

Closing the Gap Refresh AbSec Submission

April 2018



About AbSec

The Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat (AbSec) is the peak Aboriginal child and family organisation in NSW. AbSec is committed to advocating on behalf of Aboriginal children, families, carers and communities, and to ensure they have access to the services and supports they need to keep Aboriginal children safe and provide them the best possible opportunities to fulfil their potential through Aboriginal community controlled organisations.

Central to this vision is the need to develop a tailored approach to Aboriginal child and family supports delivering universal, targeted and tertiary services within communities that cover the entire continuum of support and reflect the broader familial and community context of clients. Such services and supports would operate to mitigate risk factors or vulnerabilities thereby reducing the need for more intensive or invasive interventions.

Our vision is that Aboriginal children and young people are looked after in safe, thriving Aboriginal families and communities, and are raised strong in spirit and identity, with every opportunity for lifelong wellbeing and connection to culture surrounded by holistic supports. In working towards this vision, we are guided by these principles:

- acknowledging and respecting the diversity and knowledge of Aboriginal communities;
- acting with professionalism and integrity in striving for quality, culturally responsive services and supports for Aboriginal families;
- underpinning the rights of Aboriginal people to develop our own processes and systems for our communities, particularly in meeting the needs of our children and families;
- being holistic, integrated and solutions-focused through Aboriginal control in delivering for Aboriginal children, families and communities; and
- committing to a future that empowers Aboriginal families and communities, representing our communities, and the agencies there to serve them, with transparency and drive

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AbSec can be found on the land of the Gadigal people at:

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Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Introduction..... | 4 |
| Why refresh Closing the Gap..... | 6 |
| A strengths-based approach..... | 8 |
| Principles of the refresh and priority areas..... | 12 |
| Conclusion..... | 13 |

Introduction

The Closing the Gap campaign and strategy represents a key commitment from Federal and State governments through the Council of Australian Governments to end disparities in outcomes between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the non-Indigenous Australian community. Originally oriented as a health-focused strategy to improve Aboriginal health and life expectancy, specific targets were established in November 2008, including life expectancy, mortality, education and employment. On one hand, this broadened scope reflects the inter-related nature of health outcomes, with socio-economic disadvantage recognised as a key predictor of sub-optimal health and wellbeing outcomes. However, despite this broadened scope, the framework for implementation of strategies remains limited, with insufficient focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait empowerment and self-determination as critical pathways to improved outcomes. In AbSec's view, efforts to overcome disparities in outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians must start from a human rights framework, and principally the right to self-determination. The failure to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led approaches to achieving the targets has remained a key shortfall of the Close the Gap strategy.

This is particularly concerning given the context of the National Apology to the Stolen Generations, which promised new approaches to the complex challenges facing our communities in recognition that "old" government-led approaches had systematically failed to address growing disparities in a range of domains.

Ten years later, few of the targets are on track, and by-and-large, the Closing the Gap strategy has not delivered on its intent. AbSec is pleased to join other Aboriginal community controlled organisations and peak bodies to participate in the review and reform of the Close the Gap strategy. AbSec also supports the undertaking from the Council of Australian Governments for all governments to undertake community consultations prior to agreeing a new framework, and looks forward to the NSW Government engaging with Aboriginal communities, Aboriginal community-controlled organisations and peak bodies. However, we do so cautiously, given concerns about the way representatives were selected earlier in this process to participate in a Special Gathering, with governments appointing delegates rather than engaging with Aboriginal communities through existing governance or representative structures. While AbSec is broadly supportive of the points arising from the Statement of the Special Gathering, it is nevertheless important to assert the right to determine, through our own processes, our own representatives, as a key to ensuring direct accountability.

Finally, we note the ongoing willingness of Aboriginal communities and their organisations to engage with such processes, despite our voices often being marginalised, to work with governments to achieve better outcomes for our peoples. We hope that governments are genuine in their stated desire to work differently with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, empowering our communities to tackle the challenges we face: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have the solutions.

Broadly, AbSec's submission to the Closing the Gap Refresh process is not for radical or revolutionary change. In our view, the Closing the Gap strategy, with clear measures and annual reporting, has been effective at raising awareness, maintaining focus and keeping governments accountable for progress in addressing the broad health, social and economic disparities we face.

However, it is important that we reflect on ways the framework can be strengthened to achieve our shared goals.

“Over the past 20 years, governments have taken various paths to try to address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues. Invariably, many have gone around in circles and ended up back where they started. This hasn’t been for lack of goodwill or good intentions. It has been because they have failed, in the main, to adequately ask communities where they want to go and involve them in the decision-making.

Despite this mixed progress, I am cautious about proposing a radical new way. I think amongst some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities there is fatigue and real cynicism about all these ‘new ways’. Every time the political landscape changes we get bombarded with another innovation that seldom results in measurable improvements because they fail to fundamentally engage with communities and coordinate their efforts.

What I am proposing is something that harks right back to the very first Social Justice Report in 1993 – our communities must decide the directions we take into the future. The only way we move forward is with communities meaningfully participating in the decisions that affect them and this means there needs to be fundamental changes to the way governments engage with us.”¹

Commissioner Gooda argued that the way forward was the implementation of a human-rights based approach, guided by the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, including self-determination, participation in decision making underpinned by free, prior and informed consent and good faith, respect for and protection of culture, and equality and non-discrimination².

AbSec supports this rights-based approach. In the child welfare space in which we work, a rights-based approach including self-determination has been an ongoing theme. Indeed, as Aboriginal communities develop alternative policy and service delivery approaches to improve outcomes, there is frustration that governments are not coming to the table and engaging with Aboriginal people consistent with these principles, but rather continuing to ultimately exercise control over approaches to Aboriginal child and family welfare.

AbSec’s approach to the Closing the Gap refresh urges against radical change, maintaining the key characteristics of clear targets and long-term focus and accountability. However, there is a pressing need to elevate the central issue of self-determination, with Aboriginal communities empowered through the framework to determine, implement and continuously improve local strategies and service delivery through our own processes. Inclusion of measures of Aboriginal self-determination will support achievement in this area. In addition to promoting self-determination, we also suggest strengthening the holistic approach to Close the Gap outcomes through a focus on thriving families and communities as a site for short term and generational

¹ Gooda, M. (2013) *Social Justice and Native Title Report 2013*, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Australian Human Rights Commission, pp. 88

² Ibid.

change. Regular reporting across all levels of government will drive ongoing accountability, ensuring Aboriginal communities are adequately and equitably resourced to meet identified need. A distinct commissioning framework could facilitate this investment, also strengthening the capacity and capabilities of local communities to evaluate and enhance effectiveness and engage with emerging local, national and international evidence to continuously improve local approaches.

Why refresh Closing the Gap

1. [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?](#)

In our view, the fundamental nature of the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and governments must change if the disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians are to be overcome. Indeed, this issue was the focus of a previous Social Justice Report by then Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Mick Gooda.

In short, AbSec believes there are two key issues that need to change:

1. For the voice of Aboriginal peoples, through their own representatives, to be heard on priorities, system design and delivery across all levels of government, devolving decision-making to Aboriginal communities themselves
2. Greater engagement and accountability from other levels of government

The current relationship between Aboriginal communities and their community controlled organisations and Australian Governments is, by and large, characterised by a significant and enduring power imbalance that renders Aboriginal people and communities as objects rather than agents of policy reform and program design. This was the underlying message of the Uluru Statement: the need to hear the voice of Aboriginal people, through our own representatives, on matters that affect us.

The “top down” nature of the Close the Gap strategy to-date was acknowledged in the community consultations (see Figure 1). AbSec agrees that this framework of government decision for Aboriginal people must be replaced by a genuine partnership approach that prioritises the voices of Aboriginal people in the design and implementation of local solutions, recognising the diversity of Aboriginal communities and that a “one-size-fits-all” approach will not achieve the best possible outcomes. In AbSec’s view, Aboriginal community controlled organisations and their representative peak bodies must be afforded a greater role in this local service design and oversight. A key issue with the “old approaches” that have consistently failed is not their focus or targets, but the process by which solutions are developed, delivered and refined, which has been largely government-led, or unreasonably programmatic in focus such that adaptation and innovation becomes stifled.

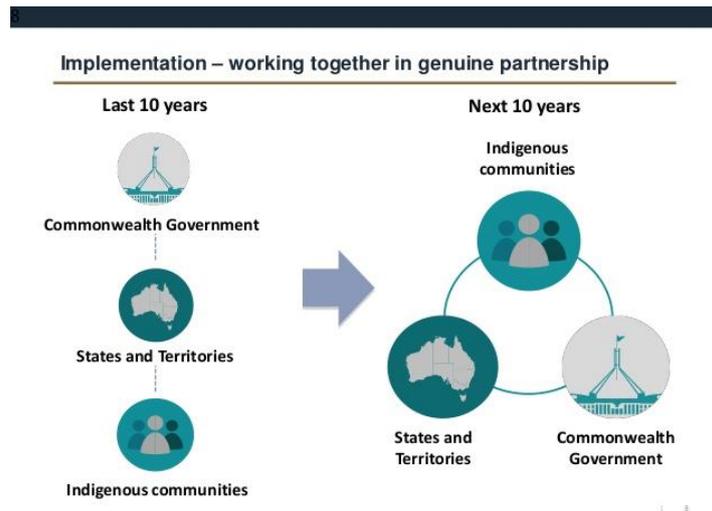


Figure 1. Suggested model for Closing the Gap implementation, by Sam Jeffries³

AbSec, along with our partners, continues to advocate for Aboriginal community controlled solutions, with government playing a stewardship role oriented towards mutually agreed high level outcomes while remaining agnostic with respect to specific community approaches. Rather, communities must be empowered to design and implement local approaches, and supported to refine these approaches through data-driven processes of continuous improvement. A network of community-controlled organisations would be supported by peaks to share their experiences and emerging evidence, as well as to engage with international evidence, to further support communities in decision-making.

A second noted issue is the apparent lack of direct involvement of other levels of government, with the Federal government perceived as carrying much of the responsibility for the Close the Gap initiatives and achievement of the targets. AbSec would like to see far greater direct engagement of State governments, including specific State targets established in partnership with relevant Aboriginal community controlled organisations, to drive a coordinated approach. These should be implemented as local Aboriginal community-led action plans. As noted above, a central consideration will be State priorities and the establishment of enabling frameworks to empower Aboriginal communities to design, deliver and implement community-controlled solutions. To date, the NSW experience has been one of the delivery of government services through Aboriginal organisations, as opposed to promoting self-determination through genuine partnership and power-sharing with Aboriginal communities.

While AbSec works closely with the NSW Government on achieving an effective Aboriginal child and family service system to strengthen Aboriginal families and communities, this relationship remains characterised by consultation and participation in service delivery as opposed to promoting self-determination through genuine partnership and power-sharing with Aboriginal communities.

³ Closing the Gap slide by Sam Jeffries – Implementation and working together in genuine partnership

These principles are not new. Numerous reports, inquiries and Royal Commissions have emphasised the importance of Aboriginal self-determination and community control of service design and delivery. Bringing Them Home emphasised the need for “Indigenous decision-making carried through to implementation”, encouraging governments to “confine their roles largely to providing financial and other resource support for the implementation of Indigenous programs and polices”. This is consistent with the existing evidence such as the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development, with the 2012 Social Justice Report noting that “The Harvard Project has found that empowering communities to make their own decisions and take control over their own affairs is the most effective way to achieve community development and results in positive health outcomes”⁴.

“When Native nations make their own decisions about what development approaches to take, they consistently out-perform external decision makers – on matters as diverse as governmental form, natural resource management, economic development, health care, and social service provision.”⁵

And yet, Aboriginal communities remain in the position of imploring Australian governments to implement these principles.

The reluctance of successive governments to support and engage with Indigenous governance is not a new phenomenon. There are numerous principles and frameworks for implementation noted below that provide important guidance for a strengthened relationship between governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and are likely to contribute to improved health, social and economic outcomes for Indigenous Australians, such as those outlined by former Social Justice Commissioner Mick Gooda that called on the Australian government to acknowledge the importance of Indigenous governance, to build its own capacity to enable and support effective Indigenous governance, and for all governments to properly resource Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to strengthen contemporary governance structures⁶. The transformative potential of these recommendations, centred on self-determination and genuine partnership, remain unrealised. Future attempts to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through a refreshed “Close the Gap” or other initiatives are likewise unlikely to be effective in the absence of structural change in Aboriginal Affairs that prioritises the voices of Aboriginal people through their own organisations to enact community-led solutions. We encourage governments to engage with Aboriginal-led approaches, and work with Aboriginal community controlled organisations to build the enabling frameworks for genuine investment in Aboriginal communities to tackle these challenges themselves.

A strengths-based approach

How could Close the Gap targets better measure what is working and what is not?

⁴ Gooda, M, (2012) Social Justice Report 2012, Australian Human Rights Commission, pp. 94

⁵ The Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development, ‘Sovereignty Matters’, <https://hpaied.org/>, accessed 24 April 2018.

⁶ Gooda, M, (2012) Social Justice Report 2012, Australian Human Rights Commission, pp. 121

In AbSec's view, the intent of the Close the Gap targets is not to measure what is working and what is not, but is to drive high level accountability for the overall impact of investment. AbSec would be concerned about consideration of this question as a need for government to identify programs with demonstrated evidence in a given community and imposing these approaches on other communities. As argued above, government control of service delivery and implementation represents the "old" approaches that have consistently failed, and will continue to fail. There is clear evidence that self-determination is a key feature of improved service provision, including health care and social services. Consistent with this, the focus of the Close the Gap refresh should be on establishing the processes and structural change needed to empower Aboriginal communities to implement and evaluate their own solutions, in supported by high level frameworks to drive government accountability and investment.

As stated above, the Closing the Gap targets might best be conceptualised as part of a high level outcomes framework to drive a commissioning for outcomes approach that remains agnostic to the approaches taken "on the ground" to deliver on these outcomes. Such an approach might be supported by a distinct Aboriginal commissioning framework that invests in community-led solutions directly. AbSec notes that the Statement of the Special Gathering which stated "the best progress over the last ten years has been in areas where the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community has led the design and implementation of programs from the beginning." As noted above, this sentiment echoes that of Bringing Them Home, which called for "Indigenous decision-making carried through to implementation" with governments encouraged to "confine their roles largely to providing financial and other resource support for the implementation of Indigenous programs and policies".

Such an approach is long overdue. AbSec strongly encourages that this advice is heeded now.

That is not to say that we should not be mindful of existing and emerging evidence and utilise it to achieve the best possible outcomes, but rather reminds us to structurally separate the roles and responsibilities such that the issue of local design, implementation and achievement remains a matter for local communities, who are closest to these challenges and best placed to address them. Local communities would be supported in this work through the development of robust, community-owned data infrastructure, allowing local communities to measure achievement and continuously refine design and implementation of local solutions in line with community priorities and aspirations. This would create a local evidence base and network of communities who are able to share local lessons and promote innovative approaches to inform ongoing design efforts. In NSW, AbSec has called for the establishment of an Aboriginal commissioning body for the child and family space, directing pooled investment in Aboriginal child and family service provision to Aboriginal communities through Aboriginal community controlled organisations to achieve a holistic, Aboriginal-led system. Amongst the commissioning body's roles would be support for community capacity building, strengthening evaluation and evidence processes, and accountability of statutory systems that impact on Aboriginal children and families. A similar independent Indigenous commissioning approach might be considered as part of the Closing the Gap strategy, but like any proposed approach would need to be designed in direct partnership with relevant Indigenous representative and peak bodies.

Similarly, while nationally aggregated data is informative of the overall performance in addressing the unacceptable disparities between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their

fellow non-Indigenous Australians, we should be mindful not to hold such aggregates as representative of any specific community. A more localised approach to data collection and reporting, that places data in the hands of local communities to drive local decision making, as well as greater accountability at the State and Territory level, is critical to the success of the Closing the Gap strategy.

[What indicators should the government focus on to best support the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples? Should governments focus on indicators such as prosperity and wellbeing or other areas?](#)

Assuming that the Close the Gap framework is refreshed as a high level outcomes framework to provide government accountability with respect to investment and achievement in advancing the wellbeing and aspirations of Aboriginal people, in our view many of the current indicators represent a strong starting point for consideration. However, AbSec would suggest that the framework could be reorganised to reflect the known inter-related nature of outcome domains, and the critical role of Aboriginal self-determination as a foundational principle.

AbSec would recommend consideration of a measure of Aboriginal self-determination and empowerment as a key driver of the refreshed approach. In particular, this reflects research that suggests that those communities that had the greatest control over their own affairs tended to demonstrate better outcomes. A distinct target focused on Aboriginal self-determination would ensure support for community-led processes, which in turn support improved design and delivery of services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. By way of example, research has linked self-determination and community control of health, welfare and education approaches to improved outcomes in one critical domain (youth suicide prevention)⁷, emphasising the need to do more than merely treat the symptoms arising from ongoing colonisation, but to empower Aboriginal communities as a critical goal in achieving equity. An orientation of Close the Gap targets to recognise the central role of self-determination and community control across all such domains would be beneficial in driving more effective achievement of specific targets. Indeed, it is our view that 'Closing the Gap' cannot be successful without Aboriginal self-determination. As noted above, a framework to consider the development of Indigenous governance has already been proposed⁸, which governments could use a starting point for future partnership with Aboriginal communities.

AbSec would also strongly recommend the inclusion of child and family indicators, including child welfare, early childhood education and juvenile justice targets in particular. 'Thriving Aboriginal families and communities' could be a key guiding principle around which to organise the various other interconnected outcome domains, given their importance in providing the developmental

⁷ Chandler, M. and Lalonde, C. (2004) Cultural Continuity as a Moderator of Suicide Risk among Canada's First Nations, in Kirmayer, L. and Valaskakis, G. (Eds) *The Mental Health of Canadian Aboriginal Peoples: Transformations, Identity and Community*. University of British Columbia Press

⁸ Gooda, M, (2012) Social Justice Report 2012, Australian Human Rights Commission

context for future generations, and the clear evidence linking early childhood experiences to later outcomes, including lifelong health outcomes⁹.

Given the clear evidence about the important role of family relationships in child development and long term impacts on physical and mental health, education engagement and employment, we recommend the inclusion of child and family targets, particularly child welfare and early childhood education. We join with our colleagues in calling for:

- An additional target to eliminate the over-representation of our children in out-of-home care by 2040, including sub-targets that address the underlying causes of child protection intervention.
- Strengthening of the current target on education to eliminate the under-representation of our 0-5-year old children in early childhood education and care services by 2040.

Further, we feel this should be accompanied by greater reporting across all levels of government about investment in Aboriginal-led child and family supports, ensuring this is commensurate with identified need.

As noted above, the use of national data, while essential for accountability of basic equity measures, is of limited utility for local communities and service system design at the point of service delivery. Recognising the diversity of Aboriginal communities and cultures, our histories and current contexts, more localised targets are needed to direct local efforts to contribute to the broader aggregate. Such targets would further serve to place greater accountability across different levels of government, particularly in the context of service delivery by State governments. AbSec therefore suggests the inclusion of State and Territory government targets, established by relevant Aboriginal communities and their relevant peak organisations (where they exist) in partnership with government, as well as localised targets and community priorities as part of a properly resourced Aboriginal-led local action plan. Examples such as the Maranguka project in Bourke provide a demonstration of the utility of local Aboriginal community controlled data-driven approaches in achieving better outcomes at the community level. Such principles could inform local processes nationally, engaging local communities to develop tailored solutions to address local priorities and aspirations.

AbSec has significant reservations about the proposed prosperity framework. To be clear, AbSec supports the key points described, “moving beyond wellbeing to flourishing and thriving”, and noting an interconnected view that links environment, community, individual and economic participation. However, AbSec is extremely wary by the primary role outlined for economic prosperity, presented as the key to Closing the Gap:

“Prosperity is about moving beyond wellbeing to flourishing and thriving. It refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples having the economic empowerment to be the decision-makers over

⁹ For example, see the CDC-Kaiser Permanente Adverse Childhood Experiences Study, available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/about.html>, accessed 24 April 2018

issues that impact their lives, and to seize opportunities for themselves, their families and communities”¹⁰.

This view downplays the significant role of successive governments in the ongoing marginalisation and disempowerment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and frames the issue as one of economic participation, and not self-determination. We reject this view, and seek to properly position self-determination and thriving Aboriginal families and communities as the key pillars of Closing the Gap.

AbSec appreciates that economic participation and inequality plays a critical role in the existing health and other disparities experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. However, we also note the findings of the international research focused on Indigenous economic development that emphasised that self-determination was the key foundation for improving outcomes, whether in economic development, health care or social service provision. Self-determination is notably absent from the proposed prosperity framework.

Should Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture be incorporated in the Closing the Gap framework? How?

In AbSec’s view, culture is central to effective efforts to Close the Gap. As noted above, effective approaches are those that are locally-derived and culturally-embedded; the absence of culturally-embedded approaches will guarantee the further failure of Closing the Gap initiatives. However, to be clear, AbSec does not support the inclusion of any form of “cultural” targets as part of the Closing the Gap framework. Rather, as has been argued above, the key mechanism to ensure culturally-embedded solutions that are tailored to local communities is to incorporate principles of Aboriginal self-determination and community control into the Closing the Gap framework. If Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are empowered to freely develop and deliver their own solutions, we can be confident that such approaches will reflect the culture and perspectives of those local communities.

In our view it is critical that the government framework remains agnostic to the actual approaches delivered by local communities through their own community controlled mechanisms, focusing on enabling effective Aboriginal-led solutions and their ongoing refinement through data-driven processes of continuous improvement. Aboriginal peak bodies at the State and National level are well placed to support local capacity and capability-building efforts as well as the dissemination of promising approaches to inform and empower local communities as part of a broader network of Aboriginal community controlled organisations.

Principles of the refresh and priority areas

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

In our view the Closing the Gap targets should reflect high level measures that drive broader accountability to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to fully participate in and benefit

¹⁰ Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Closing the Gap Refresh, available at: <https://closingthegaprefresh.pmc.gov.au/about>, accessed 24 April 2018

from the wealth and prosperity of our nation alongside our fellow Australians. The targets should therefore be seen as being supported by a matrix of community-led intermediate outcomes that contribute to the achievement of high level health and wellbeing outcomes.

One key area of focus must be the achievement of genuine self-determination for Aboriginal communities, through Indigenous governance processes. As argued above, self-determination is critical to achieving better outcomes, whether with respect to health, social or economic engagement. Self-determination provides a foundation for the maximal achievement in all other outcome domains, and should be prominently featured in the refreshed targets and commitments. This includes a commitment for local priorities and action plans established in partnership with Indigenous governance processes, and delivered through Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, with resourcing aligned to identified need and taking into consideration the particular challenges in delivering integrated supports in regional and remote communities.

From AbSec's perspectives, there is a pressing need to apply a greater focus on children and families, given clear evidence on the importance of the developmental context on lifelong wellbeing. In particular, AbSec reiterates the need to ensure our children's safety, welfare and wellbeing by including a clear target to eliminate the over-representation of our children in out-of-home care by 2040. This must be supported by sub-targets that address the underlying causes of child protection intervention including poverty and intergenerational trauma, driving greater investment in holistic Aboriginal child and family supports. There is also a critical need to foster our children's wellbeing and development by strengthening the current target on education to eliminate the under-representation of our 0 to 5-year-old children in early childhood education and care services by 2040. Developmental science emphasises the important role of families and communities in creating an optimal developmental context for children and young people¹¹¹²¹³. We therefore recommend a key focus on thriving Aboriginal families and communities as a guiding objective around which to organise the interconnected outcome domains.

AbSec also supports the inclusion of justice targets, including juvenile justice and the intersection of justice and child protection that contributes to significantly poorer wellbeing outcomes for a subset of Aboriginal children and young people.

Conclusion

The Closing the Gap strategy has shone a bright and enduring light on the ongoing health, social and economic inequalities facing Aboriginal children and young people, their families and communities. However, despite considerable focus and investment over the last decade, return on investment has been disappointing for Aboriginal communities. We agree with the Statement of the Special Gathering that "the best progress over the last ten years has been in areas where the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community has led the design and implementation of

¹¹ Shonkoff, J., and Fisher, P. (2013) Rethinking evidence-based practice and two-generational programs to create the future of early childhood policy, *Development and Psychopathology*, pp. 1635-1653

¹² Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2017). Three Principles to Improve Outcomes for Children and Families. <http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu>

¹³ Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2016). *Building Core Capabilities for Life: The Science Behind the Skills Adults Need to Succeed in Parenting and in the Workplace*. Retrieved from www.developingchild.harvard.edu.

programs from the beginning”¹⁴. Echoing Commissioner Gooda, it is our experience that the key challenge in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs has been the failure of government to enable self-determination and enable communities to design, deliver and implement their own priorities, policies and programs. As such, we call for a renewed focus by all levels of government, through a rights-based framework, on the realisation of self-determination as a key foundation for achieving improved outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, reflecting international evidence.

While a clear framework for such an approach has been presented elsewhere¹⁵, AbSec suggests that clear measures of self-determination and community empowerment within the Closing the Gap framework could increase achievement toward this important goal. Further, AbSec acknowledges the need for a holistic and aspirational approach to further strengthen progress on all targets, however we suggest that this is oriented toward “thriving families and communities” rather than “prosperity”. This reflects concerns that a focus on prosperity might derail a holistic focus in favour of prioritising economic participation, while “thriving families and communities” reinforces this holistic view and reflects the developmental science that thriving families and communities provide an optimal environment for children to flourish. Importantly, local communities must be empowered to establish their own priorities, strategies and action plans, which will in turn contribute to broader high level targets involving both State and Federal governments. This implementation could be supported by a distinct commissioning framework that invests in community controlled approaches and builds the capacity and capabilities of communities to achieve their aspirations, and in doing so our shared goals for the Closing the Gap strategy.

¹⁴ Special Gathering Statement: Building pathways for Future Prosperity, available at: <https://closingthegaprefresh.pmc.gov.au/news/special-gathering-statement>, accessed 24 April 2018

¹⁵ Gooda, M. (2013) *Social Justice and Native Title Report 2013*, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Australian Human Rights Commission