

First Nations Aged Care Reform: A Five-Year Plan 2026-2031

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Summary

A proposal by:

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A Call to Action

This Second Five-Year Plan represents a united and unequivocal call from the eight (8) Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) delivering, or building capacity to deliver, non-residential aged care across five Australian jurisdictions.

We call on the Australian Government, the Parliament, and the System Governor to **act now to fully implement the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander aged care reform recommendations from the *Final Report of the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety in 2021***, including:

- An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander aged care pathway within the new aged care system
- Ensuring cultural safety in the aged care sector
- An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Aged Care Commissioner
- Prioritising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations as aged care providers
- Employment and training for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander aged care
- Setting a funding cycle for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander aged care
- Providing appropriate funding and program streams for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander aged care.

Despite the commitments made since the Royal Commission – and the foundation laid in the inaugural five-year plan *Our Care: Our Way: National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Aged Care Plan 2021-2026* – **progress has been insufficient**.

This second five-year plan (2026-2031) reflects the contemporary operating environment of the new *Aged Care Act 2024*, and the experiences of our organisations and our Communities since the 1 November 2025 of roll-out of the Support at Home Program and the Strengthened National Quality Standards.

This Plan retains the same baseline six (6) reform areas of the first plan; however, given insufficient progress, a seventh (7th) reform area **Institutional Reform** has been added to strengthen implementation and accountability.

1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
Access Pathways	Assessment Pathways	Service Delivery Pathways	Urban/Regional Strategy	Integrated Service Delivery	Direct Care Workforce	Institutional Reform

Action is now imperative. Without immediate and sustained commitment, the opportunity to achieve meaningful change by the Closing the Gap target date of 2031 will be lost. We urge Government to **endorse this plan in full** and in doing so:

- Establish clear and measurable access and equity targets.
 - Work in genuine partnership with our sector supporting ACCO-led delivery and culturally determined pathways
- Fund sustainable and timely service delivery, leveraging NATSIFACP and block funding principles.
 - Attend also to urban and regional realities, where the majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older persons live.

Key Messages

- We are launching this second Five-Year Plan in Canberra on nearly five years to the day since the first plan was launched at Parliament House.
- Since 2021, progress by Governments and the System Governor (the Department of Health, Disability and Ageing) **has been limited** to:
 - \$106M for face-to-face support (now “Access Support Workers”)
 - Capacity Building Projects enabling ACCOs to become providers, reaching 2,300+ First Nations Elders
 - Expansion of flexible block funding (NATSIFACP) into metropolitan sub-regions (following the success of the Capacity Building Projects)
 - The eventual commissioning of three Indigenous Aged Care Needs Assessment pilot sites (late 2025)
 - Development of the *Ten-Year Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Aged Care 2025-2035* by the First Nations Aged Care Governance Group
- Despite this and after five years, a **minimum 10 percentage point access gap** for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older people persists – and this equity gap is likely **closer to double** when accounting for known indicators of social disadvantage.
- 41% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live in capital cities, and 85% in urban areas. **Access inequity is most acute where most people live**—with rates as low as 8% in capital city regions.
- Independent oversight bodies – the Interim First Nations Aged Care Commissioner and the Inspector-General of Aged Care – have been clear: **Royal Commission recommendations for First Nations aged care remain largely unimplemented.**
- The Government – through the System Governor – has instead clearly signalled a shift toward **“mainstreaming”**, rather than delivering a dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pathway.
- The *Aged Care Act 2024* **fails to embed the reforms promised**, despite prior assurances from the then Deputy-Secretary and First Assistant Secretary of the System Governor.
- The ACCOs behind this Plan are united in a single objective: **end systemic inequity and deliver real, measurable, equitable outcomes for our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older persons.**



Indigenous Access Pathways

- 1.1. Set a parity target:** To close the parity gap, a minimum of 61,070 First Nations older persons must achieve access into the aged care system in the five-year period 2026-2031. Noting this would achieve parity based on a 2025 population estimates and to achieve true parity in 2031 would actually require a higher target.
- 1.2. Set an equity target:** To achieve an equity access target of 41% of the age eligible First Nations cohort, which is almost 78,000 of the ERP of 190,000 in mid-2026, an additional 42,000 First Nations older persons must achieve access into the aged care system in the ten-year period 2026-2036.
- 1.3. Set Access Support Workers Metrics:** The two core metrics for every Access Support Worker, commencing from 1 July 2026, will be an evidence-based number of First Nations older persons who have been newly registered with an ID in MyAgedCare cross referenced against Elders who have started to receive aged care.
- 1.4. Redeploy Access Support Workers funding:** Access Support Workers funding will be redeployed from 1 July 2027 in accordance with evidence of need based on aligning demographic and service delivery data from completion of a national audit of regional variations in aged care system access by First Nations older persons, as per Recommendation 30 from the Aged Care Royal Commission.

Priority Actions



Indigenous Assessment Pathways

2.1. With immediate effect needs are Assessor – not algorithm – determined:

There is sufficient operational experience to confirm the original policy propositions that all aged care needs assessments for First Nations older persons should be determined by qualified Assessors with respect to culturally-appropriate determined level of care, personalised Support Plan, and associated budget, with immediate effect

2.2. Establish regional assessment infrastructure, nationwide: by 30 June 2031 establish a regionally based infrastructure of Indigenous Assessment Organisations throughout metropolitan-urban-rural-remote geographies, with culturally appropriate “pilots” contributing design and operational guidance.

2.3. Establish Indigenous Assessors as a workforce stream: A specific, targeted Workforce Stream should be designed and its implementation embedded within the broader Indigenous Employment Initiative (IEI) Program, to commence from 1 July 2027, aimed at producing qualified clinical and non-clinical Indigenous Assessors, for employment within the regionally based Indigenous Assessment Organisations.

Priority Actions



Indigenous Service Delivery Pathways

- 3.1. As recommended by the Aged Care Royal Commission, implement a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander aged care pathway operating within the Support at Home Program (SAHP) Framework and leveraging the program guidelines of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Flexible Aged Care Program (NATSIFACP):** The Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety made it clear that a new Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander aged care pathway is required supported by an appropriate funding model. The 2024 proposal put forward by IUIH and ACCO capacity building partners outlines a clear pathway for community-based aged care which is well within the guardrails of the SAHP and leverages the NATSIFACP guidelines – currently predominantly operating in remote Australia, to ensure ACCOs can access block funding to deliver care flexibly to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older persons everywhere.
- 3.2. Amend the Aged Care Act 2024:** at Chapter 2, Entry to the Commonwealth Aged Care System Part 4 Prioritisation Section 64, should be amended by 31 December 2026 so that:
- **Every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person who is assessed as eligible for and requiring access to service types in service groups will immediately be offered service delivery; and**
 - **Every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person who is awaiting formal needs assessment will be immediately eligible for receipt of a bespoke suite of home and community care services that address an individual’s basic and essential needs such as showering, cleaning and meals.**
- 3.3. Implement the ACCO Capacity Building Governing Board’s Funding Model:** The November 2024 “Funding Model Proposal” from the Governing Board to the System Governor for First Nations clients and service providers should be incorporated by 31 December 2026 into new, additional *Rules of the Aged Care Act 2024* under the provisions for “specialist aged care program” at Chapter 4, Part 2, Division 5, Section 247 and specified at Section 264.

Priority Actions



Urban/Regional Strategy

- 4.1. Expand capital city provider infrastructure:** The successes of the Aged Care Capacity Building Project 2022-2026 demonstrate that a more robust Indigenous aged care provider infrastructure can be fostered progressively in the sub-metropolitan regions of the eight capital cities by 30 June 2031.
- 4.2. Immediate access to essential aged care supports through a flexible funding model (ref Rec 3.1):** ACCO Aged Care providers to be flexibly funded to provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people newly entering the aged care system to have immediate access to supports that address the known, constant service requirements for domestic assistance, meals, social support, and transport.
- 4.3. Legislative Recognition:** The *Aged Care Act 2024* should be amended before 31 December 2026 at Section 247 to specifically and by name designate NATSIFACP as a “specialist aged care program”, and Rules should be co-designed with First Nations service providers for the expansion of NATSIFACP to all urban-rural-remote regions from 1 July 2027, consistent with the 2024 “Funding Model” Proposal.

Priority Actions



Integrated Service Delivery

- 5.1. Establish a Service System Integration Program:** The System Governor should transition the existing “Aged Care Capacity Building Project” into a “Service System Integration Program for Aged Care and Primary Health Care” from 1 July 2027 for applications from ACCHSs in sub-metropolitan regions, provincial cities, and rural regions.

Direct Care Workforce

- 6.1. Independent development of an Aged Care Workforce Plan:** Control of the development process for an Aged Care Workforce Plan aligned with this *Five-Year Plan* and the broader Ten-Year Transformational Plan must be centralised under the proposed First Nations Aged Care Division (see Action 7.3) and co-designed with Indigenous aged care service providers, commencing 1 January 2027.
- 6.2. Expand and re-focus the Indigenous Employment Initiative (IEI) Program:** The IEI Program should be expanded, and its additional funding refocused to support the start-up of new Indigenous aged care service providers under the broad Urban/Regional Strategy and to the expanded Aged Care Capacity Building Program, in line with the development of a connected pathway across all siloed areas of the aged care system.

Priority Actions



Institutional System Reform

- 7.1. Legislative Recognition of UNDRIP:** Amend the *Aged Care Act 2024* to embed recognition of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP), by 31 December 2026.
- 7.2. Independent statutory recognition of the First Nations Commissioner:** Amend the *Aged Care Act 2024* to embed the First Nations Aged Care Commissioner as an independent statutory officeholder, within the Office of the Inspector-General of Aged Care, by 31 December 2026.
- 7.3. Establish a First Nations Aged Care Division:** The System Governor, at the direction of the Minister for Health, Disabilities and Ageing, must establish, to operate from 1 January 2027, a full, professionally and adequately staffed First Nations Aged Care Division. This Division would incorporate the existing First Nations Aged Care Branch responsible for NATSIFACP and the IEI, and also managing the Capacity Building Project and the Indigenous Assessment Pilot, but with the additional management responsibility for policy and programs relating to implementation of this entire Five-Year plan. This Division would have authority to, and responsibility for:
- Managing end-to-end integration of the siloed parts of the aged care system and providing a whole of pathway view.
 - Implementing and reporting - to Government and to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community - on implementation of the First Nations recommendations from the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety and the Ten-Year Transformation Plan for First Nations Aged Care Reform (see Action 7.4).

Priority Actions

- 7.4. Co-design a Ten-Year Transformation Plan for First Nations Aged Care Reform:** Implement the core recommendation from the Interim First Nations Aged Care Commissioner, for the System Governor to co-design a Ten-Year Transformation Plan for First Nations Aged Care Reform, incorporating this Five-Year Plan 2026-2031.
- 7.5. Make the Ten-Year Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Aged Care 2025-2035 an auditable document:** The Minister for Aged Care to direct the System Governor that the Ministerially-approved Ten-Year Framework is an auditable document, subject to periodic performance audit by the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) and co-designed implementation monitoring which includes the ACCO authors of this *Five-Year Plan*.





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