

AbSec

NSW Child, Family & Community
Peak Aboriginal Corporation

State of the ACCO Sector

Child Protection and Out-Of-Home
Care Census Interim Report

December 2025

Acknowledgement of Country

AbSec acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout New South Wales and their continuing connections to land, waters, and communities.

Our head office is located on the land of the Gadigal People of the Eora Nation, in Redfern, and AbSec operates statewide.

We acknowledge and pay our respects to the Traditional Owners of all lands and waters across New South Wales, honouring Elders past, present, and future.

We recognise and respect their enduring connection to Country, their ongoing care for community, and the preservation and practice of their culture for generations uncounted.

We acknowledge the Elders, leaders and advocates within our sector and pay our respects to them as knowledge holders within this space and every space.

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

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



AbSec

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.

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.

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, and ensures that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people remain connected to family, community, and culture. We are a member of the NSW Coalition of Aboriginal Peak Organisations (NSW CAPO) and the primary non-government organisation responsible for Target 12 of the New South Wales Closing the Gap partnership agreement.

Through advocacy, research, and sector leadership, AbSec works to address the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the New South Wales out-of-home care system 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.

In working towards this vision, AbSec are guided by the following 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 that serve them, with transparency and drive.

Table of contents

About AbSec	3
State of the ACCO Sector: At a Glance	5
Executive summary.....	7
About the Report	7
Key Findings	8
Introduction	11
ACCO Service Provision Across New South Wales	12
How are ACCOs Making an Impact?	18
What We Heard from ACCOs	18
• Gaps in Service Provision	18
• Opportunities for Strengthening Service Delivery	19
Funding and procurement processes	20
What We Heard from ACCOs	23
• Gaps in Funding	23
• Opportunities to Strengthen Funding	24
Alignment with National Frameworks	25
Aboriginal Child and Family Sector Workforce.....	26
What We Heard from ACCOs	27
• Gaps in Workforce	27
• Opportunities for Investment	28
Alignment with National Frameworks	29
Governance in ACCOs.....	30
What We Heard from ACCOs	30
• Gaps in Governance	30
• Opportunity to Strengthen ACCO Governance	31
Conclusion.....	32
Bibliography	33
Appendix A: Key Figures Growing the ACCO Workforce	34
Appendix B: Methodology	35
Glossary of acronyms	36

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State of the ACCO Sector: At a Glance

Vision

The Aboriginal community controlled sector is strong, sustainable, and growing, leading culturally safe services and being the preferred provider for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families in New South Wales (NSW).

Challenge

Despite being culturally appropriate and safe for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families in NSW, Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) are significantly under-resourced and under-trusted by government compared to non-ACCO Non-Government Organisations (NGOs).

- Funding remains disproportionately skewed with non-ACCO NGOs receiving seven times more funding (\$3.8 billion) as compared to ACCOs (\$578 million) over the last 3 years across Family Preservation, Targeted Earlier Intervention and Permanency Support programs. Funding rules are driven by Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and restrict ACCO-led service expansion – even when demand is clear.
- There are no ACCOs in child protection and out-of-home-care (OOHC) funded across Northern Sydney. ACCOs receive insufficient funding despite growing numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children that are reported at risk of significant harm or being removed.
- ACCOs are unable to match remuneration with DCJ/non-ACCO NGOs and Aboriginal staff have limited career development opportunities.
- Transition of Aboriginal children to ACCOs from non-ACCO NGOs and NSW Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) takes anywhere between 6 – 12 months. DCJ are not fulfilling their commitments to transition the case-management responsibility of Aboriginal children to ACCOs with a little more than one in five Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in OOHC having an ACCO provide casework in NSW.
- Despite having strong cultural governance structures, ACCOs face increasing administrative burdens that limit their ability to scale and deliver services effectively.

ACCOs also report they are too often an afterthought in broader reform conversations – limiting their capacity to lead system change and deliver outcomes to achieve Target 12 under Closing the Gap (CtG) which commits the NSW Government to reduce the rate of over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in OOHC by 45 per cent by 2031.

What ACCOs are calling for:

- Significantly more service integration and genuine partnership – through service hubs that address fragmented service delivery, streamline access to holistic and relevant support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families and ensures ACCOs lead design, delivery and decision-making in child protection reform processes.
- Long-term, equitable and proportionate investment that grows ACCO-led services and reflects the actual cost of culturally safe, community-led service delivery.
- Dedicated Aboriginal workforce strategy, that includes pay parity with DCJ and NGOs, training pathways, cadetships, and career development opportunities.
- Governance and business development supports that stabilise systems and reduce administrative load.

Investment in ACCOs should not be a choice, but a practical, achievable path to better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. Building the ACCO sector is how the CtG agreement is honoured and self-determination embedded with a system that works with and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Executive summary

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children remain significantly over-represented in the NSW child protection system, being 10 times more likely to be removed by DCJ into out-of-home-care (OOHC) than non-Indigenous children (*DCJ, Aboriginal-led Data Sharing Child Protection and Out of home care statistics, 2024*). Addressing this over-representation cannot happen without major investment in Aboriginal community controlled services that support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families. (*SNAICC, Stronger ACCOs, Stronger Families, 2022*).

ACCOs have long delivered holistic, culturally safe services, well before concepts like “one-stop shops” or “integrated hubs” existed (*SNAICC, Funding model options for ACCO Integrated Early Years Services, 2024*). ACCOs are recognised experts in supporting children, young people and families.

Yet, despite commitments for ACCOs to lead service delivery (*Closing the Gap, 2019*), ACCOs still receive far less funding than non-ACCO NGOs. Current government funding and service models limit ACCO self-determination and create barriers to providing the holistic wraparound support communities need.

About the Report

The interim report provides an overview of the ACCO child protection and OOHC sector landscape as it relates to service delivery, workforce, governance and community and client needs. The strategic purpose of the State of the ACCO Sector report is to strengthen the evidence base to progress Priority Reform 2 and Priority Reform 4 under Closing the Gap.

The report serves as a baseline of the ACCO sector across NSW and highlights the strength and commitment of ACCOs in keeping Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people connected to family, culture and Country. This research also identifies systemic barriers that ACCOs face in planning and delivering services. The interim report sets out findings and lines of inquiry that AbSec will validate with the ACCO child protection and OOHC sector in the coming months, with a final report planned for May 2026.

The report emphasises the need for flexible sustained funding, significantly scaled up transition of case management of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in OOHC to ACCOs, investment in building and sustaining the ACCO workforce and strengthening supports for effective governance. Underpinning these findings, is the need to embed self-determination and community control of funding and service delivery.

Key Findings

1. 75 ACCOs across NSW commissioned to provide child protection and OOHC services

Currently, there are:

- 21 ACCOs providing Family Preservation services across 11 districts
- 58 ACCOs providing services funded through the Targeted Earlier Intervention Program across 14 districts
- 23 ACCOs providing Permanency Support Program across 13 districts
- 7 ACCOs accredited to provide Residential Care placements – now known as Intensive Therapeutic Care across 6 districts
- 9 ACCOs serving as Aboriginal Child and Family centres across 8 districts.

AbSec's engagement with ACCOs highlight some key aspects:

- ACCOs deliver trauma-informed, wrap-around supports grounded in culture, family voice and community leadership. Despite these strengths, many work well beyond their contracted scope – stretching limited funding, travelling long distances and, at times, seeing fewer families because resources cannot meet demand.
- Access to specialist services such as NDIS, housing, mental health and behavioural supports remain a significant challenge, particularly in regional and remote communities. ACCOs are clear that an integrated service model – a one-stop hub to address the holistic needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families is what is required.
- Although there has been a steady increase in the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have received TEI services from ACCOs (from 1413 in 2020–21 to 5331 in 2024–25), there has been a decrease in the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people being case managed by ACCOs under the Permanency Support Program during the same period (from 1415 in 2021 to 1297 in 2024). This is despite more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people entering the OOHC system (DCJ, Annual statistical report, 2024–25).

2. Two percent of child protection funding is available to ACCOs for prevention and early intervention services.

In 2024–25, DCJ invested over \$1.6 billion in NGOs to deliver child protection services across NSW. Funding to non-ACCO NGOs continue to outstrip funding to ACCOs in both the total funding amount and annual funding growth. Over the last three years (2022–25), non-ACCO NGOs have received significantly higher funding than ACCOs across key child and family programs – around nine times more in Family Preservation and TEI, and around six times more in the Permanency Support Program. Overwhelmingly, most funding is directed towards the tertiary end of the child protection system with funding for Permanency Support Program service delivery comprising 78% of DCJ funding to NGOs, 85% of which was granted to non-ACCOs.

Compounding this, ACCOs, which are typically smaller organisations than large non-ACCO NGOs, have greater resourcing needs, workforce and compliance requirements and cultural obligations. The current funding does not equitably support all children. The funding made available for children with complex needs is mostly insufficient for ACCOs to deliver the necessary level of support and so many ACCOs are drawing on other resources and the commitment of their staff and communities to make up the difference.

Programs funded by DCJ	Year	Funding to NGOs (\$M)	Funding to ACCOs (\$M)
Family Preservation	2022–23	129.2 (91%)	13.4 (9%)
	2023–24	139.8 (90%)	15.1 (10%)
	2024–25	140 (90%)	15.4(10%)
Total for 3 years		409 (90%)	43.9 (10%)
Targeted Earlier Intervention	2022–23	165.8 (92%)	13.8 (8%)
	2023–24	172.3 (93%)	13.5 (7%)
	2024–25	178.8 (90%)	19.7 (10%)
Total for 3 years		516.9 (92%)	47 (8%)
Permanency Support Program	2022–23	865 (86%)	137 (14%)
	2023–24	946 (85%)	166 (15%)
	2024–25	1084 (85%)	184 (15%)
Total for 3 years		2895 (86%)	487 (14%)

Table 1: Distribution of funding by DCJ to ACCOs and non ACCO NGOs (2022–25)

3. Aboriginal workforce shortages and lack of business development opportunities

A lack of proportionate and sustained funding to the ACCO child protection and OOHC sector creates significant challenges in the recruitment and retention of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers make up approximately 50 percent of the ACCO workforce (though there are exceptions), and are essential to delivering culturally grounded support across the sector. Staff are often required to manage complex cases, travel long distances, and provide holistic care, but do so without the training pathways, adequate supports, or professional development opportunities routinely available in larger non-ACCO NGOs and DCJ.

4. Administrative burden without adequate system supports

ACCOs have strong governance and deep community accountability but continue to face heavy administrative and compliance workloads. Without dedicated systems and resourcing, and simplified and streamlined reporting requirements, governance will continue to remain a challenge. Targeted supports to standardise and stabilise core governance functions will enable ACCOs to effectively deliver services and support their workforce.

Targeting Investment Where it Counts

Supporting and growing the ACCO sector is fundamental to supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people to thrive. ACCOs are essential to ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children remain safely at home with their families, and communities.

ACCOs set out the following sector development priorities:

- Government must support ACCO-led service models including integrated hubs that could address program and funding silos.
- DCJ and non-ACCO NGOs should transfer all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in OOHC to ACCO case management as soon as possible.
- Funding must reflect the real cost of culturally safe, community-led support – including higher service intensity, workforce pressures and greater compliance requirements.
- Invest in Aboriginal workforce development through career development opportunities, mentoring, cadetships and succession planning.
- Strengthen ACCO governance through training, business development, legal and financial expertise, and streamlined reporting.

Between 2024–2025 in New South Wales, one in seven Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who were in contact with a caseworker were removed into out-of-home care (OOHC), compared to one in 15 non-Aboriginal children. Over the same time period, entries to care for Aboriginal children increased by 25.5 percent, far exceeding the 2.9 percent increase for non-Aboriginal children. Restoration rates remained extremely low, with only 2 percent of Aboriginal children returning to their families—the lowest rate nationally—with just 131 children restored home (DCJ, Annual statistical report, 2024–25). These figures highlight practices that too often separate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, culture and community rather than strengthening and supporting them to stay safely together.

Reducing this over-representation requires sustained investment in Aboriginal community-led supports. ACCOs¹ are best placed to deliver culturally safe, holistic services that keep the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people at the centre and uphold their connections to family, culture and Country. As the peak body, AbSec will continue to advocate for increased investment, authority and resources for ACCOs in the delivery of child and family services.

This work sits within the broader national policy context – Priority Reform 2 of Closing the Gap. The National Agreement on Closing the Gap (‘the National Agreement’) acknowledges that building the community controlled sector requires long-term capacity building, a strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce, effective peak bodies, and dedicated, reliable funding that aligns with community needs. Clause 55 of the National Agreement explicitly calls for increased prioritisation of funding to ACCOs and a higher proportion of services delivered by ACCOs (Cabinet, 2020).

A strengthened ACCO sector is essential to reducing the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in OOHC. ACCOs are uniquely positioned to provide early intervention and family preservation services in culturally safe and responsive ways (SNAICC, Family Matters, 2024). Increased investment, accompanied by a clear sector-strengthening plan, is critical to reversing current trends and achieving the outcomes intended in the National Agreement.

The purpose of this research is to highlight the unique strengths of ACCOs and the challenges they face in workforce, community needs, funding and governance. AbSec continues to build a strong evidence base to guide investment, inform policy and ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are leading the sector to keep children safe, strong and thriving within their families and communities.

This report aims to:

- Provide a comprehensive overview of the ACCO landscape including service coverage
- Build a more comprehensive understanding of ACCO experiences of service delivery, funding, workforce and governance
- Develop an evidence informed funding roadmap aligned with Priority Reform 2.

This is an interim report which AbSec will validate, enrich and finalise with ACCOs in early 2026. For further information on the methodology, see Appendix B.

1 ACCO – the definition of an ACCO set out in Clause 44 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap – an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Community-Controlled Organisation delivers services, including land and resource management that builds the strength and empowerment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and people and is:

- incorporated under relevant legislation and not-for-profit
- controlled and operated by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people
- connected to the community, or communities, in which they deliver the services
- governed by a majority Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander governing body.

ACCO Service Provision Across New South Wales

This report aims to:

- Provide a comprehensive overview of the ACCO landscape including service coverage
- Build a more comprehensive understanding of ACCO experiences of service delivery, funding, workforce and governance
- Develop an evidence informed funding roadmap aligned with Priority Reform 2.

This is an interim report which Absec will validate, enrich and finalise with ACCOs in early 2026. For further information on the methodology, see Appendix B.

In New South Wales, there are 75 ACCOs commissioned to provide child protection and out-of-home-care (OOHC) services. The distribution of service delivery² is as below:

- 21 providing Family Preservation services across 11 districts³
- 58 providing Targeted Earlier Intervention services across 14 districts⁴
- 23 providing Permanency Support Package services across 13 districts⁵
- 7 providing Residential Care placements – now known as Intensive Therapeutic Care across 6 districts⁶
- 9 serving as Aboriginal Child and Family centres across 8 districts.⁷

The ACCO sector is spread across metropolitan, regional and remote New South Wales, with an ACCO presence in most DCJ districts. Table 2 shows the distribution of Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and services they offer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families across NSW districts including Family Preservation, Targeted Earlier Intervention, Permanency Support, Residential Care, and Aboriginal Child and Family Centres.

2 DCJ data, currently not publicly available except for Targeted Earlier Intervention services.

3 Family Preservation services – Family preservation services are typically available to families who are in contact with the statutory child protection system where children have been reported as at risk of significant harm (ROSH).

4 Targeted Earlier Intervention services –one of the key early intervention initiatives for the NSW Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ), which aims to strengthen families and communities and reduce the number of children coming into contact with the child protection system.

5 Permanency Support Program – Permanency Support Program supports safety, wellbeing and positive life outcomes for children and young people in the child protection and OOHC systems in NSW.

6 Residential Care placements – Residential care is a type of out-of-home care (OOHC) provided to a small proportion of children and young people who have challenging behaviours and medium to high support needs. Intensive Therapeutic care will be replacing residential care across NSW over a two-year period as part of DCJ's reform work

7 Aboriginal Child and Family centres- Aboriginal Child and Family Centres (ACFCs) offer culturally-safe services to families with Aboriginal children aged up to 8 years of age. The centres provide communities with access to early childhood education and care services, child and maternal health programs as well as family support, playgroups and adult education opportunities.

District	Total number of ACCOs	Family Preservation	Targeted Earlier Intervention Services	Permanency Support Package	Residential Care Placements	Aboriginal Child and Family Centres
Central Coast	4	2	4	1		
Far West	3		3	1	1	
Hunter New England	14	4	9	8	2	2
Illawarra Shoalhaven	5	2	4	1		
Southern	2	1	1	1		1
Mid North Coast	8	2	6	3	2	
Murrumbidgee	3	2	3	2		
Nepean Blue Mountains	5		4	1	1	
South Western Sydney	3	2	2	1		1
Northern NSW	11	3	9	1		2
Sydney	7	3	6	2	1	
Western NSW	4		2	1		1
Western Sydney	3		1			2
Statewide			1			
Location unknown			3			
Total	75	21	58	23	7	9

Table 2 Breakdown of ACCOs providing services district wise in 2024 - 25

Figure 1 provides a map of ACCOs delivering child protection and OOHC services in NSW.



Figure 1: Draft map of ACCOs in New South Wales commissioned to provide child protection and OOH services in 2024–25

Family Preservation

The NSW Government invests more than \$160 million to provide 4,500 Family Preservation places each year. Currently, there are 67 Family Preservation service providers in NSW, including 21 ACCOs and 46 non-ACCO NGOs (DCJ, Redesigning Family Preservation in NSW, 2024). 7,525 Aboriginal children and young people accessed Family Preservation Program services in the year 2024–25. (DCJ, Annual statistical report, 2024–25).

In 2023 – 24, 7,894 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people were seen by a DCJ caseworker. Almost 10% of these children were seen in the Hunter, Western NSW and South Western Sydney districts. However, funding to ACCOs varies significantly across these districts: no ACCOs are funded in Western NSW, while ACCOs receive only 17% and 10% of Family Preservation funding in Hunter and South Western Sydney respectively. The basis for funding allocations across districts is not transparent and does not appear to reflect demand for these services.⁸

There are nine districts (Western Sydney, Western, Northern and Southern NSW, Nepean Blue Mountains, South-Eastern Sydney, Northern Sydney, Sydney and Far West) where no ACCOs are funded to deliver Family Preservation services in 2023–24. (DCJ, Aboriginal-led Data Sharing Dashboard, 2023–24)

⁸ Analysis is based on 2023–24 data due to the absence of publicly available 2024–25 district-level indicators for ACCOs.

These findings show a clear gap between where the need is greatest and where funding is directed. This highlights the need for stronger investment in ACCO-led Family Preservation services.

Targeted Earlier Intervention (TEI)

In 2024–25, 29,436 people who identified⁹ as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander accessed TEI services, but only 5,331 (18%) accessed services from ACCOs. During that year, 58 ACCOs were funded to deliver TEI services (DCJ, Targeted Earlier Intervention Program, 2024–25).

Figure 2 shows that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people made up a much larger share of TEI clients in remote areas, including almost 40% in the Far West and 30% in Northern NSW and Murrumbidgee in 2023–24. Only six districts (Far West, Murrumbidgee, New England, Nepean Blue Mountains, Mid North Coast and Western NSW) provide ACCO funding that is equal to or higher than the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people accessing services. There are no ACCOs providing TEI funded services in Northern Sydney and Southern New South Wales.

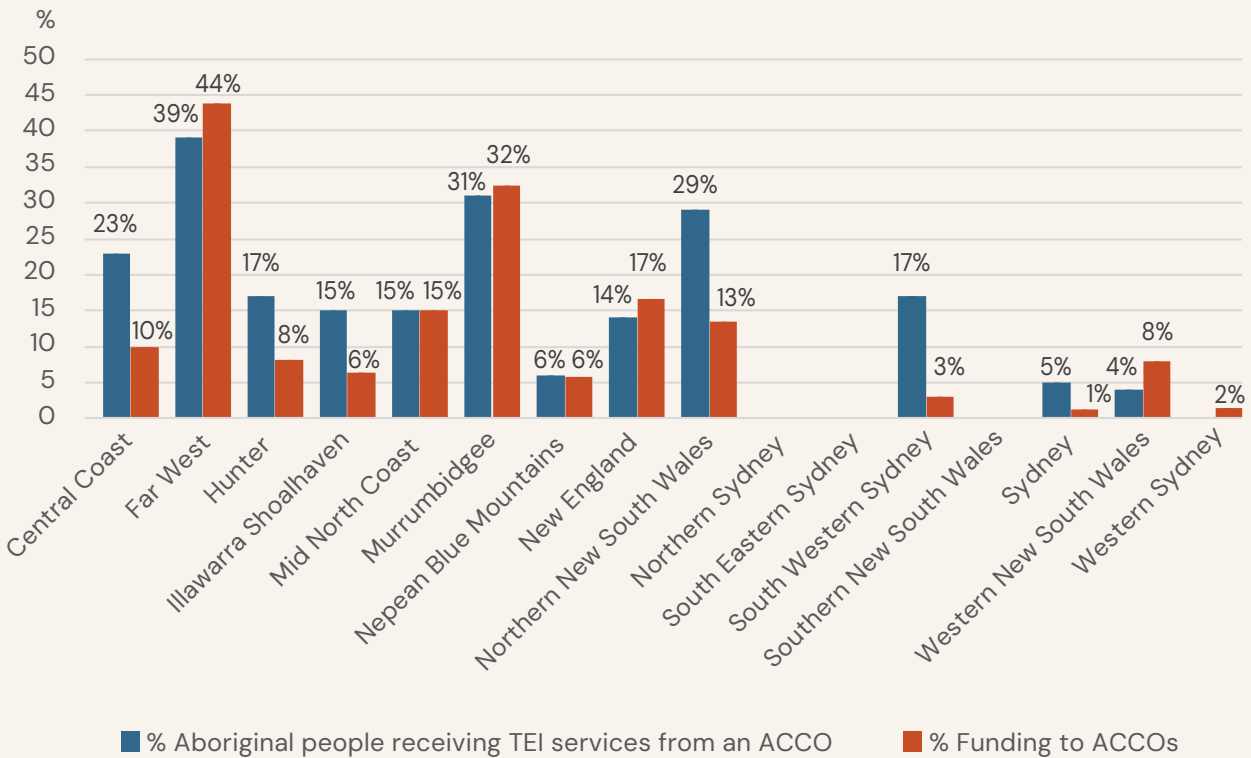


Figure 2: Proportion of Aboriginal people who received services from an ACCO and funding for ACCOs in each district in NSW (2023–24)

Overall, there has been a steady increase in the number of Aboriginal people who have accessed services from ACCOs from 1,413 in 2020–21 to 3,770 in 2023–24. Most districts have also seen proportionately more of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients supported by ACCOs over this period, with the exception of recent declines in Far West, Illawarra Shoalhaven, Mid North Coast and Nepean Blue Mountains.

⁹ DCJ may have misidentified some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children during their recording process, which means the numbers could vary based on the Department’s decisions.

Permanency Support Program Services

As at June 2024, there were 5,677 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people living in statutory OOHC across New South Wales (DCJ, Aboriginal-led Data Sharing Dashboard, 2023–24).

Of these:

- 47% (2,690) were case managed by DCJ
- 30% (1,690) were case managed by non-ACCO NGOs
- 23% (1,297) were case managed by ACCOs.¹⁰

Since 2021, there has been an eight percent decrease (from 1,415 in 2021 to 1,297 in 2024) in case management responsibility of Aboriginal children and young people by ACCOs. However, there is a 4% (from 1,630 to 1,690) increase by non-ACCO NGOs.

As one example, in Western Sydney in the year ending 30 June 2024, 31% children and young people who entered OOHC were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were:

- 15 times more likely to enter OOHC than non-Indigenous children
- 18 times more likely to be in care overall.

Table 3 below provides further detail on the distribution of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children across ACCOs, non-ACCO NGOs, and DCJ, along with the total PSP funding and annual funding per child, highlighting the funding disparities between provider types.

Children	ACCO	Non-ACCO NGO	DCJ
Aboriginal Children	1,297	1,690	2,690
Non-Aboriginal Children	32	4,057	2,518
All Children	1,329	5,747	5,208
Total PSP funding	\$166,800,000	\$946,500,000	unknown
Annual funding per child	\$125,508	\$164,695	unknown

Table 3: Number of Children in Care and Annual PSP Funding by Provider Type as at June 2024 (ACCO, Non-ACCO NGO, DCJ)

¹⁰ As at June 2025, 5,731 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people were in statutory out-of-home care across NSW. Of these, 2,785 were case managed by DCJ and 2,946 by non-government organisations (DCJ, Annual statistical report, 2024–25). However, publicly available data does not disaggregate NGO case management between ACCOs and non-ACCO NGO providers.

While ACCOs care almost exclusively for Aboriginal children (1,297 Aboriginal children compared with only 32 non-Aboriginal children), they receive significantly lower annual funding per child (\$125,508) than non-ACCO NGOs (\$164,695), notwithstanding the greater costs associated with delivering culturally safe care to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (IPART, Review of OOHHC Pricing, 2025).

Intensive Therapeutic Care Model

DCJ introduced the Intensive Therapeutic Care (ITC) in 2018–19 as a new model of residential care for children in statutory OOHHC to replace former residential care to holistically address the needs of children and young people and improve their safety, permanency and wellbeing. (DCJ, Permanency Support Program – Program Description, Appendix 5: Service Overview–Intensive Therapeutic Care, 2017)

According to DCJ, the aim is to:

- provide residential care placements for children over 12 years of age with high and complex needs “...who are either unable to be supported in foster care or require specialised and intensive supports to maintain stability in their care arrangements” (DCJ, Residential Care Placements, 2025)
- be flexible enough to respond to the needs of children and young people with the most complex support needs (DCJ, Fact sheet explaining ITC service system and types, 2019)

DCJ does not provide ITC services directly, but funds ACCOs and non-ACCO NGOs to provide these services.¹¹ As at September 2025, 15 organisations were providing ITC services across NSW. DCJ’s June 2025 data on contracted places in OOHHC shows only one ACCO operating in Intensive Therapeutic Care Home (ITCH) with eight contracted places. (Ombudsman, 2025).

Funding for ITC homes and ITC – Significant Disability is provided through a combination of a house package and a baseline package per child in placement.

As at 30 June 2024, 39% children in ITC were Aboriginal (272 of 700), 41% of children in ITCH were Aboriginal (160 of 390) and 41% of those in the selected houses (42 of 102) were Aboriginal. The displacement of Aboriginal children in ITC was raised as an issue in the 2020 Health Check. The tool DCJ uses to determine care and funding levels for children placed in ITC is not fit-for-purpose and is under review. (Ombudsman, 2025).

Aboriginal Child & Family Centres

Aboriginal Child and Family Centres (ACFCs) provide culturally safe services to families with Aboriginal children up to 8 years of age. These include early childhood care and education services, child and maternal health programs, family support and adult education opportunities. (DCJ, Aboriginal Child and Family Centres, 2025)

There are currently nine ACFCs operating across NSW with the current funding average across centres from 2023 – 28 being \$5.3 million.¹² The data for the number of people accessing services is not available publicly. However, the number of children accessing early childhood services ranges from 24 to 60 across centres.

DCJ is investing \$98 million under Brighter Beginnings to deliver six new ACFCs by June 2027. It is also doubling the annual operational funding for each centre to \$1.1 million to enhance the existing nine centres (SNAICC, Family Matters Report, 2025).

¹¹ DCJ retains functions of parental responsibility but funds NGO designated agencies to provide authorised care. Authorised carers (under s 137 of the Care Act) includes principal officers of designated agencies who are authorised to exercise daily care responsibility as outlined in s 157 of the Care Act.

¹² DCJ data, currently not publicly available

How are ACCOs Making an Impact?

ACCOs are delivering meaningful, culturally grounded outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families across NSW.

Strengths in service delivery are:

- Culturally strong, trauma informed practice that wraps holistic supports around families and strengthens culture, connection and healing, through Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing
- Casework led by lived experience and community knowledge, ensuring practice is grounded in what families need, not what systems assume
- Integrated, multi-disciplinary service models, often achieved through collaboration with local services—even when ACCOs are not funded to do so and are not situated within the area
- Decision-making that centres families and community voice, ensuring plans and goals reflect Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing.

ACCOs Supporting Our Families

Maliga Safer Families – Eleanor Duncan Aboriginal Services

This program aims to improve child and family wellbeing, parenting and educational outcomes, whilst encouraging role modelling of positive behaviours, healthy lifestyle and education choices and safety in the home. The program builds strong, healthy and resilient individuals, families and communities, which in turn enhances pathways to education and employment and reduces substance abuse, violence and contact with the criminal justice system.

Nikinpa Aboriginal Child & Family Centre –Muloobinba Aboriginal Corporation

A culturally safe early years hub that brings childcare, preschool, health services, mental health supports and community programs together in one place. Families describe Nikinpa as a safe, welcoming space where they feel seen, supported, and able to access services they otherwise would not.

Tamworth Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations

This place-based partnership model is a coalition between five leading ACCOs and Tamworth Regional Council that aims to improve outcomes for Aboriginal people living in Tamworth. This approach to partnership at the local level provides a framework for self-determination and shared decision-making under Closing the Gap and offers a model for others to adopt.

What We Heard from ACCOs

Gaps in Service Provision

- **Limited flexibility and high KPI demands:** ACCOs report that service delivery is tightly controlled by DCJ and driven by strict KPIs, leaving little room to respond to community needs. For example, under the new Community and Family Support program, ACCOs must meet a large number of KPIs with funding that does not match the scale or complexity of expectations.



“We have to show evidence of cultural practices and supports provided when there is no funding for them”

- **Geographical challenges and funding limits:** ACCOs struggle to reach families in remote or regional areas, especially on the South Coast and Western New South Wales, because travel and operating costs are high and funding is limited.
- **Barriers to specialist services:** Families face difficulties accessing supports like the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), behavioural supports and health services. Concerns about mandatory reporting can also prevent families from seeking supports early.
- **Supporting children with more complex needs:** There is insufficient funding to provide best quality supports for children with more complex needs. This particularly impacts smaller ACCOs.
- **Supporting families beyond funded areas:** ACCOs routinely support families outside their funded areas or program scope, because they will not turn away a family in need – even when it requires additional, unfunded effort.



“We never say no to a family if the family needs support, which means it is additional work and additional resourcing we have to find solutions to”

- **Funding restrictions across districts:** Funding conditions can prevent ACCOs from delivering services across district boundaries. This leads to gaps where families cannot access culturally safe ACCO services due to contract limitations.

Opportunities for Strengthening Service Delivery

- **Invest in ACCOs to deliver culturally safe services:** With appropriate funding and structural support, they can meet growing community needs more effectively and deliver outcomes that mainstream NGOs cannot replicate.
- **Develop integrated service hubs:** “one-stop shops” bringing health, education, housing, income support, mental health, and family services together in one culturally safe space. This reduces fragmentation, increases access to relevant support for the whole family and creates a model aligned with Aboriginal ways of supporting children and families. A youth hub/refuge could also help provide culturally safe supports.
- **Expand and resource Aboriginal community-led restoration:** NSW has the lowest rate of restoring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to their families across the country (2%) (SNAICC, Family Matters, 2024), reflecting systemic failures to prioritise reunification, cultural connection and family strengthening. ACCO-led restoration teams can offer the dedicated, culturally centred support needed to safely restore Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to their families.
- **Shift funding toward early intervention:** Redirect funding to Aboriginal-led prevention and early intervention.
- **Increase funding in regional and remote areas:** we must recognise that harder to reach communities require extra resources to ensure equality of access to opportunities and relevant support.
- **Work in genuine partnership:** co-design services with ACCOs and families consistent with Priority Reform One and to deliver the best outcomes for their children.

Funding and procurement processes

Overall Funding and Current Source of Funding for ACCOs

Most ACCOs delivering child protection and out-of-home-care (OOHC) services are primarily funded by DCJ. ACCOs continue to receive less funding for the services they provide – both statewide and nationally – than non-ACCO NGOs.

The current state government funded programs are:

Family Preservation and Intensive Support

- Intensive Family Preservation, Intensive Family Based Services and Resilient Families: early intervention, family preservation, restoration support or OOHC placement stability.
- Multi-systemic Therapy for Child Abuse and Neglect (MST-CAN): Goal is family preservation and restoration.
- Functional Family Therapy – Child Welfare: Goal is family preservation and restoration.
- Permanency Support Program – Family Preservation: Goal is family preservation and restoration.
- Nabu: Goal is family preservation and restoration.
- Safe Care: Parenting training program to reduce neglect and abuse among families with children from birth to five years.

Early Intervention and Prevention

- Community and Family Support Program: brings together targeted early intervention and Family Connect and Support Services.
- Parenting programs.
- Supported playgroups.

Permanency Support Program

- Foster Care and Aboriginal Foster Care
- Therapeutic Sibling Option Placement
- Residential Care Placements now delivered as Intensive Therapeutic Care which include:
 - Intensive Therapeutic Transitional Care
 - Intensive Therapeutic Care Significant Disability
 - Therapeutic Home Based Care
 - Intensive Therapeutic Care Home
 - Supported Independent Living (SIL) and Therapeutic SIL.

- Therapeutic Care and Behaviour Support
- Joint Protocol for reducing contact with the Criminal Justice System.
- Interim and emergency residential arrangements:
 - Interim Care Model
 - Individual Placement Arrangements
 - Special OOHC.
- Case Coordination (Preservation, not in placement and Post Permanency Support)
- Guardianship
- Preservation or Restoration

Programs funded by DCJ	Year	Funding to NGOs (\$M)	Funding to ACCOs (\$M)
Family Preservation	2022-23	129.2 (91%)	13.4 (9%)
	2023-24	139.8 (90%)	15.1 (10%)
	2024-25	140 (90%)	15.4(10%)
Total for three years		409 (90%)	43.9 (10%)
Targeted Earlier Intervention	2022-23	165.8 (92%)	13.8 (8%)
	2023-24	172.3 (93%)	13.5 (7%)
	2024-25	178.8 (90%)	19.7 (10%)
Total for three years		516.9 (92)	47 (8%)
Permanency Support Program	2022-23	865 (86%)	137 (14%)
	2023-24	946 (85%)	166 (15%)
	2024-25	1,084 (85%)	184 (15%)
Total for three years		2,896 (86%)	487 (14%)

Table 4: Proportion of funding to ACCOs and non-ACCO NGOs (2022-25) DCJ ALDS

Government funding continues to be heavily weighted towards downstream statutory components of OOHC and lacks the vision needed to drive progress on Target 12 by investing in Aboriginal community-led early intervention and wraparound supports which prevent entries into OOHC.

Table 4 sets out how ACCOs receive a small proportion of funding compared to mainstream NGOs. Over the past three years, close to 90 percent funding has been allocated to NGOs. Although there has been a slight increase in funding for ACCOs in the last year, it is not proportionate to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. This is inconsistent with progressing CtG Priority Reform 2.

Districts	Funding to NGOs (\$M)	Funding to ACCOs (\$M)	% Funding to ACCOs
Hunter	205.8	33.4	14%
Far West	2.7	0.7	21%
Central Coast	18.2	8.4	32%
Illawarra Shoalhaven	60.5	22.3	27%
Mid North Coast	15.3	47.5	76%
Murrumbidgee	12.7	9.5	43%
Nepean Blue Mountains	43.4	3.6	8%
New England	53.8	9.6	15%
Northern NSW	57.1	15	21%
Northern Sydney	0.9	N/A	
South Eastern Sydney	23	0.3	1%
Southern NSW	64.1	0.9	1%
Sydney	89	1.8	2%
Western NSW	76.7	15.4	17%
Western Sydney	258.4	10.3	4%
South Western Sydney	143.1	40.6	22%
Other statewide services	279.8	N/A	
Total	1,404.5	219.3	14%

*Table 5: Distribution of funding across districts for the year 2024-25
(Family Preservation, Targeted Earlier Intervention and Permanency Support Package)*

The Mid North Coast is the only region where ACCOs receive slightly more funding than non ACCO NGOs, reflecting a stronger Aboriginal community-controlled presence. In contrast, districts such as the Hunter, Western Sydney, Sydney and Nepean Blue Mountains, Southern NSW and South Eastern Sydney show minimal investment; suggesting opportunities for sector development, capacity strengthening and fairer commissioning.

New South Wales Aboriginal Family Preservation Program

The New South Wales Government has committed to directing 40 percent of the \$900 million Family Preservation funding (approximately \$350 million) to ACCOs through the Aboriginal Family Preservation Model. This represents a significant opportunity to strengthen culturally responsive service delivery, allowing ACCOs to design programs in partnership with their communities. New contracts are expected to start in April 2026.

If fully realised, this funding will quadruple current statewide allocations to ACCOs for Family Preservation services, offering potential for sector growth, capacity building and improved outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

Community and Family Support Program

The recommissioned Community and Family Support (CAFS) program will increase funding to ACCOs, with approximately 15 percent funding anticipated for ACCOs. CAFS merge the previous Targeted Earlier Intervention (TEI) and Family Connect and Support (FCS) programs, commencing January 2026 with a five and half year contract term. Whilst this recommissioning signals intent to strengthen ACCO partnerships, this remains far from the target of 30 percent which was first set out by DCJ in 2017.

What We Heard from ACCOs

Gaps in Funding

- **Current funding is insufficient:** Existing funding models do not address the impacts of past genocide and current practices affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people, and families.
- **Funding should match the need:** ACCOs need funding that reflects the complexity of their work. This includes travel, casework, family finding, cultural connections and permanency planning for Aboriginal children and young people.



“We make an impact by taking the scraps we are given and turn it into something magical. It is our passion and drive that helps us keep us keep our kids at home and safe.”

- **High expectations, limited resources:** with the new Community and Family Support Program, the expectations on ACCOs are extensive — far beyond what the current funding levels can realistically support.



“We got invited for the recommissioning of TEI, but were told clearly there is no additional funding.”

- **Competition and uncertainty:** the tendering processes often place ACCOs in direct competition for the same funding. Contract outcomes are not known until close to the start of the new arrangements, which impacts the ability of ACCOs to recruit and retain staff and plan effectively for ongoing work.

- **Inadequate support for children:** DCJ processes for accessing additional carer packages are complex, and the difference in the payments provided for children with low and high needs is small. Payments should reflect the actual needs of each child.
- **Inconsistent transition processes:** The pace and scale of transitioning children to ACCOs varies (from 3–6 months or more) and the proportion of Aboriginal children case managed by ACCOs remains low. Partnerships between ACCOs and other service providers varies across districts, and ACCOs report that there is sometimes a lack of genuine collaboration around transitions. Some non-ACCO NGOs pay foster carers more than the DCJ base rate, which ACCOs must use.



“Aboriginal children and young people are being transitioned solely on their identity and not for what Aboriginal organisations can offer culturally.”

- **Need for a dedicated funding model:** Expanding and strengthening the Aboriginal community-controlled sector requires a dedicated funding model that does not compete with large non-ACCO NGOs.
- **Government role in early intervention:** The NSW Government can support better outcomes by investing in early supports and prevention services that ACCOs are best placed to provide.

Opportunities to Strengthen Funding

- **Adequate funding for regional and remote areas:** ACCOs working in regional and remote communities shoulder higher service delivery costs due to travel, workforce shortages and limited infrastructure. Funding must reflect these realities and “not a one size fits all” model to ensure that Aboriginal children and families receive timely, high-quality, and culturally grounded care regardless of where they live.
- **Fair and transparent investment:** ACCOs have historically been underfunded, under-resourced, and under-valued, despite providing culturally safe and effective services. DCJ has a responsibility through Closing the Gap, to ensure equitable funding for ACCOs and transparency in how funding is allocated between ACCOs and NGOs.
- **Partnerships for best outcomes:** The best outcomes for Aboriginal children arise when ACCOs and mainstream services work in genuine partnership, grounded in a shared understanding of the child’s cultural framework and community.
- **Accountability for transitions** is needed from the Minister and the DCJ for the ongoing delays in transitioning case management of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in OOHC to ACCOs. This must be accompanied by a robust monitoring and auditing process to track NGO transitions and ensure these occur in a timely and transparent way.
- **Acknowledgment of culture and knowledge:** Funding agreements and service delivery must acknowledge and value the cultural knowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people bring to every part of working with their families and communities.
- **Capacity building as a priority:** Capacity releasing from non-Aboriginal organisations to ACCOs needs to be a key performance indicator in any partnership funding arrangement involving mainstream organisations. This needs to be measurable and reportable.

Alignment with National Frameworks

National Child and Family Investment Strategy

The National Child and Family Investment Strategy is a key activity of the Safe and Supported: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan 2023 – 26.

The Investment Strategy focuses on:

- shifting funding towards prevention and early support to reduce child abuse and neglect.
- investing in ACCOs to deliver an increased proportion of culturally appropriate child and family services.

The Australian Government has committed \$10 million over five years (2022–23 to 2026–27). This is to develop the Investment Strategy and an Innovation Fund. Waminda South Coast Women's Health and Wellbeing Aboriginal Corporation is one of the 10 ACCOs across Australia to have secured funding through the Innovation Fund for a project on early, targeted, healing – informed culturally safe support services.

The Strategic Plan Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Sector Development

This Strategic Plan provides a national framework to guide investment decisions, ensuring maximum impact of funding provided by Australian Governments to support the development of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector. Endorsed by the Joint Council on Closing the Gap and developed with the Coalition of Peaks, it prioritises investment across key sectors including disability, health, housing, and early childhood services.

The NSW Government has committed \$7.4 million over four years (2020–21) to support sector development in alignment with these priorities.

A New Approach to Programs for Families and Children

A new national program is proposed that will replace five existing Australian Government programs.

It aims to:

- Fund a wide range of high-quality, evidence-informed services – from general community support to targeted help for children and families during times of crisis
- Make grant and reporting processes simpler, so organisations can spend more time supporting families and less time filling out forms
- Strengthen services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

Under the proposed program, funding will prioritise ACCO-led service delivery in communities with significant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations. This will follow the Closing the Gap Grants Prioritisation Guide.

Public consultation is ongoing, with SNAICC advocating for dedicated sector engagement to shape the allocation of approximately \$400 million in funding. This consultation represents a critical strategic opportunity for the sector to influence investment towards Aboriginal-led early intervention and prevention services.

Aboriginal Child and Family Sector Workforce

The ACCO sector is evolving at a rapid pace, and it is important to plan for the short, medium and long-term needs of the Aboriginal Child and Family Sector Workforce. Evidence shows that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff build strong relationships and trust with Aboriginal children, young people and families in a culturally appropriate, safe and responsive manner (SNAICC, Family Matters, 2024) (SNAICC, Stronger ACCOs, Stronger Families, 2022).

Key strengths highlighted through AbSec's community yarns were access to culture through work, cultural supervision and less rigid hierarchies in ACCOs.

ACCOs consistently emphasise the importance of workforce growth and development. Primarily, this involves increasing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across all roles and levels (from direct practitioners through to senior management) in the children and family services workforce.

Insufficient funding, pay disparities and lack of leadership opportunities as compared to government or non-ACCO NGOs are identified as major challenges in the ACCO sector. An Aboriginal workforce planning and development strategy will help strengthen the capabilities of ACCOs to deliver services effectively and efficiently in a sustainable manner.

“

“We have good furniture at our resource centre which has been donated, however, no funding or staff to look after these kids. I am the full time staff and have 2 part time staff delivering TEI services for close to 60 young people.”

“

“It's hard to compete with the bigger agencies such as NGOs and DCJ, who offer bigger salaries.”

“

“In most ACCOs, most of the employees working in corporate services are white and we want to change that.”

Workforce Statistics and Estimated Needs in New South Wales

- **Under-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff:** Despite the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across the child and family welfare sector, nationally only 2.3 percent of the workforce identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander in 2020.(Welfare workforce, AIHW, 2021).
- **Casual Employment:** Approximately 22 percent of the NSW workforce in child, youth and family services were employed on casual contracts (M, Cortis, & Blaxland, 2017). There is no recent publicly accessible data on staffing in NSW child, youth and family services across the sector.
- **Data gaps:** There are currently no reliable figures on the size and composition of the Aboriginal child and family sector workforce across NSW, although through our more limited research we find that approximately 50% of the ACCO workforce is Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.
- **Workplace profile:** The workforce is primarily female (approximately 76 to 83 percent) with an average age of 40. Nearly half of the practitioners hold qualifications at a certificate or diploma

level, around 23 percent hold a Bachelor level qualification, and 9 percent have a post-graduate qualification.¹³

- **Pay and retention challenges:** ACCO caseworkers are currently earn \$80,000 – \$90,000 on average. Under the new Child Protection Award, caseworker salaries in the government sector are set to increase to between \$100,000 and \$116,969. DCJ is creating 100 new “Leading Caseworker” roles with salaries of up to \$121,000. (DCJ, Child Protection Award, 2025). This widening pay gap is a significant concern for ACCOs, as it will further disadvantage them in attracting and retaining skilled staff.

What Makes ACCOs Culturally Stronger?

- **Access to culture** – Staff can stay connected to culture through their work that is grounded in Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing.
- **Relational approach** – Staff feel heard, respected and able to contribute with a less rigid hierarchy.
- **Staff recognition** – ACCOs recognise and value the cultural, community and lived experience staff bring, rather than just their position and role.
- **Cultural supervision** – Supervision includes guidance, cultural support and reflection that honours staff wellbeing and cultural responsibilities.

Key Figures

There are currently 23 ACCOs in NSW that are accredited by the Office of the Children’s Guardian to provide statutory OOHC services. Only 23 percent of the Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC are case managed by ACCOs (ALDS).

Based on AbSec’s projections, it is estimated the Aboriginal child and family sector workforce needs to be at minimum **4,721** in NSW.

This includes:

- **3,994 FTE** Aboriginal caseworkers
- **619 FTE** Aboriginal case managers
- **108 FTE** Aboriginal senior managers

These figures are current and do not take into account the expected increase in Aboriginal children and young people in NSW coming into contact with child and family services and overcoming caseworker vacancy rates (see Appendix A).

What We Heard from ACCOs

Gaps in Workforce

- **Wage gaps make recruitment and retention hard:** ACCOs struggle to attract and keep skilled staff because salaries are lower than in government or non-ACCO NGOs.
- **High staff turnover:** staff often leave due to heavy workload, complex caseloads and the emotional toll of working in the child protection and OOHC systems.

¹³ Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2018). Census of Population and Housing, 2010, TableBuilder. Accessed 11 January 2020.



“Those with the best of intentions, who wish to give back to the sector they were involved in, leave or have real difficulties because the environment is very triggering”

- **Challenges in regional recruitment:** Finding qualified and experienced staff within regional areas is a major challenge. As a result, there are higher number of staff without the required qualifications and experience, which requires more supervision and investment in workforce development.



“We are spending our time and resources in training Aboriginal trainee caseworkers and that is proving beneficial for us, because the pool of experienced caseworkers is gone”

- **Short-term contracts limit growth:** temporary contracts make it hard for ACCOs to build workforce and capacity increasing the risk of burnout and turnover.
- **Limited career development:** few established and resourced career development pathways as well as limited leadership opportunities make recruitment and retention harder.



“We need to build our workforce capacity and quality, but how are you meant to do that without contracts and budgets being long-term and timely”

Opportunities for Investment

Resourcing for workforce needs a clear understanding of caseload, client ratios and geographical reach which reflects the intensity and complexity of work required in each community. This includes:

- Ensure a dedicated and identified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce, as part of a labour market in which people working in community-controlled sectors have wage parity. ([SNAICC, Early Childhood Strategy, 2021](#))
- Stronger collaboration in co-designing the training program and upskilling caseworkers and other professionals which should be resourced by the government. This includes collaborating with TAFE and universities to help create qualification pathways.
- Cultural supervision, peer supervision and mentoring as workforce development strategies for the recruitment, retention and upskilling of staff. Strategies include a designated mentor for new Aboriginal workers to encourage skill-building and confidence and to offer support during the induction process. Cultural supervision can support Aboriginal workers in understanding their cultural obligations and the blurred lines between family and work roles.
- Using social media to showcase ACCO strengths and community impact that can help attract new talent and improve visibility of career pathways.
- Gathering and sharing evidence on what is working well in other Aboriginal communities can help refine recruitment, retention and cultural supervision strategies across the sector.

Alignment with National Frameworks

Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021 – 2031

Action 4 under the [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan](#) aims to develop a national approach to building a sustainable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child and family sector workforce. As an initial step action 4.a seeks to scope current and future needs of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce, and community-controlled child protection and family support workforce.

Strategic Plan for Funding the Development of the Aboriginal and Community-Controlled Sector

Under Schedule A of the Strategic Plan, the Joint Council identified the following priorities for funding the early childhood care and development sector:

- Developing a dedicated and identified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood development, protection and care workforce
- Strengthening peak bodies to support and build the capability of organisations in the sector to deliver services and to support shared decision-making with governments.¹⁴

National Skills Agreement (NSA) – Closing the Gap (CtG) – Stage 2

The National Skills Agreement (NSA) commits to enabling investments to support Closing the Gap via skills and vocational, education and training (VET) sector actions which complement programs designed to address the entrenched inequity faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families. The AbSec Learning and Development Centre (LDC) is one of seven Aboriginal Community Controlled Registered Training Organisations (ACC RTOs) that has been part of a Community of Practice with the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) and the NSW Department of Education (DoE). The NSA Stage 2 Implementation Plan (IP) was signed off by the NSW and Commonwealth governments in November 2025 and provides \$100 million to support activities that:

- expand investment in the capability, sustainability and growth of the Aboriginal Community Controlled and First Nations Owned training sector, and
- grow the First Nations VET workforce and boost cultural competency of mainstream RTOs.

In 2026, AbSec will focus on expanding training offerings which meet the needs and emerging needs of community, ACCOs and other employers, and which strengthen wraparound student supports. This requires ACCOs to have sustainable business models and to ensure we offer innovative approaches and new training pathways to connect with Aboriginal people who have so much to offer the Child and Family and Child Protection and Care workforce.

¹⁴ Coalition of Peaks. The Strategic Plan for Funding the Development of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community-Controlled Sector 2020; Available from: [https:// coalitionofpeaks.org.au/download/ documents](https://coalitionofpeaks.org.au/download/documents).

Governance in ACCOs

ACCOs have long demonstrated that culturally grounded, community-led governance delivers better outcomes for Aboriginal children, young people and families. The strength of ACCO governance lies in deep cultural connections, community led-decision making and accountability that centres family, culture and connection to Country (SNAICC, Stronger ACCOs, Stronger Families, 2022) (AbSec, ACCO Forum Report, 2024).

Our yarns also highlighted collaborative leadership and culturally grounded practices by ACCOs – a key strength that is lacking in mainstream organisations.

However, the same body of evidence also shows that despite this strong cultural governance, ACCOs continue to face structural and systemic pressures that limit their ability to maintain and grow effective organisational governance. These pressures are not due to deficits within ACCOs but stem from under-resourcing, intensive demands placed on their governance bodies, and administrative expectations that are disproportionate to their size and funding.

What We Heard from ACCOs

Gaps in Governance

- **Governance overload caused by chronic underfunding:** ACCOs are expected to meet the same – and often greater – accountability, reporting, and risk requirements as large mainstream NGOs, but with significantly fewer staff and less stable funding. This creates governance strain across executive, board and corporate functions.



“There are no business development supports for ACCOs with the funding received. It is the government’s responsibility to put in place proper mechanisms to ensure there are no funding gaps and everyone is accountable.”

- **Insufficient investment in corporate services and infrastructure:** Many ACCOs lack dedicated staff for Finance, Human Resource, Information Technology, policy functions, contract management and training – functions that underpin strong governance. This forces CEOs and senior leaders to carry multiple roles, without being funded to build enabling systems. Board members of the ACCOs though culturally strong, may not have the required technical expertise, and upskilling them risks burnout.



“DCJ does not provide adequate resourcing for things in the back office such as data systems. But you’re required to keep data stored in a secure way and completely understand that, but then allow for some of those back office costs to be part of the contract.”

- **Growing regulatory and compliance expectations:** Reports show ACCOs face increasingly complex regulatory requirements (procurement, reporting, accreditation, program logics, risk oversight). This diverts time from cultural governance and strategic work particularly for executives.

- **Governance demands pull leaders away from community and cultural leadership:** Strong cultural governance is one of the ACCO sector’s greatest strengths — yet governance pressures often push leaders into administrative firefighting, limiting time spent on community priorities, workforce development, succession planning and strategic partnerships.



“We’re proudly governed by all Aboriginal people and we have a very good Aboriginal board of community members, which is exactly what we should have for an Aboriginal community-controlled organisation. But we are struggling at the moment as there’s not enough professional expertise in that board because of the significant projects we are toying with.”

One message is consistently clear:

ACCOs do not lack governance capability — they lack the resourcing and system settings that allow their governance strengths to operate effectively.

Opportunity to Strengthen ACCO Governance

There are clear opportunities for NSW Government that can be led by ACCO driven solutions.

Funded governance support: Government must invest in building the technical capability of the ACCO sector across key aspects such as legal, financial and project management. This will support ACCO leadership to make key decisions in the best interests of the community, while ensuring the organisation functions efficiently and is sustainable. The funding must also be flexible to support unique models such as survivor-led governance and small regional ACCOs with limited staff.

Invest in corporate services infrastructure: ACCOs require resourcing support with human resources, financial management, policy and compliance, secure data systems and quality and safety functions. Contracts should allow these costs to be built in.

Co-designed governance and casework training: Government must work with ACCOs to build capability and strengthen governance. This includes supporting ACCOs to design and deliver culturally safe training and workforce development.

Support with succession planning and Aboriginal leadership development: This is especially important for young Aboriginal people who want to contribute to their communities but often face challenges navigating the complex child and family services system.

ACCOs are delivering culturally grounded, community-led supports for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families, often missing in current non-ACCO NGOs and government agencies. Across every yarn, ACCOs spoke about their strengths and the pressures they carry—often quietly, often without the resourcing or recognition their work deserves.

Despite limited funding, small teams and heavy administrative demands, ACCOs consistently demonstrate strong governance foundations, deep community accountability, and service models built on culture, relationships and trust. Their impact is evident in the way families engage, in the strength of local networks, and in the culturally safe wraparound supports that mainstream providers cannot replicate.

For NSW Government, these findings highlight an urgent opportunity:

ACCOs must receive equitable, proportionate and sustainable funding that reflects both the historical under-investment in ACCOs and the actual costs of delivering culturally safe, community-led services.

Investing in Aboriginal workforce pathways that enable ACCOs to recruit, retain and plan succession— through fair remuneration and building a stable, skilled and culturally strong workforce.

Resourcing ACCO governance so it matches the responsibilities placed on them—ensuring Boards, systems and structures are supported to operate effectively and sustainably.

ACCOs must be partners in designing and delivering solutions, not just implementers of programs shaped within government systems.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people will thrive if they are safe, strong and connected to family, culture, community and Country. Achieving this requires shifting resources, authority and decision-making to ACCOs, in line with Closing the Gap and NSW Government commitments to self-determination.

This report reflects and honours what ACCOs have repeatedly told us. It reflects their stories, their realities, and their aspirations for their communities. And it offers the NSW Government a pathway to act: to align investment with need, to support self-determination, and to work alongside ACCOs to deliver the outcomes all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people deserve.

The voices of ACCOs are clear. The NSW Government has an opportunity to respond with trust, partnership and real investment. Invest in ACCOs as nation building institutions, because when ACCOs are supported, Aboriginal communities are strengthened.

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Appendix A: Key Figures Growing the ACCO Workforce

Key Figures

There are currently 23 ACCOs in NSW that are accredited by the Office of the Children's Guardian to provide statutory OOHC services. Only 23 percent of the Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC are case managed by ACCOs (ALDS).

Based on AbSec's projections, it is estimated the Aboriginal child and family sector workforce needs to be at minimum **4,721** in NSW.

This includes:

- **3,994 FTE** Aboriginal caseworkers
- **619 FTE** Aboriginal case managers
- **108 FTE** Aboriginal senior managers

The calculations are based on staff client ratio informed by the AbSec's Strengthening Aboriginal Families Model Framework.

Targeted Early Intervention: AIHW (2023–24) estimates that around 70,163 Aboriginal children and young people in NSW are vulnerable. Using a ratio of 1 caseworker for every 50 children, this would require 1,403 caseworkers, supported by 140 case managers and 18 senior managers (ratios: 10 caseworkers per case manager; 8 case managers per senior manager).

Intensive Intervention (Child Protection Notifications): DCJ ASR 2024–25 reports 25,096 notifications about Aboriginal children. Using a ratio of 1 caseworker per 20 children, 1,254 caseworkers would be needed, supported by 251 case managers and 50 senior managers (ratios: 5 caseworkers per case manager; 5 case managers per senior manager).

Crisis Intervention (Child Protection Substantiations): DCJ ASR 2024 – 25 reports 4,044 substantiations. Using a ratio of 1 caseworker per 5 children, this would require 808 caseworkers, supported by 161 case managers and 32 senior managers (ratios: 5 caseworkers per case manager; 5 case managers per senior manager).

Out-of-Home Care (OOHC): DCJ ASR 2024 –25 reports 6,327 Aboriginal children in OOHC. Using a ratio of 1 caseworker per 12 children, 527 caseworkers would be needed, supported by 65 case managers and 8 senior managers (ratios: 8 caseworkers per case manager; 8 case managers per senior manager).

Appendix B: Methodology

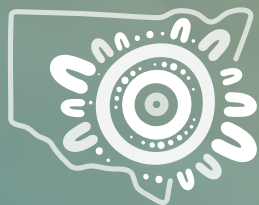
AbSec utilised a mixed consultation methodology with ACCOs. This included an online survey, in-depth stakeholder interviews, community yarn ups in Dubbo, Kempsey and Bateman's Bay and a workshop at the AbSec Quarterly Sector Forum with 17 ACCOs.

The online survey was designed to collect in-depth information on service delivery, workforce, funding, transition of Aboriginal children and governance. ACCO consultation forums involved yarns with ACCOs emphasising the qualitative aspects of the report.

A comprehensive desktop review was also undertaken to inform the development of the report. This included literature scans of state and national level policies, datasets and evaluation. These sources confirmed the insights shared by ACCOs including the structural barriers, funding trends, workforce challenges and the broader policy context influencing ACCO service delivery. AbSec also requested data from DCJ on the contracts awarded to service providers which is listed below. This evidence base supports the analysis and key themes emerging from yarns with ACCOs across NSW.

Glossary of acronyms

ACCO	Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisation
CAFS	Community and Family Support Program
CtG	Closing the Gap
DCJ	New South Wales Department of Communities and Justice
KPI	Key Performance Indicators
MST-CAN	Multi-systemic Therapy for Child Abuse and Neglect
National Agreement	National Agreement on Closing the Gap
NDIS	National Disability Insurance Scheme
Non-ACCO NGO	Non-Government Organisation which is not an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation
NSW CAPO	New South Wales, Coalition of Aboriginal Peak Organisations
OOHC	Out-of-Home-Care
ROSH	Risk of Significant Harm
TEI	Targeted Earlier Intervention
SIL	Supported Independent Living
LDC	Learning and Development Centre
VET	Vocational, education and training
NSA	National Skills Agreement
IP	Implementation Plan
RTO	Registered Training Organisation
AECG	Aboriginal Education Consultative Group
NSW DoE	New South Wales, Department of Education



AbSec

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