



## Closing the Gap 'Refresh' Brief

This document outlines SNAICC's key calls for the Closing the Gap 'refresh' process.

### SNAICC's Key Calls

We have a shared responsibility to ensure the right of every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child to be safe and thrive in family, community and culture.

To achieve this:

1. an **additional Closing the Gap target** should be included to eliminate the over-representation of our children in out-of-home care by 2040, with sub-targets that address the underlying causes of child protection intervention; and
2. the current Closing the Gap target on early childhood education should be **strengthened** to encompass early childhood development and **expanded** to close the gap in outcomes for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from birth to 4 years by 2030.

## Context

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It has been 10 years since Closing the Gap began. There are now only three of the seven national targets reported as being on track and four are due to expire in 2018.

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) is currently undertaking the Closing the Gap 'refresh' process. This process is a crucial opportunity to influence the next phase of the Closing the Gap agenda, which will form the framework over the next 10 years for all Australian governments to advance outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It will also provide the framework for how government funding is prioritised to meet the targets.

## Need and Imperative

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### A new Closing the Gap target to eliminate over-representation in out-of-home care by 2040

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are significantly over-represented at every point in child protection systems. It has been over 20 years since the *Bringing Them Home* report was released, and February 2018 marks 10 years since the historic Apology to the Stolen Generations. Despite this, the rate of removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is at an all-time high, and is continuing to grow at alarming rates.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are over 10 times more likely to be residing in out-of-home care than non-Indigenous children. More than one in every three children in out-of-home care is Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. The number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care is projected to triple by 2035 if today's conditions remain the same and significant reform is not undertaken immediately.

This significant over-representation has widespread social and economic consequences. The removal of a child doesn't just result in removal from the family – it also often leads to disconnection from community, culture and country, and further contributes to the intergenerational trauma experienced by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This disconnection is a major cause of poor outcomes and experiences for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across all facets of life, both in the immediate and long-term. Given the impacts of the experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the out-of-home care system, this creates a major long-term burden for all Australian governments through expenditure on the welfare system, the criminal justice system and issues such as family violence.

There is a compelling need to eliminate the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander in out-of-home care by addressing the underlying causes of child protection intervention. An additional Closing the Gap target and related sub-targets would be the most effective way for all Australian governments to achieve this.

The sole key indicator to determine whether the target has been met would be closing the gap in the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care compared with non-Indigenous children.

A number of key indicators or sub-targets should also be adopted to determine whether this target is being achieved, namely:

1. Full compliance with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle
2. Substantiation and re-substantiation rates
3. Rates of referral and access to early intervention supports following substantiation
4. Reunification rates with family or kin

An additional Closing the Gap target to eliminate over-representation in out-of-home care must also be underpinned by the development of a comprehensive national strategy that is both adequately resourced and developed in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This strategy must target improved wellbeing for our children and address the key drivers of child protection intervention across issues including inter-generational trauma, poverty, family violence, mental health and substance misuse. The strategy must drive culturally safe prevention and early intervention responses that support families to stay safely together.

### **A strengthened target to close the gap in early childhood development outcomes by 2030**

One of the current Closing the Gap targets is to ensure that 95 per cent of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 4-year-olds are enrolled in early childhood education by 2025. Despite some progress towards this target, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children remain significantly under-represented in early years services.

Furthermore, evidence clearly demonstrates that engagement in early childhood education and care for children from birth to three years experiencing vulnerability is critical to ensuring positive outcomes later in life.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are twice as likely to be developmentally vulnerable early in life, and only half as likely to access early education as non-Indigenous children. In 2014 the Productivity Commission identified a 15,000 place gap in early learning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and since that time there has been no significant change in their representation in government approved child-care.

SNAICC therefore considers that the current Closing the Gap target on early childhood education should be expanded and strengthened to

- focus more broadly on early *childhood development outcomes*, rather than the current narrow focus on participation in early childhood education; and
- given the crucial importance of the early years, be expanded to include children from birth to 3 years, rather than the current narrow focus on 4 year olds.

To achieve this, SNAICC recommends the following as a revised key target:

**Key target:** To close the gap in the early childhood development domains contained in the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) by 2030.

**Sub-targets:**

- (a) To ensure that 95 per cent of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 3 and 4 year olds access 30 hours per week of early childhood education by 2030.
- (b) To ensure that an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community controlled integrated early years service is available for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from birth to 2 years living in areas of particular vulnerability by 2030.

A well-resourced Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood education and care sector is the most important component to achieving these targets and shifting the trajectory for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

### **SNAICC also wishes to highlight the following key points**

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- Consistent with the right to self-determination, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their representative organisations must be involved at all stages of the Closing the Gap refresh process, including in the development, implementation and monitoring of the Closing the Gap targets. This participation must be real and meaningful, and not merely rhetorical.
- The Closing the Gap refresh must plan for the adequate resourcing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and peak bodies as the experts in working with our own communities. Adequate resourcing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations is essential to achieving better designed approaches with more effective outcomes.
- The *Family Matters – Strong Communities, Strong Culture, Stronger Children* campaign has been established to drive a collaborative effort to see all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children grow up safe and cared for in family, community and culture. The *Family Matters Roadmap* presents an evidence-based vision and a clear and comprehensive set of strategies for how to fundamentally transform the failures of current policy and practice.
- The Queensland Government’s *Our Way* strategy represents an example of how governments can develop a long-term, whole-of-government strategy in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to work towards better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

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