

NESA Response to the:

Closing the Gap Refresh

April 2018

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About NESA

The National Employment Services Association (NESA), established in 1997, is the peak body of the Australian employment services sector.

NESA is dedicated to a vision of opportunity for everyone through employment and inclusion. Employment inclusion and participation are cornerstones of the economic and social health of society. For the individual, employment participation is more than a means to income; it provides connection, purpose and inclusion. Employment participation and productivity are key drivers of economic growth and underpin the quality of life of all Australians, enabling access to such things as a well-functioning health system, quality education and a strong social safety net.

The Australian employment services sector plays a critical role in preparing Australians to participate productively in the labour market and connecting them to employment opportunities. NESA's mission is to lead a sustainable, effective and diverse employment services sector to support individual job seekers and employers and to help our nation achieve employment participation objectives.

NESA's membership encompasses the breadth of Australia's diverse labour market assistance programmes including the Community Development Programme (CDP), jobactive, Disability Employment Services (DES), Transition to Work (TTW), Youth Jobs PaTH, ParentsNext, Work for the Dole Coordinator Services and Vocational Training & Employment Centres (VTEC). A large proportion of NESA members deliver multiple programs.

Our membership is extensive and diverse, and open to all contracted providers (for-profit, not-for-profit and public). NESA delivers intensive policy, operational and capacity building support to member organisations. NESA works collaboratively with Government Departments, agencies and non-government stakeholders to support the effective delivery of labour market assistance and social policy. Our intensive member and stakeholder interaction provides unique insight into the policy and operational settings that underpin labour market assistance.

NESA is committed to working with our members, communities and Government to Close the Gap in outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Our advocacy work has focused on industry-led solutions for the employment services sector to increase the employment participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across Australia.

Introduction

The National Employment Services Association (NESA) is the peak body of the Australian employment services sector. Our membership delivers a range of programmes that support Indigenous people into work, predominantly through Australian Government funded employment services. In doing so they have a key contribution to make in addressing the disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, particularly in the areas of employment.

NESA understand the value of work in improving the lives of individuals. Since the Closing the Gap targets were first set in 2008, NESA have worked with our Membership and successive Governments to identify policy and programme opportunities that will accelerate outcomes for Indigenous people through employment services against these targets. Many of these improvements have been taken on board, resulting in positive results for job seekers across remote and non-remote Australia.

We note that the Discussion Paper is designed to gain feedback from a wide range of stakeholders, but that it has a focus on the obtaining the views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Given this in considering our response to this Discussion Paper, NESA have only responded to those questions where we feel we can offer a point of view based on our experience in employment and related initiatives. There are therefore questions contained within the Discussion Paper which NESA will not be providing feedback on, noting that Indigenous people and communities offer a more appropriate voice in these areas.

That said, we believe as a peak body for employment services providers who have committed considerable effort over the past decade to Closing the Gap, and an organisation with over 20 years' experience in contributing to social policy, there are several areas we can offer feedback.

In considering our feedback as part of the Closing the Gap Refresh, NESA are of the view that:

- The Closing the Gap agenda is important and should be retained. A focus on prosperity is positive and will tie efforts across agreed measures together in a more holistic manner.
- Employment should be retained as a target under Closing the Gap.
- Policy and programme design must be done in a way that allows service providers to contribute effectively to Closing the Gap. Service Providers have a valuable contribution to make in terms of how this can be done.
- Communication of the benefits of Closing the Gap across the broader Australian community is critical to ensuring a national commitment to the process.
- In driving effort to improve outcomes under Closing the Gap, greater local ownership and accountability is necessary. Governance arrangements which drive collaboration between Government, communities and other stakeholders in determining activities, action and investment is needed to do this.

- Improvements in data collection, use and monitoring are necessary to underpin implementation of efforts in Closing the Gap.

General Feedback

Support for Closing the Gap

NESA are supportive of the continuation of a national framework which monitors progress of Governments and communities to improve the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We support the continued operation of a shared national commitment to ending disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. We support a framework that includes measurable targets which will drive and coordinate efforts of Government and community.

In doing so, we support principles for approach and implementation identified within the Discussion paper of:

- Funding prioritised to meet targets
- Evidence-based programs and policies
- Genuine collaboration between governments and communities
- Programs and services tailored for communities
- Shared decision-making and
- Clear roles, responsibilities and accountability

These principles are consistent with those we have heard from our Membership and the Indigenous communities in which we work with.

Retaining Employment Measures as part of the Closing the Gap Refresh

NESA believe it is critical to retain Closing the Gap targets related to employment. Employment is a key determinant of wellbeing. It underpins economic independence and changes the lives of individuals and families. In our work with Indigenous job seekers and communities, the achievement of ongoing employment is always noted as an individual and community priority.

Australia has benefitted from having an employment Closing the Gap target. While progress over the past ten years against this target has been variable, its existence has ensured a continued focus on employment as a key desired outcome for Government, communities and business. It has ensured that questions are asked of policy makers, service providers and individuals around what is working, and what needs improvement. This focus should be retained as part of any revised Close the Gap policy.

In doing so, NESA note that employment is in many ways a 'downstream' indicator within the Closing the Gap framework. The opportunities for individuals to participate in employment are impacted by

opportunities to participate in schooling, literacy and numeracy and health and wellbeing. As such, we again urge those involved in establishing and monitoring progress against indicators to consider elements in a holistic manner.

Framework for Prosperity – A Coordinated Strengths Based Approach

A focus on prosperity as outlined in the Refresh material is welcomed. NESAs support a strength-based model which aligns Closing the Gap targets with the aspirations and achievements of Indigenous people. Our work within Indigenous communities across Australia notes the frustration of outcomes and lives being measured from a deficit basis, and within silos. A focus on the overall prosperity which requires targets to consider how they contribute across each of these elements is therefore welcome.

A focus on prosperity also frames any Closing the Gap measures more readily in the context of success and achievement, underpinned by the interconnecting themes of the individual, economic, environment and community. This framework lends itself more to ensuring that Close the Gap measures are viewed holistically, with the interdependence between measures is not lost in either implementation, or evaluation. We believe this will drive better investment and coordination.

Stronger focus on shared priorities and coordinating investment

NESAs believe a challenge to achieving outcomes against Closing the Gap targets has not been because of an inability to define the targets. It has been in ensuring priorities are shared across key stakeholders and that coordination of activities works to support achievement against these targets.

The opportunity exists as the framework for Closing the Gap is refined to ensure that there is a stronger commitment to establishing shared priorities and better governance, supported by coordinated investment.

Within this, governance arrangements must be in place that ensures transparency in decision making, and accountability in actions. Indigenous people must be included in decisions which determine setting local priorities, defining activities and directing investment. Government programmes and contracting mechanisms should be designed in a way which provide the flexibility for service providers to tailor their delivery in response to this. For example, mainstream employment services, delivered through the jobactive programme support the majority Indigenous job seekers in Australia to find employment. Jobactive services are contracted through a standard contract. For these services to be able to respond to local need and priorities, flexibility and tailoring of guidelines must be present.

Accountability must also be accompanied by an authorising environment which allows Government to respond to community and business feedback. Government Departments need to be given the resourcing and flexibility to drive decision making and innovation at the local level. Officers should be allowed to

operate in a way that creates partnerships, manage risk and drives innovation with service providers and communities.

The Closing the Gap Refresh offers the opportunity to review the underpinning structural pillars of implementation such as those outlined above, to allow for an acceleration of outcomes moving forward.

Greater Stability and Consistency in Policy and Programme Design

Stability and consistency in policy and programme design is required to ensure Closing the Gap targets can be achieved. In our experience services and programmes related to Closing the Gap in employment are all too often subject to regular large scale reform, rapid implementation timeframes, or both. The timing implementation and speed in how initiatives and activities have been introduced that has impacted the success and traction.

NESA support approaches which seek to ensure supports evolve and adapt to meeting needs. Where policies clearly are not achieving outcomes, then it is incumbent on all to review them. However, to see greater success in our efforts to Close the Gap in employment greater consideration needs to be given to the impacts of reform, change and implementation.

More Accountability and Transparency in Monitoring and Delivery

NESA agree with the Discussion Paper's premise that greater accountability and transparency around outcomes, opportunities and investment is needed to accelerate success under Closing the Gap.

We are pleased to see COAG's commitment to local, regional and national targets as part of the Refresh. Supported by the development of local action plans, this will ensure greater engagement, accountability and transparency. This approach should also drive better collaboration in terms of effort across both Government and communities and reducing the likelihood of working in silos.

Discussion Paper Questions

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

To better measure what is working and what is not, greater support and investment is required in capturing the experience of all stakeholders in contributing to Closing the Gap targets. Better, more regular data is necessary to measure what is working and what is not. This includes both quantitative and qualitative information.

Creating new data partnerships with academics, business and peak bodies will expand Government's ability to develop this data. NESA and our Membership hold considerable information on what is working, and what is not in terms of achieving outcomes against employment. The collation and promotion of

success stories also cannot be underestimated in terms of impact in delivering under Closing the Gap. A collaboration with NESAs on areas contributing to employment related issues could advance this.

How can Governments, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, and business work more effectively together?

There are considerable opportunities for Indigenous people, Government and business to work better together, to achieve improvements in Closing the Gap targets. NESAs offer the following suggestions as areas for improvement.

Policy and Programme Design aligned with targets

Having set targets, Government must ensure that policy and programme design efforts are aligned with Closing the Gap targets. Programme design must enable, not detract from service providers ability to deliver on outcomes. They must also be designed in a way that allows services to be adapted and changed in to response to local need. Contracting, funding and performance frameworks must align with this.

Engaging with service providers or their representatives is critical if this is to occur. As a peak body, NESAs are currently contributing in policy and programme design for employment services beyond 2020, and the reform of remote employment and participation services. NESAs are also well positioned to obtain this feedback and provide it to stakeholders and policy makers in an ongoing manner. This approach should be continued and embedded in policy design and programme implementation in an ongoing manner.

Strong Engagement with Services Providers

Ongoing engagement with service providers during the implementation of programmes will allow stakeholders to effectively work together.

Service providers engaged in delivering services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must be valued partners in delivering on outcomes for Indigenous people. NESAs work actively to ensure that the voice of the employment service industry contribute in this space.

Ensuring that services are engaged formally in planning, as well as in the day to day decisions on approaching service delivery and improvements must occur if improvements to past outcomes are to be achieved.

Investment in Communication on Closing the Gap

Closing the Gap can only be a shared priority of Government, Business and Community if it is understood across these groups. Investment must be made to build understanding of what Closing the Gap seeks to

achieve across all stakeholders. Shared understanding will drive shared commitment. Any refreshed Closing the Gap framework should take into consideration how this understanding will be built, and what investment and supports are needed to ensure this occurs.

Governments must continue to take on leadership in raising the awareness of the need, and benefits to our nation from working together to close the gap. Highlighting the disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, building awareness of the strength of Indigenous people, acknowledging and educating on the history of Indigenous Australia will contribute to this understanding.

Key partners to Closing the Gap, State and Territories can also provide stronger leadership on communication and promotion. With a commitment to more localised planning and targets under a refreshed framework, NESA would encourage the jurisdictions to also commit to their own annual reporting of progress, in addition to the current Closing the Gap report undertaken in the Federal Parliament each year.

Improved Data Collection and Confidence

To better monitor progress against targets, more detailed regular data sources must be identified, and collection methods established to allow for ongoing monitoring of achievement. Ensuring that information on each of the outcomes being measured is accessible and trusted is important in building the credibility of Closing the Gap.

For example, in considering data available with regards to labour market outcomes, localised information on employment and participation levels of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is difficult to obtain and is often not publicly available. This is exacerbated in remote locations. Without an ability to monitor consistent and robust data, tracking achievement and modifying policy and programmes is almost impossible.

As part of the Refresh process, consideration on how data will be captured must be considered. As noted previously, consideration to new data partnerships, and collections methods will be needed to do this efficiently and effectively

Initiatives to improve the underreporting and identification of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in data sets needs to be addressed. To do so, it will require investment in our communities to build their understanding and confidence on how data will be used. Communities hold the key to information on outcomes the community.

Improvements in these areas would build confidence and shared understanding of progress and contribute to allowing Government, business and communities to work better together.

Investing in the Culture and Skills to Collaborate and Innovate

It should not be assumed that Government, business and communities have the skills and capability to collaborate for impact. Working in partnership and collaboration requires more than the good will of stakeholders to be done effectively.

Governments must invest in the capability of their staff to support and enable innovations that contribute to Closing the Gap. Investment must also be made in cultures within Departments to take risks and innovate. Decentralising decision making within Government to be as close the ground as possible is also necessary. This ensures that local conditions are considered when looking at programme and investment decisions. It also builds greater accountability, and stronger more transparent relationships between partners, building a stronger platform for collaboration.

Consideration should be given to how communities and their representatives can also be supported to collaborate effectively. This could include investment in the skills of leadership within communities, or adapting processes to better respond to community strengths, as opposed to delivering within Government and other external frameworks is necessary.

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

As noted, NESAs strongly support the retention of specific employment targets within the Closing the Gap refresh. In doing so, we encourage the ongoing monitoring of data and activities which are interrelated to employment. For example, tracking participation rates, reviewing access to income support, and skills and education attainment information. All data contributes to building a picture of what is working, and what is needed to Close the Gap.

In addition to this, NESAs consider that there is value in retaining monitoring of data against all current measures as part of any refresh of the Closing the Gap agenda. The targets as outlined over the past decade offer a longitudinal view of progress across a range of measures. In doing so, they provide a consistent report on progress against key areas of focus on Australia's First Nation's people. If not retained as distinct measures, ongoing monitoring against established data sets for measures should be considered.

Moving Forward

NESAs recognise that this Discussion Paper is one part of the consultation process to refresh the Closing the Gap targets. Moving forward, NESAs can continue to contribute to this discussion, subject to the needs of the process. Areas where we may be able to offer continued assistance include:

- Engaging with our service providers to support specific consultations with Government on their perspectives on what is necessary to support a refreshed Closing the Gap framework. This could include a focus on working with their Indigenous staff
- Engaging Indigenous job seekers through our Membership for specific consultations on their perspectives of what is necessary to support a refreshed Closing the Gap framework.

Once the refreshed framework is finalised, NESAs are also well placed to assist in supporting implementation through:

- Exploring new data partnerships which could underpin the monitoring of outcomes under specific Closing the Gap measures
- Identifying opportunities to promote the benefits and importance of Closing the Gap across our network of service providers, and through their network of employers
- Continued collaboration at the national and local level on policy and programme reform, including through our Indigenous Employment Special Interest Group; and
- Work with our members and other stakeholders in locations both in remote and non-remote Australia to trial methods to plan and coordinate activity and services for impact.



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