

SUBMISSION

TO | Department of Premier and Cabinet
ClosingtheGapRefresh@pmc.gov.au

TOPIC | Closing the Gap: Refresh

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Introduction

Uniting Communities is pleased to provide a submission in response to the *Closing the Gap: Refresh* discussion paper. This submission is based on consultation with members of Uniting Communities' Aboriginal Staff Forum—a group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander¹ staff, other Uniting Communities staff (both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) and Uniting Communities' Aboriginal cultural advisor—who work with Aboriginal communities and groups.

Uniting Communities is a not-for-profit organisation working with South Australians across metropolitan and regional South Australia through more than 104 community service programs. We are committed to building compassionate communities and great lives. We are made up of a team of more than 1,500 staff and volunteers who support and engage with more than 20,000 South Australians each year.

Established in 1901, Uniting Communities recognises that people of all ages and backgrounds will encounter challenges in their lives. We offer professional and non-judgmental support for individuals and families around alcohol and other drugs interventions, housing and crises, mental health and wellbeing, people with disabilities, respite for carers, counselling and rehabilitation, medical issues, and financial and legal services. Of relevance to this submission are the services that are provided to Aboriginal peoples, including the Aboriginal Community Connect program, which provides support related to alcohol and drug use, isolation, poverty, housing, homelessness and housing crisis and disadvantage; and the Anangu Lands Paper Tracker Project, which advocates for the timely delivery of key infrastructure, services and programs to improve the lives of people in South Australian remote Aboriginal communities.

In a media release² providing commentary on the decade since the initiation of Closing the Gap, Uniting Communities' CEO, Simon Schrapel, made a number of comments that are pertinent to this submission. Reflecting on the failure to meet a number of the Closing the Gap targets, he highlighted the importance of focusing on the underlying structural factors that drive inequality and drew attention to funding cuts that have undermined the achievement of Closing the Gap targets:

'As part of understanding why the [Closing the Gap] targets haven't been met, we need to look at funding arrangements. In 2008, funding commitments were made to support the implementation of the [Closing the Gap] Strategy but this was followed in the 2014 budget with cuts to the Indigenous affairs portfolio of more than \$530 million...The contradictory messages from the Government also serve to explain the lack of positive progress. For example, the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet's recent discussion paper on Closing the Gap flagged goals in a number of new areas, including a reduction in overcrowding, poor-quality housing and homelessness and yet the Coalition Government is not indicating a commitment to continue the National Partnership Agreement for Remote Housing, that is due to expire in June this year'.

¹ Throughout this submission we use the terms Aboriginal people and Aboriginal communities to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.

² Available at: <https://www.unitingcommunities.org/2018/02/12/decade-widening-gap-failing-communities/>

While Uniting Communities supports the setting of targets from an accountability perspective, we argue that it is important to also define and measure the structural factors that contribute to Closing the Gap and appropriately resource these structural supports. If targets are not being achieved, then we would encourage investigation into why this is the case.

Uniting Communities supports self-determination for Aboriginal peoples by supporting communities to take the lead, and calls for the adequate resourcing of these activities. Self-determination is key to closing the gap.

In our view, the Closing the Gap Strategy is premised on a deficit model and we would encourage a more strengths-based and positive narrative around the contributions and successes of Aboriginal peoples. We must double-down on our efforts to close the gap.

Question Responses

Question: How can governments, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, and businesses work more effectively together? What is needed to change the relationship between government and community?

Funding

Sustained and consistent funding is needed to improve the relationship between Aboriginal communities and Government. The current cyclical approach to funding provision creates a competitive environment for organisations, leaving organisations in a precarious position and ultimately undermining the efficacy of services and the potential for sustained positive change. By way of example is the introduction of competitive tendering, such as occurs with the Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS), has led to tensions and division within communities and the break-down of service relationships. Importantly, competitive tendering processes allow organisations that have the capacity and the capability to present tenders and submissions the greatest opportunity to secure funding; not those necessarily best placed on the ground and embedded in community.

Further clarity is needed regarding the nature and scope of the 'Indigenous Grants Policy' that the Prime Minister referred to in his speech to Parliament on the Closing the Gap report, 2018. A new Indigenous Grants Policy raises questions related to any potential changes to grant funding. We trust that this new policy will not result in yet more changes and inconsistencies regarding funding for critical Aboriginal services.

Alongside sustained and consistent funding is the need for Government to engage with Aboriginal communities in co-design, rather than top-down processes in the development and delivery of services and programs.

Uniting Communities urges the Government to increase the current investment levels and resourcing commitments. We advocate that the IAS be scrapped and that funding is restructured and made more accessible and less competitive.

Self-determination

Self-determination is key to improving the relationship between Government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Over time there has been an erosion of Aboriginal communities and organisations being in charge of services that affect Aboriginal people.

Uniting Communities' Aboriginal Staff Forum (ASF) reflected on the question of how Governments and Aboriginal peoples can work better together and made the following suggestions:

- Continuity is important for Aboriginal people and this provides a strong foundation for mentoring younger generations.
- There needs to be two-way learning between Government/businesses and Aboriginal people.
- Education and sharing information are pivotal to effective partnership.
- Non-Aboriginal organisations to 'buddy-up' with Aboriginal organisations to create opportunities for the former to seek advice and support around culturally-specific issue/s.
- Organisations should be more culturally friendly to get their businesses registered, which could be achieved through a compulsory process.
- Aboriginal employment targets should be set, such as those that exist in the South Australian Strategic Plan.
- There needs to be cultural competence and anti-racism training/workshops available to businesses.
- Changes to school attendance requirements that allow for Aboriginal children attending to sorry business would be helpful.

Question: How could the Closing the Gap targets better measure what is working and what is not? What indicators should governments focus on to best support the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples? Should governments focus on indicators such as prosperity, wellbeing or other areas? (Note: We have included our response to the question addressing indicators here).

Evaluation criteria must be set at the time of introducing a program or service and before data is collected. This should be done in conjunction with communities. Aboriginal people must be involved in determining evaluation criteria by contemplating questions such as 'how will we know if things are better/worse for us?' Government should avoid top-down approaches and appropriately support and resource communities to determine, assess, measure and evaluate the programs and services that are delivered.

In order to achieve Closing the Gap targets, it is important to define and measure the factors that contribute to the Closing the Gap higher order objectives and to appropriately resource programs and supports that impact on the higher order objectives. For example, the Closing the Gap target for halving the mortality rate for Aboriginal children is dependent on multiple social determinants of health and wellbeing being addressed. These include attention being paid to the use of alcohol and drugs during pregnancy; fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD); domestic violence; maternal and child nutrition; appropriate; safe and secure housing etc. Expecting to achieve higher order objectives without a clear understanding and resourcing for the drivers of those objectives is a recipe for failure. A

focus on the structural or contributory factors to achieve the targets would allow for a more effective means to assess what is working and what is not.

Indicators are a means of determining whether goals and objectives have been achieved, which appear to be referred to in the Closing the Gap discussion paper as ‘measures’. Indicators must be determined and measured/assessed by Aboriginal people.

In his speech on the Closing the Gap report, the Prime Minister referred to the devolution of responsibilities for target-setting and data monitoring to states and communities. We are concerned that there is no reference to resourcing this devolution of responsibility, in the absence of which communities will potentially be set up to fail. We have stated elsewhere in this submission that Governments should work alongside communities in authentic ways to assist them to define their own measures of change and success, however, it is imperative that these processes and activities are adequately resourced.

Question: Should Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture be incorporated in the Closing the Gap Framework? How?

The framing of this question points to a number of concerns regarding the way in which the Closing the Gap Strategy and Framework have been established and implemented. The fact that this question is only now being posed after 10 years of implementation points to the underlying problem with the Closing the Gap Strategy and its demonstrated failings. Aboriginal culture and its inclusion appears to be an afterthought, rather than an inherent and integral part of the design and guiding principles.

Due consideration must also be given to the many and diverse language and culture groups within Australia. Aboriginal culture is not homogenous, nor is it static.

Rather than attempting to incorporate Aboriginal culture into the Closing the Gap Framework, the many and varied cultures need to inform the entire Strategy through a process of authentic consultation and with an understanding of culturally-informed ways of learning and of change.

Question: What do you think are the key targets or commitments that should be measured in a refreshed Closing the Gap agenda?

The current targets fail to capture a number of critical issues affecting communities. We propose the inclusion of the following targets:

Children in Out of Home Care (OOHC) Target

We support SNAICC’s submission³ calling for an additional target to eliminate the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait children in the out of home care (OOHC) system. We support SNAICC’s assertion that sub-targets should be developed to address the structural drivers for over-representation in OOHC as well as the co-development (with

³ Available at: https://gallery.mailchimp.com/dc8fd3501b27fd7791e83830f/files/ccce8ae1-236b-467f-846b-649b6b3c1473/SNAICC_Closing_the_Gap_Refresh_Brief_.pdf?utm_source=Family+Matters+Organisational+Stakeholders&utm_campaign=116a8df66c-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2017_12_21&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_e12281799d-116a8df66c-155298693&mc_cid=116a8df66c&mc_eid=b0f766b50a

Aboriginal peoples) of an appropriately resourced Strategy to reduce the high number of children in care. Greater focus on prevention and early intervention is needed before families require the attention of statutory Child Protection agencies, rather than the current focus on crisis intervention.

We echo SNAICC's call (referenced in the aforementioned submission) to extend the age range captured by the current Closing the Gap targets of early childhood care and education to include 0-3 year olds.

Incarceration Rate and Justice Target

We support the setting of a target to reduce the incarceration rate of Aboriginal people. According to the ABS (Prisoners in Australia, 2017: Cat. No. 4517.0), Aboriginal people comprised just over one quarter of the entire Australian prisoner population in 2017.

Sub-targets should be set that focus on the importance of resourcing Aboriginal community-controlled organisations to support a reduction in the incarceration rate.

We additionally support justice reinvestment as a crime prevention strategy. Justice reinvestment diverts a portion of the funds for imprisonment to local communities where there is a high concentration of offenders. The money that would have been spent on imprisonment is reinvested into services that address the underlying causes of crime in these communities.

Housing and homelessness

Uniting Communities supports a housing target that focusses on reducing overcrowding and homelessness. Adequate housing is a key determinant of health and wellbeing and is thus important to the achievement of a number of other targets. To support the achievement of this target there is a need for sustained funding, in particular through the extension of the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Housing that is currently due to expire at the end of June 2018.

Concluding Comments

We would like to reiterate that the Closing the Gap Strategy is premised on a deficit model and that it is important to also create space for positive narratives, such as those surfaced by the Deadly Awards. Ultimately, Closing the Gap should be about people and communities, not solely about measurable projects and the so-called deficiencies of marginalized groups of people.

The Prime Minister, in his speech on the 10th anniversary of the Closing the Gap Strategy spoke about doing things 'with' Aboriginal communities, not 'to' them. We look forward to seeing the Government adopting an approach that is based on authentic consultation and co-design with communities. It is important to reiterate that sustained and consistent funding is required to effect positive change.