



2026-2027 Federal Budget Incremental Progression or Actual Reform

Response by First Nations Economics

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Acknowledgement of Country

First Nations Economics acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as the First Peoples and Traditional Custodians of Australia, their lands, seas, and skies.

Our offices are located on the traditional lands of the Gadigal and Wangal clans of the Eora Nation in Camperdown, the traditional lands of the Bundjalung Nation in Lennox Head, and the traditional lands of the Whadjuk Noongar people in Perth, Western Australia.

We have staff on the lands of the Larrakia, the Yuggera, the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung, and the Bunurong / Boon Wurrung peoples. We pay our respects to the Elders of these lands, past and present, and thank them for their ongoing custodianship of Country.

We acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded. These lands, waterways and skies are, and will always be, sovereign Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lands.

1. Executive Summary

The 2026–27 Federal Budget delivers a substantial package of targeted investment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, with \$793.7 million committed across health, remote employment, food security, maternal care, family violence prevention, and support for children and young people. Many of these measures respond to long-standing advocacy from First Nations peak bodies and community-controlled sectors, particularly in areas where Aboriginal-led service delivery is already demonstrating strong results. Major investments in remote jobs, renal dialysis, Birthing on Country, food affordability and the new National Commission for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People indicate that government is increasingly willing to fund practical, community-based responses.

But this is not a structural reform budget. It remains primarily a service-delivery budget that expands programs while avoiding the deeper economic and governance changes needed to shift long-term outcomes. The core economic question is not simply how much government is spending, but what assets, institutions and decision-making power that spending builds in Aboriginal communities. On that measure, the Budget remains cautious. It does not deliver the scale of housing investment, justice reinvestment, capital access, wealth-building strategy or transfer of authority that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations have consistently called for. What is needed now is not only continued funding for services, but structural reform: large-scale Aboriginal housing investment, stronger pathways for Aboriginal enterprise and community-owned assets, long-term funding for community-controlled organisations, and genuine transfer of decision-making power and accountability to our communities.



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2. Introduction

This is not a reform budget. It is a service-delivery budget that funds important programs while continuing to avoid structural economic reform and genuine transfer of power.

The real test of the Australian Government's 2026–27 Budget will not be its announcement value, but whether investment reaches communities, shifts decision-making locally, and delivers outcomes our communities themselves define. While the Budget contains substantial operational investment, the larger challenge remains structural. Are governments prepared to redesign the systems of decision-making, accountability and resource distribution that shape how they work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities?

Services matter, and many of the measures announced are worthwhile. But services alone do not close structural gaps. Governments must invest in the assets, institutions and authority that First Nations communities know will create change. Without delivering capital into housing, justice reinvestment, access to financial capital, economic sovereignty and long-term community control, the Budget remains incremental rather than transformational.

Leading with a Closing the Gap package of \$793.7 million over five years, the Budget includes substantial investment in First Nations health, remote employment, food security, maternal care, children and young people, and family violence prevention. While the Budget aligns closely with many operational priorities identified by First Nations peak bodies, it falls short of the deeper structural reforms our communities have continued to call for in areas such as economic sovereignty, housing, justice reform and long-term investment.

While the announcement is one of the largest dedicated Closing the Gap investment packages announced in recent Commonwealth budgets, it is still substantially smaller than historic Indigenous housing and structural expenditure programs, particularly remote housing, and smaller still against defence capability uplift and fuel security and resilience.

3. Jobs, Business and Procurement

The largest First Nations-specific measure is the expansion of the Remote Jobs and Economic Development (RJED) program (\$299.0 million over five years) to deliver an additional 3,000 jobs in remote communities. This reflects sustained advocacy from communities and economic development organisations for locally based employment pathways that replace passive welfare models with community-based work and service delivery. Research consistently shows employment is associated

with improved health, wellbeing and economic participation outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, particularly in remote communities^[1].

The Budget also coincides with significant changes to the Indigenous Procurement Policy (IPP), including strengthened eligibility requirements requiring businesses to be at least 51 per cent First Nations owned and controlled from July 2026. While the reforms are intended to strengthen integrity and ensure procurement spending delivers genuine Aboriginal economic benefit, they also raise broader questions about how governments define Indigenous economic participation and value. Procurement systems have traditionally focused on private ownership structures and contract participation, despite many Aboriginal community-controlled and not-for-profit organisations generating substantial local economic and social value through employment, service delivery, capability building and reinvestment into community outcomes

As governments increasingly rely on Aboriginal businesses and organisations to deliver programs and services, procurement settings will play an important role in determining whether Budget investment translates into long-term Aboriginal business growth and economic participation. Future procurement settings may require more sophisticated approaches to measuring Indigenous economic participation beyond narrow ownership thresholds alone, particularly as governments increasingly rely on Aboriginal organisations to deliver services, infrastructure and regional development outcomes.

The reforms also raise broader questions about how governments define and measure Indigenous economic benefit. While the procurement policy has traditionally focused on Indigenous business ownership and contract participation, Aboriginal community-controlled and not-for-profit organisations also play a significant economic role through local employment, capability building and reinvestment of revenue into community outcomes. Increasingly, there is a need to better understand how economic and social value flows through Aboriginal-led organisations, including hybrid models that combine commercial activity with community reinvestment and long-term economic development guidelines.

4. Health

The Budget also includes significant investments in community-controlled health, including:

- \$53.0 million for remote renal dialysis services and workforce accommodation;
- \$44.4 million to expand culturally safe Birthing on Country programs; and
- \$144.1 million over five years for urgent community-controlled health infrastructure upgrades and maintenance.

Additional health-related measures include \$200.0 million over five years under the National Health Reform Agreement Better Health Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People Schedule, matched by states and territories, which is designed as "system uplift" funding, helping governments and health systems actually implement the new First Nations health reforms rather than just talking about them. It also sits alongside \$48.7 million in implementation funding and targeted mental health investments, including:

- culturally appropriate mental health services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples;
- expansion of 13YARN crisis supports;
- trauma-informed and healing-based approaches; and
- and community-led social and emotional wellbeing responses.

These investments are particularly important because they strengthen areas where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, health workers and community-controlled organisations have long demonstrated leadership in improving health and wellbeing outcomes.

Despite ongoing structural barriers to healthcare access, especially in remote and very remote communities, and despite the burden of disease remaining substantially higher for mob, community-controlled health services continue to play a critical role in prevention, chronic disease management and culturally safe care delivery^[3]. The continued prevalence of chronic disease, including diabetes, chronic kidney disease and end-stage renal failure within our communities, particularly in remote areas where access to preventative healthcare and dialysis remains limited, reinforces the importance of sustained investment in early intervention, culturally safe care and locally governed health infrastructure^[4].

At the same time, governments continue to invest relatively little in long-term comparative evaluation between mainstream and Aboriginal community-controlled delivery models, despite growing evidence that culturally governed services improve engagement, trust, continuity of care and long-term participation outcomes.

We note that the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO) has consistently called for increased investment in community-controlled healthcare, maternal care, chronic disease prevention, workforce capability and remote access to services, and these measures are likely to be among the most impactful elements of the Budget^[5].

However, from an economic perspective, one of the key limitations is that the Budget remains heavily weighted toward service responses rather than the broader determinants of health. International and Australian research consistently demonstrates that long-term health outcomes are strongly shaped by housing quality, overcrowding, employment, education, food affordability and access to infrastructure^[6].

5. Young People and Education

The Budget also contains several targeted education and youth measures, including:

- \$55.5 million for the Clontarf Foundation;
- \$30.0 million for Australian Indigenous Education Foundation scholarships; and
- \$23.8 million for Indigenous boarding providers.

Smaller investments were also made in literacy initiatives, including support for MultiLit, and community-led child and youth development organisations such as Children's Ground.

The Budget also reflects a familiar tension in Indigenous policy: strong rhetoric around self-determination paired with funding models that still concentrate institutional power outside Aboriginal hands. Outcomes matter, but so does who holds the resources, relationships and long-term authority to shape them.

This remains one of the central unresolved tensions within Closing the Gap policy. Governments are increasingly willing to fund Aboriginal-led programs while retaining highly centralised control over commissioning, reporting frameworks, policy settings and institutional authority.

The Government has also committed \$42.8 million over five years to establish permanent statutory arrangements for the National Commission for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People. The measure reflects growing recognition of the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led approaches to child wellbeing, early intervention and family support, particularly given the longstanding overrepresentation of First Nations children across child protection systems and successive state and federal government inability to address it. AIHW data shows First Nations children are around 11 times more likely to be in out-of-home care than non-Indigenous children, while rates of youth detention remain disproportionately high^[7].

At the same time, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have long maintained strong kinship systems, collective caregiving practices and culturally grounded approaches to raising children, which research increasingly recognises as critical protective factors for social, emotional and cultural wellbeing^[8]. Yet child protection systems continue to struggle to incorporate these strengths within highly standardised statutory models that often remain externally designed and centrally administered.

The establishment of a permanent national body may strengthen independent advocacy and accountability in areas where Closing the Gap outcomes continue to deteriorate^[9].

6. Food Security

In remote communities, the Budget expands food affordability and supply measures through \$32.7 million for the Store Efficiency and Resilience Package and \$27.4 million to expand the Low-Cost Essentials Subsidy Scheme across 225 remote stores.

These measures recognise the ongoing food security pressures experienced across many remote Aboriginal communities, where high freight costs, supply-chain complexity and limited market competition continue to drive extreme grocery prices. Parliamentary and audit inquiries have found that healthy food can cost up to 49 per cent more in remote community stores than in major urban centres, while more recent research found some remote First Nations communities were paying more than double capital-city prices for essential grocery items^[10]. Remote stores also sell significantly less fresh fruit and vegetables per capita than the broader Australian population, contributing to poorer nutrition and chronic disease risk^[11].

We know that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have maintained sophisticated food knowledge systems, sustainable harvesting practices and culturally grounded approaches to nutrition for tens of thousands of years. Increasingly, research and policy discussions are recognising the importance of food sovereignty, including the role native foods, local food production and cultural food practices can play in improving nutrition, strengthening cultural connection and supporting local economic development^[12].

This highlights a broader opportunity for governments to move beyond deficit-based food security responses toward investment in Aboriginal-led food economies, community-controlled supply chains and local production systems that build both economic resilience and cultural capability. Emerging Aboriginal-led native food industries and community-based food initiatives are also creating opportunities to combine cultural knowledge, health promotion and economic participation in ways that mainstream food systems have often failed to support^[13].

7. Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence

Family, domestic and sexual violence also received substantial attention. The Government committed \$218.3 million over five years to initial implementation of Our Ways - Strong Ways - Our Voices, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Plan to End Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence 2026-2036.

This includes culturally safe crisis accommodation, frontline workforce supports, prevention initiatives and healing services. The investment reflects growing recognition that First Nations-led responses are

critical to improving safety and long-term wellbeing outcomes for women, children and families. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's organisations and Family Violence Prevention Legal Services have consistently advocated for culturally grounded, place-based approaches that strengthen community capability, early intervention and healing^[14]. Research also shows that culturally safe, community-controlled services improve engagement, trust and access to support, particularly in regional and remote communities^[15].

8. General Measures

The Budget also includes several smaller but institutionally important measures, including funding for the Coalition of Peaks secretariat, a national First Nations housing peak body, First Languages Australia, the Indigenous Marathon Project, Ngurra: the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Precinct, and continued support for Aboriginal Hostels Limited.

Alongside these targeted measures, mainstream Budget initiatives are also likely to deliver significant benefits for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Investments in public hospitals, cheaper medicines, housing infrastructure, roads, regional services and cost-of-living relief are particularly important given the large and growing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population living in regional and remote Australia, where access to infrastructure, healthcare and affordable services can have an outsized impact on community wellbeing and economic participation^[16].

Importantly, the challenge is not simply funding volume, but how housing systems are designed, commissioned and governed. Many communities continue to argue that housing outcomes improve most sustainably where local organisations hold greater authority over planning, delivery and long-term asset management.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples also continue to make strong contributions across regional labour markets, caregiving, culture and local economies, meaning improvements in mainstream service access and affordability can generate broad social and intergenerational benefits^[17].

The Budget's broader tax and cost-of-living measures are also likely to affect many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers and households, particularly those already experiencing financial pressure from rising living costs, housing stress and insecure employment. Measures including the Working Australians Tax Offset, the \$1,000 instant tax deduction, cheaper medicines, energy bill relief and fuel excise reductions may provide modest but meaningful relief for low and middle-income households. These measures are particularly relevant given Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are disproportionately represented in lower-income brackets, regional labour markets and insecure forms of employment^[18].

Despite increasingly strong evidence supporting justice reinvestment and Aboriginal-led diversionary approaches, these models still receive only a small proportion of overall justice expenditure, highlighting the persistent gap between evidence generation and public sector investment settings.

At the same time, the impact of these measures is likely to vary considerably across communities. For many households already experiencing housing stress, overcrowding, high food costs and barriers to stable employment, incremental tax relief alone is unlikely to substantially shift long-term economic security.

Without structural reform to housing markets, procurement systems, capital access and regional economic participation, mainstream affordability measures are unlikely to significantly alter long-term wealth inequality experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households. While broader housing and taxation reforms may improve affordability pressures over time, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households continue to face structurally lower rates of home ownership and significantly higher rates of rental and housing stress than non-Indigenous Australians^[19].

The Budget aligns strongly with many of the practical service-delivery priorities identified by the Coalition of Peaks and community-controlled sectors. There is clear evidence that governments are increasingly responding to calls for investment in Aboriginal-led health, youth services, maternal care, remote employment and food security. In particular, the emphasis on community-controlled health and culturally safe service delivery reflects years of sustained advocacy by Aboriginal organisations.

9. The Gaps

The Budget remains more incremental than transformational, with housing remaining one of the clearest examples. While measures include support for a national First Nations housing peak body and broader housing investments, it does not contain a large-scale Aboriginal housing package proportionate to what communities actually need.

This is significant because secure and adequate housing is closely linked to improved health, educational and social outcomes. Research consistently shows that overcrowded housing increases the risk of infectious disease transmission, psychological stress and barriers to educational participation, while also placing additional pressure on family wellbeing and child protection systems^[20]. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households are substantially more likely to experience overcrowding than non-Indigenous households, particularly in remote Australia where housing shortages remain acute^[21]. Evidence also demonstrates strong associations between housing instability, contact with child protection systems and justice-system involvement, highlighting the broader social and economic importance of long-term investment in housing infrastructure^[22].

Justice reform is another major gap. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples remain significantly overrepresented in Australia's criminal justice system, despite longstanding evidence that community-led prevention, diversion and justice reinvestment approaches produce stronger long-term outcomes than punitive responses alone. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults are incarcerated at around 15 times the rate of non-Indigenous Australians, while First Nations young people represented more than half of all children in youth detention nationally in 2023-24^[23].

At the same time, evaluations of justice reinvestment initiatives, including the Maranguka Justice Reinvestment Project in Bourke, have demonstrated reductions in youth offending, breaches of bail and domestic violence reoffending alongside improved community wellbeing outcomes^[24]. Research increasingly shows that Aboriginal-led justice responses are more effective at building trust, reducing recidivism and addressing the underlying drivers of contact with the justice system^[25].

While the Budget includes important investments in family violence prevention and broader social supports, it contains limited direct investment in large-scale justice reinvestment, Indigenous legal assistance expansion or structural incarceration reduction strategies.

The Budget is also more focused on employment than on economic sovereignty and wealth creation. While employment programs remain important, long-term economic transformation is more likely to depend on asset ownership, capital access, procurement participation and Aboriginal control over regional economic development. While the RJED expansion is substantial and likely to improve labour force participation and local service delivery in remote communities, governments must move beyond employment programs toward capital access, Indigenous business development, community-owned enterprise growth and long-term wealth-building strategies. In this respect, the Budget remains cautious and relatively unambitious.

The Budget's overall direction is broadly positive because it prioritises many of the practical issues communities consistently identify as urgent: jobs, health infrastructure, maternal care, youth support, food affordability and family safety.

There is also growing policy and research recognition that Aboriginal-owned and governed organisations play a critical role in improving long-term social, health and wellbeing outcomes, particularly where services are designed locally and delivered in culturally safe ways^[26]. The National Agreement on Closing the Gap itself identifies strengthening the community-controlled sector as one of its four Priority Reforms, reflecting increasing acknowledgement that Aboriginal-led delivery is central to long-term outcomes^[27].

Taken together, the Budget reflects a public sector that is becoming more willing to fund Aboriginal-led delivery, while remaining slower to redistribute institutional authority, modernise evaluation frameworks and recognise the full economic and social value generated by Aboriginal organisations and communities. Governments are becoming more willing to fund programs delivered by Aboriginal



organisations, while remaining slower to redesign the underlying systems of governance, accountability, economic power and decision-making that shape long-term outcomes.

The success of this Budget will therefore depend less on the announcement totals and more on the quality of implementation. Three issues are likely to determine whether these investments produce lasting change:

- whether funding genuinely flows through community-controlled delivery models rather than highly centralised administration;
- whether mainstream infrastructure, housing and health spending includes enforceable Aboriginal participation and procurement outcomes rather than aspirational targets; and
- whether governments treat these measures as part of long-term structural reform rather than a collection of discrete programs.

Ultimately, the 2026-27 Budget represents a meaningful operational investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, particularly in health and remote service delivery. But the long-term success of Closing the Gap will depend not only on how much governments spend, but on who controls decision-making, how economic value is measured, and whether public systems are willing to learn from the evidence emerging from communities themselves. The measures announced may improve outcomes in important areas, especially where they strengthen community-controlled services, but many of the deeper structural challenges identified by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations remain unresolved, including housing, justice reform, economic sovereignty and shared governance.

10. Indigenous Budget Measures

Closing the Gap Package – \$793.7 million over five years

- \$299.0m – Remote Jobs and Economic Development (RJED) expansion
- \$144.1m – Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Service infrastructure upgrades
- \$55.5m – Clontarf Foundation
- \$53.0m – Remote renal dialysis services and workforce accommodation
- \$44.4m – Birthing on Country expansion
- \$42.8m – National Commission for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People
- \$32.7m – Store Efficiency and Resilience Package expansion
- \$30.0m – Australian Indigenous Education Foundation scholarships
- \$27.4m – Low-Cost Essentials Subsidy Scheme expansion
- \$23.8m – Indigenous boarding providers support
- \$18.9m – 13YARN expansion
- \$6.3m – National First Nations housing peak body
- \$4.5m – Coalition of Peaks secretariat support
- Additional included measures:
 - Aboriginal health workforce traineeships
 - Children's Ground support
 - First Languages Australia support
 - Indigenous Marathon Project support
 - Cape and Torres health services

Indigenous-specific measures outside the Closing the Gap package

- \$218.3m – *Our Ways – Strong Ways – Our Voices* (National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Plan to End Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence)
- \$200.0m – NHRA Better Health Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People Schedule
- \$48.7m – NHRA implementation and system uplift funding
- \$48.3m – Aboriginal Hostels Limited support
- \$4.2m – Ngurra: National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Precinct
- Indigenous Procurement Policy reforms (non-fiscal policy reform)

Total identifiable Indigenous-specific investment

- Approximately \$1.31 billion in identifiable Indigenous-specific measures

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