



MEDIA RELEASE

For immediate release

First Nations communities lead the way in Closing the Gap – Federal government evaluation confirms effectiveness of the Children’s Ground Approach

An independent federal government evaluation has confirmed Children’s Ground is delivering measurable outcomes that directly support the objectives of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. This confirmation comes as national Closing the Gap results continue to show structural failure, with only four targets on track, four worsening and the majority not on track to be met.

Parliamentary debate this week reflected heightened scrutiny of Closing the Gap performance and renewed calls for accountability. While the Minister for Indigenous Australians reaffirmed the government’s commitment to the National Agreement and the need to persist, national outcomes continue to demand approaches that demonstrably shift results. Demonstrated, independently verified outcomes must inform government action.

An independent evaluation commissioned by the Australian Government Department of Health, Disability and Ageing and undertaken by Allen and Clarke provides a comprehensive assessment of the Children’s Ground Approach across Central Australia and Darwin. The evaluation confirms that the model delivers a First Nations designed, integrated and evidence-based response to complex disadvantage, implemented effectively in communities facing serious economic and structural challenges.

The report identifies the Children’s Ground Approach as aligned with leading practice for prevention and responsiveness to complex disadvantage through holistic, place based and First Nations led design. It confirms that community governance and local employment are central drivers of impact, enabling communities to exercise control and shape solutions that reflect their priorities.

Critically, the evaluation found that “activities delivered under the Children’s Ground approach align closely with government priorities, as set out in departmental and inter-departmental plans and strategies, and in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.” This finding formally recognises the approach as operating within and advancing the government’s own reform architecture.

The evaluation also found that activities are implemented effectively because they respond directly to the needs and circumstances of the communities involved. It assessed the cost of implementation

as reasonable given the context and alignment with leading practice, noting that greater efficiency and effectiveness will rely on consistent and long-term funding.

The evaluation was commissioned to inform the Australian Government's consideration of future funding for Children's Ground. It makes clear that sustained, coordinated investment is essential to maintain and strengthen impact over time. Among its key recommendations, the evaluation calls for a coordinated, multi departmental funding approach over an initial seven-year period to support long-term delivery and the generation of evidence on outcomes in Central Australia and Darwin. It also recommends the establishment of an inter-agency governance group to oversee funding implementation.

These recommendations go directly to the structural challenges identified in Closing the Gap reporting and reinforced through recent Productivity Commission data on youth detention, suicide and out of home care. In 2025, Productivity Commission Commissioner Selwyn Button emphasised that progress is unlikely unless governments fundamentally rethink how they work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and commit to sustained, long-term reform. The independent evaluation of Children's Ground aligns with that assessment. It identifies stability, coordination and community governance as core conditions for success and makes clear that long-term reform cannot be achieved through short term, fragmented funding cycles.

Children's Ground is designed as a 25-year intergenerational strategy focused on prevention, early intervention and whole of community change. It operates as a unified, place-based system centred on children and families, led and governed by First Nations people with decision making authority held at community level.

Children's Ground has been sustained largely through philanthropic investment, with government funding contributing to specific program areas. The independent evaluation confirms the effectiveness of the Approach and outlines what is required to deliver it at scale. Expanding its reach and impact will require sustained, long-term government funding.

Children's Ground has been engaged in long term, ongoing discussions with government regarding the future of the Approach. A major, coordinated funding commitment has yet to be confirmed.

Quotes attributable to Veronica Doolan, Children's Ground's Head of Cultural Integrity in Research and Evaluation:

"The government commissioned this report. We met with them, we shared our research and evaluation openly, and we worked with independent external evaluators throughout the process. The evaluation confirms that our Approach is delivering measurable outcomes aligned with Closing the Gap priorities. This process began in 2024. It is now 2026 and we are still waiting for a formal funding commitment in response to the evaluation."

"We have been transparent about what we do and how we measure our impact. The findings are clear and independently assessed. The next move sits with government. If there is genuine commitment to achieving the Closing the Gap targets, then supporting a First Nations organisation that is already delivering measurable outcomes is a straightforward and responsible step."

END