

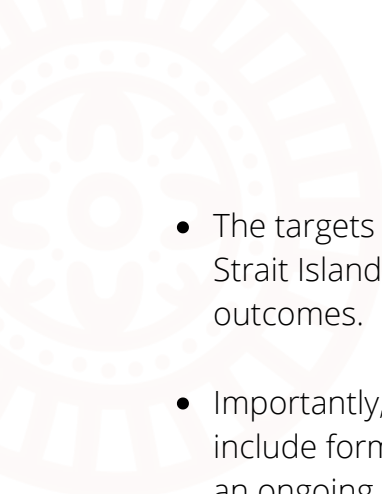
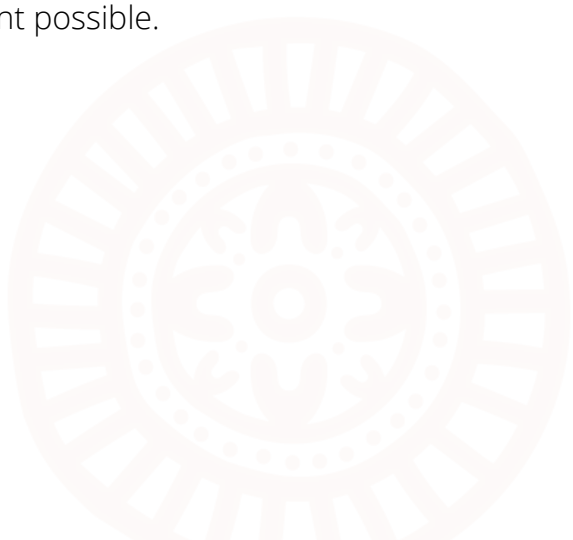


# The New National Agreement on Closing the Gap Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

## Overview

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- Our country has unforgivable gaps in the life outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians in all aspects of life including mortality, chronic disease, disability rates, housing security, education, employment and wealth.
- These gaps have burdened our people and caused the erosion of health and well-being of generations of First Nations Australians.
- The Coalition of Peaks came together because we were fed up with the way the government was approaching Closing the Gap.
- The new National Agreement has the potential to make a real difference to the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and to start to overcome these gaps.
- This is the first time a National Agreement designed to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people has been developed and negotiated between Australian governments, local government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives.
- The new National Agreement commits all governments to fundamentally change the way they work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations through four Priority Reforms that were overwhelmingly supported when we spoke to our communities late last year.
- The Priority Reforms commit governments to new partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across the country; strengthen community-controlled organisations to deliver closing the gap services; address structural racism within government agencies and organisations; and improve sharing of data and information with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations to support shared decision making.
- The National Agreement includes 16 national socio-economic targets in areas including education, employment, health and wellbeing, justice, safety, housing, land and waters, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages.

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- The targets bring focus to new areas important to the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and will help to monitor progress in improving their life outcomes.
  - Importantly, there are new accountability and monitoring arrangements that will include formal mechanisms for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to have an ongoing and direct say to governments on how the policy is or is not working.
  - The negotiations on the National Agreement with governments were hard fought. For the Coalition of Peaks, the National Agreement is not just words. They represent actions that can make a real difference to the lives of our people, our families and communities.
  - The new National Agreement reflected the voices of the more than 4000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who participated in our community engagements on what should be included in the new National Agreement. These voices guided us in our negotiations. We needed to collectively show Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that they have been heard.
  - The new National Agreement does not include everything that the Coalition of Peaks wanted, nor everything that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have said is needed to improve their lives.
  - We have been able to push governments in their commitments to our people on Closing the Gap because the Coalition of Peaks have been at the negotiating table.
  - There is a big difference from what governments alone were prepared to commit to in December 2018 and where we are now.
  - The work of the Coalition of Peaks is one part of a much bigger picture, of what has come before us and what still needs to be done.
  - As Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, we are standing on the shoulders of giants; our ancestors. They are our strength in all that we do. It is their work before us that has made the new National Agreement possible.
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## Why has closing the gap not worked and what is different this time?

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- The initial Closing the Gap commitment was welcomed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership. It included a significant amount of money to implement new programs and services and was really the first time that there was a nationally coordinated policy from governments to address the outcomes of our people.
- But the strategy was only partially implemented in some areas and stopped in others.
- Governments stopped trying and did not commit any more funding.
- There was no ongoing commitment from governments to involve communities, based on their own representation, in decisions about how targets could be achieved.
- Closing the Gap was just about governments, it was not something that was shared fully Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We didn't feel any ownership of it.
- The first major change is that Closing the Gap is now being designed and developed under a formal partnership between Australian governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives, through the Coalition of Peaks.
- For the first time we have a real seat at the table to negotiate and agree with governments on the policies and programs that are needed to improve the life outcomes of our people. And the conversation is changing because we are at the table.
- Governments have agreed to four Priority reforms that are about changing the way governments work with our people to accelerate improvements. These include specific actions governments have agreed to, and they will be held publicly accountable for.
- Governments will have to develop public implementation plans, showing what actions they will be taking and how much money they are committing to the task. Governments did not have to do this previously. They will have to report on these too.
- The National Agreement also makes way for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to have an ongoing, formal say about the way the National Agreement is working in their communities. There will be more engagement with communities and more ways for communities to tailor Closing the Gap to their needs.
- The Coalition of Peaks and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will always be at the table with governments to negotiate and agree the approaches, jointly monitor progress, and determine what additional action needs to be taken.

## **What are the Closing the Gap targets?**

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- The National Agreement establishes 16 national socio-economic targets in areas like early childhood, education, employment and health.
- The targets will help to monitor progress in improving the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- The targets also bring focus to new areas not previously included in the Closing the Gap strategy. These new areas are based on what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people said was also important to measure.
- This includes a target on suicide, children in out of home care, and adult incarceration and juvenile detention.
- Importantly there are also targets on increasing the number and extent to which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are being spoken and the extent to which Australia's land mass is subject to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander interests. These are areas that are fundamental to our people's wellbeing.
- That said, the Coalition of Peaks have always said that targets alone do not drive change. We have seen this from the past 10 years. They are just a way to monitor progress. It is the full implementation of the Priority Reforms and a commitment to additional resources by governments that will deliver the real change.
- The National Agreement also sets out targets on the delivery of the Priority Reforms. The Priority Reform Targets will help everyone track whether governments are doing what they said that would do, when they said they would do it, in taking action to change the way they work with our people and organisations.

## **Are the Closing the Gap targets ambitious enough?**

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- The ambition of the Closing the Gap targets have been worked out through negotiation between the Coalition of Peaks and governments.
- That governments think they are ambitious is really an indictment of the system we are working in.
- The Coalition of Peaks have also been clear from the outset that the only acceptable result of our shared efforts with governments is parity of life outcomes between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians, whilst at the same time our right to self-determination is supported and our status as First Peoples acknowledged. That said, they are just a way to measure progress, that are not the start or the end game.

## **Does the adult incarceration target mean that parity will not be achieved in more than 70 years?**

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- We want to see an end to the overincarceration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people – adults and kids - as soon as possible. In the last week there has been another black death in custody – now 438 deaths since 1991.
- We need to see Australia-wide leadership urgently, and we have been clear that change happening a generation from now is not acceptable.
- The Priority reforms and proposed “joined up policy approaches” in the Agreement will help us get to the structural and systemic change needed to end this injustice.
- Through the next stage of Closing the Gap, we will be holding all Australian governments accountable to getting real and immediate action to end the overincarceration of our people. Our lives depend on it.
- The Coalition of Peaks have also been clear from the outset that the only acceptable result of our shared efforts with governments is parity of life outcomes between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians, whilst at the same time our right to self-determination is supported and our status as First Peoples acknowledged.

## **Do the Coalition of Peaks represent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at the grass roots level?**

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- The Coalition of Peaks is made up of over fifty Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled members. We came together as an act of self-determination to change the way governments were working with our organisations and people across the country.
- We have worked with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities for decades on matters that are important to our people and represent areas like health, early childhood, education, land and legal services.
- Each Coalition of Peak member organisation has its own vast membership that it is in contact with regularly to represent their interests. All of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders are elected by their memberships and the communities they serve.
- It was important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled peak bodies to do what it could to influence the governments’ approach to the refresh of the Closing the Gap policy which it started in 2016 and was heading down a worrying path.
- We know that we don’t speak for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and we don’t pretend that we do. But the National Agreement provides ways for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that want to have a say to have one.

## **Does the new National Agreement mean that we no longer need a Voice?**

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- The Coalition of Peaks believe that all efforts that help to advance our position in the country are important and should be pursued equally.
- This includes the implementation of the Uluru Statement of the Heart through a constitutionally enshrined Voice to Parliament.
- The Partnership Agreement on Closing the Gap establishes forums and structures between the Coalition of Peaks and governments to negotiate and agree policy and program approaches to support Closing the Gap.
- This is an historic arrangement and one that is vitally important as we know that so many of government decisions are made at the policy level.
- We are clear that what is still missing is a Voice to the Commonwealth Parliament to advise on its use of the Constitutional powers that allows it to make laws with respect to our people.
- The Coalition of Peaks support a Voice to the Commonwealth Parliament enshrined in the Constitution.
- We also support the many important initiatives underway in states and territories, like in Victoria with the Treaty and Truth Telling process.
- These reforms can work alongside each other, and all are needed, if we are truly going to bring about positive change to the life outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

## **Will there be new money?**

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- The Coalition of Peaks have been clear from the outset that the gap will not close without a significant and sustained investment by all governments.
- We are pleased that governments are putting in funding to support Priority Reform 2. This funding will help build and strengthen the community-controlled sectors to deliver services and programs to our people.
- The key actions under Priority Reform Two will also bring additional funding to our organisations to deliver services important to Closing the Gap.
- Our organisations deliver better services for our people, they get better outcomes and employ more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

- That said, for the Coalition of Peaks, the issue of funding is yet to be fully addressed.
- At a minimum, we expect that governments will identify new funding as part of their implementation plans.
- The Coalition of Peaks also expect there to be a further national conversation on the funding needed to address the decades of underinvestment in our communities that has left us with the gap in life outcomes we are talking about today.
- We expect the Commonwealth to take a leadership role on this issue.

### **How and why did the Coalition of Peaks form?**

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- The Coalition of Peaks came together as an act of self-determination to change the way Australian governments work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, organisations and communities on Closing the Gap.
- We needed to do all that we could to change the way governments were approaching Closing the Gap. They were not doing it right and Closing the Gap was not working properly for our people.
- As some of the initial closing the gap targets were due to expire and progress was not what was hoped, in December 2016, Australian governments announced a “Refresh” of Closing the Gap and said they wanted to work in genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in determining a new framework and targets.
- However, it quickly became clear that governments were not listening properly or engaging in a genuine way.
- Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled peak bodies wanted more time to consider the options, and more information on what was and wasn't working. Most importantly, we needed to see that their voices were truly being heard.
- There was a real concern that governments had already decided what they wanted to do and were negotiating behind closed doors.
- In early October 2018, a group of 14 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled peak organisations came together to write to the Prime Minister, Premiers and Chief Ministers to insist that COAG not agree any changes to Closing the Gap without formal input and support from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

- The 14 peak organisations also asked for those representing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to be able to negotiate and reach agreement on a new Closing the Gap strategy, and to have an ongoing formal role in its implementation.
- At first, we didn't get a response. We wrote a second letter and in frustration, went to the media. A breakthrough came when the Prime Minister met with us and agreed that we should have ownership and share in the decision making on Closing the Gap.
- The Prime Minister then took this to all Australian Governments in December 2018 and got their agreement.
- In the months that followed the Coalition of Peaks formed, bringing together as many national and state and territory community-controlled peaks organisations.
- The Coalition of Peaks then negotiated and agreed the Partnership Agreement on Closing the Gap with governments that came into effect in March 2020.



**[www.coalitionofpeaks.org.au](http://www.coalitionofpeaks.org.au)**

