

# #unfinishedbusiness

# #bringingthemhome



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## **The Healing Foundation Submission: 2025 Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led Review of Closing the Gap**

Dear Independent Review Members,

The Healing Foundation welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the **Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led Review of Closing the Gap**.

The Healing Foundation is the national organisation that platforms and elevates the voices and lived experiences of Stolen Generations survivors, their families, and their communities. We work closely with survivors and communities to create environments for survivors to tell their stories and drive their healing.

The National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families was a groundbreaking process of truth-telling in Australia, where Stolen Generations survivors' voices were elevated, and the intergenerational impacts of their experiences of removal were heard across the nation. *Bringing Them Home*, the final report handed down in 1997, provided a suite of recommendations to address intergenerational trauma and improve outcomes for survivors, their descendants, families, and communities. In making these recommendations, the report noted that these experiences of forced removal contributed to ongoing social and economic challenges, such as those targeted in the Closing the Gap framework.

In 2025, The Healing Foundation released a new report '***Are you waiting for us to die?': The unfinished business of Bringing Them Home*** ([attached](#)), which showed that nearly 30 years later, only **6 percent** of the recommendations made have been clearly implemented.

With only five of the original 83 recommendations clearly implemented, The Healing Foundation has made 19 recommendations to urgently address this across six key areas: reparations;

rehabilitation and research; records, family tracing and reunions; acknowledgements and apologies; education and training; and monitoring and accountability.

Action in these areas is critical in addressing ongoing intergenerational trauma and creating improved outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Islander people.

We know from research undertaken by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare in 2018 that there is a **'gap within the gap'** – Stolen Generations survivors and their descendants are more likely than the general Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population to experience poor social, social and emotional wellbeing, health, educational and economic outcomes, and are more likely to have negative experiences with the justice system, including higher rates of incarceration.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, as this submission outlines, The Healing Foundation has heard from Stolen Generation survivors, their descendants and Stolen Generation Organisations that they are not seen in the National Agreement.

This is not to suggest it is not an important policy framework.

Rather it points to a problem whereby our current national policy framework and central mechanism established to overcome entrenched inequality, does not include specific reference to, or enough focus on the ongoing harm felt across all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families from the impacts of systematic forced removal.

**The impacts of forced removal are still being felt in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities. Until intergenerational trauma caused by previous policies of removal is acknowledged and appropriately addressed, these impacts will continue to intersect with all Closing the Gap targets.**

Addressing the unfinished business of *Bringing Them Home* is directly relevant to closing the 'gap within the gap' and promoting better outcomes for survivors and their descendants across all of the National Agreement targets.

Yours faithfully,



Leonie Williamson,

Deputy Chief Executive Officer

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Stolen Generations aged 50 and over: updated analyses for 2018-2019', 2021, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/d7a0f2d9-c965-471c-86a7-919edcb3458f/aihw-ihw-257.pdf?v=20230605181817&inline=true>

## Terms of Reference:

That Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) (Jumbunna) is appointed by the Joint Council on Closing the Gap to conduct the independent, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led independent review of Closing the Gap inquiring into, documenting and reporting on the lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities who have been engaged in the implementation of the National Agreement by all governments, particularly its Priority Reforms, with particular reference to:

- a) the extent to which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities have shared in decision making on policies and programs that have a significant impact on them, and incorporating their perspectives on the extent to which they are aware of the National Agreement and what it seeks to achieve**
- Nearly every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family was either directly or indirectly impacted by the systemic removal of children from their families up until the 1970s – and in some jurisdictions, 1980's. As outlined in The Healing Foundation recent report, informed by research conducted by the University of Canberra, the failure to systematically implement the Bringing Them Home report's recommendations and comprehensively respond to the needs of Stolen Generations survivors and their families has exacerbated intergenerational trauma, causing more pain and distress across Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.<sup>2</sup>
  - The National Agreement on Closing the Gap, including the Priority Reform's is currently the biggest policy instrument to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People.
  - Our feedback from Stolen Generations Organisations and Link Ups is that despite having participated in consultations on the Closing the Gap Agreements from it's inception. Survivors are not represented as a unique cohort within the Agreement with associated targets or measures, despite the clear increase in socio-economic disadvantage created by forced removal.
  - The lack of an articulation of the significant ongoing impact of policies to remove Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families in the National Agreement means there is a corresponding lack of accountability for governments, departments and organisations to consider policy and programme design that addresses this ongoing historic harm.
  - The Healing Foundation has heard consistent feedback from Stolen Generation survivors, their descendants and Stolen Generation Organisations that their outstanding needs must be included in the bipartisan commitment to reduce inequality and achieve better life outcomes within the architecture of the National Agreement.

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<sup>2</sup> The Healing Foundation (2021), Make Healing Happen, It's time to act, The Healing Foundation, Canberra.

- To illustrate this, The Healing Foundation is a member of the Coalition of Peaks and a member of the Social and Emotional Wellbeing Policy Partnership. However, many of the Stolen Generation Organisations, including “Link-Up” organisations who are working on the ground, in community to facilitate access to family records, reunions and social and emotional wellbeing support that is critical to our communities have expressed that they too often feel disconnected from national and jurisdiction policy and funding negotiations.
- This is evident in our partnership of the Social and Emotional Wellbeing Policy Partnership where despite being a member, we are unclear of any remit of the jurisdictions to be able to engage in holistic policy and funding reforms relating to the Social and Emotional Wellbeing of survivors, such increased funding to Stolen Generations Organisations and services, and accountability or measuring of Social and Emotional Wellbeing funding or service access by survivors.

**ii. whether power is being shared between governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, governance arrangements and communities as equal partners (and enablers and challenges to doing so)**

- The Healing Foundation as a member of the coalition of peaks works and across a number of policy areas relevant to the National Agreement. These include the Social and Emotional Wellbeing Policy Partnership; Aged Care with the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) to administer collective healing grant funding.
- Similar to many other organisations, it has been our experience that power sharing between governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations is still yet to be an embedded way of working, and where pockets of this have occurred in practice it is largely due to the personalities of individual officials – rather than a commitment to structural change.
- In too many policy areas, there are examples of government officials remaining committed to old ways of working whereby critical information regarding the development of new policy proposals, changes in legislation and other information is not shared freely, and in some examples, withheld.
- To illustrate, the lack of transparency and approach to engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders was exemplified in a recent grants process ran by the Department of Health and Aged Care: *Grant Opportunity 7396 Care Leavers, Stolen Generations and First Nations Forgotten Australians*.
- Despite being an active member of the Department’s ‘First Nations Aged Care Governance Group’ – which is tasked to co-design aged care reform, officials with the Aged Care Group did not engage with, seek the advice of, or share information with the Healing Foundation as a key partner with deep experience, national remit and existing relationships with Stolen Generation survivors and organisations to ensure the best possible planning and design of

this funding opportunity. The Healing Foundation was only made aware of the funding opportunity via GrantConnect, and when the Aged Care officials were asked to brief the Healing Foundation, this request was denied on the basis of ‘probity’ – despite clear examples of other Commonwealth entities engaging in more open and transparent approaches to market, and in contradiction to the Department of Finance probity principles, and of course, the Priority Reforms of the National Agreement.

- Similarly this lack of innovation in procurement and program contracts is evident in the lack of reform of funding agreements in line with the priority reforms. There are clear calls around extending core funding to support longer-term sustainability, rather than simple administrative calculations on the top of programme delivery. Similarly there should be measures of moving to longer term agreements, reduce reporting requirements (ie annual) on longer-term contracts and remove inhibitive clauses relating to the approval of procurements by the funding agency (in our case NIAA requires pre-approval of any procurements above \$80k), despite us having robust financial management and governance systems in place.

**b) Changes in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives from the original engagements that informed the National Agreement and Priority Reforms;**

- Broadly speaking, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are living longer since the original engagements that informed the National Agreement and Priority Reforms.
- Nearly all Stolen Generation survivors are aged over 50 and eligible for aged care.
- However, as outlined in the Final Report of the Interim First Nations Aged Care Commissioner (September 2024), the aged care system was never designed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older people and communities in mind.
- The aged care system is also accountable to the requirements and commitments all levels of Government have agreed to under the National Agreement, yet it our experience that this is huge portfolio area in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are not being included in policy development and therefore missing critical investments – there is an unacceptable disparity in access to aged care and we expect this will widen with the introduction of co-payments under Support at Home from 1 July 2025. It is possible that inclusion of aged care targets, similar to the focus on primary health targets within the National Agreement could bring greater monitoring and accountability to ensure our older people are able to access culturally safe, high quality aged care services.

**c) Advice on any additional actions by Parties to the National Agreement that could accelerate progress on the Priority Reforms.**

- The Healing Foundation supports the recommendations of the Productivity Commission review of Closing the Gap (2024) that an independent mechanism in each jurisdiction be established.
- Further investment and establishment of resources in the Coalition of Peaks secretariat to build and maintain organisational capabilities and enable greater communication and engagement between policy partnerships and place based partnerships back to members without being overwhelmingly weighed down in running secretariat functions is also necessary.
- Finally, in response to the lack of a systematic response to the needs of Stolen Generation survivors, their descendants and communities, the Healing Foundation has recommended to Government that the Closing the Gap National Agreement, aged care frameworks and other relevant policies must include specific policies for Stolen Generations and their descendants, and it would arguably be of immediate value to survivors to see the National Agreement include accountability expectations for relevant jurisdictions, agencies and department through the existing structures of the Closing the Gap – linked to targets and required within state and territory implementation plans. There is an urgent need to ensure survivors are adequately represented as a unique, prioritized and vulnerable group – and made visible within the Agreement.