

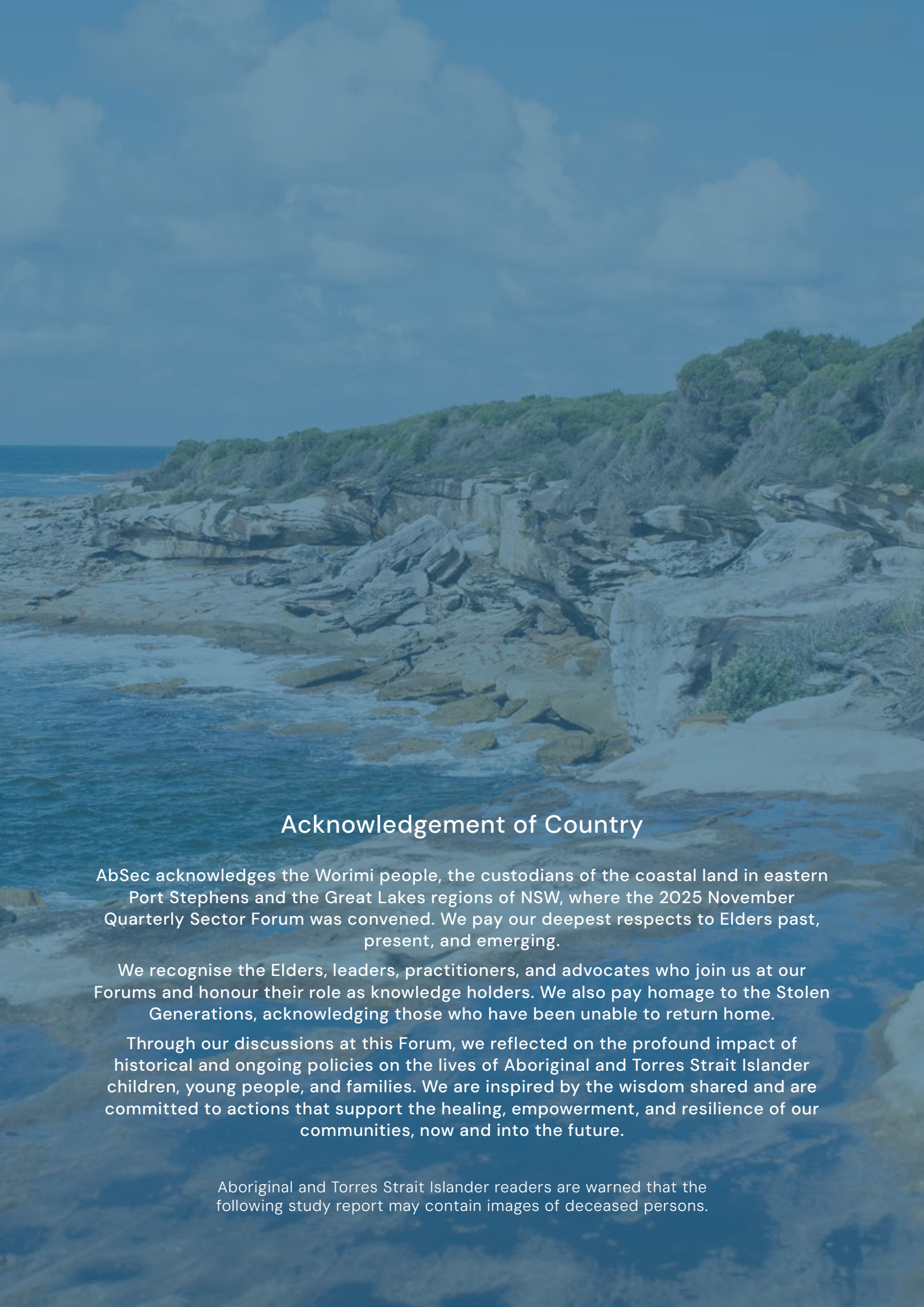
● Quarterly
AbSec **Sector
Forum**

AbSec



Together We Rise Celebrating Community Leadership and Resilience

November 2025 Sector Forum Report
Murrook Cultural Centre, Port Stephens/Worimi Country



Acknowledgement of Country

AbSec acknowledges the Worimi people, the custodians of the coastal land in eastern Port Stephens and the Great Lakes regions of NSW, where the 2025 November 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 November 2025 Quarterly Sector Forum (QSF), held on the traditional lands of the Worimi people at the Murrook Culture Centre, brought our sector together for two powerful days grounded in culture, community leadership and collective strength.

AbSec QSFs play an essential role in advancing our strategic objective of building a strong, sustainable Aboriginal community-controlled sector. These provide a culturally safe platform where community leaders, practitioners, Elders, government agencies, carers, service providers and allies come together to share insights, strengthen practice and shape the future of child protection and family support across New South Wales (NSW).



Each Forum is designed around a unique theme that reflects current priorities within our sector. This QSF's theme, ***Together We Rise: Celebrating Community Leadership and Resilience***, honoured the leadership, resilience and lived experience of our communities.

It reminded us that meaningful reform happens when Aboriginal voices are at the centre, when our solutions are guided by culture and when we walk forward in partnership with purpose.

Across the two days, the QSF created valuable opportunities for reflection, learning and collaboration. Day one was open to all stakeholders, widening the dialogue to include government, sector partners and allies who play a vital role in supporting our work and shared purpose.

Day Two provided a culturally safe, closed space for Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and community members to engage in deeper, more nuanced discussions about the challenges and opportunities facing our sector. This was an opportunity which allowed ACCOs and Mob to share insights, coordinate efforts and identify collective advocacy priorities.

The Forum aimed to provide updates on current initiatives, highlight best practices, offer guidance on emerging strategies, and strengthen networks across the sector. Through active engagement, honest conversations and community-led perspectives, this QSF reinforced our commitment to ensuring Aboriginal children, families and communities are at the heart of all policy, service design and decision-making.

The Forum reaffirmed why these gatherings are so vital to our collective work. Each conversation, each shared story and each moment of connection strengthened our commitment to building a future where Aboriginal children, young people and families are safe, supported and empowered.

The dialogue and collaboration nurtured over these two days reflect the heart of what our sector strives for: meaningful, community-led change that places Aboriginal voices front and centre.

As we move ahead, the insights shared and connections strengthened at this Forum will continue to inform our work and inspire our collective advocacy. Together, we rise to honour the resilience of our communities, to elevate Aboriginal leadership and to ensure that every child grows up connected to culture, surrounded by strength, and supported by systems designed with—and for—our people.



Welcome to Country and Smoking Ceremony

Uncle Neville Lilley, a respected Elder and Traditional Custodian of Worimi Country, was born in Newcastle on 29 July 1941 and grew up in Karuah. His early years were shaped by life on the Mission, where he attended the local Aboriginal School before completing his final year at Karuah Public School. At just 15 years old, Uncle Neville entered the workforce, beginning what became two decades of dedicated work in the Port Stephens oyster industry, most of which he spent at Phillips Oysters in Oyster Cove.

A respected community leader, Uncle Neville has devoted much of his life to strengthening relationships, advocating for his people, and preserving the cultural integrity of Worimi Country. He has served on the Worimi Local Aboriginal Land Council (LALC) Board of Directors since 2009, contributing over 13 years of continuous service and leadership. He has also represented Worimi LALC on the Port Stephens Council Aboriginal Strategic Committee for many years, ensuring the voices and priorities of his community are heard at local decision-making tables.

Uncle Neville is deeply committed to reconciliation and has worked tirelessly to foster strong partnerships between the Worimi people and key organisations across the region. His vision is for these relationships to continue to grow, grounded in respect, understanding and shared responsibility for Country.

A proud father of five, grandfather of 14 and great-grandfather of five, Uncle Neville's greatest hope is that the next generations will grow up in a world where they are treated with respect, equality and dignity — a reconciled future where Aboriginal children and families can thrive.

AbSec was honoured to have Uncle Neville deliver the Welcome to Country at the commencement of the November 2025 Quarterly Sector Forum, grounding the gathering in culture, connection and the enduring strength of the Worimi people.

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.

Who attended

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

179 individual attendees

41 organisations represented over the two-day event

Organisations that registered included:



● John Leha, Chief Executive Officer | AbSec

AbSec CEO John Leha opened the Forum by welcoming delegates to Murrook Culture Centre on Worimi Country, offering deep respect to the Traditional Custodians and acknowledging the powerful Welcome to Country by Uncle Neville Lilley. John described being on Worimi Country as “grounding and invigorating,” setting the tone for a gathering centred on community leadership, resilience and cultural strength.

Reflecting on the Forum theme, “Together We Rise,” John acknowledged the sector has faced “tough setbacks” throughout the year but emphasised that true strength comes from “how we face challenges and rise through them, as our people have done for 65,000+ years.” He reminded delegates that the sector Forums are “about connection, learning from each other, advocacy – and above all, centring the voices of our communities.”

John provided a national and NSW policy overview, noting that while the Commonwealth Government has reaffirmed its commitment to Closing the Gap, NSW has yet to demonstrate genuine shared decision-making or Aboriginal-led structural reform. He welcomed new investments in ACCO-delivered Family Preservation and the \$250 million Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence package—particularly funding for Aboriginal-led models and regional communities. However, he highlighted ongoing concerns about contract variations imposed “in ways that undermine community control,” policy shifts delivered without genuine co-design, and the absence of trusted system accountability mechanisms.

“The work ahead is big, but so is our collective power—when we move together with shared purpose, change is inevitable.”

– John Leha

John reiterated AbSec’s position clearly: “You cannot close the gap by doing business as usual. Real partnership means shared decision-making power, sustainable and expanded funding for ACCOs, and a genuine transfer of control back to our communities.”

John then addressed key system challenges. On transitions, he noted that while nearly 600 children have transitioned to ACCOs since 2022, reports that around at least 200 children have also transitioned from ACCOs to NGOs and DCJ. With “just a little more than one in five Aboriginal children in out-of-home care (OOHC) cared for by ACCOs,” he reaffirmed AbSec’s commitment to driving change, stating, “Our children have a right to be connected to culture, and our ACCOs are best placed to support that connection.”

On restorations, John highlighted a concerning decline, with Aboriginal children now more likely to age out of care than be restored safely home. He expressed disappointment that the NSW Government has withdrawn support for the Aboriginal Authority for Restoring Children (AARC), but assured delegates that “the AARC will not end here—we will recalibrate and continue this work.”

Housing remains a critical issue, with 400–500 Aboriginal young people exiting care each year into homelessness. John welcomed recent investment in homelessness services, crisis accommodation and Aboriginal housing upgrades, but stressed that without housing guarantees, young people will continue to fall through the gaps.

He concluded by celebrating the newly released Know Your Rights factsheets, reinforcing that early, accessible information is essential to equip families with greater know-how as they navigate different interactions with the child protection system. Standing on Worimi Country, John reminded the room that “culture is our guide, our strength, and our future,” and encouraged delegates to move forward with unity and self-determination.

Key findings from the IPART review of the pricing of NSW OOHC

● Andrew Nicholls, Chief Executive Officer | IPART: Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal

This opening session set the scene for the Forum by outlining how government thinks about value for money in OOHC, and what IPART's recent review means for children, carers and providers – including ACCOs.

Andrew Nicholls began by situating IPART's role as an independent economic regulator, now also appointed as the monitor of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services, noting the "notable overlap with our sector." He emphasised IPART's accountability function and independence, stating, "we hold agencies to account" and "we are impartial, independent and very much an evidence-based regulator." He also highlighted that "many of the most difficult policy questions facing government find their way to IPART," framing the OOHC pricing review as one of these complex policy challenges.

Andrew explained that IPART's focus in the OOHC report was on assessing outputs and outcomes rather than inputs, and that the recommendations were deliberately designed not to entrench any particular contracting model such as the Permanency Support Program (PSP). Instead, the aim was to ensure the recommendations remained relevant "no matter how the system changes structurally."

A key theme was the need to better reflect the individual needs of children in how services are funded. For instance, Andrew stressed that "every child has unique medical and individual needs and these need to be reflected on an individual basis," supporting a more nuanced funding approach.



The report recommends that carer allowances be paid at a consistent rate for all children assessed within a certain level of need, using "need brackets" rather than a flat payment. Highly variable costs such as medical, dental and therapeutic care, he noted, should continue to be funded as they are currently: "We recommend that funding for highly variable costs such as medical, dental and therapeutic care continue to be funded in the same way they are now and paid by providers."

Specific costings for ACCOs were highlighted. This includes an estimate of \$6,801 per child per year in organisational costs for ACCO providers. IPART also recommended that the cost to an ACCO of transitioning an Aboriginal child to an ACCO provider be recognised and funded at between \$8,934 and \$9,969 per child, along with \$6,750 per carer. These figures were particularly relevant to ACCOs which face distinctive cultural and relational responsibilities not always captured in mainstream funding models.

At the system level, Andrew acknowledged significant gaps in visibility and accountability: “There is a lack of visibility in the system of the services that are being delivered and what is effective in achieving the best outcomes for children.” He also identified a core tension within current funding arrangements: “There is a tension between providers having the discretion to spend funds on children as they see fit and government having assurance that funds are being spent for the care the child needs.” This tension resonated with many in the audience, reflecting day-to-day practice realities for providers trying to meet children’s needs while navigating funding rules and reporting requirements.

During the Q&A, several important issues were raised. One participant asked why the report did not address the “dire need for better leaving care support.” Andrew acknowledged the importance of this issue but clarified that leaving care fell outside the formal scope of IPART’s terms of reference for this review.

Another attendee queried whether ACCOs were directly involved in the development of the report; Andrew took this question on notice. ‘A further question was whether IPART made any recommendations around the value of restoring children and preventing them entering care in the first place. Andrew responded that, “Not directly, no. We weren’t charged to look at the system as a whole; we were charged to examine the system as it stands and make a judgement on which components are delivering value for money.”

This exchange highlighted a clear point of difference between the regulatory lens and the priorities of ACCOs and community members in the room: while IPART’s task was narrowly defined around cost and pricing in the current system, the sector remains deeply focused on prevention, restoration and holistic, long-term outcomes for children and families.

Main session takeaways

- IPART positions itself as an independent, evidence-based regulator with an increasing role in related areas such as ECEC, bringing a systems-wide economic lens to child and family services.
- The OOHC pricing review focused on outputs and outcomes, not inputs, and deliberately avoided locking in any specific contracting model, aiming for recommendations that remain relevant regardless of future structural changes.
- There is recognition that children’s needs are highly individual, and funding – including carer allowances – should better reflect different “need brackets” rather than a one-size-fits-all payment.
- The report acknowledges specific cost structures for ACCOs, including organisational costs and the costs of transitioning Aboriginal children and carers into ACCO-led care, which is an important step towards more realistic and culturally-informed pricing.
- The session surfaced a clear gap between the review’s narrow terms of reference and sector expectations around leaving care, prevention and restoration, reinforcing the need for separate policy and advocacy work focused on these critical areas.

This session provided a foundational understanding of IPART’s report and opened important conversations about how pricing, accountability and system design must evolve to better support Aboriginal children, families and ACCOs.

Housing for young people exiting care: cross jurisdictional reflections

● Carlee Maccoll, Project Officer, Policy and Advocacy | AbSec

Carlee Maccoll opened the presentation by grounding the discussion in the lived experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people exiting care, emphasising the urgency and scale of the housing crisis they face. She stated, “These young people, already having experienced trauma, disconnection from family and systemic disadvantage, and in some cases further harmed within the very system intended to protect them, are then left to navigate adulthood alone. The absence of coordinated housing, mentoring and wraparound supports exposes them to homelessness, violence, exploitation and justice involvement.”

Carlee highlighted that Aboriginal young people—already overrepresented in OOHC—experience some of the highest rates of housing instability post-care. She reinforced that this is not an individual failure but a systemic one: the reality is that we are creating vulnerability by design, through systems that plan for “care exit” rather than “life transition”.

The presentation set out approaches in other jurisdictions to ensuring young people exiting care are not homeless. This includes Victoria’s Village 21 Housing initiatives, Youth Foyer models, Tasmania’s Transitional Housing Models and the United Kingdom’s legislative framework and housing guarantees for all care leavers.

Carlee noted that the strongest models share core principles: guaranteed access to stable housing, extended and flexible support, culturally grounded practice and a clear expectation that government maintains responsibility for the wellbeing of young people leaving its care.

She emphasised that Aboriginal-led solutions must be central to any reform: “Aboriginal young people deserve housing options that reflect culture, identity and belonging — not systems that disconnect them all over again.” Evidence from multiple jurisdictions shows that outcomes are significantly improved when ACCOs design and deliver the supports surrounding housing, including casework, cultural connection, community links and ongoing mentorship.

Carlee also spoke candidly about the gaps in NSW, noting that despite an extended care framework to 21, the absence of a housing guarantee means too many young people fall through the cracks.



“Housing is not simply a roof over a young person’s head; it is the foundation for safety, participation in education and employment, and connection to community. Without secure housing, other supports become ineffective.”

– Carlee Maccoll

A brief workshop activity was held at the end of the session, inviting Forum participants to reflect and identify three priority areas for statewide advocacy. Strong consensus emerged around three reform priorities:

- Statutory housing guarantees and priority allocation of housing for young people leaving care, ensuring no child in care exits into homelessness.
- Aboriginal-led design, delivery and oversight of services, reinforcing that ACCOs must be empowered to lead culturally safe, community-controlled housing and support pathways.
- Youth-specific housing allocations across NSW, including tailored tenancy supports and housing options in regional and remote communities.

Participants expressed both urgency and optimism, calling for genuine structural reform.

Main session takeaways

- Housing insecurity for care leavers — particularly Aboriginal young people — remains a critical and urgent issue requiring structural reform.
- Cross-jurisdictional evidence demonstrates that legislated housing guarantees, youth-specific allocations and extended supports create far more stable transitions into adulthood.
- Culturally grounded, Aboriginal-led models consistently deliver stronger long-term outcomes for Aboriginal young people.
- NSW currently lacks a housing guarantee, leaving young people at risk despite extended care availability.
- Forum participants identified three priority reforms: statutory housing guarantees, Aboriginal-led system design and oversight, and youth-specific housing allocations across NSW.
- The session demonstrated clear sector alignment: housing stability, cultural connection and ACCO leadership must sit at the centre of any future reform agenda.

The Legal Assistance for Families Partnership Agreement

● Louise Coady, Principal Solicitor, Family Law, Care and Protection | Aboriginal Legal Service (NSW/ACT)

Louise Coady delivered an insightful and practical presentation on the Legal Assistance for Families Partnership Agreement (LAFPA), an initiative arising from the *Family Is Culture Review* (Recommendations 56 & 65) aimed at ensuring Aboriginal families receive early, independent legal advice when interacting with the NSW child protection system. She explained that while LAFPA was intended to be a departmental-led pathway, one of the biggest challenges has been shifting the culture within the NSW Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) so caseworkers see early legal referral as essential—not optional.

As Louise noted, successful implementation required training across regions and “filtering down to the people on the ground,” ensuring families actually receive the referral when they need it.

Louise reinforced that LAFPA exists to keep children safe at home, empower families to understand their rights, support informed decision-making, and strengthen family-led practice. Louise emphasised that “ALS and Legal Aid are not aligned with DCJ,” a misunderstanding often held by families. LAFPA referrals should occur as soon as DCJ knocks on the door, not only when removal is imminent. All referrals are treated as urgent, with three entry points: initial engagement, during proceedings, and post-proceedings (s.90). It is not a one-off service—families can be referred multiple times across their interaction with the child protection and OOHC continuum.

Louise outlined the range of supports provided under LAFPA. This includes mediation, family law advice, variations to Apprehended Domestic Violence Orders, Aboriginal Child and Family Advocacy and Support (ACFAS) program advocacy, Temporary Care Arrangement (TCA) guidance, and social support through ALS social workers. She highlighted a case where early LAFPA intervention prevented unnecessary removal, demonstrating the model’s potential when made available at earlier points in the interaction of the family with the child protection system. Despite receiving 535 referrals since July 1 (288 for Aboriginal families), Louise stressed that LAFPA is not being fully utilised, and too often families are given referrals “the day before removal,” which undermines the intent of early intervention. A powerful provocation she put to caseworkers was: “If removal was off the table, what would you do to keep these children safe? What active efforts would you use?”

Louise encouraged practitioners to ask whether their clients have received a LAFPA referral and to advocate strongly to DCJ when they have not, reminding the room that mediation under LAFPA—unlike a DCJ-led Family Group Conference—always includes a lawyer and can lead to earlier, safer resolutions.

Main session takeaways

- LAFPA has three referral points: initial engagement, during proceedings, post-proceedings.
- DCJ is not making enough referrals, and too many occur too late.
- LAFPA supports include mediation, family law advice, ADVO variations, TCA support, ACFAS advocacy and social work support.
- LAFPA is a critical but underused active effort designed to keep children with family and prevent entry into care.

A story of genuine partnerships with ACCOs

- Tarsha Jones, Gomeroi artist and co-researcher,
Freya Crowley, Policy, Advocacy and Research Advisor | The Benevolent Society,
Wendy Dargan, Quality and Compliance Manager | KARI

Tarsha Jones delivered a compelling presentation on The Benevolent Society's experience of implementing SNAICC's *Creating Change Through Partnerships* model, offering an honest reflection on what genuine partnership looks like in practice and the behavioural patterns that either strengthen or undermine collaboration. The model draws on interviews, lived experience and social psychology, presented through a series of "characters" that represent common patterns within organisations rather than individual people. As Tarsha explained, "It's not a strict rulebook, it's a collection of insights," designed to help both mainstream organisations and ACCOs better understand each other and navigate partnership dynamics.

Each character type captures a different approach to working with Aboriginal organisations and communities. The Visionary fosters trust and collaboration, while the Innovator drives change—but only when the organisation is ready to move with them. The Conduit, shaped by lived experience and cultural connection, is an invaluable bridge between systems and community. In contrast, the Coloniser archetype represents behaviours—sometimes overtly racist, sometimes masked behind process or bureaucracy—that resist change and use funding and policy to maintain control. As Tarsha noted, "The coloniser resists change; they will always prefer comfort over progress." The challenge, she said, is not to label people, but to work toward shifting them into more collaborative roles: "It's not about calling someone a coloniser; it's about how we work with them to make them a collaborator—although sometimes they're just racist and shouldn't be in the room."

Throughout the presentation, Tarsha highlighted how easily organisations can become trapped in bureaucracy, stating, "Getting caught up in process is a real barrier to genuine partnerships." She emphasised the importance of "naming it"—naming behaviours, barriers, and feelings—to create honest starting points for change. The work was co-developed alongside KARI and DCJ, giving the model legitimacy across ACCOs, non-government organisations (NGOs) and government. Tarsha shared that some of the barriers KARI faced in this partnership were "next-level," underscoring why tools like this are essential.

In the Q&A, Tarsha identified the Innovator as the character best placed to influence organisational change, provided leadership is willing to shift. She reminded participants that the resource is designed for anyone—ACCOs or mainstream services—to pick up and use, encouraging them to explore the broader SNAICC body of work on genuine partnership.

Main session takeaways

- The model blends social psychology with lived experience to create a practical guide for improving partnerships between ACCOs, NGOs and government.
- It provides ACCOs with a framework to identify organisational behaviours and leverage or challenge them in pursuit of meaningful reform.
- Genuine partnership requires honesty, naming harmful behaviours, reducing process-driven barriers and supporting the right people—Visionaries, Innovators and Conduits—to lead change.

A yarn about barriers to restoration

- Aunty Deb Swan, Founder | Grandmothers Against Removal and Cultural Therapeutic Advisor | Allambi Care,
Dr BJ Newton | UNSW Social Policy Research Centre

A proud Gomeroi woman, matriarch and former child protection caseworker, Aunty Deb Swan is a founding member of Grandmothers Against Removals (GMAR)—a grassroots movement she started in 2014 alongside four other grandmothers to fight the systemic removal of their grandchildren. That was the beginning of a movement that has since fought for families, demanded accountability and played a pivotal role in securing the Family Is Culture review. For Aunty Deb, the struggle is not just about policy—it is about recognising the dignity and rights of Aboriginal families and ensuring Aboriginal voices lead decision-making about the safety and wellbeing of their children.

Held outdoors, this session brought participants into a culturally grounded circle—away from formal structures and into a space that reflected community ways of knowing, being and doing. Led by Aunty Deb Swan and drawing on Professor Paul Gray's influential paper *The Shackles of Terra Nullius*, the yarn explored the deep systemic, cultural and structural barriers preventing Aboriginal children from returning home.

Dr BJ Newton opened by asking how we might strategise restoration differently: How do we become smarter, more collective, more culturally anchored in our approach? Grounding the conversation in Paul Gray's analysis, she highlighted how colonial language and legal frameworks continue to "tie up everyone's energy" and prevent progress. Gray's words captured the heart of the issue: "The system claims it has changed, but it is not giving power back to where it belongs—community." Despite legal provisions like Section 12, many judicial officers have never heard of them, making consistent application impossible. She reminded the group that Aboriginal families and communities "have always had legal frameworks for our kids."



Aunty Deb spoke with characteristic honesty and strength, challenging the ways ACCOs and communities have been pushed—often unconsciously—to conform to government systems. "We started to conform to their ways... we are still assimilated in the way the government wants us to be," she said. She described the harm caused when children lose culture, connection and belonging, insisting, "No matter what they do, they cannot reconnect our kids unless they give them back to us." She called for family-led processes from the very beginning, challenging the assumption that whole families are "a risk," and urging workers to build genuine relationships.

"We need to stop waiting for something to go wrong—we should just go have a cuppa and see how families are."

– Aunty Deb

AbSec child protection practice specialist Kim Chiswell introduced the concept of “emergent strategies”—community-led actions that do not rely on government permission, funding or endorsement. These include creative legal approaches, family-led meetings and using system loopholes to return children home.

Strong reflections from the floor underscored that ACCOs often conform to State processes rather than challenging them, even when they know families best. Workers expressed frustration at decades of unchanged conversations, with one stating: “We were talking about these same things 20 years ago and nothing has changed.” Aunty Deb emphasised that ACCOs must reclaim their authority.



"If we are not saving our kids, we are not saving our culture."

– Aunty Deb



"By refusing to restore Aboriginal kids, they continue the system as it was designed—to steal our kids."

– Dr BJ Newton

The session ended with a powerful collective commitment: restoration cannot wait for government reform. As Paul Gray asserted, “It stops with this generation, it stops here and now... What steps can we take individually and collectively to bring our kids home?”

Main session takeaways

- Colonial frameworks still shape decisions about Aboriginal children, with legal language and bureaucratic structures limiting community power and reinforcing systemic bias and racism.
- Restoration requires early, relational, culturally grounded work, not procedural triggers or compliance with rigid timelines.
- Access to full case information is essential, as DCJ records often shape narratives that ACCOs cannot challenge without knowing what these are.
- ACCOs know their families best and must use this authority to advocate strongly, consistently and unapologetically.
- Restoration is cultural survival—as Aunty Deb said, “If we are not saving our kids, we are not saving our culture.”
- The system remains resistant to change, but collective action, courage and culturally grounded practice can shift outcomes now—not after government reforms arrive.

The Tasmanian experience of progressing delegated authority

● Wendy Moore, Community Services Division Manager | Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre

Wendy Moore delivered a powerful and culturally grounded presentation on the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre's (TAC) journey toward delegated—and ultimately lawful—authority for Aboriginal child and family services in Lutruwita/Tasmania. She emphasised that TAC has always been a holistic, community-led organisation, operating statewide across health, child and family services, aged care, employment, caring for Country and community programs: “We have always been a family and children’s program.” Their reform work has produced both a model and a strategy that TAC openly invites any ACCO in Australia to use, reflecting a core principle of collective Aboriginal sovereignty.

The process, known in language as Nukara (“to weave the basket”), was deeply informed by community voices and cultural design. Over two years, TAC engaged more than 200 community members and held over 100 hours of conversations—from Elders in their 90s to children as young as seven. Wendy described the work as intentionally decolonised, shaped by “the table” conversations, desktop reviews and café-style dialogues about the how of system transfer. Using a powerful metaphor, she compared the current state system to a dilly bag—“useful, but not that useful, and our children could fall through the holes”—and explained the goal of strengthening it into a safe, robust Tirrina (basket). “It’s not a quick process when you weave something—it has to be done carefully and slowly.”

The Tirrina Model represents a strong, culturally anchored system: the handle symbolises community leadership and governance, while the fibres—drawn from eight Safe and Supported actions—represent collective strength. “An individual fibre is weak, but when you have two or more it gets stronger.” The basket is woven by community, children and families, recognising that the way you weave depends on where you come from. TAC was clear that they were “not doing the lift and shift” but instead building a fully self-determined system shaped from the ground up. Wendy also noted practical steps such as secondment of government workers, auditing Aboriginal positions within government, and the passing of a new Commission and Commissioner Act in Tasmania.

The TAC team framed their work with optimism: “We have focused on what’s strong, not what’s wrong,” and emphasised that the ultimate goal was lawful authority, not merely delegated functions.



Main session takeaways

- Reform is grounded in community design, cultural models and decolonised practice.
- The Tirrina (basket) model symbolises a strong, culturally governed child and family system.
- The work builds on Safe and Supported actions and aims toward lawful—not just delegated—authority.
- The approach is not “lift and shift” but building a self-determined system from the ground up.

Why we need a Child Protection Commission?

- John Leha, CEO | AbSec,
Gemma McKinnon, Principal Solicitor, CtG | Aboriginal Legal Service,
Professor Paul Gray | UTS Jumbunna Institute

This session brought together three leading Aboriginal voices to outline why NSW urgently needs an independent Child Safety and Wellbeing Commission—a culturally grounded, community-led accountability mechanism capable of addressing the escalating over-representation of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care. As John Leha opened, “There is nothing new in what we’ve been asking for. Our Elders, our leaders and our families have asked for the same things for decades: Accountability. Independence. Aboriginal leadership. Self-determination.” The speakers highlighted that existing oversight bodies—Office of the Children’s Guardian (OCG), Ombudsman, DCJ—are fragmented, inconsistent, and failing to address the needs of Aboriginal children, young people and families. “People in this system act as though they’re above the law—because in practice, they are,” Gemma noted.

Professor Paul Gray emphasised the scale and urgency: “A 25.5 percent rise in Aboriginal children coming into care” reflects not a failure of families, but a failure of systems. He argued that “the type of accountability should be proportionate to the type of power,” and that the statutory authority to remove children is “an incredible power, and it needs incredible scrutiny.” A Commission would consolidate existing mechanisms into one dedicated body whose sole purpose is the best interests of children, offering what Gemma described as “a bright light with a broader beam—something our children deserve.”

Speakers also framed the Commission as an instrument of cultural and structural justice, not merely policy reform. Paul stated powerfully, “The whole point of this system is to put white futures on Black bodies—but I want Black futures for our kids.” Gemma added that the Commission would restore hope:

“If it was established tomorrow, it would give our families and workers a sense of light at the end of the tunnel.”

– Gemma McKinnon



In audience discussions, speakers challenged the idea that Treaty alone could fix the system. Paul argued that governments currently see Aboriginal communities as “service providers,” while Aboriginal people see themselves as exercising inherent rights. John added, “When we inherit a system, it’s also a responsibility to act,” emphasising that NSW cannot delay reform simply because accountability is politically uncomfortable.

The panel concluded that meaningful change is possible right now. The convergence of Closing the Gap reforms, justice-family sector collaboration, and strong advocacy from ACCOs has created a unique opportunity.

“What are we going to do together to get this up? Not as professionals, but as human beings with a responsibility to our kids.”

– Dr Paul Gray

Main session takeaways

- NSW needs an independent Aboriginal-led Commission to build trust and give confidence to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and to address the systemic racism and poor system performance that is driving rising over-representation of our children at every stage of the child protection system.
- Current accountability bodies are fragmented, inconsistent and ineffective.
- Oversight must match the scale of power held by statutory child protection systems.
- A Commission would consolidate oversight, improve transparency, ensure consequences for harm, and restore hope.
- Accountability is inseparable from self-determination, justice and the right to cultural belonging.

- Michaela Sullivan, Director | Transforming Aboriginal Outcomes, DCJ
Reshma Ali, Manager OOH Transitions | DCJ

This session focused on the current state of transitions of Aboriginal children and young people from DCJ and non-Aboriginal NGOs to ACCOs.

A critical issue raised was the absence of formal guidelines to govern transitions. Michaela and Reshma explained that without mandated processes or accountability mechanisms, NGOs are able to record transitions as “not occurring” without providing a valid reason.

Michaela and Reshma shared a flow chart outlining how transitions are happening in practice—a process marked by fragmented decision-making, limited oversight and inconsistent application.

The second half of the session shifted into a participatory consultation using the Mentimeter tool. Feedback strongly reflected sector frustration around the refusal to oblige transitions and the urgent need for clear, enforceable guidelines. Participants called for accountability, transparency, and stronger obligations on NGOs and DCJ to ensure transitions occur. Mandatory transitions emerged as the strongest themes from the consultation. Across the room, there was a shared understanding that transitions must not be discretionary—these must be expected, tracked and upheld with the seriousness they deserve. The session reinforced that placing Aboriginal children with ACCOs is a foundational commitment to cultural safety, better outcomes for Aboriginal children, leadership and system reform.



Main session takeaways

- There are no current guidelines governing transitions to ACCOs, resulting in inconsistent and discretionary practices.
- NGOs can record transitions as “not occurring” without evidence or valid justification.
- A flow chart presented showed fragmented and inconsistent processes across districts.
- Consultation feedback strongly supported mandatory transitions, accountability mechanisms and clearer, enforceable pathways.

Advocacy and peer work, supporting restoration

- **Aunty Deb Swan, Founding Member | Grandmothers Against Removals NSW and Cultural Therapeutic Advisor | Allambi Care,**
Cassie Proctor, Peer Support and Advocacy | Family Inclusion Strategies in the Hunter,
Chloe Hudson | Family Inclusion Strategies in the Hunter

Held outdoors on the deck, sitting together in a relaxed circle with Mob, this session created a warm, culturally grounded space for truth-telling, healing and collective strength. Aunty Deb Swan opened the session by reflecting on the importance of advocacy led by community, reminding us that restoration is not just a legal process but a cultural, relational and spiritual responsibility.

She spoke powerfully about the deep, intergenerational harms caused by child removal—reminding everyone present that Aboriginal families are still forced to navigate systems that continue to separate children from their culture, their kin and their Country.

Aunty Deb made it clear that these harms are not historical—they are happening now, every day, to families who are doing their best within structures not built for them. With unwavering strength, she told the group that “we have to fight for our families in our way,” calling for approaches grounded in culture, community leadership and collective responsibility.

She shared the journey of Grandmothers Against Removal (GMAR)—a movement built from courage, heartbreak and determination—and spoke of the many barriers they have faced: institutional resistance, racism and the toll of standing up to powerful systems. Yet despite these challenges, GMAR has remained steadfast, driven by the unshakeable belief that every Aboriginal child deserves to grow up surrounded by family, identity and belonging. The passion in Aunty Deb’s voice—and the solidarity of others walking beside her—was deeply inspiring. It reminded the group that real change has always come from community, from our Elders, our grandmothers, and those who refuse to give up on our children. Her message was clear: when Mob stands together, we are unstoppable.

Another inspiring and powerful part of the session came from Peer Advocate Cassie Proctor, who bravely shared her lived experience of having her children removed and later restored. Cassie spoke openly about the pain, shame and isolation she carried through the process, describing moments when the system felt overwhelmingly stacked against her. Her story, and the story of another advocate with lived experience, highlighted how cultural strength, community support and self-belief can turn even the most difficult paths toward restoration. Cassie shared that coming through the other side gave her not only strength, but purpose.



Cassie now uses her journey to guide families through complex child protection processes, challenge harmful narratives, and advocate with a deep compassion only lived experience can bring. Her role—like those of many peer advocates across the state—demonstrates the transformative impact of community-led support, where healing becomes both personal and collective. Aunty Deb reinforced this, reminding the group that peer advocacy is one of the strongest tools Aboriginal communities have.

This session affirmed that peer advocacy is not just supportive—it is lifesaving. It restores dignity, builds confidence, strengthens cultural connection and shows families that restoration is possible even in the face of systemic barriers. It was a deeply emotional and empowering session that grounded the day in the resilience of Aboriginal women, families and communities.

Main session takeaways

- Peer advocates with lived experience are critical leaders in supporting Aboriginal families navigating the child protection system.
- Lived experience provides a unique form of cultural authority, credibility and trust, often bridging gaps that services cannot.
- Restoration is possible, even when families feel overwhelmed, shamed or isolated by the system.
- Community-led advocacy helps parents understand processes and challenge inaccurate narratives.
- Outdoor yarning spaces created safe, culturally grounded environments for honesty, storytelling, and collective strength.

● Dr Shiny Varghese, Policy Officer, Policy and Advocacy | AbSec

Shiny Varghese delivered an insightful and compelling presentation about AbSec's upcoming *State of the Sector Report*, a comprehensive snapshot of the NSW ACCO child protection and OOHC landscape. She opened by acknowledging the extraordinary resilience of ACCOs across NSW—organisations that continue to provide culturally grounded, high-quality support to children and families despite persistent funding shortages, workforce strain, and structural inequities. As Shiny noted, many ACCOs are “doing seven jobs at once,” often going above and beyond their funded roles because community needs simply does not wait.

Shiny unveiled an updated ACCO map and shared reflections from interviews conducted across the state. Common challenges include severe under-remuneration for travel—particularly in Western NSW and Illawarra—last-minute contract announcements that hinder planning, and ongoing wage disparities that make recruitment and retention extremely difficult. She emphasised that equitable investment in ACCOs must be understood as a form of reparation, given the historical and ongoing inequities in the child protection system. ACCOs spoke strongly about being out-of-pocket due to the absence of brokerage funding, often covering children's basic needs themselves.

Shiny presented data showing the breadth of ACCO service delivery:

- 72 ACCOs delivering child protection and OOHC functions.
- 21 ACCOs delivering family preservation (supporting 3,200 Aboriginal children).
- 55 services delivering Targeted Early Intervention (TEI) (soon to merge into Community and Family Support).
- 23 ACCOs delivering Permanency Support Programs (PSP) to around 700 children.
- Nine Aboriginal Child and Family Centres (CAFS), with six more opening in 2026.

Significant concerns were raised about CAFS, with too many KPIs for too little funding. There are also major barriers experienced by Aboriginal families accessing specialist supports (NDIS, behavioural services, occupational therapy, allied health). Services reported that families often avoid external systems due to the fear of mandatory reporting.

The audience engagement session revealed near-unanimous agreement that funding remains the single greatest barrier to strong, sustainable ACCO service delivery. Organisations shared examples such as:

- Limited staffing (one worker covering three LGAs).
- Cultural load pressures on Aboriginal workers.
- Lack of flexible funding for complex needs packages.

Despite these challenges, participants highlighted ACCO strengths: culturally safe wrap-around supports, authentic relationships, lived-experience informed practice, and deep community knowledge. As one participant shared, ACCOs succeed because they “bring trust, culture and connection in ways no mainstream service can.”



Main session takeaways

- ACCOs continue to deliver high-quality, culturally safe services despite chronic underfunding and workforce pressures.
- Funding inequity is profound: NGOs receive nearly 90% of funding, despite ACCOs supporting the highest-need communities and where Aboriginal children comprise close to half of all children in OOH in NSW.
- CAFS programs carry unrealistic KPIs compared to their limited funding.
- Workforce shortages, wage disparities, and cultural load significantly strain ACCO teams.
- ACCOs call for integrated service hubs, soft-entry programs, respectful partnerships and equitable, long-term investment.

Review of the Child Protection (Working with Children) Act 2012

- Rachael Ward, Acting Children's Guardian, NSW Government
- David Cockatoo-Collins, Senior Consultant | Cox Inall Ridgeway
- Yatu Widders-Hunt, Director | Cox Inall Ridgeway

The final session of the Forum focused on the upcoming review of the Working with Children Check (WWCC) Act 2012, led by the Office of the Children's Guardian (OCG) in partnership with Cox Inall Ridgeway.

Acting Children's Guardian Rachael Ward delivered a detailed breakdown of the OCG's role, noting that it is an independent statutory body with more than 270 staff working across WWCC, NDIS worker screening, OOH accreditations, child safe standards and reportable conduct.

She highlighted the scale of the system—more than 2 million people in NSW currently hold a Working with Children Check, with the OCG processing nearly 500,000 applications each year. Most applicants with no criminal history are cleared quickly, with 75 percent processed within one hour and 93 percent within five days. Rachael walked participants through the assessment process, including identity checks, risk assessments for offences such as drink-driving, automatic disqualifications for serious convictions, and the new internal review process, where decisions can be reassessed by a senior officer.

The presentation emphasised that the WWCC Act is undergoing a full legislative review, the first major review since 2018. Rachael outlined the broad scope of the review, which includes employee obligations, interactions with other child safety schemes, risk assessments, data mechanisms and consistency with national frameworks, noting the Commonwealth taskforce working toward a national model. She also acknowledged the importance of culturally safe reform, stating that "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples may have complex histories that impact access to child-related employment, and the system must work for us the same way it works for everyone else." She assured participants that community input will be valued and transparent.



Consultations will take place across NSW—including Newcastle, Nowra, Dubbo, Lismore, Parramatta, Liverpool, Camden Park, Albury, Queanbeyan and Broken Hill—ensuring broad demographic engagement. Rachael reaffirmed that the OCG is committed to culturally safe, respectful engagement, with an agreement to report back to Aboriginal communities on what was heard and how their feedback shaped decisions.

This final session closed the Forum with a focus on accountability, transparency and strengthening protections for children—reinforcing that the voices of ACCOs, families and community will be vital in shaping a fairer, culturally informed WWCC system.

Main session takeaways

- The WWCC Act is undergoing a full legislative review—its first major update since 2018.
- The review will cover employee obligations, child safe standards, data sharing, alignment with national schemes and cultural safety.
- Aboriginal people may face unique barriers due to complex histories; reform must ensure equitable, culturally safe access.
- Consultations will occur statewide and will include community, not just ACCOs, to ensure all voices are heard.
- Cox Inall Ridgeway will support engagement, ensuring that community voices—not agencies—shape the recommendations.
- There is a strong national commitment to improving consistency across jurisdictions through a future national WWCC model.

The two day Forum was closed by George Selvanera, AbSec's Director of Policy & Advocacy with a renewed sense of unity, purpose and determination across the sector.

Grounded on Worimi Country, the gathering brought together community leaders, ACCOs, practitioners, government partners, researchers, advocates and families in a shared commitment to strengthening outcomes for Aboriginal children, young people and families. Across all sessions—whether held inside or out on Country—the message was clear: meaningful change is only possible when Aboriginal voices, leadership and cultural knowledge are front and centre.



Over the two days, participants engaged deeply with the urgent issues facing our sector: transitions to ACCOs, restoration, housing for young people, accountability, funding inequities, and the need for culturally strong, community-led systems. Powerful presentations, lived experience storytelling, and open dialogue highlighted both the challenges we must confront and the immense strengths held within our communities. From the fierce advocacy of Grandmothers Against Removal to the hope offered by peer advocates, from policy analysis to grassroots wisdom, each contribution reinforced the collective responsibility we share.

The Forum also demonstrated the innovation and resilience of the ACCO sector—organisations that continue to deliver exceptional, culturally grounded support despite chronic underfunding and systemic barriers. The strong consensus around priorities such as statutory housing guarantees, mandatory transitions to ACCOs, Aboriginal-led oversight, and a Child Safety and Wellbeing Commission signals a clear path for advocacy moving forward.

As we concluded, the feeling across the space was one of solidarity and momentum. These two days were not just conversations—they were commitments. Commitments to our children, to our families, to culture, and to each other. The work ahead is significant, but so is our collective strength. Together, we rise, we lead, and we continue building a future where every Aboriginal child grows up safe, connected and surrounded by community and culture.

Glossary of acronyms

AARC	Aboriginal Authority for Restoring Children
AbSec	Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat
ACCO	Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisation
ACCM	Aboriginal Community-Controlled Mechanism
CAFS	Community and Family Services
CtG	Closing the Gap
DCJ	NSW Department of Communities and Justice
ECEC	Early Children Education and Care
FGC	Family Group Conferencing
GMAR	Grandmothers Against Removals NSW
HCEA	High-Cost Emergency Accommodation
IPART	Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal
LAFPA	Legal Assistance for Families Partnership Agreement
LALC	Local Aboriginal Land Council
NGO	New South Wales
NSW	Non-Government Organisation
OCG	Office of the Children's Guardian
OOHC	Out-of-home care
PSP	Permanency Support Program
QSF	Quarterly Sector Forum
TAC	Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre
TACCO	Tamworth Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation
WWCC	Working With Children's Check



AbSec

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