

COMMUNIQUÉ

20 June 2025

The Children and Families Tripartite Forum (the Forum) held its 25th meeting on 20 June 2025 on Larrakia Country in Darwin.

The Forum was chaired by Mr Rob McPhee and attended by members and observers from the Northern Territory and Australian Governments, Northern Territory Council of Social Service (NTCOSS), North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency (NAAJA) and Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory (APO NT). A Welcome to Country was provided by Ms Jeanneen McLennan.

Members reaffirmed their commitment to working with the returning Australian Government and NT Government on resetting priorities and providing advice to see meaningful progression against Closing the Gap socio-economic targets.

The Forum considered its responsibilities in relation to the Closing the Gap targets for children and families. In relation to Target 11 (youth justice), members acknowledged that the NT Justice Policy Partnership holds lead responsibility, with the Tripartite Forum playing a supporting role. As such, it was agreed that there is no requirement to include the Department of Corrections as a Forum member. Instead, the Forum will write to the NT Justice Policy Partnership to confirm its lead role in progressing Target 11 and stay connected as required.

Members also discussed the strong intersection between the Forum's priority targets and domestic and family violence. It was agreed that the Forum will write to the Northern Territory Executive Council for Aboriginal Affairs (NTECAA) to recommend that responsibility for Target 13 (domestic and family violence) be formally assigned within the Northern Territory to the Forum.

Consistent with the February 2025 commitment to apply a more focused approach by conducting a 'deep dive' into a specific Closing the Gap target at each meeting, the Forum held its first in-depth session on Target 4 – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children Thrive in their Early Years.

The Northern Territory Department of Education and Training (DET) provided an update on progress against Target 4 actions outlined in the NT's 2023–24 Closing the Gap Implementation Plan and delivered a briefing on the 2024 Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) results.

In reviewing the data, members noted that the Northern Territory is reflecting the national worsening average of early development for all children. The Northern Territory results for Aboriginal children is also similar to the national trend that shows no change in results. The members noted that one important difference between the national and Northern Territory pattern of results, is the Language and Cognitive Skills (school-based) domain is always the most on-track domain nationally and always the least on-track in the Northern Territory. The analysis highlighted this domain as requiring greater focus. Members explored how funding could be utilised in more flexible and innovative ways to support early childhood development and better prepare children for school.

DET also presented evidence that the ways the AEDC results are aggregated in the 'On Track on Five Domains' measure can mask strengths in Aboriginal and Very Remote populations in the NT. The members were given a close look at the results of one example community where there are strengths equal to or better than the national average for all children across four domains, particularly in Physical Health and Wellbeing, Social Competence, and Communication Skills and General Knowledge domains. The example further emphasised the need to focus on improving outcomes in the Language and Cognitive Skills domain.

The Forum acknowledged that while progress has been made, significantly more work is needed to ensure NT children are developmentally on track across all five AEDC domains, which can be approached in a more strategic and targeted manner following this analysis.

The Commonwealth Department of Social Services member acknowledged the Northern Territory as the first jurisdiction it had seen present this level of detailed analysis on AEDC outcomes at the jurisdiction level. The information provides valuable insights into the NT context and may assist in informing policy and program design.

Members are keeping a watching brief on the impact of School Attendance Officers on improving school attendance, which remains a key focus for the Forum. Data provided by DET identified the average Term 1 2025 attendance rate of 76.1%, a slight increase from the 2024 full-year average of 73.6%. Additionally, DET provided data on the reduction of 210 students from the Intensive Support Roll from 2023 to 2024.

The next meeting is scheduled for **August 2025**.