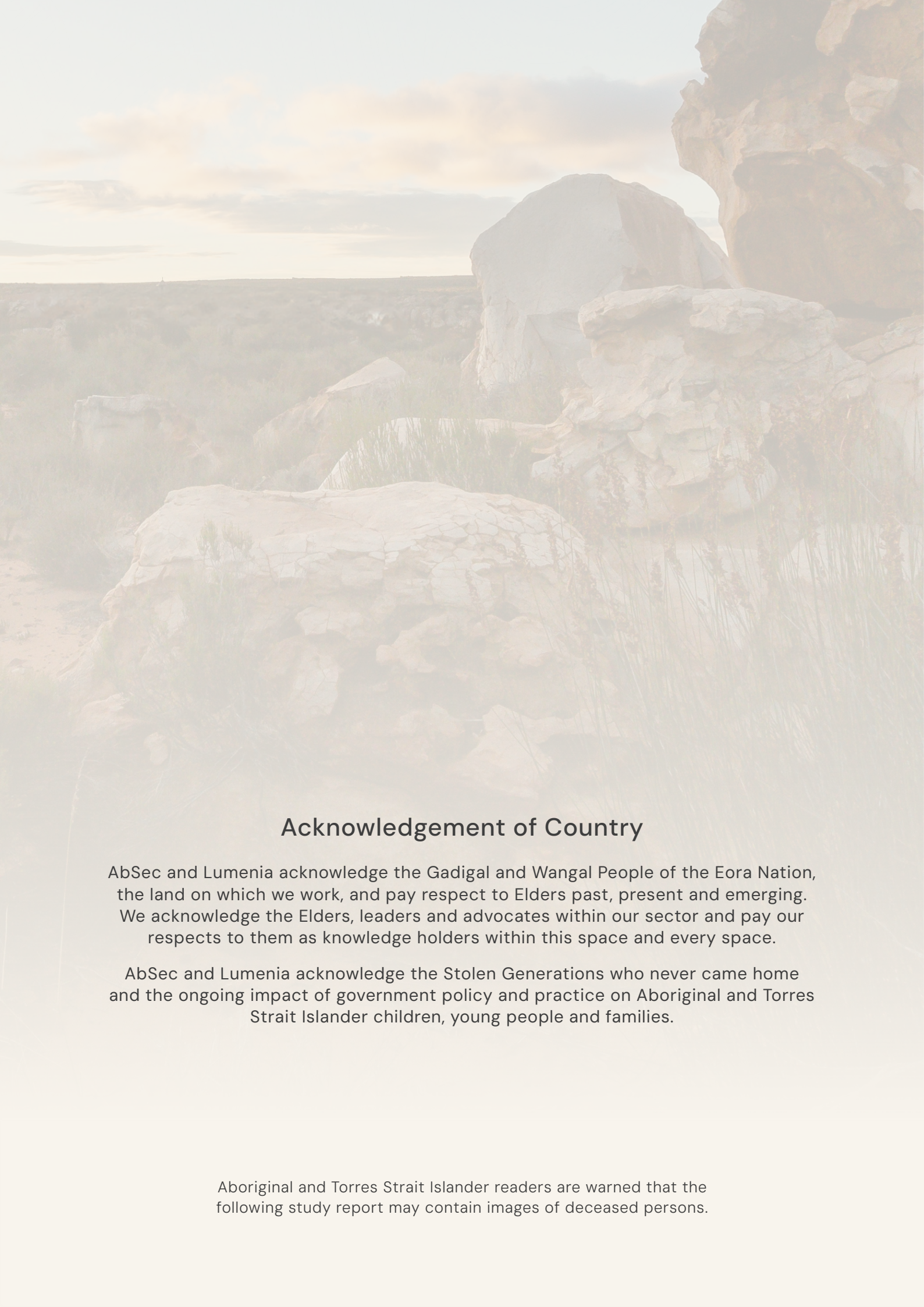




The economic and social returns of Reinvesting in Families

Evidence-based economic case for investing in earlier, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisation-led services.

August 2025



Acknowledgement of Country

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

AbSec and Lumenia acknowledge the Stolen Generations who never came home and the ongoing impact of government policy and practice on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families.

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



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 and Torres Strait Islander 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 and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care and promote holistic, community-led approaches to child and family wellbeing. Our commitment is to ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people grow up strong in culture, identity, and connection.

Our vision is that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are looked after in safe, thriving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 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 and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- Acting with professionalism and integrity in striving for quality, culturally responsive services and supports for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities.
- Underpinning the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 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 and Torres Strait Islander control in delivering outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people, families and communities.
- Committing to a future that empowers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities, representing our communities, and the agencies there to serve them, with transparency and drive.



Lumenia believe that empowering diverse perspectives is essential for achieving meaningful outcomes in communities. Through collaborative approaches, we unite individuals and evidence to build and refine services. Inspired by the Latin word “lumen,” meaning light, we embrace complexity as an opportunity to reveal new paths in human services design and delivery.

Specialising in skill sharing, we support clients in trialing and scaling new practices and policies, while fostering sustained reflective practices. Our work focuses on developing methods for monitoring, evaluation, and learning that empower both clients and the communities they serve.

For media inquiries and further details, please contact: admin@lumenia.com.au

Thank you to our contributors

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Disclaimers

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Executive summary

The New South Wales (NSW) child protection system remains overwhelmingly crisis-driven, despite decades of reviews and policy commitments to shift investment. Across the child protection spectrum, the majority of funding continues to be allocated to out-of-home care (OOHC), with only a modest portion directed to early intervention and family support. The failure to meaningfully shift funding to earlier supports and Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisation (ACCO) led services perpetuates the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families at all stages of the child protection and OOHC systems, and fails to acknowledge the deep strengths that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families bring in raising children strong in culture.

This report presents an evidence-based economic case for investing in earlier, ACCO-led services to keep Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in NSW safe, strong and connected together with their families, kin, culture and Country. The report will:

- Explore the evidence base for investment in earlier supports and the strong outcomes achieved by ACCOs.
- Provide an initial economic analysis of the return on investment yielded through earlier ACCO-led supports.
- Scope what is required for a more comprehensive analysis to support early investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities.
- Showcase deadly ACCO practice across the state which builds on the inherent strengths of Aboriginal families and keeping children strong in community and culture.

ACCOs are uniquely placed to provide holistic, trauma-informed, and culturally safe services. Research demonstrates that early intervention—particularly when led by ACCOs and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community groups—reduces the likelihood of children being removed from their families, improves family wellbeing and generates significant lifetime benefits.



Through listening sessions, AbSec's members shared their visions to empower families, with more well-resourced ACCO-led, holistic and responsive earlier supports to empower families. An initial economic analysis was undertaken that explores the return on investment of such broader early supports delivered by ACCOs aligned to these aspirations. In so doing, this work particularly builds on the independent evaluation of the NSW Government Targeted Early Intervention (TEI) program undertaken by Taylor Fry in partnership with Social Ventures Australia and Gamarada Universal Indigenous Resources (2024) and commissioned by the NSW Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ).

This modelling demonstrates that using conservative estimates, broader ACCO-led earlier supports for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families would generate a \$3.83 return for every \$1 invested, providing significant value for both government, families and the broader community.

This analysis and the examples of Deadly Practice highlighted within this report speak to the economic and social benefits that arise from Aboriginal-led early supports. They highlight the need for genuine shifts in investment to ensure Aboriginal children and young people remain safely with their families and strong in their connections to community, kin, culture and Country.

“

“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

Table of contents

AbSec NSW	03
Contributors	04
Executive summary	05
Background	08
Targeted evidence review	10
Methodology	13
Revisioning earlier supports	14
Indicative economic assessment	18
Examples of Deadly Practice	25
Future analysis opportunities: Driving reinvestment in families	34
References	36
Appendices	38
• Literature and policy review	
• Analysis considerations	
• Economic modelling calculation methodology	

Glossary of acronyms

AbSec	Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat
ACCO	Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisation
BCR	Benefit-cost ratio
BiOC	Birthing in Our Communities
CBA	Cost-benefit analysis
CtG	Closing the Gap
DCJ	NSW Department of Communities and Justice
DFV	Domestic and Family Violence
FACSIAR	Family and Community Services Insights, Analysis and Research Unit
NSW	New South Wales
OOHC	Out-of-home care
ROSH	Risk of significant harm
SNAICC	National Voice for Our Children
SROI	Social return on investment
TEI	Targeted Early Intervention
VACCHO	Victorian Aboriginal Community-Controlled Health Organisation

Background

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are strong, resourceful and deeply connected to culture, Country and kin. They have always drawn on cultural knowledge, kinship systems and collective responsibility to nurture children and support one another through adversity (SNAICC, 2022). This strength is the foundation for childrens' wellbeing and for thriving communities.

Early intervention and culturally safe family supports are fundamental determinants of positive outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people, and families. When families have access to the right supports at the right time, cycles of systemic disadvantage can be disrupted, the risk of child protection impact is reduced, and connections to culture, Country, kin, and community are strengthened (Davis, 2019; SNAICC, 2022; DSS, 2023).

As the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak body advocating for the rights and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families in NSW, AbSec provides critical leadership in driving sector reform and championing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-led solutions. Recognising the urgent need to shift investment from crisis-driven responses towards prevention and family empowerment, AbSec partnered with Lumenia to develop a robust economic case for investing in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-led, earlier family supports. This report presents the findings of this analysis and builds the evidence base for community advocacy and the case for future investment in keeping Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children safe, strong, and together with their families.

The analysis integrated:

1 A targeted evidence review

A review designed to map the policy and strategic context, synthesise the evidence base for early intervention, highlight the outcomes of ACCO-led service provision and explore areas of service and evidence need. The review drew on peer-reviewed research, government reports, policy documents, and grey literature.

Recent program evaluations and economic analyses were also included to ensure a comprehensive understanding of both qualitative and quantitative impacts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-led earlier supports to families. A literature review is contained in *Appendix A*.

2 Re-visioning earlier supports

Drawing on the views of ACCOs and community members at the AbSec Quarterly Sector Forum held in May 2025 on their aspired earlier supports service landscape. This analysis considered sector priorities for an alternative service landscape and explored key outcomes of significance to shape the economic analysis.

3. An indicative economic assessment

Developed to estimate the return on investment from scaling up ACCO-led early supports. This model builds upon the recent robust analysis of the TEI program in NSW as a foundational framework, and expands its scope to integrate both quantitative outcomes (eg. reduced child protection involvement, avoided OOHC costs) and qualitative benefits (eg. cultural connection, community empowerment), which arise from broader early ACCO-led supports.

4. Examples of Deadly Practice

Strong examples of AbSec case studies of Deadly Practice led by ACCOs and communities across NSW, were included to illustrate the practical benefits and economic value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled approaches. These examples highlight the diverse ways that ACCOs and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities deliver holistic, culturally safe supports to strengthen families and disrupt cycles of systemic inequity.

5. Future analysis opportunities and recommendations to inform AbSec's ongoing advocacy in this area

The current report sets out findings emerging from these elements of this analysis, presenting a comprehensive economic case for increased investment in ACCO-led early intervention and family support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families in NSW.

Targeted evidence review

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families possess enduring strengths rooted in culture, kinship, and collective responsibility. These strengths are foundational to the wellbeing of children and the resilience of communities. However, the legacy of assimilationist policy and systemic inequity continues to shape the landscape of child and family services, resulting in persistent over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in OOHC and ongoing bias of mainstream systems (Krakouer et al., 2023; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997).

Early intervention and culturally safe supports,—particularly when led by ACCOs, are recognised as critical determinants of positive outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families (SNAICC, 2022; Davis, 2019). This targeted evidence synthesis outlines the policy context, strategic imperatives, and the evidence base supporting investment in ACCO-led early supports. This provides the rationale for the economic analysis and recommendations that follow. Alongside this summary, a comprehensive policy and literature review is presented in *Appendix A*.

Policy and strategic context

The current policy environment is shaped by a series of national and state commitments to address the harms of past interventions and promote self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The *Bringing Them Home Report* (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997) sets out foundational recommendations for empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the design and delivery of child and family services. More recently, the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2020) has articulated a commitment to reduce the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in OOHC by 45 percent by 2031, with Priority Reforms focused on:

- Formal partnerships and shared decision-making.
- Building the community-controlled sector.
- Transforming government organisations.
- Shared access to data and information.

In NSW, these commitments are reinforced by the *Family is Culture Review* (Davis, 2019), which called for proportional investment in early supports delivered by ACCOs. The NSW Closing the Gap Partnership Agreement formalised partnership between government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak bodies, introducing an additional focus on economic prosperity (New South Wales Government, 2024).

Despite these commitments, the child protection system in NSW remains heavily weighted towards crisis response, with the majority of funding directed to OOHC, rather than prevention and early intervention (Audit Office, 2024).

Current investment and service landscape

Government investment in early supports for families is primarily delivered through the TEI and Family Preservation programs. While these programs aim to prevent escalation into statutory child protection and support family wellbeing, the proportion of funding allocated to ACCOs remains well below targets, as is presented in *Data snapshot 1*.

Data snapshot 1: Exploring proportional investment

- In 2024, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in NSW were 10 times more likely to be in OOH than non-identified children, with 46 percent of children in care identified as Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander.
- Despite calls for proportional investment, over 90 percent of DCJ's funding for early supports to families was allocated to non-ACCOs in 2024, with only 9.9 percent of TEI funding and 9.8 percent of Family Preservation funding allocated to ACCOs during this period (DCJ, 2025).

The 2025/26 NSW budget further highlights this imbalance, with an additional \$1.2 billion allocated to child protection and OOH compared to \$246.8 million over four years for Closing the Gap initiatives (New South Wales Government, 2025). This underinvestment in ACCO-led early supports perpetuates systemic bias and limits the reach of holistic, culturally safe services that deliver better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families (SNAICC, 2022; Davis, 2019).



Image credit: my4m

Evidence base for early intervention and ACCO-led supports

A robust body of evidence indicates that early intervention and family support services—particularly when culturally grounded and community-led—are critical for improving outcomes, and deliver significant cost savings to government and society (Heckman, 2011; Shonkoff, 2017). Economic analyses from interjurisdictional settings highlight that each dollar invested in early supports yields multiples of the initial investment in avoided costs and broader social benefits (Social Ventures Australia, 2019; Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2025).

The recent evaluation of the TEI program in NSW found measurable reductions in child protection risks, and improved family functioning for participants; though the financial return was modest due to the cautious scope of the evaluation (Taylor Fry, 2024).

Broader literature indicates that ACCO-led services deliver superior outcomes, including higher engagement, fewer child removals, improved mental health, and strengthened cultural identity (VACCHO, 2023; Kildea et al., 2023). Examples such as Western Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander In-Home Support Service and Victoria's Culture + Kinship program have demonstrated returns on investment of \$11.76 and \$8.29, respectively, for every dollar spent (Western Australia Government, 2024; VACCHO, 2023), highlighting the economic impact of ACCO-led earlier services.

The unique role and needs of ACCOs

ACCOs are uniquely positioned to deliver culturally safe, holistic, and trauma-informed supports that enable self-determination and community control (AbSec, 2025; SNAICC, 2022). Their effectiveness is underpinned by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance, which ensures services are designed, delivered, and evaluated in ways that reflect community values and priorities (Lowitja Institute, 2023). However, ACCOs face significant challenges due to short-term, competitive funding models, and limited access to data and burdensome reporting requirements that do not capture the full impact of their work (Davis, 2019; Audit Office, 2024).

Stable, long-term, and flexible funding is essential to enable ACCOs to invest in workforce development, infrastructure, and the deep relationship-building required for effective service delivery—particularly in regional and remote areas (Lowitja Institute, 2023; NACCHO, 2024). Investment in Indigenous data sovereignty and evaluation capacity is also critical to ensure evidence reflects the outcomes that matter most to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities (SNAICC, 2022).

Gaps and opportunities

Although the evidence base for ACCO-led early supports is strong, gaps remain in longitudinal research and in the ability to quantify holistic and cultural outcomes. Many ACCOs lack the core funding and infrastructure required to conduct comprehensive evaluations, limiting the visibility of their impact (SNAICC, 2022; Lowitja Institute, 2023). Addressing these gaps through investment in ACCO-led research, evaluation, and data governance is essential for demonstrating the value of community-led early supports, and for holding systems accountable to commitments under Closing the Gap (Davis, 2019; DSS, 2024).

The case for shifting investment towards ACCO-led early supports for Aboriginal children and families in NSW is compelling. There are many examples of practice empowering Aboriginal families across NSW, led by ACCOs and Aboriginal teams. This holistic work, driven by Aboriginal professionals and community leaders, is often underfunded despite yielding strong outcomes for Aboriginal families. The current report seeks to highlight such practice and the economic and social returns that earlier, ACCO-led supports provide.

Methodology

The Reinvesting in Families project was grounded in the strength, expertise, and leadership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities, and ACCOs across NSW. The approach was designed to centre Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community voices, draw on lived experience, and integrate robust evidence to inform advocacy and investment in ACCO-led early supports.

Collaborative design and leadership

AbSec, as the peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families in NSW, initiated this work, which was delivered in partnership with Lumenia. The project was guided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community priorities and sector expertise, recognising that solutions are most effective when they are community-led, culturally grounded, and strengths-based (Davis, 2019; SNAICC, 2022).

Strengths-based and relational

The project focused on the cultural leadership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, ACCOs and communities in empowering families who navigate challenges earlier in their journeys. The methodology prioritised relational accountability, transparency, and reciprocal knowledge sharing with those who shared their work and experiences to inform the analysis, and drive ongoing reform.

Drawing on validated economic evidence

The indicative economic assessment and Deadly Practice case studies in this report draw on a range of existing data to quantify the benefit associated with earlier, ACCO-led supports.

This includes the DCJ Benefits Database (DCJ, 2024), a comprehensive resource that provides standardised, government-endorsed estimates on the financial value of a range of social and child protection outcomes. The database includes robust and NSW Treasury-compliant, periodically updated figures for avoided costs, such as OOHC placements, substantiated child abuse, repeated statutory reports, and other crisis interventions.

By applying these values to the outcomes achieved through ACCO-led earlier supports, this analysis quantifies the direct fiscal benefits to government and the broader service system, while also acknowledging the substantial social, cultural, and intergenerational impacts that extend beyond that captured in the current analysis. Further details on the model's methods are described within the economic assessment chapter and *Appendices B and C* of this report.

Revisioning earlier supports

The project actively engaged ACCOs and sector leaders through the AbSec Quarterly Sector Forum held in May 2025, on Burramattagal land (Parramatta). The forum provided a platform for ACCOs and community members to articulate their aspirations for a reimagined early supports landscape, identifying service gaps and defining culturally significant outcomes. The participatory process ensured that the analysis was grounded in lived experience and community priorities.

Participants were invited to envision an ideal future where child protection investment prioritises earlier supports, rather than crisis-driven OOHC, and to describe the features and investment focus of such a system. These insights and service aspirations shaped the development of the economic model outlined on page 17 of this report.



Their collective wisdom and lived experience highlighted several key ambitions:

1. Holistic, community-led supports

Participants strongly advocated for:

- Investment in integrated and holistic service provision. This includes child and family hubs and maternal-child health focused holistic supports that provided safe spaces for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. These were seen as foundational environments for families to access broad, wraparound supports in a culturally safe setting.
- Recognising the existing practices and strengths of ACCO outcomes.
- Services that are community-driven, built on existing strong community connections, and are relational in nature; places where trust, healing, and cultural identity are fostered.

"Communities supporting themselves."

"Government commissioning for relationship space."

"More integration between government and non-government sector; [having us] all on same footing."

– Comments from May 2025 Quarterly Sector Forum

2. Advocacy, peer support, and empowerment

Key areas of need included:

- Practical advocacy and peer support programs, including financial advocacy and support to navigate systems. Peer-led support and advocacy services were viewed as critical for empowering families and building self-capacity.
- Programs that support parents to build on family strengths to enable self-confidence through mentoring and culturally-centred connection.
- A recurring theme during consultation was that services must focus on empowerment with opportunities to engage via health and education pathways, not surveillance as is so often the experience of current services. They noted that the existing Family Preservation and TEI service landscape is frequently experienced by parents as a mechanism to monitor, rather than empower, families.

"Reduce surveillance; early access to advocacy."

"What are appropriate responses? Community responses."

– Comments from May 2025 Quarterly Sector Forum

3. Addressing social determinants of health and meeting basic needs

Participants desired:

- Holistic support that extends beyond current family support investments was emphasised as a key area of focus and current service gap. Housing and income support, food security, and financial assistance were frequently referenced by participants. This reflects recognition that basic needs for living (eg. food and shelter) must be met for families to thrive.
- Reducing socio-economic deprivation that comes from dispossession of land and resources and ongoing systemic bias and addressing inequity in the availability of culturally-centred services.
- Improving access to ACCO-led services—particularly in rural and remote areas—was identified as essential for families to engage with comprehensive early supports.

"Access to housing! Basic needs, mental health, drug and alcohol services—[taking a] public health approach."

"Multi-agency health, child safety and NDIS; Integrated child and family hubs."

"Community programs; identifying what the community needs and be more flexible with funding to allow this."

– Comments from May 2025 Quarterly Sector Forum

4. Culturally driven, targeted earlier interventions

Building programs centred in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership was a key theme, with:

- A strong focus on culturally-centred, trauma-informed, strength-based, and therapeutic services that are ACCO led for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.
- Calls for expanded ACCO-led services in paediatric and maternal-child health areas and programs grounded in the First 2,000 Days, such as early childhood education and care.

"Culture heals our people. [Fund] alternatives to counselling and Western programs-[for example] dance, art, fishing."

"Aboriginal led programs to create localised evidence base."

"Big systemic transformation; investment in Aboriginal ways of being and knowing and doing."

- Comments from May 2025 Quarterly Sector Forum

5. Workforce and systemic revisioning

Participants suggested that a new approach to earlier supports:

- Must recognise ACCO expertise and strengthen the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce, including through trauma-informed training and measures to ensure consistent, culturally-led care across the sector.
- Ensure cultural fitness of the workforce, as ACCOs often have non-identified team members.
- Invest in evaluation and research to enable sharing of outcomes and culturally grounded, Aboriginal-led program and service improvement.
- Receive ongoing and recurrent funding to enable longevity of services.

"Shift the onus onto the funding bodies to hear the stories and write it."

"Upskilling local workforce; volunteering opportunities, then funding/investment for training."

"Longer funding for stability."

"Allowing ACCOs to be the drivers of our own goals!"

- Comments from May 2025 Quarterly Sector Forum

Quarterly Sector Forum participants were also asked to share their views via an online survey on outcomes that they felt could be achieved through earlier ACCO-led supports. This included:

- **Cultural connection:** Supports ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families feel safe, respected and understood.
- **Empowerment, wellbeing and strength:** Supports empower communities; they enable family advocacy, supporting families to participate actively in decision-making, both at individual and community levels.
- **Reduced child protection impacts:** Early supports create environments where families feel safe to address challenges, without fear of unnecessary surveillance and statutory intervention. Outcomes include well-supported families, increased family participation, avoided OOHC entry, increased restoration and a shift from KPI-driven to needs-driven services.

- **Accessibility and appropriateness:** Services can be more geographically accessible and better tailored to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, especially in rural and remote settings, to enable families to feel safe to engage.

The feedback from the Quarterly Sector Forum participants underscores the need for government investment in culturally-centred, community-led early supports that address both immediate and holistic family needs. ACCO-led models are viewed as uniquely capable of delivering outcomes, including engagement, empowerment, safety, cultural connection, and wellbeing, as well as enabling community participation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families navigating challenges.

Following the Quarterly Sector Forum, ACCOs also shared their perspectives on the current approaches to early supports for families:

“As someone who works every day in a Child Protection organisation, I see firsthand examples of how the current system’s funding focus on OOHC does not work. The focus being on a system that intervenes after the trauma has already been compounded and reached a level of needing removal. The focus needs to shift to Early Intervention, where services can intervene and support families who are struggling to be able to keep their jarjums in their home with the families, in community and on Country...”

“By supporting families to have connection to culture, it supports a sense of self and purpose which facilitates ambition, goals and productivity. Jarjums who grow up connected to their culture, grow to be the leaders of the next generation of strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.”

The key themes arising from the Quarterly Sector Forum participant listening session and survey, along with examples of ACCO Deadly Practice detailed below, informed the project’s approach to modelling the costs and benefits of earlier investments in ACCO-led family supports.

Indicative economic assessment

Building on the research base and the aspirations of AbSec's Quarterly Sector Forum participants, an indicative, evidence-based assessment of the social and economic return on investment associated with earlier ACCO-led supports for Aboriginal children and families was undertaken. This analysis explores the return on investment made possible by shifting investment toward earlier and more diverse ACCO-led services for families.

This analysis draws on additional economic studies and established cost-benefit frameworks, including the recent TEI Evaluation commissioned by DCJ as a base (Taylor-Fry et al., 2024) to provide an indicative estimate of a broader range of benefits that are likely to accrue from earlier ACCO-led supports to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. The aspirations shared by stakeholders at the Quarterly Forum for a broader range of services alongside proportional funding to ACCOs for service provision are encapsulated in the economic model.

Building on the 2024 Targeted Earlier Intervention economic evaluation

As previously discussed, the TEI program is one of DCJ's flagship initiatives for strengthening families and communities across NSW. It is designed to prioritise children, young people, and families experiencing, or at risk of vulnerability, with the aim of preventing the escalation of risks associated with child abuse and neglect by ensuring issues are addressed as early as possible.

The TEI evaluation uses matched groups and linked data to measure a clear set of child protection outcomes. The report notes that its approach is cautious, focusing only on benefits that can be clearly demonstrated at this stage (Taylor Fry, 2024). Many broader impacts are not included, in part because not enough time had passed before the evaluation to observe longer-term outcomes. As a result, the analysis highlights as its primary focus the immediate cost savings from improved child safety.

Given the evaluation took a cautious approach, it found that the costs of running the TEI program were higher than its immediate and measurable benefits. For every \$1 spent, the program was found to return \$0.66 in child safety benefits (Taylor Fry, 2024). The program's financial return is significantly lower than other studies have reported for similar early support and ACCO-led programs.

Indicative social and economic returns for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families

This current analysis estimates the return on investment for ACCO-led early supports scaled to match the size of the current TEI program in NSW. The rationale for this approach includes:

- **Robust baseline:** The TEI program provides the most recent and detailed NSW-specific data on costs, service delivery and child protection outcomes (eg. reduced reports of risk of significant harm (ROSH) and OOHHC entries) that are consistent with NSW Treasury Guidelines (New South Wales Treasury, 2023).
- **Modelling reliability and consistency:** Building on the existing TEI model as a foundation enables us to apply consistent modelling assumptions and ensures our approach is grounded in a well-defined population. This strengthens the reliability of our analysis and allows for meaningful comparisons and extrapolations.

- **Alignment with ACCO priorities:** ACCOs involved in the delivery of TEI (eg. community strengthening and family capacity building) reflect the approaches consistent with Aboriginal-led service delivery, making it a practical proxy for modelling broader early supports.
- **Increased and proportional investment:** Building on the existing model allows us to model a scenario that involves an extension of funding for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, to enable additional service provision aligned to stakeholder aspirations. It also allows us to model proportional investment that aligns with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap and the actions called for by SNAICC and AbSec. The analysis focuses on a hypothetical model in which funding and service delivery reflect both proportionate investment and the specific service needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, as reflected by ACCOs.

● Key features of the early supports economic model include:

A. Full ACCO scaling

- The model assumes 100 percent of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child population in the modelled scenario are accessing services from ACCOs, adjusting costs with an enhancement to reflect the provision of a broader range of services and brokerage. Further details of the components of the funding enhancement can be found below.

B. Additional benefits

- The analysis integrates outcomes prioritised by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities as documented through the AbSec Quarterly Sector Forum consultation process. This includes healing and thriving outcomes such as strengthened cultural connection and connection to Country, improved quality of life, greater community resilience and a strong sense of cultural identity.
- The model further considers child protection savings as well as long-term benefits, including reduced justice system, homelessness and health costs that reflect the holistic impact of ACCO-led early supports.

C. Costs

The analysis uses a base ACCO cost-per-client from the TEI evaluation and applies this to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children included in the modelling scenario. To reflect feedback from consultation participants, a 30 percent uplift is added to cover both new services and brokerage beyond existing TEI services. This is consistent with stakeholder views presented in the previous chapter, and approaches taken towards funding ACCOs for family preservation program funding (DCJ, 2025) and includes:

- Brokerage, including the costs of ACCOs helping families navigate complex service systems and providing direct material support, such as crisis funds for essential items.
- Expanded services suggested through consultations that would draw on such funding could include additional investment in:
 - » Cultural mentoring and healing programs, such as expansion of men's and boys' camps, women's weaving groups, and on-Country healing.
 - » Antenatal and perinatal support.
 - » Trauma-informed therapeutic care.
 - » Kinship advocacy.
 - » Flexible outreach.
 - » Integrated community hubs.

D. Benefits

A range of benefits have been integrated into the model to capture the holistic return on investment arising from earlier ACCO-led supports to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. This includes child safety benefits (that are characteristic of the Taylor-Fry et al. evaluation of TEI) and the broader social and economic benefits contained in the literature and described by AbSec Quarterly Sector Forum participants.

● The model comprises:

- **Costs:** ACCO costs based on TEI evaluation cost per client plus a 30% funding enhancement to reflect a broader service offering and brokerage.
- **Child safety benefits:** reduced costs of child protection and OOHC, resulting from reduced ROSH reports, reduced OOHC entries and increased restorations.
- **Adjacent service benefits:** avoided costs of adjacent crisis response services including reduced justice system costs, crisis housing and acute mental health responses.
- **Healing and thriving benefits:** building on cultural connection, improving quality of life, enabling stronger long-term outcomes through holistic ACCO-led supports, and strengthened cultural wellbeing, connection and healing.

Table one. Summary of benefits included in the economic model.

Benefit category	Benefit	Description	Source
Avoided child protection and OOHC costs.	Reduced entries to OOHC – Diversion.	Early ACCO-led supports provided to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families keeps families together and results in fewer children entering OOHC.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Taylor Fry et al., 2024. - Department of Communities and Justice, Quarterly Reports, 2024. - Department of Justice, Benefits Library, 2024. - Deloitte, 2016.
	Reduced entries to OOHC – Restoration.	Early ACCO-led supports provided to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families supports restoration of children from OOHC to their families.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Taylor Fry et al., 2024. - Department of Justice, Benefits Library, 2024. - AIHW, 2024.
	Reduced ROSH reports.	Early ACCO-led supports provided to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families reduces the likelihood of ROSH reports being made.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Taylor Fry et al., 2024. - Department of Communities and Justice, 2024.
Avoided costs of adjacent crisis response services.	Reduced need for adjacent crisis services.	Early ACCO-led supports provided to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families reduces the likelihood of interactions with adjacent crisis response services such as juvenile justice, acute mental health responses and welfare systems.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Taylor Fry et al., 2024. - Deloitte, 2016.
Broader social and economic benefits.	Healing and thriving.	Early ACCO-led supports provided to Aboriginal children and families leads to reduced harm, increased cultural connection, and thriving families and communities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Taylor Fry et al., 2024. - Deloitte, 2016.

● Avoided child protection and OOHC costs

The TEI evaluation captures statistically significant child protection outcomes for identified clients. These include a reduction in the cost of concern and ROSH reports and reduced costs of OOHC resulting from restoration efforts (Taylor Fry et al., 2024). The current analysis builds on these outcomes through additionally estimating the avoided cost of OOHC arising from reduced entries to OOHC, given its significance and the weight of evidence on the impacts of earlier family supports on avoiding OOHC (Department of Communities, 2022).

These benefits are consistent with the literature and consultation evidence that ACCOs better support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families through increasing family participation and safety, leading to earlier, more effective interventions, avoided care entry and increased restoration (Department of Communities, 2022).

Using conservative assumptions is a standard modelling principle to ensure estimates do not overstate potential benefits, and remain credible for decision-makers. Culturally competent providers have been found to deliver 3.5 times more value per avoided cost than other services in previous NSW analyses (Deloitte, 2016). A more conservative multiplier of 1.2 is applied to the relevant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander client population. The multiplier is derived from the weighted average of reported effectiveness of ACCOs serving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients compared with non-ACCOs (Taylor Fry et al., 2024).

● Avoided costs of adjacent crisis response services

Keeping families together generates significant flow-on savings by reducing demand for crisis-driven services across government systems. When children avoid the impacts of OOHC or statutory interventions, they are less likely to be impacted by costly crisis interventions from adjacent service systems, for instance juvenile justice, acute mental health responses and welfare systems.

Evidence from Deloitte (2016) demonstrates that early intervention and culturally safe models reduce the likelihood of youth incarceration, mental health crises and substance abuse. Our model estimates these avoided costs by linking improved child safety outcomes to proportional reductions in other crisis service usage arising from culturally-centred ACCO-led services.



Image credit: ashishk75

● Broader social and economic benefits (Healing and Thriving)

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children experience much higher levels of systemic inequality than their non-identified peers, particularly in their interactions with social services before accessing early intervention programs. Recent evaluation evidence suggests that prior to entering TEI services, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients accessed up to 8.6 more services

across key areas, including child protection, domestic and family violence, homelessness, school suspensions, and the criminal justice system, compared to non-identified clients.

A core strength of ACCOs is their ability to provide culturally safe, trauma-informed support that acknowledges the impacts of past injustices and ongoing colonisation. ACCOs support children and families build on their connection with culture, community, and identity, building trust and hope, and challenging systemic violence. Their holistic, strengths-based approach addresses immediate safety needs while also supporting emotional healing, recovery and long-term wellbeing.

Evidence from VACCHO's 2024 Impact Report demonstrates that families who access ACCO services show increased engagement in education and training, higher workforce participation, improved quality of life, greater community resilience, and a stronger sense of cultural pride and identity. These outcomes contribute to broader economic and community development, creating positive ripple effects that extend beyond direct service outcomes.

For this analysis, the benefit of "Healing and Thriving" is calculated using a multiplier that reflects the disparity in prior service interactions: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients have on average, 2.15 times more service contacts than non-identified clients (Taylor Fry, 2024). This multiplier is applied to the financial benefits associated with improved child safety outcomes. This captures the enhanced value generated by ACCO-led early support services, such as reduced harm, increased cultural connection, and thriving families and communities.

Economic analysis findings

The key results of the economic analysis, outlining the estimated costs, benefits, and overall return on investment associated with the modelled scenario are provided in *Figure one* below. The calculation methods and sources underpinning the model's assumptions are set out at *Appendix C*.



Figure one. Cost benefit ratio – ACCO-led early supports

The indicative economic analysis finds that every \$1 invested in ACCO-led earlier family services returns a positive benefit-cost ratio (BCR) of 1 to 3.83 where every \$1 invested results in \$3.83 of benefits, based on a scenario in which additional early supports are delivered by ACCO-led programs and serve an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child population similar in size to the current TEI program. Although this is a stronger result than the TEI evaluation findings, it is still conservative when compared to similar studies found in literature (referenced in earlier sections of this report).

While the results highlight strong social and economic value, they should be interpreted as conservative, given the limitations inherent in modelling assumptions. While grounded in available evidence and sound economic principles, the estimates presented are indicative to highlight the potential value of investing in earlier ACCO-led family supports.

Sensitivity analysis

Sensitivity analysis is used in economic analysis to understand how changes in the inputs or assumptions of a model affect its results. It is a way of testing how sensitive the results are to changes in key variables. The BCR remained positive under the scenarios tested ranging between 1.28 and 5.05 under more pessimistic and optimistic scenarios respectively. The sensitivity results are contained in *Table two*.

Table two. ACCO-led early supports modelling sensitivity analysis

Scenario	Costs	Benefits	Benefit cost ratio
Pessimistic	50% higher	50% lower	1.28
Base case	As outlined above	As outlined above	3.83
Optimistic	10% ACCO efficiency gains	20% higher	5.05

Examples of Deadly Practice

ACCOs play a vital role in delivering innovative, culturally safe, and effective supports for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people, and families across NSW. In seeking to showcase the breadth and impact of these services and consider the economic returns of their work, AbSec invited ACCOs from across the state to share their approaches and outcomes with the project team. These case exemplars were drawn on to shape the initial economic analysis and consider the holistic outcomes which arise from earlier ACCO-led supports.

The following case studies reflect the leadership, expertise, innovation and commitment of ACCOs, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and communities to keeping families strong, connected and thriving, and demonstrate the benefits of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-led earlier family supports.

Each case study describes the supports being delivered, alongside setting out family experiences that highlight outcomes experienced by families. These exemplary outcomes have been assessed by comparison with the DCJ Benefits Library (DCJ, 2024). This helps identify direct avoided costs which are generated through the outcomes of these services. Holistic benefits are also described qualitatively, highlighting the strong outcomes that ACCOs are currently generating through their innovative and community-driven work.



Gunhinarrung-bang
Ngaangirra

Gunhinarrung-bang Ngaangirra – Aboriginal Grandmothers Gathering Group keeping families strong

Gunhinarrung-bang Ngaangirra Aboriginal Grandmothers Gathering Group is a grassroots collective of more than 30 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander grandmothers and Elders from Dubbo and the surrounding regions. Established in 2022, the group emerged from a shared concern about the growing number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families who were isolated and struggling to navigate the complex web of child protection, housing and health systems.

Drawing on deep cultural knowledge, lived and professional experience and kinship responsibility, Gunhinarrung-bang Ngaangirra provides culturally safe, community-driven support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families navigating challenges.

They shared their experiences at the AbSec Quarterly Sector Forum in February 2025:

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“We formed because too many of our families, especially grandmothers raising grandchildren, were isolated, unsupported, and struggling to navigate the system. We come together to be that support, to make sure no one is left alone when things get tough, and to bring our cultural ways and knowledge to help our people.”

Their approach is grounded in cultural authority and collective wisdom. When a family is in crisis, whether at risk of child removal, homelessness, or facing other statutory interventions, the Grandmothers act to empower families. The group are centred in community and local networks, bringing together extended family, local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, and mainstream agencies to empower families, ensuring that solutions are holistic, relational, and culturally appropriate. The Group advocates for broader systemic change, challenging barriers and campaigning for more flexible, sustainable, and culturally responsive services for their people and communities.

Members of the group shared an example of their work with families involving a young Aboriginal mother who was heavily pregnant and caring for her nine children in a dilapidated three-bedroom social housing home. DCJ was preparing to remove all nine children.

Recognising the gravity of the situation, Gunhinarrung-bang Ngaangirra were alerted to this family's experience by local services and immediately mobilised. They convened a meeting around the kitchen table, bringing together not only the family and Grandmothers, but also representatives from housing, education, legal advocacy, and the Three Rivers Aboriginal Regional Assembly. The Grandmothers insisted that men from the community also be involved, recognising that this was not just a family issue, but a community crisis.

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“She was that close—that close—to having all those children removed and separated... this is a community crisis, it's not just to do with that family...I said, 'grab all of those people from all of those organisations, and we'll sit around the table, and we'll deal with it'.”

Through their leadership and advocacy, Gunhinarrung-bang Ngaangirra shifted the response from punitive child removal to one of coordinated, wraparound support. The mother and her children were able to stay safely together, with services meeting needs related to housing, legal advocacy, and supporting the children's wellbeing. Gunhinarrung-bang Ngaangirra's cultural authority ensured that the family's voice was heard, and their needs were met in a way that respected their cultural identity and circumstances.

“At the end of the day, the service that we helped to get, all those services to wrap around her... is going really good. She's got all these services—the Department of Housing, Education and all the other services, the legal services and everything else—working and supporting this one family.”

The impact of this intervention is profound, both for the family and for the broader community. Financially, the avoided care costs to NSW government alone are substantial.

Whilst it is not possible to quantify the costs of the support provided by Gunhinarrung-bang Ngaangirra, on the basis of the benefits described by the group, the avoided costs of child protection and OOH along with avoided adjacent DCJ service costs, which were generated through the community-led support provided for this family exceed \$3.5 million.

Table three. Economic impacts of Gunhinarrung–bang Ngaangirra’s support for this family.

Benefit category	Description	Value (DCJ, 2024)	Quantity	Total value
Avoided child protection and OOHC costs.	Lifetime avoided OOHC cost per child.	\$331,118	9 children	\$2,980,062
	Prevented substantiated child abuse.	\$44,102	9 children	\$396,918
	Avoided repeated statutory reports at risk of significant harm.	\$10,583	9 children, noting additional possibility of removal at birth of child 10.	\$95,247
Avoided costs of adjacent crisis response services.	Avoided eviction from social housing.	\$27,552	1 event	\$27,552
	Avoided crisis accommodation.	\$25,448	1 event	\$25,448
				Total = \$3,525,227

The holistic value of Gunhinarrung–bang Ngaangirra’s work goes far beyond reduced costs to DCJ. By keeping families strong together, maintaining cultural and family bonds and strengthening community advocacy, their leadership enables cultural connection, wellbeing and systemic change.

“It’s not just about helping one family. We want the services and the government to see that our way—bringing everyone together, listening to the grandmothers, looking after each other—is what works. We want to show them that Aboriginal leadership and community is the answer.”



Image credit: Ngunya Jarjum 2023 Annual Report

Ngunya Jarjum – Holistic responses and advocacy for families

Ngunya Jarjum, established in 1995 by Bundjalung Elders and community members, is an ACCO dedicated to keeping Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in family, on Country, and immersed in culture. Ngunya Jarjum provides culturally centred care for families across the Bundjalung Nation, including the Clarence, Richmond, and Tweed Valley areas.

Guided by values of culture, child-centred practice, community connection, and deep listening, Ngunya Jarjum's vision is to see a connected, culturally rich, and thriving community where children are nurtured, raised on Country, and supported to maintain their culture and strength for generations to come. Ngunya Jarjum's team shared the following de-identified case studies with AbSec to highlight how their ACCO works alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to support their outcomes.

Case study one: Sheree, Steven & Samantha

Sheree and her jarjums, Steven (12) and Samantha (16), were referred to our program after experiencing a severe incident of domestic violence from Sharee's former partner and father of the jarjums. This incident resulted in the father being incarcerated with no-contact AVO protecting Sharee, Steven and Samantha.

Steven had significant struggles understanding the actions of his Dad and why he was no longer allowed to see him. This led to some resentment and lashing out towards Sharee whom he blamed for no longer being in contact with his dad. Steven started smoking yarndi with his friends and began to have violence outbursts towards his family and school teachers. This is a path several of his adult siblings had followed, some of whom were incarcerated with long sentences in gaol.

Samantha was very reserved and struggled with engaging in positive friendships. This led to consistent bullying and disengaging from education. Samantha began "huffing" and would not engage in any counselling.

The family were at risk of homelessness due to the damage done to the home during the domestic violence incidents over the previous 12 months. Sharee was reluctant to leave the home and displayed signs of agoraphobia. This made it difficult for services to engage with her.

The family worker approached working with the family from a relationship-based framework. This included supporting Sharee from inside the home when she would not come out. The worker built trust by working with Sharee in understanding how she was feeling and validating her feelings. Sheree grew to trust the worker and built a close bond. This allowed the worker to facilitate positive relationships with other services.

- The family worker referred the following services for support:

Cultural mentoring support: Steven was referred to cultural mentoring where he spent several hours a week engaging with a male from the community who worked with our organisation. This mentor engaged Steven in cultural healing through art and engagement in a Bush program that allowed Steven to learn to care for the land and work with nature.

Traineeship through local hairdresser: Samantha would not return to school, however her family worker reached out to a local beauty salon who agreed to support Samantha with a traineeship while she attended TAFE to undertake her Certificate in Hairdressing and Beauty.

Counselling for Sheree: The family worker referred Sheree to a counsellor who could support with in home sessions. The worker attended these to support Sheree and slowly removed herself as Sheree became comfortable over time. These visits soon were able to occur in the front yard, and eventually at a local café on the corner from her home.

Referrals to housing support and the Tribunal: The family worker advocated hard for the family to have an extension on their eviction. This was successful and the worker engaged with a local housing support service around getting the family moved to a new home that was unknown to the father of the jarjums.

Referred to domestic violence support organisation: The family engaged with an organisation that supported the removal of some of the debt that had been accrued by housing due to the domestic violence in the home and supported the family to install security cameras and safety screens on their new property.

Other resources utilised to support the family:

- Food vouchers.
- Furniture and removalists.
- Drivers license test and fees.
- Mentoring resource costs.
- Skip bins and waste removal.
- Home repairs.
- Vehicle repairs.
- Transportation.

- Outcomes achieved for the family:

Education engagement: Steven engaged back in school with the cultural mentor supporting a slow transition. Steven engaged with the cultural mentor and the school ground keeper to care for the gardens around the school. Steven's school attendance increased to more than 80 percent, rising from 12 percent when the program first began work with the family.

Strong in culture: Steven worked with his cultural mentor, which included supporting him in the facilitation of cultural workshops in his local area, which his cultural mentor ran as part of his small business. Steven expressed an interest in creating his own programs that involved being out on Country, and supporting other kids to learn to be happy.

Employment: Samantha engaged in her traineeship and while initial engagement with TAFE was poor, the family worker was able to support her assisted learning through the TAFE. During the family's two years in the program, Samantha worked consistently with a hairdresser, who indicated they were looking to hire her as a full-time employee once she had completed her certificate.

Life skills: Samantha got her learner's license and was able to support getting herself to her traineeship.

Healing: Sheree engaged in ongoing mental health counselling and was seen around town at local events. She attended Steven's award ceremony and Steven appeared very happy to see her there as she had never attended previously. Sheree began to feel safe leaving her home and engaging with the wider community. Sheree began to volunteer at the local neighbourhood centre supporting victims of natural disasters.

Removed impacts of child protection: DCJ closed their case file on this family.

Future economic thriving: The children's engagement in more positive activities set both up for productive occupations, with Steven looking to cultural mentorship and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership after he finished school, while Samantha successfully held down a job and gained a qualification, which extended her opportunities for social and financial growth into the future.

Strengthened families: The relationships between Sharee and Steven improved significantly with the input of Steven's mentor working with him on his negative feelings for his mother. Sharee has supported Steven to attend the workshops and they spend one-on-one time together doing gardening, which they both enjoy.

ACCO-led service delivery, as demonstrated in this case study, provides culturally safe, holistic, and relationship-based support that enables families to heal, thrive, and avoid crisis. The tailored approach not only addresses immediate risks, but also strengthens cultural identity and long-term wellbeing. This results in measurable reductions in child protection impacts, crisis service use and improved life outcomes for Aboriginal children and families as highlighted in *Table four* below, generating over \$1.3 million of benefits for this family alone.

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“The limited funding given to each family through the government contracts can make it difficult to provide sustainable services. The family workers often have to utilise their own local knowledge to source programs that are looking for less financial support and are more interested in community development. However, this is not always sustainable.

“Our program leaned on another program within our organisation to support the cultural mentoring, as the funding provided was not sufficient enough to support one of the more crucial elements of this families change.”

Table four. Economic benefits for this family

Benefit category	Description	Value (DCJ, 2024)	Quant.	Total value
Avoided child protection and OOHC costs.	Client avoids incident of substantiated child abuse or incident of substantiated child abuse prevented.	\$44,102	2	\$88,204
	A client who is the subject of a ROSH report is not re-reported at ROSH in the following year.	\$10,583	2	\$21,166
	A client deemed as in need of care and protection avoids entering OOHC.	\$331,118	2	\$662,236
Adjacent crisis response service benefits.	Client avoids entering crisis accommodation (small to medium refuge).	\$27,552	1	\$27,552
	Avoided police call-out to a client's residence or community.	\$387	1	\$387
	Client avoids or overcomes moderate to severe cannabis dependence for 12 months.	\$169,131	1	\$169,131
	Client with mental health (MH) condition is able to access treatment.	\$4,547	1	\$4,547
Healing and Thriving.	Client increases school attendance in Year 7 from below 80% to over 80%.	\$54,818	1	\$54,818
	Expected income with a Tertiary Certificate (Certificate III or IV), compared to just completing Year 12.	\$322,370	1	\$322,370
				Total = \$1,348,307

Case study two: Aunty May, David, Peter, Adam, Rick and Elijah

Aunty May (referred to as Aunty due to her prominent position within the community, although she is the grandmother of the jarjums) was referred to our program after her grandchildren David (10), Peter (nine), Adam (seven), Rick (five), and Elijah (eight months) moved into her home under a family arrangement. Their father is incarcerated and their mother, Annie, is unable to care for them due to substance abuse and mental health concerns. An incident saw Annie driving the children without car seats while heavily intoxicated, resulting in a car accident and minor injuries to the children. Annie agreed for Aunty May to care for the children while she sought rehabilitation.

Living outside of town in a remote community, Aunty May faced significant challenges taking on the care of five boys, especially given her age and health. She was particularly focused on Elijah due to his age and needs. David, Adam, and Rick have diagnosed Autism and ADHD, with Rick being non-verbal.

At referral, none of the children had support services or were attending education. David exhibited trauma-related behaviours, refusing to get into cars, and Elijah was distressed when buckled into a car seat. Aunty May's car had broken down, limiting access to groceries, medical supplies, and support. Her home was not set up for children, and she was concerned about the lack of support.

● Referrals and resources utilised:

- Provided car seats and prams for transport.
- Linked with local AMS health hub for paediatric care.
- NDIS referrals for David, Adam, and Rick.
- Enrolment in local school for David, Peter, Adam, and Rick.
- Enrolment in day care for Elijah two days a week.
- Mental health support for David, Peter, Adam, and Rick via AMS.
- Mentoring for David, Adam, and Rick through NDIS.
- Parenting programs for Aunty May.
- Furniture, bedding, and school supplies.
- Grocery home delivery.
- Enrolment in local cultural playgroup for Elijah.
- Mentoring for Peter through community connections.
- Car repairs, food vouchers, safety equipment for Elijah.
- Support for Aunty May to set boundaries and keep the children safe.

● Outcomes achieved for the family included:

Education engagement: David, Peter, Adam, and Rick engaged in schooling, with attendance between 90 to 100 percent for the year.

Community support: Aunty May received support through playgroup and joined a parents' group.

Parenting support: Parenting programs helped Aunty May understand her grandchildren's needs, especially Rick's.

Positive family relationships: Aunty May set boundaries with Annie, allowing safe ongoing contact only after rehabilitation.

Building confidence: Aunty May became more confident and self-advocated for further support.

As is presented in *Table five*, the benefits generated for this single family exceeded \$2 million.

Table five. Economic benefits for this family

Benefit category	Description	Value (DCJ, 2024)	Quant.	Total value
Reduced costs of child protection and OOHC.	Client avoids incident of substantiated child abuse or incident of substantiated child abuse prevented.	\$44,102	5	\$220,510
	A client who is the subject of a ROSH report is not re-reported at ROSH in the following year.	\$10,583	5	\$52,915
	A client deemed as in need of care and protection avoids entering OOHC.	\$331,118	5	\$1,655,590
Healing and Thriving.	Client increases school attendance in Year 7 from below 80% to over 80% (for eligible children).	\$54,818	3	\$164,454
				Total = \$2,093,469

As is described by Ngunya Jarjum’s team, “ACCOs have a unique position in working with community as they are not just supporting the community but are deeply rooted in their local area and culture. ACCOs are comprised of vast knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers, who understand the connection to culture, land and family; workers that can walk alongside community and families for change to support long term sustainable change across generations of mob”.

These Deadly Practice studies showcase the return on investment generated through innovative, culturally-led earlier supports for Aboriginal families drawing on examples provided by ACCOs, demonstrating the impact that community-driven services can have in changing family trajectories.

Future analysis opportunities: Driving reinvestment in families

While the current illustrative analysis provides valuable insights and highlights the significant social and economic returns associated with Aboriginal community-led services, there are opportunities to strengthen future evaluations using linked administrative data, rigorous methodologies, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-led frameworks. This aligns with Priority Reform 4 (PR4): Shared Access to Data and Information (IDS&G), which commits governments and partners to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have access to the data and information they need to make informed decisions, drive change, and hold systems accountable.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance and delivery

Ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance oversight and meaningful shaping of the economic analysis approach is fundamental to the legitimacy and effectiveness of future work in this space. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance is central to self-determination, including in the design, implementation, and interpretation of economic analysis methods. This means embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and decision-making at every stage—guiding methodological choices, determining what outcomes matter, and ensuring that the analysis reflects cultural values and community priorities.

This includes ensuring oversight processes that provide independent leadership, ensure accountability, and facilitate ongoing dialogue between ACCOs, communities, and analysts to meaningfully ensure self-determination.

Analysis methods

From an economic analysis technical standpoint, there is benefit of alignment with NSW Treasury guidelines.

Outcomes are likely to vary significantly across activities, service types, and providers due to differences in local needs, implementation approaches, and client demographics. Future modelling should account for this heterogeneity by stratifying analyses by service streams and provider type, ensuring results reflect the nuanced realities of service delivery.

This approach measures both monetary and non-monetary impacts, compares outcomes to a counterfactual, and incorporates qualitative evidence. This includes case studies and lived experience—alongside quantitative data. Any analysis should be complemented by sensitivity analysis and scenario modelling to reflect the complexity of family and community contexts.

Drawing on linked datasets

To enable more fulsome analysis, leveraging the NSW Human Services Dataset (HSDS) offers scope for more robust analysis of the outcomes of ACCO-led earlier services for families. The HSDS is a cross-agency, de-identified, longitudinal dataset that brings together decades of data from across NSW Government agencies. This includes health, education, police, housing, and DCJ. This dataset allows for a whole-of-government view of service use, pathways, and outcomes for children, young people, and families, enabling analysis of a range of holistic outcomes for families.

Using the HSDS will allow for cross-sectoral analysis of risk, service use, and outcomes over the life course, identification of service gaps and points for early intervention, and modelling of the impact and cost-benefit of ACCO-led and prevention-focused supports across multiple domains. It can enable comparison of outcomes for different cohorts, including those engaged with ACCOs versus mainstream services.

The e-cohort study led by University of New South Wales does not currently hold the level of information on broader earlier supports and ACCO-delivered supports which is required to inform a comprehensive economic analysis. It can, however, be drawn on to understand children's trajectories, explore service gaps and identify areas for development to address the needs of families with additional resourcing.

Targeting future analysis to ensure reinvestment

Numerous studies and reviews referenced have established that investing in ACCOs is cost-effective, delivers improved outcomes, and is critical to Closing the Gap. The current illustrative analysis adds weight to this evidence base, and highlights the value that earlier, ACCO-led services can generate for families and the NSW Government and community.

Continuing to build the evidence base on the outcomes of earlier ACCO-led supports and working in partnership with families and communities to explore what is most needed to achieve lasting change is necessary. This could include specific funding for:

- ACCOs to enable them to develop their own evaluation and research.
- Targeted analysis using the HSDS and linked e-cohort study data to examine service gaps and areas of unmet need.
- Working directly with families to ensure that future advocacy and investment are grounded in lived experience and local community priorities.

Taken together, such an approach will enable the sector to advocate for investment in culturally safe, holistic interventions that reflect the realities and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. It will also aid the sector's view of service gaps and highlight where more detailed cost-benefit analysis is necessary for future investments.

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Appendix A: Literature and policy review

A comprehensive analysis of literature and policy was undertaken to inform the project's illustrative economic modelling, as presented below.

Policy and strategic context

The current landscape of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child and family wellbeing in NSW cannot be understood without acknowledging the enduring legacy of assimilationist policies in child protection. Historically, these policies have systematically undermined Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural identity and connection, resulting in deep mistrust of mainstream systems and contributing to the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in OOHC. The ongoing impacts of these practices are evident in the persistent removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families and communities, often justified by deficit-based narratives that fail to recognise the strengths and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families (Krakouer et al., 2023).

Almost 20 years ago, the *Bringing Them Home Report* (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997) was released. This landmark inquiry into the Stolen Generations made clear recommendations to address the legacy of forced child removals and to promote self-determination. Recommendation 43b calls for funding for services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families to be provided to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agencies wherever possible to prevent removal of children, while Recommendation 43c urges that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities be directly empowered through transfer of power in the design and delivery of child and family welfare services (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997).

In the decades following, there have been a series of national and state commitments aimed at addressing longstanding inequities and repairing the harms caused by past interventions. These commitments aim to recognise the unique strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities and the need to restore cultural connection as central to child and family wellbeing.

A critical national commitment is articulated in *Closing the Gap Target 12*, which states:

"By 2031, reduce the rate of over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in OOHC by 45 percent".

Despite this commitment, progress is significantly off track. At the current rate of change, FACSIR data (DCJ, 2025a) has estimated that it would take approximately 40 years to achieve the target, far beyond the 2031 goal. This slow progress highlights the urgent need for transformative action and accountability.

In recent years, there has been growing recognition that sustainable change will only be achieved when ACCOs are resourced and empowered to lead the design and delivery of services for their communities. This shift is reflected in major policy frameworks, which commit governments to move from crisis-driven, mainstream responses towards prevention and early intervention which are centred in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-led solutions.

Against this backdrop, a number of key agreements and strategies, including the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* (2020) and the *Family is Culture Review* (Davis, 2019) recommendations set the direction for delegation in decision-making and meaningful transfer of power, investment in ACCO capacity and a stronger focus on outcomes that matter to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities.

● The National Agreement on Closing the Gap

The need for increased investment in ACCOs is recognised at national and state levels. Alongside its focus on reducing over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home-care, the National Agreement on Closing the Gap commits all governments to formal partnerships and shared decision-making, ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are central to decision-making regarding systemic change and formally recognised in service design and delivery. These include:

Priority reform one: Formal partnerships and shared decision-making

Ensures Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have a genuine say in policies and programs that affect them.

- Embeds shared decision-making at all levels, recognising the right to self-determination and the importance of community-led solutions.

Priority reform two: Building the community-controlled sector

Focuses on strengthening and expanding the ACCO sector across all areas of service delivery.

- Aims to ensure ACCOs are adequately resourced, supported, and enabled to deliver high-quality, culturally safe services.
- Investment in ACCO capacity is critical to shifting power and responsibility to Aboriginal-led organisations, ensuring services are designed and delivered by and for communities.

Priority reform three: Transforming government organisations

Commits governments to change their own structures, funding models, and reporting requirements to better support self-determination.

- Involves reforming government systems, policies, and practices to remove barriers, address systemic racism, and create an enabling environment for ACCO leadership.
- Includes developing new accountability measures that recognise and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance and ways of working.

Priority reform four: Shared access to data and information

Commits to shared access to data and information, so communities can drive change and hold systems accountable.

- Ensures that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations have the information they need to make decisions, monitor progress, and advocate for their priorities.

Together, these Priority Reforms underpin the logic for shifting investment towards ACCO leadership and governance. They require not only a transfer of resources but also a transformation in how governments partner with, fund and are held accountable by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and Communities.

The Agreement's Priority Reforms are clear: strong ACCOs, shared decision making, shared data and information, government transformation and investment in prevention. These components are essential to achieving better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families (Coalition of Peaks, 2020).

SNAICC, the national peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, is leading the development of the National Child and Family Investment Strategy due for release in 2025. This strategy aims to establish a national framework for Aboriginal-led early investment in family and child wellbeing. The strategy prioritises ACCO leadership, shared decision-making, and outcomes that reflect community values and aspirations (SNAICC, 2025).

● Policy commitments and community advocacy

New South Wales' policy commitments to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child and family wellbeing are strongly shaped by decades of community advocacy and key policy reviews. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have consistently called for increased investment in ACCO-led early supports for families, recognising that culturally safe, community-led prevention and early intervention are essential to keeping children connected to family, culture, and Country (Davis, 2019).

The *Family is Culture Review* (Davis, 2019) and its Community Report Cards (eg. AbSec, 2024) urge investment in early supports and ACCOs, including Recommendations 21 and 22 for proportional investment in earlier supports for families:

Recommendation 21

The NSW Government should increase financial investment in early intervention support as a long-term investment to prevent more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children entering the OOHC system.

Recommendation 22

The NSW Government should ensure that financial investment in early intervention support is commensurate with the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in OOHC, with a preference for delivery of early intervention and prevention services by ACCOs.

These calls for reform are reinforced by the *NSW Closing the Gap Partnership Agreement*, which formalises a genuine partnership between the NSW Government and the NSW Coalition of Aboriginal Peak Organisations (CAPO), with AbSec acting as the CAPO lead for children and families (New South Wales Government, 2024). This agreement is grounded in the four national Priority Reforms, and introduces a fifth, NSW-specific reform focused on economic prosperity (New South Wales Government, 2024).

Despite this, the NSW child protection system remains heavily weighted towards crisis response. In 2022–23, the NSW Audit Office noted that 61 percent of the child protection budget was spent on OOHC, while only 13 percent was allocated to family support services, including early intervention. For every dollar spent on early intervention and family support, nearly five dollars were spent on OOHC. In its review, the Audit Office concluded that DCJ had not made meaningful progress in shifting resources toward early intervention, despite DCJ commitments to do so in line with repeated recommendations from major system reviews (Audit Office, 2024).

In 2024, the DCJ System Review into OOHC reinforced these findings. It noted that underinvestment in earlier, non-statutory responses remain a key driver of demand and escalating costs in OOHC, with flow-on impacts across government budgets (DCJ, 2024).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sector leaders have consistently emphasised that investment in the delivery of ACCO-led services for families should be proportionate to the representation which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families experience within the child protection system. These include the Safe and Supported First Action Plan (DSS, 2023) which commits governments to grow the ACCO sector and invest in prevention. Likewise, SNAICC and AbSec, partners in the previously referenced National Agreement and NSW Agreement, have led advocacy for proportional funding and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander commissioning, calling for investment that matches the scale of need and supports self-determination (SNAICC, 2022; AbSec, 2017, 2024).

The need for proportional funding is particularly stark when considered in relation to the ongoing disproportionality in the child protection system. Nationally, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children remain vastly overrepresented in OOHC, being 10.8 times more likely than non-identified children to be in care (SNAICC, 2024). In NSW, the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in OOHC persists despite ongoing policy commitments to address it. Currently, for every 1,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, 45 are now in OOHC, as compared to 5 per 1,000 non-identified children (DCJ, 2025).

This over-representation highlights the urgent need for government to take focused action to resource ACCOs in a proportionate manner, given that ACCOs provide the most effective, culturally safe services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families (Davis, 2019; Coalition of Peaks, 2020). As is overviewed below, significant change is required to ensure that earlier support investments achieve proportional investment aligned to these commitments.

● Current NSW earlier support investments

DCJ currently funds earlier intervention supports for families navigating challenges through two primary streams: TEI and Family Preservation programs. These programs aim to prevent escalation into statutory child protection, support family wellbeing, and keep children safely at home, connected to community and culture.

The TEI program provides flexible, locally tailored supports to children, young people, and families through multiple referral pathways. The TEI program is structured to respond to local priorities and offers a broad range of activities, including parenting support, case management, community development, and cultural connection programs. In 2023–24, DCJ reported an investment of over \$130 million in TEI.

An independent evaluation found that participation in the program leads to measurable improvements in child protection outcomes: 16–18 months after entering TEI, the likelihood of a child being the subject of a concern report was reduced by 6.6 percent, compared to similar children not accessing TEI support (Taylor Fry, 2024).

This recent evaluation noted that DCJ set an investment target of 30 percent of TEI funding for ACCO-delivered services, which was first announced in 2017. However, the actual proportion remains below this target. It was reported as 7.7 percent at the time of the evaluation in 2022–23, moving to 9.9 percent in the most recently available data from 2024 (DCJ, 2025). The report recommended further investment in ACCO capacity and reach, particularly in high-growth and remote areas, to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families have access to culturally safe and holistic supports. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders, including those engaged throughout the development of this report, reinforce the case for expanded investment in Aboriginal-led TEI.

Family Preservation services are currently undergoing significant reform in NSW. During 2024, only 9.8 percent of Family Preservation service funding was provided to ACCOs (DCJ, 2025), well beyond the level of proportionality called for by successive reviews. DCJ's 2025 Family Preservation Funding Approach outlines a new commissioning model for implementation from April 2026. The redesigned program will replace legacy models with new evidence-based approaches, including Families Together and Aboriginal Family Preservation. It commits DCJ to a 40 percent allocation of funding to ACCOs in 2026 (DCJ, 2025), reflecting a welcome and overdue step towards proportional investment.

This redesign has been shaped by extensive sector consultation and co-design, including 'Listen and Learn' workshops with AbSec and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders to ensure culturally safe and responsive service delivery. The new approach aims to allocate funding efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of children, families, and communities, with a particular focus on increasing ACCO involvement in Aboriginal Family Preservation service delivery. AbSec is currently working with ACCOs to support their responses to this tender process, with an aim of increasing the pool of ACCO funded family preservation services across NSW.

The value of shaping upcoming TEI recommissioning with the insights of ACCOs and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in a similar way to that of the current Family Preservation recommissioning process is clear.

Notwithstanding the significance of proportional investment commitments made within the upcoming implementation of the redesign of Family Preservation, when taken alongside current TEI, the NSW earlier supports service landscape is characterised by:

- A predominance of non-ACCO providers.

- Minimal investment in comprehensive, wrap-around supports tailored to the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

The failure to transition investment towards earlier ACCO-led supports for families contributes to the continued experience of systemic bias and overrepresentation navigated by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

The 2025/26 NSW Budget represents the largest investment in OOHC and child protection in the state's history, with a \$1.2 billion Child Protection Package, of which approximately \$1 billion is focused on OOHC (New South Wales Government, 2025). Despite this significant investment, its focus remains on crisis response. The vast majority of funding is directed to OOHC and statutory responses rather than early supports for families, despite clear evidence that investing earlier in families delivers better outcomes and reduces long-term costs (SNAICC, 2022; Davis, 2019).

Although the budget includes investment to targeted Closing the Gap initiatives and Aboriginal-led programs, the scale of investment in crisis services far outweighs support for community-controlled, culturally safe early supports that recognise the strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and can disrupt intergenerational cycles of disadvantage.

2025/26 budget snapshot

In its 2025/26 budget, the NSW government committed \$246.8 million over four years (including \$202.4 million in 2025–26) specifically to Closing the Gap initiatives, which include early supports and Aboriginal-led programs across health, education, employment, justice, and early childhood.

In contrast, the investment in OOHC and child protection was \$1.2 billion in the 2025–26 Budget, with \$1 billion allocated to rebuilding the OOHC system and \$143.9 million for increasing the Foster Care Allowance.

Both the AbSec-informed Family Preservation redesign consultation process and TEI evaluation underscore the need for a more holistic, community-controlled service system. Increasing the proportion of ACCO-delivered services is essential to enable stronger outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families and to realise the commitments of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap and recommendations from the Family is Culture Review.

Evidence Review

There is a robust and longstanding evidence base demonstrating that early intervention and family support services are critical for improving outcomes for children and families experiencing challenges (Heckman, 2011; Shonkoff, 2017). Early supports can prevent escalation of these challenges, reduce the impact of statutory child protection, and foster long-term wellbeing.

Investing in early childhood development is widely recognised as one of the most effective strategies for breaking cycles of systemic bias and disadvantage, with the greatest returns realised when interventions are delivered early and are culturally grounded (Heckman, 2011; SNAICC, 2022).

● The clear evidence base for earlier supports

A substantial body of literature demonstrates that early intervention and family support programs improve outcomes for children and families and deliver significant cost savings to governments and society. This is both in terms of directly avoided child protection and OOHC costs, alongside other holistic short- and longer-term benefits.

There is a wealth of evidence on the strong outcomes of earlier supports across a broad array of family functioning, parent-child wellbeing, health and educational outcomes (Shonkoff, 2017). Recent comprehensive economic analysis in the Victorian context found that upfront, additional investment in earlier supports could prevent 1,200 children per year from entering OOHC, resulting in cumulative net savings of \$1.6 billion over ten years. This equates to a \$2 saving for every \$1 invested in early intervention (SVA, 2019). The authors noted that these savings estimates were conservative, as these did not fully account for the broader social and intergenerational benefits of keeping children safely with their families and connected to Community and culture.

International evidence supports these findings. A Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP) meta-analysis found that evidence-based prevention and early intervention programs for children and families consistently deliver positive net benefits. The return on investment reported for these programs range from \$1.50 to over \$13 for every dollar invested, depending on the program and target population (WSIPP, 2025).

In NSW, the recent evaluation of the TEI program further supports these findings. The evaluation demonstrates that TEI services are associated with significant reductions in risk factors for child protection involvement, improved family functioning, reduced child development concerns, and increased connection to community and culture (Taylor Fry, 2024). The evaluation's qualitative assessment highlighted that investment in TEI generates broader downstream benefits by reducing demand for high-cost statutory services.

● The strong impact of ACCO-led services

ACCOs are uniquely positioned to deliver culturally safe, holistic, and trauma-informed early intervention and family support services. They inherently enable self-determination and Community control. These are essential for strengthening outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families (AbSec, 2025; SNAICC, 2022). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance is foundational to effective and sustainable systemic change. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance ensures that communities have control over service design, data, evaluation, and decision-making (Lowitja Institute, 2023).

Early supports and ACCO-led services can produce a wide range of direct and holistic outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families navigating challenges. Short-term outcomes include improved family functioning, increased parenting confidence, reductions in child protection risk factors, and greater engagement with health, education, and social supports (VACCHO, 2023; Kildea et al., 2023). These services also strengthen cultural identity and connection, which are critical protective factors for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families (SNAICC, 2022).

Longer-term outcomes reported within the literature include reduced rates of child removal and OOHC entry, improved mental health and wellbeing, and intergenerational healing. Strengthened community self-determination and capacity are also key benefits which arise from earlier and ACCO-led family support (WA Government, 2024; VACCHO, 2023; SNAICC, 2022; SVA, 2019).

Broader system and societal impacts are also evident from earlier family supports. Early intervention generates savings across multiple service systems, including health, education, justice, and housing. Families who receive timely support are less likely to require crisis accommodation, emergency health services, or become involved in the criminal justice system (SVA, 2019; AIHW, 2024).

There is strong emerging evaluation and research evidence for what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities inherently know: that ACCO-led early supports are more effective at engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, addressing trauma, and supporting cultural continuity (SNAICC, 2022). Evaluations of earlier support programs demonstrate that ACCO-led programs generate significant social and economic benefits.

Examples of the strong outcomes arising from ACCO-led earlier supports for families include:

Western Australia's Aboriginal In-Home Support Service

The Aboriginal In-Home Support Service (AISS) is an intensive, culturally safe in-home intervention designed to keep Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people safely at home with family and connected to Country, culture, and community. The program works with families where children are at imminent risk of entering care or where restoration is possible for children already in care.

Delivered by a consortium led by Wungening Moort, AISS provides practical, strengths-based support to address parenting challenges, build family capabilities, and develop safe family networks. The service is tailored to each family's needs and includes connecting families with other community supports. In 2024, an independent evaluation found that for every dollar invested, approximately \$11.76 was saved for every \$1 spent in avoided child protection and related costs (WA Government, 2024).



VACCHO's Culture + Kinship program

The Culture + Kinship program, developed by the Victorian Aboriginal Community-Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO), funds ACCOs to run community-based initiatives that strengthen cultural identity, connection, belonging, and safety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. Its programs are designed and led by local ACCOs and focus on cultural activities, healing, and building community capacity.

A recent independent evaluation including social return on investment analysis found that for every dollar invested in the program, \$8.29 in benefits are generated. These benefits include improved mental health, increased community connection, self-determination, and strengthened capacity to care for Country (VACCHO, 2023).



Birthing in Our Communities (BiOC)

Birthing in Our Communities is an Aboriginal-led, culturally safe maternity service operating in partnership between Aboriginal Medical Services and mainstream health providers. The program provides wraparound, holistic care that centres Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, families, and communities throughout pregnancy, birth, and the early parenting period. The services offers continuity of care from known midwives, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family support workers, and health practitioners, with a strong focus on cultural safety, family engagement, and reducing barriers to care.

Research evidence indicates that the program has increased family engagement, reduced preterm births, and generated cost savings of approximately \$4,810 per mother-baby pair compared to standard care when health outcomes for mothers and babies were considered. In subsequent studies, women accessing BiOC care have been found to be three times less likely to have their newborns removed by child protection services (Kildea et al., 2023; Kildea et al., 2024), highlighting the broad impacts of ACCO-led services.

● ACCO needs

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and ACCOs bring deep cultural strengths, expertise, and resilience to the work of supporting children and families. Across Australia, the current service system does not adequately recognise or resource these strengths (SNAICC, 2022).

It is widely recognised that ACCOs delivering supports to families require stable, long-term, and flexible funding that matches both the scale of need and the aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities. Current funding models remain heavily weighted toward short-term, competitive grants and narrow program silos, which frequently undermine organisational stability and limit the ability to plan, grow, and innovate (Davis, 2019; Audit Office, 2024; DSS, 2023). This instability makes it difficult for ACCOs to invest in workforce development, infrastructure and the deep relationship-building that is essential for effective, culturally safe service delivery, especially in regional and remote settings where staff recruitment and retention are ongoing challenges (Lowitja Institute, 2023; NACCHO, 2024).

ACCOs require access to meaningful, community-controlled data and evaluation tools to ensure equity in service provision. This is consistent with delivering on government commitments to Closing the Gap Priority Reform 4 about Indigenous data sovereignty and governance. Current reporting requirements often focus on outputs rather than outcomes, and do not capture the holistic, long-term, and cultural impacts of ACCO-led programs (Lowitja Institute, 2023). ACCOs require resourcing to develop their own data systems, participate in linked data initiatives, and lead the design and interpretation of evaluation and research so that evidence reflects what matters most to families and communities. This includes investment in Indigenous data sovereignty and governance, and a shift from burdensome output-focused administrative demands that take time and resources away from direct service delivery (SNAICC, 2022; Coalition of Peaks, 2020; Productivity Commission, 2020).

ACCOs delivering child and family services require genuine partnership and shared decision-making with government at all levels. As was previously noted, policy commitments to Closing the Gap and sector strengthening will only be realised if ACCOs are empowered as equal partners in funding, design, monitoring, and evaluation of services (Davis, 2019; DSS, 2023). This can be achieved through ensuring that accountability mechanisms are reciprocal and relational, centred on trust, transparency, and overseen by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities. Through addressing these inequities, the sector will strengthen the ability of ACCOs to deliver the wrap-around, culturally grounded supports that keep children and families safe, strong, and connected to culture.

● Aboriginal Community-Controlled Mechanisms (ACCMs)

ACCMs represent a critical innovation in the landscape of child and family wellbeing services in NSW. Developed under the Aboriginal Case Management Policy (ACMP), ACCMs are designed to embed self-determination and cultural authority in decision-making processes affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. With AbSec's leadership and initial funding, several ACCMs have been established, providing communities with the structures needed to deliver culturally safe, community-led responses. These mechanisms are particularly significant in light of successful grassroots initiatives including those highlighted in the Deadly Practice section of this report, which have demonstrated the effectiveness of Aboriginal-led approaches in maintaining family and cultural connections (AbSec, 2024).

Despite the eagerness of many communities to implement ACCMs, a lack of ongoing government funding has left a significant number of these mechanisms unable to operate at scale. This funding gap undermines the objectives of both state and national policy commitments, including the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, which prioritises the expansion of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector and shared decision-making (Australian Government, 2020; NSW Government, 2024).

● Evidence gaps

The evidence base for ACCO-led earlier supports to families continues to grow, with strong qualitative, quantitative and economic data demonstrating their effectiveness in improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. However, gaps remain in longitudinal research. This is especially in relation to culturally centred and driven approaches which benefits from two-way sharing of data and captures a broad range of culturally grounded outcomes.

Many ACCOs deliver programs that are highly valued by communities, but are not provided the core funding and infrastructure required to conduct comprehensive evaluations or access to longitudinal and linked data. This limits the visibility of their impact and the ability to build a comprehensive, culturally relevant evidence base (SNAICC, 2022; Lowitja Institute, 2023). As participants in SNAICC's Stronger ACCOs, Stronger Families (2022) report highlight, ACCOs are frequently not enabled through data sharing to effectively to support business cases for funding, nor are they enabled through evaluation and research funding to meet so-called 'evidence-based program' requirements.

Current government funding models often favour mainstream providers and short-term grants, which can restrict ACCOs' capacity to deliver holistic, wraparound supports tailored to community needs. It also limits smaller community groups and emerging ACCOs from securing necessary investment. The misalignment between government definitions of evidence and the lived realities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families means that the rich, community-generated knowledge held by ACCOs is frequently undervalued in commissioning processes. Systemic barriers, such as administrative burdens and limited government capacity for genuine partnership, continue to constrain ACCO participation and growth (SNAICC, 2022; DSS, 2024).

To strengthen the evidence base, we need scaled up investment in ACCO-led research, evaluation, and data governance. This includes sustainable core funding for ACCOs to build evaluation capacity, integrating linked data approaches like the NSW' Human Services Dataset to track long-term outcomes, and fostering meaningful co-design and partnership between governments and ACCOs. Addressing these gaps is essential to demonstrate the value of ACCO-led early supports and to ensure Aboriginal families have access to culturally safe, effective services that keep children safe, strong, and connected to culture (SNAICC, 2022; DSS, 2024; Lowitja Institute, 2023).

Appendix B: Analysis considerations

While this analysis provides a robust initial economic assessment and associated case for increased investment in ACCO-led early intervention and family support, several limitations should be acknowledged:

Scope of evidence: The targeted evidence review, while comprehensive, was limited to available peer-reviewed research, government reports, policy documents, and grey literature. Given the evidence that ACCOs are frequently underfunded for evaluation activities and noting the focus on the development of this literature, it is likely that there may be relevant local or emerging evidence which is not captured within the review

Economic modelling assumptions: The indicative economic assessment relies on standardised values from previous rigorous analysis alongside the DCJ Benefits Library to estimate avoided costs and benefits. These values, while government-endorsed and widely used, are subject to change over time and may not fully capture the nuanced, long-term, or indirect benefits of culturally grounded interventions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and their families. We note this is of particular importance given that the DCJ Benefits Library provides benefits based on whole-of-child population averages rather than disaggregated benefits.

Quantification of cultural and social outcomes: Many significant outcomes associated with ACCO-led supports, such as strengthened cultural identity, community empowerment and intergenerational healing, are not readily quantifiable and are therefore not fully reflected in the economic modelling. The true value of the outcomes yielded through ACCO-led earlier services for families extends beyond what that captured in fiscal terms in this report.

Attribution and generalisability: Case studies and qualitative data illustrate the impact of ACCO-led supports but may not be generalisable to all settings or communities. Given the complexities in costing individual services provided to families by local Elders and communities in the absence of detailed data on activities, case studies are focused on exploring clear and quantifiable benefits alone. We note that there are costs associated with delivery of these services which are both funded in some instances and unfunded, thus held by the community.

We further note that there are a vast array of benefits which are not captured in these case studies, given that they were quantified on the basis of the information provided to the AbSec Lumenia project team, which is not exhaustive. We recognise that they represent selective, strong outcomes, but also feel it essential to highlight the benefits being created through such work using these exemplars, noting that we do not have necessary outcomes evidence to claim they are representative.

Data availability and quality: Some data required for detailed modelling, such as long-term outcomes, family trajectories, and service system interactions, are limited or not routinely collected, particularly for ACCO-specific programs. We have drawn on robust, published evidence and prior analyses where possible to ensure conservative and defensible inclusions and assumptions, noting this may constrain the precision of the economic estimates.

Changing policy landscape: The policy and funding environment in NSW is evolving. Future changes to program design, commissioning, or data collection may affect the relevance or applicability of the findings over time, including upcoming changes to Family Preservation funding which have been detailed herein.

Despite these limitations, the analysis draws on the best available evidence and government data to provide a compelling case for shifting investment towards ACCO-led, culturally safe early supports for Aboriginal children and families.

Appendix C: Economic modelling calculation methodology

Category	Model inputs*	Description	Source
Population	12,282 (children).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The population of TEI is derived by taking the reported pop TEI individual population and multiplying it by the proportion of the population aged 0-17. - To derive the Aboriginal TEI population this figure is multiplied by the proportion of the population aged 0-17 that is Aboriginal. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Taylor Fry et al., 2024. - Department of Communities and Justice, Quarterly Reports, 2024.
ACCO served clients	6,756 (Aboriginal children-ACCO served). 5,525 (Aboriginal children - non-ACCO served who are included in the model under the scenario that all Aboriginal clients are served by ACCOs).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The number of ACCO served children as reported in the TEI Evaluation. - The figure for the Aboriginal children served by non-ACCOs is calculated by deducting this number from the Aboriginal population aged 0-17. - This represents the number of additional clients served by ACCOs in the modelling scenario. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Taylor Fry et al., 2024.
Cost	\$25,491,295 (Investment in ACCO-led early support).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cost of individual TEI sessions 2023 \$139m apportioned to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal clients on the basis of 7.76% of funding to ACCOs - Funding to ACCOs divided by number of clients served in 2023 to derive the ACCO cost per client - ACCO cost per client multiplied by total Aboriginal clients to be served by ACCOs under the modelling scenario to derive additional funding to ACCO's - ACCO cost to serve is multiplied by total number of Aboriginal clients served by ACCOs. - A further 30% is added to integrate the desire to offer new services and brokerage raised by consultation participants. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Taylor Fry et al., 2024.

Category	Model inputs*	Description	Source
Benefit one (Reduced Entries to OOHC – diversion).	\$30,992,320	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The number of ROSH reports is derived based on the number implied by the unit cost of an avoided ROSH Report. – Calculate the proportion of ROSH reports with Aboriginal children as the subject based on over-representation of Aboriginal TEI clients who are represented in TEI 2.5 times their share of the general population. – A conversion rate from ROSH Report to OOHC entry based on annualised DCJ Quarterly ROSH reports divided by admissions to OOHC. – The conversion rate is applied to the ROSH reports where Aboriginal children are the subject. – The avoided costs resulting from reduced entries to care is from the DCJ Benefits Library. – We apply a multiplier of 1.2 to the portion of the benefit that relates to the additional clients to be served by ACCOs under the modelling scenario. – This reflects the additional value of reduced entries arising from ACCO-led services and is a conservative estimate based on the evidence. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Taylor Fry et al., 2024. – Department of Communities and Justice, Quarterly Reports, 2024. – Department of Justice, Benefits Library, 2024. – Deloitte, 2016.
Benefit two (Reduced OOHC costs – restoration).	\$18,344,422	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Calculate the number of restorations implied by TEI Evaluation benefit by dividing it by the unit value. – Calculate the proportion of restorations that involve Aboriginal children. – The avoided costs resulting from reduced entries to care is \$376,143 from the DCJ Benefits Library. – We apply a multiplier to the portion of the benefit that relates to the additional clients to be served by ACCOs under the modelling scenario. This multiplier is derived from standardised survey responses relating to the effectiveness of ACCOs serving Aboriginal clients. The weighted average effectiveness rating reported by ACCO providers (5.08) is compared to non-ACCO providers (4.43). – This reflects the additional value of restorations arising from ACCO-led services and is a conservative estimate based on the evidence. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Taylor Fry et al., 2024. – Department of Justice, Benefits Library, 2024. – AIHW, 2024.
Benefit three (Reduced cost of ROSH reports).	\$21,799,669	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – ROSH reports where Aboriginal children are the subject (from calculation of reduced entries to OOHC). – Apply unit value \$10,583 (DCJ). – We apply a multiplier of 1.2 to the portion of the benefit that relates to the additional clients to be served by ACCOs under the modelling scenario. – This reflects the additional value of reduced ROSH reports arising from ACCO-led services and is a conservative estimate based on the evidence. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Taylor Fry et al., 2024. – Department of Communities and Justice, 2024.

Category	Model inputs*	Description	Source
Benefit four (Avoided cost of adjacent crisis services).	\$14,938,646	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Benefit valued as a percentage of the value of child safety benefits accruing to Aboriginal clients (Deloitte, 2016 based on the ratio of individual benefits to child safety benefits for services delivered by culturally competent services). – Apply ratio to total value of child safety benefits. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Taylor Fry et al., 2024. – Deloitte, 2016.
Benefit five (Broader social and economic benefits – Healing and Thriving).	\$11,491,266	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Benefit valued as a percentage of the value of child safety benefits accruing to Aboriginal clients (Deloitte, 2016 based on the ratio of individual benefits to child safety benefits for services delivered by culturally competent services). – Apply ratio to total value of child safety benefits. – Reduced to acknowledge that some non-ACCO services may also be considered culturally competent (standardised client surveys Taylor Fry, 2024). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Taylor Fry et al., 2024. – Deloitte, 2016.

**Note that figures may not reconcile exactly due to rounding.*



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