



2024 NSW
**Aboriginal Child &
Family Conference**

12–14 November, Western Sydney Conference Centre

Truth Telling: A journey towards understanding & empowerment



Acknowledgement of Country

AbSec acknowledges with deep respect the Traditional Owners of the land where we gathered to discuss vital issues, the Mulgoa clan of the Dharug Nation. These lands, known for their rich cultural heritage and spiritual significance, have been nurtured and preserved through the wisdom and resilience of the Dharug people for tens of thousands of years. We honour the Elders, leaders, and custodians, past, present, and emerging, whose steadfast guardianship has safeguarded these traditions and teachings.

We pay heartfelt homage to the Stolen Generations—those who never returned home—and solemnly reflect on the profound impacts of colonial policies that continue to echo through generations. We recognize the unyielding spirit of Aboriginal children, young people, and families who, despite enduring adversity, lead the way in healing and cultural revival.

AbSec commits to fostering understanding and justice, acknowledging the pivotal role that Aboriginal leadership plays in shaping a future where the community's rights and aspirations are at the forefront of all policies affecting them.



Foreword

The 2024 NSW Aboriginal Child & Family Conference was a landmark event that brought together over 347 participants from across the state. With 260 delegates and 87 community members attending to share their knowledge, the event showcased broad representation from all states and territories. Our gathering was held from 12–14 November 2025 on the land of the Mulgoa Clan of the Dharug Nation, at the Western Sydney Conference Centre.

A diverse range of organisations were involved, with strong participation from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups, as well as numerous not-for-profit, government agencies, and other stakeholders. The conference provided an important opportunity for the sector to unite, discuss, and debate key issues impacting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people, families and communities.

The venue and location offered a unique setting to deliver a comprehensive program, including 19 concurrent sessions and 20 plenary sessions. This format allowed for both large group discussions and smaller, more intimate gatherings to explore the wide variety of work being done across the sector.

The program centred on our theme of ***“Truth Telling: A Journey Towards Understanding and Empowerment”*** addressing critical issues such as the lived experiences of children and families impacted by child protection, and Aboriginal Community-led approaches to system transformation.

This year’s conference placed a particular emphasis on three subthemes:



Secure Families, Connected Culture

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people living securely within their families, deeply connected to their culture, community, and Country. Through this theme we hosted discussions and workshops focused on initiatives that strengthen family bonds while maintaining and enhancing connections to Aboriginal culture, community, and Country.



Data-Driven Design and Delivery

Utilising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander data and evidence to strategically design and deliver projects tailored to community needs. This sub-theme was dedicated to exploring how data and evidence can be effectively used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to design, manage, and evaluate projects that respond precisely to their specific needs and circumstances.



Government Transformation for Cultural Safety

Transforming government practices to ensure cultural safety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people, and families. Through this theme we featured topics around policy reforms and transformative government practices necessary to ensure a culturally safe environment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families. This included panel discussions on advocacy strategies and successful case studies of policy change.



Esteemed keynote speakers and panelists from both state and inter-jurisdictional backgrounds provided valuable perspectives that challenged and inspired all attendees to collaborate towards positive change. Keynote speakers included Aunty Muriel Bamblett the CEO of VACCA, Commissioner Sue-Anne Hunter of the Yoorrook Justice Commission and Gracie, an inspirational young person who spoke of her lived experience of out-of-home-care.

Throughout the event, over 35 presenters delivered impactful sessions, including a range of workshops, panel sessions and presentations. Many of these were led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics, leaders and community-controlled organisations, sharing their successes and challenges, as well as the strengths of their distinct cultural programs. Contributions from the Minister for Families, Communities and Disability Inclusion, and the Secretary for the Department of Communities and Justice also offered valuable insights into the collective efforts needed to address ongoing challenges.

The gathering was not only an educational experience but also a celebration of culture, with 12 performance groups from communities enriching the event through traditional and contemporary performances. Highlights included First Nations Education representing a Torres Strait Island performance who brought the spirit of both the Dharug Nation and the Torres Strait Islands to the forefront of the conference.

The event also featured AbSec's Gala Dinner and Awards where delegates could meet, connect, and reflect on the sessions. We were honoured by a warm welcome from local Elder Uncle Graham Davis King and enjoyed performances from Radical Son, and DJ Pete Gunz setting the tone for the vibrant atmosphere throughout the conference.

As we move forward, a list of resolutions was agreed upon, which include continuing to advocate for an NSW Aboriginal Commissioner for Children & Young People, the Aboriginal Authority for Restoring Children, and empowerment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families aimed at improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities. These resolutions will guide our work until the next gathering in 2026, as we continue striving to ensure a brighter future for our kids.

This report provides a summary of the conference highlights, feedback from delegates, and an outline of the program. We look forward to building on the momentum generated during this conference to continue driving positive change.



John Leha

Chief Executive Officer, AbSec



Who we are

AbSec is the peak organisation advocating for the rights, safety, and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people, families, and communities in New South Wales.

As an Aboriginal-led organisation, we champion self-determination and work towards a child and family system that is culturally safe, community-driven, and responsive to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

AbSec leads policy reform, strengthens the capacity of Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), and ensures that Aboriginal children and young people remain connected to family, community, and culture. We are a key member of the NSW Coalition of Aboriginal Peak Organisations (NSW CAPO) and the primary organisation responsible for Target 12 under Closing the Gap.

Through advocacy, research, and sector leadership, AbSec works to address the disproportionate representation of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care and promote holistic, community-led approaches to child and family wellbeing. Our commitment is to ensuring that Aboriginal children and young people grow up strong in culture, identity, and connection.

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

Our Board of Directors

Our team is governed by a Board of Directors, responsible for determining strategy and overseeing the implementation of our strategic directions. Comprised of representatives from Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations across New South Wales, our board includes organisational members of AbSec, ensuring a diverse and representative governance structure.

AbSec operates under the guidance of a dedicated Aboriginal governing board, led by an Aboriginal Chief Executive Officer. This structure includes both representatives of Aboriginal organisations and individuals, reflecting our commitment to inclusive and culturally-informed leadership.



Dana Clarke
Chair

*Former CEO, Burrun Dalai
Aboriginal Corporation*



Petrice Manton
Vice Chair

*CEO, Muloobinba Aboriginal
Corporation*



Wendy Knight
Director

*Executive Director,
Life Without Barriers*



Mykol Paulson
Director

*CEO, Burrun Dalai Aboriginal
Corporation*



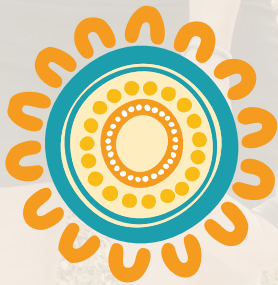
Ursula Donohue
Director

CEO, Ngunya Jarjum



Jai Kilroy
Director

CEO, Wandiyali



Special thanks

The successful organisation, planning, and execution of the AbSec NSW Aboriginal Child and Family Conference involves the collaboration, hard work and contributions of many people. AbSec extends its gratitude to all those who participated and helped make the 2024 AbSec Conference in Penrith a success, with special recognition given to some key contributors listed below.

The conference could not have been a success without the hard work of entire AbSec team. In particular the AbSec conference working group for their input into the program and the AbSec Communications & Marketing Team for their hard work in the lead up and during the conference. Thanks to the AbSec Executive Team for their participation and commitment during the conference.

We would like to express our gratitude to the Elders and traditional owners for welcoming us onto their land, as well as to the Dharug community for their support of the conference.

A special thank you goes to the performers, groups, and children who joined us to showcase their talents, making their performances a memorable highlight of the event.

Our sincere thanks also go to our sponsors and supporters whose invaluable contributions helped make this event possible. We appreciate the guests who attended to speak at the conference, sharing their knowledge and insights.

We are grateful to those who facilitated sessions, led workshops, delivered presentations and who contributed their insights and experiences throughout the conference. We also thank the exhibitors who showcased their services at the conference.

Above all, we extend our heartfelt thanks to our delegates who travelled from all corners of the state to share their important work. Their participation was key to the vibrant atmosphere of the conference and ensured that it was a resounding success, filled with valuable knowledge and perspectives.



Truth Telling

A JOURNEY TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING & EMPOWERMENT

Truth-telling is central to justice and healing. It's not just about recounting facts, but confronting the lived experiences, pain, and resilience of our communities. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, truth-telling is a vital process of reclaiming our stories, histories, and rights. It enables us to acknowledge the wrongs of the past and present, honour our ancestors, and build a future grounded in dignity, respect, and equality.

For too long, our truths have been silenced—through colonial violence, systemic discrimination, and the erasure of our cultures and languages. The impact of these silences is far-reaching. The consequences are clear in the overrepresentation of our children and young people in out-of-home care and in the continued displacement of our kids from their communities and from the land that sustains us.

This conference was a step in our shared journey of truth-telling. It was an invitation for all of us across the sector to listen to the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and reflect on the truths that have been hidden for too long. We share our stories because they are powerful—stories of survival, resistance, and connection to Country, culture, and family that cannot be broken by colonial violence. These truths have the power to transform not only how we view our past but how we imagine and build our future.

Our people have always shared our truths through oral histories, ceremonies, and songs. Even when silenced, we passed them down through generations. But for truth-telling to be truly transformative, it must be heard by those who hold power. It must be listened to with open hearts and minds and acted upon, with truth-telling must also come Dadirri, deep listening and quiet, still awareness. This is why truth-telling is not just a process of speaking but also a call to listen, and then to act.

Collectively, we have witnessed the courage it takes to share these truths. We have also seen the healing that occurs when our voices are heard with respect. Yet, we have also seen the resistance and denial that often accompany our truth-telling. The uncomfortable truths about our shared history challenge the foundations of colonial systems, but it is precisely this discomfort that must be faced for true justice and reconciliation.

This gathering has been an essential part of that process. It is a tool for understanding, a catalyst for change, and a reminder that truth-telling is a lifelong commitment. We cannot move forward without truth. We cannot heal without it. We invite you to engage with this report not just as a document, but as an opportunity to join the ongoing journey of truth-telling that will shape a future where justice, equality, and respect are realities for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Conference feature artwork

Jasmine Andrews drew inspiration from the theme of this year's conference. The impact of last year's referendum deeply affected her and heightened her empathy for her people. Jasmine's family, like many others, was affected by the Stolen Generation, which weakened their connection to Country and culture. This theme is especially significant to Jasmine because of her profound love for her culture.

Jasmine envisions a future where all Aboriginal people and children feel confident and comfortable sharing their culture with everyone. She believes this starts with Aboriginal people being able to freely share their stories, traumas, and hardships. By doing so, future generations can gain the courage and knowledge necessary to decide their path forward.

The journey to this point has been long, but Jasmine believes that through truth telling, we can grow together and make a difference. In her artwork "Truth Telling," she expresses the depth of her feelings on this important topic.



Jasmine Andrews – "Truth Telling"



Event highlights and key takeaways

313 tickets sold

4.8 /5
survey rating.

35 sessions & workshops
across three rooms, in three days.

4,284 reactions

Combined clicks, comments and shares
via all AbSec social media accounts.

247

gala attendees

congratulated our award
winners and enjoyed the
night's entertainment.

60,107

social impressions

Conference mentions seen
across all platforms.

13,719

website views

A new website dedicated
to the event was built and
gained significant traction.

10

cultural performances

by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
singers and dancers.

67

abstract submissions

by academics and sector leaders.



Thank you to our sponsors

We thank all stallholders who contributed to the 2024 NSW Aboriginal Child & Family Conference. The inclusion of stalls was a purposeful element of the program—designed to inform, inspire, and connect attendees across all areas of the sector.



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Exhibitors

Keynote speakers & performers

The AbSec NSW Child and Family Conference spanned three days, hosting a total of 35 informative presentations and workshops. These sessions showcased the impactful efforts of diverse organisations in pursuit of a common objective: enhancing the well-being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people, families, and communities.

Participation of mainstream organisations, services and government representatives provided an opportunity for us to gather collectively, and share a stronger understanding of how we can better work together with children and families within their communities.



Dr. Tracy Westerman AM

Managing Director, Indigenous Psychological Services

Dr. Tracy Westerman, a Nyamal woman from WA's Pilbara, is a trailblazer in Aboriginal mental health and suicide prevention. The first Aboriginal person to earn both a master's and PhD in Clinical Psychology, she founded Indigenous Psychological Services in 1998 and developed culturally validated tools for assessing at-risk Indigenous individuals.

Dr. Westerman has trained over 50,000 practitioners globally and launched the Indigenous Psychology Scholarship Program and The Westerman Jilya Institute, supporting 55 Indigenous psychology students. Her memoir, *Jilya*, became a bestseller in 2023, further cementing her impact on mental health and cultural competency.



Sue-Anne Hunter

Deputy Chair, Commissioner Yoorrook Justice Commission

Sue-Anne Hunter, a Wurundjeri and Ngurai Illum Wurrung woman, serves as Deputy Chair and Commissioner of the Yoorrook Justice Commission, Australia's first truth-telling initiative. With over 20 years of experience in child and family services, she advocates for transformative practices that empower Aboriginal people.

Her leadership in Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations is widely recognised, and she frequently contributes to government inquiries and advisory committees. Sue-Anne's work focuses on healing from the impacts of colonisation and ensuring the voices of Aboriginal people are heard.



Brenda Matthews

Author, Founder, Director

Brenda Matthews, a Wiradjuri woman, is the co-director of the acclaimed documentary "The Last Daughter" and author of the book by the same name. Her deeply personal story of being part of the Stolen Generation reflects themes of healing, reconciliation, and resilience.

Brenda is also the co-founder and director of Learning Circle, an organisation focused on education and cultural storytelling. Through her film, book, and advocacy, Brenda's work inspires understanding and unity, making her a powerful voice for healing and reconciliation in Australia.



Professor Aunty Muriel Bamblett

Chief Executive Officer, Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency

Aunty Muriel Bamblett, a proud Yorta Yorta and Dja Dja Wurrung woman, has been CEO of the Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency since 1999. A prominent advocate for Indigenous children and families, she serves on numerous boards, including SNAICC and the Coalition of Peaks.

Her leadership and contributions to Victoria's Indigenous community have earned her multiple awards, including the 2024 National NAIDOC Award for Person of the Year. Aunty Muriel's work focuses on empowering Indigenous families and advancing Aboriginal justice and welfare.



Djuwan Hoosan

Young Advocate for First Nations Justice and Education Reform

Djuwan Hoosan, an Arrernte/Garrwa teenager, starred in the acclaimed 2019 documentary "In My Blood It Runs", which follows his journey through an education system misaligned with his cultural identity. The film, widely used in Australian schools, sparked a multi-year impact campaign led by his family, advocating for juvenile justice reform and anti-racism.

At just 12, Djuwan became the youngest person to address the UN Human Rights Council, urging Australia to raise the age of incarceration and reform First Nations education. He has since appeared on talk shows, contributed articles to The Guardian and Overland, and co-authored a children's book with his grandmothers.



The Hon. Kate Washington MP

NSW Minister for Families and Communities and Minister for Disability Inclusion

Since 2015, Kate Washington has proudly represented the people of Port Stephens in the Parliament of NSW. Prior to entering Parliament, Kate was a partner in a law firm in Newcastle, specialising in health law. As a parent, parliamentarian and lawyer, Kate has a strong track record of giving voice to, and advocating for, the most vulnerable people in our communities.

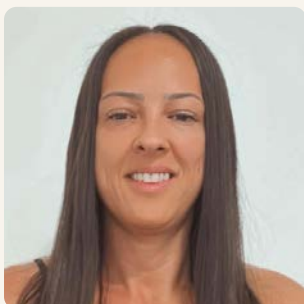


Catherine Liddle

Chief Executive Officer, SNAICC – National Voice for our Children

Catherine Liddle, an Arrernte/Luritja woman from Central Australia, is the CEO of SNAICC – National Voice for our Children. She has held senior roles in First Nations organisations, including First Nations Media and Jawun Indigenous Corporate Partnerships, and worked as a journalist with ABC and NITV/SBS.

Catherine has been a fierce advocate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights, driving policy reforms and positive change. Her leadership in SNAICC focuses on ensuring the safety, development, and wellbeing of Indigenous children, while advocating for their cultural rights and community-driven solutions.



Carla Ware

First Nations Performance Audit Team Leader, Audit Office of NSW

Carla Ware, a Mualgal woman residing on Darkinjung Country, leads the First Nations Performance Audit Team at the Audit Office of NSW. With 20 years in the public sector, including 16 at the NSW Ombudsman's office, Carla managed the Aboriginal Unit, conducting audits to support Aboriginal self-determination in government policy.

Carla was instrumental in advocating for Indigenous-focused healing, contributing to the NSW government's inclusion of healing in their OCHRE (Opportunity, Choice, Healing, Responsibility, Empowerment) Aboriginal Affairs strategy. Her experience also includes roles at AbSec as Operations Manager. She now leads the First Nations Performance Auditing Program, ensuring Indigenous perspectives are integral to public sector accountability.



Michael Tidball

Secretary, NSW Department of Communities and Justice

Michael Tidball brings over 35 years of experience in public service and legal sector leadership. Previously, he served as CEO, Law Council of Australia, Secretary-General of The Law Association for Asia and the Pacific (LAWASIA), and CEO, Law Society of NSW for 14 years. Beginning his career in child protection within the South Australian public service, Michael went on to develop juvenile justice programs for the Commonwealth, working alongside government leaders, the judiciary, and community organisations. His career reflects a commitment to community justice and comprehensive support systems within legal and public sectors.



Alira Tufui

Director, Sector Operations, AbSec

Alira is a proud Gomeroi Yinarr woman and, with a background in Aboriginal education, employment, and training. Alira focuses on improving outcomes for Aboriginal youth, communities, and families. Alira has extensive experience in project management, program design, community engagement and evaluation.

Growing up in a large Aboriginal family, she is deeply committed to creating opportunities for Aboriginal people. Alira also serves as Chairperson of a prescribed body corporate, managing large-scale projects, budgets, and compliance. She is solutions-focused, driven to create lasting impact and positive change for her community.



Dr. BJ Newton

Scientia Senior Research Fellow at the Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW Sydney

Dr. BJ Newton is a proud Wiradjuri woman and Scientia Senior Research Fellow at UNSW Sydney's Social Policy Research Centre. Her research focuses on Aboriginal families' experiences with child protection systems, particularly successful restoration for children in out-of-home care.

Dr. Newton's impactful work, including the "Bring them home, keep them home" project, supports Aboriginal community-determined initiatives and truth-telling efforts. Her dedication to improving outcomes for Aboriginal children through research and advocacy is transforming child protection practices across Australia.



Dr. Paul Gray

*Chancellors' Postdoctoral Indigenous Research Principal,
Jumbunna Institute of Indigenous Education and Research*

Dr. Paul Gray, a Wiradjuri man from NSW, is a Chancellor's Postdoctoral Indigenous Research Principal at University of Technology Sydney's Jumbunna Institute, where he leads the Indigenous child protection hub. His work centres on reimagining child protection through First Nations-led frameworks and research, amplifying Indigenous voices in policy and practice.

With a background as a psychologist and experience in key roles at AbSec and NSW DCJ, Paul co-chairs the Family Matters National Leadership Group. He is a passionate advocate for systemic reform to improve outcomes for First Nations children and families, focusing on evidence-based approaches rooted in Indigenous community perspectives.



Jessy McKinless Currie, a proud Indigenous man from the Sunshine Coast, Queensland, has been a cultural ambassador through dance for many years. He has performed for notable figures such as the Queen of England and the Dalai Lama and incorporates traditional Gubbi Gubbi and North Stradbroke Island dances into his work.

As founder of **Nulungu Dreaming**, a family-run business, Jessy teaches Indigenous song, dance, and culture to thousands across Australia. His mission is to preserve and share Indigenous culture, ensuring future generations embrace their heritage with pride and a sense of belonging.

Day One

Tuesday 12 November

Keynote address by Commissioner Sue-Anne Hunter

Commissioner Sue-Anne Hunter highlighted the urgent need for reform in Victoria's child protection and justice systems. With one in ten Aboriginal children in out-of-home care and a removal rate 14.36 times higher than for non-Aboriginal children, she argued that the system's failure is not an accident but the result of colonial structures designed to perpetuate disadvantage.

Commissioner Hunter emphasised that self-determination must go beyond consultation to include genuine decision-making power for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, who continue to be impacted by systemic racism and criminalisation.

Drawing on insights from the Yoorrook Justice Commission, she called for a reimagining of the child protection system—one that is culturally safe, accountable, and led by Aboriginal people, with solutions grounded in their lived experience and leadership. Only through truth-telling and meaningful action can we achieve justice and healing for Aboriginal children and families.

"This isn't failure, this is the colonial system working exactly as designed, perpetuating disadvantage to maintain power."



Towards Truth: Truth-telling About Law and Policies Impacting First Nations People in NSW

Corey Smith, Brydie Zorz

Towards Truth is a ground-breaking project which shows how New South Wales laws and government policies have impacted almost every aspect of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lives from 1788 to today. This session explained how Towards Truth came to be, and how it supports truth-telling and law reform. Corey and Brydie underscored that acknowledging this history can empower Aboriginal communities and encourage a reckoning with Australia's past, present and future.

"We hope Towards Truth will empower First Nations peoples and force all Australians to reckon with our past".

Bridging The Gap: Advocating for Cultural Safety In Schools

Prof. Kevin Lowe

This session spoke about the ongoing failures in the NSW Government's approach to education, particularly in regional and remote settings in NSW. Currently, education programs utilise outdated education programs which utilise outdated teaching methodologies which demand a degree of social and emotional separation between a teacher and their student. These outdated methodologies, combined with woefully inadequate cultural safety and cultural appropriateness of teaching curricula coalesce to produce a negative impacts on the quality, experience and outcomes of Aboriginal public school students in rural, regional and remote settings.

"We don't want five-year deals; we want intergenerational agreements."

Learning and Leading: The Experiences of Four Young Aboriginal Women and Their Social Work Student Experience

Mahlia Garay, Tiah Payne, Tara Weldon, Tyrah Chan-Hampton, Keely-Che Cain

This panel discussion heard from four staunch Aboriginal women and social work students from UNSW as they reflected on their journey through the child protection system and the importance of Aboriginal leadership in social work. The panel discussed how the system, rather than Aboriginal people, is the root of harm, emphasising the need to minimise harm and advocate for change.

Drawing from personal experience, they highlighted the trauma caused by DCJ, questioning why Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are disproportionately removed. The panelists stressed the need to centre ATSI young people's voices in decision making. They called for systemic change, emphasising truth-telling, cultural context, and listening to children and families.



"We have our lived experience as truth, but also our professional truth, and the systems truth. We are constantly battling for the truth. These things have defined what we want or what we think we deserve moving forward in our careers. Or how we can use truth to change the systems."

Our Own Voices: Truth Telling from Aboriginal Families Navigating the Child Protection System and Restoration

Community Panel

This panel of Aboriginal family members spoke to the truth of navigating the child protection system and restoration. They have been involved in Aboriginal-led community-based research focused on their families' experiences with the child protection system and restoration processes.

"The system actively works to keep families separated. Both my girls are home now. Not because of the system. The system only ever did everything it could to stop them from coming home."

Housing Instability and Child Protection: Empowering Aboriginal Families Through Culturally-Led Reform

Dr. Melissa Kaltner, Mark Galvin

This session presented the findings of AbSec and Lumenia's draft scoping report on access to public housing for Aboriginal families impacted by the child protection system.

The study highlights significant inequalities in housing accessibility, with housing instability often correlating to increased child protection involvement. The report emphasises the need for culturally responsive policies, including decolonising risk assessments, improving housing availability, and addressing systemic barriers.

This session advocated for Aboriginal-led housing reforms, increased collaboration between housing and child protection sectors, and legislative changes to reduce unnecessary child removals.



Self-determination in Aboriginal Perinatal Health

Leshay Chong

Leshay Chong explored self-determination in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perinatal health, highlighting the legacy of her great-grandmother, Granny Mary, and the strengths passed through her matrilineal line. Chong emphasised the importance of cultural frameworks in maternal health, grounded in "Knowing, Being, and Doing."

The session critiqued systemic failures in the healthcare system, particularly its biomedical focus, and called for a holistic approach considering body, mind, and spirit. Chong introduced the RISE Framework, advocating for redesigning healthcare systems, strengthening communities, and embedding cultural safety.

"We don't want piecemeal funding, 12 month, 18 month funding, where you can't make longitudinal change."

"That'll Never Happen Because We Don't Want White People to Raise Our Kids": Experiences of First Nations People in the NSW OOHCC System

Dr. James Beaufils

Dr. James Beaufils presented his thesis, the journey of which began at the 2019 AbSec conference. He reflected on his family's experiences with the child protection system. Dr. Beaufils highlighted a 48% increase in statutory care and critiqued the inconsistent application of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Placement Principle. The speaker emphasised that out-of-home-care philosophies often fail to align with First Nations worldviews, citing systemic colonial and paternal constraints. He discussed the Meninditje model, which prioritises family-based care, and argued that communities, not systems, are key to keeping children connected to their culture and families.



"At a systems level there are inherent colonial and paternal constraints and families are continuing to lose their children both physically and culturally."

Establishing the Wee-ya Win-na Aboriginal Community Controlled Mechanism

Petrice Manton, Sonnie Ridgeway, Paula Giles

Wee-ya Win-na, a group of dedicated Aboriginal community members, provides a culturally safe space for Aboriginal families in Newcastle and the Hunter Region, offering support and referrals for Aboriginal families. The panel discussed the importance of community-driven decisions and the shift towards family-led decision-making, empowering families to take control of their support needs. Wee-ya Win-na is formed by community members who have experience with the sector and commitment to improving outcomes for Aboriginal families. These members are trained to identify risk (and what risk can look like) for Aboriginal children, young people, families and communities as early as they can and engage them in support through family-led decision-making.

"Early intervention and prevention is the best way that we can change outcomes."

Racial bias of the SDM Family Risk Assessment: Lessons from Queensland

Dr. Brian Jenkins

Dr. Brian Jenkins critiqued the Family Risk Assessment (FRA) tool used in child protection, highlighting its racial bias and flaws. He explained that while intended to predict future maltreatment, the tool often predicts child protection involvement based on crude, discriminatory factors, such as cultural or ethnic markers. Jenkins emphasised that the FRA disproportionately inflates risk scores for Indigenous children, leading to false positives and systemic discrimination. He called for a shift in focus from risk-based assessments to understanding and addressing family needs, advocating for a more holistic, non-discriminatory approach in child protection.

"An assessment shouldn't just tell you high or low or intervene or don't intervene, but it tells you how and why you need to help this family, what are their needs. Give them what they need right now, right in front of us."



Welcome Drinks

The welcome drinks at the conference were a great way for participants to connect in a relaxed setting. It gave everyone a chance to catch-up, share ideas, and build relationships, helping to strengthen partnerships and encourage collaboration.

The Emms, Mikayla and Matilda, blend rock, pop, and classics, representing a new generation that honours musical tradition while exploring fresh boundaries. Matilda, a skilled multi-instrumentalist and songwriter, brings creative energy and technical skill to their partnership, while Mikayla's classical choir training adds a refined depth. A proud Tharawal woman, Mikayla has won multiple choral awards, enriching their contemporary sound.



Daniel Mateo is a descent of the Gomeri/Gamilaraay people on his mother's side and on his fathers, a descendant of the Pasifika people of Ma'ufanga in the remaining kingdom of Tonga. Daniel is a multidisciplinary artist exploring the colonial language in the form of poetry as well as painting and dance to showcase and tell the stories and true history that's imbedded in blak Australia's history.

Day Two

Wednesday 13 November

Video presentation by the Hon. Kate Washington MP

Minister Washington acknowledged that “the system is broken” and committed to reform in collaboration with Aboriginal organisations and peak bodies. Minister Washington highlighted replacing the biased Structured Decision Making risk assessment tool with an interim process, while a new approach is developed. The Minister also noted progress in reducing children in high-cost emergency arrangements and thanked AbSec for its work on the Aboriginal Case Management Policy and establishing ACCMs. The Minister outlined targets to increase funding for ACCOs over five years and assured progress on transitions by June 2026. Additionally, she emphasised efforts to improve cultural safety within DCJ.

“I heard loud and clear Aboriginal people want more transparency, accountability and participation in decision making about their children.”

Keynote Address by Catherine Liddle

Catherine Liddle spoke passionately about the importance of truth, connection to ancestors, and redesigning the child protection system. She highlighted the need for Aboriginal leadership in reshaping the system to ensure children and young people are loved and connected to their communities.

Liddle emphasised that current policies fail to address the lived experiences of Aboriginal children, with over 22,000 across the country in out-of-home care, disconnected from family and culture. She called for systemic change, stronger partnerships, and resources for Aboriginal communities. Liddle urged for long-term planning, celebrating strengths, and empowering communities to tell their own stories.

“It was truth that I was listening to, our stories, and our creators are in every grain of sand, every molecule, every water, every plain. This is the truth, our ancestors live and breathe in every molecule that makes up this Country. That land was never ceded.”



Keynote Address by Young Advocate Gracie

Gracie, shared her story of growing up in out-of-home-care. Now 18 years-old, she spoke about the lack of communication and support, including not being told why she was in care. Gracie spoke of the importance of listening to children's voices and the need for caseworkers to provide clear explanations about their rights and care plans. She highlighted the emotional toll of feeling like an outsider, the significance of cultural connections, and the need for better communication and proactive support for young people transitioning out of care.

“Family is supposed to be there to support you but mine was more like a well-kept secret.”

Keynote Address by Adjunct Professor Muriel Bamblett

Aunty Muriel Bamblett, Chief Executive Officer of Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency which shared insights from their work at VACCA, emphasising the importance of Aboriginal-led, family-centred approaches in child protection. Highlighting VACCA's higher restoration rates (22%) compared to the department's (10-12%), Aunty Muriel stressed the value of building in-house data and analysis capabilities to better track children across systems.

Aunty Muriel advocated for early health interventions and dedicated workforce development for Aboriginal staff. She shared stories of supporting families, such as refurbishing homes for grandmothers to care for their grandchildren, and reflected on the importance of trauma-informed, evidence-based practices to improving outcomes for Aboriginal children and families.

"Someone asked me, after 25 years, are you tired? It's a type of tired that I like, a tiredness that comes from doing things."



Deadly Resources with Ngunya Jarjum

Ursula Donohue, Michelle Hicks

Ursula and Michelle from Ngunya Jarjum presented their work on developing essential resources for supporting Aboriginal children, young people, and carers. They discussed key resources such as an orientation booklet, incident flowcharts, and a casework reference guide. These were designed to provide clear, consistent, and practical information for both new and experienced caseworkers.

Emphasising cultural relevance, they highlighted the importance of leading case plans with culture and incorporating cultural identity into leaving care plans. Other resources discussed included a carer handbook, a "Going to Big School" guide, and a Bundjalung activity book, aimed at fostering independence, education, and cultural connection.

"Culture should be leading the case plan, and not the other way around."

The Intersection: Supporting Children in Both the Criminal and Out-of-Home Care System

James Clifford, Daniel Daylight, Mouny Yarns

This session highlighted the intersection of the criminal justice and out-of-home care systems, featuring lived experiences and advocacy from Elija, a youth ambassador, and other speakers.

Elija shared his journey from foster care to the criminal justice system, emphasising the lack of support from agencies like DCJ and the value of Koori Court, where the process was clearer and more accountable. He highlighted the damaging role of caseworkers who sometimes weaponise the justice system, preventing children from seeing their families.

The discussion stressed the need for cultural competence and accountability, with speakers calling for systemic change and stronger support for children in both systems.

"Hey, you are working for the child and not the system!"

Family Is Culture: Five Years On

Zoe De Re, Aunty Deb Swan, Dr. Paul Gray, Jonathan Hall Spence

Representatives of the FIC Advocacy Working Group and Grandmothers Against Removal NSW (GMAR NSW) launched the FIC: Five Years On Community Report. Panelists critiqued the ritualistic nature of child protection practices that prioritise system compliance over family and child support. They discussed the key pillars of FIC: self determination, public accountability and family-led decision making. They also discussed the limitations of the current system in addressing Aboriginal children's needs.

"There are all different ways we can rise up. We need to take back our individual power. We need to speak up. When good men say nothing, evil happens."



Missing Girls: From Childhood Runaways To Criminalised Women

Dr. Phillipa Evans, Shiree Talbot, Caitlin Parker

This session, led by Dr. Phillipa Evans, Shiree Talbot, and Caitlin Parker, explored the experiences of young Aboriginal women who have experiences of going missing or running away, and also have contact with the criminal justice system. The speakers highlighted how these women often resist systems, seeking agency and autonomy in a context where their voices are ignored.

They discussed how the NSW Police criminalise runaway girls rather than offering support, and how the emphasis on documentation and compliance in case management fails to address the root causes of their issues. The session also underscored the link between early statutory system involvement and the overrepresentation of these women in prisons.

"Without relational case management practices young girls become dehumanised in the system, known only by case file reports."





Formed in 2014 under the leadership of Wiradjuri woman Rayma Johnson, the **Buuja Buuja Butterfly Dancers** have become a cultural force in Sydney. They inspire audiences through cultural performances at schools, community events, corporate functions and major venues like the Sydney Opera House and Barangaroo Reserve. Their mission is to celebrate Indigenous heritage and educate others, leaving a lasting impact through their dynamic performances rooted in cultural pride and passion.

Involving Young People with Lived Experience in Systems Reform

Lauren Stefanou, Peta MacGillivray, Daniel Daylight

A panel discussion on the Aboriginal Legal Service Therapeutic Pathways project. Speakers emphasised the need for a multipronged approach to reform that includes raising the age of criminal responsibility and building community resources. They advocated for shifting from criminal justice to therapeutic pathways and the importance of shared decision-making. The session highlighted the significance of involving young people in policy discussions and co-design processes, using initiatives like sports and social programs to engage youth and ensure their voices are heard in shaping law and policy development.

"We don't want the next generation to go through what we went through... we need to make sure young fella voices are heard now."

Keynote Address by Brenda Matthews, Author, Founder and Director

Brenda discussed her experience of growing up in out-of-home-care before being returned to her Aboriginal community. Years later, feeling disconnected from both cultures, she sets out to reconnect with her foster family, with whom she had lost contact. During her search, she uncovers long-hidden truths, government deception, and the possibility of reconciliation with both her Aboriginal and foster families. The Last Daughter is a documentary that follows Brenda's exploration of her past, seeking answers, healing, and a deeper understanding of her identity and cultural heritage.

"I was thrown into these two worlds without the proper transition or the proper tools to navigate these two spaces."



NSW Independent Aboriginal-led Government Accountability Mechanism

Sharif Deen

NSW Coalition of Aboriginal Peak Organisations has proposed an Independent Aboriginal-led Government Accountability Mechanism to address gaps in government accountability for Aboriginal outcomes. This model includes a legislated administrative body (the Authority) partnered with a social accountability wing (NSW CAPO) to ensure community engagement. The Mechanism will promote Aboriginal leadership, hold government accountable, and conduct reviews, inquiries, and public hearings on Aboriginal outcomes. It draws on extensive community consultation, evidence, and lessons from existing models. Key principles include independence, transparency, community involvement, and robust powers. The model aims to drive meaningful change, with support from the NSW government needed for implementation.

"The commitment to establishing government accountability is significant and it has the chance to bring about real change for our people."

Peer Parent Family Advocacy (PPFA) Research

Karina Maxwell

This session focused on the importance of parental advocacy within the child protection system, specifically through peer parent advocacy (PPFA), where parents with lived experiences support others navigating the system. Key benefits include building mutual trust, empowerment, and stronger connections between parents and advocates. The research explored three projects: sustaining parent-led advocacy, developing culturally responsive practices, and embedding PPFA in statutory child protection systems.

A significant emphasis was placed on culturally safe practices for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, with the goal of mapping and understanding PPFA's effectiveness and challenges in these communities across Queensland and NSW.



"Parents should be recognised as leaders; their participation is pivotal."

Kinchela Boys Home Aboriginal Corporation

Uncle Roger "Pigeon" Jarrett, Uncle Robert 'Bobby' Young, and Uncle William 'Willy' Nixon

Kinchela Boys Home operated as a forced assimilation site for Aboriginal boys on Dunghutti land, holding profound memories for Survivors. Now, as an Aboriginal Corporation serving as a powerful historic record of the lived experiences of genocidal government policies.

The Uncles shared powerful testimonies of their survival and, their experiences of abuse, loss, and cultural destruction at the hands of the institution. The session highlighted the profound connection between survivors of Kinchela Boys Home, the ongoing impact of the Stolen Generations and the importance of truth-telling.

"They call us the Stolen Generation; it wasn't the Stolen Generation, we were kidnapped in this country."

Family Inclusion in Child Protection and Care: What Does it Look Like?

Aunty Deb Swan, Tammy Prince-Doyle, Shantelle Common and Jessica Cocks

This session highlighted the importance of family involvement in child welfare, with a focus on the Family Inclusion Strategies in the Hunter (FISH) movement. Panelists shared their experiences of working within the system and the barriers faced when advocating for Aboriginal children's cultural and family connections. The panelists described the movement's origins in response to families being mistreated and children losing cultural ties. The session also emphasised the power of parent advocates, noting success in reducing children in care. The session stressed that family inclusion is not just a policy but a lived experience, essential for children's wellbeing.

"It takes village to raise a child, so we should just be looking at their parents... why are we ripping that child away from everyone?"



Luca Saunders, a proud Biripi woman, is a rising First Nations singer from Sydney. She has been performing since age seven, with notable appearances at the Sydney Opera House and festivals like Saltwater Freshwater. Luca gained international attention with her song "Deadly" in 2018 and continues to build her career as a songwriter, producer, and recording artist.

With a dynamic presence in music and modeling, Luca's captivating performances and upcoming releases cement her status as a vibrant talent in the Australian music scene.

Gala Dinner & Awards Night

The Gala dinner was an evening filled with cultural celebration and community connection. The event, attended by 300 guests, also featured vibrant cultural performances and an awards ceremony. The evening concluded on a high note with everyone on their feet, dancing to the tunes spun by DJ Pete Gunz, creating a joyous atmosphere of celebration and unity.

Keynote Address by Djuwan Hoosan, Actor, Author, Teenager, Young Advocate

We were honoured to hear from Djuwan Hoosan, a proud Arrernte/Garrwa young man whose voice has become a catalyst for truth telling and systemic reform. Best known for his role in the acclaimed documentary *In My Blood It Runs*, Djuwan shared his lived experience of navigating systems not designed for Aboriginal children—particularly education and youth justice—and the strength he draws from family, culture, and community.



His keynote address was a powerful moment in the conference, aligning deeply with the theme, Truth Telling – A Journey Towards Understanding and Empowerment. Speaking from the heart, Djuwan reflected on how love, cultural identity, and kinship guided his journey, and how he uses his story to drive advocacy—not only on Australian soil, but internationally. As the youngest person to speak at the United Nations Human Rights Council, he continues to call for change, including raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility and creating culturally safe, community-led education systems.

Djuwan's story powerfully reflected each of the conference's sub-themes. His call for Aboriginal-led education echoed Secure Families, Connected Culture, underscoring the need for young people to be raised in culture and language. His ongoing activism and data-informed advocacy resonated with Data-Driven Design and Delivery, while his critique of institutional injustice and call for structural change spoke directly to Government Transformation for Cultural Safety.

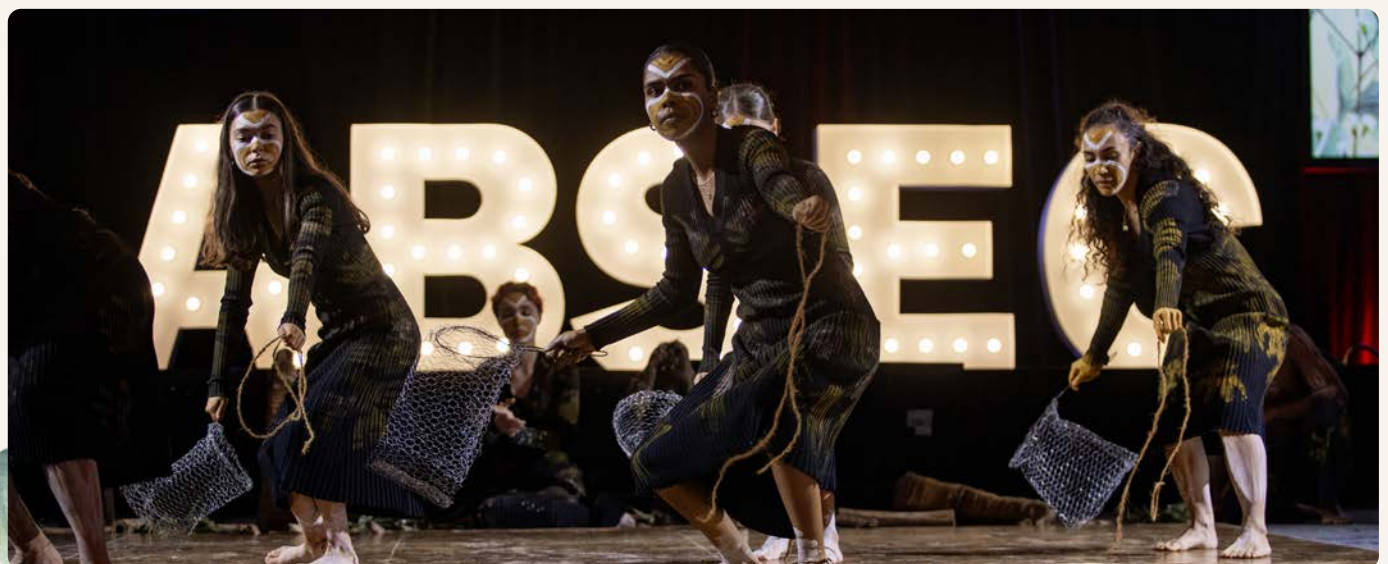
More than a keynote, Djuwan's message was a reminder of the strength that lies in our young people—and the critical role that lived experience must play in shaping the systems meant to serve them. His address brought clarity, urgency, and hope to the conference's closing night.

Culture is at the heart of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people's identity, wellbeing, and sense of belonging. Connection to culture strengthens their resilience, confidence, and pride in who they are and where they come from. It provides a foundation of knowledge, language, values, and practices passed down through generations, shaping how they see themselves and their place in the world. Maintaining strong cultural connections ensures that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island children and young people grow up knowing their mob, Country, and stories, which is essential for their healing, safety, and ability to thrive now and into the future.

"I've said it since I was maybe 9 years old and I'm still saying it today, anything that happens in the future if there's something that needs to be changed and if there's a protest or anyway, we can get through it together I'll be more than happy to join in it."



Radical Son is one of the mightiest voices and most compelling performers currently rising on the Australian concert, festival and dramatic stage. A Kamilaroi man with Tongan heritage, his work draws immense power and resolve from a challenging past and a style that melds the urgency of hip-hop and the emotional punch of soul, as heard on his albums *Cause N'Affect* and *Bilambiyaal (The Learning)*.



Burrundi Theatre for Performing Arts, a cross-functional community performing arts organisation, was established in 2020 by Wiradjuri woman Kerry Johnson. Burrundi translates to "black" in Southern Wiradjuri/ Wiradjuri dialect and is inspired by the vision and spirit of Black Theatre 1972–1977.

Day Three

Thursday 14 November

First Nations Cultural Education represents Torres Strait Island dance and song performance led by Ryka. This captivating performance showcased the vibrant songs and dances of the Torres Strait Islands, highlighting traditions from the five major island groups. Presented by First Nations Cultural Education, a 100% woman-owned and majority Aboriginal-owned business, the group brought to life the rich cultural heritage of the Torres Strait with authenticity and passion.

Keynote Address by Michael Tidball

This session focused on the urgent need for transformative change in the child protection system, particularly for Aboriginal children and families. Secretary Tidball acknowledged the profound and intergenerational impacts of government policies on Aboriginal communities and stressed the importance of genuine partnerships with ACCOs.

Emphasising the need to listen to Aboriginal advocates, the keynote recognised the lack of trust in government, shaped by a history of broken promises. Real reform, Tidball argued, requires legislative and policy changes, bold action, and a shift in mindset. The goal is to uplift Aboriginal children and families, ensuring that ACCOs lead the way in culturally safe services.

"The truth is we can't tinker around the edges anymore hoping it will make a difference... the system needs, and has needed for quite some time, significant and transformative change."

Problematic & Harmful Sexualised Behaviours (PHSB)

Julie Shelley, Jane Key

The session focused on addressing PHSB in children under ten years, with a particular focus on Aboriginal communities. It highlighted programs like Safe Wayz, a NSW statewide initiative providing early prevention and therapeutic support for children, and New Street, offering specialised counselling for youth aged 10–17. The session emphasised a holistic, culturally informed approach, recognising the significance of kinship, community, and trauma. Multiagency collaboration and early intervention were identified as critical for effective support and prevention.

"A behaviour is a behaviour; it isn't who you are."

Keynote Address by Carla Ware

Carla Ware's keynote focused on the findings and recommendations from audits of DCJ child protection system. Key issues identified include DCJ's failure to establish governance and accountability mechanisms for Aboriginal children and families, and its lack of progress on implementing critical recommendations.

The audit found that DCJ's policies and practices were not informed by human rights frameworks, and its use of decision making tools such as Structured Decision Making (SDM) were heavily biased against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.. Recommendations included an independent review of SDM tools, better prevention strategies, and culturally appropriate support for Aboriginal families. Ware stressed the need for self-determination and systemic reform.



"Human rights have existed for years... what we found is that DCJ government arrangements are not informed by and do not reflect these safeguards."

Bring them home, keep them home: Evidence and key insights for system transformation from Aboriginal- led research

Dr. Kathleen Falster, Kimberly Chiswell, Dr. BJ Newton

Bring Them Home, Keep Them Home presented insights from Aboriginal-led research exploring the child protection system through a decolonial lens. Dr. Kathleen Falster, Kimberly Chiswell, and Dr. BJ Newton analysed de-identified data for over 2 million NSW children (2001-2020), revealing alarming statistics about the impact of child protection on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in their early years. The session highlighted a system of surveillance which often leads to repeated investigations and out-of-home care placements, with many families facing systemic barriers and unclear pathways for reunification.

"I was never told what I needed to do to get my kids back, I had to figure everything out for myself and fight for years."

Pathways for Transformation: Considerations of a Future System

Dr. Paul Gray

This workshop focused on self-determination in child protection, with particular focus on political organisation for transformational change. Facilitated by Dr. Gray, participants explored the challenges faced by ACCOs in working with government agencies like DCJ. While DCJ claims collaboration with ACCOs, there is limited autonomy and funding for these organisations, which are often treated similarly to NGOs despite their distinct community roles.

Dr. Gray emphasised the need for a shift towards a more self-determined approach, drawing on examples of community alliances across the state. Participants discussed the importance of solidarity, community-led planning, and holding DCJ accountable for real change. The session concluded with a call for actionable steps and collective leadership from Aboriginal peaks.

"We are a community when we come together, we are strong."

Developments in Indigenous Data Sovereignty Through the Intersection of First Nations Disability Data for Families and Children

Dr. Scott Avery

This session explored the intersectionality of disability and Aboriginal identity, highlighting the colonial legacy of “othering” Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disabilities. Dr. Scott discussed how ableism and racism have subjected people to violence, neglect, and social isolation. The session emphasised that Aboriginal children with disabilities face disproportionately high rates of removal into out-of-home care and juvenile detention.

Recommendations included addressing these issues through community-led research, strengthening the First Nations disability sector, and ensuring disability is integrated into policies like Closing the Gap (CtG). The session called for healing and redress to address systemic harm.



“What you say, with Aboriginal people being dispossessed from the land, you also have Aboriginal people being dispossessed from their bodies.”

Supporting Aboriginal Children To Heal From Domestic and/or Family Violence

Terrienne Hughes, Joanne Campbell

This session reviewed the positive outcomes of the Child and Young People Framework for Aboriginal women and children, focusing on healing through rebuilding mother-child relationships impacted by domestic and family violence.

Emphasising that not all children need professional intervention, the Framework empowers mothers to support their children’s healing. Key outcomes included zero child removals and 72% of mothers reporting increased safety.

The Framework recognises children as co-victim-survivors, highlighting the importance of creating happy memories as part of the healing journey. It also underscored the significance of community and family support in addressing the lasting impacts of trauma.



“Not all children need professional help, there is a lot a mother can do.”

Co-Designing a National Clinical Framework for Responding to Concerning or Harmful Sexual Behaviours in Aboriginal Children and Young People

Amanda Morgan, Dr. Melissa Kaltner, Mark Galvin

This interactive session discussed the co-design of a national framework for responding to PHSB in Aboriginal children and young people. The framework, developed by the National Office of Child Safety (NCOS), aims to guide therapeutic and clinical responses while complementing existing jurisdictional approaches. Key considerations include culturally responsive practices, working with schools, OOH agencies, and families, and integrating Aboriginal cultural practices such as storytelling and the involvement of Elders. The session also addressed the challenges of addressing shame, guilt, and privacy, emphasising the need for training, appropriate language, and community involvement in healing and recovery.

"Healing recovery does not need to be attached to the person being incarcerated or 'found guilty' by the white system."

Keynote Address by Dr Tracy Westerman AM

In her keynote address, Tracy Westerman, a Nyamal woman and the first Aboriginal Australian to earn a PhD in Clinical Psychology, shared her journey of overcoming significant odds to become one of the nation's leading psychologists. She founded her own practice to challenge the mental health profession's approach to cultural difference and recently established a foundation to mentor Indigenous youth into psychology careers.

Tracy discussed the systemic issues surrounding child removals in Australia, highlighting how they create a "pipeline to suicides" and deepen intergenerational trauma. She called for cultural understanding, trauma-informed care, and a shift from punitive measures to prevention.

"This is the most important conference I attend because child removals are the pipeline for everything, mental health, prison, suicide, poor health outcomes."





Digital Engagement & media impact

Absec employed a multi-channel strategy to maximise the reach and effectiveness of the 2024 conference, positioning itself as a leader in advocating for Aboriginal communities and driving systemic reform. This section details the digital engagement strategies and media impacts that were instrumental in amplifying our advocacy efforts.

Communications strategy and collaborator engagement

Our comprehensive communications strategy focused on enhancing dialogue about critical issues within Aboriginal communities. By integrating email marketing, social media, and direct media engagements, we extended our reach beyond traditional boundaries. The involvement of our collaborators—presenters, performers, exhibitors, and sponsors—was invaluable. Their willingness to share our content and engage with the media significantly magnified the impact of our messages and enriched the discussion surrounding key reforms.

Media coverage

The conference attracted significant attention from well-respected outlets such as the National Indigenous Times, ABC news, and The Guardian. The coverage highlighted urgent issues like the disproportionately high rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care, emphasising the pressing need for Indigenous-led solutions and systemic reforms. This media exposure was crucial in elevating AbSec's role in national advocacy efforts.

Website traffic and engagement

Our conference website was central to our strategy, serving as the primary source of information and updates. The significant increase in traffic underscored its importance as a hub for uniting stakeholders and spreading critical information. The site's role in facilitating ongoing engagement was pivotal in keeping the conversation alive and relevant long after the event concluded.

Impact and influence

The use of strategic digital platforms in conjunction with media coverage greatly enhanced AbSec's visibility as a state peak body. This not only raised awareness but also fostered a deeper understanding of and support for the profound issues discussed at the conference, contributing to a broader and more unified call for change.

Acknowledgements

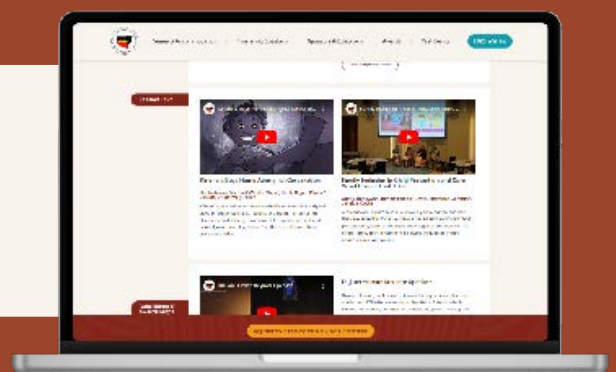
We extend our deepest gratitude to all contributors who shared their insights and stories. Your active participation was key to the success of our collective efforts and has significantly strengthened our advocacy impact.

By employing these strategies, AbSec not only addressed critical issues but also created a dynamic platform for dialogue, bringing together diverse voices in a united effort to advocate for meaningful change. This holistic approach ensured that all stakeholders could engage meaningfully, supporting AbSec's vision and paving the way for future initiatives.

Watch all on-demand sessions!

From keynote addresses to panel discussions, every speaker was chosen to inspire meaningful dialogue, foster connection, and drive change within the child and family sector.

[Click here to view](#)



362 tickets sold
with all attendees fostering
collaboration and knowledge-sharing.

35 sessions & workshops
across three rooms, in three days.

4,284 reactions
Combined clicks, comments and shares
via all AbSec social media accounts.

281

gala attendees
congratulated our award
winners and enjoyed the
night's entertainment.

60,107
social impressions
Conference mentions seen
across all platforms.

13,719

website views

A new website dedicated
to the event was built and
gained significant traction.

12 cultural performances
by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
singers and dancers.

10,052 email sent
during the campaign.

Media coverage

Click to read media articles



"This isn't history, this is now":
Children still being removed
at Stolen Generations levels,
Yoorrook Commissioner says

National Indigenous Times

'I was never told I was in care':
The reality behind the rising
number of out-of-home
children

ABC News

SNAICC confirms more than
22,000 Indigenous children
remain in out-of-home care

National Indigenous Times

"Enough is enough": NSW child
protection system needs to be
in the hands of Indigenous-led
organisations, experts say

National Indigenous Times

Aboriginal organisations call for
urgent overhaul of beleaguered
NSW child protection system

The Guardian

What We Heard

Overall, the community's message was clear: we need accountability, better data collection, more family involvement, and real change in the system. We need to restore children to their families, fight for self-determination, and continue our truth-telling.

For AbSec, the insights shared by conference participants reinforced our existing positions, and highlight areas that may require further development, particularly in relation to the support systems for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people, families, and communities.

System Accountability and Oversight

There was a strong call to "ROSH the system" when it fails to meet the needs of our children. Concerns were raised about whether enough data is being collected on deaths in out-of-home care or within the prison system, with a call for better tracking of these deaths. The ongoing issues of systemic violence and cultural genocide were also highlighted. Attendees emphasised the need for improved cultural plans, family-led decision making, and the importance of standing up for and properly empowering Aboriginal Community-Controlled Mechanisms. Continued calls were also made for the establishment of a NSW Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People.

Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Governance

Indigenous data sovereignty and governance was a key focus of the discussion, with calls for more comprehensive data on deaths in care and the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in out-of-home care. One participant questioned, "How many reports do we need?" referring to the number of reviews and reports released in 2024. Delegates asked who holds the authority to hold systems accountable for the treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. There was also a strong call for communities to start collecting their own data and stories as a way to hold the system accountable.

Family and Cultural Rights

The importance of family meetings as a way to find solutions was strongly emphasised, as families are often able to resolve issues on their own, being the best placed to determine what works for them. One participant highlighted, "culturally, I have more rights than my daughter," stressing that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family members should be the first to be contacted if something happens to their children. Concerns were raised by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners, who are witnessing the devastating impact of systemic violence on children. It was reiterated throughout that children cannot heal from violence if they are continually exposed to a system that keeps perpetuating harm.

Restoration and Systemic Change

A major topic of discussion was the need for restoration—bringing children back home. Participants expressed frustration that, despite Aboriginal community-led system design being progressed, the system continues to present barriers and NSW is one of the worst performing states for restoring Aboriginal children to their families. The call for real systemic change was loud and clear, with the establishment and sustained funding of the Aboriginal Authority for Restoring Children being called for as an immediate action.

Calls for Immediate Action

There was a widespread sense that, despite the numerous reports and audits, there is still no effective system in place to ensure accountability on a day-to-day basis. Attendees expressed a desire for direct action, not just more reports that fail to lead to tangible change. This included a call from many to “hit the streets” again.

Next steps

Self-Determination and Collective Action

action AbSec will take a leading role in uniting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, organisations, and leaders to co-develop self-determination models and political strategies.

next step Organise a series of community-led forums across regions to bring together ACCOs, leaders, and families to discuss and develop shared models of self-determination and governance.

Truth-Telling Sessions

action Initiate and facilitate truth-telling sessions within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to acknowledge and address the ongoing impacts of systemic violence, child removals, and cultural genocide.

next step AbSec will collaborate with community leaders to organise truth-telling forums where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, Elders, and survivors of the child protection system can share their experiences, stories, and insights. These sessions will provide a platform for healing, raise awareness, and contribute to ongoing efforts to create systemic change. The outcomes should inform advocacy and policy development to ensure justice, healing, and reconciliation.

Accountability Framework for DCJ

action Develop and implement a robust accountability framework for DCJ to ensure that their actions align with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities’ needs and priorities, and that the rights of our children are protected.

next steps AbSec will continue to push for the establishment of an independent Child Protection Commission and the appointment of a NSW Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People.

AbSec should lead the creation of a formal, ongoing process for tracking and reporting on DCJ’s progress in implementing accountability measures, building on the findings from previous reports. This should include mechanisms to hold DCJ accountable for its actions, particularly concerning child removals and restoration efforts.

Systemic Change for Restoration

action Secure sustained funding to implement the Aboriginal Authority for Restoring Children (AARC), ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities are central to the decision-making process.

next step Advocate for long-term funding commitments from government and philanthropic sources to support the development and implementation of the AARC. This will involve working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders, ACCOs, and community members to ensure the strategy is adequately resourced and sustained over time to achieve lasting impact.

Data Collection and Auditing

action

Advocate for better data collection practices in line with principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Governance (IDS&G), specifically related to the wellbeing, experiences of violence, deaths in care, and abuse of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in the child protection system.

next step

AbSec should push for an independent audit of DCJ's data collection and reporting practices, especially regarding violence, deaths, and abuse within care, and the creation of a transparent system for regularly reporting these findings to the community.

Empowerment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Families

action

Strengthen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family-led decision-making processes, ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family members, and Elders, are involved in all decisions about child wellbeing and restoration.

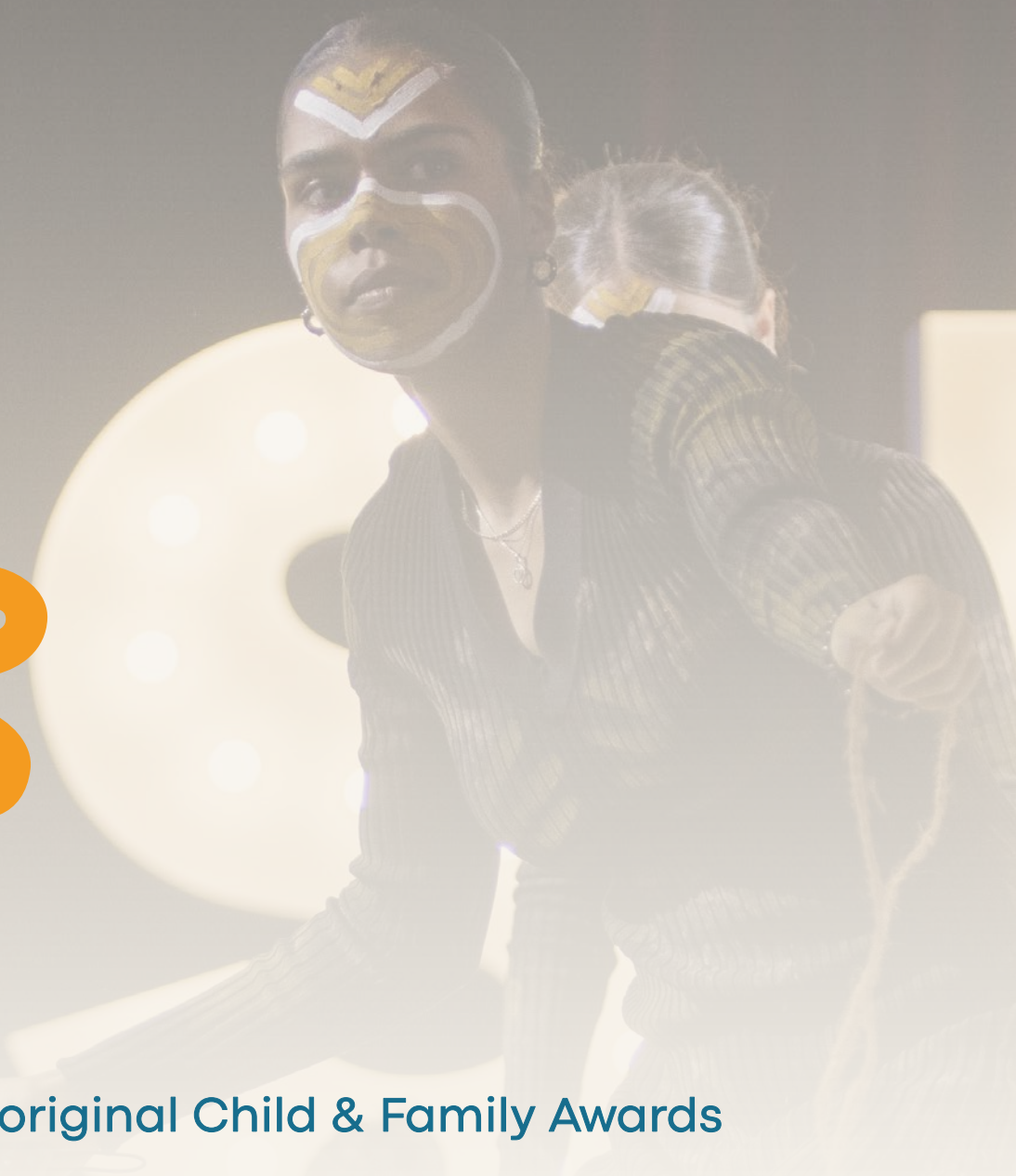
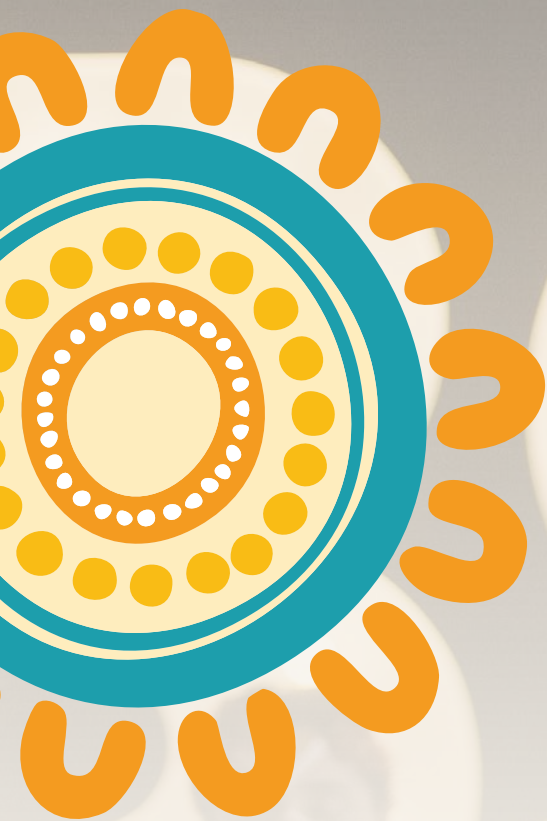
next step

Support and promote the establishment of family-led decision-making models, where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families have the primary role in making decisions regarding child protection, restoration, and healing. This may include advocating for cultural protocols to be respected and formalised in the child protection system.

Final reflections

These next steps reflect the collective resolve of our communities to lead, transform, and hold systems accountable. Each action outlined is grounded in the voices, experiences, and aspirations shared throughout the 2024 NSW Aboriginal Child & Family Conference.

As we move forward, AbSec reaffirms its commitment to walk alongside communities, advocate with strength, and work towards systems that uphold the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people, families, and communities. Together, through truth telling, self-determination, and sustained action, we will continue to drive the change our people demand and deserve.



2024 NSW Aboriginal Child & Family Awards

AbSec is dedicated to acknowledging and celebrating the incredible efforts of those working tirelessly to support Aboriginal children, young people and families. Our awards recognise the remarkable contributions and outstanding achievements of individuals and organisations committed to improving outcomes for our children, young people and families.

Nomination criteria

These annual awards are an opportunity to highlight and honour those who have demonstrated exceptional dedication, innovation, and impact in their work. By celebrating their achievements, we aim to inspire others and foster a stronger, more supportive community.

Achievement	Their reported actions and approach to achievement outcomes for, or contribute to the wellbeing of, Aboriginal children, young people, families and communities.
Impact	The results that have been observed for children, young people, families and communities as a result of their actions and achievement.
Values	Consistency or alignment of their actions with AbSec's principles or values, including acknowledgement, respect, professionalism, integrity, self-determination, independence, solutions focus, transparency and commitment.

Community Member of the Year

Recognises the contributions of an Aboriginal person to the welfare and wellbeing of Aboriginal families and their community. Awarded to an Aboriginal community member that has demonstrated outstanding commitment to, and positive impact on, the wellbeing of families and communities.



Noelene Skinner, Nyami Gawbarri Hub

Noelene Skinner, a proud Gumbaynggirr woman, is the CEO of Nyami Gawbarri Hub, supporting Elders, women, and youth on Gumbaynggirr Country. Passionate about empowering Aboriginal women and amplifying their voices, she leads programs connecting the community with vital services.

Noelene has co-founded impactful initiatives like the Deadly Sista Girlz, earning multiple accolades, including the NSW Premier's Excellence Award and Gumbaynggirr NAIDOC awards. Her dedication continues to inspire and uplift her community, fostering connection, prevention strategies, and cultural pride.

Deadly Advocate of the Year

Honours an individual who has made a significant impact in advocating for the rights and wellbeing of Aboriginal children, young people, and families. This award recognises those working within or alongside the NSW Department of Communities and Justice or other mainstream systems who have successfully integrated Aboriginal perspectives and driven meaningful change.



Russell Smith, Burrun Dalai Aboriginal Corporation

Russell Smith, a qualified CPA with a Postgraduate Diploma in Law, has over 40 years of professional experience in local government, the not-for-profit sector, and health. Since joining Burrun Dalai Aboriginal Corporation in 2014, Russell has transitioned from Accountant to Chief Financial Officer, contributing significantly to the organisation's growth and mission.

His decade-long tenure at Burrun Dalai has been the highlight of his career, where he has embraced the opportunity to work alongside and learn from Aboriginal colleagues. Russell is dedicated to supporting the wellbeing of Aboriginal children, young people, and families through his work.

ACCO of the Year

Recognises an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation demonstrating excellence in service delivery to their community, achieving lasting positive outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people, their families and their communities.



Eleanor Duncan Aboriginal Services

Eleanor Duncan Aboriginal Services, led by Wiradjuri women Belinda Field and Casey Coss, exemplifies excellence in service delivery for Aboriginal communities.

Belinda, with over 20 years' experience in child protection, out-of-home care, and Aboriginal program initiatives, combines her policy expertise and community knowledge to bridge gaps between government and community.

Casey, with a decade in community services, champions the safety and wellbeing of vulnerable children and families, driven by principles of social justice.

Together, their leadership fosters impactful change, promoting opportunities and achieving lasting outcomes for Aboriginal children, young people, and their families.

Walking Together Award

Recognises the contribution of a non-Aboriginal agency in partnering with Aboriginal communities in service design and delivery, achieving improved outcomes for Aboriginal families and communities. This could include a team or an organisation.



Dr. Melissa Kaltner, Lumenia

Dr. Melissa Kaltner, co-founder of Lumenia, leads collaborative efforts to support meaningful change in the child and family sector. With a focus on genuine partnerships, Lumenia works with Aboriginal communities and Peaks to design and deliver impactful projects. Notable collaborations with AbSec include research into child protection and housing, supporting the Ministerial Aboriginal Partnership group, and co-developing the business case for the Aboriginal Authority for Restoring Children.

Melissa's leadership fosters shared learning and community-led approaches, driving systemic change and empowering communities. Lumenia's dedication reflects a deep commitment to improving outcomes for Aboriginal families and communities.

Young Person of the Year

Recognises the achievements of an Aboriginal Young Person aged under 25 years for their leadership and contribution to their community.



Tyrach Chan-Hampton

A proud Wiradjuri woman, Tyrach has transformed her lived experience in out-of-home care and housing insecurity into a powerful platform for advocacy and systemic change. Having entered kinship care at age 11 and faced periods of homelessness, Tyrach found stability at Uniting's Foyer Central in Chippendale, a youth foyer supporting young people transitioning from care. There, she pursued a double degree in Criminology and Social Work.

Tyrach uses her personal journey to inform her practice, focusing on Aboriginal-led solutions in child protection and housing. As a Youth Ambassador for the Foyer Foundation, she advocates nationally for youth homelessness reform and community-led support systems. Tyrach's leadership exemplifies the strength, and vision of young Aboriginal people shaping a better future for their communities.

Practitioner of the Year

Recognises an Aboriginal Practitioner's excellence in achieving positive outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people, their families and communities.



Dixie Link Gordon

Dixie Link Gordon is a proud Gooreng Gooreng woman from South East Queensland and a respected advocate for First Nations communities across Australia and the Pacific. Based in New South Wales, Dixie has dedicated her life to supporting vulnerable women as a Domestic Violence Community Educator and Advocate.

She is the Founder and Ambassador of Breaking the Silent Codes, a charitable organisation creating safe spaces for First Nations women to share their stories and begin healing. Dixie has also represented First Nations women on the global stage, hosting and speaking at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women in 2012, 2016, 2019, and 2020.

Carer of the Year

Recognises the outstanding contributions of a carer for an Aboriginal child or young person.



Cheryl Martin, Life Without Barriers

Cheryl Martin, a dedicated Aboriginal social worker and foster carer with Life Without Barriers in South Western Sydney, was named Carer of the Year for her extraordinary commitment to Aboriginal children, young people, families, and communities. While Cheryl was unable to attend the ceremony, the award was proudly accepted on her behalf by her Area Manager and Regional Director.

With both professional and lived experience in the out-of-home care system, Cheryl brings deep cultural insight and compassion to her work. Her approach is grounded in community, culture, and unwavering advocacy. Cheryl's contribution reminds us of the vital role carers play in transforming lives and supporting healing for future generations.

Cheryl Martin was not present, holding the award was the Area Manager on the left & Regional Director on the right.

Thank you to our independent judging panel



Bill Pritchard
Senior Aboriginal
Consultant



Office of the
Children's Guardian

Larissa Johnson
Manager, Accreditation
and Monitoring



Communities
& Justice

Noni Greenwood
Director, Aboriginal Culture
in Practice

**LIFE
WITHOUT
BARRIERS**

Servena McIntyre
Chief Transformation Officer,
Cultural Justice & Reform Unit



Maree Walk
Chief Executive Officer



Communities
& Justice

Lizzie May
Project Officer, Aboriginal
Culture in Practice



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