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| Aboriginal Children’s Forum September 2023 |
| CommuniqueOFFICIAL |
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# Communique

## Purpose

The 27th Aboriginal Children’s Forum (ACF) was held on the lands of the Dja Dja Wurrung and Taungurung peoples on Wednesday 13 September and Thursday 14 September 2023, hosted by Bendigo & District Aboriginal Co-operative (BDAC). Dallas Widdicombe, CEO of BDAC co-hosted day one with Peta McCammon, Secretary of 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.

The ACF continued discussions between Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, Community Service Organisations and Departments to progress the Aboriginal-led children and families service system. Alignment between the children and families current reform with Treaty and the Yoorrook for Justice Report remains a focus of ACF members. Government’s 2023/24 budget investment supports the pillars to reform and ACF members play an integral role in the design and delivery of Victoria’s future child protection system for Aboriginal children and young people.

Progressing Treaty: First People’s Assembly A presentation by Rueben Berg, Co-Chair of the First People’s Assembly Victoria, (Assembly) outlined the composition of 32 representatives elected by the Victorian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and reserved seats for each formally recognised Traditional Owner group. The Assembly is elected every three years.​ The Assembly has developed an additional pathway for Traditional Owner groups who do not have formal recognition under legislation to apply for a reserved seat.

The pathway to Treaty will encompass Traditional Owner Treaties and a Statewide Treaty. Traditional Owner Treaty/ies will focus on matters that are self-determined by Victorian Traditional Owners in relation to their own Country. ​Statewide Treaty will focus on statewide matters, such as reform to government structures and system(s).

The Assembly has laid the foundations and agreed on the process for Treaty-making in Victoria. The Assembly and ACF partnership and collaboration will enhance both an Aboriginal-led service system and Treaty. The agreed Treaty negotiation framework and process enables Treaty negotiations by the end of 2023.​

Reform Agenda: A future Aboriginal-led service system
Discussions about the reform agenda were central to the September 2023 ACF, with the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency and the Victorian Aboriginal Children & Young Peoples’ Alliance (Alliance) providing progress updates. Members workshopped, discussed, and presented back concepts and advice on current reform alignment with Wungurilwil Gapagpduir: Aboriginal Children and Families Agreement.

Broad agreement was gained from members that Wungurilwil Gapgapduir encompasses accountability, reform, Treaty and Yoorrook to bring together a self-determined service system that is Aboriginal-led and delivered for Aboriginal Victorians. Wungurilwil Gapgapduir is a shared commitment between the three parties to improve outcomes for Victorian Aboriginal children and families with aims and objectives based on the overarching principle of Aboriginal self-determination and reducing the over-representation of Aboriginal children in child protection.

It was highlighted through these groups that Wungurilwil Gapgapduir needs to be evaluated and revised with culturally safe language and a shift away from targets/output-based funding. It was also emphasised that a refresh of Wungurilwil Gapgapduir should incorporate a whole of government approach to the Aboriginal-led reform agenda and early help. Other key areas of importance identified throughout discussions were the Monitoring & Evaluation Assessment plan, streamlining of governance structures like the divisional and objective groups, and the potential to further workshops the key performance indicators.

Yoorrook Justice Commission: Yoorrook for Justice ReportThe *Yoorrook for Justice Report* is the culmination of the Commission's work to achieve truth, understanding and transformation by prioritising and centring First Peoples’ voices, experiences, cultural and human rights, and their right to self-determination.

The Report outlines:

* 2 recommendations for transformative change through Treaty,
* 4 recommendations related to urgent reforms about accountability, cultural competence and compliance with human and cultural rights,
* 20 recommendations related to urgent reforms to the child protection system,
* 18 recommendations related to urgent reforms to the criminal justice system, and
* 2 that relate to "other matters".

On day two of the ACF, members were asked to split into four groups to discuss Yoorrook for Justice report recommendations relating to child protection and family services. Members spoke and presented back on their discussions and guidance on how the recommendations align with current reform work, and whether changes were needed.

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