

MEETING OF THE COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENTS

CANBERRA – 9 FEBRUARY 2018

COMMUNIQUÉ

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) held its 45th general meeting today in Canberra. The Premier of Tasmania was represented by a Senior Official as the Tasmanian Government is in caretaker, ahead of an election to be held on 3 March 2018.

Improving outcomes for Indigenous Australians

This year marks the tenth anniversary of COAG's pledge to Closing the Gap in outcomes for Indigenous Australians. First Ministers welcomed a delegation of prominent Indigenous Australians to represent the views of the Special Gathering held ahead of COAG to discuss priorities for the next decade as part of their commitment to work together, and with Indigenous leaders, to refresh this agenda.

A delegation from the Special Gathering presented COAG with a statement setting out the Gathering's priorities for the refresh. Leaders and the delegation discussed the opportunities that the refresh provides. Reflecting the breadth of expertise of the Special Gathering participants, the delegates and leaders had a diverse, insightful and constructive conversation. Leaders agreed that the statement would inform future community consultations, undertaken by all governments.

All governments will undertake community consultations on the refresh, ahead of COAG agreeing a new Closing the Gap framework, national and state targets, performance indicators and accountabilities by 31 October 2018. COAG asked the Ministerial Council on Indigenous Affairs to consider the outcomes of the public consultation processes and potential new Closing the Gap targets before COAG's next meeting.

Leaders agreed to promote opportunities for Indigenous economic development and workplace participation. They noted that having a job or being involved in a business activity contributes to economic and social outcomes for Indigenous families and communities. Leaders also recognised that health services and the education of children is critically important. To demonstrate its commitment in this area, COAG will publish jurisdiction-specific procurement policies, and Indigenous employment and business outcomes annually.

Reforming Australia's health system

Leaders reaffirmed their commitment to provide for contemporary and sustainable health services focused on prevention as well as treatment of ill health, in which citizens are at the centre of decision-making and the patient journey informs the design and provision of health services. Leaders agreed that future arrangements will incorporate sustainable funding for public hospitals to provide high quality services.

Leaders agreed four strategic priorities for reform in our health system: improving efficiency and ensuring financial sustainability; delivering safe, high-quality care in the right place at the right time; prioritising prevention and helping people manage their health across their lifetime; and driving best practice and performance using data and research. All leaders have committed to explore and implement options to drive down the number of avoidable hospital admissions, including through better coordinated primary care.

Consistent with these strategic priorities, the Commonwealth presented a Heads of Agreement for public hospital funding and health reform from 1 July 2020 to 30 June 2025. This would see the

Commonwealth providing a \$30 billion increase in hospitals funding over the life of the new agreement compared to the previous five year period, with growth in Commonwealth funding continuing to be capped at 6.5 per cent a year. The Heads of Agreement was signed by New South Wales and Western Australia. Recognising that Tasmania is in caretaker, it will have an opportunity to sign up to the Heads of Agreement once its next government has been sworn in.

Health Ministers will implement the Heads of Agreement by leading the development of the National Health Agreement for COAG approval before the end of 2018.

Protecting Australia's children

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse handed down its final report in December 2017. The Royal Commission heard evidence of shocking and appalling abuse perpetrated on children by the very people who were supposed to care for them. COAG noted the courage of the survivors who shared their heartbreaking accounts, and the dedication of the many people who worked on the Commission.

Leaders welcomed progress on developing the National Statement of Principles for Child Safe Organisations, agreed the importance of creating organisations where children are safe from abuse and neglect, and acknowledged the work underway to establish a national redress scheme. First Ministers committed to responding to the recommendations of the Royal Commission's final report in June 2018. COAG tasked the COAG Education Council with advancing recommendations relating to teachers and students.

The Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory found that the child protection and youth justice systems were broken. It made significant findings regarding the failure to care and protect young Territorians, particularly Aboriginal children, who are up to 16 times more likely to be in the child protection and youth justice systems than non-Indigenous children nationally.

First Ministers acknowledged that many of the recommendations of the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory have relevance for other state and territory child protection and youth justice systems. Leaders agreed to the sharing of lessons learnt and best-practices to improve outcomes for children, young people and their families either at risk of, or already in, the child protection and youth justice systems, through the Community Services Ministers' Meeting. The Commonwealth reiterated its commitment to working with the Northern Territory Government on those recommendations where the Commonwealth has responsibility, and those where the Northern Territory and Commonwealth Governments have shared responsibility.

Bullying has no place in Australia, and can be especially harmful on children and young people. The growth of social media and mobile devices means that Australians can be subject to bullying 24 hours a day and from any location. Leaders heard from the eSafety Commissioner, Ms Julie Inman Grant, on initiatives to combat cyberbullying and acknowledged the ongoing importance of this work. First Ministers agreed that if we are to successfully reduce the incidence of bullying, we must better understand its underlying drivers and adopt a whole-of-community approach. COAG agreed that a working group of senior officials from First Ministers', Education, Justice and Health departments consider existing and potential initiatives to help combat bullying and cyberbullying and establish a work program to be led by the Education Council. The Education Council will report to COAG at its next meeting on tangible measures where there is an identified need.

Education

Early Childhood Education and Care is essential to ensuring children, regardless of their background or location, are school-ready. Preparing children for school has flow on effects, not just on their school performance, but on the whole of their lives. To ensure that Australian children have the best start possible, COAG asked the COAG Education Council to provide advice in 2018 on reform principles, informed by the recommendations and findings of the 'Lifting Our Game' review. First Ministers invited the authors of the review, Susan Pascoe AM and Professor Deborah Brennan, and the chair of the Review to Achieve Excellence in Australian Schools, David Gonski AC, to present their findings at the next meeting of COAG. Leaders welcomed the Commonwealth's extension of the Universal Access to Early Childhood Education National Partnership until the end of 2019, and the opportunity this provides for jurisdictions to work together.

A strong school education system funded on a sustainable, nationally consistent basis that ensures all children receive an excellent education is a shared goal of all governments. Leaders look forward to receiving the report on Achieving Educational Excellence in Australian Schools, which will inform future reforms, and noted the need to finalise a national schools agreement by the end of September 2018 to provide certainty to schools for 2019 and beyond.

Supporting those affected by terrorism overseas

COAG acknowledged the importance of Commonwealth and state and territory support for Australian victims of terrorism overseas. COAG asked the National Victims of Crime Working Group to consider nationally consistent guidelines to protect the rights of victims of terrorism within the Victims of Crime National Framework, and to provide these to the COAG Council of Attorneys-General in 2018.

Maximising efficiency and effectiveness in federal financial relations

First Ministers agreed to use the opportunity provided by negotiation of a new National Health Agreement as a pilot for exploring improvements in efficiency and effectiveness in federal financial relations. This pilot will aim to incorporate Commonwealth-state health funding arrangements into a single health agreement and streamline terms and conditions to demonstrate citizen benefit, remove any duplication and balance accountability and autonomy.

This work will be progressed through a working group of Deputy Senior Officials from First Ministers', Treasuries and Health departments, reporting to COAG Senior Officials.

Promoting security and innovation in Australian elections

COAG also considered proposals from the Electoral Council of Australia and New Zealand to modernise state and federal electoral systems. COAG noted the importance of cooperation to mitigate cyber security risks, and looks forward to the Australian Cyber Security Centre's proposed cyber-security health checks of our electoral processes.

Developing Northern Australia

First Ministers of the Northern Australia Strategic Partnership took the opportunity provided by the COAG meeting to discuss opportunities to encourage economic growth in Northern Australia. Discussions focused on infrastructure in Northern Australia, including water and roads projects, and actions to address the affordability of insurance premiums in areas prone to cyclones and related flooding.

First Ministers noted the upcoming meeting of the Ministerial Forum on Northern Development, to which Infrastructure Ministers have been invited, in Kununurra in April 2018. It will provide an opportunity to agree a forward work plan of collaborative projects to be delivered by the forum.