



Interim Report

2022 Closing the Gap Partnership Health Check

Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
Peaks

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Acknowledgement

ABSTARR Consulting acknowledges the Sovereign Owners of country throughout Australia and pays respect and recognises the contributions from Elders past and present. We proudly acknowledge the sovereignty, strength, and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the world's oldest living culture and the contribution of generations of leaders who have fought tirelessly for the rights of First Nations people and communities.

We recognise the intergenerational consequences of colonisation, dispossession, child removal and other discriminatory government policies and acknowledge that the impacts and structures of colonisation still exist today.



Introduction

In March 2019, a formal Partnership Agreement on Closing the Gap (the Partnership Agreement) was established between the Commonwealth Government, State and Territory governments, the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations (the Peaks) and the Australian Local Government Association.

The Peaks is comprised of approximately 80 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak organisations, formed for the purpose of negotiating with governments to develop a new National Agreement on Closing the Gap (the National Agreement).

The objective of the National Agreement is to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and governments to work together to overcome the inequality and inequity experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and achieve life outcomes equal to all Australians.

Under the terms of the Partnership Agreement, an annual Partnership Health Check is to be completed against partnership success indicators set by the parties. The purpose of the Health Check is to consider the direction of movement of the Partnership against the agreed Success Indicators, which are broadly related to the principles of shared decision-making, equal participation and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agency.

The first Partnership Health Check report was considered by the Joint Council in November 2020. The second Partnership Health Check report was considered by the Joint Council in December 2021. In 2022 an independent process with Partnership Brokers, was engaged by the Closing the Gap Partnership drafting group in response to recommendations from the partnership health check conducted in 2021.

The interim report (this document) mainly considers the progress reported from Partnership Brokers and forms the first of two steps in the 2023 health check. The Partnership Brokers approach to the Health Check was gathered through a survey; six individual government partner interviews; and seven focus groups with Peaks partners. The number of responses from the survey was unclear. This interim report also included the review of the 2021-2022 Annual Report which provided a broad and commendable growth in membership, policies, and systems, despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

To be clear, this interim report by ABSTARR Consulting is not the 2022 annual Partnership Health Check, but rather a summary of findings from the progress reports and information gathered by the Partnership Brokers in 2022.

In developing this report, ABSTARR Consulting considered strengths and limitations of progress and findings of the reviewed documents. A conclusion is also presented summarising the important findings.

This interim report is presented to the Joint Council for noting. As no formal recommendations are made, no response is required. The issues highlighted herein this interim report are intended to initiate discussions for noting and preparation for the upcoming 2022-23 Annual Partnership Health Check.



Key Documents

There are many documents that serve to inform Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing outcomes. ABSTARR Consulting reviewed the documents provided by the Peaks that were pertinent for the interim report. ABSTARR Consulting considered the strengths and limitations of each document, which are listed below;

Joint Council Response to 2021 Partnership Health Check Report
Report Progress on Closing the Gap Partnership Development Process

- Peaks 2021–2022 Annual Report

Findings

Joint Council Response to 2021 Partnership Health Check Report

At the time of the Joint Council Response to the 2021 Partnership Health Check Report, the National Agreement had been in place for 18 months. The Joint Council response highlighted the strong commitment to continuous improvements to the partnership approach, and the need for responsiveness to improved outcomes from the Closing of the Gap with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, communities and enabling the ongoing path to self-determination being fostered and enhanced.

Strengths

- All nine recommendations in the 2021 Health Check Report were ‘agreed in principle’.
- There were many achievements that had been accomplished, such as the: (i) development of eleven separate Implementation Plans, (ii) the finalisation of Sector Strengthening Plans for the Health and Early Childhood Care and Development community-controlled sectors; (iii) establishment of the Justice Policy Partnership; (iv) new target on access to information and a revised family violence target; and (v) Joint Communications Strategy to support engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to build awareness of the National Agreement and to assist them to talk to governments.
- In 2022, the Joint Council maintained a focus on the four priority reforms which included (i) jurisdictional expenditure reviews; (ii) progress on development of funding prioritisation policies to ensure that a meaningful proportion of new funding initiatives are allocated to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations; (iii) as well as a data development plan; and (iv) establishment of the four remaining policy partnerships.
- The ongoing building and continued momentum for the National Agreement’s transformative agenda, highlighting the importance for the partnership principles: shared, open, and transparent consensus-based decision making; mutual accountability and responsibility; engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities; and self-determination.
- The reiteration of the purpose of the Health Check to assess the trajectory of change against the partnership success indicators.



Limitations identified

- The challenge that COVID-19 has had nationally, and its adverse impacts on achievements.
- The challenge regarding the deliverables on the National Agreement in 2021. Parties finding the scale and pace ambitious and difficult to manage.

Report Progress on Closing the Gap Partnership Development Process

In 2022, the Partnership Brokers conducted the Health Check Report, which was aimed at 'supporting all Parties to transform their approaches beyond 'business as usual' engagement and explore more innovative partnership models.' The Partnership Brokers were commissioned to conduct the health check report by the Closing the Gap Partnership drafting group in response to recommendations from the Partnership Health Check conducted in 2021.

ABSTARR Consulting note that this next section is based on preliminary observations and discussions.

Strengths

- Interviews were conducted with up to seven Government partners; New South Wales (NSW), Tasmania, Australian Capital Territory (ACT), Queensland (QLD), Western Australia (WA), National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) Secretariat and Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Australian Local Government Association and interviews with six of the Peaks partners; Secretariat, First Peoples Disability Network (FPDN), Lowitja Institute, Aboriginal Drug and Alcohol Council of South Australia (SA), Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement, National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO).
- Issues regarding the relationships with the Government and the Peaks were highlighted. Particularly the purpose and intent of the 'Partnerships'. It was further identified that the focus had shifted to compliance mechanisms, over the relational aspects of establishing and maintaining good partnerships. Noting, feedback was provided to ABSTARR Consulting that whilst there are challenges in some spaces the partnership model is working well in NSW and SA.
- The report identified that there were structural issues regarding equity within the Partnerships. For instance, it was noted that the Peaks and their Secretariat are all funded by government. The report shares that, *'the government partners can do to the peaks partners, what the peaks partners cannot do to them.'*
- It was further identified that there was complexity to the 'Partnership' embodied by the Partnership Agreement. The report discloses that there is multiple 'partnerships at play' including Ministers and Peaks leadership; NIAA Secretariat and Peak Secretariat; State/Territory Government and Peaks; Commonwealth Government and National Peaks.
- The report suggested improvements on the 'Ways of Working' between the NIAA Secretariat and the Secretariat for the Peaks.
- It was highlighted that the NIAA Closing the Gap Branch, and the Secretariat for the Peaks should collaboratively agree on a clear plan for the Partnership.

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- Undertaking cultural competence was recommended as ‘needed’ to deliver the best outcomes from the Partnership, and how the Government stakeholders can build on their learnings and maintain cultural competence.

Limitations identified

- Observations drawn in the report were regarded as inadequate from the limited amount of data collected; additionally, the data was not tested with the broader group.
- Interviews, survey and consultations were incomplete, as clear issues were identified. There was broader support from the partners, regarding time allocation, and energy to the Partnership development process.

Peaks Annual Reports

The Peaks Annual Reports 2021–2022 (the Annual Reports) is comprehensive and it highlighted the growth in membership, resources, communications, policies and systems. The Annual Reports celebrated the opportunities in the strength of increased membership that further reinforced and amplify self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and voices to improve outcomes.

Strengths

- The Peaks membership increased to 80 community controlled peak organisations – representing up to 800 organisations, that worked in collaboration to negotiate agreement with governments on a new Closing the Gap approach.
- The Annual Reports exhibited high-level transparency between Peaks and the Partnership activities. The inclusion of communication and engagement to build awareness and community ownership of the National Agreement was very important to garner success and transparency. This was inclusive of sharing:
 - The growth of the Policy and Secretariat Team, which supported both members and non-members.
 - Establishment of place-based partnerships improved, with the inclusion of Maningrida, Northern Territory (NT), the East Kimberley region of WA, Tamworth, NSW, Doomadgee, QLD, and the western suburbs of Adelaide, SA.
 - Achievements of three of the six Community Data Project sites being established during the reporting period. These sites are in Western Sydney, the Kimberley region, and the western suburbs of Adelaide.
 - Increased connections through a face to face gathering in Naarm (Melbourne), with 70 Peaks representatives in attendance of the two-day strategy workshop which set priorities for the incoming Australian Government.
- The visibility of progress the Peaks achieved against the actions in the Implementation Plan, highlighted improved communication and strategic partnerships.
- Best practice outcomes were achieved between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and mainstream organisations when non-Indigenous staff were provided with quality cultural competence training.



Limitations identified

- There is limited progress on Priority Reform Three — transforming mainstream organisations — and increased efforts are required in this priority reform. It is recommended that Government Parties are required to be bold to break down the systems, structures, and beliefs of the past to implement and achieve this Priority Reform. Communications and the sharing of data were critical to the successful implementation of the National Agreement.

Conclusion

This interim report completed by ABSTARR Consulting, as part of the 2022–2023 Partnership Health Check notes valid challenges regarding trust and transparency between the Partnerships. This is primarily highlighted in the progress reports and supported by other key documents. The noted challenges in trust and transparency, are best understood when the Partnership started to move towards compliance over the strengthening of a Partnership.

ABSTARR Consulting suggests, that to continue to produce sustainable and quality outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, there is a critical need to clarify practices and expectations of the relationship and role between the Peaks and Government.

The Partnership Agreement on Closing the Gap clearly sets out expectations for what a partnership *should* look like, but not *how people and organisations need to change their practice* to build a genuine partnership. To achieve shared decision-making, there is a need for equal participation between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agency and government around processes, languages, timeframes, policies, funding mechanisms, and evaluation frameworks. This then needs to embed and align with the values and knowledges of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partners.

Cultural safety training and operationalising this training within the Partnerships is required to move the partnership to one where there is clearer understanding of the power imbalance that exists between the Peaks and Government agencies. This training to improve understanding is recommended with the hope that this will support the negotiation and redistribution of power. As noted in the progress report [‘the government partners can demand/require things of the peaks partners, which the peaks partners cannot structurally demand/require from government.’](#)

The next twelve months of the Partnership Agreement is critical to renegotiate this Partnership and move into a paradigm of equal partnership. An equal partnership, where the Parties collaborate on:

- Redefine what is meant by ‘partnership’ and ‘respect’ in terms of engagement and valuing each other’s expertise and knowledge systems.
- Develop a cultural safety implementation plan, that is responsive to power balances, racism and level the playing field.
- Develop an effective culturally safe set of mechanisms to resource the partnership, where the Peak partners are not reduced to merely recipient organisations in regular funding processes.
- Determine shared monitoring, evaluation and accountability mechanisms, based on outcomes and people rather than compliance.



Strategic partnerships have the potential to benefit everyone. Deepening these ties within the Partnerships fosters collaboration and longevity and allows the Partnerships to offer solutions to help the sector become more successful. There is a requirement to embrace the Partnerships wholeheartedly and lean into each of the members strengths. Strategic and transformational growth will not occur in silos, working together to generate the energy to fuel growth and sustainability is critical. These are fundamental issues and addressing them is critical to the quality and sustainability of the Partnership at the national and jurisdictional levels.



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