from 52 peak Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health bodies, as well as mainstream health, advocacy and human rights organisations to create a national movement committed to ensuring health equity and improved life outcomes for First Nations Australians.**

To achieve this, we took a rights-based approach to advocate for greater investment and changed ways of working across the health sector – because we knew this approach will lead to equity and equality becoming a reality. We also know the changes that needed to be made were not just about targets, as we so often see now. It was then, as it is now, about building the right infrastructure in communities, so they can lead and create the changes that are required for future generations to meet their aspirations. First Nations youth are the pride of their families and the hope for our future, not just for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples but for our entire nation.

Since 2019, the Close the Gap reports have demonstrated how Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing are central to improving health outcomes. These are the principles we showcase again in this report because, in the face of painfully slow progress, it has been Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, innovation and creativity that has pushed boundaries and created opportunities for the community-controlled sectors to flourish.

This Campaign has been fortunate to have as our leaders, nationally renowned Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health experts and researchers, who continue to build on our Ancestors' knowledge, passed down to us across generations to explore and identify what First Nations peoples across our land have known since millennia.

That our connection to community, to Country, to language; our sense of belonging, identity and being; our laws, customs and traditions – all of these are protective factors that nurture our spirit and provide the right cultural environment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities to thrive. And all of these cultural determinants of health play a vital role in achieving long-term health outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

When Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were building the community-controlled sector, they carried their culture front and centre. They were also advocating for and developing research that shows why culture matters, a body of work that has broadened the way that health services think about culture and the fundamental shift in which it can improve life outcomes.

Equally important, it has created the space for us as a Campaign to explore how culture expressed and experienced through a range of mediums, can and does provide protective factors for our health and wellbeing.

**Health is more than just our physical wellbeing: it is our connection to Country and language. It also enables us to access education and to build connections with the wider community – all of which are vital to our social and emotional wellbeing.**

And so, we followed the research and looked to 21st-century examples of music, dance, language, belonging and identity – all intrinsic aspects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures – to show how these concepts shape Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' health in the long-term. This approach has





allowed us to showcase in this report a range of organisations that, although they don't directly work in the health sector, do, in fact, use cultural determinants to provide holistic care to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth to improve their lived experiences and encourage them to achieve their aspirations for the future.

But in highlighting these initiatives, our intention is not to overlook the incredible work being done in our community-controlled health organisations. To those of you working tirelessly in the health field we see you creating safe spaces for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to access health care. We know the effort, the sheer determination it takes to move the pendulum even a little, towards better health outcomes. And we thank you for your care and dedication to your work and our communities.

**When we started this journey, we knew that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership would be pivotal to creating meaningful transformative change. And we see it everywhere in the innovative work showcased in this report. It is not just a cultural obligation to Country, community and culture, it is the pathway to a better nation for all of us. Our Ancestors paved the way that our Elders continue to illuminate, and our young are following their footsteps in creating their own legacy.**

We are cognisant that, later this year, Australians will vote in a referendum on whether to establish a permanent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament – a representative body that can advise policy makers on matters that affect all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

If the Yes vote succeeds, we can take pride in knowing that, just as our Ancestors have done, we have provided an opportunity for our future generations to inform and direct the policies that impact their lives.

Today, as we release our 14th report, we are proud and honoured to shine a light on individuals and organisations that work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities to enrich the lives of our children and youth. It is our hope that when these young people read this report, they will see themselves reflected in the stories it contains, and know that their dreams, their visions and hopes for the future are being paved right now.

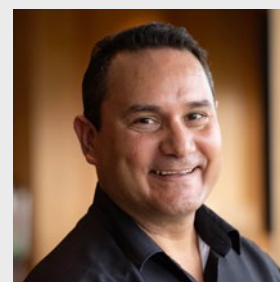
That across this nation, we see you: we see your drive, your determination, your care of, and for, community and culture.

We take heart in knowing that our future is in the hands of our young people – and that your future is bright.



**Ms June Oscar AO**

Aboriginal and  
Torres Strait Islander  
Social Justice  
Commissioner



**Mr Karl Briscoe**

CEO, National  
Association of Aboriginal  
and Torres Strait Islander  
Health Workers and  
Practitioners

**Co-Chairs – Close the Gap Campaign**



# Executive Summary

**The past year has been one of consolidation and of new milestones. The 2020 National Agreement on Closing the Gap (National Agreement) continues to be implemented and reported upon. Progress so far is mixed but occurring in relation to the structurally focused four Priority Reform Areas.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, progress against the Targets is less evident despite it being the critical measure by which the National Agreement will be assessed. The National Agreement must lead to measurable improvements in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, families and communities. And the stark images from Alice Springs in early 2023 have reminded us that, in too many cases, it is not.**

Reflecting the above, on 13 February 2023, the Prime Minister – stating the ‘gap was not closing fast enough’<sup>3</sup> – released a reinvigorated second Commonwealth Closing the Gap Implementation Plan. The Coalition of Peaks tabled and released their Implementation Plan<sup>4</sup> in Parliament at the same time as the Commonwealth Government. As noted by the Coalition of Peaks “this Implementation Plan is designed with the purpose of progressing outcomes across the four priority reform areas”.

Also recently refreshed is the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021–2031.<sup>5</sup> The Plan marks a milestone in integrating suicide prevention (as one of three priority areas), and social and emotional and mental health into a planning space that has traditionally been focused on physical health. While mental health strategies are still needed, the Health Plan’s integrated approach better reflects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander holistic conceptions of health as including body, mind, family, community, culture, Country and spirituality. The mainstream National Medical Workforce Strategy 2021–2031<sup>6</sup> and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan 2021–2031<sup>7</sup> complement the Health Plan.

In 2022, the Uluru Statement from the Heart<sup>8</sup> moved back to the centre of Australian political debate. While the Statement also calls for a truth-telling and healing process and a Makarrata or agreement-making process, the focus has been on its call for a National Voice to Parliament. The Close the Gap Campaign not only supports the Uluru Statement and National Voice as a vehicle for partnership and self-determination, but – to the degree that it supports a national healing process – also as a health gap-closing measure. In addition, the Close the Gap Campaign calls for the domestic implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples to complement these potential developments.<sup>9</sup>

In 2023, the Close the Gap Alliance welcomed the Australian Government’s January launch of Revive – National Cultural Policy with its significant support for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander creative economy and languages.<sup>10</sup>

**In this report, we recommend building on this foundation by developing a dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural policy that promotes both culture and the cultural determinants of health, and otherwise aligning cultural and health policy, and reflecting the interconnectedness between the two.**

In a ground-breaking international human rights law precedent, in September 2022 the United Nations Human Rights Committee held Australian Government climate change inaction in the Torres Strait Islands amounted to a violation of eight Islanders’ (the Torres Strait 8) human rights, including to practise and preserve their culture.<sup>11</sup> In recognition of this, and in order to address the significant impacts that climate change is having on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, the Close the Gap Campaign recommends the development and implementation of a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander climate change framework that connects to Closing the Gap policy.

And to align Australian government approaches with international human rights standards further, the Campaign recommends raising the age of criminal responsibility from 10 to 14. This is based on the understanding that the impact of the current age is racially discriminatory, with much greater impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people than on their non-Indigenous peers.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to considering developments over the past year, this report shines a light on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people's tremendous contributions to their communities. It does this through eight case studies organised across three themes that are intended to highlight the importance of the cultural determinants of health to Closing the Gap: Share Knowledge; Cultivate Community; and Cherish Wisdom.

The case studies describe the work of:

1	<a href="#">Gumbaynggirr Giingana Freedom School</a>	Language keeps culture strong
2	<a href="#">Youth Verdict</a>	In the fight for a future, youth voice speaks loudest
3	<a href="#">BlaQ Aboriginal Corporation</a>	Being our authentic selves
4	<a href="#">Impact of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project (ATSISPEP)</a>	Listening to youth is key
5	<a href="#">Maranguka Justice Reinvestment Project in Bourke</a>	Delivering on justice, one day at a time
6	<a href="#">Rekindling Youth Program, Bangarra Dance Theatre</a>	Dancing up a storm, in both worlds
7	<a href="#">Aurora Education Foundation's High School Program</a>	Learning to love learning
8	<a href="#">Naytive Mentorship Program</a>	Connecting youth through music

The report also includes features on the [Uluru Youth Dialogue](#) that was established to inform and involve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth about the Uluru Statement from the Heart; and on two long-standing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ally organisations, [Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation](#) (ANTAR) and the [Fred Hollows Foundation](#).

“Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health, equity and equality is possible to achieve within a generation. But it will take courage, investment and a genuine allyship, with every single one of us having a role to play.”

— Karl Briscoe

# Recommendations

The Close the Gap Campaign continues to advocate for health equity, equality and improved life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities. Without large-scale systemic institutional reforms this cannot be achieved at a national level.

The Campaign recognises that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's spiritual connection to land, and the continual use and revitalisation of traditional languages, practices and law, play a vital role in the health and wellbeing of First Nations communities. Affirming the centrality of culture and implementing these cultural determinants into health policy and frameworks will require a shift from top-down, centrally managed planning procedures to participatory, bottom-up, community-driven processes.

In recognition of this, we call on Australian governments to implement, in full, the following recommendations:

## National Agreement on Closing the Gap

Implementation across the 4 priority reform areas lacks consistent national coordination and is impeding progress to meet the objectives in the National Agreement.

### Recommendation 1

Australian governments, in genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities, accelerate action and implementation across the National Agreement on Closing the Gap priorities and reform focus areas including:

- a** Ensuring that formal partnerships and shared decision making support Indigenous leadership and cultures, recognising that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples must be at the centre of owning and driving the actions needed across policy and the community controlled sector to achieve meaningful outcomes – as per Priority Reform Area 1.
- b** Allocating appropriate resources to community-controlled organisations. This must include a commitment to sufficient and sustainable long term (10+ years) needs and placed-based cross-sectoral funding by federal, state, territory and local governments – as per Priority Reform Area 2.
- c** Embedding and operationalising the principles of Indigenous data sovereignty and Indigenous data governance. Ensure that governments fund and coordinate a national policy framework and infrastructure that enables the sharing of relevant data – as per Priority Reform Area 3.
- d** Exploring best practice across the community controlled sector to address entrenched racism in Australian health care systems. This will ensure that institutions are trauma-informed and culturally safe, and address the explicit needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples – as per Priority Reform Area 4.





## Social and Emotional Wellbeing

Address the social and cultural determinants of health through equitable, sustainable, and long-term needs-based funding.

### Recommendation 2

Australian governments, in partnership with the community-controlled sector, develop strengths-based, place-based, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-led social and emotional wellbeing initiatives.

## Suicide Prevention

### Recommendation 3

Accelerate action on, and implementation of, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021–2031, and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan 2021–2031. In recognition of the need for trauma-aware and healing-informed care™, and the work and expertise undertaken by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project, we support in full their key findings and recommendations, as noted in the next recommendation.

### Recommendation 4

A government commitment to ensure that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide prevention activity includes:

- a** Community-specific and community-led upstream programs focused on healing and strengthening social and emotional wellbeing, cultural renewal, and improving the social determinants of health that can otherwise contribute to suicidal behaviours, with an emphasis on trauma informed care.
- b** A commitment to, and a provision for, the evaluation of the activity and the dissemination of findings to further strengthen the evidence-base.
- c** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and related peak bodies and organisations co-designing youth-focused healing programs as a critical component of positive long-term health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.

## Gender Equity and Justice

Advance First Nations gender justice and equality and ensure that the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls are secured.

### Recommendation 5

Australian governments, in genuine partnership, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's and girls' representatives implement, in full, the recommendations from the *Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices): Securing Our Rights, Securing Our Future Report*, and support the development and implementation of a National Framework for Action to achieve First Nations Gender Justice and Equality.

## The Uluru Statement from the Heart

### Recommendation 6

Australian governments implement in full the Uluru Statement from the Heart, including:

- a** A First Nations Voice enshrined in the constitution.
- b** Establish a Makarrata Commission to supervise a process of agreement-making with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.
- c** Adopt a national policy platform underpinned by truth telling, recognising our shared history as a nation.

## United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

### Recommendation 7

Australian Governments negotiate in good faith with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities in all matters regarding the adopting and embedding of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs, and in Australian law, regulations, policies, and administrative practices. This includes the definition of human rights in the *Human Rights (Parliamentary Scrutiny) Act 2011* (Cth).

## Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Policy

### Recommendation 8

Australian governments partner with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities to develop, fund and implement an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural policy that:

- a** Complements and reinforces the Revive – National Cultural Policy that respects the centrality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture in the Australian arts, entertainment and cultural sectors.
  - b** Asserts the centrality of culture to the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
  - c** Informs investment in cultural governance, maintenance and revitalisation projects, initiatives and activities both for community and nation building.
  - d** Provides environmental and heritage protections for sites that are sacred or culturally significant, recognising the impacts on Country, social and emotional wellbeing and the cultural determinants of health.
  - e** Improves Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community access to opportunities and resources that support the cultural determinants of their health and wellbeing according to their needs, priorities and aspirations.
  - f** Includes cultural knowledge holders in decision-making positions that affect communities.
  - g** Establishes a monitoring, evaluation and action-learning framework.
- a** Provides resources to develop community climate adaptation plans and risk assessments for climate change.
  - b** Support, in partnership, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and relevant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-owned businesses to lead the development of emergency management plans affecting their communities.
  - c** Undertakes research into the specific implications of the climate emergency for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.
  - d** Includes housing and infrastructure planning, in regional and remote communities that are particularly vulnerable to extreme weather conditions as a direct result of climate change.
  - e** Investigates green policies to reduce Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities' reliance on climate-damaging fossil fuels by way of introducing electrical vehicles and installation of associated infrastructure.
  - f** Ensures that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural sites, knowledge, land management and conservation practices are embedded into national climate change mitigation efforts.
  - g** Invests in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people to obtain qualifications and training to address:
    - Australia's national response to the climate crisis; and
    - to develop local place-based solutions to community needs.

## Responding to the Climate Emergency

### Recommendation 9

Australian governments work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities to develop, fund and implement an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander climate change strategic framework that:

## Raising the Age of Criminal Responsibility

In line with international conventions and empirical evidence regarding childhood development.

### Recommendation 10

All Australian governments immediately raise the age of criminal responsibility from 10 years to 14 years of age.

# About this Report

**In 2019, the Close the Gap Campaign shifted the focus of its annual reports to highlighting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander successes and strengths-based approaches. To that end, this year's report shines a light on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. How could they not be a focus? In 2021, just over one-half (51.5%) of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population were under 25 years of age, with 18.5% between the ages of 15–24.<sup>13</sup>**

The Campaign's 2023 report showcases the work of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth through eight case studies on co-designed and otherwise focused innovative and creative programs. These eight span the creative arts, mentoring, youth justice initiatives, climate activism, LGBTQ+SB rights, educational innovations, suicide prevention, and the structural reform of mental health services.

This year's report also builds on the Campaign's previous annual reports: *Transforming Power: Voices for Generational Change*, our 2021 report that highlighted the importance and success of community-led solutions using cultural knowledge and practices to restore community health and social and emotional wellbeing; and the 2020 report – *We Nurture Our Culture for Our Future and our Culture Nurtures Us* – which celebrated what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples can achieve by privileging our knowledge, continuing our cultures, and maintaining connections to Country and kin.<sup>14</sup>

As these reports make clear, to Close the Gap and meet the National Agreement targets there must be a focus on the social and cultural determinants of health.<sup>15</sup> It is for this reason that the National Agreement adopted an ecological approach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health encompassing social determinants – education and income, housing, and access to health services – and cultural determinants relating to Country and languages.

The approach reflects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' holistic conception of health as social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) comprising an interconnected matrix of physical and mental health, and the health of connections to family, community, Country and spirituality (see also Figure 1: A model of social and emotional wellbeing, p.32). The SEWB concept is otherwise inseparable from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural law, values and perspectives, healing practices and traditions designed to strengthen collective identities and cultural continuity.<sup>16</sup> As observed:

Cultural Determinants originate from and promote a strength-based perspective, acknowledging that stronger connections to culture and Country build stronger individual and collective identities, a sense of self-esteem, resilience, and improved outcomes across the other determinants of health including education, economic stability and community safety.<sup>17</sup>

The focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in this report is organised by three key themes:

- 1 Sharing Knowledge
- 2 Cultivating Community
- 3 Cherishing Wisdom.

Each is connected to the six core domains of the cultural determinants of health identified in the [Mayi Kuwayu](#) longitudinal study of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, health and wellbeing: Connection to Country; Indigenous Language; Self-determination and Leadership; Family, Kinship and Community; Indigenous Beliefs and Knowledge; Cultural Expression and Continuity.<sup>18</sup>



The eight case studies are also intended to illustrate the themes as follows.

Theme	Cultural determinants from the Mayi Kuwayu study	Case studies
<b>Share Knowledge</b>	<b>Self-determination and Leadership</b> – facilitates leading or, at a minimum, involvement in decision making at individual, family, community, organisational and political levels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Gumbaynggirr Giingana Freedom School</li> </ul>
	<b>Family, Kinship and Community</b> – knowing and being part of the community, with its responsibilities and obligations, and the perception of oneself	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Youth Verdict</li> </ul>
<b>Cultivate Community</b>	<b>Connection to Country</b> – related to identity, attachment with the physical environment, a sense of belonging, and of spiritual relationships and responsibilities to look after and maintain Country	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● BlaQ Aboriginal Corporation</li> <li>● Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project</li> </ul>
	<b>Indigenous Language</b> – verbal, written and body language as a vehicle for expressing culture and teaching it to others including transmitting cultural knowledge to the next generation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Maranguka Justice Reinvestment Project</li> </ul>
<b>Cherish Wisdom</b>	<b>Indigenous Beliefs and Knowledge</b> – concepts of relational identity, spirituality and cultural traditions, as well as healing, traditional medicines and gendered knowledge systems and practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Rekindling Youth Program, Bangarra Dance Theatre</li> <li>● Aurora Education Foundation's High School Program</li> </ul>
	<b>Cultural Expression and Continuity</b> – expressing attitudes, beliefs, customs and norms in the form of artefacts, symbols, dances, songs, art and ceremony, storytelling, language, family relations, sharing of food and celebrations, and representation of values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Naytive Mentorship Program</li> </ul>

The case studies confirm that, despite mixed progress in relation to the National Agreement at the national level, there remains cause for celebration because of the strength and resilience of culture-led practice driven by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership.

They also support the evidence that the earlier young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples engage with their culture and enjoy its richness and diversity, the more likely they will be to lead healthy and fulfilled lives.<sup>19</sup> Positive role models/champions figure large in this, which in turn produces a new and bigger cohort of role models as the generations roll by – a virtuous circle.

This report continues its youth focus with a summary of the Uluru Youth Summit – the aim of which was to engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young

people with the Uluru Statement and what it hopes to achieve – written by the Co-Chairs of the Uluru Youth Dialogue. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people play an integral role as active leaders in this grass-roots movement – the education work they do in this space and their voices need to be heard strongly and clearly.

It also features the work being done by ANTAR – Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation and the Fred Hollows Foundation, two members of the Close the Gap Alliance Group. The focus is on their support for the Uluru Statement from the Heart and their broader advocacy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social justice and reform in Australia.



# A Year in Review

**Through strong and purposeful leadership, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have continued to create key structural reforms across all sectors for improved and lasting outcomes. As in previous years, we call on governments to implement large-scale systemic reform that will genuinely support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' empowerment and right to self-determination. The Campaign makes recommendations on:**

- Progress against the National Agreement Priority Reform Areas and targets and the renewal both of the Australian Government's and the Coalition of Peaks' respective Closing the Gap Implementation Plans.
- The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021–2031.
- The Uluru Statement from the Heart and the National Voice to Parliament, and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.
- The Australian Government's Revive – National Cultural Policy.
- The need for a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander climate change policy.
- Raising the age of criminal responsibility from 10 to 14 as the current age is racially discriminatory against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.

## Implementing the National Agreement on Closing the Gap

The November 2022 *Commonwealth Closing the Gap Annual Report*<sup>20</sup> – the first against the National Agreement on Closing the Gap targets in 17 outcome areas including health, housing, justice, education, economic development and culture – shows signs of mixed progress. Areas improving or on track to meet their targets include babies born with a healthy birthweight and children enrolled in pre-school. However, targets worsening or not on track include the number of children being school ready, adults in prison, children in out-of-home care, and deaths by suicide.<sup>21</sup>

Four National Agreement Priority Reform areas (see [Appendix 3](#)) commit all parties to the structural reforms needed for the 17 targets to be met. In August 2022, the Coalition of Peaks, which is now more than 80 strong, reported on the first two years of National Agreement implementation including in relation to the following areas:

### Priority Reform Area 1

Shared decision-making through formal partnership arrangements including through place-based and subject matter policy partnerships. The Coalition of Peaks reported three of the five anticipated policy partnerships were operating: the Justice Policy Partnership; the Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership; and the Social and Emotional Wellbeing (Mental Health) Policy Partnership. Five place-based partnerships were progressed at: Maningrida, NT; the East Kimberley region of WA; Tamworth, NSW; Doomadgee, Qld; and the western suburbs of Adelaide, SA.<sup>22</sup>

### Priority Reform Area 2


Building the community-controlled sectors through sector strengthening plans. The Coalition of Peaks reported plan agreement and/or development for the Early Childhood Care and Development, Health, Housing, and Disability sectors (see below).

### Priority Reform Area 3

Transforming government organisations and mainstream services to be accessible to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The Coalition of Peaks reported that while government partners have agreed to an approach, implementation remains slow: 'Government Parties need to be bold and break down the systems, structures, and beliefs of the past to implement and achieve this Priority Reform'.<sup>23</sup>

### Priority Reform Area 4

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander shared access to data and information including to support the above three outcomes. The Coalition of Peaks report three of the six anticipated Community Data Project sites were established: Western Sydney; the Kimberley region; and in Adelaide. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare is developing community data portals for each.<sup>24</sup>



The Coalition of Peaks' second Closing the Gap Implementation Plan was released in February 2023.<sup>25</sup> It contains a series of National Agreement implementation actions that are supported by the Close the Gap Campaign as reflected in its first Recommendation.

## Implementing National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021–2031 and refreshing Suicide Prevention and Social and Emotional Wellbeing Frameworks

A refreshed National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021–2031 was also launched in 2020. The Health Plan's Priority 6 is for 'social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) and trauma-aware, healing-informed approaches™' in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and mainstream health services.<sup>26</sup> This includes objectives:

- To refresh and implement the National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing 2017–2023.
- To support Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services (ACCHS) to deliver more SEWB services.
- To support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations including ACCHS in SEWB and healing leadership, and mainstream health services and organisations delivering SEWB supports to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.<sup>27</sup>

The Close the Gap Campaign supports these objectives.

The refreshed Health Plan will also drive progress against the three National Agreement health-specific targets including 'significant and sustained reduction in suicide of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people towards zero'.<sup>28</sup> The latter is Priority 10 in the new plan and connected with the objectives:

- To refresh the 2013 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Strategy with an emphasis on supporting place-based solutions.

- To strengthen the role of ACCHSs to deliver and/or coordinate culturally safe mental health and suicide prevention services.
- To embed integrated models of suicide prevention and mental health for culturally safe and inclusive care pathways (through early intervention, after-care and post-intervention services) with ACCHSs being the preferred providers of these services.
- To ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with lived experience are at the centre of the development and delivery of mental health and suicide prevention services.

Further recommendations in relation to these important initiatives include a reference to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project, which is the subject of the case study [\*Listening to youth is key\*](#).

A mainstream National Medical Workforce Strategy 2021–2031<sup>29</sup> and an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan 2021–2031<sup>30</sup> were launched in 2022. The aim of the latter is for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to be fully represented in the health workforce by 2031 using a Close the Gap approach that includes actions to attract, recruit and retain workers across all roles, levels and locations within the health sector.<sup>31</sup> The Close the Gap Campaign commends the commitment in the Australian Government's October 2022 Budget of \$54.3 million to train 500 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers and practitioners, among other investment totalling \$1.2 billion over six years from 2022–23.<sup>32</sup>

## Securing gender equity and justice for First Nations women and girls

In August 2021, the Australian Government released its first Closing the Gap Implementation Plan, which was superseded on 13 February 2023 with the release of a second plan. In marking the change, the Prime Minister stated the 'gap was not closing fast enough'<sup>33</sup> and that a new plan was needed.

The second plan also effectively broadens the reach of the National Agreement to include foci on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander with disabilities, on Elders in aged care, and on remote communities all backed up with \$424 million in funding.<sup>34</sup>

A further new priority was supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander gender equity and justice, which was guided by the December 2020 launch of the *Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices) Report*.<sup>35</sup> In June 2017, the Australian Government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner June Oscar AO partnered to support a national conversation on how best to promote the human rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls. Following consultations involving almost 3000 participants,<sup>36</sup> the resulting report covered culture, families, women's leadership, child protection, and culturally safe and co-designed services. A December 2021 launched *Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices) Implementation Framework* sets out priority areas and next steps.<sup>37</sup>

The Close the Gap Campaign commends the second plan's support for the *Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices) Implementation Framework's* recommended National Summit for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls (scheduled for May 2023) and the development of the Framework for Action to Achieve First Nations Gender Justice and Equality.<sup>38</sup> It also welcomes the long-overdue priority national focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls, including on their health and wellbeing.

## Uluru Statement from the Heart and the National Voice

Newly elected Prime Minister Albanese committed Labor to supporting a National Voice to Parliament enshrined in the Constitution in May 2022, with a referendum to decide the issue later in 2023.

A foundational element of the Close the Gap approach, and one which Campaign members have consistently advocated for over the past 16 years, is for Australian governments to work in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders, communities and peak bodies to support the delivery of improved health and other outcomes – as set out in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. Aligned with this, the Close the Gap Campaign supports the Uluru Statement from the Heart and the National Voice as vehicles for partnership and self-determination.

More broadly the Campaign supports the Statement's truth-telling and Treaty elements as critical to the healing and social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, families and communities. This includes as a foundation for healing the intergenerational trauma that continues to challenge so many by restoring a greater sense of collective control.

**When viewed through this lens, the full implementation of the Uluru Statement from the Heart – its Voice, Treaty and Truth elements – can be understood as a vehicle for closing the gap.**



## Domestic implementation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

The United Nations (UN) General Assembly adopted the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in 2007, with Australia's formal support being given in April 2009.<sup>39</sup> UNDRIP's 46 substantive articles do not create any new rights but apply existing universal human rights to the position of Indigenous peoples. These rights, set out in the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and international human rights treaties otherwise apply to all.

UNDRIP has been repeatedly identified as part of the international legal basis for the Close the Gap approach, including in relation to Indigenous peoples' individual and collective right to health. Cultural rights and identity are also paramount in the UNDRIP agenda (see [Blaq case study](#)).<sup>40</sup> In this context, the Close the Gap Campaign supports the National Voice as a vehicle to protect and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' collective right to self-determination. But the Close the Gap Campaign goes further by recommending the domestic implementation of the UNDRIP as a necessary and complementary measure.

The UNDRIP itself supports this proposition. Article 38 provides that: 'States, in consultation and cooperation with indigenous peoples, shall take the appropriate measures, including legislative measures, to achieve the ends of this Declaration'.<sup>41</sup>

## Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural policy

The Close the Gap Campaign welcomes the Australian Government's January 2023 launch of Revive – National Cultural Policy. This has five pillars including 'First Nations First: Recognising and respecting the crucial place of First Nations stories at the centre of Australia's arts and culture'.<sup>42</sup> In addition, a guiding implementation principle is that 'First Nations arts and culture are First Nations led' (see [Naytive Mentorship case study](#)). Creative Australia will oversee policy implementation funded by just under \$200 million over four years from 2023–24. Within the new body, a dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led Board will support self-determination and artist engagement with the 'creative economy'.

Other key measures – such as establishing a 'First Nations Languages Policy Partnership' between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives and Australian governments<sup>43</sup> – build on an existing (as mentioned) commitment within the National Agreement.<sup>44</sup>

While the Revive policy's support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural expressions and languages (see [Freedom School case study](#)) is applauded, the Campaign recommends building on this foundation by developing a dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural policy that promotes culture and the cultural determinants of health beyond the largely 'creative economy' Revive-focus.

This aligns with the National Agreement in which: 'The Parties acknowledge that strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are fundamental to improved life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people',<sup>45</sup> and complements the Agreement's culture-related outcomes and targets.

## An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander climate change response framework

In his 2008 *Native Title Report*,<sup>46</sup> then Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Tom Calma called on Australian governments to respond proactively to climate change-related health and other impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.





These included:

- An increase in vector-borne, water-borne and food-borne diseases: malaria, dengue fever, Murray Valley encephalitis, Japanese encephalitis, melioidosis, leptospirosis and scrub typhus.
- Disruption to food security by limiting hunting and gathering opportunities and increasing reliance on, and the cost of, food transportation and storage.
- Increased and more intense natural disasters: bushfires, floods, droughts, cyclones.
- The SEWB and mental health impacts associated with the loss of ancestral, spiritual, totemic and language connections to lands and waters as people are forced to leave communities that – in some cases – were already challenged by suicide, depression and alcohol use.
- The migration of impacted people to other communities and/or urban centres stretching services and programs.<sup>47</sup>

The Commissioner included a case study on climate change impacts in the Torres Strait in his report. Fifteen years later, it is estimated that sea levels are rising twice as fast as the global average in the region.<sup>48</sup> In 2019, eight Torres Strait Islanders protested to the United Nations Human Rights Committee that the Australian Government's neglect of sea walls and broader climate change inaction was affecting their right to enjoy and practise their culture, and 'a life free from arbitrary interferences' to their families, homes and property on the islands.<sup>49</sup>

In a ground-breaking international human rights law precedent, in September 2022 the UN Committee held that Australian Government climate change inaction in this context amounted to a violation of the rights of the Torres Strait 8 (also see [Youth Verdict case study](#)). The government was obliged to pay compensation, and ensure the safe existence of the islands as a result.<sup>50</sup> It has 180 days to respond to the decision.<sup>51</sup>

In addition to international and macro-level climate change policy, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities must be supported develop the capacity to respond effectively to the climate emergency mitigation, prevention and adaptation planning.

## Raising the age of criminal responsibility

The age of criminal responsibility is the age in which a person is considered by law to have understood that their actions were wrong and can face criminal charges.<sup>52</sup> All Australian States and Territories have this age set at only 10 years old. In contrast, the global average is 14 years old.<sup>53</sup>

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child has consistently criticised Australia on this count, and said that all countries should be working towards a minimum age of 14 years or older.<sup>54</sup> This is because of a scientific consensus around brain development studies that suggest this is the appropriate age to assume criminal responsibility.<sup>55</sup>

Further, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination has also criticised Australia<sup>56</sup> because the current minimum age is racially discriminatory in its impact: in recent years, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have been locked up at 17 times the rate of non-Indigenous children.<sup>57</sup>

**And when children are forced through a criminal legal process, their health, wellbeing and future are put at risk, including that of becoming entrenched in the justice system with the likelihood of reoffending (see [Maranguka Justice Reinvestment case study](#)).<sup>58</sup> The Close the Gap Campaign makes its final recommendation accordingly.**

# A Voice to Parliament

**In May 2022, when the Albanese Labor government was elected, the first commitment they made was to establish a constitutionally enshrined Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament. Since then, every state and territory government has indicated their support for this national reform, which is to be decided by referendum later this year. If successful, it would be the first step in implementing the Uluru Statement from the Heart.**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their allies know the important role that the Voice can play in creating a holistic pathway to genuine systemic reform, and a new way of working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. It will do this by providing Parliament and government with independent advice, based on the wishes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, that is ‘empowering, community led, inclusive, respectful, culturally informed and gender balanced, and include youth’.<sup>59</sup>

The Voice will also work alongside existing organisations and traditional structures, which is why the key recommendations in this report also call for the full implementation of:

- [Uluru Statement for the Heart](#)
- [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#)

and call for the accelerated action and implementation of:

- [National Agreement on Closing the Gap](#)
- [National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021–2031](#).

Each of these frameworks recognises the intersectional nature of disadvantage that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience. Without the holistic focus that these frameworks call for, the ability of policy, programs and services to appreciate and respond to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples – who sit at the intersection of other disadvantaged identity markers – are obscured. This undermines Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ agency and, as a result, mitigates the efficacy of policies meant to support them.

This lack of genuine holistic reform is evident and it is impeding the success of meeting the Closing the Gap targets. This failure manifests in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples being over-represented in the justice system, having disproportionately higher suicide and child removal rates, lower life expectancy and poorer employment outcomes. It is, in measurable terms, seen in the lack of health equity and equality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across the nation.

This is the ‘torment of our powerlessness’ that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders spoke of in the Uluru Statement from the Heart.<sup>60</sup>

While the details of a Representative Voice to Parliament are yet to be outlined, this is what we do know:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ lived experiences in this country manifest issues that are specific to them as former colonial subjects.
- The key to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ social, cultural, political and economic advancement is the full realisation of their rights as self-determining peoples.
- The primary factor that stipulates how much Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities can exercise their right to self-determination on a national scale is whether they have a voice, at the highest level of government, to represent them and to advocate for their priorities and aspirations.



L–R: Bridget Cama (Co-Chair, Uluru Youth Dialogue), Auntie Pat Anderson AO and Professor Megan Davis (Co-Chairs, Uluru Dialogue) and Allira Davis (Co-Chair, Uluru Youth Dialogue) holding the 2021/22 Sydney Peace Prize at the Award Ceremony and Lecture

As a nation, we find ourselves at a moment in history where we can create the transformative change that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities have been calling for. We have, right now, the opportunity to build a national framework that creates the type of large-scale structural reform that is necessary if we are to Close the Gap.

A constitutionally enshrined Voice cannot, and will not, be the only answer, but it would be a significant step in advancing the rights and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. As Commissioner Oscar notes:

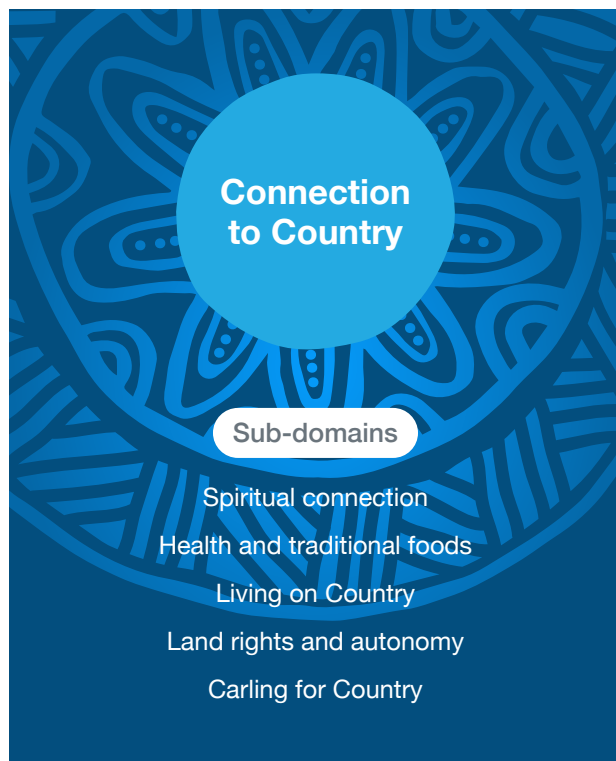
There are, as always, a few voices rallying against progressive propositions. But the tussle between most, is not so much about where we are heading or what we are wanting the future state to be – most of us want less suffering and struggle, an end to discrimination, and guaranteed fairness and equality. The dissent is about what should be done in policy and law and institutional arrangements to form these conditions. It is about the road we construct to take us there, and the practical steps for how change should take effect.<sup>61</sup>

A nationally enshrined Voice in the Constitution is but one of those institutional arrangements to achieve those practical steps. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the broader Australian public will have differing views and ideas on how to achieve the changes needed. As such, it is imperative that in discussing what the ‘Yes’ vote might mean, we collectively drive the national conversation in an open, healthy dialogue.

**We do not need to agree on everything, that is not necessary nor likely, but we must find common ground so we can move forward and deliver real and practical change.**



# Share Knowledge



Throughout history, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have maintained a strong and enduring connection to Country, a connection that is manifest in their relationships with, and care of place, and the maintenance of land, language and culture.<sup>62</sup>

Two domains of the cultural determinants of health<sup>63</sup> – Connection to Country and Indigenous Language – articulate how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ spiritual connection to the land, and the continual use and revitalisation of traditional languages, play a vital role in the health and wellbeing of our communities (see also Figure 1: A model of social and emotional wellbeing, p.32).

Using the knowledge contained in languages, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples ‘lived full and abundant lives in an intense consciousness of their lands and waters’. For millennia, First Nations ‘customary practices shaped environments across Australia, maintaining ecosystems in a managed equilibrium’.<sup>64</sup>

The two case studies for Share Knowledge – Gumbaynggirr Giingana Freedom School and Youth Verdict – both preserve, share and pass down Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural wisdom to succeeding generations. In so doing, they demonstrate how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities continue to navigate their responsibilities in the 21st century to preserve the gifts of their Ancestors and safeguard their children’s futures.





## National Agreement on Closing the Gap: Relevant Outcomes

### Outcome 3

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are engaged in high quality, culturally appropriate early childhood education in their early years.

### Outcome 4

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children thrive in their early years.

### Outcome 15

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people maintain a distinctive cultural, spiritual, physical and economic relationship with their land and waters.

### Outcome 16

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and languages are strong, supported and flourishing.

# Language keeps culture strong

**I think when we feel strongly who we are, it's like a shield – everything just bounces off when you feel really connected and comfortable as Aboriginal people... and that all comes down to language.**

So says Clark Webb, Gumbaynggirr man and CEO and Founder of Bularri Muurlay Nyanggan Aboriginal Corporation (BMNAC), which runs the Gumbaynggirr Giingana Freedom School (GGFS).

GGFS, located in Coffs Harbour on the New South Wales mid-north coast, is the State's first Aboriginal bilingual school. It teaches the Gumbaynggirr language alongside English to children in their primary school years. The school opened its doors in 2022 to 14 students enrolled in years Kindergarten through to Year 2. In 2023, student numbers will expand to at least 49 students from Kinder through to Year 4. The eventual goal is to teach students all the way through to Year 12.

Research from around the world shows a range of cognitive development benefits for children who grow up bilingual. Studies have shown that bilingual children can complete mental puzzles quicker and more efficiently than those who speak one language, while a recent study of infants growing up in bilingual homes showed they gather more information from their environment and shift attention faster than infants living in monolingual homes – and that these benefits last into adulthood.<sup>65</sup>

Clark says that GGFS is already seeing positive outcomes.

'Part of our challenge comes from that colonial idea that our culture holds our children back,' Clark says. 'Well, our kids are growing up literate and numerate – tangible proof that everyone can see.'

Clark says being strong in language means being strong in culture, which in turn builds self-esteem and confidence. First Nations children educated in a strong cultural environment are more likely to thrive, both in their early schooling and right through to the end of high school and into their adult lives. This is essential to closing the gap on their non-Indigenous peers.

'Alanah Jack, our school principal, summed it up last week when she said self-esteem and confidence are such hard things to teach our children, but our culture does the job for us,' Clark says.

'In our school the children feel the love that they get from us, and even when we have to get cranky they know it's coming from a place of love because we want them to be the best versions of themselves. We want them to be respectful of Elders, we want them to be proud and knowledgeable, and they know that.'

BMNAC started running after-school learning centres for Aboriginal children back in 2010 before expanding into community language classes, cultural camps, in-school tutoring programs and daily language lessons at the Coffs-based Kulai Aboriginal Preschool.



“  
We want [our kids] to be engaged in their culture,  
their language – from birth all the way through to Year 12.  
”

– Clark Webb

‘What we noticed from Kulai Preschool is that we were getting our children off to a pretty good start in Gumbaynggirr,’ Clark says. ‘But for the most part, they were then going into mainstream schools and were either ceasing their language journey altogether or only getting an hour a week or less. So we wanted to bridge that gap.

‘It’s transformative as an education revolution; we’re going to change how things are done. We want [our kids] to be engaged in their culture, their language – from birth all the way through to Year 12 and beyond.’

The school aims to be delivering 80 per cent of class content in Gumbaynggirr by the end of each year. It’s not there yet but already about 60 per cent of content is taught in Gumbaynggirr.

There were challenges in getting the school up and running. First the school had to go through the lengthy process of becoming registered with the NSW Education Standards Authority, then it had to find enough teachers proficient in the Gumbaynggirr language.

BMNAC’s community language classes have been steadily building the number of language speakers over the past decade, but the growing demand for enrolments at the school is straining existing capacity.

‘We don’t have many speakers of our language, so that’s a challenge,’ Clark says. ‘It means the adult learners who are doing pretty well just need to knuckle down and keep focusing!’

The school receives funding from NSW education authorities and from its philanthropic partners, topped up by income from a growing stable of commercial enterprises run by BMNAC such as its cultural tourism business. Much of that money is reinvested into training more Gumbaynggirr speakers as language teachers.

Unsurprisingly, the school’s tuition and business model has attracted strong interest from other Aboriginal organisations wanting to start their own language programs.

‘We’re very keen to support different communities all around the place,’ Clark says. ‘In July we hosted a workshop at our school called Accelerated Second Language Acquisition or ASLA, which was delivered by

the developer of the method, Dr Neyooxet Greymorning. More than 50 people attended, representing five Aboriginal language groups.

‘They saw how we’ve built through our community language programs... the capacity of our adult learners over a number of years, and then how that’s been transformed into the ability to open a viable school. Communities are asking us to come to them as well. We’re a bit time poor, however we’re very keen to share what we can.

‘When our kids are proud and strong, they do well at school. It’s a pretty simple equation.’

### Key points

- Teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schoolchildren in their own language as well as English gives pupils a strong cultural foundation, which builds self-esteem and the confidence to succeed in education and life.
- The critical first step in establishing a bilingual school is to invest in ongoing adult language and teacher training so as to ensure the continued availability of a well-trained cohort of language teachers.
- Building an underlying business model to fund a bilingual school’s operations is a key ingredient to ensuring long-term viability by reducing reliance on government and grant funding.
- Sharing experiences and insights with other First Nations educators is essential to creating a collaborative, mutually supportive bilingual education sector over the long term.

### Images

Page 20 (left): GGFS Gumbaynggirr Language Teacher Ellie Buchanan demonstrating uses of plants

Page 20 (right): Cultural Tour Guide Matt Flanders showing students a native bee nest

Cover (row 1, centre): GGFS student on Country at Red Rock, 2022

Cover (row 4, right): GGFS student painted up and ready for ‘Gawbarri’ – end of year ceremony 2022



# In the fight for a future, youth voice speaks loudest



First Nations communities around the world are on the front line of climate change, no more so than in the north of Queensland where coastal and island communities are already seeing their lands eroded and their sea country decimated by the rising, warming waters.

Among those most determined to do something about it is the emerging activist group, Youth Verdict, comprising Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and culturally diverse young people who are driven by the knowledge that the very survival of their First Nations cultures and our collective futures is threatened by climate change.

‘We see that the future young people will inherit is going to be defined by whether there is justice for First Nations peoples or not... young people are at the centre of this fight,’ Youth Verdict Director and First Nations Lead Murrawah Johnson says.

‘Climate change is already happening for our Mob, especially in the north of the country, and the survival of First Nations peoples and cultures is at stake.’

And right in Youth Verdict’s sights is the fossil fuel industry, especially coal mining.

Murrawah is a Wirldi woman with connections to Wangan and Jagalingou Country, Birri Gubba and Gangalou Nations whose lands encompass the vast area of central-northern Queensland, including the massive coal reserves in the Bowen and Galilee Basins.

It is in the Galilee, including the homelands of the Wangan and Jagalingou people, that billionaire businessman Clive Palmer’s mining company Waratah Coal hopes to develop its Galilee Coal Project – and it is here that Youth Verdict chose to make a stand.

‘It starts with Waratah but the reality is that there are another 30 new coal extraction projects lined up in the region behind that, and looming over everything is a huge industry that’s been running for over five decades, with the most recent entrant being the highly contentious Adani Carmichael coal mine,’ Murrawah says.

‘We have to work with our communities to connect climate change impacts on their Country with fossil fuel extraction, and support them if they want to challenge these new projects.’



On a global scale, the link between climate change and adverse health impacts is stark. The World Health Organization estimates that between 2030 and 2050 climate change is expected 'to cause approximately 250 000 additional deaths per year from malnutrition, malaria, diarrhoea and heat stress alone'.<sup>66</sup>

In northern Australia the combined health impacts of climate change – if left unaddressed – could force Traditional Owners to abandon Country they have lived on and looked after for thousands of years.

The 17 national Closing the Gap targets include keeping cultures and languages strong and flourishing by maintaining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' existing connections with their lands and their waters – which is why fighting back against big polluters is core business.

'What Youth Verdict is doing is challenging the settler-colonial construct that separates important interconnections, and puts land rights over here, native title over here, environmental protection over here, human rights over there,' Murrawah says.

'We are challenging this arbitrary division, because the law of the land – Aboriginal First Nations law – is all of those things are so intimately intertwined that they can't be separated.'

Youth Verdict emerged as a response from diverse young Queenslanders to the rising threat of climate catastrophe, witnessed first-hand on the lands and in the communities where they live. The unrestrained and accelerating threats of coal and gas mining presented a millennial challenge that gives rise to a call for climate justice.

'Environmental, native title and cultural heritage laws in this country have not worked for the benefit of First Nations peoples for a long time,' Murrawah says. 'Then, in 2020, the Queensland *Human Rights Act* came into effect and enshrined cultural rights as human rights, confirming we had the right not just to maintain our cultures but to grow them.'

'That gave us our opening to take on Waratah – it means that the decision-makers and developers of any new project in Queensland have to consider First Nations cultural rights.'

'The first thing we decided we needed to do was go where climate change is having immediate, direct impacts. And so, over a period, we went up to far North Queensland and to the Torres Strait to meet with potential witnesses and interview First Nations peoples about their observations of climate change, and how climate change is affecting cultural sites and resources and the ability to practise culture.'

With the witness statements in hand and with legal representation from the Environmental Defenders Office, Youth Verdict – along with local conservation group,

The Bimblebox Alliance – lodged an objection in Queensland's Land Court opposing Waratah's application for a mining lease and environmental approval.

'Our young people across Queensland, and in the north particularly, got right behind us with the support of their Elders,' Murrawah says.

'That was important because we're still learning – it is about respecting the knowledge of our Elders who have understood and observed Country

for decades, having inherited the knowledge of our ancestors stretching back thousands of generations.'

'We are the next in line with the responsibility to care for our culture and Country.'

On 25 November 2022, Land Court President Fleur Kingham agreed with Youth Verdict and The Bimblebox Alliance that Waratah's project should be rejected because it would have environmental, climate and human rights impacts (including on First Nations cultural rights) that were unacceptable, and could not be justified on the basis of purported economic benefits from the project. President Kingham recommended to the Queensland Government that Waratah's application for a lease and environmental approval be rejected.



We have to work with our communities to connect climate change impacts on their Country with fossil fuel extraction, and support them if they want to challenge these new projects.



— Murrawah Johnson



This decision addressed impacts at every level: from the impacts on local ecology of the nearby Bimblebox Nature Refuge, to the human rights of First Nations peoples, young people and property holders, through to the international climate impacts of burning the coal from the mine.

‘This is significant on all grounds, and particularly because this is the first time that human rights have been part of the grounds for rejecting a coal mine,’ Murrawah says.

In December 2022, Waratah Coal filed an appeal in the Queensland Supreme Court to try to overturn the Land Court’s recommendation, then unexpectedly withdrew the appeal in February 2023.<sup>67</sup> That means the ball is now in the Queensland Government’s court to determine whether it will accept President Kingham’s recommendation, or overturn it in favour of Clive Palmer’s proposed mine.

Murrawah says Youth Verdict is calling on the Queensland Government to reject the Waratah mining lease and environmental approval applications.

But no matter what happens next with Waratah Coal, Youth Verdict’s fight to stop coal mining in Queensland will continue. Murrawah sees litigation as just one instrument to achieve justice for First Nations Australians – court action still needs to be augmented by public campaigning.

‘The Australian legal system is still an instrument of the colonial law apparatus, it’s never going to fully work in our favour, but we’ll take the wins,’ she says. ‘Our case shows that the courts in this country are finally waking up to the real consequences of climate change, including the destruction and loss of our rich First Nations cultures, and this will flow through to public policy.’

The Australian Government is already under pressure after the United Nations Human Rights Committee ruled last year that it had failed to protect Torres Strait Islanders against the impact of climate change. This ruling followed a complaint lodged by a group of Torres Strait residents known as the Torres Strait 8.

‘There’s another case that’s running out of the north-western islands in the Torres Strait at the moment as well,’ Murrawah says

‘They’re all just different legal avenues and actions that First Nations peoples are using to put on record that climate change is happening, it is really impacting our communities and affecting our ability to maintain and pass on culture and identity, and it poses the threat of irreversible harm to our Country.’

### Key points

- Climate change is happening now, and First Nations communities are already feeling the first and worst effects of it.
- Without First Nations justice, our collective futures are at stake.
- Successful court outcomes are powerful instruments for forcing governments to listen and respond, as they did in landmark rulings such as Mabo and Wik.

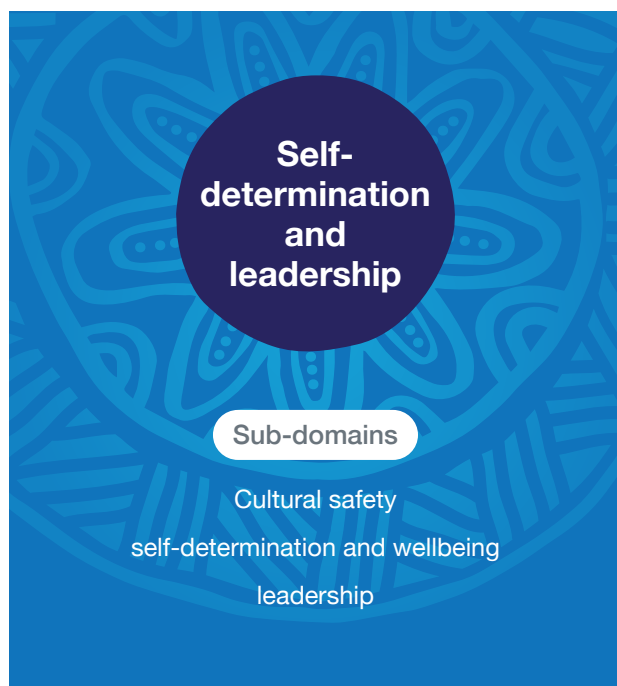
### Images

Page 22: Youth Verdict Co-Directors – Murrawah Johnson (First Nations Lead Campaigner) and Monique Jeffs (Founder)

Page 24: Youth Verdict and First Nations Witnesses – Harold (Harry) Ludwick (2nd left), Kapua Gutchen and Florence Gutchen (centre) – following the handing down of President Kingham’s historic Land Court decision (25 November 2022)

Cover (row 4, left): Murrawah Johnson speaking to press conference following Land Court decision win over Clive Palmer’s Waratah coal mine

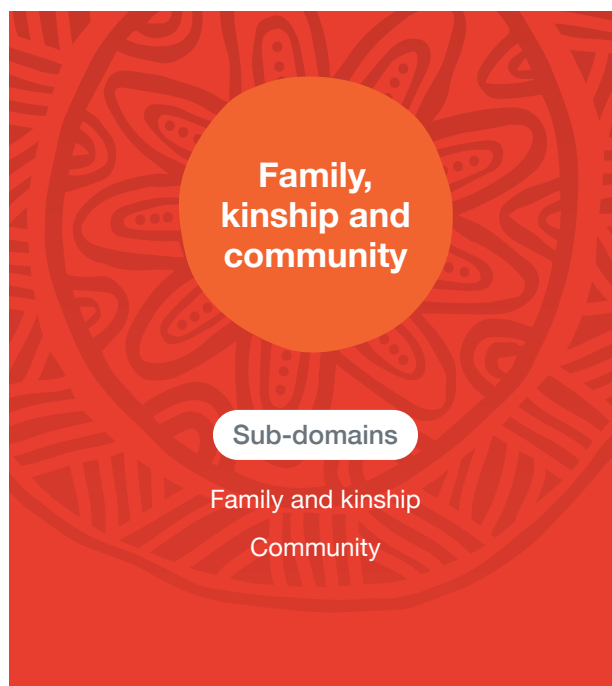
# Cultivate Community



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies are constructed around community, and within strong kinship and family ties. Being part of a kinship system entails various responsibilities and obligations – e.g. to extended family, to be active in various community functions, initiatives and political issues – that confirm and reinforce membership and belonging.<sup>68</sup>

Almost two decades ago, the United Nations endorsed its Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.<sup>69</sup> This document, the work of so many Indigenous leaders across the globe, set a foundation for governments world-wide to improve their response to the needs and aspirations of Indigenous peoples.

Adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2007, and supported by Australia from 2009, the Declaration is a statement of principles based on the fundamental rights of self-determination, participation in decision-making, respect for and protection of culture, and equality and non-discrimination. As former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Mick Gooda states, 'As an international instrument, the Declaration provides a blueprint for Indigenous peoples and governments around the world, based on the principles of self-determination and participation, to respect the rights and roles of Indigenous peoples within society'.<sup>70</sup>



Self-determination, which is key to improving health and wellbeing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, means working from a community-led, strengths-based and culturally safe approach. 'Across the country Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are leading the way, shaping a vision of health and wellbeing built upon a foundation of culture'.<sup>71</sup> And a critical part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures is family, kinship and community.

The absence of this sense of belonging has profoundly negative consequences for First Nations peoples but especially for youth and children.

When Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are separated from culture, they are more likely to be separated from the protective factors that support high self-esteem, secure attachments and a strong and positive social network.<sup>72</sup>

As shown by the three case studies for Cultivate Community – Blaq Aboriginal Corporation, Maranguka Justice Reinvestment Project, and the ongoing positive impact of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project – with pride, diligence and unwavering dedication Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities have shown what is possible when they lead and cultivate community in building culturally safe spaces.

## National Agreement on Closing the Gap: Relevant Outcomes

### Outcome 10

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are not overrepresented in the criminal justice system.

### Outcome 11

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are not overrepresented in the criminal justice system.

### Outcome 12

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are not overrepresented in the child protection system.

### Outcome 14

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people enjoy high levels of social and emotional wellbeing.

### Outcome 17

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have access to information and services enabling participation in informed decision-making regarding their own lives.



# Being our authentic selves

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer and Sistergirl and Brotherboy (LGBTQ+SB) Mob have always had the double challenge of navigating a world in which they experience the intersectionalities of being a racial minority, and of being gender and/or sexually diverse. Amid the decades-long struggle to close the gap with the wider Australian society, the voices of our LGBTQ+SB Mob have remained largely unheard.

Now, with the emergence of a powerful new champion in the shape of Sydney-based BlaQ Aboriginal Corporation (BlaQ), those days are gone.

‘Our vision is for a society where our young people living in community can just be free to prosper and live their lives being their authentic selves, and to have that space to really just explore what they want to explore – whether it be their sexuality, their gender or whatever else,’ BlaQ Policy Officer Desiree Leha says.

In common with other LGBTQ+ communities here in Australia and around the world, LGBTQ+SB Mob can experience barriers affecting their health and wellbeing.

The World Health Organization says this can mean LGBTQ+ people ‘may be less likely to access health services and engage with health workers due to stigma and discrimination, resulting in adverse physical and mental health outcomes’.<sup>73</sup>

BlaQ opened its doors in Redfern in 2019, the brainchild of a collective of First Nations queer activists determined to smooth the path for future generations of LGBTQ+SB Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Its board is comprised solely of First Nations peoples, the majority of whom are LGBTQ+SB. Desiree, herself a Birri Gubba/Wakka Wakka woman, says BlaQ exists ‘in a unique space, because there’s the intersection of being Aboriginal and then there’s the intersection of also being LGBTQ+SB’.

‘BlaQ came into being really in response to the lack of representation for our particular community,’ she says. ‘We’re a minority within a minority group, and over the last few years we’ve come to realise that there’s a lack of data, research and literature around our cohort. BlaQ seeks to promote the growth of this body of knowledge to ensure our programs are evidence based when working with our LGBTQ+SB Mob.’





Within a few short years punctuated by the COVID-19 crisis, BlaQ has become well entrenched as the peak body for New South Wales' First Nations queer community, building its brand largely through both a strong social media presence and effective community networks. Desiree says that it now has 'really good engagement from both the wider community, our members and our allies', while also 'recognising the importance of continuing to grow BlaQ's social footprint'.

BlaQ is also a member of the NSW Coalition of Peak Organisations (CAPO) and of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA), which has recently made BlaQ the Australian delegate for ILGA Oceania.

'Being a member of CAPO in particular is very special because I think it's the first time an LGBTQ+SB organisation has been a part of an Aboriginal Peak coalition,' Desiree says. 'It gives us that platform to provide the LGBTQ+SB perspective on all the different areas involved in closing the gap in NSW.'

Early on, BlaQ entered into a partnership with Western Sydney University to conduct the ground-breaking Dalarinji Project, the first research effort in NSW dedicated specifically to understanding and promoting the social and emotional wellbeing and mental health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LGBTQ+SB young people.

'We started focusing on our young people aged 14–25, then expanded to our Elders, then to our service providers,' Desiree says. 'We held yarning circles with each of the three cohorts because we wanted to have a holistic understanding of the opportunities to strengthen current service provision.'

'We heard people's stories and gave their voices the platform they deserved. At the end of the project, we also developed a roadmap: in other words, "here's what we heard and this is what everyone can do to bridge that divide".'

The Dalarinji Project has finished, with the project report, [Dalarinji – 'Your Story': Community Roadmap](#), and key recommendations released late in 2022.<sup>74</sup>

BlaQ is now focusing on a busy 2023 headlined by the Sydney WorldPride festival running from February to March, and also attending regional Pride festivals throughout Australia to expand its social footprint.

'We're organising the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander caucus and the First Nations (worldwide) caucus for the Human Rights Conference at the Sydney WorldPride festival, so it'll be great to connect with Mob across Australia and internationally,' Desiree says.

In building its presence in Australia's First Nations community BlaQ has been supported by prominent

LGBTQ+ organisations such as Interpride, ACON (AIDS Council of NSW), LGBTIQ+ Health Australia, the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, and many more organisations.

'They've all been very supportive of us breaking up the visually white narrative of Australia's LGBTQ+ community so that people can see there's an Aboriginal First Nations perspective on all LGBTQ+ subject matters,' Desiree

says. 'BlaQ continues to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LGBTQ+SB people hold space and are heard and valued in places where it hasn't necessarily been safe to do so previously.'

'We also share resources with our own Mob, such as crisis support to people who drop into the BlaQ Hub in Redfern. We have gift vouchers available for people who need them, we have toiletries, personals, all of that. We also hold events like community barbecues, picnics, Drag Bingo [as] those small events really go a long way for a community that usually doesn't have that safe space to just be and connect with peers.'

'We've recently partnered with Tranby College to run LGBTQ+SB Elders' lunches, providing an opportunity where young people can come along and connect with our Elders and really just have yarns and share their struggles, stories and strengths. And I think that is very powerful in itself.'

“Our vision is for a society where our young people living in community can just be free to prosper and live their lives being their authentic selves.”

— Desiree Leha





BlaQ is also keen to build partnerships with the private sector along the lines of its existing relationship with Calvin Klein, which continually supports the important work that BlaQ does.

Another focus is supporting young people exploring their identity, with plans to establish a Young People's Community Committee and develop targeted resources to help them on their journey of self-realisation.

BlaQ recognises the importance of our LGBTQ+SB Mob being given opportunities to own their journeys and be strong in their culture, kinship and community. As an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation, BlaQ is led by the needs of our community and its members.

'We sure are trying to provide those opportunities for community to really guide us,' Desiree says. 'Ultimately, we want to be guided by community so that we're doing justice for them.'

### Key points

- Acceptance and identity are central to young people's social and emotional wellbeing and mental health, and their ability to achieve their aspirations.
- A major priority is connecting young Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people with Elders in the LGBTQ+SB community to enhance community cohesion and improve overall health and wellbeing.
- A strong social media presence has been the springboard for BlaQ to build effective engagement with its own community, its allies and wider society – and particularly with young people from all backgrounds.
- Partnering with peak local and international organisations in both the First Nations and LGBTQ+SB space has positioned BlaQ to make strong contributions in policy and program development, especially in regard to closing the gap.
- Collaborating with Western Sydney University on the Dalarinji project has provided key insights into how best to support Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander young people and Elders who identify as part of the LGBTQ+SB community.

### Images

Page 27: BlaQ Aboriginal Corporation launch at the National Centre of Indigenous Excellence, 2019

Page 29: Dalarinji Roadmap launch at What Matters: Indigenous LGBTIQ+ Pasts, Presents and Futures Symposium, Western Sydney University, 2022

## Listening to youth is key

**Leading Aboriginal psychologist and Bardi woman Professor Pat Dudgeon is hopeful that Australian governments are finally serious about reducing the appalling impact of suicide on young people in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities as they work to close the health gap.**

‘Youth want to be heard and have a voice, youth also want the Elders to listen to them and protect them,’ Pat says.

For her, real action to address the suicide crisis began building after the publication in November 2016 of the seminal report *Solutions that Work*.<sup>75</sup> This was the culmination of the Commonwealth-funded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project (ATSISPEP) led by Pat and her research team from the University of Western Australia (UWA).

‘I think we’ve now got the makings of a really strong system to help our youth,’ she says. ‘We’ve got an unprecedented investment into Indigenous suicide prevention from the Commonwealth.

For instance, NACCHO received considerable funding to establish regional networks and after-care services – called Culture, Care, Connect – which they are now rolling out nationally.

‘If you had told me this would happen five years ago, I would have been delighted and amazed! We have long advocated that the ACCHO sector needs to be in charge of funding and decision making for the community.’

Pat was the first Aboriginal person in Australia to be awarded a psychology degree when she graduated from WA’s Curtin University in 1986 and has been

working in the field of social and emotional wellbeing ever since, a key focus area in the national effort to close the gap on First Nations disadvantage. She is now a professor and senior researcher in the School of Indigenous Studies at the UWA.

Suicide has become a major cause of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s premature mortality, with statistics showing the overall suicide rate for First Nations Australians is double that of the wider community. Even worse is that children under the age of 18 comprise 30 per cent of all First Nations deaths by suicide, while those in the 15–24 age group are five

times as likely to take their own life than their non-Indigenous peers.<sup>76</sup>

ATSISPEP undertook a detailed review of previous research findings and conducted its own research to provide a comprehensive evidence base for what works in reducing the risk of suicide. As well as a literature review, a series of roundtables were held across Australia, with our first national conference also part of gathering information. *Solutions that Work* was the first comprehensive report to summarise the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and evidence-base for ‘what works in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-led suicide prevention, including responses to the social

determinants of health that are “upstream” risk factors for suicide’. Seventeen key recommendations and 33 success factors aim to ensure a strong foundation for future Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide prevention activity.

The report also provides tools for planning, assessment and evaluation including implementation frameworks, an evaluation framework and information for practitioners and program delivery to support suicide prevention activities. Self-determination and the importance of cultural solutions is at the heart of the project (see Figure 1, p.32).

“  
Ten years ago, no one talked  
about ‘lived experience’ in  
suicide prevention. Now  
we’ve got our own National  
Indigenous Lived Experience  
Network that is also focused  
on the experience of our  
young people. I think people  
across all the areas are now  
very conscious of listening to  
youth, not speaking for them or  
browbeating them  
”

— Professor Pat Dudgeon



The main messages for effective suicide prevention from the report are:

<b>Community control and empowerment</b>	Projects should be grounded in community, owned by the community, based on community needs and accountable to the community.
<b>Holistic</b>	Based on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander definitions of health incorporating spirituality, culture and healing.
<b>Sustainable, strengths-based and capacity building</b>	Projects must be sustainable both in terms of building community capacity and in terms of not being 'one off', and must endure until the community is empowered.
<b>Partnerships</b>	Projects should work in genuine partnerships with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders and other providers to support and enhance existing local measures not duplicate or compete with them.
<b>Safe cultural delivery</b>	Projects should be delivered in a culturally safe manner
<b>Innovation and evaluation</b>	Projects need to build on and share learnings, try new and innovative approaches, and improve the evidence base.

As part of its work, the ATSIPEP team held a number of youth roundtables that resulted in the voice of young people coming through loud and clear in the final report.

'It is disempowering being an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander adult in a community where you are ignored and decisions are made for you,' Pat says. 'If you're young and you feel you have no agency, hopelessness sets in and you don't have the life experience to see a way out.'

'But if your community has strong processes of self-determination, if the members of that community feel like they belong, that their voice matters, their opinion matters, and that they are engaging in cultural activities and their spiritual needs are being met, then that's a far healthier community for young people to grow up in.'

Along with action at the national level, ATSIPEP has been part of changes in suicide prevention initiatives in Pat's home State. The WA Government has committed significant funding to developing regional Aboriginal Suicide Plans across WA, and \$17.6 million is being provided to Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services to pilot a culturally secure Social and Emotional Wellbeing Model of Service program, some of which might be targeted at young people.

ATSIPEP was also the catalyst for the founding of the Centre for Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention at UWA, which provides advocacy and a number of clearinghouses, including one for best practice suicide prevention programs and services, as well as sponsoring further research in this area.

'The Centre has done a review of the impact of ATSIPEP, which shows it's been a great success,' Pat says. 'We now know there's a whole range of factors that need to be part of suicide prevention efforts. Some of it is systemic, such as what and how programs are funded, and some of it is community specific, such as cultural activities and healing programs, which is why we need a whole smorgasbord of different interventions to address the issue.'

'Ten years ago, no one talked about "lived experience" in suicide prevention. Now we've got our own National Indigenous Lived Experience Network that is also focused on the experience of our young people. I think people across all the areas are now very conscious of listening to youth, not speaking for them or browbeating them.'

**Figure 1: A model of social and emotional wellbeing<sup>77</sup>**  
 (© Gee, Dudgeon, Schultz, Hart & Kelly 2013)



‘We recently had [Associate Professor and Aboriginal health researcher] Ted Wilkes come over to do a video message to our youth – it’s a deadly message and will shortly be up on our website. In it he says, “You Mob, you are important to us. Remember, you can have some bad times, but you’ll get through it. You are our future and we can’t go on without you”.

‘I think we need to be saying that to our youth. Our Elders need to be telling our youth all the time that they’re important, and we need to listen to them and find out what they want.’

#### Key points

- Findings from ATSISEPEP have led to substantial investments in suicide- prevention strategies aimed primarily at young people, with control of strategy implementation firmly in the hands of First Nations organisations.
- There is no one-size-fits-all strategy that works. Rather, action needs to be systemic at the policy level and community specific at the grassroots level, requiring a smorgasbord of evidence-based interventions.
- Communities with few or no suicides have good levels of self-determination, are inclusive in their decision making and actively undertake cultural reclamation.
- Elders have a key role to play in listening to young people and ensuring that their voices are heard by the decision-makers responsible for developing suicide prevention strategies and overseeing program rollouts.

# Delivering on justice, one day at a time



We've proven that when communities like Bourke are given every opportunity to have access to the necessary and appropriate set of resources, we can make things work for the betterment of our youth, our families and our community.

That's according to Alister Ferguson, the Executive Director and Founder of Maranguka Community Hub, a grassroots organisation originally established in the remote New South Wales township of Bourke to deliver better coordinated support for vulnerable First Nations families and children.

In the local Ngemba language Maranguka means 'caring for others and offering help', and the organisation continues to fill that role to this day. At the very outset, its prime concern was the number of Aboriginal children and young people being incarcerated, and in 2007 Maranguka responded with an initial program 'to give our children a future'.

In 2013 Maranguka, in conjunction with the Bourke Tribal Council and Just Reinvest NSW, took the next step and began developing the Bourke Justice Reinvestment Project (BJRP), a response to the persistent social and economic challenges facing the Outback community. It was Australia's first major justice reinvestment project and its success has prompted other First Nations communities to consider similar strategies.

Justice Reinvestment is an approach to tackling the causes of crime that involves redirecting money spent on adult prison and youth detention to community development initiatives aimed at addressing the underlying causes of crime. It directly addresses two key Closing the Gap targets – ensuring young people are not overrepresented in the criminal justice system, and that children are not overrepresented in the child protection system.

Research shows that locking up Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people during their crucial years of development has devastating health

impacts, in particular on mental health, leading to increased risk of suicide, psychiatric disorders and drug and alcohol abuse.<sup>78</sup>

As a long-term resident and proud Ngemba Kuliali Wiradjuri Yorta Yorta man, Alister speaks of the deep frustration he experienced at the way his beloved community was constantly tarred with the brush of 'dysfunction'.

'For a long time that was all we ever heard about Bourke. We were endlessly frustrated about the ongoing negative interpretations about our community from outsiders when, in actual fact, the dysfunction was mostly to do with the way services were provided to our community,' Alister says.


'So we set out to re-empower our community and put decision-making back in our hands, which we'd never really had.'

Using philanthropic funding from the Dusseldorp Forum and the Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation, the BJRP established multidisciplinary teams working in partnership with relevant government and non-government agencies and organisations to divert young people away from the justice system.

'When we first started it wasn't so much herding cats as mustering kangaroos! But now that we're past the exploration phase we've created for ourselves a non-invasive, respectful way to allow young people to gravitate organically to our process,' Alister says. 'We've still got a long way to go but we're much clearer now about our principles and priority areas.'

Those priority areas are to support:

- early childhood and parenting
- children and young people aged 8–18 years
- the role of men
- service delivery reform.



“When we first started it wasn’t so much herding cats as mustering kangaroos! But now that we’re past the exploration phase we’ve created for ourselves a non-invasive, respectful way to allow young people to gravitate organically to our process.”

— Alister Ferguson

The BJRP’s initial focus was on gathering data, which showed that 62 per cent of offending occurred between 6pm and 6am, and 48 per cent of offences took place on weekends: ‘You don’t have to be a rocket scientist to work out where you should be shifting your resources’, Alister says.

‘Data sovereignty has been a big part of our work, as well as how we utilise data,’ he says. ‘We might run a program for six or 12 months, say, then we measure the impact to see if it aligns with the systems change and reform and transformation work that we do. If it does, the program gets integrated into our wider service delivery.’

‘Everything gets measured against KPIs, which I refer to as ‘community expectation indicators’ – that’s code for the co-design we do as a community.’

This approach has led to the creation of after-hours services and activities in addition to the regular daytime services aimed at keeping young people engaged in community life. The effectiveness of these services and activities is constantly monitored.

‘Every 24 hours the various teams gather to discuss what’s occurred in the previous 24 hours, which shifts our whole service sector from being reactive to becoming more responsive,’ Alister says. ‘The daily check-in process has been quite a success.’

A Preliminary Assessment of the BJRP, *Unlocking the Future: Maranguka Justice Reinvestment Project in Bourke* conducted by KPMG in 2015–16, found that its approach aligned with NSW Government and Australian Government justice policies:

The Justice Reinvestment approach, when contrasted with several other crime prevention approaches, was found to be a promising approach on a number of criterion. The approach has the potential to address the underlying causes of crime, the approach is data driven and it is community-led.<sup>79</sup>

Alister says BJRP programs and activities have continued to be refined since then and the Bourke community is keen to see its own positive experience shared with others around Australia.

‘The BJRP is scalable to any First Nations community but the key is how it’s customised to suit different communities,’ he says. ‘So far, we’re unique because we adopted a community-driven model but you need the support and resources to drive that, which we had.’

‘But where there’s a will there’s a way, a way which can make such a life-changing experience for children, young people and family.’

### Key points

- Greater investment in education, mental health, youth services etc. will help to keep people out of the custody system, thereby reducing the high costs of imprisonment.
- To work in First Nations communities, Justice Reinvestment programs need a whole-of-community approach to ensure programs have the grassroots support and resources required to make an impact on youth offending.
- Ongoing data collection and analysis drives effective program design and implementation, and communities must have sovereignty over data collection and storage rather than relying on outside agencies.
- Daily monitoring of program activity enables service providers to be responsive rather than reactive to young people’s needs and challenges.
- Justice Reinvestment is scalable to other First Nations communities but needs to be customised to suit particular community needs, e.g. remote vs regional vs urban locales.

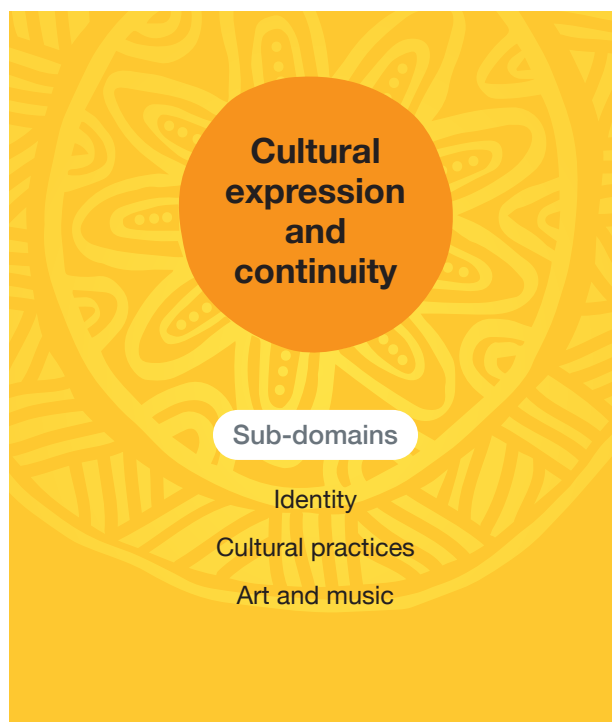
### Images

Page 33: Maranguka Traditional Dance Group

Cover (row 3, left): Maranguka Traditional Dance Group member



# Cherish Wisdom



We know that it has been our exclusion and the absence of our voices, that has led to uninformed systems, policies and practices which have caused us harm.<sup>80</sup>



— June Oscar AO

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been working for a long time to decolonise how we imagine systems, and to reassert Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander systems and ways of knowing, doing and being. To achieve this, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations have been leading the way in structural and systems change and social impact because how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples connect to culture, and perform and access knowledge transmission, is fundamental both to cultural connection and to continuity but also to overall health and wellbeing.

To respond to cultural determinants of health and wellbeing is to facilitate the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by recognising their strong attachment to and respect for culture.<sup>81</sup> This principle is a key focus in current Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health policy, particularly across the national frameworks that govern this policy. What is less evident is that this principle is implemented across program funding, services and delivery, particularly in those services that are non-Indigenous.

The three case studies included in Cherish Wisdom – Bangarra Dance's Rekindling Youth Program, Aurora Education Foundation's High School Program, and Naytive Mentorship Program – show cultural transmission in action, and the benefits of these programs to our young people's health and wellbeing.

And in a clear example of cultural transmission Allira Davis and Bridget Cama, Co-Chairs of the Uluru Youth Dialogue, share their wisdom on why a Voice to Parliament is necessary for improving the life outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples now and in generations to come.

Cultural practices need to be informed through the sharing of language and culture across and between generations.<sup>82</sup> How Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples explore spiritual beliefs and share traditional knowledges through 21st century mediums are simply a continuation of what First Nations peoples and communities have always done.

## National Agreement on Closing the Gap: Relevant Outcomes

### Outcome 5

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students achieve their full learning potential.

### Outcome 6

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students reach their full potential through further education pathways.

### Outcome 7

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are engaged in employment or education.

## Dancing up a storm, in both worlds

Performance powerhouse Bangarra Dance Theatre is renowned the world over for its exuberant physical portrayal of Australia's First Nations cultures. Less well known is that for the past decade it has been sharing its creative energy with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schoolchildren all over Australia via its Rekindling Youth Program.

Led by Youth Program Director and Wulli Wulli Waka Waka man Sidney Saltner – himself a former Bangarra dancer – Rekindling is a dance residency for secondary school students. It can be delivered anywhere in Australia for schools that wish to participate.

So far Rekindling has been taken to 48 schools in communities across Australia. Although not part of the formal school curriculum, the program provides partner schools with a cross-curricular document that sets out all the expected program benefits and milestones and how those align with the formal school curriculum.

'Education is paramount across the board, but we're trying to educate mainstream education systems that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, languages, dances and songs are just as important to our kids and Elders and should be embedded in school systems. This program is designed to achieve that,' Sidney says.

Over the course of a year participants spend time on Country, gather stories with guidance from community Elders and develop skills to produce thought-provoking performances.

'Many of us at Bangarra come from small communities out in regional Australia and we understand the necessity of being able to have access to residencies like Rekindling,' Sidney says. 'We're not going into those communities or just doing a workshop and then going away and not seeing those communities for another five or six years [or until] our touring schedule allows.'

'Rekindling is aimed at those communities where there's a disconnect between the Elders and the youth and cultural learning, and being able to reignite these practices. A lot of the remote communities still speak their languages and still practise their songs and dances, but we're coming from a place... where Elders weren't allowed to speak their languages and teach dance or songs either.'

Rekindling focuses on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander secondary schoolchildren because, traditionally, this would be the time when they would be going through initiation and ushered into the adult world of responsibilities, a rite of passage into adulthood.

'This age has become the time when you can start to go off the rails, get led down the wrong track with drugs and alcohol, crime and all that sort of stuff,' Sidney says. 'The program is about making sure that our kids have that important mentoring and guidance, that touch point, and going – OK, this is where you start to buckle down and learn about your culture, learn about yourself, and your responsibility.'

By keeping students involved in physical and sensory learning, Rekindling helps steer them away from the criminal justice and child protection systems, and strengthens their connection with their own cultures and languages – all key targets under the National Closing the Gap Agreement.

'We want to create a safe space for everyone to come together, to share their stories, to give to the next generation a sense of identity, of pride and kinship, and also enable our Elders to be able to come into that safe space to share those stories and pass them on,' Sidney says.

The program is about making sure that our kids have that touch point of going, OK, this is where you start to buckle down and learn about your culture, learn about yourself, and your responsibility.

— Sidney Saltner



Rekindling Youth Program Team Tutor workshopping with Karratha high school students

Schools and Elders that participate in Rekindling are involved in developing a tailor-made program designed specifically for them. This can take several years of consultation to achieve.

'It is a long program, because the first year or so is all about consultation in the community. It's about building trust and getting the Elders on board, it's getting all your other stakeholders like the school parents, the youth organisations, the local land council, Aboriginal Medical Services and other non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations such as big employers and shire councils.

'It's up to the communities that we go into [as to] what they share. A key partnership with us is always with the Elders, but we also empower the students to be able to tell a story in performance their way, then hand it back to the Elders.

'One of the things we say to the students is that anything that you do here is not wrong, and everything is valid, as long as you are participating. We find with this program that kids are allowed to be physical, they're allowed to be creative, allowed to be free – it opens their mind to what's around them, what you can use.'

Up until now, Bangarra had made a deliberate decision to avoid government funding for Rekindling in order to maintain control of the program, which is provided free to schools. It also gives feedback to schools, Elders and funding partners about participant numbers and outcomes, and maintains connections with school communities over the long term.

'We're starting to see some of the students go on to pursue performance careers but also other positive directions, like university study,' Sidney says.

'From where we were 10 years ago, we can see the difference; there's a lot more schools out there teaching languages and a lot more community dance, and more opportunities to showcase our culture through the arts.

'At the end of the day dance is our tool, it's all about breaking down barriers, the shame factor, all that kind of stuff, and empowering our young people to go, 'I can be and do anything'.

'They really start to understand who they are and their responsibilities [as they] step into the future, with a foot in both worlds. They're not treading on wobbly boards anymore, they're solid and with a great foundation.'

### Key points

- Performance programs like Rekindling keep Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander secondary school students engaged with learning, and connected with their communities, history, and culture.
- Including Elders and key community organisations in developing program content rebuilds cross-generational understanding and strengthens community cohesion.
- Cultural engagement is crucial in the secondary school years to transition youth and young adults towards accepting adult responsibilities and reducing the risk of going down the 'wrong track'.
- Empowerment through performance provides meaning in young people's lives, providing impetus for ongoing post-school study and participation in wider society.



# Learning to love learning



I didn't think that I'd get to where I am today in terms of being a university student in general, let alone going on a postgrad study tour. It wasn't until I started to have... mentors and extra tutoring support, and as feeling valued, I guess, within the system that it really started to thrive for me



— Aurora alumnus

Providing that sense of 'feeling valued' lies at the very core of the Aurora Education Foundation's High School Program, which over the past 10 years has successfully mentored and supported hundreds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander high school students to reach Year 12 and beyond.

As well as smoothing the path for First Nations students to achieve their full learning potential – a key Closing the Gap target – the program is also focused on changing the way education is delivered in Australia, and on sharing data and insights with fellow providers in the education space.

Aurora CEO Leila Smith is a Wiradjuri woman from central NSW and a graduate of the United Kingdom's prestigious University of Cambridge, where she completed a Master of Public Policy before returning to Australia to pursue her career. She says the High School Program aims to complement 'our own ways of knowing and doing things'.

'The mainstream Western education system doesn't cater to our children as well as it could. If we're going to build strength and resilience and leadership, it's really about combining a Western approach with Indigenous ways of learning,' Leila says.

Student outcome statistics from Western Australia show that around one in 200 First Nations students who start Year 9 go on to get the State's minimum direct university entrance score of 75 or more when they graduate at the end of Year 12.

'That rate is not an outlier, but it's also not a true reflection of the talent, drive and intellect of Indigenous students,' Leila says. 'We talk about how every sector, business and organisation wants more Indigenous leaders, but what are those sectors and policymakers doing to help Indigenous students get their foot in the door to have leadership opportunities?'

'At Aurora, we build Indigenous leadership and strengthen resilience by supporting Indigenous students through high school. And if they want to go to university, we support them to get to university too.'



'We've had huge success in that we've doubled Year 12 attainment rates, tripled ATAR attainment rates and doubled transition to university rates as well. So it's working.'

Right now, Aurora is supporting around 300 Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander students in partnership with 25 public high schools in WA and NSW.

'These are all high schools with a significant proportion of Indigenous students in low socio-economic status regions,' Leila says. 'We are also selective about who we take. To join our program, students must not only be committed to their learning, and that can mean a wide variety of things, but also have a strong interest in strengthening their cultural identity.'

The program works with students from Year 7 through to one year after they leave Year 12. Students are supported through academic enrichment camps, mentoring from First Nations graduates, time with local Elders and a tailored curriculum that runs alongside – but is separate from – the school curriculum.

'We work directly with families and carers, and provide a tailored academic support grant for each student in our program. We aim to build cohorts of 30 students at each year level, in each location,' Leila says. 'That way, when students get to Year 12, they've got a wide and diverse group of Indigenous peers around them who are mutually supportive.'

'This means they're happier at school, they feel valued at school, which yields stronger academic performance, stronger cultural identity, more support networks and greater confidence in all areas of their life beyond the classroom.'

[Our students] are happier at school, they feel valued at school, which yields stronger academic performance, stronger cultural identity, more support networks and greater confidence in all areas of their life beyond the classroom

— Leila Smith

'But for this to work, we have to partner with communities, local organisations and the schools. Support from the school leadership as well as their Aboriginal Liaison Officers is absolutely critical, and we could not do our work without them.'

Aurora is also supported by external partnerships with the National Indigenous Australians Agency, the Paul Ramsay Foundation and a growing number of other corporate, government, academic and non-government organisations.

'As an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation, it's important that we reflect on and learn from our

performance as we go.

This isn't just for our own benefit, but also for others working in this space who wish to support, design and deliver quality education to our young people,' Leila says.

'We've started an intensive evaluation called RISE, or Redefining Success in Education, which will be following 700 of our high school students over the next five years to figure out what's working and why. We'll be getting our first batch of data this year, which we'll share through roundtables and

other means based on the advice we receive from our external Indigenous Data Governance Committee.'

Leila says it is extremely important for Aurora to retain control of the research data it generates, both from a governance and self-determination perspective.

'The findings are going to be very practical, with real insights that are replicable. As an Indigenous organisation, we will be the custodians of the data and apply Indigenous Data Governance principles as we look to share the insights with community and government. We need to work together to fix education in this country and move towards an improved model that reflects Indigenous aspirations and values.'





‘Priority Reforms 3 and 4 are about transforming government organisations and providing access to data. We want governments and mainstream education to be more efficient and effective in sharing education data with community and education service providers. We need this to advance Indigenous interests in education and influence positive change in mainstream education systems.

‘Our young people are moving between all these different worlds, so the more we can get their priorities and definitions of success reflected in their education, and the way it is measured, funded and delivered, the more likely it is they will take their opportunities in both hands and build their version of Black excellence.’

#### Images

Page 39: Aurora High School Program Elder Uncle Charlie Mundine shares his cultural knowledge with students

Page 41: Aurora International Study Tour scholars explore pathways to international study

Cover (row 1, right; row 3, centre): Aurora High School Program students feel happier and more valued at school, where they are able to build cultural strength, resilience and leadership

#### Key points

- Bringing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of learning and knowing together with mainstream Western education models is more likely to generate a stronger cultural identity and positive high school experience for First Nations students.
- External mentoring, support for families and the influence of trusted community Elders are critical ingredients in keeping First Nations students involved in their studies.
- A cohort of mutually supportive peers through the high school years engenders improved social and emotional wellbeing, yielding stronger academic performance and greater confidence in all areas of life beyond the classroom.
- Evaluation of educational programs and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance via the data generated delivers continuous quality improvement and findings that are practical for students and educators alike, increasing the likelihood of systemic change.



# Connecting youth through music

The Cairns-based Naytive Mentorship program is harnessing the power of music to change young lives for the better, providing a complete music industry apprenticeship to reconnect young people with the communities in which they live and a pathway into the wider economy.

The program aims to develop a network of community-based music hubs staffed by facilitators, allowing participants to stay in supportive environments while they build their industry skills and a pathway into employment.

Naytive Mentorship is the brainchild of siblings Naomi Wenitong and Layla Wenitong-Schrieber. The sisters grew up in a musical family, with both their mother Deb and their father Mark Wenitong playing in bands across Queensland and NSW – while Mark was training to become one of Australia's first Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander doctors. They have always loved song writing and performing.

Naomi herself went on to become one half of the popular Australian 'girl group' Shakaya in the early 2000s and continues performing to this day.

'I think the main thing that started me down the track to the Naytive Mentorship program was the memory that, when I was in high school, there wasn't really a pathway for me as a muso,' Naomi says. 'Luckily, I was able to push through and create my own path that ultimately led to Shakaya and a label deal.'

'Just before we released our first album Shakaya, our manager flew us over to the States and we stayed in Orlando [Florida] for about two months and got a lot of training. I was only 17 years old at the time and it got me thinking. I was like, "Man, we've got to do that back home".'

'Fast forward to now and we're doing that.'

With Naomi as Facilitator and Layla as Program Coordinator, Naytive Mentorship started in 2020 with a grant from the Australia Council. In the first six months of delivery, 12 young people from low socio-economic areas were recruited and learnt the full suite of music industry skills including: how to write songs and record themselves; performance and interview techniques; and understanding copyright laws and branding/business development.

'We see ourselves as youth workers and our program builds strength and resilience in communities,' Layla says. 'We know that music has been used by our people forever... there's all this music in every single community, and we really want them to be supported by an organisation that's on the ground there.'

The program's vision encompasses key aspects of the Closing the Gap strategy by connecting youth with career-focused learning, and opening up the prospect of strong economic and community participation.



We see ourselves as youth workers and our program builds strength and resilience in communities. We know that music has been used by our people forever... there's all this music in every single community.

— Layla Wenitong-Schrieber

'It's not even just about being black but more about being a creative,' Naomi says. 'Most creatives are disengaged with school; they find it boring. But by providing that support and really upskilling these participants and giving them all these different options, they can do it for themselves. And that's all most young people need, really.'

'Even if they don't want to have a musical career, the foundation level of Naytive Mentorship builds capacity in self-determination.'

Naytive Mentorship is supported by Cairns-based youth services organisation Deadly Inspiring Youth Doing Good (DIYDG), headed up by Merrissa Nona who is DIYDG's Chief of Good. Merrissa co-founded DIYDG in 2016 and the organisation now acts as an umbrella structure for a variety of services and programs run for and by young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across North Queensland right up to Cape York.

'We started off as a volunteer organisation running welfare camps and pop-up events for young people across North Queensland. We saw such huge potential that in 2019 we decided to incorporate,' Merrissa says. 'We're all about being led by community and young people in the design of their programs, and Naytive Mentorship fits right in with that.'

Naytive Mentorship is able to keep its autonomy and its own identity under the DIYDG umbrella while having the security of a back office for support and administration, for instance in setting up a recording studio and auspicing grants.

Right now, Naomi is close to completing her Training and Assessing in Education qualification which will allow her to train young people in Certificate III and IV Music Performance.

'It's really important because, just like me, you can only learn it by doing it,' Naomi says. 'I really want to pass all that on and give some of these kids a head start.'

'I only went to Year 10 at school, but I'm not stupid. I want kids that are just like me to have another avenue, another path that they can use, and we'll smash it. Music has changed my life, so it definitely can change the world!'

As Naytive Mentorship refines its program, DIYDG is using its back-office capabilities to capture program outcomes via rigorous data collection.

'The hardest challenge we have with Naytive Mentorship is that, yes, it's an arts development project,' Merrissa says. 'But because it's about empowering community and empowering the individual to find self-determination through their expression, finding the funding to match is difficult. So what we know is that their outcomes will speak loudest.'

### Key points

- Using a whole-of-industry approach to reconnect with disengaged youth provides a purposeful pathway for individuals to acquire key skillsets and achieve economic independence.
- A network of community hubs staffed by facilitators will allow tuition and personal support to be provided in young people's home communities, rather than on a fly-in-fly-out basis.
- Having an umbrella organisation providing back office, logistical and governance support frees up early-stage groups like Naytive Mentorship to focus on developing their programs and building their brands.
- Targeted data collection facilitates the tracking of participant outcomes and the implementation of continuous quality improvement, essential components for long-term program success.

### Images

Cover (row 1, left): Naomi Wenitong warms up the mic in the Naytive community studio

Cover (row 2, right): Gooroomarra (Naytive mentorship) helps sell shirts at community events to raise funds for the program

Page 42: Naomi Wenitong assists Young Indigenous Women's Stem Academy participant Talea Villaflor to record her vocals

# Uluru Statement from the Heart

## Uluru Youth Dialogue

Allira Davis and Bridget Cama, Co-Chairs of the Uluru Youth Dialogue ([ulurustatement.org](http://ulurustatement.org))



We seek constitutional reforms to empower our people and take a rightful place in our own country. When we have power over our destiny our children will flourish. They will walk in two worlds and their culture will be a gift to their country. We call for the establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution.



— The Uluru Statement from the Heart (2017)

Issued to the Australian people on 26 May 2017, the Uluru Statement from the Heart is an invitation to walk with First Nations peoples in a movement that will lead to a better future for Australia.<sup>83</sup> The Uluru Statement emerged from an unprecedented and robust consultation with First Nations peoples in urban, regional and remote communities across Australia throughout 2016/17.<sup>84</sup> The structure of the consultations was well thought out, with the 16 First Nations members of the Referendum Council – established to advise Parliament on how best to have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples recognised in the Constitution – designing and testing the model over a two-year period.

In those consultations, First Nations peoples were asked what meaningful constitutional reform meant to them. There was a total of 12 Regional Dialogues and an information day, with up to 100 First Nations individuals, selected by their local/regional community, invited to each Regional Dialogue. Those in attendance were deliberately made up of 60 per cent Traditional Owner groups, 20 per cent from Aboriginal or Torres Strait community-controlled organisations and 20 per cent individual community members.<sup>85</sup> Ensuring youth participation, gender balance and including people who didn't necessarily fit into these first two categories were important considerations in deciding who participated.

Through the Regional Dialogues, more than 1200 First Nations peoples engaged in a deliberative process of considering various options of constitutional reform and voting on the preferred proposal. Symbolism was immediately dismissed. Rather, there was an overwhelming consensus on the need for substantive reform that would enshrine a First Nations representative body to give voice to First Nations peoples and to speak directly to Parliament. This consensus was solidified at the Uluru Convention in May 2017, where elected delegates from the members of each Regional Dialogue met and confirmed their communities' views. The outcome of the Regional Dialogues and Convention is captured in the Uluru Statement – firstly, the call for a constitutionally enshrined First Nations Voice to Parliament, followed by Makarrata (treaty/agreement-making and truth-telling processes).<sup>86</sup>

Following the issuing of the Uluru Statement, the Uluru Dialogue was formed from those who were a part of the process leading to the Uluru Statement. Co-chaired by Professor Megan Davis and Pat Anderson AO,<sup>87</sup> the Uluru Dialogue has the mandate and represents the cultural authority of the Uluru Statement from the Heart.





Uluru Youth Dialogue handed out merchandise to community members at the NRL All Stars 2021 in Townsville

## Uluru Youth Dialogue

In mid-2019, we (the authors) met at an Uluru Dialogue meeting with community and started to yarn about how there were only a few young people's voices in the conversations that were happening at the time. Together we approached the Uluru Dialogue senior leadership and, by December 2019, we had organised and held our first Uluru Youth Summit in Cairns, with more than 50 First Nations young people from across the nation attending. The purpose of the Uluru Youth Summit was to give our young people an opportunity to understand what the Uluru Statement from the Heart aims to achieve with structural reform, and to have a space to discuss the Statement and its reforms. Following the Youth Summit, we developed the Uluru Youth Dialogue (of which we, the authors, are Co-Chairs), a growing national network of First Nations young people aged between 18–30.<sup>88</sup>

Four years on, the bulk of the work that the Uluru Youth Dialogue members do is education based: sitting on panels; meeting with MPs, organisations and local councils; being active in their places of influence (sporting teams, workplaces, community groups); organising and leading on-the-ground information/education activations; and working and yarning with communities across the country. The goal is to make

sure Australians are informed about what the Voice is, why the reform is needed, the journey that led to the issuing of the Uluru Statement from the Heart, and what it will mean for our Mob, and Australia, to enshrine a First Nations Voice and recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the constitution.

First Nations young people play an integral role as active leaders in this grass-roots movement, and the importance of our youth is captured in the Uluru Statement from the Heart itself, which envisions a better future for our young people and for future generations to come. It specifically speaks to matters of national crises and shame that particularly affect First Nations young people when it states:

Proportionally, we are the most incarcerated people on the planet. We are not an innately criminal people. Our children are alienated from their families at unprecedented rates. This cannot be because we have no love for them. And our youth languish in detention in obscene numbers. They should be our hope for the future. These dimensions of our crisis tell plainly the structural nature of our problem.





These issues are expressed in the Uluru Statement because they were key points of discussion raised in the Regional Dialogues.<sup>89</sup> According to the latest data released by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), only 5.8 per cent of all Australian young people aged 10–17 are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and yet they constitute almost half of all young people in detention.<sup>90</sup> This shows plainly the disproportionate rates in which our young people are incarcerated and have contact with the criminal justice system.

AIHW data also found that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children were younger when they entered the criminal justice system than their non-Indigenous counterparts, and more likely to be from remote and lower socio-economic areas. Young people from very remote areas were six times as likely to be in detention as those from major cities, and spent an average of six months in detention with the majority unsentenced or awaiting trial.<sup>91</sup> More than a third (37%) of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander young people were first in contact with the criminal justice system when aged 10 to 13, compared with just 14 per cent of non-Indigenous youth.<sup>92</sup>

In Western Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth detention was at 212.8 per 10,000 young people, and in the Northern Territory the rate was approximately 31 times that of non-Indigenous young people.<sup>93</sup>

When it comes to the removal of children from their families, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kids make up just over 36 per cent of all children living in out-of-home care across Australia.<sup>94</sup> Our jarjums are removed at unprecedented rates and are 10.1 times more likely to be taken away from their families than other Australian children.<sup>95</sup>

And we know that there are so many more issues that affect our young Mob. Our young people are dying at higher rates than our old people, with youth suicide being a major crisis. In 2017, suicide was the leading cause of death among our children aged 5 to 17, and one in every four Australian children who died by suicide was Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.<sup>96</sup> These crises that we face as First Nations peoples are symptoms of intergenerational trauma, poverty, racism, and social and economic exclusion – all of which are legacies of colonisation.

The political and legal systems in their present form disempower our young people, our families and our communities. They continue to maintain the status quo, while the gap remains between First Nations and non-Indigenous Australians and is not closing at the rate that we need it to. These systems do not afford us self-determination as First Peoples and hinder us from having the ability to engage meaningfully and deliver solutions. Limited power over our destinies feeds into the cycle of intergenerational trauma, with the issues we face in our communities the symptoms of this – and no end goal in sight. This is why those consulted in the Regional Dialogues said we need substantial structural reform and a guaranteed and protected Voice.

As young First Nations peoples, we continue to be in awe of our old people, of their intelligence, wisdom and selflessness. At those consultations, they weren't thinking of themselves, they were thinking about those who are young now and the future generations of young people to come. They didn't make it about themselves, they made it about us, and our futures. The solution they developed, and put forward to address the disadvantage and structural nature of the issues we face, was the Voice. For as the Uluru Statement states:

When we have power over our destiny our children will flourish. They will walk in two worlds and their culture will be a gift to their country.

The Voice to Parliament proposal was born as a means of addressing the types of issues faced by our communities. For when we have the power to advise on, influence and inform the policies and laws that determine how First Nations matters are dealt with by the Parliament and government, we are able to provide solutions which lead to positive outcomes. Through the Voice, we are able to advise on and influence policies to implement services, programs and prevention pathways that work for our Mob. Where you have programs and services that are led by, tailored to and informed by the community that they seek to serve, you have much improved outcomes.

Through our elected representatives who make up the Voice, we will be better able to inform laws and policies based on our lived experiences, our expertise as First Nations peoples and in our communities, and our cultural knowledge. This will in turn address the issues we are facing in our communities and families





Left: Allira Davis and Bridget Cama (Co-Chairs, Uluru Youth Dialogue) at their information stall, Splendour in the Grass Festival, 2022  
 Right: Uluru Youth coming together for a regional mini summit in Parramatta, 2022



in practical and informed ways, with self-determined solutions at the forefront. This is important because we know that those laws and policies imposed upon us, about which we currently have no say, can further entrench the problems we have.

However, they also have the ability, if done right, to drive positive outcomes. This will lead to improved policies, laws, services and solutions, and create a brighter future, one in which our young people have the same opportunity as everyone else, and where we are able to thrive and be celebrated for the unique and invaluable contributions that we all bring to these great lands that we all call home.

As young people, and as black young people, we have an obligation and a responsibility to continue the fight of our Ancestors. Enshrining the First Nations Voice will allow us, as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, to have more political power and self-determination over our lives. The Voice positions us with both a guaranteed seat at the table and a say on the matters that affect our lives – and we must be listened to. The structures that the Voice puts in place are extremely important to us because they confirm that our voices matter, that we as people matter. It empowers us. It is our future on the line and the generations after that.

In the 2021 Close the Gap Report, the recommendation was made that the Government implement the Uluru Statement from the Heart in full and establish a constitutionally enshrined Voice to Parliament. In May 2022, the Australian Labor Party won the federal

election and in opening his victory speech, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese committed to implementing the Uluru Statement from the Heart in full – to establish a constitutionally enshrined Voice to Parliament and a Makarrata Commission. The current Labor Government has stayed true to its commitment so far and has told Australians that they will be heading to the booths to vote on a referendum on the Voice in the second half of 2023. However, we must never lose sight of the fact that the Uluru Statement from the Heart emanated from what is a people's movement. Gifted to the Australian people by the First Nations delegates of the Dialogues, the Uluru Statement invites all of us to work together to make this historic moment become a reality.

As young people, we feel the pain and suffering that our old people have gone through. We feel the silencing of our people and the structural powerlessness that we still face. However, we also feel the resilience, fight, love and strength that has allowed us to be here, and we stand strong in the mandate of the Uluru Statement from the Heart. We know that it is time for our people to take their rightful place in this country, our own country, and to take control of our destinies.

The next step is for us to have a say on the matters that affect us, and for this right to be protected in the 'big law' – the Australian constitution. We can't leave this unfinished business for future generations to deal with. We don't want them to be facing the same problems and having the same conversations we are having now. We must see this change happen in our lifetime. History is calling.

# Celebrating Our Allies



**In our 2022 Campaign report, one of the key themes was Allyship. As our nation approaches a Referendum on the Voice to Parliament, we find that the role of Allyship – in advancing institutional reform for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples – is front and centre once more.**

Being an Ally also means knowing when it is time to step back and, equally as important, when it is time to step forward. In stepping forward with, Allies can use

their power and privilege to support action in creating meaningful change for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

This year we would like to highlight two members of the Close the Gap Campaign – ANTAR and The Fred Hollows Foundation. Both are Allies in word and deed, member organisations of this Campaign that have worked in genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to advance health equity, equality and improved life outcomes for all Australians.

## ANTAR – Our allyship

ANTAR has been working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and leaders on rights and reconciliation issues for more than 25 years. What began as a grassroots protest movement to resist the watering down of Native Title rights in the late 1990s has developed into a strong, consistent advocacy organisation standing with First Nations peoples for a reconciled Australia. ANTAR actively supports the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, communities and organisations to self-determination, and works with them to amplify their voices in this endeavour.

ANTAR is proud of our long partnership with the Close the Gap Campaign, both as a founding member of the Campaign, and of the Steering Committee (now the Alliance Group). It was actually at an ANTAR-hosted gathering on NSW's Central Coast in 2006 that the campaign took the name – Close the Gap.

Together with thousands of everyday Australians, we have been calling on governments for nearly two decades to take real and measurable action to achieve equality across life outcomes for First Nations Australians by 2031. To this end, we have been closely involved in the organisation of National Close the Gap Day each March, and since 2010 have assisted in the production of many of the Campaign's annual Shadow or Progress and Priority reports. These reports have showcased the amazing work of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-owned and -led programs and services throughout Australia – and this report is no exception.

A recent highlight for ANTAR was our 25th Anniversary, which we celebrated in Canberra in October 2022. The Hon. Linda Burney MP, Minister for Indigenous Australians addressed the event, which also featured a planting of our iconic Sea of Hands – an enduring symbol of reconciliation and allyship. Our anniversary was more than just a time for reflection, but also an opportunity for our movement to reaffirm its commitment – for the coming decade or as long as it takes – to achieving true reconciliation across this continent.

We remain as committed as ever to closing the gaps in life expectancy and health outcomes that still exist between our First Nations and non-Indigenous communities – once and for all.



### Images

Above: The Hon. Linda Burney MP, Minister for Indigenous Australians addressing the ANTAR 25th Anniversary event

Cover (row 4, middle): Chelsie Collard, ANTAR 25th Anniversary event





The Fred Hollows Foundation team, including CEO Ian Wishart (2nd from right) and Director of Social Justice & Regional Engagement Jaki Adams (3rd from left)

## The Fred Hollows Foundation – Advocacy for the Uluru Statement from the Heart

In November 2022, The Fred Hollows Foundation facilitated an Activate for Uluru Forum to mobilise organisations in support of a YES vote in the referendum for an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament. This forum was part of the Foundation's long-term support for the Uluru Statement from the Heart and broader advocacy for social justice and policy reform in Australia.

More than 30 organisations came together at the forum to unpack how to be true allies to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and to support the campaign for a Voice in the lead up to the referendum.

The Hon. Linda Burney MP, Minister for Indigenous Australians, was joined at the forum by Uluru Dialogue Co-Chairs Pat Anderson AO and Professor Megan Davis to provide key insights on how organisations can collectively support both the Uluru Statement in its entirety, and the Voice to Parliament as the first step in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' journey to constitutional recognition.

The forum gave us a critical opportunity to act on this guidance and to announce the formation of an Allies for Uluru Coalition to support the YES campaign, which was officially launched on 28 February 2023. The Coalition is open to any organisation committed to taking collective action in support of the Voice to Parliament.

It will function to execute critical components of the YES campaign, as guided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, through mobilising our collective resources and networks.

As Minister Burney emphasised at the forum, the referendum is an important chance for all Australians to use their voices in support of a better future: 'History is calling, and we as a nation have an opportunity to decide how we will respond.'

Both Megan Davis and Pat Anderson implored us as allies to step up and take action and leadership. As Megan Davis commented: 'We need Australians to own this. Up until now Australians have been standing back looking for permission, but we're past that now.'

The Allies for Uluru Coalition is a joint initiative of The Fred Hollows Foundation, ANTAR, Oxfam Australia, and the Australian Council of Social Services. It was established to demonstrate leadership and mobilise collective action in support of the Uluru Statement from the Heart, and stand with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the push for a successful referendum.

As Jaki Adams, our Director of Social Justice & Regional Engagement, said at the forum: 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been doing the heavy lifting for so long. We need other Australians to walk beside us.'



# Conclusion

**As evidenced in this report, cultural determinants of health play a pivotal role in the long-term health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities. Strong cultural protective factors ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are able to develop the resilience needed to withstand adverse circumstances by focusing on social, emotional, spiritual and communal wellness.<sup>97</sup>**

Throughout this report we have heard from individuals and organisations working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people. They have provided a platform for youth to engage with culture, to nurture their spirit, and to find community and belonging.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and youth, now and in generations to come, deserve, as we all do, a voice to speak their truth and to hold high aspirations as to what their future might look like.

We draw back to the Imagination Declaration in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people at the Garma Festival shared their vision of the future.

We do not want to inherit a world that is in pain. We do not want to stare down huge inequality feeling powerless to our fate. We do not want to be unarmed as we confront some of the biggest problems faced by the human race, from rising sea levels... to droughts and food shortages, and our own challenges around a cycle of perpetuated disadvantaged...

We can design the solutions that lift islands up in the face of rising seas, we can work on creative agricultural solutions that are in sync with our natural habitat, we can re-engineer schooling, we can invent new jobs and technologies, and we can unite around kindness...

With 60,000 years of genius and imagination in our hearts and minds, we can be one of the groups of people that transform the future of life on earth, for the good of us all...

Test us... Expect the best of us...

And then let us spread our wings, and soar higher than ever before.<sup>98</sup>

This report captures those hopes and dreams and shows what is possible when young people have 'the freedom to be whatever a human mind can dream'.<sup>99</sup>

We want to thank everyone who has contributed to this extraordinarily diverse body of work, all of which is helping to shape a responsive and effective health policy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and drive change across our communities.

# Acronyms and Abbreviations

<b>ACCHO</b>	Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation
<b>ACCHSs</b>	Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services
<b>AIHW</b>	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
<b>ATAR</b>	Australian Tertiary Admission Rank
<b>ATSISPEP</b>	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project
<b>BJRP</b>	Bourke Justice Reinvestment Project
<b>BMNAC</b>	Bularri Muurlay Nyanggan Aboriginal Corporation
<b>CAPO</b>	Coalition of Peak Organisations (NSW)
<b>DIYDG</b>	Deadly Inspiring Youth Doing Good
<b>GGFS</b>	Gumbaynggirr Giingana Freedom School
<b>ILGA</b>	International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association
<b>KPIs</b>	key performance indicators
<b>LGBTQ+SB</b>	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer and Sistergirl and Brotherboy
<b>NACCHO</b>	National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation
<b>National Agreement</b>	National Agreement on Closing the Gap
<b>NSW</b>	New South Wales
<b>SEWB</b>	social and emotional wellbeing
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNDRIP</b>	United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
<b>UWA</b>	University of Western Australia
<b>WA</b>	Western Australia

# Close the Gap Campaign Alliance Group Members

- 1 Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council of New South Wales
- 2 Aboriginal Health Council of South Australia
- 3 ANTaR
- 4 Australian College of Emergency Medicine
- 5 Australian College of Midwives
- 6 Australian College of Nursing
- 7 Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine
- 8 Australian Council of Social Service
- 9 Australian Healthcare and Hospitals Association
- 10 Australian Human Rights Commission (Secretariat)
- 11 Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association
- 12 Australian Indigenous Psychologists' Association
- 13 Australian Medical Association
- 14 Australian Physiotherapy Association
- 15 Australian Student and Novice Nurse Association
- 16 Beyond Blue
- 17 Black Dog Institute
- 18 Cancer Council of Australia
- 19 Community Mental Health Australia
- 20 Congress of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nurses and Midwives
- 21 CRANApplus
- 22 Expert Adviser – Alcohol and other drugs, Professor Pat Dudgeon
- 23 Expert Adviser – Epidemiology and public health, Professor Ian Ring
- 24 First Peoples Disability Network
- 25 Heart Foundation Australia
- 26 Indigenous Allied Health Australia
- 27 Indigenous Dentists' Association of Australia
- 28 Indigenous Eye Health Unit, University of Melbourne
- 29 Kidney Health Australia
- 30 Lowitja Institute
- 31 Menzies School of Health Research
- 32 National Association of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers and Practitioners
- 33 National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation
- 34 National Association of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Physiotherapists
- 35 Professor Tom Calma AO – Campaign founder, former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, and National Coordinator – Tackling Indigenous Smoking
- 36 National Family Violence Prevention Legal Services
- 37 National Heart Foundation
- 38 National Rural Health Alliance
- 39 NSW Aboriginal Land Council
- 40 Oxfam Australia
- 41 Palliative Care Australia
- 42 Public Health Association of Australia
- 43 Reconciliation Australia
- 44 Royal Australasian College of Physicians
- 45 Royal Australian College of General Practitioners
- 46 SBS, the home of National Indigenous Television (NITV)
- 47 The Fred Hollows Foundation
- 48 The Healing Foundation
- 49 The Pharmacy Guild of Australia
- 50 Torres Strait Regional Authority
- 51 Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation
- 52 Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health Service

# Closing the Gap Outcomes and Targets for 2022<sup>100</sup>

	Outcome	Target
1	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people enjoy long and healthy lives.	Close the Gap in life expectancy within a generation, by 2031.
2	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are born healthy and strong.	By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander babies with a healthy birthweight to 91%.
3	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are engaged in high quality, culturally appropriate early childhood education in their early years.	By 2025, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children enrolled in Year Before Fulltime Schooling early childhood education to 95%.
4	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children thrive in their early years.	By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children assessed as developmentally on track in all five domains of the Australian Early Development Census to 55%.
5	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students achieve their full learning potential.	By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (age 20–24) attaining year 12 or equivalent qualification to 96%.
6	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students reach their full potential through further education pathways.	By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 25–34 years who have completed a tertiary qualification (Certificate III and above) to 70%.
7	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are engaged in employment or education.	By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth (15–24 years) who are in employment, education or training to 67%.
8	Strong economic participation and development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.	By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 25–64 who are employed to 62%.
9	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people secure appropriate, affordable housing that is aligned with their priorities and need.	<p><b>a</b> By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in appropriately sized (not overcrowded) housing to 88%.</p> <p><b>b</b> By 2031, all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— within discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities receive essential services that meet or exceed the relevant jurisdictional standard</li> <li>— in or near to a town receive essential services that meet or exceed the same standard as applies generally within the town (including if the household might be classified for other purposes as a part of a discrete settlement such as a ‘town camp’ or ‘town based reserve’).</li> </ul>



	Outcome	Target
10	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are not overrepresented in the criminal justice system.	By 2031, reduce the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults held in incarceration by at least 15%.
11	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are not overrepresented in the criminal justice system.	By 2031, reduce the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people (10–17 years) in detention by at least 30%.
12	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are not overrepresented in the child protection system.	By 2031, reduce the rate of over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care by 45%.
13	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and households are safe.	By 2031, the rate of all forms of family violence and abuse against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children is reduced by at least 50%, as progress towards zero.
14	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people enjoy high levels of social and emotional wellbeing.	Significant and sustained reduction in suicide of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people towards zero.
15	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people maintain a distinctive cultural, spiritual, physical and economic relationship with their land and waters.	<p><b>a</b> By 2030, a 15% increase in Australia's landmass subject to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's legal rights or interests.</p> <p><b>b</b> By 2030, a 15% increase in areas covered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's legal rights or interests in the sea.</p>
16	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and languages are strong, supported and flourishing.	By 2031, there is a sustained increase in number and strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages being spoken.
17	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have access to information and services enabling participation in informed decision-making regarding their own lives.	By 2026, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have equal levels of digital inclusion.

# Closing the Gap Priority Reforms for 2022<sup>101</sup>

Priority Reform	Outcome	Target
<b>Priority Reform 1</b> <b>Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision Making</b>	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are empowered to share decision-making authority with governments to accelerate policy and place-based progress on Closing the Gap through formal partnership arrangements.	There will be formal partnership arrangements to support Closing the Gap in place between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and governments in place in each state and territory enshrining agreed joint decision-making roles and responsibilities and where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have chosen their own representatives.
<b>Priority Reform 2</b> <b>Building the Community-Controlled Sector</b>	There is a strong and sustainable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector delivering high-quality services to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across the country.	Increase the amount of government funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs and services going through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations.
<b>Priority Reform 3</b> <b>Transforming Government Organisations</b>	Improving mainstream institutions: Governments, their organisations and their institutions are accountable for Closing the Gap and are culturally safe and responsive to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including through the services they fund.	Decrease in the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have experiences of racism.
<b>Priority Reform 4</b> <b>Shared Access to Data and Information at a Regional level</b>	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have access to, and the capability to use, locally-relevant data and information to set and monitor the implementation of efforts to close the gap, their priorities and drive their own development.	Increase the number of regional data projects to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to make decisions about Closing the Gap and their development.

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