



Aboriginal Community Response:

Communities for kids (Tier 1)

December 2017



Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat (AbSec)

About AbSec

The Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat (AbSec) is the peak Aboriginal organisation within the child and family sector in NSW. AbSec is committed to advocating on behalf of Aboriginal children, families and communities, to ensure they have access to the services and supports they need to keep Aboriginal children safe and provide them the best possible opportunities to fulfil their potential through Aboriginal community controlled organisations.

Central to this vision is the need to develop a holistic approach to Aboriginal child and family supports delivering universal, targeted and tertiary services within communities that cover the entire continuum of care and reflect the broader familial and community context of clients. Such services and supports would operate to mitigate risk factors or vulnerabilities thereby reducing the need for more intensive or invasive interventions, as well as ensuring that tailored and critical Aboriginal out-of-home care and after care services are provided to intervene in the cycle of disadvantage that continue to impact generations of Aboriginal families.

Our vision is that Aboriginal children and young people are looked after in safe, thriving Aboriginal families and communities, and are raised strong in spirit and identity, with every opportunity for lifelong wellbeing and connection to culture surrounded by holistic supports.

In working towards this vision, we are guided by these principles:

- 1) acknowledging and respecting the diversity and knowledge of Aboriginal communities;
- 2) acting with professionalism and integrity in striving for quality, culturally responsive services and supports for Aboriginal families;
- 3) underpinning the rights of Aboriginal people to develop our own processes and systems for our communities, particularly in meeting the needs of our children and families;
- 4) being holistic, integrated and solutions-focused through Aboriginal control in delivering for Aboriginal children, families and communities; and
- 5) committing to a future that empowers Aboriginal families and communities, representing our communities, and the agencies there to serve them, with transparency and drive

Published December 2017

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Introduction

Aboriginal children continue to be disproportionately represented in the NSW Child Protection system, and current national rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child removals are unprecedented¹. These rates demonstrate the ineffectiveness of previous reforms and inquiries in making meaningful change to the plethora of systemic issues contributing to this overrepresentation. Statistics show that Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC experience poorer outcomes across the domains of mental health, and education² and approximately one in 10 young people involved with the NSW criminal justice system in NSW were in OOHC. AbSec is committed to strengthening Aboriginal families and communities so that all Aboriginal children can thrive in a culturally enriched environment and surrounded by holistic supports.³

'KINSHIP, SPIRITUALITY, CONNECTION TO TRADITIONAL LANDS AND CULTURAL CONTINUITY PLAY A CENTRAL ROLE IN THE HEALTH AND WELLBEING OF ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIANS'³

Achieving this goal will require a significantly transformed child protection system, investing in approaches at the community and family level that strengthen the developmental context to support children to thrive. This requires an integrated approach, delivered through Aboriginal Community

Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) including education, housing, health services, and broader societal changes which must be enacted through the government, communities, and individuals⁴. Sadly, however, less than 20% of all funding is directed to early intervention, prevention and preservation, with only a proportion of that invested in universal or community level supports. In our view, there is a pressing need to shift the focus of the system to providing effective community-level responses that strengthen all families and communities, recognising that prevention is better than any cure.

The purpose of this paper is to outline a program framework for universal Aboriginal child and family supports, strengthening networks of care so that Aboriginal children can thrive. This series of papers seeks to present a comprehensive framework for a holistic Aboriginal child and family service system, representing a clear, state-wide support system for Aboriginal children and families developed by the Aboriginal community-controlled child and family sector.

Background

This program framework builds on two key documents:

- a) AbSec/FACS co-design process: 'Plan on a Page for Aboriginal Children and Young People 2015-2021'

¹ Funston, L., S. Herring, and ACMAG (2016), 'When Will the Stolen Generations End? A Qualitative Critical Exploration of Contemporary "Child Protection" Practices in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities', *Sexual Abuse in Australia and New Zealand* Volume 7(1): 51-58

² Townsend, M.L. (2011), 'Are we making the grade? The education of children and young people in out-of-home-care', *PhD Thesis*, Southern Cross University, Lismore, NSW.

³ Moore, T.G., N. Arefadib, A. Deery, M. Keyes, & S. West (2017) *The First Thousand Days: An Evidence Paper – Summary*. Parkville, Victoria: Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Children's Research Institute.

⁴ Ibid

b) AbSec's paper 'Achieving a holistic Aboriginal Child and Family Service System for NSW'

The 'Plan on a Page for Aboriginal Children and Young People 2015-2021' evolved following a co-design partnership approach between AbSec, FACS, Aboriginal non-government agencies and NSW government agencies. The Plan highlights high-level concepts for the future state of the Aboriginal sector and identified the need for a new, integrated Aboriginal-led approach across the sector to improve outcomes for Aboriginal children and their families.

The overarching objective of the Plan is to promote child safe communities and reduce the over-representation of Aboriginal children in OOHC through a sustainable safety-net of Aboriginal agencies interconnected to local community governance, ensuring Aboriginal community ownership, accountability and control in meeting this challenge with Government and other stakeholder support through partnerships.

The Plan also sets out AbSec's vision for a 'strong safety-net of Aboriginal community-controlled organisations that effectively meet the needs of Aboriginal children, families and communities through holistic and individually tailored Aboriginal child and family centres across NSW, working towards child safe communities and reducing the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in out-of-home-care and providing for better outcomes over time'

AbSec's 'Achieving a holistic Aboriginal Child and Family Service System for NSW' presents a comprehensive model of Aboriginal child and family services aimed at creating an environment in which families can be supported to optimise the developmental environment for Aboriginal children and young people. It outlines three key principles for an effective Aboriginal child and family sector, including:

1. Child development occurs within the context of their social and physical environment, with relationships playing a key role in optimal development and adaptive outcomes⁵. Effective approaches to improving outcomes for vulnerable children must include supporting positive change for the child's social network, their parents, extended families and communities. A genuine integration of services that support children both directly and indirectly through strengthening the capabilities, stability (including economic) and resilience of families and communities is required. Interventions can become genuinely inter-generational, thereby optimising the developmental context and trajectory of the next and subsequent generations of Aboriginal children and young people.
2. Empowering Aboriginal families and communities to identify and address the issues impacting their lives will contribute to three important objectives. Firstly, families and communities will be strengthened. Secondly, programs and interventions will be tailored for the communities they serve; Aboriginal communities themselves are best placed to develop and deliver services aimed at supporting Aboriginal children and families. Thirdly, control over futures and the direction of services impacting Aboriginal families is in line with broader self-determination goals.
3. The positive relationship between access to and continuity of Aboriginal culture, and the wellbeing of Aboriginal peoples is well-established. Strengthening communities and families to raise strong children connected to their cultures will build resilience in children, youth, and

⁵ Shonkoff, J. and Fisher, P. (2013) Rethinking evidence-based practice and two-generational programs to create the future of early childhood policy, *Development and Psychopathology*, pp. 1635-1653

adults. Empowering communities to develop and deliver culturally sound universal and targeted interventions will contribute to the development of a comprehensive, state-wide safety-net of services that are embedded within communities they serve. This will enable a community-wide response that will support Aboriginal families to keep children safe and connected to their families, communities, culture and Country.

Further, AbSec proposes a holistic Aboriginal community-controlled service system for NSW that comprises **three** interconnected intervention levels of increasing intensity. Each level will provide services tailored to the needs of Aboriginal children and families at the local level, allowing flexibility in service delivery while adapting intensity levels to respond to the needs or circumstances of families that may change over time.

1. **Aboriginal Community response (Primary)** – *targets the whole community and is commonly referred to as universal interventions.*

Programs or activities run at the Aboriginal Community Response interventions level will be aimed towards reducing risk factors of maltreatment and wellbeing concerns at a whole of community level; enhancing the developmental context and environment of all Aboriginal children.

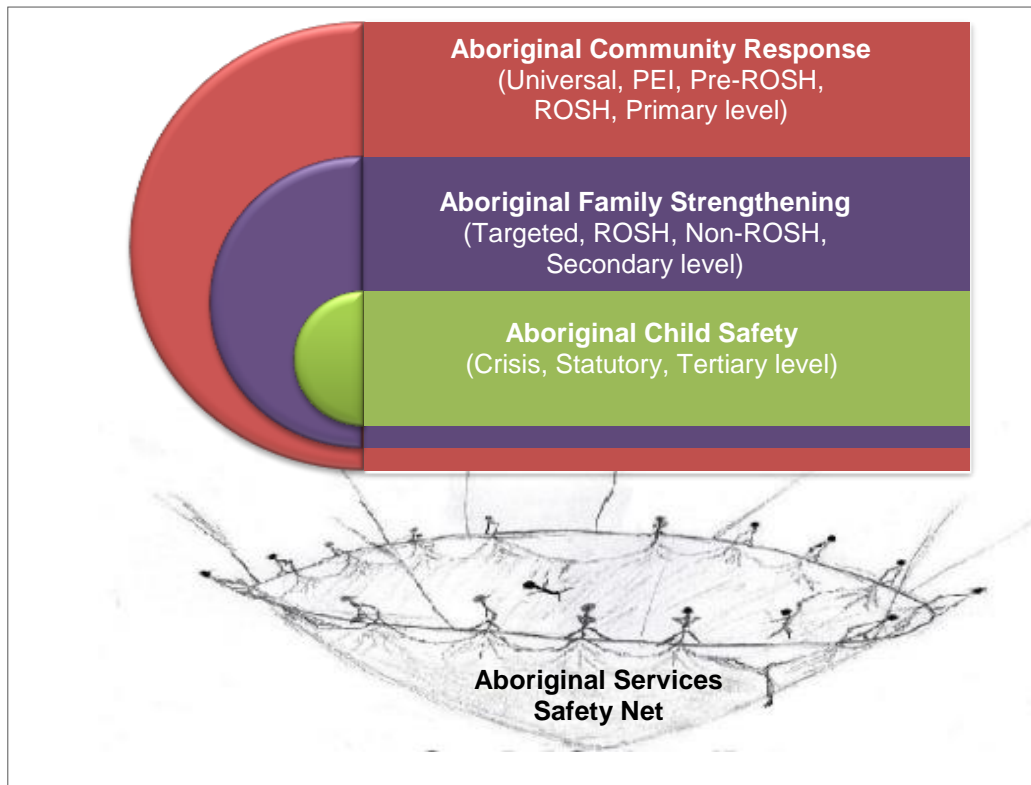
2. **Aboriginal Family Strengthening (Secondary)** – *targets individuals or a population sub-group that have higher than average parenting difficulties and families whose children are at risk of maltreatment*

Aboriginal Family Strengthening intervention at this secondary continuum level is typically focused on reducing risk and safety concerns at the family level, to keep children safely with family and in their home.

3. **Aboriginal Child Safety (Tertiary)** – *targets families where child abuse has occurred and it is at this level that the child more than likely enters the statutory Out of Home Care (OOHC) system – perhaps for the first time.*

This level of intervention is aimed to reduce long-term damage to the child and to prevent recurrence of child abuse through delivery of programs and /or activities in OOHC.

This paper further articulates this holistic model, focused on targeted supports provided within the primary or universal intervention level 'Aboriginal Community Response.



Aboriginal Community Response

The Aboriginal Community Response seeks to ensure that all families and communities are properly equipped and supported to provide the optimal developmental context to support Aboriginal children to thrive within a culturally enriched environment, including specialised supports to promote intergenerational healing and overcome structural disadvantage and marginalisation that continues to disproportionately impact on Aboriginal families. To be culturally embedded and reflect the core principle of self-determination, the Aboriginal Community Response, like the broader holistic model, must be delivered by Aboriginal people through Aboriginal community controlled organisations. The importance of Aboriginal community control in effective service delivery has been noted in a range of wellbeing domains.⁶⁷

At a broad level, efforts to achieve better outcomes for children and young people focus on three key elements; strengthening core life skills, supporting responsive relationships and addressing sources of familial stress.⁸ Further, these interventions should be delivered through integrated, intergenerational approaches that appreciate the specific needs of children and adults and the interdependencies between them.⁹ Supports aim to strengthen appropriate community networks (such as cultural

⁶ Emerson, L., S. Fox, C. Smith (2015) *Good Beginnings: Getting it right in the early years*, The Lowitja Institute, Melbourne

⁷ Dudgeon, P., Milroy, J., Calma, T., Luxford, Y., Ring, I., Walker, R., Cox, A., Georgatos, G., and Holland, C. (2016) *Solutions that Work: What the Evidence and our People Tell Us*, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project: Report. Available at www.atsispep.sis.uwa.edu.au

⁸ Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2017). *Three Principles to Improve Outcomes for Children and Families*. <http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu>

⁹ Shonkoff, J. and Fisher, P. (2013) *Rethinking evidence-based practice and two-generational programs to create the future of early childhood policy*, *Development and Psychopathology*, pp. 1635-1653

groups, schools, and neighbourhoods), in addition to realising the strength of family bonds inextricably linked through shared experiences¹⁰.

Existing services

Targeted Earlier Interventions are currently undergoing significant reform. The NSW Human Services Outcome Framework emphasises the need for collaboration and interaction across service domains and the need for a holistic response. This is consistent with AbSec’s model, the approach of Aboriginal communities, and the best practices in familial capacity building. A number of Aboriginal communities are already delivering culturally embedded, integrated services to their families. However, there is a distinct under-investment in ACCOs to deliver effective Aboriginal community responses.¹¹

Elements of effective supports

Effective supports within this segment should consider how the experiences of children (starting prenatally) impacts lifelong outcomes; as well as the core capabilities adults need to thrive as parents¹². As noted earlier, three key principles are considered critical to achieving better outcomes for children and families:

supporting responsive relationships for both children and adults, strengthening core life skills, and reducing the sources of stress in the lives of children and families (see figure 1)¹³. Responsive relationships are critical to development, providing scaffolding for core skill development (social, emotional and cognitive functioning) and

“REDUCING THE PILE-UP OF POTENTIAL SOURCES OF STRESS WILL PROTECT CHILDREN DIRECTLY (I.E. THEIR STRESS RESPONSE IS TRIGGERED LESS FREQUENTLY AND POWERFULLY) AND INDIRECTLY (I.E. THE ADULTS THEY DEPEND ON ARE BETTER ABLE TO PROTECT AND SUPPORT THEM, THEREBY PREVENTING LASTING HARM).”¹³

buffering the emerging stress response system through “serve and return” interactions. These interactions are critical in guiding healthy brain development and preventing toxic stress, as well as building resilience. Responsive relationships are also beneficial in adulthood, boosting wellbeing, providing practical assistance and emotional support, and strengthening hope and confidence. Responsive relationships should be mirrored in interactions between caseworkers and families, engaging respectfully, listening to their perspective and supporting them to plan for the future. Responsive relationships provide a key foundation for achieving positive change for children and their families.

Strengthening core life skills means building and maintaining the essential skills needed to manage life, work, and relationships. These core skills include executive functioning and self-regulation skills, include the ability to focus, plan, and achieve goals, adapt to change, and resist impulsive behaviours, as well as managing emotions, particularly negative emotions and responding to setbacks. These skills develop across our lives through incremental steps, drawing on supportive relationships to help us

¹⁰ BABCOCK, E. & RUIZ DE LUZURIAGA, N. 2016. Families Disrupting the Cycle of Poverty: Coaching with an Intergenerational Lens. Boston: Economic Mobility Pathways

¹¹ It is acknowledged that FACS have committed to providing 30% of Targeted Earlier Intervention Funding through ACCOs by 2021

¹² Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2017). *Three Principles to Improve Outcomes for Children and Families*.

¹³ *ibid*

build and hone these skills so that we can implement them confidently alone. Adults contribute to the development of these skills in children through the scaffolding provided by responsive relationships, by maintaining supportive relationships, providing routine, and modelling appropriate social behaviours. This is particularly important early in life, providing strong foundations for future skill development.

Finally, efforts to achieve better outcomes for children and families also depends on our ability to reduce experiences of severe stress that are associated with poverty, community violence, substance abuse, and mental illness. While addressing these stressors has a direct and positive impact on children and young people, it also supports their families to be able to provide an enriched developmental environment characterised by responsive relationships, and provides the opportunity to further strengthen core skills that are the foundation of parenting. Reducing barriers for families accessing basic supports and minimising punitive measures which add further stress to already stressful situations will create positive change.

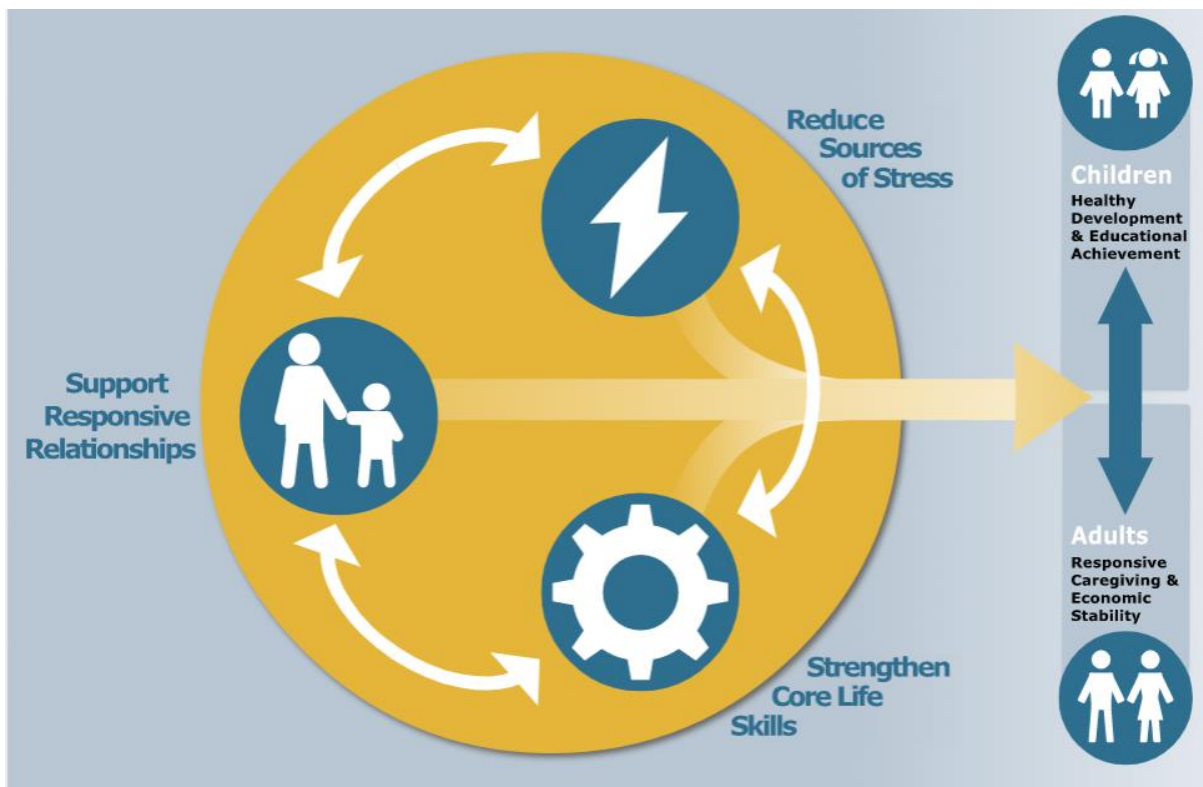


Figure 1 Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University's Three Principles to Improve Outcomes for Children and Families available at <http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu>

Effective supports are those that reflect these core principles: supporting responsive relationships, strengthening core life skills for both children and adults, and reducing sources of stress and their impact on children and families. Such approaches are likely to have short-term benefits for children and families, but also intergenerational benefits as children raised in an environment in which external stressors are better managed and their impacts buffered, and caregivers are supported to provide an enriched early environment enjoy the lifelong benefits. As a result, these children will grow into adults who are better placed to provide an enriching early environment for their own children, and other children and young people they interact with in their community.

In addition to these broad points, there are particular needs and approaches that are critical to achieving positive outcomes for Aboriginal children and families.¹⁴ These include:

- being driven by, and accountable to, Aboriginal communities through Aboriginal community controlled processes
- are culturally embedded, reflecting the values and beliefs of Aboriginal families and communities
- take a holistic view that appreciates the complex structure and relationships within Aboriginal families and communities
- address intergenerational trauma through healing
- are delivered by a culturally competent work force

For Aboriginal children and young people, their families and communities, such supports must be culturally embedded, strengthening access and reducing barriers for engagement in effective supports. Culture is an important protective factor in overcoming adversity¹⁵. Aboriginal communities themselves are therefore best placed to understand the needs of their families, and to design and deliver the holistic supports that families and communities need to support responsive relationships between children and caring adults in their lives, strengthen the development of core skills for both children and adults, and respond to the needs of families in addressing stressors that overwhelm their capacity to cope, creating an integrated community of care for Aboriginal children and young people. Implementing these supports into practice at the Aboriginal Community Response level requires both community strengthening elements as well as more targeted case management approaches in which key workers support tailored case planning and service coordination for vulnerable Aboriginal families aligned to the service elements noted above

Objectives

An Aboriginal Community Response within a holistic Aboriginal child and family service system would meet the following broad objectives:

- Foster protective community connections and prevent isolation
- Support parents and children to develop core skills, foster responsive relationships and address the impact of stressors on families through holistic supports through culturally embedded supports.
- Provide evidence informed, culturally embedded supports for all Aboriginal children and families, designed and delivered by Aboriginal communities through their own organisations and processes
- Identify potential risks early (both early in life, and early in the onset of the risk) and provide access to appropriate community supports, including more intensive tailored supports where needed

¹⁴ Emerson, L., S. Fox, C. Smith (2015) *Good Beginnings: Getting it right in the early years*, The Lowitja Institute, Melbourne

¹⁵ National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. (2015). Supportive Relationships and Active Skill-Building Strengthen the Foundations of Resilience: Working Paper 13. <http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu>

- Develop a robust evidence-based system and process for collecting relevant information and data for reporting purposes, to demonstrate accountability and transparency and for measuring performance against benchmarks and a system for continuous service improvement

Outcomes

Child-centred

- Children are safe and supported to thrive
- Children are supported by their families and communities
- Children are connected to their communities and experience culturally enriched environments

Family-centred

- Families are supported to meet the needs of their children
- Families are stable and resilient economically, socially, and culturally, and are able to address risks and issues as they arise
- Networks of care for families are strengthened. Families feel more connected and better supported. Families are confident and able to access supports when they are needed

System-centred

- Reduced notifications for Risk of Significant Harm (ROSH) that in turn escalates to removal
- Better identification of families in need of assistance
- Support in alleviating underlying issues such as lack of health care, education, housing, and other factors identified on a local level
- Increasingly logical and integrated local service delivery

Framework

The model is agnostic to the specific service approaches, rather forming an enabling framework that empowers local communities and ACCOs to develop and adapt responses based on available evidence, practitioner experience and community values (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: Elements for implementing evidence-based practice, as adapted from California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse and the Institute of Medicine (2001) – see Walsh, Rolls Reutz and Williams (2015)

Service Design

Local Aboriginal communities will be empowered to identify clear, practicable solutions to address the challenges of raising and keeping their children safe. Local Aboriginal people will be involved in designing local service approaches, through local Aboriginal Child Safety Governance groups, engaging directly with FACS and Aboriginal service providers to ensure that services are properly aligned to the needs and expectations of the communities they serve.

Local service design will broadly include two key streams; the development of key community supports and infrastructure to promote social inclusion and prevent isolation, and the provision of tailored supports through Aboriginal key workers to provide more intensive, targeted supports to individuals and families as required.

Community supports and infrastructure including strengthening Aboriginal community programs, including cultural activities and events and language, parent groups, child and maternal health, child care, early childhood education, youth activities and other activities tailored to the needs of Aboriginal people and communities, and are supported by strategies to promote access and reduce barriers. These supports foster connections within communities as well as providing a safe and trusted point of connection to individually tailored supports when and as required.

Individually tailored supports are delivered through Aboriginal community key workers who are able to actively assist Aboriginal people and families to develop goals and action plans, supporting access to the supports and community resources needed to implement case plans and achieve their individual and family goals. This provides important scaffolding and coaching of key skills and supports the reduction of external stressors through empowering families to actively overcome challenges associated with poverty and structural disadvantage and inequality, promoting greater social, cultural and economic participation. Tailored supports within the Aboriginal Community Response will carry a case load of approximately 50 to 60 families per key worker, providing low intensity supports. This aligns with the family support framework provided in AbSec's *Our Families, Our Way: Strengthening Aboriginal Families So Their Children Can Thrive*, providing a clearly integrated continuum from community-wide supports through individually tailored responses right up to intensive in-home supports.

Design of local service models will include:

1. Data analysis and service mapping of local Aboriginal population and Aboriginal service providers, ensuring service alignment and building necessary capacity while avoiding duplication
2. Understanding of local need, including demographic and socioeconomic indicators, and existing challenges facing families and children and young people (such as reasons for ROSH notifications or factors associated with risk). Investment to be determined on the basis of localised need, and sensitive to changes over time
3. Aboriginal community to determine local community priorities and approaches, informed by local issues and need, and governed through community processes which ensure direct accountability to the community

Evaluation and Review

Given the broad nature of this tier, and the diversity across Aboriginal communities, adaptive and locally-sourced evaluations must be appropriately resourced and included in project designs. Ongoing action-focused evaluation processes will be built in to the service model to drive a system of continuous improvement and recalibration of service design as necessary. It is expected that this approach will entrench a culture of evidence and innovation, driving ongoing efficacy across the service spectrum, with associated savings and efficacies achieved and reinvested to further improve outcomes for Aboriginal children and families. AbSec will collaborate with local Aboriginal service organisations to develop a set of benchmarks and key performance indicators aligned to the outcomes noted above. These indicators must be sufficiently flexible to account for the diversity of the local Aboriginal community, different needs of the client base, and the capacity of the network organisations. In particular, outcome measures within Aboriginal Community Response will rely significantly on engagement with both service users and the broader local Aboriginal community, including their feeling of connection within their community, that they feel supported and are confident that they are able to access effective, culturally embedded supports even if they are not currently accessing those supports. As a community level support, it is critical that evaluation and performance consider this wider connection and responsibility for universal supports.

In developing and selecting evaluation methods, culturally informed and embedded approaches are critical. The absence of Aboriginal-led evaluation will contribute to a mismatch between evaluation approach and the needs of local Aboriginal communities¹⁶. Aboriginal communities must be empowered to define success for their children and families, and the measures that are best suited to reflecting Aboriginal community conceptualisations of success. Some of these will likely include system data routinely collected by FACS, such as a reduction in the rate and number of notifications or substantiations of Risk of Significant Harm for Aboriginal children and young people. Evaluation will then become a process of robust data collection and utilisation against those outcomes, as agreed with FACS, and linked to the broader NSW Human Services Outcomes Framework and the *OCHRE* strategy. To drive ongoing service improvement, data and outcomes achieved across the network of ACCOs will be curated into a locally available evidence base, supporting communities across NSW to take evidence-informed approaches and learn from each other as well as addressing the noted lack of publically available evidence on the efficacy of programs for Indigenous families¹⁷.

¹⁶ Muir, S. & A. Dean (2017) 'Evaluating the outcomes of programs for Indigenous families and communities' *Child Family Community Australia Information Exchange* Australian Institute of Family Studies: Melbourne

¹⁷ Ibid