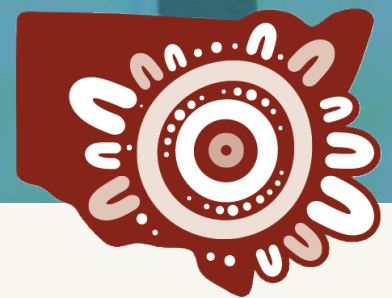


AbSec Quarterly
**Sector
Forum**

AbSec



Walking Together Collaborative Pathways to Holistic Family Wellbeing

February 2026 Sector Forum Report

Dubbo Rhino Lodge, Dubbo/Wiradjuri Country



Acknowledgement of Country

AbSec acknowledges Wiradjuri people as the Traditional Custodians of the lands in Central Western NSW, where the February 2026 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 February 2026 Quarterly Sector Forum held on Wiradjuri Country in Dubbo marked AbSec's first Forum of 2026. The event brought together ACCOs, community members, policy leaders, researchers and government representatives to share knowledge, strengthen partnerships and shape the direction of reform across the New South Wales child and family sector.

The Forum created a space for practical reflection on what each discussion means for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families, communities and the sector. It combined policy updates, lived experience, place-based practice and strategic discussion in ways that reflected the breadth of work underway across New South Wales. It set the direction for discussions on AbSec's next Strategic Plan, and the role of a peak body in a rapidly shifting reform environment.



Welcome to Country

The Forum opened with a Welcome to Country by Wiradjuri Elder Aunty Margaret Walker, who welcomed participants to Wiradjuri Country and grounded the gathering in local cultural authority, history and responsibility. Her address set a respectful and reflective tone for the two-day Forum.

Aunty Marg is a descendant of Wilay and Wiradjuri people and has been deeply connected to her community through her work with Allira since it began, including as a staff member and cook. Her grandchildren have attended the centre, and she joined the Board in 2023. A passionate advocate for community, Aunty Marg is committed to seeing strong, thriving spaces for young people.



The Forum opening acknowledged the importance of young Aboriginal voices in sector spaces. Local Wiradjuri and Kamilaroi man Brendan Fuller introduced himself as Emcee, setting the tone for the Forum. From the outset, it reflected a key theme that was carried throughout the event: children, young people and community members must lead, advocate and drive reform conversations. It brings to life AbSec's strategic priorities of advancing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination, ensuring government hears our voices and sector leadership.

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.

The diversity of individuals and organisations in the room was critical. It ensured a wide range of perspectives, experiences and expertise were shared, strengthening the depth of discussion and supporting more informed, community-grounded outcomes across the sector.

204 individual attendees

78 organisations represented over the two-day event

Organisations that registered included:

- Aboriginal Legal Service (NSW/ACT)
- ACWA (Association of Children's Welfare Agencies)
- Australian Childhood Foundation
- Barnardos Australia
- DCJ (Department of Communities and Justice)
- Legal Aid NSW
- Life Without Barriers
- Link-Up NSW Aboriginal Corporation
- Lowitja Institute
- Mission Australia
- NCOSS
- NIAA (National Indigenous Australians Agency)
- NSW Health
- SNAICC
- The Benevolent Society
- Uniting NSW
- University of New South Wales
- Waminda
- South Coast Medical Service Aboriginal Corporation
- Riverina Medical and Dental Aboriginal Corporation (RivMed)

● John Leha, Chief Executive Officer | AbSec

John Leha opened the Forum by welcoming delegates to Dubbo. He acknowledged the significance of gathering on Wiradjuri Country at the beginning of a year that was already proving demanding for the sector. His remarks positioned the Forum as a place for connection, shared learning, accountability and collective action.

John reflected on the intense reform environment facing ACCOs and the broader sector, including major developments in Family Preservation funding and the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) out-of-home care (OOHC) reform agenda. In that context, he described the Forum as an opportunity to reconnect with purpose, to hear directly from one another about what is working and what needs improvement, and to maintain momentum on the issues that matter most to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families in New South Wales.

“At a time when we should be moving toward community control, we cannot afford to take steps backwards. Our goal is simple: our children must be safe, must thrive, and must remain connected to family, culture and community.”

– John Leha

John also linked the Forum to AbSec’s broader advocacy agenda, speaking about the continuing need to shift resources, authority and trust to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. He pointed to key areas of ongoing concern: the extremely slow pace of transition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to culturally safe care provided by ACCOs, the critically low rate of restoration for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, pressure on family support programs and the heavy administrative burden on services. John reiterated the need for genuine investment into Aboriginal community-controlled solutions, rather than piecemeal reform: a central plank of the AbSec Strategic Plan 2023–2026.

John also highlighted areas of active work for AbSec. These include Strong Families Our Way, which is leading the statewide rollout of Aboriginal Community-Controlled Mechanisms (ACCMs), and the joint advocacy with other peak bodies toward a NSW Child Safety and Wellbeing Commission, and a NSW Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.

John highlighted Know Your Rights as a key initiative to equip families with greater know-how to navigate the child protection and OOHC system, alongside efforts to strengthen the evidence base available to the sector.

Main Session Takeaways

- The opening remarks connected day-to-day sector pressures to the wider reform agenda
- AbSec’s priorities were framed through the lens of self-determination, keeping children safe and together with their families, accountability and the need for stronger community-controlled infrastructure
- The Forum was positioned as an active feedback loop between ACCOs, community and AbSec’s ongoing advocacy work and commitment to sector leadership and ensuring government hears our voices.

Consultation About the Review of the Working with Children Check

- Yatu Widders Hunt, Director | Cox Inall Ridgeway
Chloe Gunning, Consultant | Cox Inall Ridgeway
Bianca Dufty, Deputy Aboriginal Children's Guardian | Office of the Children's Guardian
Alice Lim, Senior Legal Officer | Office of the Children's Guardian

This session focused on the Office of the Children's Guardian's (OCG) review of the Working with Children Check scheme. The presenters explained the current purpose of the scheme – screening people performing child-related work in New South Wales and continuously monitoring relevant records – and outlined why a further review is now underway. They noted that the scheme commenced in 2013 and was previously reviewed following the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. They note that the policy environment has shifted considerably since then.

Particular attention was given to changes including the introduction of the Child Safe Scheme and the push towards nationally consistent approaches in Working with Children Check processes. The session signalled that this review was an opportunity to ask more fundamental questions about who requires a clearance, how decisions should be made, how status changes are communicated, and what a scheme that is fair and child-safe should look like in practice.

The issue that mattered most to Forum participants was how any reform affects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities. The discussion invited reflection on the experience of kinship carers, carers whose histories intersect with complex system involvement, and the risk that rigid or purely compliance-based approaches unintentionally exclude Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from caring roles, or from the workforce more broadly.

The session spanned the intersection of safeguarding and justice with participants encouraged to provide direct feedback through table activities, written submissions and further consultation sessions in Dubbo and online.



"It's a really important review, and it's really important that our communities are strongly represented in the recommendations that we put forward."

– Yatu Widders Hunt

Main Session Takeaways

- The review was presented as a live consultation rather than a finished reform package, with multiple avenues for sector and community input
- Participants highlighted that child safety and cultural safety must be held together; systems that screen for risk cannot ignore Aboriginal community context
- The session reinforced concern that workforce and kinship implications must be carefully considered in any future change.

Aboriginal Governance Framework for Brighter Beginnings

- Maja O’Dell, Manager Reform and Design | Brighter Beginnings
Joseph Achenza, Senior Policy Officer | Brighter Beginnings
Hayley Walsh, Senior Policy Officer | Brighter Beginnings

The Brighter Beginnings team presented on the cross-government initiative focused on pregnancy through to the early years of life. They described the Brighter Beginnings program as a collaborative commitment to improve child health and development outcomes by working across NSW Government agencies and intervening early, before disadvantage becomes more entrenched.

A key part of the presentation was about the scale and complexity of the initiative. The presenters explained that eight NSW Government agencies are involved. Core work is led by NSW departments of Health, DCJ, Education and Customer Service, and supported by agencies including Aboriginal Affairs and partners connected to the Closing the Gap architecture. Programs include support for families during pregnancy, early childhood services, services that support families engage with systems and initiatives that prepare children for school.

The session was not framed as a simple program update. The presenters’ priority was to hear from the sector about what meaningful Aboriginal governance of Brighter Beginnings could look like in practice. Participants were asked to consider the structures through which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families are represented, prioritised and protected in early intervention policy.

“At the forefront of our mind ... we really do focus on putting Aboriginal children at the centre of everything that we do in Brighter Beginnings.”

– Maja Odell



The session spoke to a recurring tension across reform agendas: the difference between Government consulting communities, and genuine shared decision-making. While participants support coordinated and integrated early-years support, the conversation returned to the need for stronger Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authority, clearer accountability and genuine partnership and co-design.

Main Session Takeaways

- The session drew attention to aspects of the government investment in early intervention and the crucial importance of the pregnancy-to-five period to children's life chances
- Participants were invited to shape the governance conversation
- The strongest message from discussions was that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance must be embedded from the outset if early intervention is to be effective and trusted.

● Kristie Burge, Founder & Executive Director | Bunmabunmarra Service

Kristie discussed Bunmabunmarra’s culturally grounded approach to addressing homelessness, domestic and family violence (DFV), and mental health in the Central Western NSW. Established in 2024, Bunmabunmarra Service is an ACCO delivering holistic, healing-focused supports to individuals experiencing disadvantage. Its model is grounded in cultural safety and Aboriginal knowledge systems, with a strong emphasis on strengthening connections to community, culture, and Country. The organisation responds to gaps in mainstream service access, particularly for Aboriginal people navigating complex systems in Central Western NSW.

Kristie outlined four key programs offered by Bunmabunmarra Service. Their Gibir House program (Gibir meaning Man in Wiradjuri language) provides a 10-bedroom supported accommodation service in Dubbo for men experiencing homelessness, housing instability, exiting custody, or on bail. The Winhangarra program (Winhangarra meaning “hear, think, listen” in Wiradjuri language) supports individuals experiencing housing instability, homelessness or barriers to accessing services. A key challenge identified is the complexity of systems and paperwork, with the program providing practical navigation and advocacy support to improve access and outcomes.

“The cycle ends when healing begins.”

– Kristie Burge

The Warrior Way program is a culturally grounded domestic and family violence healing and recovery initiative for men, women, and young people. It supports participants to build respectful, non-violent relationships through connection to culture, community, and Country. Funded under Closing the Gap Target 9, the program also works with young people aged 17–18 on DFV-related charges, reflecting a strong early intervention focus.

Their Walumarra Strong Families program (Walumarra meaning “to protect” in Wiradjuri Language) delivers the Leaving Violence Program, funded by the Commonwealth Department of Social Services. Walumarra is part of a regional face-to-face trial of the program, providing all the same financial support plus face-to-face case planning, risk assessment, and wraparound supports. In this way, Walumarra offers a much more holistic and personalised, community-based service.



Main Session Takeaways

- Holistic, community-led and culturally-grounded responses are critical to addressing complex intersectional disadvantage faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- Dedicated, culturally safe navigation and advocacy support are key to addressing barriers faced by Aboriginal people in navigating and accessing mainstream services
- Integrated, early intervention models are key to breaking cycles. Programs like Warrior Way and Gibir House show the value of combining housing, supports for change and cultural healing.

From Tender to Transformation: ACCO Transition in Youth Justice Work

● Kevin Jones, General Manager, Youth Family and First Nations Language Services | REDI.E

Kevin used this session to reflect on REDI.E's experience in transitioning youth justice work into the Aboriginal community-controlled sector. Kevin delivered an engaging session covering ethics, power and system change. The title logic of the presentation – from tender to transformation – captured the core message: that moving programs into ACCOs only matters if it changes who holds influence, how services are designed and whose knowledge is taken seriously.

Kevin spoke openly about the tendering process and the risks of over-promising in order to stay competitive. He argued that ACCOs should not be forced to under-cost cultural work, treat community engagement as an add-on, or make unrealistic commitments simply to meet commissioning expectations. He described an approach that is grounded in what can be delivered ethically, culturally and safely. This includes ensuring adequate time for relationship-building, transparent assumptions about workforce and strong cultural governance.

The presentation then moved beyond tendering to implementation. Kevin emphasised that real community engagement begins before a program starts and requires careful attention to local histories of harm, distrust and resilience. He also discussed the challenge of balancing evidence-based models with Aboriginal cultural knowledge, workforce development, supervision, and the role of lived experience workers whose value to program delivery may not fit neatly within mainstream probity frameworks.

Kevin also spoke to the pressures that often accompany transition work. This includes microaggressions, lateral violence and an absence of growth mindset commissioning. The overall message was that transition cannot be treated as a technical transfer of contracts. It needs structural change, flexible commissioning, deep community engagement and a willingness to shift power in practical terms.



"The transition is more than just about moving contracts. It's about changing practice. It's about changing influence in systems."

– Kevin Jones

Main Session Takeaways

- This session moved the conversation about ACCO transition to power, ethics and system design
- Cultural governance, community engagement and lived experience workforce capability were described as infrastructure, not optional extras
- The presentation made clear that procurement reform without broader structural reform will not deliver genuine transition.

Sharing Deadly Practice: Child Protection Services for Aboriginal Children and Families in Dubbo

● Sheena Olsen, Founder and Director | Oyster Tribe Aboriginal Corporation

Sheena offered an honest and valuable account of what is required to establish an Aboriginal Community–Controlled Organisation in the current environment. Drawing on her vast experience in child protection, consulting and community work, Sheena described the establishment of Oyster Tribe as the result of years of planning, consultation and a strong conviction that Dubbo needed more Aboriginal–controlled service responses that were designed around community need.

The presentation outlined Oyster Tribe’s emerging service mix. This includes youth programs, child protection work, NDIS advocacy and broader cultural and wellbeing initiatives. What made the session particularly compelling was the honesty in describing the barriers to building an ACCO. This was not a story of simple growth, but one of structural difficulty: identifying Board members, meeting compliance requirements, building infrastructure and accessing the establishment support that policy suggests is available, but in practice, is often very difficult to secure.

A major theme was the challenge of establishing Aboriginal–led out–of–home care capacity. Sheena outlined her efforts to seek support from government and mainstream providers, as well as her relationship with AbSec, and about the gap between stated commitment to transition and the reality. This resonated strongly with wider sector concerns about ACCO growth being expected without the level of investment that would make such growth sustainable.



“How can systems actually come together to help us Aboriginal communities? Because we know how to do our work. We’ve been doing it for 1000s of years, and we know what needs to be done.”

– Sheena Olsen

The presentation provided valuable insights, as both a practice case study and reflection of policy in action. It showed the determination and capability within community, while highlighting how ACCOs are forced to build despite the system, rather than with meaningful support behind them.

In the context of the wider learnings, Oyster Tribe’s experience underscored that supporting ACCO development requires long–term establishment funding, practical infrastructure support and a genuine commitment to community–controlled service expansion.

Main Session Takeaways

- Demand for Aboriginal community–led services is strong, but support for establishment remains difficult and under–resourced
- The session exposed the gap between policy commitments to ACCO transition and practical support available to emerging organisations with the realities of how these commitments are implemented
- Long–term investment in infrastructure, governance and capability is essential if growing the ACCO sector (a Closing the Gap strategic priority) is to be more than symbolic.

● Caitlin Parker, Policy Officer | AbSec

Caitlin presented the launch of the Know Your Rights website. The website is a major practical resource designed with Aboriginal mothers, researchers and community partners to equip Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families with more know-how to navigate the child protection and OOHC system in New South Wales. The presentation described how the website is an accountability tool, an advocacy resource and a response to what families have consistently said about their experiences of system contact: that they are too often left in the dark, uncertain of their rights and forced to learn the system while under immense pressure and experiencing significant distress and trauma.

The website draws on the Bring Them Home, Keep Them Home research led by A/Prof BJ Newton at the UNSW Social Policy Research Centre, that centres the voices of Aboriginal parents and families with lived experience of the NSW child protection system. It follows different family journeys through the system and combines guidance about what should happen consistent with law and policy and grounded in the actual insight of what families can encounter in practice.

A key strength of the resource is its accessibility. Caitlin walked through features including animations, informational videos, guides, flowcharts, artwork and practical journals that families can use to record information and build their own evidence. This emphasis on accessibility aligned closely with the project's purpose: families need clear, culturally grounded tools that help them stay strong and advocate for their children.

The launch carried an important political message as well. Caitlin noted that while system-level accountability reform remains vital, families cannot wait for institutions to become more responsive before receiving support. The Know Your Rights resource is therefore part of building accountability from the ground up: equipping families with knowledge of what should happen, recognising when systems are failing them, and navigating interactions with greater confidence and knowledge.

"Don't wait for someone to save you. Don't wait for the system to change. It won't happen quick enough. Know your rights, learn the system and make noise."

- Parent

Access Know Your Rights here: <https://kyr.org.au/>



Main Session Takeaways

- Know Your Rights was presented as a practical resource built with and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families navigating the child protection system
- The website integrates legal and policy guidance with lived-experience knowledge and user-friendly tools such as animations, flowcharts and journals
- The session reinforced that family empowerment and system accountability must move together.

● Panel Session: Parents and researchers who developed the Know Your Rights tool

The parent panel brought the themes of the website launch into life. Two Aboriginal mums spoke powerfully about what it means to navigate the child protection system over many years, to keep fighting for children under extraordinary pressure, and to carry the emotional, practical and relational weight of system intervention long after formal decisions have been made.

What made this session so important was the position from which the mums shared their stories. The mums were not invited as case studies, rather as brave experts whose knowledge shaped the research that the Know Your Rights resource is built on.

The discussion touched on trauma, confusion, grief, persistence and the exhausting work of trying to understand how such profound harm can continue under systems that are designed to protect children. The mums highlighted the role that knowledge, solidarity and speaking out can play in resisting that harm. Their contributions reinforced why resources like Know Your Rights are essential and why these are never a substitute for deeper structural reform.

This session is best understood as a critical contribution to policy and practice. It reminded the room that child protection reform must be answerable to the people most affected by the system. Without that, policy language risks drifting too far from the daily realities of fear, confusion, endurance and advocacy that families, especially Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families who are disproportionately over-represented in the system, continue to carry.

Access Know Your Rights here: <https://kyr.org.au/>



"If I'd had this when I was going through the system it would have made a big difference, I just remember feeling so alone and not knowing where to turn"

– Parent

Main Session Takeaways

- The panel reframed lived experience from personal testimony to expert knowledge that shapes quality research, policy and service design
- Families described long-term system harm alongside extraordinary persistence and strategic advocacy
- The session reinforced that practical resources matter but cannot replace structural change and system accountability.

● John Leha, Chief Executive Officer | AbSec

Day two opened with consultation on AbSec's 2026–2029 Strategic Plan. John noted the current plan is nearing completion and that the Forum provided a chance to test AbSec's theory of change, reflect on the outcomes the sector wants to see, and consider what a peak body should prioritise in the next phase.

The consultation was grounded in one simple question: what is the role of a peak body? John encouraged participants to think not only about what AbSec currently does, but about the expectations held by communities, ACCOs, young people and families, and how those expectations should shape advocacy, coordination and sector support. In this framing, strategic planning was not treated as an internal organisational exercise but presented as a collective conversation about purpose, priorities and accountability.

"It's really about understanding what the role of AbSec as a peak body is."

– Parent

The session also acknowledged current challenges within the sector. John spoke on how administrative burden can pull organisations away from direct practice, reflection and connection, and about the importance of being clear on ultimate outcomes rather than becoming trapped in fragmented reform agendas. Participants were invited to help shape AbSec strategic priorities, identify missing elements and to consider how AbSec can best coordinate a collective response to address entrenched issues in the NSW child protection and OOHC system.

This conversation modelled a particular way of planning: one that starts with community understanding of the problem and desired outcomes, not abstract performance measures. In that context, it ensured that broader themes of leadership, accountability and self-determination kept returning to the central question of what kind of peak the sector needs.



Main Session Takeaways

- The consultation centred on priorities, outcomes and the expectations communities and ACCOs hold of AbSec as the peak body for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child and family sector in New South Wales
- Strategic planning is led by community as a collective and continues to evolve as a sector conversation
- Participants were asked to reflect on what AbSec does, could do and how current priorities and theory of change can continue to match the evolving reform landscape.

● Eamon Brodie, Policy Officer | AbSec

Eamon presented AbSec work to develop a more comprehensive and sector-controlled map of NSW child and family ACCOs. The workshop began with a practical question: if someone needs to find an ACCO in another part of the State, or understand what services are delivered by ACCOs in a particular district, where would they go? Existing public maps were partial, service-specific and not created from an Aboriginal community-controlled perspective.

The presentation walked participants through the logic of building the AbSec ACCO map and described the frustration of relying on fragmented official sources, the work involved in confirming which organisations were ACCOs, and the difficulty of sourcing reliable information about targeted early intervention and family preservation services. This underscored the ways in which the project was as much about making useful data transparent as it was about producing a digital tool.



Eamon discussed several features and functions of the ACCO map including:

- The ability to filter ACCOs delivering child and family services by service type and district,
- Search for ACCOs by name
- Details such as service locations, addresses, websites and the programs delivered by each ACCO.

“By serving as a point in time snapshot of the ACCO sector over time this could be used to chart the growth of the ACCO child and family sector”

- Eamon Brodie

The session moved beyond the technical aspects of the project and discussed the importance of Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Governance – that information about the ACCO child and family sector should not sit with government or be mediated by non-Aboriginal institutions but that the ACCO sector itself should govern and own its data. Data sovereignty is about more than just access, it's about who gets to define the sector, represent its reach, and shape the evidence that aids advocacy and reform.

Main Session Takeaways

- The dashboard addresses a sector gap by bringing together service information that has previously been fragmented or very hard to access
- The project was presented as both a practical tool and a data sovereignty initiative
- By showing the complexity of the underlying work, the session highlighted the importance of investing in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems and data governance.

Sharing the Richness of Our Culture and Responsibilities of Custodianship

- Aunty Pam Wells, Founder | Tubbah-Gah Wiradjuri Aboriginal Corporation
Jackie Wells | Tubbah-Gah Wiradjuri Aboriginal Corporation

This session brought a strong place-based and culturally grounded perspective to the Forum. Aunty Pam Wells and Jackie Wells described how Tubbah-Gah Wiradjuri Aboriginal Corporation (TWAC) has evolved. TWAC was initially established to deliver cultural performances and has grown into broader cultural mentoring and identity-strengthening work across the community.

A significant theme in the presentation was that not all prevention work looks like formal child protection programming. The presenters were clear that TWAC does not deliver statutory or crisis-oriented services. Instead, they positioned their work as early support, where strengthening cultural identity, ceremony, belonging and intergenerational connection can change the trajectory of a young person's life diverting them from potential statutory system involvement.



The session highlighted:

- strong cultural leadership and deliberate governance, supported by a small, skilled board and a network of cultural leaders
- the role of cultural leaders as mentors carrying deep cultural responsibility, not just performers
- work spanning schools, families and community spaces, with a focus on teaching, ceremony and cultural knowledge transfer
- ongoing funding challenges for community-led prevention work, including the need to piece together resources
- the gap between what communities know is valuable and what systems recognise as core service delivery
- the need for sector strengthening to include investment in cultural foundations that keep Aboriginal children, young people and families strong and safe.

“What we think of ourselves is that right at the early intervention stage where it matters, where we can actually make a difference in a young person’s life or in a family’s life.”

- Aunty Pam Wells

Main Session Takeaways

- The session broadened the definition of child and family sector work to include cultural mentoring, ceremony and identity-building as prevention
- The presenters showed how local cultural authority and community trust are central to effective early intervention
- Funding systems continue to undervalue cultural work even when communities know it is foundational to safety, belonging and wellbeing.

Mounty Aboriginal Youth & Community Services: Panel on the Lived Experience of Aboriginal Young People in Mount Druitt

● Jess Brown, Isaiah Sines, Dillon Saunders, Adam McKellar and Taleigha Glover

Mounty Aboriginal Youth and Community Services presentation provided a powerful lived experience perspective on growing up in Mt Druitt and the ongoing gaps in support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people. Speakers reflected on their own experiences growing up in Mounty. They described how, growing up, youth services options were minimal with police-run facilities such as Police Citizens Youth Clubs (PCYC), which many young people did not feel comfortable accessing, often the only option.

A key theme was the lack of accessible, culturally safe and consistent support for young people, particularly after hours. Presenters described how, in the absence of early intervention and community-based services, many young people are driven into cycles of disenfranchisement, run ins with police and involvement with systems such as child protection and youth justice. The discussion highlighted that support is often difficult to access, with young people and families required to actively seek out or “beg” for support rather than being proactively engaged or referred.

The session drew attention to the broader system response, including the significant cost of youth detention. Speakers questioned the potential impact of investing those resources into culturally grounded, community-led programs that support young people earlier and more effectively.



A strong call was made for youth services that are designed and delivered by Community, rather than institutions that may be perceived as extensions of policing or surveillance. This includes the need for safe, welcoming spaces where young people feel comfortable, supported and understood. The presenters also emphasised the importance of flexible service delivery, particularly programs that operate outside standard business hours, when young people are most likely to need support.

“Once you turn 18 it feels like you just get dumped and there’s no support, you go back to that same support and they can’t help you anymore because you’re over 18 then you go to jail and all of a sudden they’re back to help you”

– Mounty Yarns panel member

Mounty Aboriginal Youth and Community Services is one such organisation providing a judgement-free space where young people can speak openly about their experiences and connect with people who understand. The session reinforced that addressing gaps in youth support requires sustained investment in community-led, culturally safe initiatives that meet young people where they're at and meet them with empathy and understanding not monitoring and surveillance.

Main Session Takeaways

- Culturally safe and accessible youth support is effective at reducing statutory and carceral system involvement
- Community-led, flexible youth spaces provide safe and non-judgemental spaces for young people
- Investment is misaligned with outcomes – funding should be redirected from statutory systems to community early intervention and prevention services.

● George Selvanera, Director, Policy & Advocacy | AbSec

The Dubbo forum brought together policy, practice and lived experience, with a consistent emphasis on the need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authority across every part of the child and family system in New South Wales.

Self-determination was always central. Whether the topic was early intervention, youth justice transition, family advocacy, governance or data, speakers repeatedly returned to the need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations holding meaningful authority and decision-making capabilities; not being invited in after core decisions are made. Another central focus was on the need for significantly expanded Aboriginal-led prevention and early intervention that are grounded in culture, identity and community connection.



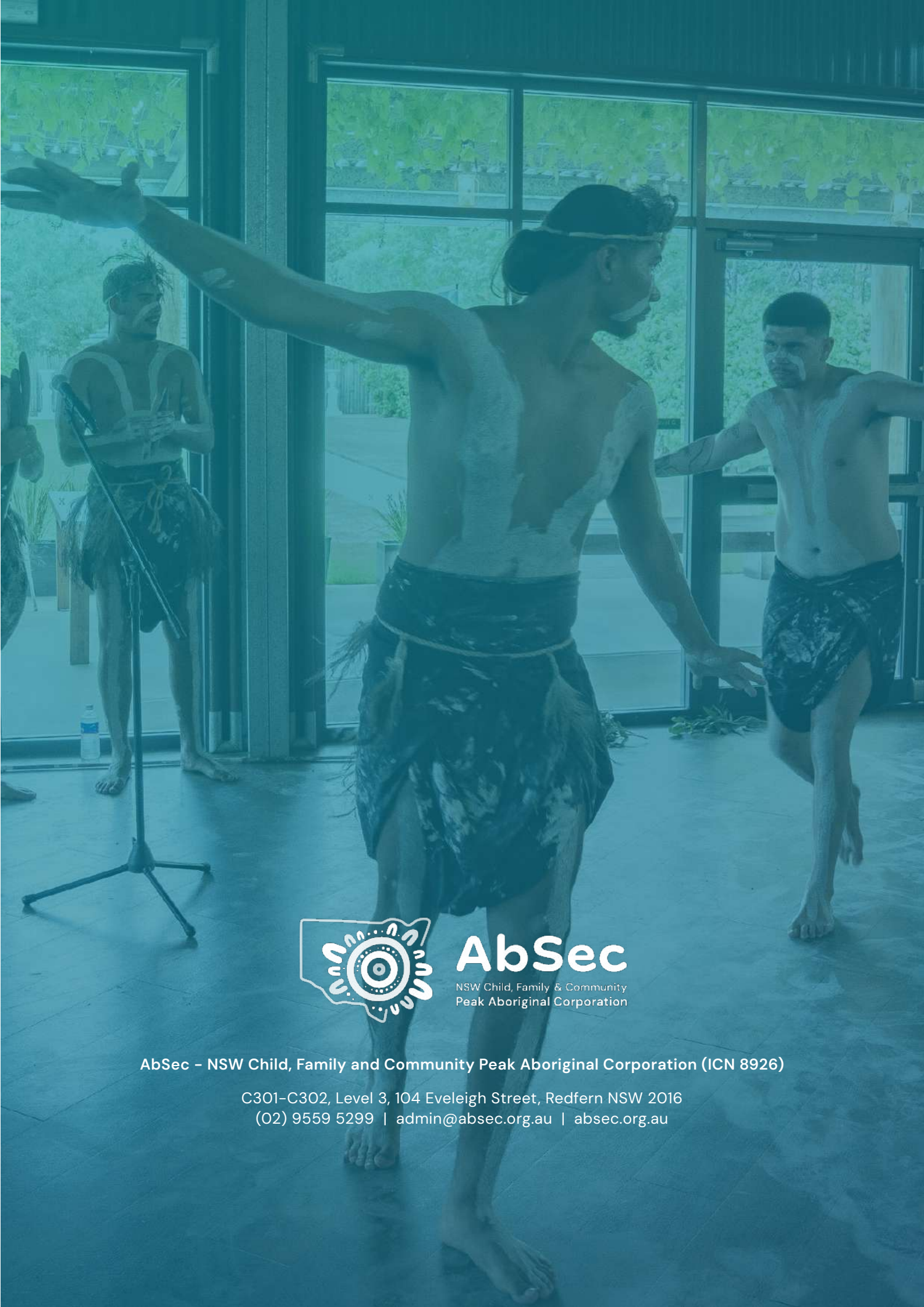
The Forum also highlighted the ongoing gap between reform rhetoric and operational reality. Emerging ACCOs continue to face barriers to establishment and growth; families still confront opaque and harmful system processes; and government reforms often proceed more quickly than the infrastructure needed to make them safe, fair and community-controlled. The Forum also highlighted the benefit of practical tools that share learning about what works – tools to understand and navigate the system like the Know Your Rights website, or to understand what supports are available like the ACCO map, or strategic planning that asks the sector to define its own outcomes.

This was one of the strongest and best attended Quarterly Sector Forums reflecting the depth of engagement across ACCOs, community members, Elders, practitioners and government partners. It was an honour to gather on Wiradjuri Country, grounding the Forum in culture, connection and local leadership.

Each session offered clear direction shaped by lived experience and cultural knowledge. The conversations and information sharing reinforced the strength, resilience and leadership already present across the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child and family sector, and strengthened the collective case for reform that is Aboriginal-led, accountable and built for the long term.

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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