



**GOVERNMENT OF
WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

CLOSING THE GAP 2021

PROGRESS REPORT

**HON DR TONY BUTI MLA
MINISTER FOR ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS**

CLOSING THE GAP 2021 PROGRESS REPORT

INTRODUCTION

It is my privilege today to table this statement on recent progress on Western Australia's commitments under the 2020 National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

In doing so, I pay my respects to the Whadjuk people of the Noongar Nation, on whose Country we elected leaders gather, and their Elders, past and present, and their emerging leaders. I also acknowledge all Aboriginal Western Australians and their connection to Country, wherever it may be across this magnificent State.

I also acknowledge my Aboriginal Parliamentary colleagues: Ms Divina D'Anna, the Member for Kimberley, in the Legislative Assembly, and the Honourable Rosie Sahanna, Member for the Mining and Pastoral Region in Legislative Council. I applaud and welcome their election to this Parliament, and their immense contributions to date, on behalf of all Western Australians.

These acknowledgements are not made simply out of custom or obligation, but in recognition that Aboriginal Western Australians are members and practitioners of the world's oldest continuing cultures — and that Western Australia “always was and always will be, Aboriginal land.”

Those peoples who comprise the First Nations of Western Australia have practised those cultures from time immemorial or, to borrow a phrase from the Yindjibarndi (pronounced *inn-ja-baan-dee*) people of the Pilbara, “when the world was soft”. Those cultures, languages and lifeways sustained Aboriginal people for many millennia and, when Europeans arrived and colonised, formed a source of strength, resilience and survival. The WA Government celebrates and honours the inherent value of Aboriginal Western Australians and their rich, vibrant and complex cultures.

However, approaching the bicentenary of the formation of the Swan River Colony in 1829, we recognise the dispossession, damage, and neglect arising from that process and its subsequent cost to the continuity of Aboriginal culture, family and economic life. The impositions of colonialism have reverberated through Aboriginal families and communities over the past two hundred years, and continue to be felt today.

Even as I acknowledge Aboriginal people as the Traditional Owners of Western Australia, I note that Aboriginal Western Australians continue to have, on average, lower life expectancy than other Western Australians. The initial national commitment to Closing the Gap, conceived in 2007, acknowledged this fact on a national scale. From this acknowledgement arose recognition of a wide range of measures, according to which First Nations Australians experienced a significant and unacceptable gap in life outcomes.

Today, efforts to close those gaps remain a significant and substantial work in progress.

When the McGowan Government came to power in 2017, we made a commitment to improve outcomes for Aboriginal Western Australians. That broad commitment included resetting the relationship between the WA Government and Aboriginal people, and establishing different ways of working. Along with a range of structural and policy reforms, work commenced on the development of a whole-of-government Aboriginal affairs strategy, in consultation with Aboriginal stakeholders across the State, and in partnership with a reinvigorated Aboriginal Advisory Council of WA.

ABORIGINAL EMPOWERMENT STRATEGY

One outcome of that process was the release of the Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy 2021-2029, in September 2021. This Strategy envisages a better Western Australia for Aboriginal people in our bicentenary year: one of partnership and shared decision-making; of greater self-determination and economic prosperity; and one where Aboriginal people and Aboriginal cultures are celebrated and valued, and racism has no place.

The goal of the Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy is for Aboriginal people, families and communities to be empowered to live good lives and choose their own futures from a secure foundation.

The Strategy outlines how the Government must work differently to support Aboriginal culture, and reshape its own organisational culture and systems to be more responsive to the Aboriginal community. It stresses how we need to work in partnership with Aboriginal people, support Aboriginal-led solutions, and be more accountable. It emphasises the need for more investment in strength-building and prevention. It also recognises the many ways that we can support Aboriginal people's economic aspirations and opportunities, whether through employment or enterprise.

The Strategy also underscores this Government's commitment to eliminating racism, and to truth-telling. Truth-telling is an essential ingredient in healing, for individuals, families, communities and society as a whole. We do not have all the answers, but we are committed to working with Aboriginal people to understand better how we, as a government and as a society, can support the process of healing from traumas experienced across multiple generations.

On its own, the Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy will be a manual for all Government departments, agencies and authorities, for implementing these different ways of working for all services, programs and initiatives that affect Aboriginal Western Australians.

Just as importantly, the Strategy provides the framework for how the State will implement its commitments under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

NATIONAL AGREEMENT ON CLOSING THE GAP

The National Agreement came into effect in July 2020 and holds great significance because, unlike previous work on Closing the Gap, it was the first to be developed in full partnership with Aboriginal people. The Coalition of Peak Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Organisations (Coalition of Peaks), representing Aboriginal community-controlled organisations across the nation, is an equal party to this Agreement. WA's representative on the Coalition of Peaks is the Aboriginal Health Council of WA, and their Chair, Ms Vicki O'Donnell. As members of the Joint Council on Closing the Gap, representatives of all Australian jurisdictions, the Australian Local Government Association and the Coalition of Peaks worked together to develop a set of socio-economic targets and four priority reform areas.

These priority reform areas provide for a fundamental shift in how governments across Australia will work to achieve better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. They recognise that the old ways of "Government knows best" and the practice of investing in programs with limited input or leadership from the Indigenous community often serve to entrench the Gap rather than close it.

The priority reforms are about having Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at the forefront of designing, deciding and implementing actions aimed at addressing those socioeconomic gaps, and involved in measuring and evaluating the success of those approaches.

The National Agreement's priority reforms are:

1. **Partnership and shared decision making** – committing to building and strengthening structures that empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to share decision-making authority with governments;
2. **Building the community-controlled sector** – supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations to design and deliver services to Aboriginal people and communities;
3. **Transforming government organisations** – by improving accountability and responsiveness to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; and
4. **Sharing access to data and information at a regional level** – to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations to make evidence-based decisions as equal partners with governments, and to keep governments accountable.

These priority reforms were strongly driven and supported by Aboriginal people, through extensive consultations conducted by the Coalition of Peaks. The key message at the core of the National Agreement is that the priority reform areas represent the essential structural and systemic changes needed to deliver the socio-economic outcomes. They also represent years of frustration for Indigenous stakeholders who have observed—largely from the outside—governments attempting to "close the gap" by doing the same things repeatedly, but each time expecting different results.

We cannot expect different results without changing our approach — without making ourselves more accountable for the decisions we make, accepting responsibility for our shortcomings, and being willing to adopt different ways of working.

CLOSING THE GAP IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

In September 2021, the WA Government released its first Jurisdictional Implementation Plan (Implementation Plan), outlining how the State is addressing its commitments under the National Agreement. It is quite a substantial document, developed with the input and collaboration of 19 State Government agencies and the Aboriginal Advisory Council of WA, and critical contributions from the Aboriginal Health Council of WA.

This first Implementation Plan establishes a baseline, setting out the State's approach to meeting its Closing the Gap commitments. It says what we as a government, are currently doing and what we intend to do over the next twelve months and beyond. By late 2022, I expect that the Implementation Plan will have been refined and refreshed, and will be updated regularly thereafter.

That process of refining the Implementation Plan will reap the benefits of collaboration and partnerships with Aboriginal people and organisations, a more robust community-controlled sector, and a more data- and accountability -driven approach. This is a key reason for the current Plan's up-front focus on the priority reforms and we recognise that different ways of working are an essential ingredient in maximising this tremendous opportunity we have to help deliver better outcomes, sustained over time.

PROGRESS STATEMENT ON THE IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

This statement looks at developments since the release of the Implementation Plan in September 2021. Key reforms and initiatives are already underway, some of which have been in progress since the National Agreement was signed in the middle of 2020. A significant component of the \$374 million in Aboriginal wellbeing initiatives announced in September's State Budget also directly arise from, or are associated with, Closing the Gap commitments.

PRIORITY REFORM ONE – PARTNERSHIP AND SHARED DECISION MAKING

For a many years now, Aboriginal people have given us this very simple, but powerful message — “nothing about us without us”. Aboriginal communities have made it clear that they do not want to be consulted repeatedly about the same things. We must ensure sure that Aboriginal people are empowered to participate in making decisions about matters that affect them and their own communities. This requires a proper information base, a platform of mutual respect, and the capacity to hold governments accountable for doing what they have agreed to do.

The Government's key partnership in this regard is with the Aboriginal Advisory Council of WA. Comprising Aboriginal men and women representing urban, regional and remote areas of WA, and bringing a range of expertise and lived experience, the Council offers guidance, advice and accountability to the Government's work in Aboriginal affairs.

We are also working closely with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders at a national level, including through Sector-Strengthening Plans and Policy Partnerships under the National Agreement. These involve a collaborative process, incorporating all government jurisdictions and representatives on the Coalition of Peaks, to ensure a joined-up approach.

The establishment of the Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committee in November 2021 also demonstrates our approach to seeking Aboriginal expertise and participation in policy development. The nine Aboriginal men and women appointed to this committee will provide the Government with cultural advice and guidance on justice issues, and help achieve better outcomes for Aboriginal people in contact with the justice system, and their families and communities.

Partnerships also continue to be established at community level through the Government's approach to co-design and shared leadership. The \$1.5 million Community Place Based Grants Program, administered by the Department of Local Government, Sports and Cultural Industries, is an example of this approach. This program will provide funding for the co-design, development and delivery of place-based, structured holiday and out-of-school activity programs in the Kimberley, Goldfields, Pilbara and Gascoyne regions, working with Aboriginal leadership, local government and Aboriginal community-controlled organisations (ACCOs) to support vulnerable or at-risk young people.

PRIORITY REFORM TWO – BUILDING THE COMMUNITY-CONTROLLED SECTOR

Western Australia is blessed with a wide range and number of dedicated and professional ACCOs operating throughout this State, each with the goal of ensuring Aboriginal people and communities receive the quality, continuity and cultural security of services they deserve.

We know that service delivery by ACCOs can increase the effectiveness and reach of such services, which can have significant flow-on effects in terms of community employment, skills development and infrastructure. For these reasons, the WA Government is engaged in work with ACCOs, supporting them in providing an increased proportion of the services and support required by the Aboriginal population and—where opportunities arise—to the broader Western Australian community.

ACCOs are also at the forefront of designing and implementing innovative and highly effective initiatives that deliver better outcomes for Aboriginal people across the state.

Of the many ACCOs out there doing amazing work in the WA community, I would like to highlight just a few examples, to demonstrate the depth and breadth of what ACCOs have to offer:

- The Wungening Aboriginal Corporation in the Perth metro region provides dedicated alcohol and other drug support programs, and leadership of the ReSet program that supports people in incarceration and prepares them and their families for life after their release;
- Marr Mooditj Aboriginal Corporation provides essential vocational training for Aboriginal students to work in health and mental health careers;
- The Ashburton Aboriginal Corporation links Aboriginal people to jobs and other economic opportunities throughout the Pilbara;
- Garnduwa provides sport and recreation, and health and wellbeing services across the Kimberley; and
- Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Services, a group of seven Aboriginal community-controlled health organisations contributes to the medical and social and emotional wellbeing of Kimberley Aboriginal communities. Their work has always been critical, but their value during the pandemic has been immeasurable.

The importance of ACCOs, to the Aboriginal community and to the Government, cannot be overstated. That is why the State's Jurisdictional Implementation Plan includes a commitment to develop a whole-of-government Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisation Strategy, intended for completion by 2022.

This ACCO Strategy will increase opportunities for ACCOs to deliver services across the Closing the Gap outcome areas, and support Aboriginal organisations to build their capacity at the sectoral, organisational and workforce levels. The ACCO Strategy will also help coordinate investment in ACCOs and oversee policy changes to commissioning and grant making to facilitate this better.

Included in this process will be assistance to develop the ACCO sector, through programs such as the Department of Communities' ACCO Capability Building Grants Program.

We are also supporting the establishment of a peak body for Western Australian ACCOs. The Aboriginal Health Council of WA is being funded to auspice the work necessary to develop the peak body, bringing together organisations from across the different service sectors. A committee with members from multiple sectors has been established and a state-wide data-gathering process is underway.

In the context of this priority reform, the WA Government has been expanding its engagement of and with ACCOs in developing and delivering a range of key projects and initiatives, including those that work towards achieving the National Agreement's socio-economic targets.

One example of this approach is the development of the Aboriginal Family Safety Strategy, a collaborative work between the Government, ACCOs and the Aboriginal community, aimed at reducing violence against women and children in Aboriginal households.

The ACCO sector is also extensively involved in the Family Led Decision Making initiative, which is being piloted in two locations – Mirrabooka and Midwest-Gascoyne – as of October 2021. Two ACCOs – Wungening Aboriginal Corporation and Geraldton Streetwork Aboriginal Corporation – were chosen via a competitive tender process to help implement the pilots. They will be employing independent Aboriginal convenors, who will facilitate a culturally safe process for Aboriginal families to have input into decisions regarding children involved in the child protection system.

The Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development has also completed the engagement process for an Aboriginal Pastoral Industry Workforce Development Strategy, with invaluable contribution to that process from a regional Aboriginal business.

PRIORITY REFORM THREE – TRANSFORMING GOVERNMENT ORGANISATIONS

Priority Reform Three provides an opportunity to reflect on and reckon with the structural and systemic factors that, historically, have led to repeated, long-term inefficiencies and injustices. We have an opportunity to implement different ways of working, some of which are identified as transformational elements for this priority reform in the National Agreement. They include:

- Identifying and eliminating racism;
- Embedding and practicing cultural safety;
- Delivering services in partnership with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community;
- Increasing accountability;
- Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures; and
- Improving engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

We have begun that journey, but it is a long one, requiring courage and persistence, and a commitment to truth-telling. Through this journey, we can walk alongside Aboriginal Western Australians, helping to supply the tools they need for empowerment, self-determination and healing.

In the first instance, we will implement the Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy throughout the public sector. The strategic directions and principles of the Strategy will become intrinsic to the policies and services of all State Government departments, agencies and authorities. It is not an optional extra, or a “nice-to-have” — we **must** have a culturally secure, prejudice-free government sector, committed to equity, truth-telling, and justice.

To this end, we are developing an accountability framework to provide for transparent measurement and reporting on our progress under both the Strategy and Closing the Gap. This framework will address the changes the Government makes in how it works with Aboriginal people, and the life outcomes Aboriginal people experience.

We are currently undertaking a review of expenditure on Aboriginal programs and services, to be completed by the middle of this year. This will help us identify opportunities

to reprioritise spending towards better outcomes, including opportunities to increase the involvement of ACCOs in delivering those services.

In other developments under this priority reform, the WA Government has commenced work on implementing the Noongar Economic Participation Framework through the convening of the Noongar Economic Steering Group.

As part of proposed reforms to the *Local Government Act 1995* (WA) announced in November 2021, we are also looking to introduce a range of key changes around local democracy and community engagement, including formal recognition of Aboriginal Western Australians.

In October 2021 we announced new business and employment targets for Aboriginal people on the State's major transport infrastructure program. Over the next five years, we will look to award \$700 million of contracts to Aboriginal businesses and provide 3.5 million work hours for Aboriginal workers. A Meet the Buyer and Supplier Forum was also held recently, to connect Aboriginal businesses with road and rail construction and maintenance contractors, and to explore upcoming opportunities.

The education sector is another area with tremendous capacity to develop and influence systemic change, not just among its approximately 60,000 staff, but also through shaping the knowledge and insight of an estimated 320,000 students in the state system. Our educators are dedicated to helping strengthen young Aboriginal people in their cultural identity and social and emotional wellbeing; and instilling in staff and students a more profound respect for, and understanding of the cultures, histories and experiences of Aboriginal Western Australians.

The education sector is also highlighting Aboriginal voices and building on Aboriginal knowledge and cultures, in partnership with Aboriginal people. One example of this is the relationship developed with Noongar Elders in the south-west through the Danjoo Koorliny project, which is assisting to enhance the cultural responsiveness of school leaders. Similar cultural exchanges are being implemented, on varying scales, through the Department of Education's Two-Way Science Initiative. This initiative supports schools to build partnerships with local Aboriginal communities to develop integrated, culturally responsive learning programs, connecting traditional Aboriginal knowledge with the WA Curriculum. This includes school staff participating in immersive workshops on Country to help prepare materials to be taught by members of the Aboriginal community to students both on Country and in the classroom.

The WA Government also continues to support Aboriginal art, heritage and culture by investing strongly in initiatives such as the Connecting to Country grants program. The Connecting to Country grants assist Aboriginal Western Australians to undertake on-Country activities that foster the intergenerational transfer of knowledge, preservation of culture, and strengthening of communities.

In November 2021, the WA Government announced the signing of a major new housing maintenance contract with Ngaanyatjarra Services Aboriginal Corporation (NSAC). The contract, worth up to \$32 million, is for NSAC to manage the maintenance of housing on

Ngaanyatjarra Lands. This commitment demonstrates this Government's approach to supporting Aboriginal business and enterprise through the Aboriginal Procurement Policy, and to delivering services in partnership with the Aboriginal community.

PRIORITY REFORM FOUR – SHARED ACCESS TO DATA AT REGIONAL LEVEL

The fourth priority reform is about making sure that Aboriginal organisations and communities have access to the data that allows them to share and participate in decision-making. Under the National Agreement, up to six community data projects will be established across Australia, to help develop the processes and criteria required to develop best practice.

In the Implementation Plan, we proposed to conduct one such initiative here in WA, and we are in the process of scoping a Kimberley Data Project, through a collaboration between the WA Country Health Service and Kimberley Aboriginal organisations.

Another key action under this priority reform will be the publication of regional information through publicly accessible dashboards.

We are also working alongside our Aboriginal partners in land and native title agreements to implement data collection studies to help us develop a better understanding of how to work together to implement agreements and evidence-based regional development activities. The Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development is currently working with the Yamatji Southern Regional Corporation, and will work with the six Southwest Settlement groups in the future, around funding for baseline studies and gathering culturally relevant data throughout this process.

BUDGET INITIATIVES

The priority reforms of the National Agreement present a significant opportunity and this Government is determined to see these translated into real, measurably improved outcomes for Aboriginal people. My hope is that with each year that passes, the quality of life and wellbeing for Aboriginal people will exceed that of the year preceding, and that they will be more empowered, healthier, safer, with greater social and emotional wellbeing and more educational and economic opportunities. For this vision to be realised, we must be brave and committed, and steadfast in our different ways of working.

The McGowan Government underscored this determination in the 2021-2022 State Budget, with a commitment of \$374 million towards better outcomes for Aboriginal Western Australians.¹

¹ <https://www.mediastatements.wa.gov.au/Pages/McGowan/2021/09/McGowan-Government-commits-374-million-dollars-to-Aboriginal-well-being.aspx>

In closing, I would like to highlight just a few of these initiatives, emphasising their potential to contribute to this Government's commitment to Closing the Gap.

We have earmarked an initial \$3.6 million towards implementing the National Agreement. This will assist with meeting the significant policy, administrative and coordination requirements at a national and state level, working with our Aboriginal partners and stakeholders to ensure the implementation process reflects place-based action and shared decision-making.

We have also committed \$14 million towards continuing the Aboriginal Community Connectors Program across 13 locations state-wide. The Community Connectors are a community safety and wellbeing service for vulnerable Aboriginal people, provided by Aboriginal organisations and staffed by local Aboriginal community members.

We are continuing to support the Aboriginal Business Capability Program, providing \$1.5 million towards essential capability training and guidance for Aboriginal organisations and businesses.

We have also dedicated \$1.5 million to the second stage of the Olabud Doogethu Halls Creek Justice Reinvestment Project, which was co-designed and being co-led by Aboriginal community members in the Halls Creek Shire. This project is seeing some real results in the reduction of youth crime in the Shire. Stage Two will be about establishing more culturally appropriate services, alternative education pathways and on-Country engagement.

We are further committing to the safety of Aboriginal families by developing more robust, culturally responsive methods of intervening in and preventing family violence. In addition to developing the Aboriginal Family Safety Strategy, \$5.6 million has been allocated to establish an Aboriginal-led specialist family violence court in Broome, styled on the Barndimalgu Court in Geraldton.

An additional \$50 million over the next four years will be put towards consolidating and expanding the Aboriginal Ranger Program. This program funds Aboriginal organisations to train and employ Aboriginal people to provide services in land and sea management, tourism and cultural conservation, using traditional cultural knowledge and understanding of Country.

\$20 million has been allocated to the Aboriginal Tourism Fund to help implement *Jina: the WA Aboriginal Tourism Action Plan 2021-2025*. This will support the development of new Aboriginal tourism initiatives, stimulate Aboriginal employment in the tourism industry, and support the development of administration and bookings systems to assist Aboriginal tourism businesses.

We are investing heavily in agreement-making and returning land to Aboriginal custodianship, with \$15.6 million over the forward estimates dedicated to negotiations with Traditional Owners for nine identified reserve proposals.

Our dedication to promoting and celebrating Aboriginal cultures is also demonstrated through the \$50 million allocation towards consultation, planning and design for a new Aboriginal Cultural Centre near Derbarl Yerrigan (Swan River) in Perth, and the \$3.5 million Gascoyne Aboriginal Heritage and Cultural Centre (Gwoonwardu Mia) in Carnarvon.

These funding decisions, and the numerous others not mentioned, provide a snapshot of how the McGowan Government is working differently to Close the Gap, and its approach to achieving better outcomes for Aboriginal Western Australians.

I look forward to keeping this Parliament and the people of Western Australia informed about the progress of the National Agreement, including the release of an updated Implementation Plan and a formal annual report in the second half of 2022. Through updated iterations of the Implementation Plan, and a public sector-wide implementation of the Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy, I hope to see this Government continue to develop flourishing working relationships with the Aboriginal community. I also hope that these partnerships will guide us towards a very different Western Australia by the year 2031, one where, to quote the Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy, 'all Aboriginal people, families and communities are empowered to live good lives and choose their own futures from a secure foundation.'



Dr Tony Buti MLA

Minister for Aboriginal Affairs