

Implementation of the renewed Closing the Gap Agreement

In March 2019, the NSW Government signed the formal Partnership Agreement on Closing the Gap 2019–2029 alongside the Commonwealth, state and territory governments, the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations and the Australian Local Government Association. This partnership agreement led to the National Agreement on Closing the Gap 2020, which contains four priority reforms and 17 socio-economic targets designed to “overcome the entrenched inequality faced by too many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people so that their life outcomes are equal to all Australians”.

NSW has adopted the 4 national reform priorities and developed an additional NSW specific priority area. The NSW Closing the Gap Implementation Plan 2022–2024 identifies the five priority reform areas in NSW as:

1. Formal partnerships and shared decision making
2. Building the community-controlled sector
3. Transforming government organisations
4. Shared access to data and information at a regional level
5. Employment, business growth and economic prosperity (NSW-specific).

The renewal of the Closing the Gap agreement is a holistic, long-term approach that aims to significantly transform the delivery of government services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The key to this is building genuine partnerships with communities and community-controlled organisations and embracing the strength of the community-controlled sector. This approach is not about consultation or co-design but about equal and shared decision making between government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. It will address policy, processes and services that directly affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

In NSW, the key partnership driving this work is between the NSW Government (led by Department of Premier and Cabinet and Aboriginal Affairs NSW) and the NSW Coalition of Aboriginal Peak Organisations (NSW CAPO). Having NSW CAPO as a partner is critical to bringing the voice of Aboriginal communities directly to the decision-making table and empowers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with solutions that genuinely meet community needs.

Together, Aboriginal Affairs NSW and NSW CAPO have created the NSW Joint Council, which is the key decision-making group overseeing the planning and implementation of the agreement. Partnership with the community-controlled sector is embedded in every part of this process. The NSW Joint Council is jointly chaired by the NSW Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and the Co-Chairs of NSW CAPO. Its membership comprises all NSW CAPO members and the Secretary of the NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet.

The principles that underpin the NSW Joint Council are appropriate for NSW Government agencies to apply to all Closing the Gap initiatives. The Aboriginal Affairs website describes those principles as:

- inclusiveness: ensuring all perspectives are heard, respected, and appropriately acknowledged as decisions are made
- genuine shared decision making, including transparency in negotiation and data sharing
- ensuring the views, needs, interests and aspirations of Aboriginal peoples are central to all decision making
- participation: ensuring the active and informed involvement of all parties is possible
- partnership, in accordance with the strong partnership principles outlined in the Partnership Agreement on Closing the Gap 2019–2029.

Initiatives that are responsive to community needs and engage in genuine partnership with the community-controlled sector are beneficial to public administration. This partnership model serves as an example for future initiatives where public administration transitions from government provision to the commissioning of community-controlled services.

While the implementation of the renewed agreement is in its early stages, strong governance groups and the accountability and commitment of ministers, secretaries and public service leaders will lay the foundation for future success. The Closing the Gap model challenges the sector to do things differently by looking at new ways of working, setting new goals and building partnerships with community-controlled organisations.

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