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| Aboriginal Children’s Forum June 2023 |
| Communique  OFFICIAL |
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# Communique

Graphic introducing the 26th Aboriginal Children's Forum on 8 & 9 June 2023 
Welcome to Country - Look after country, and you will have access to its special natural resources. Country is our provider of food, water, shelter and sacred activity. Welcome to the lands of the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung People. 

## Purpose

The 26th Aboriginal Children’s Forum (ACF) was held on Wurundjeri Country in Caroline Springs on Thursday 8 June and Friday 9 June 2023, hosted by the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, West (VACCA). Muriel Bamblett, CEO of VACCA co-hosted day one with Annette Lancy, A/Deputy Secretary, Children and Families Division, the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. The Minister for Child Protection and Family Services, the Hon. Lizzie Blandthorn MP co-hosted on day two.

A future Aboriginal-led service system  
The June 2023 ACF centred on the priority to progress an Aboriginal-led children and families service system. This was following meetings between Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisation (ACCO) leaders, Minister Blandthorn, and the Premier, with discussion building on existing commitments to transition Aboriginal children to Aboriginal care.

In the six months since the last ACF there have been significant milestones achieved, including:

* a commitment to refresh *Wungurilwil Gapgapduir: Aboriginal Children and Families Agreement* to ensure it is contemporary and fit for purpose.
* the Premier’s public statement to devise the child protection system in response to evidence given at the Yoorrook Justice Commission and the Yoorrook critical issues report expected regarding the child protection system.
* completion of the Transition of Aboriginal Children to ACCOs report: Rights and Aspirations project.
* the 2023/24 State Budget investment of $140 million over four years to focus on Closing the Gap target 12.
* progression of the *Children and Health Legislation Amendment (Statement of Recognition, Aboriginal Self-determination and Other Matters) Bill 2023.*

Reform Agenda Scene Setting Graphic
Column One: Reform Agenda for the Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance
The changed system we see: Families together, carer equity, safety and access to services, wage parity with government, purpose-built facilities 
The Alliance calls for local decision making for ACCOs, Aboriginal care based on outcomes, needs-based funding and recognition of the Alliance as the ACCO peak body. 
Column Two: VACCA's reform agenda includes Community Protecting Boorais. Three recommendation categories are agreement-making, an Aboriginal system and monitoring and evaluation. VACCA's reform model would be based off best practice where they set the outcomes and the language through a tiered approach, keeping every family and child connected to culture and care. 

#### Reform Agenda

Members considered the need to create a Child Protection system that works for Aboriginal children and families. This would be informed and led by Aboriginal people, communities and organisations, and be one that embeds and demonstrates Aboriginal best practice, cultural safety, and be focused on building the capability of Aboriginal children and families. This will need to be developed in strong partnership with Aboriginal stakeholders and will consider Yoorrook Justice Commission, Treaty, and the First Peoples’ Assembly and practically apply the principles of self-determination – both within reforms of the current systems and structures, and in the longer term.

Members considered and spoke to the proposals provided by the Alliance and VACCA. The synergies between the two proposals include:

* Enable local decision-making by ACCOs
* Needs based funding
* An Aboriginal-led care system based on community needs.

#### Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care

ACCOs support the intent of the Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care (ACAC) program and reiterated the importance of local decision making in relation to ACAC expansion.

ACCO members considered a future standalone Children, Youth and Families Act that would better capture the true intent of an Aboriginal-led service system including ACAC and discussed how this would impact Courts and different order types.

#### Early Help

ACCOs emphasised the importance of early help, including proportionate funding, to enable community-controlled organisations to work with community members and divert contact with the child protection system. Discussion included:

* The Orange Door referral pathways
* Placed-base flexible funding to design and delivery Aboriginal-led responses
* Joining-up government responses such as health, education, housing and child protection.

#### Workforce

Attraction and retention of the workforce needed to design and deliver an Aboriginal-led system remains the biggest challenge ACCOs face. Considerations include:

* Upskilling current workforce to undertake statutory services
* ACCO pay parity
* Working in partnerships with the sector to develop secondment opportunities to best support the entire sector.

**Graphic depicting the ACCO Best Practice. 
Column One: VACCA Aboriginal Leadership and Sector Engagement. Workshops on network building and communication to build Aboriginal identity as a resource. Aboriginal leadership centres on community governance and interests. 
Column Two: Goolum Goolum Family Services have a therapeutic healing program for years 11 and under to heal trauma through itner play. Growing stronger families parenting program and carers network is to support parents and carers during their journey. **

#### ACCO Best Practice

Four ACCOs provided a best practice presentation that spoke to topics on early help, wrap-around services, the need for local decision making and collaboration amongst stakeholders.

Goolum Goolum spoke to: Supporting parents and carers; Therapeutic healing program; and Growing stronger families, parenting program and carers network.

Wathaurong spoke to: The heart of our early years playgroup; Parenting support tailored program with Aboriginal family educators.

Rumbalara spoke to: Referral pathways and collaboration; Practical and emotional supports during loss and homelessness; Case study around complexity of family and support provided by ACCOs.

VACCA spoke to: Aboriginal leadership and sector engagement, centred around a recent forum provided to stakeholders to understand Wungurilwil Gapgapduir; and community governance and interest.

#### Discussion Panel

Members from ACCOs, Community Service Organisations and government caucus groups spoke to their reflections on a future Aboriginal-led service system which highlighted the current system punishing Aboriginal children by progressing them deeper into the child protection system.

Members provided input into how the current $140 million 2023/24 budget announcement could be used within the current legislative frameworks to support and progress an Aboriginal-led service system, namely the expansion of the Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care (ACAC) program. Participating ACCOs encouraged their fellow colleagues to consider how ACAC expansion could best work for their community.

Members reflected on the success of the ACF and their guidance towards the current progress.

#### Wungurilwil Gapgapduir Refresh

Presentations by DFFH, VACCA and the Alliance on Wungurilwil Gapgapduir and the Aboriginal Children’s Forum and how it could look in the future. Members were asked to write down their suggested thoughts on a refreshed Wungurilwil Gapgapduir, so they can be collected and compiled and will be distributed in the June 2023 ACF Report.

#### Background

The ACF gives practical effect to the implementation and monitoring of [*Wungurilwil Gapgapduir*](https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/publications/wungurilwil-gapgapduir-aboriginal-children-and-families-agreement)to promote the safety, health and resilience of Aboriginal children and young people, so they thrive and live in culturally rich and strong Aboriginal families and communities.

*Wungurilwil Gapgapduir* supports the government’s commitment to increase Aboriginal self-determination for Aboriginal people and is the foundation for how this government and the children and families sector will address the over-representation of Aboriginal children involved within the child protection system.