



AUSTRALIAN
LOCAL GOVERNMENT
ASSOCIATION

Closing the Gap Implementation Plan

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Contents

- Opening Statement 1
- Working in Partnership 3
 - Purpose of this Implementation Plan..... 3
 - Partnership on this Implementation Plan 4
 - Working with state and territory governments 4
 - Accountability, monitoring and reporting on progress..... 5
- Priority Reforms 6
 - Priority Reform One: Partnership and shared decision-making 7
 - Priority Reform Two: Building the community-controlled sector..... 9
 - Priority Reform Three: Transforming government organisations..... 11
 - Priority Reform Four: Shared access to data and information at a regional level 12



Opening Statement

Overcoming inequality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is an important objective for local government given our commitment to creating a better future for all communities.

Last year, the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) was proud to be a co-signatory in a landmark agreement that marks a new chapter in the national effort to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

At the heart of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap Partnership, there are four agreed priority reform targets and 16 socio-economic targets in areas including education, employment, health and wellbeing, justice, safety, housing, land and waters, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages.

As the level of government closest to the people, local government plays an essential role in supporting and helping to steer the development of policies and programs in partnership with local Indigenous peoples that address these priorities at the local and regional level.

In many communities, councils are proud to be a major employer of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and benefit from the skills of our highly trained, knowledgeable people in the work we do.

ALGA has long worked to give Indigenous Australians a greater say on, and input, into matters that directly affect their lives.

As a result, local governments have many aspirations for this Agreement, in particular that it will help to support current employment and accelerate new employment opportunities for Indigenous peoples at the local government level.

Local governments have also advocated strongly for local government representatives to be engaged in the co-design of the Indigenous Voice – and for national recognition of Aboriginal community-controlled councils – to ensure the ambitions of the Agreement can be realised.

This Implementation Plan for the new Closing the Gap Partnership will build on this work and enhance the shared policy development and decision-making at the local government level that is fundamental to improving the lives and prospects of First Nations people.

Prepared with advice and input from all the state and territory local government associations, this Plan sets out key actions required to achieve each of the four priority reforms.

One of the most important of these is “shared access to data and information at a regional level” – an area where councils can make an important contribution.



Our inability to reduce disadvantage among First Nations people over many decades is a stain on our national reputation as an egalitarian society that values a fair go for all.

I am confident, however, that this Implantation Plan will enable local governments to work more effectively to reduce Indigenous disadvantage in all its forms.



Cr Linda Scott

President

Australian Local Government Association



Working in Partnership

Purpose of this Implementation Plan

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap (July 2020) requires that all Parties to the Agreement develop their own Implementation Plan to support the achievement of the Agreement's objectives and outcomes.

The Commonwealth, states and territories because of their significant roles and responsibilities in achieving the outcomes and targets under the Agreement are required to prepare an Implementation Plan using an agreed format. The Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) and the Coalition of Peaks, because of their different roles, responsibilities and circumstances are not required to adopt an agreed format but must still develop and provide an Implementation Plan to the Joint Council within twelve months of the Agreement.

In ALGA's case our Implementation Plan will (cl 109):

- a. ensure local governments understand the Agreement and its commitments and encourage its adoption by local governments
- b. assist the state and territory governments to work with local governments in the implementation of this Agreement
- c. support strengthened shared decision-making at the local level, supporting local governments to be part of partnerships with the Commonwealth, states, and territory governments and local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities.

The state and territory governments Implementation Plans are to be whole-of-government plans, covering government agencies and statutory bodies including local governments. Further, the state and territory government Implementation Plans are to include information on how they will work with their local governments to implement the Agreement.

The efforts of individual local governments will not be captured in the ALGA Implementation Plan. This ensures that efforts to achieving the objectives and outcomes of the Agreement are not overstated in a national local government report and state/territory reports. It also ensures that state/territory governments and their councils are working together with their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partners to deliver on the objectives and outcomes within the context of state or territory.



Partnership on this Implementation Plan

Unlike other Parties, the Australian Local Government Association does not have a Coalition of Peak Organisation (CAPO) to partner with to develop and implement this Plan, however further relationships will be developed in the next stage. The National Coalition of Peaks is developing its own standalone Implementation Plan.

This plan however draws upon the views of the Coalition of Peaks as espoused by a representative at the National General Assembly of Local Governments on 22 June 2021. The presentation to the gathered Mayors, Councillors and General Managers from councils across the nation highlighted the Coalitions views on local governments roles and responsibilities related to the obtainment of the four priority reform areas.

ALGA, as a federated organisation comprising of the state and territory local government associations and the ALGA Secretariat, have established an internal network of officers with responsibility for the provision of policy advice and support on matters related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait communities, including in some jurisdictions supporting Aboriginal Shire Councils. This officer’s network will play an important role in ensuring the delivery of actions in ALGAs Implementation Plan.

Working with state and territory governments

The Australian Local Government Association as a member of both the Joint Council and the Partnership Working Group has consistently reinforced the need for state and territory governments and the relevant state/territory-based Coalition of Peaks (or their equivalent) to work closely with individual local governments in their jurisdiction and the relevant local government association.

Local Governments across the country are committed to reconciliation and Closing the Gap and share the priorities of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. Local Governments are an important partner in helping to ensure that Closing the Gap initiatives are locally tailored, relevant to each community and deliverable, particularly in ‘thin markets’ – rural and remote areas of the country where local governments are often the principal service provider in a location.

These councils however are often the local governments who are the most financially constrained due to their low-rate base, limited capacity to raise revenue through additional fees and charges and access to appropriate grants. This has important implications for the ability of local councils to provide social services and local infrastructure to assist with the implementation of many of the Closing the Gap initiatives. Assistance from the other levels of government may be required.



Accountability, monitoring and reporting on progress

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap requires the Parties to the Agreement to make public information on their progress on the Agreement and their Implementation Plan through Annual Public Reports (cl. 118). Jurisdictions are required to table their Public Report in their Parliaments (cl. 119).

In the absence of a Parliament, ALGAs Public Report will be presented by the ALGA Board and where appropriate released in June each year at the National General Assembly (NGA) of Local Governments. The NGA is convened annually by ALGA and is the peak annual event for Local Government Mayors and Councillors across Australia. Following the NGA, the report will be made available on the ALGA website.

This Implementation Plan will be reviewed annually following the publication of the Annual Report to capture areas where additional focus and collaboration between ALGA, state and territory local government associations and governments and other partners is required to ensure that there is progress towards achieving the Priority Reforms and targets.



Priority Reforms

The focus of the ALGA Implementation Plan is on the four priority reform areas included in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. The Priority Reforms focus on changing the ways, where appropriate, that Governments work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to embed long term systemic change and support the accelerated achievement of the socio-economic targets.

These reforms will require concerted effort and time to be embedded in the way all tiers of government work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and individuals.

All local governments are unique. There are currently 537 local governments which make up the third tier of government in the Australian federal system. Each council provides local solutions to local issues. No two councils are identical because they seek to provide the mix of services and infrastructure needed or expected by their communities, within the resources and funding they have available.

From a local government perspective, some of these changes may already be taking place or embedded in the way that an individual council delivers its service and infrastructure and work with its local communities. Other changes may be more significant and require support and enabling actions from the state and territory governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partners.



Priority Reform One: Partnership and shared decision-making

Outcome: *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.*

Target: *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.*

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap recognises the critical importance of every level of government working in genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and sharing decision making to close the gap. Under the Agreement there are two forms of partnerships – the policy partnership and the place-based partnership.

There are five priority areas for the policy partnerships: justice (adult and youth incarceration), social and emotional wellbeing (mental health), housing, early childhood care and development, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. In some of these priority areas local governments have a very limited role (e.g., justice) and in others, some local governments may have a more direct role such as early childhood care and development. Local governments, via the state and territory local government associations need to be engaged in the relevant policy partnership at a jurisdictional level.

Place-based partnerships are particularly relevant to councils as the level of government effectively responsible for ‘place’. Local governments create and enforce local laws, and deliver local infrastructure, services and activities which are adapted to and reflective of the needs of the community they serve. Given that local councils are much more focused on specific places and communities than state and federal governments, they are, in theory at least, well positioned to foster a collaborative approach to governing communities and ensuring that all members of the community can influence decision making, and in some cases jointly make decisions.

The relevant local governments must be engaged early in the process of identifying the locations for the place-based partnerships and participate throughout the partnership. Given that in some locations a place-based partnership may cover many local government areas the relevant Councils, working with the other partners must identify the most effective way to engage and participate. These arrangements will often need to be supported by the state and territory governments.



- Key action PR1.1** ALGA and each state and territory local government association to work with the state and territory governments to identify any legislative impediments to joint decision making on Closing the Gap.

- Key action PR1.2** The state and territory local government associations and individual councils (where relevant) to be involved in any stocktake and/or health check of existing partnerships being undertaken by state and territory governments and the relevant Aboriginal Partnership Organisation.

- Key action PR1.3** ALGA and state and territory local government associations to identify principles relevant to (and case studies if appropriate) effective partnerships involving local governments that builds on successes seen through the stocktake and health check process. These principles should be made publicly available and build upon the characteristics of shared decision making outlined in the National Agreement at (cl 32c).

- Key action PR1.4** The state and territory local government associations will be engaged in the relevant policy partnerships at a jurisdictional level whilst ALGA will engage at the national level.

- Key action PR1.5** The relevant local governments to actively participate in the place-based partnerships with support from the state and territory government and their local government association. This may include identifying and developing appropriate governance arrangements for the involvement of the relevant councils.

- Key action PR1.6** ALGA and the state and territory local government associations to promote local governments participation in priority reform 1 partnerships and report annually. Best practice to be publicly recognised.



Priority Reform Two: Building the community-controlled sector

Outcome: *Building the community-controlled sector: 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.*

Target: *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.*

The Parties to the National Agreement acknowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled services are better for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People, achieving better results, often preferred over mainstream services, and employing more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People. The Agreement also recognises the need for sustained capacity building and investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations and workforce development.

Government parties have committed to building strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sectors and organisations in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives. Whilst ALGA, the state and territory local government associations and individual local governments will have a limited direct role in building the community-controlled sectors, they can promote the achievement of this priority reform particularly in sectors where local governments are engaged in service delivery.

The Parties to the National Agreement have prioritised several sectors for joint national strengthening efforts through the development and implementation of Sector Strengthening Plans as outlined in the Agreement. The initial sectors are early education care and development, health (with respective plans due by November 2021) and housing, and disability (with respective plans due by April 2022).

The state and territory governments need to consider the roles and responsibilities of local government when developing these plans to ensure that opportunities can be appropriately captured. For example, councils are the provider of early childhood education and childcare services in some states and territories councils provide housing in remote communities or provide community health services.

In some rural and remote areas (thin markets) the local government may be the “provider of last resort”. In these areas, it is important that the council and any proposed Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO) work together to ensure that new or expanded services are sustainable. Local governments in these areas also typically experience issues with skills shortages and accessing training and development opportunities. There may be opportunities for the local government sector and the Aboriginal Community controlled sector to work together for mutual benefit.



Key action PR2.1 ALGA and state and territory local government associations to participate in the development and implementation of Sector Strengthening Plans as appropriate.

Key action PR2.2 State and territory local government associations to work with state and territory governments to review procurement policies and guidelines to facilitate greater ACCOs participation in council tenders for goods, services, and construction/maintenance contracts.

Key action PR2.3 As part of the 2021 Local Government Skills and Capability Project being led by ALGA with the state and territory local government associations, consider issues associated with employment and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and opportunities for joint training and development with ACCOs.



Priority Reform Three: Transforming government organisations

Outcome: *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.*

Target: *Decrease in the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have experiences of racism.*

Addressing institutional racism and promoting cultural safety are essential elements for closing the gap. The Government parties to the National Agreement have committed to systemic and structural transformation to ensure government mainstream institutions and agencies are free of institutional racism and promote cultural safety. Further, they have committed to challenge unconscious biases that result in decisions based on stereotypes.

Many individual councils already have initiatives underway in relation to organisational transformation to eliminate racism and promote cultural safety. The initiatives are often as unique as the council and the community they serve. There may however be a benefit in ensuring that each local government has access to the same training and resources/toolkits which can then be tailored in partnership with members of the local Aboriginal community.

- Key Action PR 3.1** **State and territory local government associations to work with their respective jurisdictional governments to facilitate council access to toolkits (or the equivalent) and cultural awareness training to support a culturally capable and confident workforce.**

- Key Action PR 3.2** **ALGA and state and territory local government associations to encourage all councils to develop and implement a Reconciliation Action Plan that aligns with Closing the Gap objectives.**

- Key Action PR 3.1** **ALGA and state and territory local government associations to showcase councils with Reconciliation Action Plans and/or undertaking other activities that improve the cultural appropriateness of council services.**

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Priority Reform Four: Shared access to data and information at a regional level

Outcome: *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.*

Target: *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.*

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations access to location specific data and information is crucial for achieving the first three priority reforms. It underpins the ability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations to make informed decisions about the services and supports required at a local and regional level and to inform and influence policy and programs more broadly.

Local governments collect data for a multitude of purposes and using a multitude of data collection methodologies and processes. Given the scale of some local government areas, there may be challenges with council's ability to disaggregate data in a way that protects individuals privacy. It is therefore important that the state and territory governments provide advice and assistance to their local governments about what and how data should be made available and data management approaches.

Key Action PR 4.1 **ALGA and state and territory local government associations to encourage councils who are involved in the six Community Data Project Sites to capture their learnings so that these can be collated and made available to all local governments to inform their deliberations on relevant data collection and sharing.**

Key Action PR4.2 **ALGA will alert state and territory local government associations to critical issues that would benefit from improved reporting that are raised at the Joint Council meetings, to assist them and state and territory jurisdictions to improve information to be collected and shared.**