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| Aboriginal Children’s Forum |

# Communique September 2021

# Purpose

The 21st Aboriginal Children’s Forum (ACF) was held virtually on Wednesday 8 September and Thursday 9September 2021, hosted by the Wathaurong Aboriginal Corporation and the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. The forum was co-chaired by the Minister for Child Protection, the Hon. Luke Donnellan MP. This document contains key findings and discussion topics from the event.

*A graphic explaining the forum's purpose

Text: Purpose - capture, build and share Aboriginal knowledge and practice. 

- advise and inform government
- ensure availability and accessibility
- access for quality, applicability and transferability
- research, pilots, evaluations
- document and translate knowledge and ways of working
- identify and explore methodologies, cultural outcomes and ways of working.*

# Knowledge, learning and evidence to inform practice

The theme of the forum was how tocapture, build and share Aboriginal knowledge, learning and evidence to inform child protection practice. The forum imagined and explored how a future independent Aboriginal Knowledge and Practice Centre would have the potential to be a powerful agent of change in capturing, building and sharing Aboriginal knowledge, learning and evidence.

There are many challenges in the current evidence-based approach for Aboriginal people, which is largely based on non-Australian evidence-based programs. However, the research evidence base that has been developed by and for Aboriginal communities is starting to emerge. Members of the forum discussed ways this can be applied to local content moving into future service delivery design and implementation.

A decorative image explaining the context of the forum. 
Main headline: Scene Setting with Argiri Alisandratos (DFFH) and Muriel Bamblett (VACCA)
- We must recognise Aboriginal-led research, knowledge, learning and evidence
-we need to both broaden and focus our view of what we accept as evidence
- what would an Aboriginal Centre of Knowledge look like?
- context is important. We can't import programs.
The vision: A more equitable, inclusive and culturally responsive approach to evidence generation assessment and use that recognises and legitimises our ways of knowing and doing. 
Ask ourselves: What's Aboriginal about it? 
- guiding principles
- generation prioritised
- outcomes framework
- quality of evidence
- applicability and transfer
- culturally-centred knowledge and lived experience
- Aboriginal theories and knowledge systems
- Utilise culturally developed and aligned methodologies

Aboriginal-developed learning and evaluation systems
Challenges
- Context
- Bias
- Cost of implementation
- Staffing/recruitment
- Adaptation

# Closing the Gap

Representatives from Aboriginal community-controlled organisations (ACCOs), community service organisations and government examined the Closing the Gap National Agreement Target 12 on how to reduce the number of Aboriginal children in out-of-home Care by 45 percent by 2031. Members collectively developed actions on how the sector will meet this target.

“During National Child Protection Week, the Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People’s Alliance welcomes this Government’s commitment to Closing the Gap and the announcement of an additional two member organisations entering pre-authorisation under Section 18 of the Child, Youth and Families Act (2005). However, to reduce the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in care by 45 *per cent* we must not only focus on ACCOs providing tertiary child protection services but increase investment to the ACCOs for early help with our families. We need to be realistic and creative in ways we can achieve this target that doesn’t force ACCOs down the road of delivering high risk services and truly supports Aboriginal self-determination.”

## Raylene Harradine, CEO from the Bendigo & District Aboriginal Co-operative (BDAC)

## and Chair of the Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People’s Alliance

# Celebrating success

The forum, held during National Child Protection Week, took the opportunity to celebrate the successes Victoria’s nation-leading initiatives such as Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care (ACAC) program and recognised those individuals, organisations and teams amongst the children and families sector that work every day to protect Victorian children.

The program enables ACCOs to be authorised in functions and powers usually undertaken by the Secretary of the department and assume responsibility for Aboriginal children on Children’s Court protection orders.

“It was fitting that during Child Protection Week, all participants at the ACF took time out of their busy lives to discuss, reflect on and re-energise those cross-sector commitments we have made in the interests of Aboriginal self-determination and the best interests of Aboriginal children. It was particularly exciting to see the impact of Aboriginal-led programs and practices connecting children to culture, community and Country, the expansion of the Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care initiative, and the robust foundations of an Aboriginal Knowledge and Practice Centre that will be a critical step in the building of an Aboriginal evidence base.”

Deb Tsorbaris, CEO from the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (CFECFW)

# More Aboriginal children in Aboriginal care

The Minister for Child Protection [announced the expansion of Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care](https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/strengthening-connection-culture-country-and-family) <https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/strengthening-connection-culture-country-and-family> to include Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative and Gippsland and East Gippsland Aboriginal Co-Operative. This means those organisations will be authorised to look after Aboriginal children in care – to help keep more Victorian Aboriginal children connected to culture, Country and family.

The Aboriginal Children’s forum members and government reinforced the strong commitment to Transitioning Aboriginal Children to ACCOs with the aim of achieving 100 per cent. Through discussions across divisions, commitments were made and initiatives identified to increase the rate of transfer by December 2021.

“I am pleased to hear the Ministers commitment to Wungurilwil Gapgapduir has not waned and of the announcements of funding to roll out ACAC in areas of great need. The ACF continues to have the difficult conversations necessary to address over representation of our children. Clearly our biggest challenge before the ACF is to deliver on agreements within the Close the Gap but I believe we are up to it. Transitioning of resources for early intervention and prevention are critical first step”.

Muriel Bamblett, CEO from the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA)

Visual explanation of the ACAC TAC evaluation.
Main headline: ACAC TAC evaluation  - inside policy
Sub-headline: It's doing what it's meant to 

We assessed:
- implementation
- outcomes 
- cost effectiveness
- successes and improvements
- informing future policy and design
- quantitative and qualitative

Reunification with families:
- strengths focused
- access to culture
- culturally appropriate, trauma informed, timely
- ACCO and DFFH responsibility
- engage families in decisions  
- engagement and trust
- cultural empowerment and self-determination

Considerations:
- commitment to transitioning kids to ACCOs
- coordinated strategy
- resource and support ACCOs re evaluation capability
- support broader embedding of ACAC
- resource and support ACCOs capability, expertise, governance and accountability
-co-design and implement longer term plan


# Background

The Aboriginal Children’s Forum gives practical effect to the implementation and monitoring of [*Wungurilwil Gapgapduir: Aboriginal Children and Families Agreement*](https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/publications/wungurilwil-gapgapduir-aboriginal-children-and-families-agreement) <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 on how this government and the children and families sector will address the over-representation of Aboriginal children involved within the child protection system.

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