

July 2024

Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation Forum Report

Empowering ACCOs for
Community-Led Change



Acknowledgement of Country

AbSec acknowledge the Gadigal and Wangal People of the Eora Nation, the land on which our office stands, and pay respect to Elders past, present and emerging. We acknowledge the Elders, leaders and advocates within our sector and pay our respects to them as knowledge holders within this space and every space.

AbSec acknowledges the Stolen Generations who never came home and the ongoing impact of government policy and practice on Aboriginal children, young people and families.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are warned that the following study report may contain images of deceased persons.



Who we are

AbSec is the peak organisation concerned with the welfare of Aboriginal children, young people and families. We advocate for their rights, while supporting carers and communities. Our main priority is to keep children and young people safe, with the key goal of also keeping them within their family and community. It is vitally important that young people grow up surrounded by those who understand them, comfortable within their own culture where they will thrive.

AbSec ensures Aboriginal children, young people, families, carers and communities have access to services and support that give them the best possible chance to fulfil their potential. We work with both Aboriginal community-controlled organisations and non-Aboriginal organisations, as well as government agencies and other stakeholders, to steer and coordinate efforts to close the gap. We are driven to advocate for a society where all children and young people have the same opportunities, regardless of cultural heritage.

At the core of this vision is our efforts to develop a tailored approach to Aboriginal child and family supports. We want to deliver universal, targeted and tertiary services that cover the full gamut of care. The aim is to create a system that recognises vulnerabilities in families and mitigates risk factors, reducing the need for invasive interventions. The fewer children and young people who need to be removed from their families, the better off we will all be. We also want to see more tailored Aboriginal out-of-home care and after-care services, with the goal of ending the cycle of disadvantage that continues to impact generations of Aboriginal families.

The bottom line is that we want to see Aboriginal children and young people cared for in safe, thriving Aboriginal families and communities, where they are raised strong in spirit and identity. We want them to have 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 and communities.
- Underpinning the rights of Aboriginal people to develop our own processes and systems for our communities, particularly in meeting the needs of our children, young people, families and carers.
- Being holistic, integrated and solutions-focused through Aboriginal control in delivering outcomes for Aboriginal children, young people, families and communities.
- Committing to a future that empowers Aboriginal families and communities, representing our communities, and the agencies there to serve them, with transparency and drive.

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Glossary of Acronyms

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| AbSec | AbSec – NSW Child, Family and Community Peak Aboriginal Corporation |
| ACCO | Aboriginal Community–Controlled Organisations |
| DCJ | the NSW Department of Communities and Justice |
| NSW | New South Wales |
| OOHC | Out-of-home Care |
| PSP | Permanency Support Program |

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Executive Summary



The Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCO) July Sector Forum was held on 17 and 18 July 2024. The forum was a closed, safe space for Senior Aboriginal community leaders and organisations; it centered on elevating the voices of Aboriginal people, including experiences living under guardianship and the impact that trauma has had upon our lives.

The ACCO Sector Forum was guided by AbSec’s working principles and showcased our solutions-focused drive and community spirit. Our focus at the ACCO Sector Forum was underpinned by the rights of our community to make decisions about our lives under the principle of self-determination; and we recognise the interests of Aboriginal children, young people, families, carers and communities in all that we achieved during the forum. Over the two days, we focused our attention on how we could deliver holistic approaches to issues affecting the ACCO sector and all stakeholders, as well as how these could be supported through smart strategies.

The forum was attended by 80 delegates from across a broad cross section of New South Wales – predominantly ACCOs, non-government organisations (NGOs) and government stakeholders.

“Come back to basics. There’s so much happening, as I mentioned before about the sector being on steroids. All these initiatives, all these buzzwords, but at the end of the day we’re doing what we do to care for and protect our children and young people.”

Key themes

AbSec appointed Native Pulse to facilitate three planning sessions at the event that were developed to help build strategic conversations amongst attending stakeholders to grow solutions that reflect the needs of community; inform them of policy and position; create an advocacy approach to each session; and to provide a report capturing the outcomes.

Each session held at the forum was designed to build conversations and relationships and ultimately grow solutions that reflect the needs of community. The three sessions held during the forum targeted:

1.

Guardianship – the role of ACCOs

2.

Growth and sustainability of the ACCO Sector

3.

Procurement and commissioning for the ACCO Sector

Guardianship - the role of ACCOs

Under the current Guardianship orders, full parental responsibility is determined for a child or young person when there is “no realistic possibility of restoration”. They will be placed with a “relative, kin or suitable other person” until they are 18 years of age. According to the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ), “Guardianship orders are made by the Children’s Court of NSW on a final and long-term basis by placing a child or young person in the independent care of a guardian. Such orders are made as an alternative to foster or out-of-home care where the court decides it’s not safe for a child or young person to live with their parents.”

In the last decade, there were five key Guardianship policy moments that directly affected Aboriginal children and families. These, and their impact, need to be considered when discussing the needs of Aboriginal children and families and the role that ACCOs play moving forward.



2014: Guardianship orders

The NSW Government made Guardianship orders the primary (or priority) method to reduce the over-representation of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care (OOHC). However, action on and surrounding this policy was many orders failing as a permanent arrangement. This was due to lack of consultation, planning and adequate support for carers.

2015: AbSec Guardianship Policy Paper

AbSec released an initial [Guardianship Policy Position Paper](#), confirming our fundamental opposition to Guardianship. Some of the major concerns included permanent care arrangements being administered by non-Aboriginal decision-making systems, concerns about a withdrawal of caseworker support for children under Guardianship and a distinct lack of accountability for carers to upkeep acceptable cultural care.

2017: Permanency Support Packages

DCJ launched the Permanency Support Program (PSP), stating it “brings together government and non-government partners to work together in the best interests of children.” Functionally speaking, the PSP funds accredited organisations to deliver services to children in OOHC. The model is made up of a case plan goal package, baseline package and child needs package. Specialist packages are also available, depending on a child’s eligibility. All PSP packages are provided to cover the cost of case management, services and support required to address the individual child’s needs across the continuum of care.

2019: Aboriginal Case Management Policy

AbSec played a key role in the design of a tailored [Aboriginal Case Management Policy](#), published on the DCJ website in 2019. The policy is yet to be rolled out at any meaningful scale.

2021: Guardianship Support Model

Throughout 2020, AbSec worked towards addressing issues that came from the change to Guardianship orders in Aboriginal communities across New South Wales. During this time, AbSec led a co-design process to develop types of supports wanted by families in two selected areas in New South Wales. This led to AbSec's collaboration with project partners and funders to trial a new model of support for Aboriginal children and young people on Guardianship that has been co-designed with guardians, carers, community members, service practitioners and government partners. This trial ran from 2021–2023 in the Hunter and Sydney's Southwest area.

When designing the model, AbSec spoke with people who have been affected by the transition to Guardianship orders, as guardians have not been eligible for ongoing assistance and support from DCJ or an OOHC agency to help them meet the long-term needs of a child or young person with a Guardianship order.



Forum response

Guardianship orders work well when children are kept with family and kin; communication is consistent with all parties; and families are actively involved in decisions. A key piece of sector feedback is the need for more safeguards, especially to ensure cultural and family connections are maintained.

Guardianship can work well for Aboriginal children if they are placed with family or kin.

Children's voices need to be heard in the process.

Aboriginal families need to be actively involved in decisions.

Safeguards to ensure cultural and family connections for children must be enforced.

AbSec will consult on a draft policy position paper with a view to finalising it by November 2024.

The forum session on Guardianship and ACCOs provided a means for the community to speak openly about the issues with Guardianship and the potential benefits if or when, used in an appropriate situation.

The session found that Guardianship can lead to a loss of cultural identity and significant trauma – which boils down to a lack of oversight from key parties involved in these decisions. Importantly, there is a need for better cultural involvement and continuous engagement with Aboriginal families to avoid significant trauma to the child or young person. Another issue flagged is financial support, or lack thereof. The session noted that financial support does not cover all costs, and there is insufficient support for guardians after placement.

Although there are more issues than benefits when it comes to Guardianship orders, the session generated some that reflect the important role that ACCOs play in connecting children to their culture. The session emphasised that ACCOs can, do and should play a crucial role in ensuring children remain connected to their culture and community; providing ongoing support beyond simple financial assistance. Equally, when properly managed, the session found that Guardianship can provide stability, maintain cultural connections, and offer autonomy to families.



Forward planning

What arose from the ACCO July Sector Forum was the need for greater influence of ACCOs in ensuring children and young people remain connected to their culture; providing ongoing support; and ensuring that all carers receiving meaningful financial assistance. This session and sector feedback will be fed into policy, to create a more meaningful direction and impactful leadership.

As reflected in the Native Pulse Report, the suggested journey timeline is as follows:

21 September: Native Pulse plans to deliver a draft AbSec Policy Paper for 2024, based upon initial sector and stakeholder feedback that's reflected in this report and from the AbSec quarterly sector forum in August 2024.

30 September: The draft policy position paper is presented to targeted stakeholders for formal feedback.

31 October: The position paper is refined in response to feedback and launched at the 2024 NSW Aboriginal Child and Family Conference, scheduled for November 2024.

Growth & sustainability of the ACCO Sector

Under the current [National Agreement for Closing the Gap](#) (CTG), which was published in July 2020, the NSW Government devised three key action areas. These sit under Priority Reform Two, which aimed at building a community-controlled sector:

1. ACCOs have a dedicated, reliable and consistent funding model designed to suit the types of services required by communities.
2. There is a dedicated and identified workforce in ACCOs, which has wage parity.
3. ACCOs have strong governance and business processes.

Upon analysis, none of these areas have gained any meaningful traction. As for the National CTG agreement (to which New South Wales is a signatory), Aboriginal Affairs NSW is leading a prioritisation policy in response to Clause 55. Clause 55 requires governments to:

“...implement measures to increase the proportion of services delivered by ACCOs by:

- *implementing funding prioritisation policies that require decisions about the provision of services to Aboriginal communities to preference ACCOs.*
- *where new funding initiatives are decided, a meaningful proportion is allocated to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations.”*

The prioritisation policy is set for release early next year (early 2025), alongside an ACCO sector uplift strategy; which will have an impact upon the growth and sustainability of this sector.

As prepared by Native Pulse, there are six high-level initiatives that the ACCO sector should leverage to support growth and sustainability:



As a sector, we should leverage these opportunities to support evidence-based strategies for growth. These were raised within the July forum and received overwhelming support and consensus. The findings reflect the importance of more government accountabilities to support growth and sustainability, and the need for more communication and consultation.

Forum response

The ACCO July Sector Forum provided important feedback from stakeholders that reflects the need for more communication, trust and support between the ACCO sector and governmental bodies.

Findings will be broken down under key calls for action including the impact on communities, transition and accountability, funding and resource management.

Communities

The key finding of the forum is that the government needs to listen to ACCOs for guidance on community needs and effective programs. Our communities need proper consultation, so our needs are understood and met. There is a need for sustainable and longer funding period to provide our organisations with financial security, meaning we can deliver and role our programs more effectively to our communities.

Equally, administrative burdens should be reduced, and the government should trust ACCOs as community experts. With a greater emphasis on sharing training resources and information, ACCOs will thrive and the communities we serve will also see the impact of that.

As for ACCOs, the forum found that ACCOs need to consult with communities to understand and meet their unique needs. Leadership is crucial for growing and managing staff within ACCOs, and the forum believed greater collaboration between ACCOs will enhance our funding opportunities. ACCOs need to ensure staff also receive better funding and training, which is essential for staff retention. Finally, the forum believed that ACCOs should lead from the ground and support smaller organisations with mentoring and capacity building.

Transition and accountability

When it comes to transition and accountability, the forum believed that Governments should support ACCOs during transitions and allow them to control and authorise their own processes. This relates back to the importance and striving for self-determination within our communities; and should be at the heart of every Governmental move. They also found that a clear mandate for the ACCO transition should be established to facilitate change within the sector, and relationships.

As for the role of ACCOs within the space of transition, ACCOs should advocate for their expertise to be acknowledged and work towards gaining decision-making authority. The forum also found that continual engagement with the government is critical for successful transitions and ensuring ACCOs are trusted as experts.

Funding and resource management

The forum found that there needs to be new approaches when it comes to funding, and they generated three key moves that need to happen:

1. The government needs to implement an Aboriginal outcomes framework that values both qualitative and quantitative results.
2. The reporting processes need to be streamlined, and there needs to be the creation of easier platforms for data management to reflect ACCOs' strengths.
3. The government needs to allow flexibility in funding to support various community needs and review current funding models for better alignment with ACCO goals.

The forum also believed that there is a need for holistic and flexible funding within our sector. This means that the government needs to provide funding that is flexible and based on community needs, rather than specific program requirements. There is also cause to enhance early intervention programs and improve community referral pathways to ensure more practical support for those in need.

Forward planning

The ACCO July Sector Forum generated a list of recommendations for government and ACCOs which need to be considered moving forward, as well as ways of effective implementation.

For government, there was a need to improve funding fairness and support for ACCOs, including equal funding when compared to that given to NGOs. There is also an identified need for reducing bureaucratic controls. The government also needs to recognise ACCOs' expertise and initiative when it comes to training and development and provide resources to generate more activity in this space.

“We need to focus on self-determination and community empowerment while leading the way in service delivery.”

For ACCOs, the forum believed we need to focus on self-determination and community empowerment while leading the way in service delivery. Equally, we need to collaborate more with each other and the government to ensure our community needs are met effectively.

For effective implementation, there is a growing need to address the imbalance of funding and resource distribution between ACCOs and NGOs. This would improve our service delivery – and by extension, the ability to empower our community and focus on self-determination. There is also cause to develop a robust system for evaluating programs and support services based on community needs and feedback. This will increase community and carer confidence and showcase our expertise as leaders in this area.

The overarching message from the ACCO sector forum was this – the current system is not working. Specifically, the sessions at the forum identified flags that work to create a system that does not reflect the true potential of support we could offer.

Issues raised include:

- The funding is short term
- We are pitting organisations against each other
- Funding agreements are too rigid
- We are measuring and reporting on wrong outcomes
- Funding is not proportionate to demand
- It is not an equal playing field
- Reporting is too administrative.

Above all else, we need to focus on self-determination and empowering our community through funding that meets their needs, holistic and flexible funding agreements, outcomes that adapt to change and a need to level the funding and opportunities given to ACCOs and NGOs. The disproportionate level of access and functionality needs to change if ACCOs are to meet our operational and community needs.

Right now, ACCOs need to consider forming a coalition to apply for funding in partnership, instead of using the competitive process that pits ACCOs against each other. AbSec has begun working with Paul Gray, Chancellors Postdoctoral Indigenous Research Principal at Jumbunna Institute-Research, to assist in partnerships in preparation for business proposals.

Within six months, the AbSec Aboriginal Led commissioning Framework will be delivered to a select range of communities on a trial basis, with a strong focus on elevation, refinement and deriving key learnings.

Within the next year, the NSW Government is to reform internal procurement and commissioning mechanics to support a streamlined approach to administering funding that aims to alleviate the key issues that described within the Native Pulse Report and this paper.

Conclusion

The forum was a significant and crucial step in understanding community needs when it comes to the direct impact of Guardianship, as well as functionally on ACCO. There is a strong call for more engagement with government in every step of policy building, where the government should actively listen and enable change. ACCOs need more sustainable funding for capacity building to fully support and meet that call, as opposed to the rigid, inflexible nature of funding to date.

Overarchingly, we need time to provide and allocate resources, greater data pools for more data-informed decisions and legislation that reflects the feedback and concerns of our community. Collectively, and conclusively, we need the NSW Government to start to listen to the community and respond accordingly.

Key takeaways from the forum were the need for more communication, trust and support between the government and ACCOs. The lack of equality between NGOs and ACCOs is also a huge red flag for our sector, and we need to work collectively to better enable funding decisions and improve our service delivery.



“We can work towards continuous engagement with Aboriginal families to avoid significant trauma to children and young people and provide ongoing support.”

As for Guardianship orders, ACCOs can play an important role in connecting children and young people to their culture during placement. We can work towards continuous engagement with Aboriginal families to avoid significant trauma to children and young people and provide ongoing support. ACCOs have such an important role to play within this space, so steps and forward planning need to be actioned to better support our young people.

More work needs to be done to address the discussion had at the forum and the feedback generated from the Native Pulse survey.

Specially, the following needs more attention when it comes to designing and development of specific policy:

Policies that address the disparity of funding for ACCOs and between NGOs, the short term and rigid nature of funding and the lack of holistic scope in agreements

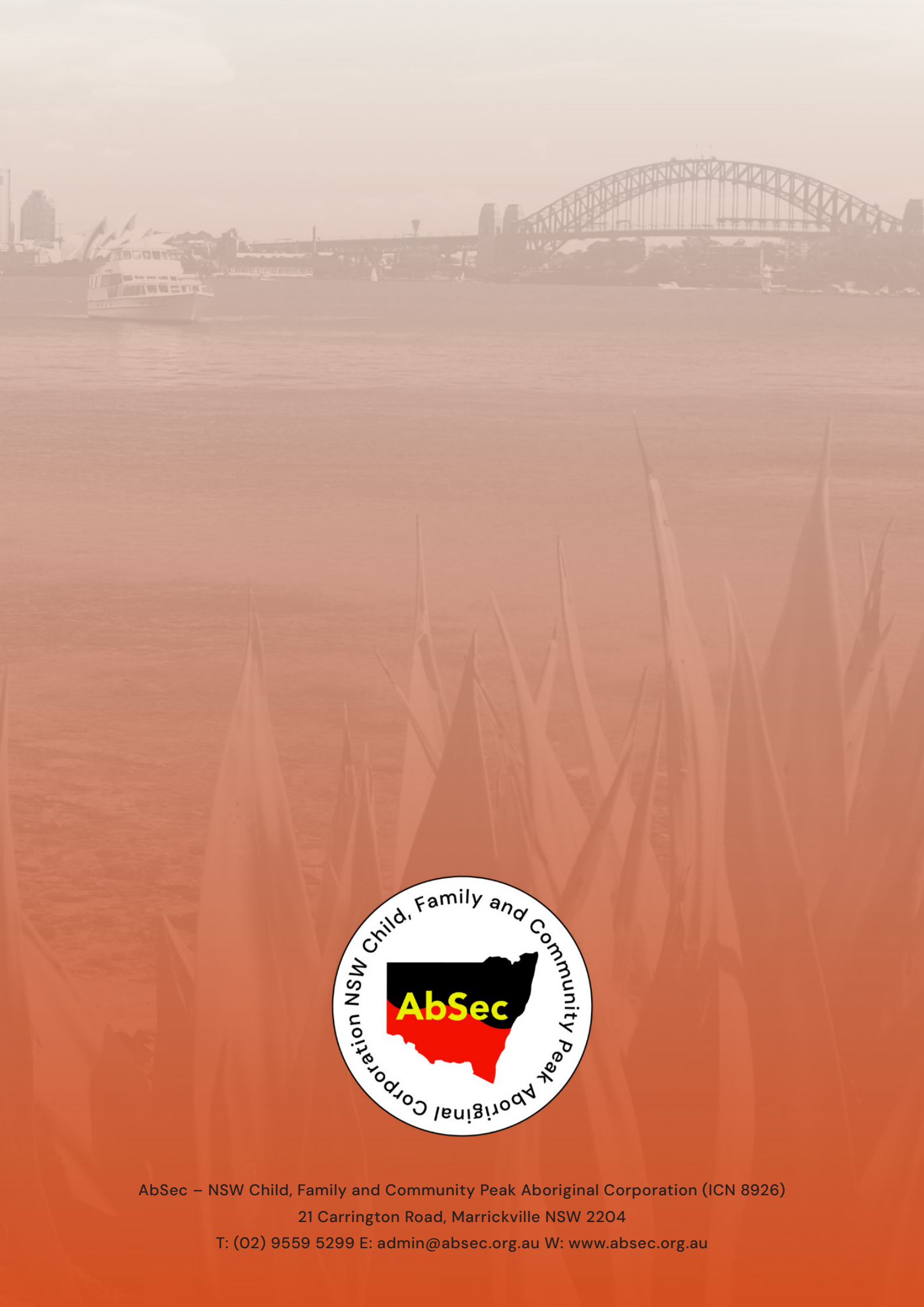
Equally, the disproportionate need for more funding when it comes to demand

The challenges of funding agreements, the nature of pitting organisations against each other and the need for more collaborative action

Reporting outcomes need addressing, as does the nature or rigidity of reports that often do not reflect the needs of community

The need for more trust, communication and respect between Governments and ACCOs; with a lack of reliance on those relationships and the knowledge that ACCOs bring to governmental decisions and policies

The need to address concerns with Guardianship orders more directly; specifically, when removing children and young people from their culture during placement and the significant impact of trauma on a child or young person.



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