

National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ageing and Aged Care Council

Submission

Feedback on the Coalition of Peaks' Independent
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-Led Review of
Closing the Gap: The Missing Piece

April 2025



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Contents

National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ageing and Aged Care Council.....	1
About.....	3
Our Vision.....	3
Our Purpose	3
With thanks	3
Funding.....	4
NATSIAACC Recommendations.....	4
Executive Summary	5
Responding to the Independent Review of the Closing the Gap Agreement	8
Awareness.....	9
Participation	10
Power-Sharing.....	11
Adaptation.....	13
Expectations vs. Reality	14
Impact	16
Conclusion.....	17



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National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Ageing
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National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ageing and Aged Care Council

About

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ageing and Aged Care Council (**NATSIAACC**) is the national peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ageing and Aged Care. NATSIAACC works to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People can access support and care that is culturally safe, trauma aware and healing-informed, and recognises the importance of their personal connections to community, Country and/or Island Home.

NATSIAACC is building a membership base of:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community-Controlled Providers of Ageing and Aged Care, and
- Entities with an interest in culturally appropriate Ageing and Aged Care Services.

NATSIAACC's founding Directors are all leaders in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ageing and Aged Care provision.

Our Vision

All Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are thriving, healthy, strong, with ongoing cultural connections in their older years.

Our Purpose

NATSIAACC supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Older Peoples, their Families, and Communities to identify, engage in, advocate for, and lead systemic reform to embed culturally safe practices across the Aged Care and Ageing Sector.

With thanks

NATSIAACC thanks its members, stakeholders, and other peak bodies for their valuable contributions to this submission and for generously giving their time to support older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.



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Funding

NATSIAACC is funded by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care (the Department). NATSIAACC has been in operation since 2022. In the context of the current Aged Care reforms and the need for extensive advocacy, input, and leadership in the sector, it will be necessary to provide additional funding to support NATSIAACC to provide the input and engagement required to ensure that the reforms deliver much needed support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People.

NATSIAACC Recommendations

- 1) Establish a dedicated Closing the Gap target focused on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People, recognising their right to age with dignity, remain connected to Country and/or Island Home, and access culturally safe Aged Care Services delivered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led Aged Care Providers.
- 2) Formally acknowledge the central role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People in sustaining cultural knowledge, law, kinship, and intergenerational community wellbeing, and ensure this recognition is embedded throughout the Closing the Gap Agreement.
- 3) Ensure that the new Closing the Gap target for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People (as outlined in Recommendation 1) is informed by the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety, by incorporating the Commission's recommendations into the structure of the target, including, but not limited to the outcome of the target, the target itself, indicators related to the target, disaggregation and data development.
- 4) Invest in the long-term capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led Aged Care Providers, including sustainable funding for governance, back-of-house systems, workforce development, and culturally embedded models of care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People.
- 5) Integrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People into all Priority Reform areas within Closing the Gap, particularly:
 - **Priority Reform 1:** Through formal policy partnerships that centre Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People in decision-making.
 - **Priority Reform 2:** By strengthening the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Aged Care Sector and supporting community-controlled governance.



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and Aged Care Council



- **Priority Reform 3:** Through the transformation of government systems to embed cultural safety, eliminate institutional racism, and ensure accountability in Aged Care engagement.
- **Priority Reform 4:** All Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People, from children to Elders and Older 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 driver their own development.

Executive Summary

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap is a bold, community-led and nation-shaping framework. NATSIAACC acknowledges its strength and ambition, particularly its emphasis on transforming power structures, embedding accountability through measurable targets, and elevating the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities. The Agreement is already working to improve outcomes in areas like child mortality, early childhood education, life expectancy, employment, housing, and justice. It represents a major national commitment to measurable reform and equity.

NATSIAACC was not involved in the original development of the Agreement. However, we support its purpose and welcome the opportunity to contribute to its future. As the national peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People and the Community-Led Organisations that care for them, we see this Review not just as an opportunity to review the Agreement, but to complete it.

Despite all the wonderful things the Agreement is working towards, it is still, missing an extremely crucial aspect, a commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People and their right to age with dignity, on Country and/or Island Home, with access to culturally safe, community-led care that honours their roles as cultural, spiritual, and governance leaders.

NATSIAACC seeks clarification as to why the Closing the Gap Agreement does not contain a specific target for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People are excluded as a focus area, despite the National Agreement's stated commitment to improving life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. NATSIAACC calls to see measurable, accountable commitment to Aged Care reform in a framework designed to transform lives.

A dedicated target geared towards formalising, measuring, and holding Governments accountable to improving Aged Care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People will lead to longer, stronger, and more dignified ageing and therefore better life outcomes.



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NATSIAACC firmly believes that excluding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People from the Agreement was a grave oversight during its development. Nowhere in the Agreement is there an explicit, measurable commitment to the longevity, health, and well-being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People, despite the fact that these individuals are the foundation of culture, governance, and intergenerational knowledge transfer within Community.

It is unthinkable that a national framework built around self-determination, power-sharing, and cultural resilience has overlooked the very people who uphold and sustain these principles. Without Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People, there is no lived connection to Country and/or Island Home, no authoritative voice in decision-making, no continuity of traditions that has survived over 65,000 years.

To not recognise this as a critical failure is to willingly allow the erosion of the world's oldest living culture through policy neglect and bureaucratic inertia. This mistake is not just an abstract policy flaw, it is a direct threat to the survival of cultural identity, leadership, and governance structures within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities.

If this failure is not confronted and addressed first within the Community itself, it will never be properly taken up by Government. We must name this mistake, own it, and demand its correction. Without acknowledging and addressing this critical oversight, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People will continue to be denied the same opportunities that many non-Indigenous older Australians have, to actively contribute to the continuation of their personal history, culture, and customs.

Instead, they risk being sidelined, placed in mainstream Aged Care systems that fail to respect their unique cultural identities, sever their connection to Community, Country and/or Island Home, and prevent them from fulfilling their roles as knowledge holders and leaders. This exclusion not only weakens intergenerational knowledge-sharing but also undermines Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination, as it removes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People from decision-making processes that shape the future of their people.

If we fail to recognise and correct this mistake, we are not just losing individual lives, we are losing the very fabric of cultural survival, the wisdom that has guided Communities for thousands of years, and the leadership essential to navigating the challenges of today and tomorrow.

The absence of an explicit commitment to the longevity and well-being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People in Closing the Gap is not just an oversight, it is a structural failure that, if left unaddressed, will have irreversible consequences for the preservation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity, governance, and Community strength.



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The failure to provide culturally appropriate care means many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People will spend their final years in loneliness and distress, unable to practice ceremony, speak their language, or pass down their knowledge in the ways that have sustained cultures for millennia. Beyond this, Government inaction risks the rapid deterioration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People-led governance within Communities, as the premature loss of knowledge-holders weakens the ability of younger generations to carry forward cultural, legal, and land-based responsibilities.

Communities will be left to navigate the ongoing effects of intergenerational trauma without the guidance of those who have fought to preserve strength and resilience in the face of colonisation, displacement, and systemic discrimination.

The question is not whether governments will accept this change, it is whether we as a Community will accept the continued omission of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People from a framework that claims to protect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People's future.

There is no justification for this exclusion. No reason to delay action and no excuse for maintaining an agreement that structurally ignores the very people who make cultural survival possible. This is a failure that must be rectified now, not later, not in another policy cycle, but immediately.

If Closing the Gap is truly about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People leading their own futures, then securing the health, longevity, and well-being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People is not a secondary issue, it is the issue.

This submission speaks directly to the six terms of reference that all members of the Coalition of Peaks have been asked to address as part of this Independent Community-Led Review. In addition to these core questions, NATSIAACC, informed by the voices of its members, stakeholder engagements, and consultation activities, uses this submission to reflect more broadly on how the Closing the Gap Agreement can and must evolve in 2025 and beyond.

Our aim is clear: to provide a blatantly ignored recommendation that will accelerate the progress of the Priority Reforms and support the delivery of the Agreement's overarching goals. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People cannot remain invisible. Their voices, rights, and leadership must be formally embedded into the Closing the Gap Framework to ensure that its promises become reality, not only for the next generation, but for those who have carried our Communities this far.

To let this mistake go unaddressed is to fail our past, our present, and our future



Responding to the Independent Review of the Closing the Gap Agreement

The Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-Led Review of the Closing the Gap Agreement provides an opportunity for Communities, organisations, and peak bodies to reflect on the implementation of the National Agreement through the lens of lived experience, shared success, and ongoing challenge. As a formal part of the Agreement's accountability framework (Clauses 125–127), this Review runs parallel to the Productivity Commission review cycle but is grounded in the self-determined insights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People.

Led by the Jumbunna Institute, the process is designed to capture the real-world effects of the Agreement, particularly the Priority Reforms, on the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People. The Review includes a series of terms of reference, including Community submissions, stakeholder interviews, and the April 2025 Closing the Gap Assembly held on Ngunnawal and Ngambri Country.

As a member of the Coalition of Peaks, NATSIAACC has contributed to this process through member yarning circles, external stakeholder engagement, and internal reflection. The insights below respond directly to the six Review themes:

1. Awareness
2. Participation
3. Power-sharing
4. Adaptation
5. Expectations vs Reality
6. Impact

In responding to these questions, NATSIAACC does more than evaluate what has worked and what hasn't. We also make clear that the current Agreement, though visionary and valuable, omits a core constituency: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People.

The absence of a dedicated target or strategic focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People is not merely a policy oversight. It represents a structural gap that undermines the entire Closing the Gap framework by excluding those who carry culture, wisdom, and intergenerational continuity. As this submission outlines, the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People in Closing the Gap is not an optional add-on, it is a missing foundation.

What follows is NATSIAACC's response to each of the six key Review themes.



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Awareness

What is your understanding of the National Agreement's goals and objectives?

While the National Agreement on Closing the Gap is understood by policy professionals and Government stakeholders as a landmark document committed to reform and accountability, NATSIAACC members report that awareness of the Agreement, particularly its goals and objectives, is uneven at the Community level.

There is general familiarity with the phrase "Closing the Gap" among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities, and most people we engage with are aware that it relates to Government efforts to improve life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. However, members noted that the specific content of the Agreement, including how the targets are structured, how progress is tracked, and how the Priority Reforms are supposed to function, is not widely known in detail.

Importantly, this is not a matter of comprehension. The issue is not that Community members don't understand the Agreement when it is explained, it is that they often do not know where to look or are not aware that such detail even exists. For example, few were familiar with the Implementation Tracker, and even fewer understood that it provides a breakdown of Government performance across jurisdictions.

One reason for this may be the way these kinds of agreements are framed and communicated. They are often treated as technical, high-level frameworks meant for Governments, peaks, and professional advocacy bodies, not as resources that individuals and community members can use to hold systems accountable. This perception reinforces a broader disengagement, where people may believe that their thoughts or lived experiences won't influence government direction, particularly due to long histories of institutional mistrust.

In the context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People, this disconnect is even more pronounced. When providers and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People themselves search for their place in the Agreement and find no references to Aged Care, cultural responsibilities, or Ageing on Country and/or Island Home, it reinforces the sense that the Agreement is for other people, not them.

NATSIAACC believes that if Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People cannot see themselves or their Elders and Older People in a document that is supposed to represent their collective future, then awareness will continue to be partial and passive. To improve awareness, the Agreement must be inclusive in both content and delivery. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People must be acknowledged, their needs reflected, and their roles as leaders and cultural authorities recognised. Only then will the Agreement become a tool for transformation, not just for Governments, but for Communities too.



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Participation

How have you been able to influence decisions on policy and programs that impact Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities?

As NATSIAACC was not directly involved in the implementation of the Closing the Gap Agreement, we are not in a position to comment on our influence over specific decisions made under that framework. However, we are well positioned to reflect on our experience as a peak body, and to draw on consistent feedback from our members, regarding the broader policy environment and the extent to which participation in consultations has led to tangible change.

Across the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Aged Care Sector, a clear and consistent concern has emerged: while opportunities to participate in policy consultations have increased, the extent to which that participation shapes final outcomes remains extremely limited. One provider described it plainly:

“So look, being heard is one thing. Whether we've seen action on the basis of what we've said, I would say you know, that's probably a 10% maybe.”

This reflects a wider pattern in that Governments may invite Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Organisations to participate in reform discussions, but those contributions are rarely reflected in the final shape of policies or programs. Consultations often occur late in the policy cycle, when models are already substantially developed. Feedback is sought within constrained timeframes, using technical language that excludes Community-level insight. Even where Aged Care Providers and peak bodies engage in good faith, there is a prevailing sense that decisions have already been made.

The starkest example for our sector is the Government's continued pursuit of the co-contributions model under the new Aged Care Act. NATSIAACC and our members have raised significant, repeated concerns about the impact this model will have on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities. We have emphasised that it is culturally inappropriate, that it will undermine access to care, and that it threatens the viability of many small, Community-Led Aged Care Providers. Yet despite this clear and unified opposition, the model continues to be progressed with minimal change.

This raises serious questions about whether Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation is being treated as a genuine exercise in shared decision-making or merely as procedural consultation. Aged Care Providers are often invited into policy spaces without any corresponding authority or assurance that their expertise will shape outcomes.

Compounding this challenge is the structural exclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People from the Closing the Gap framework itself. There is currently no dedicated target, outcome, or Priority Reform area relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait



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Islander Ageing and Aged Care. As a result, the Organisations that support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People are not meaningfully embedded in key reform agendas, making their influence over policy directions even more tenuous.

These issues are further exacerbated by the capacity constraints faced by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-Led Aged Care Providers. Aged Care Organisations in our sector are typically small, underfunded, and required to operate with a constrained workforce. Engaging with federal consultations, particularly those that are complex, lengthy, and technical, often requires time and resources that simply do not exist. The result is that participation becomes an additional burden, not an empowering opportunity.

For participation to be effective, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Aged Care Providers must be more than respondents to pre-determined proposals. They must be recognised as co-designers of policy, supported through dedicated resourcing, and structurally included through the establishment of a Closing the Gap target focused on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People. Their participation must be underpinned by accountability, not just visibility.

Until this happens, participation will remain largely cosmetic. It may create the appearance of inclusion, but without genuine influence, it risks entrenching the very exclusion that the Closing the Gap Agreement was designed to dismantle.

Power-Sharing

What is your experience of working in partnership with Government (national, state/territory and local), Communities and Organisations?

The previous section on participation and this section are intrinsically linked, particularly in the Aged Care space. True power-sharing can only occur when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Aged Care Providers are treated as genuine partners in the development, implementation, and evaluation of policies and reforms. Unfortunately, this is not the current reality.

Based on recent yarning circles and broader consultation across our membership, NATSIAACC has heard consistent dissatisfaction from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Aged Care Providers regarding how power-sharing is playing out in practice. Members have repeatedly stated that “co-design” is used liberally, as a high-level concept in Government communications, websites, and departmental language, but in practical terms, it remains largely cosmetic.

It might be a shiny word on the Department of Health and Aged Care website. It might be printed in high-level strategy documents, circulated in focus groups, discussed at roundtables, and referenced in consultation reports. But from the vantage point of Aged Care Providers,



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and Aged Care Council



this is not what co-design looks or feels like. Our members see themselves treated as informants, asked to speak, but not to steer.

Perhaps the clearest indicator of this is the fact that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Aged Care Providers see no structured mechanism to shape national Aged Care reform, despite the fact that the new Aged Care Act, set for implementation on 1 July 2025, is one of the most significant Aged Care legislative overhauls in decades. While roundtables, consultation meetings, and face-to-face discussions have occurred, the sense from our members is that these were limited in scope, short on transparency, and disconnected from the actual levers of reform.

Providers tell us that their input, while welcomed, does not translate into influence. NATSIAACC echoes this view. While we are the national peak for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ageing and Aged Care, and while we are included in higher-level meetings, we must state clearly that we do not believe we have had a lot of meaningful input into the direction or priorities of the new Aged Care Act, on several occasions.

And if the peak body itself does not feel it has been given sufficient standing to shape national reform, particularly in relation to Aged Care, that should ring alarm bells. It is one of the most glaring signs that genuine power-sharing is still not embedded in Aged Care governance.

If government departments read this submission and respond by saying, “But NATSIAACC was given the opportunity to participate,” we must respectfully disagree. Yes, we have been present. But presence is not power sharing. Being in the room is not the same as shaping the agenda. There have been several instances, both for NATSIAACC and for our members, where consultation has occurred, but impact has been negligible.

This issue is not limited to one department, one reform, or one engagement. It is systemic. Across Aged Care policy spaces, the mechanisms for sharing power remain underdeveloped, untested, and in many cases, entirely absent.

If the Government is serious about meeting its commitments under Priority Reform One of the Closing the Gap Agreement, then it must go beyond symbolic inclusion. It must establish permanent structures that embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Aged Care Organisations as co-governors of reform, not ad hoc invitees to consultation sessions.

But more than this, a structural reformatting of how Government departments engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Aged Care Providers must also occur. If the current model of consultation, driven by tight timeframes, pre-determined proposals, and closed decision-making loops, is not fundamentally changed, then power-sharing will never be truly actualised.

Co-design must stop being a label applied to already-decided policies and instead become a process that is embedded from the ground up. Unless engagement changes at the



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departmental level, (and in our case) within the Department of Health and Aged Care, the principles of self-determination and partnership will remain aspirational, not operational.

Adaptation

How do you think Governments and Community-Controlled Organisations, including peak bodies, have adapted to new ways of working together, under the Agreement?

Adaptation under the Closing the Gap Agreement was meant to signal a turning point, a shift in how Governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Organisations work together. For the Aged Care Sector, however, this shift has been slow, fragmented, and in many areas, absent.

NATSIAACC acknowledges that some efforts have been made to align with the Priority Reforms. For example, the Department of Health and Aged Care now routinely references the Closing the Gap framework in their public-facing documents and strategic priorities. Similarly, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Aged Care Providers are more frequently included in consultation processes than in years past. However, these surface-level improvements have not led to the kind of systemic change envisioned by the Agreement.

From the perspective of our members, adaptation is not happening in a way that meaningfully alters power dynamics, reforms service delivery models, or embeds self-determination into Aged Care policy (at this stage). Despite the language of genuine partnership, Government departments continue to operate in traditional ways, setting the agenda, controlling and extremely short timelines, and expecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Organisations to respond on their terms.

This is particularly evident in the context of the new Aged Care Act. While consultations were held, they were largely one-directional. Feedback was gathered, but little evidence has emerged to suggest that the design of the Act was significantly altered based on the input of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Stakeholders. For our members, this reinforces the perception that adaptation has occurred only at the rhetorical level, not within the actual machinery of Government.

Even within the Department of Health and Aged Care itself, adaptation is uneven. There remains a significant divide between the Health and Aged Care branches. While the Health side of the Department has made some progress toward engaging with cultural safety frameworks and embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander priorities, the Aged Care branch has lagged behind. Members have noted that Aged Care policy is still too often treated as a universalist space, with little regard for the specific cultural, historical, and governance needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People.

On the Community-Controlled side, many organisations are willing, and in fact eager, to embrace new ways of working. But they are constrained by limited funding, restricted back-



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of-house capacity, and the regulatory demands imposed by the new system. Adaptation cannot be one-sided. If Governments expect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Aged Care Providers to lead, they must first be resourced to do so.

Critically, adaptation also requires cultural humility from Government. It means acknowledging that the current approach is not working, and that meaningful partnership cannot be built on departmental timelines and bureaucratic logic alone. It means seeing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People not just as service recipients, but as cultural leaders, decision-makers, and custodians of systems that pre-date Western Care frameworks.

Right now, Aged Care policy reform is happening around us, but not with us. Without a structural shift in how Governments operate, engage, and value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and leadership, adaptation will remain symbolic.

To meet the ambitions of the Agreement, departments must embed mechanisms for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Aged Care Organisations to shape, lead, and co-own reforms, from design to implementation. Anything less will continue to reinforce the very power imbalances that Closing the Gap was designed to dismantle.

A good place to start is by implementing a new dedicated target focused on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People and their right to culturally safe Aged Care.

Without a clear, measurable commitment embedded within the framework itself, adaptation under the Agreement will remain symbolic, and the Aged Care needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People will continue to be overlooked, because they are not even acknowledged in the Agreement to begin with.

Expectations vs. Reality

Is there alignment between initial goals and real-world outcomes, specifically regarding formal partnerships and decision-making under the National Agreement?

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People, the expectations set by the Closing the Gap Agreement have not aligned with reality. From a policy perspective, the Agreement promises transformation, a national shift toward equity, accountability, and genuine partnership. But from the perspective of our members and the Aged Care Sector, these promises have not yet materialised.

At the highest level, this failure is structural. The Agreement contains no explicit recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People, nor does it contain any specific targets, indicators, or accountability mechanisms related to Aged Care. Despite the pivotal role Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People play in cultural continuity, governance, and community leadership, they are entirely absent from the very



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framework designed to improve life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People.

This omission in the Agreement cannot deliver better life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People when it does not include the people responsible for shaping, teaching, and preserving those lives. We cannot claim to be building a stronger future when we are not actively protecting the lives and wellbeing of those who have carried us through the past.

While NATSIAACC and its members were not involved in the original design or implementation of the Closing the Gap Agreement, our members have engaged in various consultations related to Aged Care reform that claim to align with the Agreement's principles. In doing so, they expected these processes to reflect genuine co-governance and shared decision-making. Instead, what many have experienced are consultation sessions that result in little or no change; submissions that are acknowledged but not actioned; and feedback loops that feel closed before they begin. Engagements are often framed as collaborative but rarely shift the course of reform in any meaningful way.

The most glaring example of this disconnect is the implementation of the co-contributions model under the new Aged Care Act. As mentioned previously, both NATSIAACC and many of our members raised deep concerns about how this model would affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Aged Care Providers, especially those operating in thin markets and on limited budgets. We made it clear that this model is culturally inappropriate, economically unsustainable, and risks forcing Aged Care Providers to close their doors.

Despite this, the model is moving ahead. This sends a clear message to our sector that the Government may listen, but it does not respond.

This is not merely a shortcoming in implementation. It reflects a deeper failure to respect the principle of partnership. When Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Organisations engage in good faith, provide clear feedback, and are still excluded from the final decision-making process, that is not partnership. It is policy theatre.

There is still time to correct this, but correction will require far more than words. It will require an overhaul of the engagement architecture, the introduction of a specific target focused on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People, and a willingness by Governments to be led, not just informed, as per Priority Reform Three: Transforming Government Organisations.

Until Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People are formally included in the Closing the Gap framework through a dedicated target and structural representation in decision-making, the Agreement may continue to deliver uneven results. It cannot claim to be fully Community-Led while excluding those who have led our Communities their entire lives. Aged Care reform is happening, but without our sector's full participation and leadership, it risks entrenching the very inequities it was meant to dismantle.



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We must make it undeniably clear that Aged Care reform is a priority for our Communities, and the most effective way to do this is by embedding a dedicated, measurable target within the Closing the Gap Agreement itself. Anything less risks signalling that the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People are not considered a national priority. Only through this formal recognition can we begin to track meaningful change, assess progress, and respond truthfully to whether expectations are being met.

Impact

How have these changes influenced Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities?

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People, the impact of the Closing the Gap Agreement remains limited, because our sector has never been formally included in the Agreement to begin with.

Without a dedicated target, there is no structure to track progress, no mechanism for accountability, and no commitment to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People age with dignity, safety, and cultural security. Our members report that while broader reforms to the Aged Care system are underway, the specific needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities are too often treated as peripheral, or worse, left to adapt to mainstream systems that were not designed for them.

The reality on the ground is that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People continue to experience hardship in their final years. Culturally unsafe Aged Care environments, the forced separation from Country and/or Island Home, language barriers, and institutional neglect are still far too common. The new Aged Care Act may offer some promise of change, but without a clear Closing the Gap target to hold Government to account, that promise risks becoming another missed opportunity.

Even when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Organisations provide feedback and solutions, through yarning circles, submissions, and consultations, the result is often superficial uptake. For example, the widespread opposition to the co-contributions model from our members was not only ignored, but its implementation has now placed the future of some services in doubt. In the absence of structural commitments, our Communities are being asked to trust in good intentions. That trust is wearing thin.

Furthermore, the lack of a dedicated target has wider consequences. It allows Aged Care to remain invisible within the national narrative of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy reform. It denies Communities the opportunity to see themselves reflected in national goals. And it fails to address the intergenerational loss that occurs when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People are no longer supported to pass down knowledge, ceremony, governance, and language.



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The impact of the Agreement on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People is negligible, because we are still fighting to be seen as part of it.

The Closing the Gap framework cannot deliver for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People if it does not explicitly name them, target them, and resource their care. Aged Care reform must be measured not only by system-wide improvements, but by its ability to uphold the rights and cultural needs of those who carried us here. Until that becomes a national priority, written into the very heart of the Agreement, the full impact of Closing the Gap will remain unrealised in our sector.

Conclusion

The Closing the Gap Agreement is a powerful and necessary national commitment, one grounded in Community priorities and designed to transform the way Governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People work together. It has already delivered positive momentum across a number of key outcomes, and NATSIAACC recognises its immense potential to change lives.

But it is not yet complete.

The absence of any specific target, indicators, or accountability mechanisms for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People is no small oversight, it is a foundational gap in the framework itself. As this submission has outlined across all six areas of review, the lack of formal inclusion for our Ageing and Aged Care Sector has led to:

- Fragmented awareness and limited Community engagement.
- Participation without decision-making power.
- A perception of consultation without shared control.
- Systems of engagement that remain unchanged.
- A disconnect between policy aspirations and real-world outcomes.
- Minimal measurable impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People to date.

This is not due to a failure of Community will. Our members have participated in good faith, spoken clearly, and offered practical solutions. But without formal recognition in the Agreement, those voices have no structural footing. There is no national direction for Aged Care reform that is accountable to our people.

That must change.

NATSIAACC calls for a new Closing the Gap target focused on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People, a target that is informed by the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety, aligned with the Priority Reforms, and supported by appropriate indicators, disaggregation, and data development.



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A target is not just a symbolic gesture. It creates obligations. It creates visibility. It forces system-wide accountability. And most importantly, it gives Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People the recognition they deserve in a framework that is supposed to speak for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People.

Because if Aged Care is not written into the Agreement, it is not being measured. If it's not being measured, it's not being funded. And if it's not being funded, the cycle of exclusion continues.

The Closing the Gap Agreement is strong, but it must be made stronger.

Aged Care must be brought into the fold. A dedicated target must be created. And Governments must demonstrate, in writing, in funding, and in action, that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People are central to the future of this Country's reform efforts.

This is not just a recommendation. It is an opportunity to complete the framework, honour our knowledge holders, and ensure that no part of our community is left behind.

The future cannot be secured without those who have carried us this far. Now is the time to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Older People are formally and meaningfully included in Closing the Gap, not just in spirit, but in structure.

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