

Quarterly
AbSec **Sector
Forum**

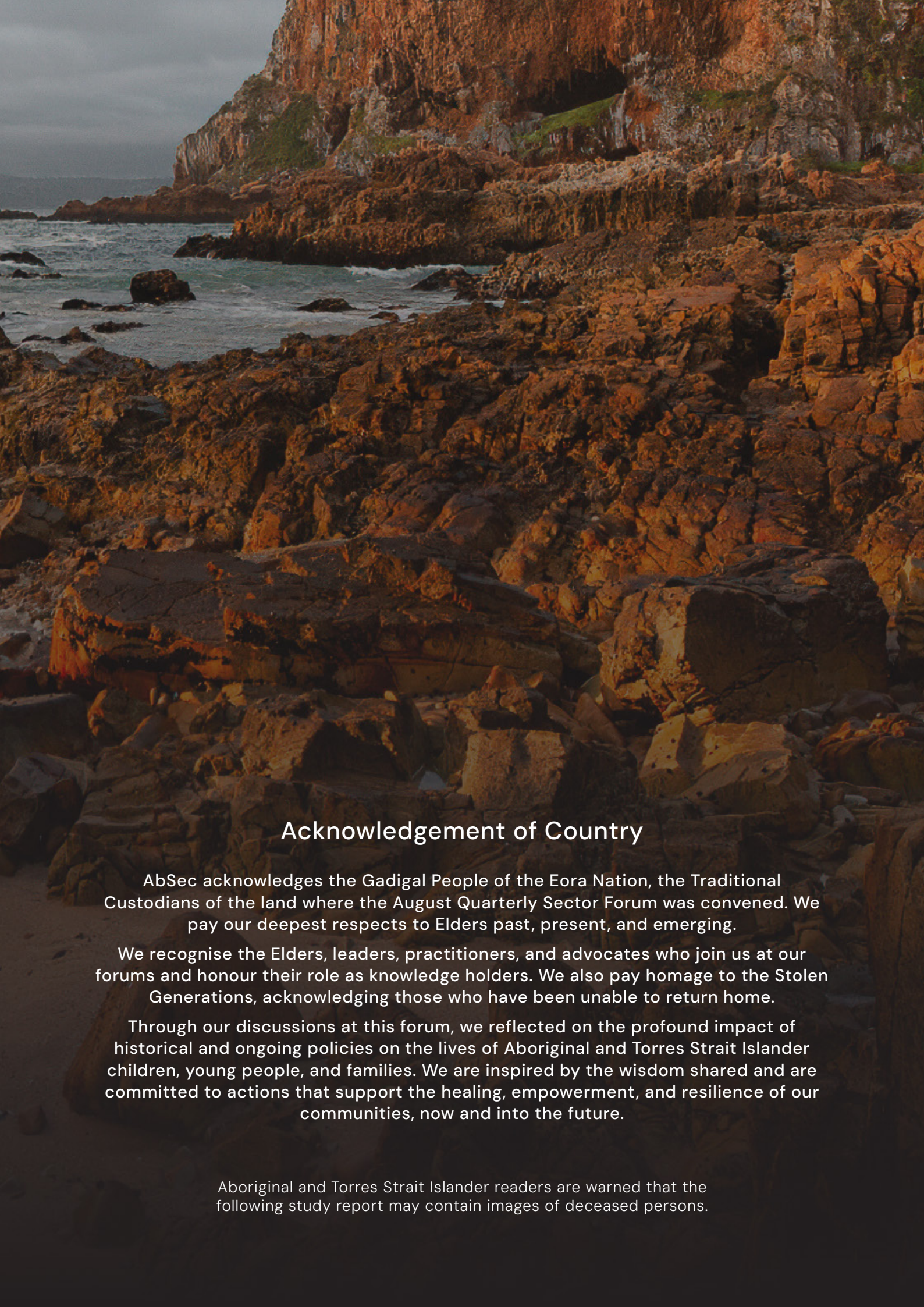
AbSec



Building bridges Collaboration for community impact

August 2025 Sector Forum Report

Dockside Cocklebay Wharf Sydney/Gadigal Country



Acknowledgement of Country

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

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

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

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



AbSec

NSW Child, Family & Community
Peak Aboriginal Corporation

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 (NSW).

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 (OOHC) 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.

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The August 2025 Quarterly Sector Forum (QSF) brought together Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), government partners, and community stakeholders under the theme 'Building Bridges'.

The concept of 'Building Bridges' refers to the creation of meaningful, respectful, and collaborative relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and non-Aboriginal individuals, organisations and government.



This metaphorical 'bridge' connects different worldviews, values, and histories, aiming to foster mutual understanding, trust, and cooperation to advance change in the child protection sector that is informed and led by community. Using this theme as a catalyst for conversation, the forum serves to:

- **Empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities**, as meaningful partnerships help advance Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination and community-led development.
- **Improve outcomes**, with collaborations that respect and integrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge. Collaboration results in more effective, sustainable, and culturally appropriate outcomes.
- **Foster long-term relationships**, because bridge-building isn't a one-time task. Rather, bridge building creates a foundation for ongoing, respectful, and productive partnerships.

Held at Docklands on the lands of the Gadigal people in Sydney, the QSF provided a culturally grounded space for learning, reflection, and connection across the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child and family sector in New South Wales (NSW).

This forum centred on strengthening partnerships, deepening our collective understanding of the challenges facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, and celebrating community-led solutions in the New South Wales out-of-home care (OOHC) and child protection system.



Welcome to Country

Performed by Uncle Raymond 'Bubbly' Weatherall.

Uncle Raymond 'Bubbly' Weatherall is a Gomeroi Traditional Custodian from Gamilaraay Nation in Northern NSW and prominent Aboriginal activist. Uncle Raymond is known for his advocacy against coal and gas mining in the Narrabri-Pilliga region and for championing Native Title rights, climate justice and reconciliation.

AbSec warmly thanks Uncle Raymond for welcoming the Forum attendees to Gadigal Country on behalf of the Traditional Custodians of the land, the Gadigal and people of the Eora Nation.

We want to hear from you!

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

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

Sector Forum Report

Who attended

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

182 individual attendees

61 organisations represented over the two-day event

Organisations that registered included:



T.A.C.C.O.
Tamworth Coalition of Aboriginal
Community Controlled Organisations



Centre for
Relational Care



Communities
& Justice



● John Leha, Chief Executive Officer | AbSec

The theme for our August Quarterly Sector Forum, “Building Bridges: Collaboration for Community Impact”, calls on government, service providers, communities, and families to come together to create lasting change for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people, and families.

Since our last forum, we have seen both progress and ongoing challenges. The NSW Budget included a \$1.2 billion investment in the OOHC system, with funding to address critical caseworker vacancies and the first increase to foster carer allowances in more than 20 years, a clear win for sector advocacy. Importantly, \$350 million has been earmarked for Aboriginal Family Preservation, co-designed with ACCOs, alongside nearly \$250 million for Closing the Gap initiatives across health, education, justice, and employment.

While these commitments are welcome, we remain deeply concerned about increased investment in residential care, restrictive mid-term changes to Permanency Support Program contracts, and the removal of independent appeal rights for Working with Children Checks. Each of these measures undermines ACCO capacity, workforce stability, and outcomes for children and families.



“I want to acknowledge how much your voices shape our work. Every forum, every conversation, every yarn over coffee. Your insights feed directly into our advocacy, our policy, and our partnerships.”

– John Leha

AbSec continues to lead reforms that centre Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices and solutions. We are:

- Working with the Aboriginal Housing Office (AHO) and ACCOs to co-design culturally relevant, place-based resources for young people leaving care, a group at greatest risk of homelessness and poor life outcomes.

- Partnering with Jumbunna Institute (UTS) to deliver a fully costed model for independent accountability in NSW, including the establishment of a Child Protection Commission and a dedicated Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People, reflecting recommendations of the *Family is Culture Review* (2019) and commitments as part of *Safe and Supported*.
- Preparing our first ACCO child protection and OOHC census that maps service delivery, sector challenges, and opportunities for reform and investment.

To strengthen our collective voice, the AbSec Board has also approved the establishment of a new Subcommittee to provide advice on policy and advocacy priorities. This will ensure that the needs and experiences of ACCOs, communities, young people, and those with lived experience are at the heart of our advocacy.

I want to thank you for the critical work you do every day for our children, young people, and families. Our QSFs are not just about updates or presentations — they are a space to connect, to challenge, and to recharge.

Day One

Open to all participants, including ACCOs, government representatives, carers, and community stakeholders. The day offered a full program of sessions designed to spark dialogue, share innovations, and highlight systemic challenges.

The day showcased community-led solutions such as the Wagga Wagga Aboriginal Case Management model, provided updates on sector-wide reforms including the new OOHC Code of Practice, and explored practical supports through the Carer Gateway.

Participants also heard about efforts to reduce reliance on high-cost emergency accommodation, plans to secure long-term funding certainty, and government's perspective through the Ministerial Address. The day closed with networking and a cultural performance by Burrundi Theatre, reminding everyone of the central role of culture in advocacy and reform.

Day Two

Closed session for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and staff from ACCOs.

The focus was on funding stability, workforce development, and embedding Aboriginal governance at the heart of reform. Guided by cultural authority and community priorities, the sessions reinforced the importance of self-determination and the leadership role of ACCOs in shaping child and family services across NSW.

Aboriginal Community-Controlled Mechanisms in action

- Penny Magann-Jones, Strong Families Our Way Project Manager | AbSec
- Margarette Davis, Community Engagement Officer | AbSec

Penny Magann-Jones and Margarette Davis shared the experience of standing up the Wagga Wagga Aboriginal Community-Controlled Mechanism (ACCM), One Mob Connection. Unfortunately, colleagues from the One Mob Connection were unable to co-present due to Sorry Business.

Established in April 2024, the initiative was formed to strengthen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices in child protection decision-making and ensure families are supported by community-driven solutions. The panel includes 13 community members from diverse backgrounds, with Elders, carers, and representatives from the NSW Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) meeting monthly to guide the work.

Since commencing referrals in May 2025, One Mob Connection has supported families through seventeen cases, most referred directly from community. A powerful case study was shared of a mother who, after having two previous children removed, was supported through the birth of her third child. Intervention by the ACCM, alongside Elders and local services, ensured the child remained safely with their mother. Other examples included tenancy advocacy, where One Mob Connection successfully intervened to prevent eviction of a grieving family during Sorry Business.

The presenters emphasised that the value of the ACCM model lies not only in responding to child protection risks but in providing wraparound support that strengthens families and prevents future intervention. Despite these successes, One Mob Connection remains unfunded, with members volunteering their time and expertise.



"When you set up an ACCM, you're setting up families... Standing side by side, working together, that's what we do."

– Margarette Davis

The call for sustainable funding was made clear, with participants underscoring that ACCMs provide culturally grounded, preventative solutions that government systems struggle to deliver.

Main session takeaways

- Cultural identity and connection have been too often overlooked by DCJ, which sparked AbSec and local community leaders to partner and form ACCMs.
- The work is unpaid and driven by passion and dedication. However, resources are limited.
- ACCMs require sustainable funding and formal recognition to support growth and advance self-determination.

A new code of practice for out-of-home care providers

- Larissa Johnson, Director, OOHHC Regulation | Office of Children's Guardian
Belinda Kendall, Co-Chief Executive Officer | Curijo

Larissa Johnson from the Office of the Children's Guardian (OCG) and Belinda Kendall of Curijo presented on the development of the new Code of Practice for OOHHC providers. This new Code, due to replace the 2023 Child Safe Standards in October 2025, was described as a significant step in embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, community, and authority across every level of OOHHC practice.

The presenters explained that the Code is designed to ensure that care arrangements are culturally grounded, as well as promoting safety and accountability. Building on engagement that began in 2020 with AbSec and ACCOs, the Code moves beyond statements of principle to actionable guidance, ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices and lived experience are central. A two-part structure will provide organisations with minimum compliance requirements and guidance about what best practice looks like.

There are eight core practice requirements, with strengthened focus on cultural governance and leadership accountability, relational practice, and rights-based participation using yarning and cultural tools. Specialist resources have been developed to build sector capability, address systemic gaps and provide frontline practitioners with the tools to respond in ways that are culturally appropriate. The Code also recognises that selecting the right carers means prioritising cultural knowledge and kinship, ensuring children remain connected to family and identity.



"Culture can't be something we reference; it needs to be something we implement... Cultural governance means recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, families, and kin as the ones with authority."

– Belinda Kendall

Belinda Kendall from Curiyo stressed that culture is not an add-on, but central to healing, belonging, and safety. This sentiment was echoed throughout the session, reinforcing that cultural rights and self-determination are non-negotiable. Governance, they argued, must honour cultural authority rather than organisational hierarchy.

OCG confirmed that these standards are intended to reduce harm by increasing the likelihood of identifying and responding to risks appropriately. Online resources will continue to be updated regularly, with a focus on continuous improvement rather than a “set and forget” approach. As participants were reminded, this Code is an open invitation to embed culture with intention, not obligation.

Main session takeaways

- Cultural rights and self-determination are non-negotiable—essential for healing, identity and safety.
- Practice must be relational, not transactional.
- Culture must be central to carer selection and practice.

Carer Gateway and Carer Support: Collaboration in action

● Tanya Miles, Senior Client Service Officer | AbSec

Shanelle Beazley, Indigenous Partnership & Development Engagement Officer | Benevolent Society

Tanya Miles from AbSec and Shanelle Beazley from the Benevolent Society delivered a joint presentation on the Carer Gateway, the national service funded by the Australian Government to support carers. They explained that the Gateway provides a wide range of practical supports for anyone who has a caring role, including kinship and foster carers, and that access is open and inclusive without requiring documentation or proof of care hours.

The Benevolent Society is the service provider for metropolitan Sydney and the Illawarra, operating one of four Carer Gateway services across New South Wales. Together with AbSec, they have created culturally safe spaces and pathways that specifically address the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers, ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices are heard and respected within the service system.



"We give carers easier access to help and support, and make sure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices are heard."

– Tanya Miles

The presentation highlighted the breadth of support available. Peer support initiatives allow carers to connect with others who have shared lived experiences, offering opportunities for mutual learning and encouragement. The Young Carers Program provides tailored assistance to carers under 25. This includes education-focused support, tutoring, driver's licence assistance, and peer support groups. Counselling is also available, with up to six free sessions for carers to manage stress and improve balancing caring responsibilities and personal wellbeing.

In addition, the Gateway offers coaching services to help carers achieve personal goals, whether related to health, study, or career development. Tailored support packages can include education assistance, planned respite, cooking and cleaning services, and emergency respite for urgent or unplanned events.

Audience members praised the service for creating safe and culturally supportive pathways. One participant noted, *"The work that they do when they go into community, they've created some really deadly and safe support pathways for mob."* Another emphasised the importance of making sure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices are embedded throughout the service design and delivery.

Through collaboration between AbSec and the Benevolent Society, the Carer Gateway is providing inclusive, holistic, and practical supports that are strengthening families and communities while ensuring carers are recognised and supported in their vital roles.

Main session takeaways

- Every carer situation is different, and the Carer Gateway has expanded its scope to tailor support for individual carer needs.
- A counselling service supports clients who are feeling overwhelmed or isolated in their caring role.
- Ongoing peer and youth support builds community resilience and makes it easier for new or inexperienced carers to access help.

Transitioning Aboriginal children out of high cost emergency accommodation

- Briony Foster, Executive Director, High-Cost Emergency Arrangements Strategy Unit | NSW Department of Communities & Justice

High-Cost Emergency Accommodation (HCEA) is one of the least suitable forms of care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, often involving placements in hotels, motels, or caravan parks. In this session, Briony Foster from DCJ outlined progress and challenges in phasing out reliance on HCEA, underlining the urgency of reform.

Foster reported that as of April 2025, no Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children remain in unaccredited emergency accommodation arrangements such as hotels and motels. Significant reductions in HCEA placements have been achieved across multiple districts: the Northern District has eliminated HCEA placements; South Eastern Sydney reported reductions of up to 80 percent; and the Far West recorded a decrease of 32 children. As of 20 August 2025, there were 20 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in HCEA placements case-managed by ACCOs, with many more children now supported in culturally grounded care by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agencies.

This progress reflects a deliberate shift towards more Aboriginal-led solutions. The HCEA Strategy Unit now canvasses Aboriginal providers immediately for every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child entering interim placement arrangements, ensuring that Aboriginal agencies are the first point of contact. Aboriginal-led kinship carer assessment teams, using ACCO member Winangay's Aboriginal Model Carers Assessment Tool, have been established to embed strengths-based, culturally safe decision-making in every case. Foster highlighted that these consultations prioritise restoration to parents, family, or community wherever possible.

Practical examples were shared of collaboration between AbSec, ACCOs, and Elders to secure kinship placements, repair and modify housing, and provide wraparound support. However, systemic challenges remain. These include housing shortages, workforce capacity challenges, and meeting the needs of children that require intensive therapeutic or disability support. Foster acknowledged concerns raised by participants about placement stability and the damaging impact of "rotating caseworkers" on children's sense of security.

Despite these barriers, the strategy has created measurable change. DCJ now provides transparent, real-time data to districts and agencies which supports their enabling accountability and informed decision-making. Weekly monitoring of exits and fortnightly focus meetings are driving continuous progress. While the numbers and cultural load remains significant, partnerships with Aboriginal agencies are beginning to shift outcomes in a meaningful way.

Foster closed the session with a reminder that urgency must remain at the centre of this work:

"We need to continue to look at every opportunity for restoration to parents, to family, to community. We all need to recruit carers and then support and sustain them better."

Main session takeaways

- By changing ways of working and embracing partnerships the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in HCEA has greatly reduced.
- Housing shortages and system-wide capacity issues remain major barriers.
- Continuing collaboration with ACCOs, AbSec and other government departments is paramount to restoring our children and young people to kin and culture.

Secure Jobs and Funding Certainty Roadmap

● John Leha, Chief Executive Officer | AbSec

Rob Stirling, Chief Executive Officer | The Network of Alcohol and Other Drugs Agencies

Melinda Norton, Executive Director, Partnerships | NSW Department of Communities & Justice

In 2023, the Minns Labor Government made an election commitment to secure jobs and funding certainty for the NSW community services sector. This commitment included longer-term funding arrangements, a new sector Leadership Group, a streamlined prequalification process, and simplified reporting and contracting requirements.

John Leha, Network of Alcohol and Other Drugs Agencies CEO Rob Stirling, and DCJ Executive Director, Partnerships Melinda Norton reflected on progress to date and the implications for ACCOs.

The state-wide consultation process, which ran until October 2024, provided clear and consistent feedback from service providers, frontline workers, and sector leaders: short-term contracts have created instability, undermined workforce security, and restricted the growth of ACCOs. Responding to this, the NSW Government has committed to rolling out five-year funding cycles across the community services sector. This shift will assist long-term planning, improve job retention, and provide greater certainty for the sector's workforce. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations in particular, this change is seen as a critical step toward building capacity and supporting Closing the Gap (CtG) priorities.

"Collaboration should be the normal ways of working. We might all move at different rates, but we will all end up at the same destination. We want to make sure the transition happens seamlessly across government sectors."

– Melinda Norton

AbSec emphasised that genuine reform requires more than just longer contracts. Sustained collaboration, accountability, and a commitment to self-determination are vital to ensuring ACCOs have a central role in delivering services, building local workforces, and driving community-led solutions. Leha stressed that the reforms must not be limited to symbolic commitments but need to embed ACCOs as equal partners at the decision-making table.

Practical challenges remain. This includes ensuring reforms are implemented consistently across government and backed by adequate resourcing. Participants noted the importance of building talent pipelines, particularly in disability and therapeutic services, and the need for greater transparency in the monitoring and delivery of funding commitments.

Despite these challenges, the Secure Jobs and Funding Certainty Roadmap is regarded as pivotal to sector transformation. If delivered effectively, it has the potential to strengthen Aboriginal organisations, improve service stability, and embed accountability at all levels. Leha closed the session by reminding participants of the broader vision underpinning these reforms: *"We need a strong ACCO sector where this is not just a job but a career."*

Main session takeaways

- Five-year guaranteed funding cycles essential for long-term planning and staff retention.
- ACCO workforce development is critical to sustainability and growth in the sector.
- Government must guarantee ACCOs are included in decision-making, representing the voice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.

Ministerial update on child protection reforms

- The Hon. Kate Washington | Minister for Families and Communities and Minister for Disability Services
John Leha, Chief Executive Officer | AbSec

The Minister for Families and Communities, the Hon. Kate Washington MP, update the Forum on government reforms in child protection and OOHC. She acknowledged the sector's frustrations with the slow pace of change and affirmed that cultural transformation within the Department of Communities and Justice remains an ongoing challenge.

The Minister emphasised that recommissioning under the Family Preservation model would soon take effect, with a stronger focus on early intervention and support for families before they reach crisis point. She acknowledged the sector's consistent call for additional advocacy and oversight, noting that misuse of funds and a lack of transparency in how funds are used must be addressed.

Community members raised concerns during this session. Some noted that family group conferencing is not working as intended, that contracts are failing to meet community needs, and that carers continue to face barriers due to rotating caseworkers. Others observed that families are not seeing a strengths-based approach in practice, despite this being a stated policy priority. Comments such as *"Aboriginal families don't work on a dashboard"* highlighted the disconnect between administrative systems and the lived reality of families.

"We want to see more resources, more supports and more services flowing to Aboriginal children and young people, and we want those resources, supports and services flowing through ACCOs. That is our starting position, but I am not offering a blank cheque. The reformed OOHC system will be tied to universal expectations around financial transparency and accountability."

– Minister Washington



The Minister responded by acknowledging these concerns, noting the need to *"address the market share – who is delivering what to whom"* and acknowledging that the Structured Decision Making (SDM) tool was not designed for Aboriginal families. She reiterated that caseworker vacancies, currently at seven percent, remain a challenge, but assured participants that measures are being taken to provide better support to frontline staff.

The Minister concluded by reaffirming government's commitment to transforming the system to keep children safe, stressing that reforms must be judged not only on policy intent, but on practice outcomes that are visible to families and communities. She emphasised the importance of partnerships with AbSec, ACCOs, and the Aboriginal Legal Service, reminding the QSF that progress can only be achieved through collective advocacy and accountability.

Ministerial update on child protection reforms: Full speech transcript.

I'd like to begin by acknowledging the Traditional Custodians of the land we gather on today—the Gadigal People of the Eora Nation. I pay my respects to Elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal people here today.

Thank you to John and the AbSec team for organising this important forum, and I also want to acknowledge AbSec Board members, member organisations and all the community and non-government organisations working tirelessly to protect Aboriginal children and keep Aboriginal families safely together across NSW.

The theme of this forum, Building Bridges: Collaboration for Community Impact, calls for us all to come together, and work with each other, to tackle the complex challenges facing our communities.

Building bridges and collaborating will be an essential part of the OOHHC reforms being pursued by the NSW Government, which is focussed on building a transparent and accountable service system that responds to the needs of children and communities.

System context

Everyone in this room knows that the child protection and OOHHC systems in NSW are in need of significant reform.

Despite significant investment in the Permanency Support Program, the number of restorations are going backwards.

Too many Aboriginal children and families are not getting the services and supports they need.

Therapeutic supports are far too difficult to source and maintain.

The number of children and families being reported at risk is increasing, but the department and service system's capacity to respond is decreasing.

And, we have report after report clearly highlighting that status quo is not an option, and the system needs more transparency and accountability.

I also heard this message loud and clear at the Aboriginal Child Safety and Wellbeing Forum that I held shortly after I became Minister.

At that point, the system was truly spiralling out of control. We had hundreds of Aboriginal children cycling through hotels and motels with unaccredited providers. DCJ caseworkers were walking out the door. Carers were leaving the system. And we had an \$800 million budget deficit to deal with, on top of everything else.

These were the stark realities of the system I inherited, and from day one, we have been open and honest about it.

System stabilisation

Since 2023, we have been working methodically to address these foundational challenges in order to stabilise the service system for everyone.

We have banned the use of unaccredited providers, and thankfully, the number of Aboriginal children in hotels and motels is now zero.

And we've reduced the number of children in all types of high-cost emergency arrangements by 36 percent.

We are creating a new standalone Award for DCJ caseworkers to ensure the department has the capacity to respond to families in need.

We have announced a 20 percent increase in carer allowances, which is the first real increase in that allowance for 20 years.

We recently announced a historic \$1.2 billion Child Protection Package, which will guarantee increased investment in services and supports for children in out-of-home care as a result of our reforms.

And, we've announced a historic investment in Aboriginal Family Preservation, a co-designed service model, with \$350 million guaranteed for ACCO service delivery.

By any objective measure, these are positive steps in the right direction – but we know that there is so much more work to do.

I also acknowledge that the issues I need to prioritise in order to stabilise the system won't always be your priorities.

Government commitments since 2023

Which is why I want to spend some time going through the nine specific commitments I made at the Aboriginal Child Safety and Wellbeing Forum in 2023, and what we've done since.

These were the commitments I made in direct response to the issues raised by Aboriginal sector and community representatives at that Forum.

Firstly, we committed to get every Aboriginal child out of hotels and motels, and we have done that.

Secondly, we committed to establishing the Ministerial Aboriginal Partnership Group, to provide a mechanism for senior Aboriginal leadership to help design and oversee OOHC reforms. And we have done that.

Thirdly, we committed to reviewing the actuarial risk assessment tool that was not designed for Aboriginal families. We have now removed that tool, and we are working in partnership with AbSec and ALS to redesign a new permanent tool.

We also committed to investing more in the Aboriginal community-controlled sector, which we have done, in partnership, with the Family Preservation recommissioning process delivering a significant uplift in guaranteed funding for ACCOs.

We have also been enhancing and expanding Aboriginal Child and Family Centres, with more centres soon to be announced, and existing centres having their operational funding doubled.

We have also committed to at least doubling the funding for ACCOs within the Targeted Earlier Intervention program.

And we finally have green shoots emerging with the OOHC transition project, with a five-fold increase in NGO to ACCO transitions over the past 18 months, compared to the 18 months prior.

In addition to the 201 NGO to ACCO transitions, there have also been 326 transitions from DCJ to ACCOs.

So, more to do, but significant progress is being made.

At the Forum, I also committed to establishing a restoration taskforce to drive increased restorations of Aboriginal children. Since that time, we have been working through a detailed policy design process to stand up this taskforce.

To demonstrate our continuing commitment, we have funded and seconded BJ Newton and an AbSec employee into the Department, part-time, in order to facilitate and progress the really important and game-changing work of increasing restorations.

Another of the nine commitments was to work to improve Alternative Dispute Resolution and family meeting processes. Since then, we have been improving Family Group Conferencing – with 49% of facilitators being Aboriginal, which means 98% of Aboriginal families have an Aboriginal facilitator.

We've also expanded Pregnancy Family Conferencing state-wide for the first time, with recruitment processes finalised in 13 of the 16 DCJ districts.

But I also acknowledge that there is a lot of work for us to do on embedding informal family meeting practices where possible and appropriate.

The three commitments that are still in train include:

- *Work on reducing the use of emergency removals.*
- *Increasing local shared-decision making.*
- *Building a better workforce culture within the Department.*

I hope this helps illustrate how the government is making progress and being responsive to issues and reform priorities raised by the Aboriginal sector, families and community.

There is so much more work to be done, and I don't think the work will ever be done, but there's a lot of good work going on, and we are getting things done.

\$1.2 billion Child Protection Package

Importantly, because of the gains we've made together, including the significant reduction in high-cost emergency arrangements, and the work we've done to stabilise the spiralling system, in this year's budget, we got the backing of the Premier and the Treasurer to take our next steps.

For the first time in the history of NSW, vulnerable children and families became the centrepiece of the NSW Budget.

I hope you all saw that we announced in a landmark \$1.2 billion Child Protection Package focussed on getting better outcomes for kids, families and communities.

The investment includes:

- \$191.5 million to recruit more than 200 new and retain 2,100 caseworkers with higher pay and specialised training, including 100 new leading caseworker roles.*
- \$143.9 million to increase the foster care allowance for the first time in 20 years.*
- \$797.6 million to continue supporting children and young people in OOHC care while reforms are designed and implemented, plus increased investment for a reformed OOHC program beyond 2027.*
- \$49.2 million for at least 44 government owned purpose-built or upgraded residential care homes that will deliver safe and stable housing for children over 12 years of age with complex needs.*

This record investment will enable us to deliver real change for safer, stable, and higher-quality care for children and young people, and greater transparency and accountability for all.

System reform

What does any of this mean for Aboriginal kids and families? A lot.

Unless we reform the system, status quo will remain. That's not an option for me and I don't think it's an option for any of you either.

Unless we're open and honest about the current system, and unless we rebuild and reform it, we can't shift more support to keeping families safely together.

Some of the reform conversations will be uncomfortable, and some already are.

But, as Minister, I fundamentally believe that this system will never achieve what we all want, unless it is rebuilt on a foundation of transparency and accountability.

The Government's next big reform decision is yet to be made. The important question about market-share—who is delivering what and to whom.

But our timing is tight – I've always said that the Government's OOHC reform decisions will be made this year.

So, by the end of this year, I will be presenting to Cabinet the future direction of the OOHC system so it can be redesigned, recommissioned and implemented when current PSP contracts end in mid-2027.

I want to be clear to everyone in this room. The NSW Government wants to work with ACCOs to ensure more Aboriginal kids are being supported in community and by community.

We want to see the ACCO sector grow and strengthen.

We want to see more resources, more supports and more services flowing to Aboriginal children and young people, and we want those resources, supports and services flowing through ACCOs. That is our starting position.

But I am not offering a blank cheque – the reformed OOHC system will be tied to universal expectations around financial transparency and accountability.

The public money invested in OOHC services is significant. And I expect all providers to ensure taxpayer funds are being spent on supporting kids and families, as intended.

I don't want to see providers purposefully rationing services in order to generate significant surpluses. Unfortunately, we have seen that.

I also don't want to see large-value assets purchased without benefitting the children and young people in care. Unfortunately, we have seen that, also.

PSP contract variations

I imagine there will be questions about the Department's contract variations at the end, and I welcome the discussion.

But, as always, I am going to be open and honest about the situation we face – and the reality is that some providers have been misusing PSP funds. And that means kids have been missing out.

Turning a blind eye is not an option. And, playing whack-a-mole after the fact also isn't an option. Which is why we have issued contract variations to all providers to ensure these issues aren't repeated by others in future.

In the long-run, I fundamentally believe that a more transparent and accountable system will lead to much better outcomes, more public trust, more public investment, and – importantly – an increasing ability of Aboriginal communities to care for Aboriginal kids.

But we know we can't do it alone, so we're not.

In May this year, DCJ entered into a formal Partnership Agreement with AbSec and the ALS to review and redesign the frameworks that govern child protection assessment, and to consider the Family is Culture recommendations that we're supported but are outstanding. This work is being funded with \$2.3 million over two years for an additional 6 staff.

This is in addition to a number of other funded partnership projects we have on foot with Absec and since we came to government, we've also increased AbSec's operational funding to ensure they were adequately resourced to meaningfully contribute to the critical OOHC policy reform we have been undertaking – work that I'm very grateful for.

While we have made significant investments to date, there will be more opportunities to invest in the front-end of the system, which we know is where we can have the greatest impact on children and families who need support.

Closing statement

Before I finish, I want to acknowledge the critical importance and difficulty of the work you do.

It's complex and challenging, but I also know that I'll never truly appreciate the additional cultural load you all carry.

It's work that you can't switch off from. You live and breathe it 24/7 in the communities that you're a part of.

So, I thank you for being here today, and for being willing to work with us to make the changes we all desperately want to see.

We're working hard on multiple fronts, but we know there's much more to do.

I will keep showing up, keep listening, and keep working in partnership with you to make sure these reforms deliver real outcomes for Aboriginal children, families, and communities. I hope you'll keep showing up too.

As I've said to you before, I asked for this role because I knew there was difficult, important work to be done – and I consider it to be the most important role I'll ever have.

Because the opportunity we have right now is to reform a system to give children the strength, sense of identity and opportunity they need to harness their beautiful futures.

Thank you again for your leadership, your partnership, and your unwavering commitment to Aboriginal children, families and communities.



Closing of day one: Networking and cultural performance

Day One concluded with a networking session and a cultural performance from Burrundi Theatre, offering participants the chance to connect and reflect on the day's discussions. The performance was a powerful reminder of the beauty and resilience of Aboriginal culture, reinforcing that advocacy and reform must remain grounded in cultural pride and identity.

Established in 2020 on Gadigal land in Redfern, Burrundi Theatre is a First Peoples multidisciplinary arts organisation inspired by the legacy of Black Theatre (1972–1977). Its vision is embedded in songlines, dance, storytelling, and Wiradjuri philosophies of Yindyamarra—respect, humility, and honour. Through performance, Burrundi honours the sacrifices of families and communities across NSW, using art as a platform for activism, truth-telling, and transformation.

- Rachael Phillips, Chair of the TACCO Board / Director of Birrelee Multi-Functional Children's Services (MACS)

Jocelyn Cockbain, Coordinator | Tamworth Regional Council and Councillor

Marc Sutherland, Councillor | Tamworth Regional Council

The Tamworth Coalition of Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (TACCO) shared the story of Mara Ngali—meaning 'two hands' in Gomeroi language—a first-of-its-kind partnership between five ACCOs and the Tamworth Regional Council. Formed in March 2025, Mara Ngali is the first formalised place-based partnership under CtG Priority Reform One, pioneering a new model of localised governance.

Speakers Rachael Phillips (Chair of TACCO Board), Councillor Marc Sutherland, and Council Coordinator Jocelyn Cockbain reflected on the strength of community-led solutions. For Tamworth, where Aboriginal people make up nearly 15 percent of the population, the partnership is built on decades of groundwork. *"We don't work for community, we are community,"* explained Phillips, emphasising the deep connection between ACCOs and the families they serve. For Sutherland, who is the first Aboriginal person elected to Tamworth Council, the signing of Mara Ngali formalised what the community had long been waiting for: *"Our families have been told no for too long. This is about changing the system."*



Since its signing, TACCO and Council have embedded all Priority Reforms into the Council's governance and created a five-year Community Development Plan that reflects community priorities and aspirations. Monthly gatherings now provide a structured forum for Elders, carers, and service providers to identify gaps and drive solutions together.

The partnership has demonstrated how fiscal stability can be secured. All five ACCOs involved are financially stable, giving them the capacity to invest in partnerships rather than simply focus on survival. This stability has created space to explore flexible funding arrangements, where pooled resources can be repurposed or redirected to meet emerging community needs. Such flexibility has enabled TACCO to respond quickly to challenges, proving that financial security is a foundation for innovation.

Presenters noted, however, that not all ACCOs across NSW enjoy the same stability. Without funding reforms, including longer funding cycles and greater investment in ACCO capacity, many organisations will be unable to participate in similar partnerships. The risk remains that coalitions can be seen as “duplication” by government which undermines their transformative potential.

While partners do not always agree, they stressed that disagreement is part of the process. What matters is the cultural safety of the space and a shared vision that unites everyone involved. As Councillor Sutherland noted, *“Small wins add up. Incremental wins might not get celebrated the way they should. But they create change.”*

The focus throughout was on financial security, flexible funding, workforce development, and embedding Aboriginal governance at the heart of reform. Guided by their collective cultural authority and community priorities, TACCO reinforces the importance of self-determination and the leadership role of ACCOs in shaping child and family services across NSW.



“Our families have been told no for too long. This is about changing the system... Small wins add up. Incremental wins might not get celebrated the way they should. But they create change.”

– Marc Sutherland

Main session takeaways

- TACCO is the first place-based partnership signed in alignment to CTG Priority Reform One, recognising the need for local government involvement.
- Place-based partnerships must be backed by flexible and sustainable funding for ACCOs.
- The TACCO partnership is underpinned by a shared, strengths-based mindset and ability to collaborate in a culturally safe environment.

Deadly Practice: Grandmothers Against Removals NSW

- Aunty Deb Swan, Founding Member | Grandmothers Against Removals NSW, Cultural Therapeutic Advisor | Allambi Care

Led by Aunty Deb Swan, the Grandmothers Against Removals (GMAR) session was one of the most powerful of the Forum. GMAR began in 2014 after Aunty Deb's grandchildren were removed, sparking community protest and sustained advocacy against systemic injustice. The movement continues to fight for Aboriginal families' rights to raise their children within culture and kinship.

Aunty Deb reflected that colonisation continues to distort Aboriginal voices: *"They don't hear our message – colonisers have their own version."* She explained that her own experiences working within DCJ for 13 years showed how persistent discrimination and systemic barriers are; which ultimately led her to seek change outside the system. When more Aboriginal grandmothers put up their hands to care for their grandchildren, she and four other Gomeroi women founded GMAR in Gunnedah. Together, they took to the streets, protested, and called for systemic reform that prioritises Aboriginal self-determination.

At the heart of her presentation was the Wheel of Communication, a framework GMAR uses in women's groups that focuses on history, actions, senses, interpretation, contemplation, and intentions. Aunty Deb stressed that real change comes from aligning words with action, underpinned by cultural authority. She also introduced Dadirri, the practice of deep listening and still awareness:



"... It makes us feel whole again. In our Aboriginal way, we learn to listen and are not threatened by silence. Contemplate means sitting and letting it work out where to go from there. The rush stops us from doing that."

– Aunty Deb Swan

She challenged non-Aboriginal people in government and the child protection system to 'decolonise the mind', stressing that good intentions are not enough. Without an understanding of the continuing impact of colonisation, intentions can become empty. *"White therapy will leave us gaslighted, inadequate, disconnected and dead,"* she warned, underscoring the urgent need for culturally grounded therapeutic models.

The discussion centred on family-led decision making and Active Efforts as vital tools to prevent removals and strengthen restoration pathways. *"For an Aboriginal child to know their culture, they need to know their family. Family is culture. Belonging is linked to family,"* Aunty Deb told the audience. She compared families trapped by systemic barriers to "fleas in a jar," conditioned not to jump free, reminding participants that decolonising practice is necessary to break this cycle.

Yet, there was also strength and hope. Quoting African-American civil rights activist and politician John Lewis, Aunty Deb urged: *"Never be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble."* She also reminded participants that the new source of power is not money in the hands of a few, but information in the hands of the many.

This session underscored the urgent need to decolonise practice, embed family authority, and ensure cultural planning is not optional but central to the child protection system.

Main session takeaways

- Belonging and identity are central to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's wellbeing.
- Communication is key: GMARs promotes the wheel of communication: understanding actions, history, senses, interpretation, contemplation, intentions through listening.
- Non-Aboriginal people in government and the child protection sector need to understand the real and ongoing impacts of colonisation.

Insights from the Aboriginal-led review of National Closing the Gap

- Professor Lindon Coombes, Director, Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research | University of Technology Sydney

Professor Lindon Coombes, Director of the Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research presented the findings of the first Aboriginal-led Independent Review of the Closing the Gap Agreement, an historic milestone in accountability and reform. Conducted in 2024–25, the Review engaged more than 500 participants through interviews, surveys, site visits and community forums. Its purpose was to capture lived experiences and provide constructive feedback on how the National Agreement is working in practice.

The Review confirmed that while the framework of CtG is fit-for-purpose, implementation has been weak. Progress has been slowed by government inaction, poor coordination, and a heavy reliance on underfunded ACCOs. Key structural barriers also remain. These include limited recognition of Indigenous Data Sovereignty and inadequate education for communities and government alike on what CtG requires.

Professor Coombes emphasised that CtG is not a quick fix but long-term, intergenerational work: *“Closing the Gap was never meant to be a quick fix, we’re talking about long-lasting and intergenerational change.”* He explained that each Priority Reform reinforces the others, and when applied holistically, these offer the greatest potential for sustained success.

Participants described the “cultural load” borne by Aboriginal organisations and leaders as heavy and unsustainable. They noted that governments have yet to commence genuine transformative work. Tensions remain between colonial governance systems and Aboriginal aspirations grounded in self-determination, sovereignty, and human rights. *“Focus remains on communities to change, but government not so much,”* the Review noted.

The Review set out urgent recommendations to shift the balance:

- Longer-term contracts, stronger resourcing of ACCOs, and reform of funding systems to reduce reliance on short-term cycles.
- A move away from consultation towards genuine power-sharing, embedding Aboriginal governance and accountability at every stage.
- Implementation of clear monitoring and reporting processes to measure progress consistently across all jurisdictions.
- Recognition of Indigenous Data Sovereignty, ensuring Aboriginal communities control and protect their own data, strengthening decision-making and cultural authority.



Ultimately, the Review concluded that success will only come if governments relinquish control and work in true partnership with Aboriginal peoples and organisations. As Coombes summarised:

"Closing the Gap is not a quick fix, we're talking about intergenerational change... All parties must build their capability to work in partnership."

– Prof. Lindon Coombes

For ACCOs and Aboriginal communities, the Review validated what has long been voiced: the burden of implementation cannot continue to rest on Aboriginal organisations alone. Achieving genuine reform requires a shift in responsibility, resourcing and power to Aboriginal-led structures. For the sector, the message is clear; sustained advocacy is needed for long-term funding, stronger accountability mechanisms, and the embedding of Aboriginal governance as central to CtG.

Main session takeaways

- The CtG architecture is sound, but hindered by systemic issues and inaction.
- Government transformation and shared-decision remain essential.
- Structural and funding reform, stronger accountability and better communication are urgent priorities.

- Magistrate Keisha Hopgood | NSW Children's Court
Magistrate Tracy Sheedy | NSW Children's Court
Zoe De Re, Senior Policy Solicitor | Aboriginal Legal Services (NSW/ACT) Limited

Magistrates Keisha Hopgood and Tracy Sheedy, alongside Zoe De Re from the Aboriginal Legal Service, reflected on the implementation of Active Efforts one year after their introduction through the *Family is Culture* reforms. These legislative changes require practitioners to take rigorous, practical steps to prevent removals and prioritise restoration for Aboriginal children and families.

The speakers emphasised that when done properly, Active Efforts are powerful. Magistrate Hopgood explained that cultural identity is central: *"It's about best interests in keeping children at home. There is strength in connection to family, community, culture and country which needs to guide Active Efforts."* Yet, too often, Active Efforts are reduced to generic casework rather than the tailored, comprehensive plans the law requires. As Magistrate Sheedy noted, *"Until we start tailoring Active Efforts, we will not see the change that we need."*

Challenges remain. Systemic pressures such as housing shortages, mental health treatment gaps, and workforce constraints undermine implementation. The Children's Court continues to see instances where Active Efforts are overlooked or abandoned, with removals carried out instead of restoration plans. Sheedy was clear that, *"The principle of Active Efforts includes family finding — and that is where a lot of casework falls down. Too often that is not included in the evidence. Not what you did to do family finding, but what was actually achieved."*



Innovations were also shared. Dubbo Children's Court's Winha-nga-nha List is trialling a more culturally grounded process, allocating time for all stakeholders — magistrates, Elders, families, and services — to sit together, speak openly, and co-design solutions. Parents are supported to participate fully, and agencies are held accountable in real time. This approach has improved confidence, engagement, and outcomes.

The session underscored that Active Efforts must be embedded as a living practice, not a tick-box exercise. For Active Efforts to succeed these must start early, be properly resourced, and focus on keeping children connected to culture and kin. For the sector, this means advocating for reforms that ensure housing, health, and wraparound supports are treated as integral to child protection, not as external issues. As Hopgood reminded the room:

"Extend wraparound support to the family too. Keep following up with a parent if they have disengaged."

– Magistrate Hopgood

Main session takeaways

- Active efforts must be practical, accountable, and documented, and begin early— not as an afterthought.
- Cultural connection must guide decision-making for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.
- Concerns remain about generic casework, delayed interventions, and poor planning.

The August 2025 Quarterly Sector Forum closed with a strong sense of momentum and solidarity. Across both days, participants shared stories of innovation, challenge, and resilience. From Wagga Wagga's One Mob Connection to Tamworth's Mara Ngali partnership, from calls to decolonise practice led by Grandmothers Against Removals, to hard truths on CtG and Active Efforts, the Forum provided space for honest dialogue and collective problem-solving.

Cultural authority remained central throughout, reminding us that culture is not an 'add-on' but the foundation for healing, identity, and strength. Burrundi Theatre's closing performance on Day One reflected this, sending participants home with a renewed appreciation of the beauty and resilience of Aboriginal culture.

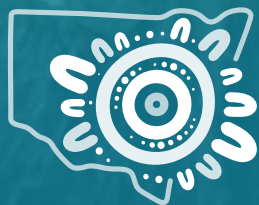
Looking ahead

As AbSec prepares for the November 2025 Quarterly Sector Forum and Gala Awards, the message from August is clear: building bridges requires action as well as words. The sector is ready to seize the opportunities of longer-term funding, greater accountability, and stronger partnerships with government. That change must be grounded in Aboriginal governance, cultural authority, and the lived experiences of families.

AbSec will continue to lead advocacy for reforms that put Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people, and families at the centre of decision-making and that provide the necessary supports that keep Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children safe and together with their families, strong in identity and connected to culture and Country. Together with ACCOs, community leaders, and government partners, we will keep working towards a future where all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are safe, connected, and thriving in culture.

Glossary of acronyms

AbSec	Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat
ACCO	Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisation
ACCM	Aboriginal Community-Controlled Mechanism
ATSICPP	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young Persons Principle
CtG	Closing the Gap
DCJ	NSW Department of Communities and Justice
FGC	Family Group Conferencing
GMAR	Grandmothers Against Removals NSW
HCEA	High-Cost Emergency Accommodation
NSW	New South Wales
OCG	Office of the Children's Guardian
OOHC	Out-of-home care
QSF	Quarterly Sector Forum
TACCO	Tamworth Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation



AbSec

NSW Child, Family & Community
Peak Aboriginal Corporation

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