



# Data Processes for Aboriginal Organisations: A Discussion Paper

February 2020



## About AbSec

AbSec – NSW Child, Family and Community Peak Aboriginal Corporation (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:

- acknowledging and respecting the diversity and knowledge of Aboriginal communities;
- acting with professionalism and integrity in striving for quality, culturally responsive services and supports for Aboriginal families;
- 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;
- being holistic, integrated and solutions-focused through Aboriginal control in delivering for Aboriginal children, families and communities; and
- 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 November 2019

© AbSec – NSW Child, Family and Community Peak Aboriginal Corporation – ICN: 8926

This publication is copyright. Reproduction of this material from this proposal should obtain permission from the publishers.

## AbSec can be found at:

21 Carrington Road, MARRICKVILLE NSW 2204

Phone: (02) 9559 5299

**E-mail:** [reception@absec.org.au](mailto:reception@absec.org.au)

**Website:** [www.absec.org.au](http://www.absec.org.au)

**Facebook:** [on.fb.me/AbSec](https://on.fb.me/AbSec)

**Twitter:** [@AbSecNSW](https://twitter.com/AbSecNSW)



## Contents

About AbSec.....	2
Contents.....	3
Introduction .....	4
Background .....	4
Rationale .....	6
Existing Frameworks .....	6
Analysis of Existing Data Collection Frameworks .....	9
Key Considerations for Developing Aboriginal Data Processes .....	10
<i>Supporting Data Processes for Aboriginal Community Organisations</i> .....	10

## Introduction

The Aboriginal Child and Family Investment Strategy (the *Strategy*) outlined a number of key initiatives in achieving a strong, state-wide network of Aboriginal community controlled organisations delivering holistic services to Aboriginal children, families and communities.

The vision outlined in the Strategy is consistent with AbSec’s comprehensive plan, the *Plan on a Page for Aboriginal children and young people* that advocates for: “A strong safety-net of Aboriginal community-controlled organisations that effectively meet the needs of Aboriginal children, families and communities across NSW, working towards safe communities and reducing the over representation of Aboriginal children in out-of-home-care and providing for better outcomes over time”<sup>1</sup>.

The Strategy includes **five headline priorities** and **20 strategic enabling initiatives** targeted at enhancing the capacity and capability of Aboriginal Child, Family and Community sector through a consistent, coordinated approach.

One priority of the *Strategy* is focused on the need to ‘generate evidence on service delivery models for Aboriginal communities and share knowledge across the sector to build capacity’ noting that there is not currently ‘a sector-wide, coordinated approach that supports the establishment of an Aboriginal led evidence base to enable greater self-determination and support capacity building in the sector’.

This priority included an initiative to “**develop a performance framework for the sector that ACC organisations can use to inform data collection and reporting**”.

Developing effective approaches to the collection, use and reporting of data is relevant to a number of reforms underway across the service sector, including the Targeted Earlier Intervention reforms and the Permanency Support Program. Equipping Aboriginal community organisations to establish and utilise data processes at the local level will contribute to evidence building and ongoing service improvement across the continuum of support.

This paper presents an overview of the collection, use and reporting of service performance data by and for Aboriginal communities to inform the development of a guide for Aboriginal community controlled organisations.

## Background

The NSW government and the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) share a commitment to achieving better outcomes for Aboriginal children and families. This reflects a broader shift within the DCJ cluster and the NSW Government towards outcomes-based commissioning, which places a focus on impact rather than output in funding decisions. As part of conversations about outcomes-based commissioning, AbSec advocated for the establishment of an Aboriginal commissioning framework, empowering Aboriginal communities to ultimately direct investment in local service system design and administration to achieve their own development goals.

AbSec’s approach is based on the important concept of Aboriginal self-determination. Article 1 of the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights states that “all peoples have the right to self-

<sup>1</sup> Achieving a Holistic Aboriginal Child and Family Service System for NSW, May 2016

determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development". The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples applies these universal rights in the context of indigenous peoples, including the right to self-determination. The exercise of the right of self-determination has long been identified as a cornerstone of effective, rights-based policy for the care and protection of Aboriginal children and young people. The *Bringing Them Home Report*, released in 1997, outlined the importance of self-determination in promoting healing and addressing the disproportionate impact of contemporary child welfare systems in the lives of Aboriginal children, families and communities. In 2019, the *Family is Culture Review* likewise emphasised the importance of self-determination, and raised concerns about the ways in which governments have consistently undermined or otherwise limited enjoyment of this right. The review noted that enjoyment of the right to self-determination for Aboriginal peoples includes the right to be free from the unwarranted interference of the state in the affairs of Aboriginal communities. Rather, Aboriginal communities should be supported to develop and implement their own systems and supports for the care and protection of our children and the strengthening of our families and communities.

Extending these basic rights of indigenous peoples, Indigenous Data Sovereignty refers to the right of Aboriginal communities to exercise control over data that pertains to them. This recognises that data is an essential resource for community development efforts, and that governance of data systems provides access to this important resource for effective community governance. The Maiam nayri Wingara Indigenous Data Sovereignty collective and Australia Indigenous Governance Institute identified that Indigenous Data Sovereignty includes the right to:

- *"Exercise control of the data ecosystem including creation, development, stewardship, analysis, dissemination and infrastructure.*
- *Data that is contextual and disaggregated (available and accessible at individual, community and First Nations levels).*
- *Data that is relevant and empowers sustainable self-determination and effective self-governance.*
- *Data structures that are accountable to Indigenous peoples and First Nations.*
- *Data that is protective and respects our individual and collective interests."*<sup>2</sup>

AbSec's Aboriginal commissioning framework<sup>3</sup> integrates these principles into services commissioning processes, empowering Aboriginal communities to design and administer these systems for themselves. AbSec's Aboriginal commissioning framework also builds on strategic commissioning insights of the NSW Government, specifically<sup>4</sup>:

- a) *"The importance of robust monitoring, evaluation and data collection processes to measure outcomes, performance and whether the needs of service users are being met; and to help ensure that competitive processes do not undermine collaboration between service providers.*

<sup>2</sup> Maiam nayri Wingara Indigenous Data Sovereignty Collective and Australian Indigenous Governance Institute (2018) 'Indigenous Data Sovereignty' Communique of the Indigenous Data Sovereignty Summit, 20 June 2018, Canberra ACT. Available at: <https://www.maiamnayriwingara.org/s/Communique-IndigenousDataSovereigntySummit.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> AbSec (2018) Commissioning paper

- b) *When governments take a less prescriptive approach to service delivery reform, there are more significant benefits from competition and innovation, including greater adaptability and flexibility with the focus on specifying desired outcomes and ensuring space for innovation”*

Ultimately, AbSec’s broader commissioning framework emphasises a broad network of monitoring, evaluation and data collection processes to measure impact and promote accountability at the local level, while contributing to a broader evidence base curated by Aboriginal communities through our own processes.

## Rationale

The measurement and reporting of outcomes achieved for Aboriginal children, families and communities is a key feature of this framework. Importantly, these outcomes and priorities should be shaped by Aboriginal communities themselves, in line with their own aspirations for their social, cultural and economic development. This approach promotes “collaborative competition”, recognising the right of Aboriginal communities to develop and administer their own systems while providing a broader context to compare performance and build evidence across communities.

Currently, there is an extremely limited evidence base regarding effective approaches with Aboriginal families and communities. Few programs have been designed and developed by and for Aboriginal communities, with the specific perspectives and needs of Aboriginal families at the centre. Rather, international programs with evidence for other distinct populations tend to be imported and imposed on Aboriginal communities. A review of evidence-based parenting supported by the Parenting Research Centre identified fifty-seven programs with good evidence aligned to Targeted Earlier Intervention program outcomes, however noted a number of gaps in the evidence, including the absence of programs designed for Aboriginal populations. Intensive family support programs including the Homebuilders model, Multi-Systemic Therapy – Child Abuse and Neglect and Functional Family Therapy – Child Welfare have all been introduced from the United States and used with Aboriginal communities, despite no evidence of their suitability. Similar issues have been consistently raised by AbSec and Aboriginal community stakeholders across the continuum of support.

In the absence of a robust evidence base, there is an obligation on system stewards to invest in its development. Consistent with the above principle of self-determination, this means empowering Aboriginal communities to design, implement and evaluate our own programs and services, based on community expectation, priorities and aspirations. This means supporting Aboriginal communities to develop the necessary infrastructure and processes to collect, analyse and report on the impact and effectiveness of community-led programs.

## Existing Frameworks

Development of AbSec’s Framework involved a limited desk-top review of comparable frameworks from other state and federal jurisdictions to increase our understanding of the dynamics of effective, operational Frameworks. Recent examples where the Commonwealth government has taken a similar approach outlined in includes the Family Relationship Services Performance Framework and the Data Exchange Framework, as well as a Maori initiative employed by the New Zealand government, Whanau Tahi.

### 1. The Family Relationship Services Performance Framework (FRS)

FRS is an example of a Performance Framework developed by the Commonwealth government. The Family Relationship Services Performance was developed in partnership with a joint sector-government working group and essentially uses a results based accountability approach to ask four key questions about service delivery: *how much did we do (outputs); how well did we do it (processes); did we make a difference in the short term (immediate outcomes); did we make a difference in the longer term (intermediate outcomes).*

Data collected is required for reporting and FRS program management purposes and sits alongside other quality assurance mechanisms such as competitive selection processes, administrative approval and compliance processes and service assessment against client targets and compliance with the Funding Agreement.

This Framework uses a results based accountability approach to ask key questions about funded organisations service delivery, processes, outputs and outcomes and performance against the funding agreement and guidelines. For example, one Program objective, 'Improved Family functioning', asks four key questions about service delivery:

1. How much did we do (outputs)
2. How well did we do it (processes)
3. Did we make a difference in the short term (immediate outcomes) and
4. Did we make a difference in the longer term (intermediate outcomes)

Program logic	Performance Indicator	Data Source	Counting rule
<i>Intermediate outcomes: did we make a difference in the longer term?</i>			
Improved family functioning	% clients with improved family functioning including child wellbeing	Service provider survey	# clients better able to cope or deal with the issues they received support with as a % of followed up clients who answered the question

Data collection is undertaken through a secure, web-based portal titled FRSP Online, in which service providers can input measures pertaining to the framework's key questions. The data collected via the online platform will accompany research and service assurance evaluations. FRS have indicated that outcome measures can vary, but have suggested that data input be based on statistics (i.e. percentage of service engagement or number of client participation), standardised assessment tools, client outcome data collection forms and the FRSP Online Client Feedback Form. The outcome measures used in the FRS aim to be standardised for consistency and continuity across the data set, as well as measure pre- and post- service implementation to monitor impact.

FRS has provided guidelines outlining the processes, policies, funding and complexities of the Performance Framework, however, there is no clear indication of a practical user guide to provide information on how to record and upload data. Within these guidelines, a sample

program logic has been provided (see table above) to help users develop their logic in accordance to the FRS Performance Framework. FRS also provided a template form, the FRSP Online Client Feedback Form, for data collection that can be utilised to record outcome measures in a consistent manner.

## **2. The DSS Data Exchange Framework (DEX)**

**DEX** Performance Framework, developed by the Commonwealth Department of Social Services', outlines the new approach to program performance reporting in grant agreements. DEX provides more efficient ways of collecting data from service providers, and more useful reporting back of data about the outcomes achieved for individuals, families and communities. DEX is a comprehensive framework that facilitates the efficient collection of data from funded service providers that is aligned to reporting on outputs and outcomes achieved. DEX partners with funding agencies and organisations and uses data to gain insight about client outcomes and about the effectiveness of funded programs.

DEX allows for mass data collection through partner organisations using a streamlined reporting platform, *SCORE (Standard Client/Community Outcomes Reporting)*, that aims to promote a partnership approach in which data sharing between participant outcomes and funding agencies can occur. Through standardised scoring and communal exchange of data, SCORE aims to shift to an outcomes-focused agenda to help advise service and program delivery. SCORE systematically compiles data through creating a consistent and comparable scoring system for performance outcomes. SCORE provides organisations with the control and flexibility to decide how to measure outcomes with the ability to use validated instruments (research recognised), in-house instruments (developed by organisations without formal recognition) and self-assessment tools (i.e. client self-reported). Data is translated into a standardised five-point Likert scale (very poor outcomes, poor outcome, moderate outcome, good outcome and very good outcome) to assess outcomes. The ability for organisations to determine their own data collection methods enables further flexibility in allowing localised measures to be consolidated onto a singular platform and then compared across sites. To assist in maintaining consistency across variable outcome measures, DEX has developed a generic translation matrix to be used as a template for uploading in-house and self-assessment measures.

DEX provides users with a "*Quick Start Guide*" that incorporates step-by-step guidelines to assist users in setting up their account, uploading data alongside providing IT support as needed. In addition to the guidelines, DEX provides access to training materials inclusive of task cards, webinars and e-learning modules to further assist the utilisation of this data sharing platform.

## **3. Whanau Tahi**

Whanau Tahi is a framework governed by the philosophy of *Whanau Ora* – family-led well-being. The Whanau Tahi platform was developed by Maori communities to align service provision, funding and data collection with the aspirations of families and communities. Whanau Tahi employs a shared approach to connect Maori families to service providers and funders whilst simultaneously contributing to a shared data set in accordance with a Maori outcomes framework. This platform provides families with the control over their own prosperity, whilst partnering with services to consolidate and capture measured family driven outcomes. The platform allows flexibility in its data collection, by allowing families, services and funding sources access to the family-centred measures it records. Through acknowledging the local and internal validity of outcomes, Whanau Tahi provides further flexibility in the measures collected whilst creating a consistent and representative data set.

Through this shared platform, Whanau Tahi allows services to efficiently measure their impact and track the progress of Maori families in achieving their aspirations. Importantly, access to and use of data is managed through community-led processes, enabling the use of data by local communities to improve service delivery and achieve their goals.

## Analysis of Existing Data Collection Frameworks

Data Collection is the process of gathering information on variables of interest from several different sources and analysing or processing this information to gain useful insights from it in an established systematic fashion that enables one to answer stated research questions, test hypotheses, and evaluate outcomes. Robust data collection processes are critical to demonstrating impact for service users, building confidence for communities and funders as well as supporting continuous improvement efforts.

The snapshot of existing frameworks discussed above raise a number of key points for consideration.

Organisations can collect data from practitioners, organisations as well as from Aboriginal children, families and communities themselves. Data can be collected in various ways including:

- Online or non-online open-ended surveys or questionnaires
- One-on-one (or face-to-face) interviews – a common data collection methodology used in qualitative research
- Focus groups
- Direct observation of relevant practitioners
- Lived experience and voice
- Local knowledge

Data can be collected at various points in time and across a time period. This allows for the opportunity to map family change over time by collecting data and measuring progress over the course a family's involvement with the program or service.

Data and research form an evidence base that can be utilised to identify priorities, inform practice and ultimately improve outcomes. Data collection assists with service improvement through ongoing needs analysis and sharing with the sector to drive a system of continuous service improvement and performance. Enhanced data collection, evaluation and analysis assists in organisations' strategic planning and ensures scarce resources are targeted where they are needed most.

The importance of reporting is integral in the development of an Aboriginal community controlled data infrastructure. Reporting data and collecting outcome measures assists in identifying priorities to the Aboriginal communities, monitoring progress of families through the duration of their service and to understand and improve the impact services have on Aboriginal communities.

As noted above, access and ownership of data that pertains to them remains a fundamental right of Aboriginal communities. Communities remain concerned about the use of data, including by government agencies, to justify policies that undermine the rights of Aboriginal peoples and may be harmful or contrary to their aspirations. Aboriginal community controlled organisations and other representative bodies often find it difficult to negotiate access to the data kept about them by governments, limiting the use of this data to inform community decision making. Aboriginal

community ownership of data and data infrastructure is an important part of promoting Indigenous Data Sovereignty and the ethical and effective use of data about Aboriginal peoples to achieve Aboriginal communities' development goals.

The shift towards an outcomes-based approach raises other significant issues, particularly regarding the paucity of quality evidence about what works for Aboriginal children, families and communities. Whilst the ability to standardise data collection is an asset in creating a consistent data platform such as in DEX and FRS, it is important to recognise that standardised measurement tools are not often validated with Aboriginal children, families and communities. Development of relevant and valid measurement tools for Aboriginal communities is essential. Flexibility in tool development and use is also an important feature, requiring a mechanism to align various measures to a consistent and comparable framework, like the Likert SCORE scale. Whanau Tahi allows for local organisations and services to utilise and upload their own measurement tools as deemed locally valid for the community in which they are serving, and is aligned to a broader Maori outcomes framework that reflects their values and aspirations. Individual and family goals are then mapped to this broader framework to enable analysis at a community level, and support community development goals.

## Key Considerations for Developing Aboriginal Data Processes

Evidence is essential to know things are improving, for informing changes and refreshing policy, and building the confidence of government investment in the Aboriginal children, families and communities. Ongoing evaluation of evidence results in improved outcomes for Aboriginal children, families and communities. By incorporating the accountability of Aboriginal communities to develop their own evidence base, it emphasises the right that Aboriginal communities have to monitor and develop the services that impact them.

Aboriginal data collection processes need to take into consideration various principles including the standardisation of measures, the times at which collection can occur, multiple service providers and the ongoing monitoring of services for continuous improvement. An Aboriginal data collection approach acknowledges that current standardised outcome measuring tools are not valid to assess an Aboriginal communities' identified issues and goals. Validity and consistency should be dictated by communities to ensure outcome measures are in line with their own expectations and aspirations. Across multiple service providers, data collection should focus on maintaining consistency and reliability in measuring change in the circumstances of children and families. Whilst it is important to recognise the limitations of certain data collection methods, data collection methods will be tailored to community needs, with Aboriginal community controlled data infrastructure needing flexibility to accommodate and synthesise local approaches. Furthermore, it is noted that outcomes are ever-changing and therefore can be measured at set points (pre- and post- service implementation) or during a service at multiple timeframes across engagement, is integral in developing an Aboriginal community controlled data infrastructure. Finally, the principle of continuous improvement is integral in ensuring Aboriginal community control over a data collection process in which communities can be responsible for ongoing service improvement tailored to their needs and aspirations.

## Supporting Data Processes for Aboriginal Community Organisations

The Aboriginal Child, Family and Community sector lacks a common data collection and reporting system that will enable the sector to share knowledge about best practice, what works and to ensure

organisations have the capacity to develop their own systems and processes to track and report on outcomes.

The above analysis emphasises two key points – the importance of Aboriginal community controlled data infrastructure, and the need for greater guidance in the collection and use of data, to equip local communities with the data and evidence they need to design and administer child and family services.

Development of a common Aboriginal community controlled data system will enable the sector to draw from a strong evidence base of best practice service design and delivery that meet the needs of Aboriginal children, families and communities. It will also generate a greater understanding of how and why performance quality standards and outcomes compare across the sector. Culturally appropriate data collection and reporting systems would support the collection of information on activities and outputs and help Aboriginal organisations measure their progress. This system would also enable organisations to easily access reports, information and data on evidence of best practice (service model design and delivery) and training. Organisations should equal consideration to the feedback we receive from families and communities on their experiences, needs and aspirations to other kinds of evidence and data.

It is evident that there is a need for an Aboriginal community controlled data infrastructure that is able to capture and record the outcomes being achieved in reaching Aboriginal child and family goals. It should be noted that the development of an Aboriginal community controlled data infrastructure requires investment from the government. An Aboriginal-led approach to data collection highlights the importance of acquiring the processes and skills necessary for data collection, the use and reporting of data and the ability to analyse data for continuous improvement. An Aboriginal community controlled data infrastructure will notably increase accountability whilst simultaneously promoting community confidence in services, ultimately contributing to service and program improvement.

ACCOs are committed to demonstrating the value of their services to the wellbeing of their communities, as well as sharing best practice evidence about what works in regards to culturally appropriate models to deliver child and family services. Measuring the performance of service delivery organisations is an essential part of building this evidence, and setting a baseline for continuous improvement. This evidence can also be communicated internally (throughout the organisation) and externally (to communities, funding agencies and key stakeholders) to improve services and increase the confidence of the community and funding bodies. However, greater guidance is needed to support Aboriginal organisations to implement effective data processes.

AbSec is developing a practical guide, *“Demonstrating Success in Service Delivery: A guide for Aboriginal Organisations”*, to assist in the data collection process. The guide will outline the key steps in preparing to collect data about the impact of a service or program, as well how this data can be used effectively. The *“Demonstrating Success”* guide will support Aboriginal communities to operationalise the two key areas stated in the guide;

1. Designing and Developing a Program logic (Preparing for Data Collection)
2. Defining measures, collecting and using data and continuous improvement (analysing and reporting data to inform service design)

Through the supported implementation of the practical guide, Aboriginal communities will be better informed to identify and address gaps and goals, measure their progress through data collection and showcase the effectiveness or iterations of a program in addressing Aboriginal child, family and community goals.

These steps are important in developing a holistic Aboriginal Child and Family Service System for NSW, designed and administered by Aboriginal communities themselves. The establishment of Aboriginal community controlled data infrastructure, alongside the implementation of robust data processes at the local level, will contribute to the development of a local evidence base and promote continuous improvement, with Aboriginal children, families and communities the chief beneficiaries.