



Community-Led Solutions: A Pathway to Collective Wellbeing

May 2025 Sector Forum Report

Parkroyal, Parramatta/Dharug Country



Acknowledgement of Country

AbSec acknowledges the Burramattagal People of the Dharug Nation, the Traditional Custodians of the land where the May Quarterly Sector Forum was convened. We pay our deepest respects to Elders past, present, and emerging.

We recognise the Elders, leaders, practitioners, and advocates who join us at our forums and honour their role as knowledge holders. We also pay homage to the Stolen Generations, acknowledging those who have been unable to return home.

Through our discussions at this forum, we reflected on the profound impact of historical and ongoing policies on the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people, and families. We are inspired by the wisdom shared and are committed to actions that support the healing, empowerment, and resilience of our communities, now and into the future.

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



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.

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Glossary of acronyms

AbSec	AbSec – NSW Child, Family and Community Peak Aboriginal Corporation
AARC	Aboriginal Authority for Restoring Children
ACCA	South Australian Aboriginal Child Care Agency
ACCO	Aboriginal Community–Controlled Organisation
ACFAS	Aboriginal Child and Family Advocacy Service
ACMP	Aboriginal Case Management Policy
ALS	Aboriginal Legal Service (NSW/ACT) Limited
CFS	Community and Family Support
CTG	Closing the Gap
DCJ	NSW Department of Communities and Justice
IPART	Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal
FACSIAR	Family and Community Services Insights Analysis and Research
FCS	Family Connect and Support
FIC	Family is Culture
NSW	New South Wales
NGO	Non–Government Organisation
OCG	Office of the Children’s Guardian
OOHC	Out-of-home care
QSF	Quarternary Sector Forum
RIF	Reinvesting in Families
TACCO	Tamworth Coalition of Aboriginal Community–Controlled Organisations
TAO	Transforming Aboriginal Outcomes
TEI	Targeted Early Intervention
UTS	University of Technology Sydney

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About the Sector Forum

AbSec's Quarterly Sector Forums connect sector leaders, advocates, and community members together to learn, share and drive meaningful action.

The May 2025 Quarterly Sector Forum was held on the land of the Dharug people in Parramatta.

Theme: "Community-Led Solutions: A Pathway to Collective Wellbeing"

The future of our sector starts with community-led solutions. As we navigate challenges and opportunities across the child and family sector, it's clear that Aboriginal voices must be at the forefront of shaping change.



This is how we work towards achieving self-determination for all Aboriginal people and communities, and build a safe, secure and caring environment that is surrounded by culture.

This theme emphasises the importance of community-led solutions in creating lasting change. It recognises that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are best placed to define their own paths to wellbeing and prosperity. Through collaboration and community leadership, we can develop solutions that are not only effective but also culturally safe and sustainable for future generations.

We want to hear from you!

If you have question, feedback, or ideas you'd like to contribute to future gatherings, please reach out to our team. Your insights help shape meaningful, community-driven forums that reflect the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families.

Contact us via policy@absec.org.au or via phone (02) 9559 5299.



Welcome to Country

Performed by Western Sydney Aboriginal Elder Representative Uncle Graham Davis King.

Uncle Graham is a Wiradjuri and Ngiyampaa artist and activist, raised in and around Sydney's inner-west. His passion for storytelling and dance has seen him perform Australia-wide and internationally with the Kooris in Theatre and Yidaki Didj and Dance troupes.

He currently lives in Katoomba, where he has been instrumental in helping grow the local Aboriginal cultural scene. Uncle Graham is Director of the Blue Mountains Aboriginal Culture and Resource Centre.

AbSec warmly thanks Uncle Graham for welcoming us to Dharug land, home of traditional owners, the Burramattagal people. We thank him for sharing the local story about the tree, the rock and floods; a story carrying a timeless message about the importance of helping one another and a perfectly told reminder for Forum attendees about the importance of the work we do in this sector.

Who Attended

The Sector Forum was open to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal leaders from organisations across the sector. The event continues to have growing interest with registrations and attendance numbers rising at each Sector Forum.

161

individual
attendees

54

organisations represented
over the 2-day event

Organisations that registered included:



Quarterly update from AbSec

Feedback loop with the Sector

John Leha, Chief Executive Officer | AbSec

John Leha, AbSec CEO, opened proceedings with a sector-wide update from the previous quarter and provided an overview of key priorities for AbSec and the wider Aboriginal children and families' sector in New South Wales for 2025.

Federal election and Closing the Gap

The Sector Forum was held less than four weeks since Prime Minister Anthony Albanese was re-elected in a historic landslide victory for Labor.

The Prime Minister's re-commitment to Closing the Gap (CTG) in his acceptance speech was an encouraging message for the sector, especially in the wake of a shameful opposition campaign characterised by racist rhetoric.

To AbSec and our sector at large, Closing the Gap is at the core of all the work we do. It's not just a policy nor just a slogan—it's a promise to ensure Aboriginal children grow up safe, loved, and strong in culture.



"A lot of progress has happened since the last Forum three months ago, but also there has been a lot of devastation and sorry business affecting our community too."

Local progress and community strength

Closing the Gap (CtG) is most effective when local partnerships mobilise to drive Aboriginal community development.

The recently announced Mara Ngali partnership in Western Sydney is an excellent example; the first example nationally of partnership between local government and Aboriginal communities under CtG. What Tamworth Coalition of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (TACCO) has achieved is a huge step towards the realisation of CtG at every level.

Meanwhile, the Ngaliya Partnership in Western Sydney is on the cusp of being announced as the second place-based partnership after TACCO, as a direct outcome of CTG Priority Reform 1: Formal partnerships and shared decision-making.

We look forward to seeing the establishment of new local partnerships under CtG across New South Wales.

AbSec's advocacy and policy work

AbSec's work continues with ACCOs and the NSW Department of Communities & Justice (DCJ) across several key strategic directions and areas of focus, including:

- Continued work with DCJ and the Aboriginal Legal Service (ALS) to establish the Aboriginal Authority for Restoring Children (AARC); a community-built model proposed to address the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in Out-of-Home-Care (OOHC).
- Implementation of long overdue Family is Culture (FIC) recommendations which aim to transform the child protection system.
- Submissions to the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART) about their draft report examining the costs and prices of OOHC in NSW. This includes key positions that carer payments must remain with ACCOs; cultural support must be funded and protected; and penalties are needed for unjustified delays in transitions.
- We have been looking outside NSW to strengthen cross-border connections and exchange knowledge with our inter-state counterparts. We welcome Ashum Owen from South Australia's new peak body Wakwakurna Kanyini who'll be presenting today.

Partnership with DCJ and cross-state collaboration

We are progressing important partnership work with DCJ, most notably on the re-commissioning of Family Preservation, Targeted Early Intervention and Closing the Gap plans. We have also been working closely with DCJ and the ALS to progress a new partnership agreement that is charged with reform of the child protection assessment framework and mapping and ensuring alignment of reforms with FIC recommendations.

There has been significant improvement on investment in Family Preservation, with \$350 million in funding available for initiatives to launch in 2026. AbSec will support ACCOs by enabling free access to independent consultants to assist in the tendering process.

Targeted Early Intervention (TEI) review workshop

Reviewing what will make commissioning of early intervention more impactful.

*Simon Jordan, Managing Director and Kieran Sobels, Manager, Policy & Program Development
| Nama Jalu Consulting*

Simon Jordan and Kieran Sobels from Nama Jalu Consulting presented an overview of their work with AbSec to develop a position paper that emphasises strengths in ACCO-led programs. This work aims to elevate the voices of Aboriginal services and communities in the period of change, when DCJ's Targeted Early Intervention (TEI) and Family Connect and Support (FCS) programs merge in 2026 and become the new Community and Family Support (CFS) program .

Once the background information had been provided, the presenters jumped right into the morning's workshop, a table-to-table yarning session on two focus questions:

What improvements would you like to see in the commissioning and delivery of DCJ's new early intervention program?

What will it take to achieve the goal of 30% delivery of early intervention programs by ACCOs?

For 20 minutes, sounds of discussion and frantic scribing buzzed through the room before time was called and each table reported back their huddles. Ideas were diverse and wide-ranging, and the mix of perspectives between ACCOs in the room provided Nama Jalu Consulting rich feedback for the project.

Aboriginal-Led commissioning and community control

- Shift to Aboriginal-led commissioning where ACCOs design, deliver, and evaluate services based on local priorities.
- Fund ACCOs directly, without open competitive tenders that disadvantage smaller organisations.
- Commissioning should include meaningful community input, especially in defining deliverables and success measures.

Equity, flexibility and sustainability in funding

- Move away from short-term, restrictive contracts to flexible, long-term funding that reflects actual service costs.
- Provide start-up/seed funding for emerging ACCOs to overcome "chicken and egg" barriers.
- Separate funding streams for ACCOs and mainstream providers, with culture-specific outcomes for ACCOs.

Reduce administrative burden

- Simplify and align reporting requirements with Aboriginal ways of working and Indigenous data sovereignty principles.
- Develop culturally appropriate accountability systems focused on impact, rather than activity metrics.



Cultural safety and system reform

- Embed cultural safety across the commissioning process.
- Require cultural awareness training for DCJ and mainstream staff.
- Support systemic reform by addressing institutional racism, red tape, and deficit narratives.

Strengthen community-led, holistic service delivery

- Prioritise wraparound supports such as housing, health, childcare, education, and employment.
- Embed proven models like Family-Led Decision Making, Active Efforts, and the Aboriginal Case Management Policy (ACMP).
- Respect community pace and family-led approaches, ensuring services are built around family needs and strengths.

Capacity building and workforce development

- Invest in traineeships, cadetships, and training for community members to work in ACCOs.
- Provide tender writing and governance training to strengthen ACCO capacity to engage in commissioning.
- Create TEI-specific and trauma-informed training programs tailored for Aboriginal services.

Shift measurement of success

- Redesign KPIs to reflect outcomes and impact for families, not just service numbers.
- Develop shared definitions of success and self-determination between government and Aboriginal communities.

Targeted and adequate investment

- Achieving 30 percent requires dedicated funding, clear timelines, and public accountability for progress.
- Provide equitable resource allocation to allow ACCOs to scale service delivery.

Capacity building and sector strengthening

Strengthen existing ACCOs and support the growth of smaller ones through:

- Ongoing training and workforce development.
- Support for governance, systems, and evaluation.
- Access to shared resources like grant writers and legal guidance.

Government reform and power-sharing

- Require genuine partnerships that shift power to communities.
- Stop dictating service models and allow ACCOs to decide what works locally.
- Acknowledge and address systemic barriers, including racism and resistance to Aboriginal-led success.



Collaboration over competition

- Incentivise partnerships between ACCOs, not competition.
- Allow flexibility in subcontracting and/or forming consortia to meet diverse needs.

Stronger monitoring and accountability

- Improve tracking of progress against the 30% target.
- Analysis of past failures to meet delivery goals.
- Monitoring whether reforms lead to meaningful system change.

Clearer shared understanding and local engagement

- Build a shared understanding of self-determination and success across ACCOs and government.
- Engage communities in localised decision-making, informed by lived experience and cultural authority.

Inter-jurisdictional learnings from Wakwakurna Kanyini

Introducing Wakwakurna Kanyini: the South Australian community-controlled peak body for Aboriginal children and families.

Ashum Owen, Chief Executive Officer, Wakwakurna Kanyini

Ashum Owen, CEO of Wakwakurna Kanyini led a session that explored the experiences and lessons learned on the long and difficult road travelled by South Australian Aboriginal organisations to achieve recognition and peak body representation.

The story began with Uncle Brian Butler's pioneering work in 1978 to establish the South Australian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, only to see it defunded 20 years later. What followed was a period of sustained stagnation, where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities endured seven election cycles, before—finally—Wakwakurna Kanyini was formed, with Owen proud to serve as its first CEO.

The lesson from South Australia exposes the systemic barriers Aboriginal community-led organisations face in achieving long-term sustainability and recognition.

Owen summarised the struggle: "The government has made a business off the bodies and minds of our most disadvantaged groups".

"No matter how much discomfort our truth-telling will cause, it's necessary in order to achieve our vision."



Shifting focus to the present and future, Owen shared Wakwakurna Kanyini's core values:

Leadership

Culturally informed models that amplify community voices, honour our Elders, and uplift our young people.

Decolonisation

Centring self-determination, Aboriginal-led decision making and truth-telling is how we reclaim our power and change the trajectory for our communities.

Empowerment

Strengthening autonomy of individuals and communities.

Cultural integrity

Central to everything we do, upheld through transparency, authenticity and accountability

Human rights

We fight for equitable outcomes for Aboriginal families and communities

Family centred

Advocating family-centred approaches that are holistic, strengths-based, culturally responsive: and trauma and healing informed.

Owen also highlighted the role of South Australia's Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People (considered one of the best models in the country). The Commissioner plays a crucial role in ensuring the system's accountability and Aboriginal-led oversight of child protection processes, with real legislative authority.

She provided background on the Commissioner's 'Holding on to Our Future' report, including the extensive and critical consultation efforts taken in its development. Parallels were drawn with NSW's Family is Culture review—each advocating the need for Aboriginal-led accountability and oversight, as well as culturally safe systems.

As NSW embarks on its next steps towards an independent commissioner model, Owen's compelling

Take home messages

- ACCOs are consistently underfunded and restricted by inflexible funding streams.
- Aboriginal communities are still waiting for sustained change, including internal government reform and the need to redistribute and reallocate funding through a decolonising lens.
- Government systems need to build internal capacity to support and partner with Aboriginal-led services meaningfully.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must be empowered to exercise their right to self-determination, and lead their own service systems and reforms.

Governance workshop

Exploring key responsibilities of board directors; managing conflicts of interest, and upholding cultural values within regulatory frameworks.

John Byrne, Coordinator, Cultural Programs, AbSec LDC

John Byrne from AbSec's Learning Development Centre (LDC) kicked off the workshop with a question to the group to define 'governance.' On paper, the definition of governance is universal; it's how decisions are made, who has the power, how people are held accountable, and how values are upheld. However, governance in practice can differ between mainstream approaches and ACCO-specific structures, which the yarns in this workshop explored.

ACCO values vs Mainstream vs governance models

Mainstream governance often talks about structures, risk, and compliance, whereas in ACCOs, governance reflects cultural authority, community control, and collective responsibility.



"ACCOs are subject to the same requirements as non-indigenous organisations, PLUS the need to maintain a deep, reliable, and responsible connection to culture and community."

Looking into structures, the group examined how boards and board members operate in organisations, and the specific duties and responsibilities they are legally required to uphold:

Key board responsibilities

- Duty of care and diligence.
- Acting in good faith and in the best interests of the organisation.
- Not misusing position or information.
- Managing financial affairs responsibly.
- Ensuring compliance with laws and funding agreements.
- Upholding cultural integrity and community direction.

Legal duties were highlighted as particularly important, as they are not just about compliance but are essential for safeguarding the organisation, its members, and the community they serve.

- Legal duties protect the organisation, the community, and you, personally.
- Understanding your duties helps boards make strong, defensible decisions.
- Many ACCOs operate in high-risk environments — being clear on responsibilities supports good outcomes.

Scenarios and discussions

The group shared their own perspectives around how each responsibility applies to real-life situations and community experiences. For example, how 'duty of care' becomes relevant when a board decision is made about a new youth program.

Other 'what-if' scenarios were also discussed as a group, including what if:

- A board member signs a contract without board approval?;
- A family member of a board member is given a contract?;
- The board wants to change the name of the organisation?; and
- The treasurer raises concerns about unspent funding?

The final part of the workshop centred on the sometimes blurry lines between the board's role in governance and management's role in operations. Examples include approving annual budgets, managing staff leave requests, and developing a risk management policy. The exercise helped reinforce the importance for all organisations—ACCOs included—to ensure there are clear boundaries to prevent confusion and enable both the board and management to perform their roles.

Updates and conversations on Aboriginal identification

The NSW Department of Communities and Justice policy work related to the identification and de-identification of children as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

Bianca Jarrett, Executive Director, and Sally King, Director, Aboriginal Child Safety and Wellbeing / Transforming Aboriginal Outcomes, NSW Department of Communities & Justice

The topic of identification is a long-running matter of contention and deep concern for the sector. Since March 2024, there has been a pause on cultural status changes, after concerns were raised by ACCOs that some non-government organisations (NGOs) have been de-identifying children to avoid transitioning them to ACCOs.

In this session, Bianca Jarrett and Sally King from DCJ's Transforming Aboriginal Outcomes (TAO) team updated the Forum on developments over the past 12 months, most notably:

- Immediately following the pause, a desktop review of 38 cases of children flagged as being misidentified, revealed that 24 of these cases were not recorded in ChildStory; and only seven were recorded with sufficient evidence.
- Concerns over the poor handling of practice, process and decision making, led to calls for a deeper dive. TAO reviewed 99 OOHC cases involving change of identity status between January 2023 and March 2024. This review includes close consultation with families, community and ACCOs.
- At time of writing, the scope and terms of reference for this review are awaiting DCJ approval. In the meantime, an interim process was enacted in April 2025 that lifted the blanket pause for urgent requests.



"The final decision on identification should sit with community, not with DCJ."

Case Studies

Attendees were invited to participate in table discussions on two case studies that exemplified some of the complexities of identification in casework. For example self-identification without documentation and a scenario where a child is raised thinking they are Aboriginal, but subsequent family finding work concludes that the child is not Aboriginal.

These cases generated a lively discussion. Feedback shared from the floor provided some invaluable and diverse insights, such as:

- Situations where families are suspicious of sharing information with DCJ, whereas it can work much better for ACCOs who are often much more tenacious in securing appropriate records.
- An observable insufficiency in training for what should be basic casework practice—especially where there’s a lack of lived experience for less experienced caseworkers entering communities.
- Concerns that risk to a child’s mental health can be overlooked in legal mechanisms—stressing how important it is to think about the story we share with children, and listen to the story they grow up to believe.
- That ‘evidence’ is key issue, because “we put too much stock in colonial records”.

Next steps

The final policy is expected to be released by December 2025. Bianca and Sally said they will use the consultation period— noting the presence of diverse views within Aboriginal communities—to target some of the most pressing challenges in identification policymaking. For instance, discrimination, fear and suspicion, an insufficiently culturally competent workforce and the highly personalised nature of any individual’s identity journey.



Legal advocacy for ACCOs

A guided conversation focusing on experiences since Practice Note 17 and supporting shared insights into navigating court proceedings.

Zoe De Re, Senior Policy Solicitor | Aboriginal Legal Service

Zoe De Re, Senior Policy Solicitor at the Aboriginal Legal Service led a guided conversation on legal advocacy, focusing on experiences with the Children's Court of NSW's Practice Note 17 (PN 17) and navigating court proceedings.

What is Practice Note 17 (PN 17) and what does it mean for ACCOs?

PN 17 was introduced in January 2023 to enhance the Children's Court's ability to make informed decisions in care and protection cases by ensuring designated agencies—including ACCOs providing support and case management to children—have the opportunity to actively participate in the process and provide critical information to the Court.

Before PN 17, agencies placed trust in DCJ to represent their interests in the Children's Court. They were involved by invitation and by consent of the parties who have standing. Now, PN 17:

- Clarifies how ACCOs can access filed evidence and provide relevant information to the Court, with the intention that the Court gains a better picture of a child's circumstances.
- Encourages designated agencies to contribute to Court proceedings, including participating in Dispute Resolution Conferences.
- Means ACCOs don't just provide expertise and knowledge of a child or their family's circumstances, but they bring cultural expertise to the Court proceedings.

"It's not that the cultural information is being extracted, it's part of the bigger picture for that child; no magistrate should be making a decision without it."



What are the key barriers for ACCO participation in Court Proceedings?

Financial constraints mean ACCOs often cannot engage fully in court proceedings, lacking means for legal representation and relying on external support to prepare legal documents, such as affidavits. Legal costs are sometimes expected to come out of the child's care plan/package, which is inappropriate and unsustainable.

Some ACCOs also report fear and lack of confidence navigating legal processes, especially about being questioned in court without preparation.

Inconsistency is a major problem. For example, some magistrates welcome ACCO participation, while some do not. Similarly, some DCJ offices are open to the involvement of ACCOs, while some are not.

While PN 17 aims to support ACCO participation and information sharing, many ACCOs still face obstacles. For example:

- Not being properly informed of the process.
- Not consistently invited or supported to sign or use Practice Note 17.
- Unclear on how to access filed evidence or contribute cultural expertise to proceedings.
- Not provided clear, standardised access to documentation and timelines to contribute meaningfully.

Systemic violence and distrust of systems

A common thread for ACCOs navigating the legal system is concern about misleading or inaccurate information being presented to court without their input—a pattern highlighted in the Family Is Culture (FIC) Report. It's a concern shaped by historical exclusion from decision-making, which creates a deep distrust. This lack of trust can deepen further where there is no clarity about roles and expectations.

- There is concern that cultural identity and context is often overlooked by courts unless there is active advocacy in place.
- ACCOs are often asked for cultural input without understanding how that information will be used in court.
- Cultural evidence is often decontextualised or undervalued by the court system.
- There's a lack of transparency as to about whether ACCO input will influence judicial decision-making, or how it may be used.

Progressing a commissioner model

Further testing and refining of a model for an independent commissioner for Aboriginal children and young people in New South Wales.

Associate Professor Paul Gray | Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research, University of Technology Sydney (UTS)

Associate Professor Paul Gray from the UTS Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research) returned to the QSF stage for day one's final session. Paul was picking up the conversation from his last appearance at February's Forum about accountability in the child protection system.

This time, Forum participants weighed up the merits and weaknesses of certain models that could be adopted in establishing an independent commission and/or commissioner for Aboriginal children and young people in NSW.

Assoc Prof Gray posed the question—***what path will lead to greater accountability within the child protection sector?***

A child protection commission

Based on recommendation nine from the Family is Culture Review: *"The NSW Government should establish a new, independent Child Protection Commission, which should be required by legislation to operate openly and transparently and include certain listed functions."*

A rights-based commissioner for Aboriginal children and young people

From the Safe and Supported Plan's Action 7: *"Governments should establish advocacy and accountability roles in all jurisdictions to amplify the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, drive systemic reforms to support their rights and wellbeing, and hold governments and services accountable."*

Each option would be independent, grounded in legislation and report to the Parliament and public. The discussions between tables indicated a fairly even distribution of preferences for either option. Many people said they had no preference because any option would represent an improvement on the current lack of accountability.

The lively yarns surfaced a number of considerations that would be essential for any potential model. General consensus from the room stated that any solution must include:

Community-centred, statewide accountability

- A commission or oversight body must itself be accountable to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and have inclination for action, understanding that community voices need to be heard and responded to.
- There is a need for diverse and representative streams of accountability to reflect the breadth of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across NSW. Change cannot be concentrated in urban or coastal regions.
- More calls for a community role in appointments (eg. young people on selection panels, broader engagement mechanisms).
- Oversight must operate across jurisdictions and systems (eg. child protection, health, education, youth justice).



Public advocacy grounded in culture

- Oversight should have the power to challenge harmful public narratives about Aboriginal children and families.
- A need for culturally grounded analysis of decisions being made about Aboriginal children.

Balance between systemic and individual advocacy

- Broad support for system-level oversight as well as a strong desire for early intervention and practice-level accountability.
- Oversight needs to address:
 - Front-end child protection decisions.
 - Failures in Aboriginal consultation.
 - Prevention of care entries, not just oversight post-entry.
 - Limitations of Office of the Children's Guardian (OCG), eg. regulation-focus.
- The Aboriginal Assistant Guardian may bring new perspectives but cannot fill all gaps alone.

Use of evidence-based reform tools and a shift in decision-making powers

- Strong support for qualitative file reviews across DCJ and service providers.
 - Publicly releasing these findings is seen as a valuable quality assurance tool.
 - Family is Culture recommendation 9 about establishing an independent commission with at least one Aboriginal Commissioner widely endorsed.
- Push to decentralise funding decisions, bringing them closer to Aboriginal communities (Aboriginal-led commissioning).
- Oversight body should be able to analyse how and why key decisions are made.



Closing of day one: Cleansing ceremony and dance performance

Closing out day one was an enthralling performance by Diraamu Dance and Didgerido, led by Aboriginal Elder, teacher and artist, Walangari Karntawarra.

The word Diraamu means 'tree' in the Darug Nation language and symbolises strength and knowledge. The dance, storytelling and music performance certainly lived up to its namesake and was a fitting way to end a day where community-led knowledge—and the strength it provides the sector—was a central theme.

Introducing the Aboriginal Child and Family Advocacy Service

Introducing a free, confidential service available to Aboriginal families and kin in NSW who can obtain independent advice and assistance.

Louise Coady, Family Law and Care and Protection Solicitor, Shannon Doyle, Child and Family Advocacy Senior Support Officer, and Kristy Tansey, Deputy Principal Solicitor, Care and Protection/ Family Law Practice | Aboriginal Legal Service

Louise Coady, Shannon Doyle and Kristy Tansey from the Aboriginal Legal Service (ALS) kicked off by introducing a new service that provides free, confidential advice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents, young people and families that are engaging with the NSW child protection system.

The Aboriginal Child and Family Advocacy Service (ACFAS) is an Aboriginal Community-led support initiative based on a model from Victoria (Independent Family Advocacy and Support) that has seen success achieved through early intervention (around 20 percent of cases were prevented from going to court).



The ACFAS team includes local Aboriginal advocates and social workers, who meet on a weekly basis to track emerging family needs in case management. Core to its purpose is the emphasis on being, as Coady put it, “born from community for community”. Other key characteristics include:

- Advocates acting as educators, cultural holders, and protectors, not authority figures.
- Basing office locations separately from justice/criminal spaces, to reduce stigma.
- Championing strengths-based support, cultural safety, and dignity in engagement.

Coady then shared some of the challenges that have confronted (and continue to confront) ACFAS since it began operations in September 2024, particularly with DCJ referrals.

She reported inconsistency and delays with referrals from DCJ and frustration over the department’s lack of proactive communication—despite outreach efforts—and the omission of references to ACFAS in the Department’s inductions or in toolkits staff use for standard referrals.

Finally, while there are champions within DCJ who do keep ACFAS top of mind, there remains a need for ongoing adaptation and refinement of the model and commitment to learning and evolving.

“Our advocates are listeners, protectors, educators and cultural holders, they sit with families and not above them, they speak with the systems and not for them ... they’re not just doing a job, they’re holding the line.”

Trends in child protection & OOHC across NSW

An update on key data and trends for Aboriginal children in New South Wales at a statewide and district level basis.

*Peter Reily, Director, Family and Community Services Insights Analysis and Research (FACSIAR)
| NSW Department of Communities & Justice*

Peter Reily, Director of the NSW Department of Communities & Justice's FACSIAR unit, was next on stage to bring data into the spotlight, using the public-facing Aboriginal-led data sharing dashboards to show trends and insights on Targeted Early Intervention (TEI), Child Protection, and out-of-home care (OOHC) in NSW.

These dashboards (co-designed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders) shows trends up to 10 years at statewide and district levels. They made crystal clear the over-representation at every stage of the child protection process of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.

"The over-representation of Aboriginal children in the system escalates until children enter care. Aboriginal children are then under-represented in children exiting care."

To give overall context to the statistics, the FACSIAR data shows that while NSW is making progress towards the Closing the Gap goal of a 45 percent reduction in overrepresentation by 2031 (with the rate down from 48 to 45 per 1,000)—it is far too slow. Based on current pace, the target could take around 40 years to reach.

Below is a breakdown of some of the key statistics and insights behind this, as well as a number of other key performance indicators and trends.

Key statistics (2023–24)

- Aboriginal children make up 8% of NSW's child population.
- 22% reported at ROSH.
- 33% seen by a caseworker.
- 46% of children entering OOHC.

Of 25,863 Aboriginal children reported at ROSH

- 7,894 seen by a caseworker.
- 807 entered OOHC.
- 6,315 Aboriginal children in OOHC as of June 2024.
- 159 restored to family, 97 exited to guardianship.
- 27,000 received TEI services, 6,131 accessed family preservation.

[All data can be accessed on the DCJ website.](#)

3.1: Latest data: Over-representation in the NSW system



45% (6,315) of children in OOHC at 30 June 2024 were Aboriginal

In 2023-24 Aboriginal children made up:



- 38% of children restored to family
- 39% of children exiting to Guardianship



Trends over time

- There are 139,000 Aboriginal children and young people aged 0-17 years in NSW.
- The rate of overrepresentation varies by district alongside variability in the rate of Aboriginal children in the population.
- ROSH reporting peaked in 2020-21 and declined post-COVID.
 - Aboriginal rate ratio dropped from 4.8x to 3.4x over 10 years.
- Children seen by DCJ decreased (rate ratio from 7.6x to 5.7x).
 - Population entry rates into OOHC declined (Aboriginal: 8.7 to 5.8 per 1,000 from 2017-18 to 2023-24).
 - Re-entries indicate issues with placement stability and restoration outcomes.
- Restorations dropped by 21 percent for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children since 2018-19—underrepresented compared to their OOHC population share.

Funding and transitions to ACCOs

- 2024-25 ACCO funding commitments:
 - Targeted Early Intervention: \$19.7 million.
 - Family Preservation: \$15.4 million.
 - Permanency Support: \$184.4 million.
- ACCO share of funding is gradually increasing (eg. TEI from 6.9% to 9.9% since 2021-22). However, this is far below the 30% target that was set for TEI for ACCOs in 2017
- 469 Aboriginal children transitioned from DCJ/NGO to ACCOs since July 2022.

Systemic challenges and gaps

- Reporting and caseworker visits declined post-COVID.
- The number of children restored has been dropping and has plateaued over the last three years for both Aboriginal and non- Aboriginal children. NSW has one of the worst rates of restoring children to their families across the country
- Fewer children are exiting care, more are returning to care.
- Inconsistency in case plan documentation across DCJ, NGOs, and ACCOs.
- De-identification, juvenile justice transitions, and interstate movement obscure and full data picture.

Targets and projections

- Closing the Gap goal: 45% reduction in overrepresentation by 2031.
- NSW is making progress (rate down from 47 to 45 per 1,000), but too slowly.
- Based on current pace, the target could take around 40 years to reach.

Reinvesting in Families: Valuing what matters

Sharing key findings from AbSec and Lumenia's Reinvesting in Families project and invites participants to explore the power of early intervention and ACCO-led, culturally centred family support models.

Dr Melissa Kaltner, Partner and Mark Galvin, Partner | Lumenia

Dr Melissa Kaltner and Mark Galvin from Lumenia led an interactive session on the Reinvesting in Families (RIF) project, which will support an AbSec advocacy strategy focused on Aboriginal-led early intervention.

Reinvesting in Families aims to demonstrate economic, social, and cultural returns from earlier investments led by ACCOs.

Backed by significant work and research that demonstrates the value and return on investment of early intervention, this project aims to encourage shifting resources away from crisis response—specifically, child protection and OOHC—to family support and early intervention.

In 2024, the NSW Audit Office reported limited progress in this area. While OOHC receives 61 percent of DCJ funding, only 13 percent is spent on early intervention.

With this statistic in mind, Lumenia convened a workshop to gather vital feedback from the attendees around priority areas for early support investment, best practice and what else is needed to drive advocacy and policy change.

Through table discussions, each group shared some valuable ideas, bringing unique perspectives from across the sector, and helping shape deeper evidence and lived-experience insights into the project.

Insights from the workshop

What are some key messages for advocacy?

- Early supports should be community-led and built on respect for and investment in ACCOs.
- Integrated services and hubs are a core focus and a high-impact model (eg. Benevolent Society hubs in QLD).
- Services must be trauma-informed and grounded in bottom-up, community-based approaches.
- Structural barriers to accessing services (eg. housing availability) need to be addressed; access should not depend solely on referral pathways.
- Shift funding from assessments toward direct services and supports.

Which specific supports should the Government prioritise?

- Prenatal support, parenting programs, and early childhood development (eg. First 2,000 Days model).
- Early intervention in schools and targeted support for children aged 8–13 years—particularly boys.
- Supports for young care leavers who are becoming parents.
- Ensure access to family preservation services before removal is considered.
- Improved access to legal support, information about available services, and earlier access to advocacy.
- Expanded domestic violence services and supports for families at risk.

What else do we need to see?

- Ongoing training for health and service staff, particularly due to high staff turnover.
- Investment in local workforce capacity, including peer support roles within ACCOs.
- Build seamless interagency collaboration and navigation support for families.
- Community-led, integrated service hubs as a central model – providing one-stop access to support for families and children.
- Self-referral mechanisms and accessible, culturally tailored information for Aboriginal children and families.
- Equip the wider workforce with knowledge and skills to engage Aboriginal families early and effectively.
- Implement key worker models for coordinated and consistent support (e.g. midwives assisting from pregnancy through early childhood).
- Develop step-up/step-down service models that adjust intensity based on family needs.
- Substantially expand investment in Aboriginal-led self-help and peer support models.
- Support small, culturally significant community initiatives that struggle to access mainstream funding.

“Self-determination is not just a principle—it’s practice. When Aboriginal communities control the design and delivery of services, we see children thriving in culture, families staying strong, and communities healing from generations of harm.” Aunty Muriel Bamblett, CEO, Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (quoted in RIF research).

Raise the Age NSW

Campaign milestones – where we have been, where we are now and what’s next. Sharing insights about building powerful partnerships and changing hearts and minds to work for social justice and law reform.

Emily Mayo, Campaign Manager, Raise the Age and Emma Bastable, Solicitor, Strategic Litigation | Justice and Equity Centre

As of May 2025, children as young as 10 can be arrested, sentenced and imprisoned in New South Wales. This is true in most of Australia. The Raise the Age campaign has been lobbying politicians across the country for the past five years for change. Today, it is co-led by 13 organisations and supported by more than 160 partners and individual supporters.

Emily Mayo and Emma Bastable from the Justice and Equity Centre (one of Raise the Age’s 13 partner organisations), co-presented this session to share updates, insights and what’s next for the campaign.



“You can’t expect the colony to fix the problems created by the colony.”

Why we need to Raise the Age

The evidence supporting Raise the Age is clear, well-established, and supported by global and local experts (UN, doctors, academics, economists). It’s also deeply concerning. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are 24 times more likely to be incarcerated, and for children between 10–13 years old, this rate doubles to 51 times.

As Emily Mayo explained, this overrepresentation is not due to criminality, but systemic failures in responding to trauma, disability, neglect, and misinterpreted behavioural responses. Most offences by this age group are non-violent (eg. property damage, low-level theft), and there is clear evidence that early contact with the justice system only increases the likelihood of re-offending.

The call for system change

Raising the minimum age for criminality is a minor law reform with the potential for major systemic impact. Reform must be accompanied by a large commitment to do things better and differently, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Core to this understanding is that self-determination is not just a principle, but a pathway to better outcomes—and this means investing in ACCOs.

Campaigning, power and political will

The campaign requires public and political support for momentum to carry through to change, although the latter has proven to be lacking on most fronts. Any reforms on children and criminal responsibility across Australia have so far been partial, limited or purely symbolic.

“We spend billions to cause generational harm—resource misallocation is a moral and economic issue.”

Shifting focus: ethical and moral imperatives

In 2022, the campaign made a strategic pivot towards outward-facing public engagement and quickly gained traction, with petitions reaching more than 36,000 signatures.

Powerful ad campaigns (including a recent example, linked below, which has been highly effective in terms of marketing statistics), and messaging that emphasises moral and ethical implications, have been a key part of the Raise the Age strategy across the country, including NSW.

As the public side of the campaign gathers steam, advocacy work in the political arena has remained ceaseless. Representatives from the campaign recently met with the Attorney General and several Members of Parliament, and campaigners have been involved in the state’s Community Safety Inquiry—remaining close to the conversations in order to counter negative and dangerous narratives.

Next steps

Emily Mayo and Emma Bastable concluded with a brief overview of Raise the Age’s upcoming activities, including building links with national and other state campaigns to further strengthen collective voices; undertaking a review of *doli incapax* (legal presumption around criminal intent), and mapping out the strategy for 2025 and beyond.

Watch the campaign’s powerful new video on the UnLtd Youtube channel.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XEYJ0tz2qgo>



An update on Family Preservation

Introducing AbSec's new initiative to support ACCOs tendering for Family Preservation funding in 2026.

Sally Cowling, Director | AbSec

Less than a week before the Sector Forum commenced, the NSW Government announced its commitment to provide close to \$350 million of funding over five years for Family Preservation services across NSW—with ACCOs to receive approximately 40% of the total Family Preservation funding. AbSec's CEO John Leha described the announcement as a positive shift towards a more inclusive, culturally grounded response to keeping children and young people safe and connected. AbSec was proud to have been a key partner in designing the Aboriginal Family Preservation Framework with ACCOs, community, and DCJ.

"Long-term investment in ACCOs isn't just the right thing to do—it's the smart thing to do. We know what works. What we need is the trust and resources to deliver it."
– John Leha, AbSec CEO

AbSec Director, Sally Cowling, was grateful to take the opportunity at the Forum to share details about an exciting new support initiative, designed to ensure ACCOs to be well positioned to design and deliver Family Preservation services that are culturally safe, recognise strengths and respond to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

Introducing the Family Preservation Tender support initiative

AbSec will facilitate free access to independent consultants, dedicated to help assist ACCOs in NSW prepare and submit tender responses through the eight-week procurement period. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal consultants, all hugely experienced at working with ACCOs have partnered with AbSec on this project.

While not every ACCO may want or need support, any organisation that does can choose from three levels of online support:

Tier 1: Basic information and advice.

Tier 2: Editorial support – coaching, editing, Q&A time, helping integrate your draft responses and the supporting documents required.

Tier 3: More intensive 1:1 support – drafting some tender material including some answers and supporting documentation.

Details about how to register for this free support were provided to ACCOs through emails, newsletters and AbSec's website shortly following the Forum's conclusion.

Note: this session replaced the originally scheduled workshop by Gomeroi artist Jody Trindall, which unfortunately was postponed due to sorry business.



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