

**In their laughter we heal:
ACCO Aspirations for Aboriginal
families, children and young
people**

December 2025



**Victorian Aboriginal
Children & Young
People's Alliance**



Artist's Note

Tarsha Davis is a Kuku Yalanji and Palawa woman and multidisciplinary artist. 'This artwork represents the Victorian Aboriginal Child and Young People's Alliance as an interconnected system, a network of organisations that are both distinct and mutually reinforcing, working together to support Aboriginal children, young people, and families across Victoria. The design acknowledges both the diversity and collective strength of VACYPA's fifteen members. Each solid-fill circle in the base layer represents one of these organisations and their unique contributions to education, wellbeing, and cultural continuity.'



Acknowledgement

We recognise and acknowledge the traditions and culture of Aboriginal peoples across Australia. We honour their Elders, past and present. We extend our respect to the children of Community who are the future custodians of Country.

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Executive Summary

This report sets out a clear and urgent truth: the current child and family service system in Victoria is failing Aboriginal children, young people and their families. Despite decades of reform, Aboriginal children continue to be removed from their families at devastatingly high rates, disconnected from culture, Country and kin, and drawn into systems that fail to keep them safe, strong or whole.

Victoria has the highest over-representation of Aboriginal children in care in Australia. This is not an accident, nor an unavoidable outcome of individual family circumstances. It is the predictable result of a system built on colonial assumptions, constrained self-determination, fragmented service design and chronic under-investment in Aboriginal-led solutions. For Aboriginal families, child removal is not an abstract policy issue; it is a lived and intergenerational trauma. When close to one in ten Aboriginal children are removed from parental care, the result is not merely personal heartbreak but a collective and shameful failure that demands decisive action.

This report reflects the voices, aspirations and expertise of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) across Victoria, brought together through the Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance (VACYPA). VACYPA Members are not service providers at the margins of the system. Member ACCOs are cultural authorities, community anchors and the organisations that Aboriginal families trust. They know their communities. They know what works. And they know what must change.

At the heart of this report is a shared vision: a future where Aboriginal children and young people grow up nurtured by kin, guided by culture and supported by community; where families receive help early and without fear; and where statutory child protection becomes a last resort rather than a default response. Member ACCOs are united in their commitment to early intervention and prevention, with a clear ambition to put child protection out of business by addressing the causes of harm before children are removed.

Culture is not an optional extra in this vision. It is the foundation of safety, identity and healing. Activities that activate culture in a child or young person's life build life-long resilience and protection. Yet a consistent message from VACYPA Members is that culture is not funded. The time required for deep listening, the responsibilities of cultural authority, the costs of sustaining strong Aboriginal governance and workforce, and the work of maintaining connection to Country and kin are all absorbed by ACCOs without recognition in funding models. Government expectations of excellence, accountability and compliance sit alongside an ongoing failure to resource the true cost of culturally grounded service delivery.

The report also makes clear that Aboriginal families' reluctance to engage with mainstream services is rational and understandable. Fear of child protection intervention, combined with experiences of racism and culturally unsafe practice, means that many families avoid seeking help until crises escalate. Where Aboriginal services are unavailable, families are left with no real choice at all. This deepens over-representation, entrenches disadvantage and shifts costs into the most intrusive and expensive parts of the system.

VACYPA Members articulate a strong and consistent aspiration for integrated, Aboriginal-led early years and family support services — community-based hubs where families can access universal and targeted support without stigma, where culture is embedded from the earliest years, and where trust replaces fear. Early intervention in the early years is critical: data shows Aboriginal children are reported to child protection at dramatically higher rates from infancy, with over-representation compounding at every stage of the system. Investment at this point is both a moral imperative and a practical solution.

Alongside prevention, ACCOs continue to pursue greater authority and responsibility within the statutory system through Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care (ACAC) and Community Protecting Boorais (CPB). These models demonstrate the profound difference that Aboriginal-led decision-making makes for



children and families. However, progress remains slow and constrained by legislative barriers, inflexible funding, lack of delegated authority and insufficient growth investment. Despite a commitment that all Aboriginal children in care should be case managed by ACCOs, that figure has remained stalled at around 50 per cent since 2021.

This report identifies significant legislative, policy, funding and workforce barriers that must be addressed if Aboriginal-led systems are to succeed and aspirations to be fully realised. These include the absence of financial delegation for ACAC decision-makers, restrictions on data use, limits on CEO authorisation, under-resourcing of cultural planning and implementation, family finding and Aboriginal Family-Led Decision Making, and a failure to respect local ACCO authority over Country.

The recommendations in this report are practical, evidence-based and grounded in community knowledge. They call for funding reform that recognises the real cost of culture; expansion of ACCO-designed family and early years services; recognition and support of voluntary kinship care; accelerated growth of ACAC and CPB; legislative amendments to remove structural barriers to self-determination; and sustained investment in Aboriginal-led policy development and system design.

Above all, this report calls on government to move beyond rhetoric and intent. Treaty, truth-telling and the findings of the Yoorrook Justice Commission have made clear that incremental change is no longer sufficient. Justice for Aboriginal children requires the transfer of power, resources and authority to Aboriginal communities themselves.

This is not a request for special treatment. It is the recognition of a right — the right of Aboriginal children to grow up safe, loved and strong in their identity; and the right of Aboriginal communities to determine the futures of their children. The path forward is known. ACCOs are ready. What is required now is the courage to act.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1:

The Victorian Government should inform itself about the cost of providing culturally grounded services through ACCOs and include an allowance for those costs both in budget bids and program allocations.

Recommendation 2:

VACYPA recommends the Minister for Children engages with the Ministers for Education and Health in the Victorian and Commonwealth Governments to enter into partnerships to fund ACCO Integrated Early Years Services, as recommended by SNAICC.

Recommendation 3:

ACCOs that provide DFFH funded family services all seek growth funding. DFFH must provide growth funding for ACCO-designed, led and delivered family services.

Recommendation 4:

The Commonwealth Government should review its Emergency Relief funding to enable all ACCOs in so-called Victoria to administer the program, if they choose to do so.

Recommendation 5:

In addition to growth funding directly to ACCOs, DFFH must provide additional resourcing to provide advice and support, as well as allowing sufficient lead time, in the development of Aboriginal-led models.



Recommendation 6:

Recognise voluntary kinship care by establishing an ACCO-managed support stream, with practical aid, small brokerage and brief casework to keep families out of the statutory system.

Recommendation 7:

DFFH must not fund an ACCO to provide a service on the Country of another ACCO without written approval from the Board of the local ACCO.

Recommendation 8:

DFFH must continue to support ACCO led policy reform. Existing funded positions need to be ongoing and additional positions are required to enable ACCOs to lead policy development and implementation for ACAC.

Recommendation 9:

DFFH must support ACCO-designed variations to the ACAC service model to enable ACAC to be tailored by local ACCOs to their individual circumstances.

Recommendation 10:

DFFH should explore the potential for an ACAC After Hours response.

Recommendation 11:

DFFH must amend the Financial Management Act 1994, or implement an alternative solution, to allow ACAC case planners to make financial decisions to support the case planning decisions they make.

Recommendation 12:

DFFH must amend the CYF Act to enable ACCOs to utilise data for purposes associated with policy and program development, including quantitative planning measures, quality assurance and meeting regulatory requirements.

Recommendation 13:

As soon as possible, Government should amend the CYF Act to enable the Secretary to authorise a non-Aboriginal principal officer to undertake powers and functions under section 18 of the Act.

Recommendation 14:

DFFH must allocate dedicated funding to support Family Finding services for all VACYPA members.

Recommendation 15:

DFFH must expand the Cultural Planning program, enabling all ACCOs that seek to provide the program to deliver the program for their communities. Capacity within existing providers must be expanded to meet demand, so that Child Protection can meet its legislatively mandated responsibilities.

Recommendation 16:

DFFH must substantially increase the level of brokerage funding provided to ACCOs to support cultural plan implementation. Cultural planning brokerage funding must be flexible in application and also support ACCOs to connect Aboriginal children to culture who they are not working with directly. DFFH must support ACCOs to build those connections through whatever means ACCOs find effective.



Recommendation 17:

DFFH must increase funding for ACSASS to enable the service to meet demand, and so that Child Protection meets its legislative responsibilities.

Recommendation 18:

DFFH must either seek expressions of interest from ACCOs that wish to provide ACSASS in areas outside Metropolitan Melbourne or facilitate the transfer of ACSASS from VACCA to local ACCOs.

Recommendations 19:

DFFH must use data on substantiations to seek growth funding for the current AFLDM program to enable Child Protection to meet its legislative and policy requirements.

Recommendation 20:

DFFH must work with ACCOs on a model of AFLDMs to be provided for Aboriginal families prior to substantiation, and seek growth funding based on that model so DFFH can meet its commitment to the Aboriginal Children's Forum to implement Wungurilwil Gagapduir Action 1.4.

Recommendations 21:

DFFH should enable VACYPA Members to undertake cultural assessments and provide advice to the Children's Court regarding applications for Permanent Care Orders (PCOs) by undertaking the following:

- **DFFH should seek approval from the Governor in Council to authorise all ACCOs as Aboriginal agencies under section 6 of the *Children Youth and Families Act 2005* should their Boards agree. Gazettal under s.6 of the CYF Act would allow ACCOs to provide a report to the Court that recommends the making of a PCO under Section 323 of the CYF Act.**
- **In cases where a decision is made by a case planner to seek a PCO and a local ACCO has case management of the child, the local ACCO should be asked to undertake the permanent care assessment and provide the report to the Court. ACCOs may decline.**
- **Where cases have not transitioned to ACCOs and case management sits with Child Protection or a CSO, Child Protection should engage local ACCOs to undertake a cultural assessment for those cases who are case planned for permanent care. The permanent care assessment can be undertaken by Child Protection or a CSO (unless otherwise agreed) and the ACCO will complete the cultural assessment and make the recommendation to the Court.**
- **ACCOs may choose to establish their own local Permanent Care Panel or Cultural Authority Panel. While VACCA has established a panel to approve permanent carers, this is not a legislated requirement and ACCOs who undertake to provide a report to the Court will consider what is an appropriate process in their communities.**
- **VACCA should continue to provide this service for the six metro areas of Melbourne where there is no local ACCO, or if a local ACCO declines to undertake an assessment. In Southern Melbourne and Bayside Peninsula areas, Dandenong and District Aboriginal Cooperative should be considered for these assessments.**
- **The current funding provided to VACCA for Permanent Care Assessments should be reviewed to allow VACCA to meet demand in metropolitan Melbourne areas, but consideration will need to be given to a more equitable distribution of resources across the state.**
- **DFFH should consider funding development of a training program for permanent care assessments.**
- **DFFH should establish unit prices for permanent care assessments and cultural assessments.**



Recommendation 22:

The Department of Health must expand Aboriginal Maternal and Child Health Services to ACCOs that aspire to deliver that service.

Recommendation 23:

DFFH should investigate the potential to adapt Balit Murrup for application with Aboriginal children and young people in care as an alternative to Looking After Children.

Recommendation 24:

DFFH must guarantee access to core supports for kinship carers. This must include adequate allowance for respite, as well as funding for carer peer support groups, cultural mentoring, reflective supervision, and family day events.

Recommendation 25:

DFFH must standardise kinship carer onboarding (orientation and cultural practice pack) and annual refreshers. This includes carers access to ACCO-run training equal to (or better than) foster-care offerings.

Recommendation 26:

DFFH must address the lack of parity between carer payments for kinship and foster carers, aligning kinship allowances with foster care levels at commencement, based on child needs, not receipts, and removing the current default Level 1 allowance for kinship carers. Brokerage must be increased so that it works, including establishing flexible ACCO-held brokerage for urgent essentials (beds, transport, health) to prevent placement breakdowns.

Recommendation 27:

DFFH must explore options to refer case tasks, functions and roles to ACCOs, regardless of whether case management can be contracted. Family services funding should be enabled for this purpose, or direct allocation of client expenses to an ACCO.

Recommendation 28:

DFFH must seek funding to offer the VACYPA residential care model to ACCOs that are interested in providing an Aboriginal residential care model.

Recommendations 29:

DFFH must undertake funding reform that enables separating care, carer support, recruitment and development from case management of Aboriginal children in foster and residential care. This will allow ACCOs to assume case management functions without providing care and placement support, where desired.

DFFH must amend the foster care case management performance target that requires 80 per cent of children on final orders placed for over six months to be case contracted to the agency.

Recommendation 30:

DFFH must expand provision of Targeted Care Packages across ACCOs that aspire to deliver them and ACCOs that seek growth.

Recommendation 31:

DFFH must urgently fund ACCOs to provide culturally grounded youth support services.



Recommendation 32:

DFFH must urgently increase funding for Take Two and allow local ACCOs to provide the service for Aboriginal children and young people in their communities.

Recommendation 33:

The following recommendation (recommendation 13 from the 2023 report) should be implemented:

Progress reforms to departmental procurement and funding processes that:

- **Include criteria or weighting that supports ACCOs to deliver additional or new services (and therefore increase proportional funding to ACCOs) rather than only weighting service delivery experience.**
- **When building program models and budgets, consider the viable (rather than minimal) staff needed to sustain service delivery. Factor in vacancy management and include establishment and infrastructure costs and funding to support community communication strategies**
- **Consider the additional need ACCOs have for:**
 - **specialist legal positions**
 - **principal practitioners**
 - **positions to manage regulatory burdens, additional risks and develop capabilities in working with complex or high-risk clients.**
- **Consider the merits of providing additional funding in program budgets to areas with significant travel needs (that is, where a radius of more than 50 kilometres is usual).**
- **Consider including funding for overtime in relevant program budgets where it is considered necessary to provide on call, recall and regular overtime.**

Recommendation 34:

The following approach to transition of case management to ACCOs for children living interstate, as proposed in the 2023 report and discussed at the Aboriginal Children's Forum, should be implemented on a case-by-case basis:

That operational divisions be advised there is no legal basis for not pursuing the authorisation or transfer of case management to ACCOs of children subject to Protection Orders living interstate.

That the following tiered approach be progressed (this was to have commenced from October 2022).

- i. **That each division consider the merits of authorisation and case contracting of each child on a Protection Order living interstate with the most relevant/local ACCO on a case-by-case basis considering their:**
 - **community connection,**
 - **proximity of the ACCO to the interstate address,**
 - **benefits and risk associated with contracting**

utilising existing kinship funding, Reunification Response targets, 200-hour targets, ACAC or TCPs subject to the characteristics of the case



- ii. That where the local ACCO most connected to the child is unwilling/unable to accept case management or authorisation, that an ACCO close to the relevant interstate border consider the merits of accepting authorisation or contracted case management for all children living close to the border and or in the adjoining State utilising kinship funding/targets, Reunification Response targets, 200-hour targets, ACAC or TCPs subject to the characteristics of the case.
- iii. That VACCA as a statewide service consider assuming responsibility for all children on protection orders residing interstate where the ACCO from the child's community or close to the border is unwilling/unable to assume responsibility. Targets and funding for such a specialist service could be from underutilised kinship targets or via provision of new kinship targets allocated for Aboriginal children residing interstate where options (i) and (ii) are not possible. Alternatively, Reunification Response targets, 200-hour targets, ACAC or TCPs could be utilised subject to the characteristics of the case.

Program requirements and appropriate policies will be revised including

- i. Amending the program requirements and Human Service's standards for visitation and to include remote contact via phone and skype etc
- ii. Ensuring ACCOs providing services are allocated brokerage to support interstate travel etc and able to access existing funding/targets including for Targeted Care Packages for complex matters.

Where the case is contracted to an ACCO the ILO or area CPP will support the ACCO and progress the transfer to the case to the appropriate State or Territory wherever possible.

Recommendation 35:

DFFH must fund ACCOs to develop an intensive support service for Aboriginal children and young people experiencing high needs or challenging behaviours. DFFH must seek funds to implement that Aboriginal intensive support service.



Introduction

'For the last 200 years, we have had successive governments saying they know best about our business. Countless bodies, commissions and policies have been set up without the leadership of First Peoples. Even with governments with good intentions, it just does not work. All of us can agree our approach must change. Today we can agree to move forward together by discontinuing the centuries of ineffective and harmful policies. This is not a favour asked, but a right recognised. Not a louder plea, but a clearer purpose. Not charity, but justice.'

*Reuben Berg, Co-Chair, First Peoples Assembly of Victoria
Victorian Parliament 14 October 2025*

The fifteen Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) that comprise the Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance (VACYPA) believe in a future where every Aboriginal child and young person in the Treaty State grows up happy and healthy in their home, wrapped in their family's love, strong in culture and living a good life.

With the signing of the first Treaty between First Peoples and government in November 2025, that future moved closer.

But the task ahead is not insignificant.

The problem

The brutal colonisation of Victoria entrenched loss, grief and trauma upon the longest living culture in the world. Victoria's Yoorrook Commission brought that truth to light. One of the intergenerational impacts of that painful history is the limitation it places on self-determination for First Peoples. People who once lived their truth and passed on living culture through story, song, art, dance, ceremony, and lore were dispossessed and separated from Country and culture. For those children and young people separated from family and placed in the care of the state, that loss of connection can be terminal.

The Victorian service system fails to meet the needs of vulnerable Aboriginal children and families. Limited self-determination and failed connection to culture results in the land now known as Victoria having the worst over-representation of Aboriginal children in state care in Australia. The proportion of Victorian Aboriginal children in care is 95 per thousand, compared to four per thousand for non-Indigenous children.

As of August 2025, there were 3,037 Aboriginal children in care.

It is a personal heartbreak for a family when one child is removed from parental care. But when close to one in ten is removed, it is a shameful tragedy that warrants public outrage.

In addition to over-representation in child protection and care, inadequate service capacity, limited self-determination and disconnection from culture result in Aboriginal families distrusting service providers, and consequently reluctant to seek support or engage with services.

Provision of services solely through mainstream providers can effectively make services inaccessible unless those services are culturally safe. Lack of an Aboriginal service provider eliminates choice for Aboriginal service users. Without an Aboriginal service provider, service choice becomes a choice of whether or not to seek access to a service at all.

Over-representation in child protection and care has huge impacts on multiple service systems down the line, including education, health, employment, housing, justice and corrections. The financial cost of this failure is immense and the human cost inestimable.



A clear impact of the vast over-representation of Aboriginal children in care is the disconnection of Aboriginal children from their families, culture, community and Country. The result of that disconnection is loss of Aboriginal identity, a diminution or even elimination of the value of culture as a protective factor, and ongoing intergenerational trauma; all of which contribute to a cycle of intergenerational child protection intervention.

An Aboriginal-led, place-based future

VACYPA and the fifteen ACCOs we represent are future focused. Acknowledging the commitment of the Victorian Government to First Peoples through Treaty, forever mindful of the heartbreaks of the past and failures of present systems, but filled with hope for the children and young people of today that tomorrow will be better, we are forging new ways of working that respect culture and Country, people and place. This project shares ACCOs' aspirations for their families, children and young people. ACCOs know their communities and know their families. They also know what works for those families and how to support families so they can nurture children and young people.

The Yoorrook Commission's first and overarching recommendation from its Yoorrook for Justice report called on the Victorian Government to:

- a) *Transfer decision-making power, authority, control and resources to First Peoples, giving full effect to self-determination in the Victorian child protection system. Transferring or creating decision-making power includes but is not limited to:*
 - i. *system design*
 - ii. *obtaining and allocating resources*
 - iii. *powers of, and appointments to bodies or institutions, and*
 - iv. *accountability and oversight functions including new First Peoples led bodies, oversight processes or complaints pathways*
- b) *negotiate this through the Treaty process including through potential interim agreements*
- c) *in doing so, go beyond the transfer of existing powers and functions under the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 (Vic), which will require new, dedicated legislation, developed by First Peoples, for the safety, wellbeing and protection of First Peoples children and young people, and*
- d) *recognising the urgent need for immediate reform and without delay, take all necessary steps to begin and diligently progress the establishment of a dedicated child protection system for First Peoples children and young people supported by stand-alone legislation based on the right of First Peoples to self-determination and underpinned by human and cultural rights to be developed by the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria which must be sufficiently resourced by government for this purpose.*

Government must enable ACCOs to design and build an Aboriginal-led system so that Aboriginal parents and caregivers are supported by their local ACCOs for all their needs, from family planning to old age: holistic, wrap around, accessible, flexible and timely support that helps families, children and young people thrive and build identity as the First Peoples of this country, proud, strong and living their best lives.

VACYPA knows there are no short cuts or quick fixes. We know the inherent resistance to change embedded within all systems. But we also know that change is inevitable: the only constant is change. The future does not materialise in an instant like magic; it evolves and results from events small and large on a journey forwards. ACCOs knew that when they convinced the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) to commit to **transfer case management for every Aboriginal child in care to an ACCO**. From that commitment, a raft of change transpired: enabling policies, resources for kinship case management, support for divisional engagement, and more.



Acknowledging the benefits for Aboriginal children from local ACCO support for children and young people in care enlisted Child Protection directors and managers across the state in the business of establishing an Aboriginal-led and Aboriginal delivered child protection system. Aboriginal children do better when ACCOs support their needs.

Despite investment in kinship case management, establishment and growth of Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care, hundreds of hours of meetings to work through barriers to transition, the proportion of Aboriginal children in care who are case managed by ACCOs has sat at around 50% since 2021, well short of the agreed commitment that 100% of Aboriginal children in care should be case managed by ACCOs.

Transitioning Aboriginal Children to ACCOs: Rights and Aspirations Project (2023)

The Transitioning Aboriginal Children to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations: Rights and Aspirations Project was undertaken in 2022 by DFFH, with a report circulated in 2023.

The 2023 project's stated aim was to reinvigorate the Victorian Children and Families sector to transition Aboriginal children subject to final protection orders and placed in care, from child protection and community service organisations (CSOs) to ACCOs, and to find ways to work through the barriers that resulted in transitioning of case management to ACCOs stalling at around 50%.

2023 Report recommendations

The report made 24 recommendations in relation to legislative, policy and practice change at the statewide and systems level to support future strategic planning, service development and delivery. The report uses the term 'findings', though they are clearly framed as recommendations. VACYPA's response to the recommendations from the 2023 report, provided to DFFH in 2023, are included in Appendix 3.

DFFH has not shared its position on those 24 recommendations, though some have progressed to completion. Of those 24 recommendations, VACYPA's assessment is that:

- Two recommendations are completed
- Four recommendations are partially completed
- Four recommendations are underway
- Eight recommendations have not commenced
- The status of five recommendations is unknown.

Over the previous two or three years since the 2023 project, there has been significant development across ACCOs that provide services for families and children in so-called Victoria. However, for the most part, the recommendations made in 2023 are still relevant today. Those recommendations have been considered in this project and where relevant, they are discussed under the following chapters. VACYPA continues to support most of those recommendations and, subject to the views of VACYPA Members, we have made recommendations that they continue to be implemented.

Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance

The Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance (VACYPA) is the collective voice of Victorian Aboriginal communities working together to positively influence the future of Aboriginal children and young people. We are the Victorian peak body for Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) working in the welfare sector providing services under the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* with a robust Aboriginal led governance structure. As a statewide organisation representing the strong majority of ACCOs in our sector, we are member controlled and our strategy is driven by the needs of local communities. The VACYPA is a Child Safe organisation and is compliant with the Commission for Children and Young People Child Safe Standards. As an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation, we are incorporated under the *Corporations Act 2001* with an Aboriginal majority board and Aboriginal CEO.



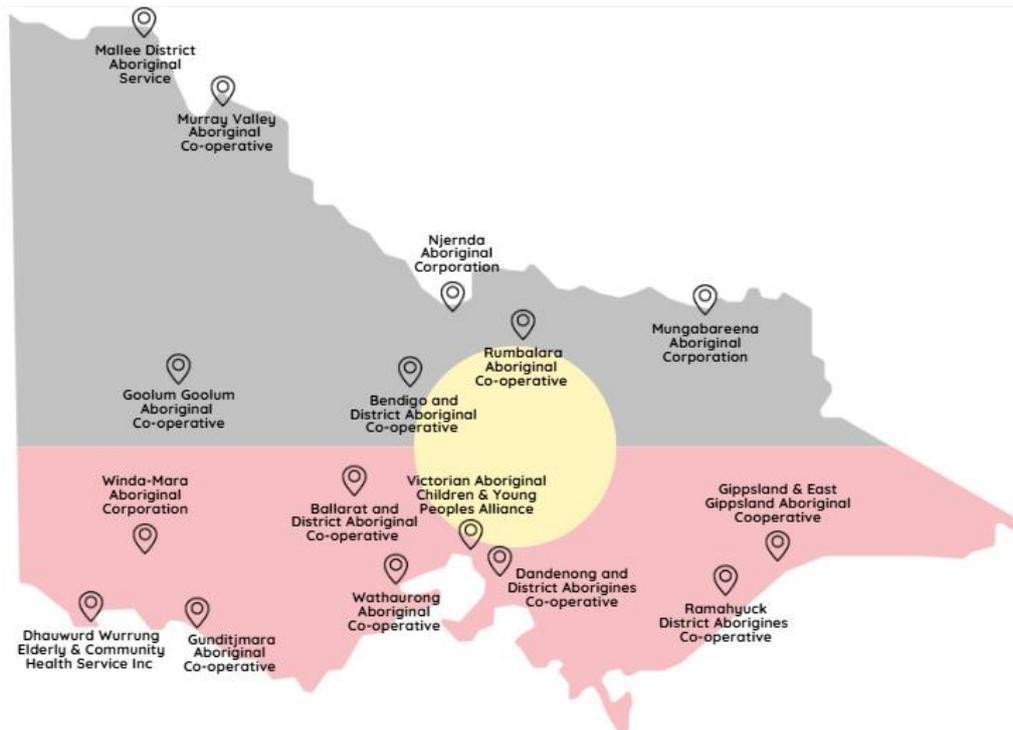
Our values are:

- Self-Determination
- Empowerment
- Excellence
- Culture
- Leadership and Accountability

VACYPA Members cover 97.5% of the Country now known as Victoria, working in 75% of local government areas (ABS 2024) with more than \$250 million combined annual revenue, and over 2,000 employed staff (ACNC 2024). 72% of Aboriginal children in Victoria, 76% of Aboriginal children on Protection Orders and 73% of Aboriginal children in Out-of-Home care live in the areas covered by the Member ACCOs.

The ACCOs that are VACYPA members are:

- Ballarat and District Aboriginal Co-operative
- Bendigo and District Aboriginal Co-operative
- Dandenong and District Aborigines Co-operative Limited
- Dhauwurd-Wurrung Elderly and Community Health Service
- Gippsland and East Gippsland Aboriginal Co-operative Limited
- Goolum Goolum Aboriginal Co-operative
- Gunditjmara Aboriginal Co-operative Limited
- Mallee District Aboriginal Service
- Njernda Aboriginal Corporation
- Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation
- Murray Valley Aboriginal Co-operative
- Ramahyuck District Aboriginal Corporation
- Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative
- Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-Operative
- Winda-Mara Aboriginal Corporation.



The Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency (VACCA) is a major provider of services for Aboriginal families, children and young people, particularly in Metropolitan Melbourne. VACCA is not a member of VACYPA. VACYPA does not speak on behalf of VACCA any more than VACCA would speak on behalf of VACYPA Members. VACYPA respects the important and long-standing contribution that VACCA makes in so-called Victoria. Most Aboriginal children in so-called Victoria live outside Metropolitan Melbourne. For too long, government children and families policy has adopted a city-centric approach. The aspirations of Member ACCOs need to be acknowledged and acted upon to achieve justice and fairness in the future.

VACYPA's 2025 review of ACCO Rights and Aspirations

With the proportion of Aboriginal children in care who are case managed by an ACCO still remaining at around 50% in 2025, DFFH engaged VACYPA to review ACCOs service aspirations for their children, young people and families.

The 2022-23 report detailed each ACCOs' service aspirations for each of DFFH's funded programs for families and children. A summary of ACCOs' service aspirations from the 2023 report are included in Appendix 2. As noted above, much has changed in those few years. Disappointingly, despite progress and service growth, the barriers listed above are still challenges that exist today. Those challenges, and additional ones identified through this project, are discussed in the chapter, *Knots to untangle*.

ACCO engagement in this review

VACYPA was funded by DFFH to review the aspirations of our 15 Member ACCOs. Jason Kanoa, CEO, and John Cheshire, Senior Adviser, consulted with CEOs and senior executives from each ACCO.

Discussions were semi-structured, allowing ACCOs to lead the discussion about their service aspirations for families, children and young people. As a prompt for discussion, VACYPA provided background data tailored to each ACCO:

- census population data for the local government areas relevant to the ACCO
- statewide child protection data
- local child protection data: numbers of reports, investigations, substantiations, children in care, children on orders, unborn reports
- comparisons of over-representation based on area
- proportion of Aboriginal children in care in the local area case managed by an ACCO.

The aspirations from the 2023 report were discussed and revised.

In acknowledgement of the depth of understanding held by local Aboriginal people about their communities, VACYPA encouraged ACCO leaders to speak openly about what they see and what they know is needed. Discussions necessarily expanded beyond program boundaries. Each discussion was unique, as each community and its ACCO is unique.

VACYPA acknowledges with respect the passion and commitment shared with our staff along with the visionary ideas and hope for a better future.

In order to remain true to the commitment we made to ACCOs, this report endeavours to capture ACCO aspirations in ways that are unbounded by program or departmental categorisation, offering an opportunity to do things differently. VACYPA also acknowledges the current limitations of program and departmental constraints. We cannot move towards the future without understanding where we are now. Therefore, aspirations are expressed both in terms of current program descriptions as well as ACCOs' culturally grounded holistic ambitions.



Policy Context

Children, Youth and Families Act 2005

The *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* (CYF Act) provides the legislative basis for the state to provide services to support families as well as describing systems to protect children and young people from abuse and neglect.

Section 10 of the CYF Act describes the ‘Best Interests Principles’ that the Act requires DFFH, and any child and family services funded by DFFH, to follow. While the overarching principle in section 10 is ‘the best interests of the child’, First Nations people have heard ‘best interests’ used against them and their children countless times since colonisation.

The CYF Act gives the DFFH Secretary, and by delegation, Child Protection practitioners, a legal mandate to intervene in the lives of Aboriginal families.

Section 10 also includes what is known as the ‘minimum intervention principle’, that requires decision makers to consider the need to give the **‘widest possible protection and assistance to the parent of the child’** and to ensure that intervention is **‘limited to that necessary to secure the safety and wellbeing of the child’**. Understandably, First Nations people are affronted when Child Protection intervention skyrockets to child removal, before any offer of assistance to the parent of the child.

Section 12 requires that, ‘a decision in relation to the placement of an Aboriginal child or other significant decision in relation to an Aboriginal child, should involve a meeting convened by an Aboriginal convener who has been approved by an Aboriginal agency or by an Aboriginal organisation approved by the Secretary and, wherever possible, attended by—

- (i) the child; and
- (ii) the child's parent; and
- (iii) the extended family of the child; and
- (iv) appropriate members of the Aboriginal community as determined by the child's parent.

Aboriginal Family-Led Decision Making (AFLDM) meetings provide a means for an ACCO AFLDM convener to operationalise the requirement under s.13. Child Protection embeds this requirement in the Program Requirements for AFLDMs by making AFLDMs the ‘primary case planning process to be used for Aboriginal children’ (DFFH, 2017, p.9).

Section 12 requires that, ‘in making a decision or taking an action in relation to an Aboriginal child, **an opportunity should be given, where relevant, to members of the Aboriginal community to which the child belongs and other respected Aboriginal persons to contribute their views’** and **‘in making a decision to place an Aboriginal child in out of home care, an Aboriginal agency must first be consulted and the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle must be applied’**.

The Aboriginal Child Specialist Advice and Support Service (ACSASS) provides a mechanism for DFFH Child Protection decision makers to consult with an Aboriginal agency and receive cultural advice on significant decisions. Mallee District Aboriginal Services (MDAS), Bendigo and District Aboriginal Cooperative (BDAC) and Njernda Aboriginal Corporation, ACCOs that are VACYPA members, provide ACSASS in addition to VACCA. VACYPA Members report that advice they provide to Child Protection is frequently not acted upon. The legislative requirement for consultation fails its goal to bring Child Protection decision making into alignment with cultural understanding.

The CYF Act places many other obligations on Child Protection about Aboriginal children and young people. The word Aboriginal is used 186 times in the Act. Despite those obligations, the colonial law, the colonial Courts that oversee the Act and Child Protection practitioners that implement the Act combine to fail Aboriginal children, young people and families.



As outlined in Yoorrook for Justice’s first and overarching recommendations, Yoorrook Commissioners called for *establishment of a dedicated child protection system for First Peoples children and young people supported by stand-alone legislation based on the right of First Peoples to self-determination and underpinned by human and cultural rights*. With Treaty in place, Gellung Warl will give consideration to progressing that recommendation. In time, a dedicated First Peoples child protection system, backed by stand-alone child protection legislation that replaces the CYF Act, will build cultural authority and Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing into a new system where children and young people are loved and cared for within their families and communities, negating the reliance on statutory intervention and ending excessive child removal.

In the meantime, VACYPA will continue to work with Member ACCOs to improve the existing child protection system. If legislative amendment can provide better solutions, we will work to bring ACCO voices to amending the Act. The same applies to policy and to funding decisions.

Member ACCOs are all registered community service organisations under the CYF Act. They all provide services funded by DFFH and other government departments to support families in their communities. Their understanding of what works and does not work in communities informs this report.

Statement of Recognition and Recognition Principles

In 2023, the CYF Act was amended to add:

- A formal acknowledgment (s. 7A) from the Victorian Government that the Child Protection system played a key role in in the dispossession, colonisation and assimilation of Aboriginal people
- Binding recognition principles (s. 7E) that Child Protection must consider in all decision making for an Aboriginal child, as well as a requirement to provide opportunity for a child’s family, community and ACCOs to contribute to decision making.

The Statement of Recognition includes acknowledgement by the Parliament that that ongoing structural inequality and systemic racism impact Aboriginal people and culture in relation to child protection decision making and over-representation in child protection. Inequality and racism are not news to First Peoples. Acknowledgement by the Parliament of ongoing racism is a meaningful step.

One of the critical Recognition Principles is that:

*6. The planning and provision of child and family services for Aboriginal children and Aboriginal families under this Act is to be based on commitment, accountability and responsibility to Aboriginal people in Victoria, with **proper consideration to be given to the views of Aboriginal-led community services.***

VACYPA recommends DFFH gives proper consideration to the views put forward by ACCOs through this report.

Aboriginal Child Placement Principles

At the same time as adding the Statement of Recognition and Recognition Principles to the CYF Act, Section 14 was amended to include all five elements of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle:

- Prevention
- Partnership
- Participation
- Connection
- Placement

VACYPA notes that the Victorian Government, along with all Australian jurisdictions, has agreed on indicators to monitor compliance with these principles. While not all indicators are able to be measured



currently, Victoria has committed to working to improve its systems and develop processes so that it can report on all indicators.

Of the placement principles, Prevention remains the most important priority for VACYPA Members. ACCOs aim is to put Child Protection out of business. We know that is a dream, but some dreams are worth striving for, even when they seem out of reach.

The issues facing Aboriginal families are complex, driven by over 250 years of dispossession and discrimination.

The agreed indicator for the Prevention domain relates to the proportion of funding for family services and intensive family services.

Families' needs span **Health, Education, Housing, Justice, and Family Services**. But too often, those systems work in isolation and do not fit into a single portfolio. That's why we need **joined-up, cross-portfolio approaches**, led by ACCOs.

ACCOs face crisis on their doorsteps every day. It can be hard to lift your head up above that sea of daily desperation. Until there is healing, ACCOs will continue to swim against the current.

We can't turn back the boats from 1788. But healing is possible through truth telling, voice and treaty. With passage of the *Statewide Treaty Act 2005* through the Victorian Parliament in October 2025, as Ngarra Murray, Co-Chair of the First Peoples Assembly of Victoria said to the Victorian Parliament, treaty heralds an era where everyone prospers: 'It is children growing up proud of who they are, walking confidently in two worlds, knowing their language and history and that their rights are honoured.'

Wungurilwil Gaggapduir

Wungurilwil Gaggapduir is the tripartite Agreement for Aboriginal families and children between the Victorian Government, ACCOs and Community Service Organisations (CSOs). This is the state-based commitment to reduce the number of Aboriginal children in care, through Aboriginal-designed and led system change, funding reform and proportional funding, based on need. In addition to the Agreement, parties commit to rolling action plans that make the goals actionable in bite-sized pieces, with milestones and allocation of responsibilities for progress against timelines.

The current Wungurilwil Gaggapduir Action Plan is well underway.



VACYPA Members aspire for families, children and young people to thrive

Culture holds community together

Each of our fifteen Member ACCOs hold culture as the defining characteristic of service to their communities. Culture is embedded in the way ACCOs work. It is not an add-on, nor a box to be checked; it is a source of strength, identity and safety for local communities.

Each ACCO consulted through this project spoke of the pain and distress experienced by parents trying to make the best decisions they can on a daily basis, struggling against systemic racism and intergenerational trauma, making sacrifices for the benefit of their children, or their kin, but weighed down by oppression and despair. Where do Aboriginal families turn when they need support? Where is the place that they know they will feel safe and be heard? ACCOs understand. ACCOs do not judge. ACCOs will not turn Aboriginal families away. If you are Aboriginal, ACCOs are your first and last refuge, because culture runs deep and Aboriginal identity provides eligibility through blood.

Culture is not funded

The recurrent theme from consultations was that culture is not funded by government.

There is a cost to providing culturally grounded services to Aboriginal families. Some costs are obvious, such as the time it takes for deep listening, or the cost of attracting, recruiting and retaining an Aboriginal workforce as workers live within small close-knit communities, at the same time as providing intensely personal support to members in those communities. Some costs are less obvious, such as the cost of supporting genuine governance structures where community members understand their roles on ACCO Boards of Management, are comprehensively briefed in language that is accessible about the complexities of managing multi-million-dollar organisations, and the multitude of challenges involved in service delivery across the spectrum from playgroups to aged care.

One ACCO made the point that government is particularly critical of ACCOs regarding governance mechanisms, but it makes no contribution to supporting those mechanisms.

Another ACCO estimated that the cost to the ACCO of providing a culturally grounded service was 3% of the total revenue of the ACCO. None of that cost is included in the ACCO's funding.

VACYPA is currently undertaking a project to ascertain the additional costs of providing services in ACCOs. The *True Cost, Fair Price* project will provide evidence to support the argument for funding mechanisms to account for the cost of culture.

Recommendation 1:

The Victorian Government should inform itself about the cost of providing culturally grounded services through ACCOs and include an allowance for those costs both in budget bids and program allocations.

Healing flows from knowing who you are

ACCOs are led by their communities. That is the central tenet of community-controlled organisations. Established by those communities and responsible to those communities, ACCOs are understandably wary of requests for service from people who are not Aboriginal. Issues relating to identification are often framed around service eligibility. But as is well known, the impact of colonisation, stolen generations, restricted movement, missions and assimilation policies has resulted in many Aboriginal people struggling to find their families of origin. Governments in so-called Victoria were particularly good at destroying Aboriginal people's connection to Country, community and kinship.



When it comes to addressing the issue of identification, Aboriginal people must lead the solutions, not governments.

Acknowledge Country by using Country boundaries not government areas

ACCOs spoke about borders with neighbouring Countries. Governments fund ACCOs using their departmental borders, based on colonial local government areas. Country borders are based on land and waterways, on natural formations like rivers, streams, mountains, trees and other types of flora. ACCOs are clear about what Country is appropriate for them to provide services on and what Country is served by other ACCOs.

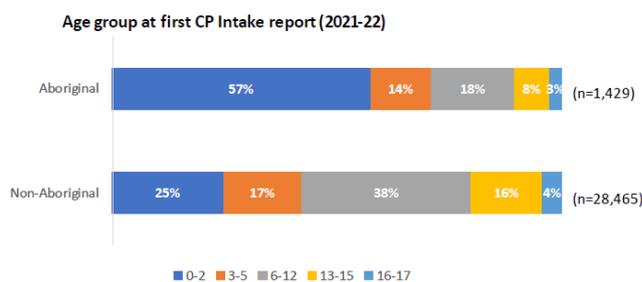
For instance, BDAC provides services on Dja Dja Wurrung Country in Loddon area. Njernda provides services on Yorta Yorta Country in Loddon area. The two ACCOs share provision of ACSASS in Loddon. The ACCOs have no difficulty understanding boundaries, but this is more complicated for DFFH.

Over time, ACCOs support a shift to Country based service delivery, rather than artificially constructed area boundaries.

Little children are the dreaming carried forward

The importance of early intervention and prevention, particularly focused on the early years, was discussed at each ACCO consultation. ACCOs are aware of data provided to the Aboriginal Children's Forum regarding the over-representation of Aboriginal children and young people in child protection and care. For instance, Aboriginal children are reported at four times the rate of non-Aboriginal children.

Drilling down into reporting data, most reports to Child Protection (57%) about Aboriginal children are made when the children are aged two years or under, while most reports (38%) about non-Aboriginal children are first made when the children are at primary school:



There is a clear case to support Aboriginal families with young children and provide the care they need so there is no reason to involve Child Protection in their lives.

Early intervention in the early years can prevent reports to Child Protection. Once reported, the rate of over-representation increases at every stage, as data provided to the Aboriginal Children's Forum shows (DFFH, 2025):

- Four times the rate of reporting
- Six times the rate of re-reporting
- Seven times the rate of investigations
- Nine times the rate of substantiations
- Eleven times the rate of open cases
- 22 times the rate in care.

Discussions varied about the nature of support each ACCO seeks to provide, depending upon the extent of existing service delivery by the ACCO, the size of the local population, the capacity of mainstream services in the area (both culturally and quantitatively) and alignment with existing strategic planning.



Nurtured by kin, guided by culture, supported by community

The most common theme that emerged from consultations was the aspiration to deliver culturally grounded early childhood education and care (ECEC) services in an integrated early years community centre.

ACCOs spoke of the value that stems from wrapping a cultural community centre with a range of universal and targeted services to foster the cultural and developmental needs of young children and the needs of their families. For more than two decades, SNAICC has been championing ‘thrive by five, with culture alive’. Some Member ACCOs have established ECEC services, other ACCOs have plans and other ACCOs aspire to provide integrated early years hubs.

A range of varying service elements were raised by ACCOs in consultations. Not every element was proposed by every ACCO. Naturally, the mix of additional services should be tailored to the needs of each particular community. For instance, the availability of culturally safe mental health and healing services varies across Countries, as does access to speech pathology or financial counselling. The core elements ACCOs raised are:

- Playgroups
- Long day care
- Pre-prep (kindergarten)
- Maternal and child health
- Parenting advice and support
- Family support

There are two fundamental problems that targeted stand-alone services struggle with in Aboriginal communities: stigma and worry about child protection. One CEO raised the problem that Aboriginal people will avoid admitting there is a problem at home. The corollary of that is avoidance of being seen to reach out when you need support. Aboriginal mothers are already told they are failures via countless measures reported daily in Closing the Gap data. Avoiding further stigma is understandable.

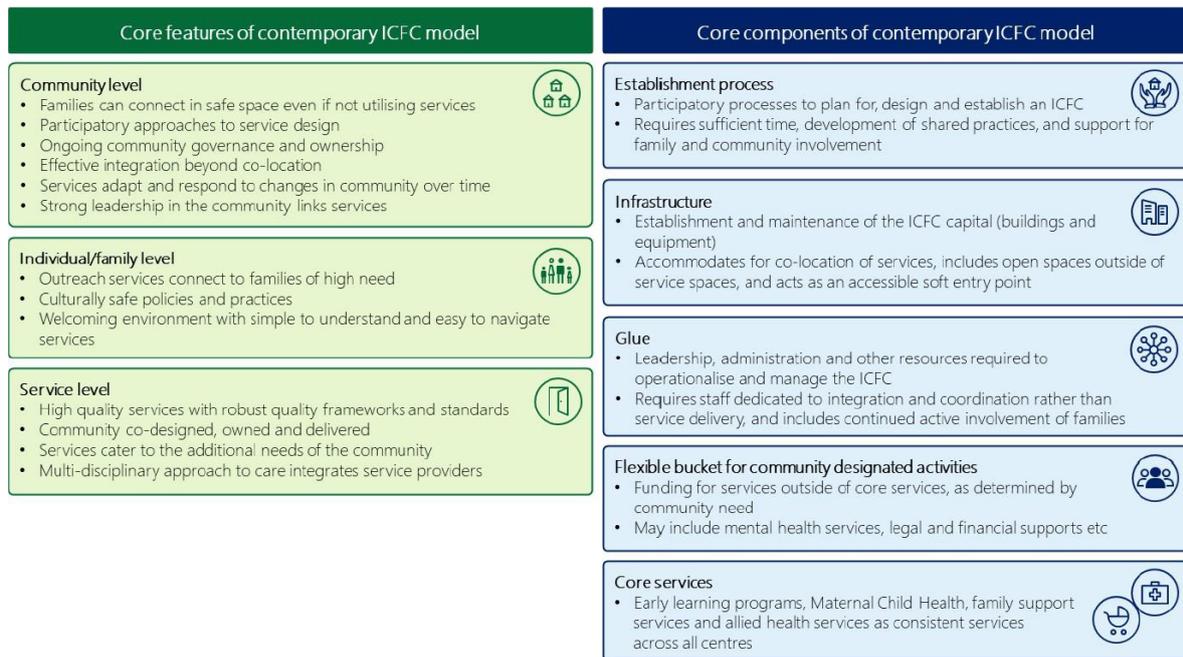
Fear of child protection is also perfectly understandable, as the over-representation data above demonstrates. Fear that services will report their children gets in the way of parents seeking support when it is needed.

But if there is a good reason to attend a community centre, such as cultural activities, the company of other parents or safe play space, then parents willingly attend and stay. Once attendance at the community centre becomes desirable, the potential to connect to other services follows. The principle sitting behind integrated early years community centres is not complex. Moreover, from a cultural perspective, the interconnectivity of everything within Country is readily accepted. Indeed, the opposite of integration – rigid program boundaries – feels foreign and unintelligible to many Aboriginal people.

Research shows positive outcomes for Indigenous children from early childhood education programs (Elek et al, 2020). Early years policy is at an important stage of redevelopment in Australia, providing opportunities for laying policy foundations that support better ways of doing things for Aboriginal children. Significant work has been undertaken to investigate optimum methods of funding integrated early years centres, including a major study in 2023 by Deloitte Access Economics for Social Ventures Australia and the Centre for Community Child Health, ‘Exploring need and funding models for a national approach to integrated child and family centres’. Deloitte Access Economics describe the key features of an integrated child and family centre in the following figure:



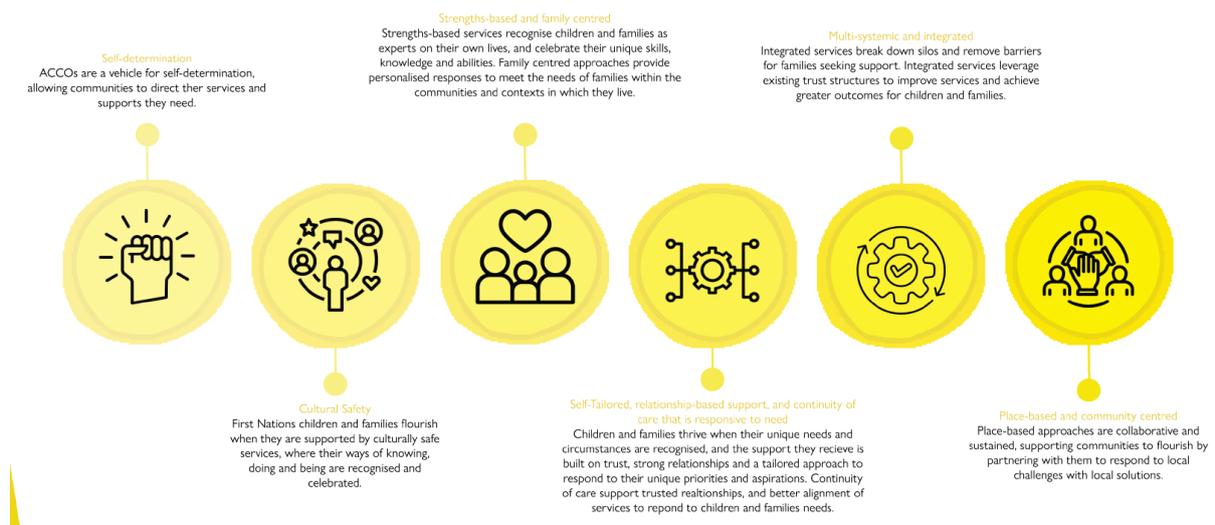
Figure 4.1: Core features and components of the contemporary ICFC model



SNAICC undertook further research, published in May 2024: ‘Funding Model Options for Integrated Early Years Services’. Building on the work by Deloitte Access Economics, and undertaking extensive ACCO consultation and community surveys, SNAICC identified the following core characteristics of ACCO integrated early years services:

-  Community-centred, building trust with children, families and their communities
-  Provide universal service offerings
-  Provide flexible services in response to need.

In addition, SNAICC identified six principles of ACCO integrated early years services:



At a funding level, SNAICC points out the various funding streams that exist, as well as several now discontinued funding streams that supported Aboriginal integrated early years services. SNAICC’s research found some ACCOs are relying upon a mixture a Commonwealth, state and even local government funding to maintain services established under streams that ended, or whose criteria altered



over time. They point out that ACCOs are left cobbling together funding from multiple sources to provide the services they know their communities need. The positive outcomes achieved by ACCOs are generally ‘in spite of’ rather than ‘because of’ government policy and funding arrangements.

SNAICC notes the intervention of the NSW Government to fill the gap in funding Aboriginal Child and Family Centres with flexible funding for ACCOs to deliver culturally safe services, including ECEC, maternal and child health, parenting and family support. Funding is provided initially for four-year periods with scope to extend. **VACYPA would welcome a similar initiative in Victoria.**

After reviewing the failures of existing piecemeal funding mechanisms, and describing the need for holistic, universal, accessible early years services that acknowledge the need for cultural connection as well as child development and wellbeing, SNAICC calls for a new funding model, based upon the following principles:

- **Certainty**, to ensure that services have confidence and assurance that funding commitments are both enduring and commensurate with the full cost of high quality integrated early years services that embed culture in all aspects of service delivery
- **Control**, such that communities and services can flexibly direct funding resources to their highest and best use given the needs of the local community
- **Reliability**, such that the integrated services and supports that children and families require can be accessed and utilised in a timely and predictable manner
- **Responsiveness**, such that funding levels recognise and respond to variations in need across and within communities
- **Administrative simplicity**, such that the costs and administrative burden of accessing and utilising funding are minimised.

SNAICC analysed three possible funding approaches against these principles:

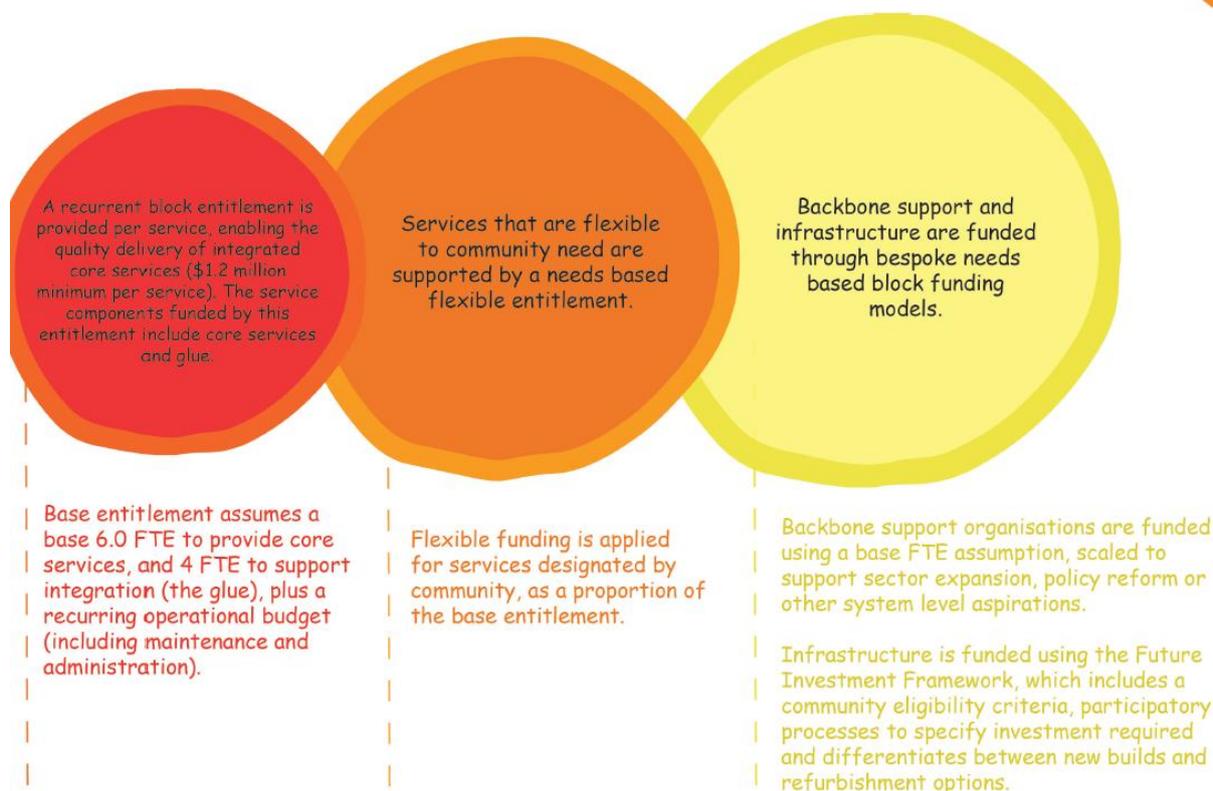
- Supplemented Child Care Subsidy (CCS) model
- Adjusted CCS Model, with supplementary needs-based funding
- Dedicated ACCO Early Years Model.

SNAICC concludes that only a dedicated ACCO early years model can meet all five of the principles above. They therefore recommend that the Commonwealth should partner with states and territories and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the development of such a model, incorporating block-based funding and needs-based funding to provide sustainable and flexible ACCO integrated early years services across Australia.

Drawing on the Deloitte Access Economics research and other data, SNAICC proposes the following core funding elements:



Figure 3: Key components of the proposed funding model



SNAICC is currently undertaking detailed costings of the model, but they offer the following estimates as possible costs for ACCO integrated early years services:

Table 6: Estimated investment for example ACCO-led integrated early years services (\$ millions)

	Example service 1	Example service 2	Example service 3
Region	Remote	Regional	Metropolitan
Community size	Small	Medium	Large
Build	New	Uplift	Existing
Vulnerability	High level of vulnerability (quintile 1)	Average level vulnerability (quintile 3)	Low level of vulnerability (quintile 5)
Once off cost (\$m)	\$5.8	\$6.1	\$3.5
Recurrent cost (\$m)	\$2.0	\$2.5	\$2.4

Source: ACCO model estimates are based off Deloitte Access Economics cost modelling using a variety of sources, including but not limited to a range of federal and state/territory data and resources.

VACYPA is not aware what response governments have made to SNAICC’s comprehensive proposal for early years services. Our own research, undertaken through this project, uncovered ACCOs that are ready and willing to embark on the journey described by SNAICC. The opportunity to make a profound difference in the lives of Aboriginal children calls for government attention now.



Here in so-called Victoria, the Department of Education funds infrastructure for Pre-Prep (kindergarten) buildings, but that infrastructure does not extend to funding Maternal and Child Health or Family Services infrastructure. An ACCO needs to source separate funding from different departments to cobble together the necessary infrastructure funding as well as ongoing operational expenditure across programs and departments. VACYPA sees an opportunity for the Minister for Children to work with her colleagues across departments and come up with a single, simple funding model for integrated early years services.

Recommendation 2:

VACYPA recommends the Minister for Children engages with the Ministers for Education and Health in the Victorian and Commonwealth Governments to enter into partnerships to fund ACCO Integrated Early Years Services, as recommended by SNAICC.

The following ACCOs aspire to deliver ACCO integrated early years centres:

- Ballarat and District Aboriginal Co-operative
- Bendigo and District Aboriginal Co-operative
- Gippsland and East Gippsland Aboriginal Co-operative
- Goolum Goolum Aboriginal Co-operative
- Gunditjmara Aboriginal Co-operative
- Mallee District Aboriginal Service
- Murray Valley Aboriginal Co-operative
- Ramahyuck District Aboriginal Corporation
- Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative
- Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-Operative
- Winda-Mara Aboriginal Corporation.

Everyone needs an extra hand now and then

Consistent with VACYPA's reform agenda, as well as priorities established in Wungurilwil Gaggapduir, VACYPA Members aim to provide early intervention and support for every Aboriginal family if needed, averting the need for any Aboriginal child or young person to be reported to Child Protection. Everyone needs extra support now and then. Each ACCO consulted in this project spoke of the need to provide culturally safe, accessible, non-stigmatising family support for Aboriginal families when and where it is needed, as soon as possible and for as long as it is needed. Each ACCO considered family support an essential core service for the ACCO, regardless of the level of DFFH family services funding received. Community expect their ACCO to be there for them when they need a hand. The trust placed in ACCOs by community is a privilege ACCOs do not treat lightly. ACCOs will always do whatever they can to support their communities.

Recommendation 3:

ACCOs that provide DFFH funded family services all seek growth funding. DFFH must provide growth funding for ACCO-designed, led and delivered family services.

A range of different priority community sub-groups were identified. One CEO sought additional support for young single mothers, another spoke about the need to prevent relationship breakdowns, and most talked about wanting to support pregnant women better so their infants are not reported to Child Protection upon birth. Flexibility was a key theme across all ACCOs. ACCOs want the capacity to match their response to the particular need, both through service intensity, location (in-home or centre), modality (individual or group), as well as the option to use evidence-based programs that are supported, or ACCO designed programs that are tailored to the community.

ACCOs seek flexible funding to support family programs, as material aid is frequently a presenting problem. Capacity to assist families with their practical material needs is both a sign of good faith as well as acknowledgement of the practical reality of very many Aboriginal families. VACYPA understand that



VACCA is the only ACCO in so-called Victoria funded by the Commonwealth Government to distribute emergency relief, despite poverty affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people more significantly in regional and rural areas than in Metropolitan Melbourne.

Recommendation 4:

The Commonwealth Government should review its Emergency Relief funding to enable all ACCOs in so-called Victoria to administer the program, if they choose to do so.

Many ACCOs lamented the cessation of the Cradle to Kinder program, including the brokerage allocated to that program. One ACCO was pleased it had been able to maintain its Cradle to Kinder, which raises questions regarding DFFH area consistency and equity.

As the 2023 budget allocation for Aboriginal Rapid Engagement and Diversion (ARED) rolls out across ACCOs over four years, ACCOs are at different stages of ARED establishment and delivery. Each ACCO funded for ARED chooses its own service model. The principle sitting behind ARED is sound: each ACCO knows what works best for community. VACYPA received funding for a team of two staff members to support ARED and Koori Supported Playgroup establishment and implementation. VACYPA and our Members can already see clear benefits from this approach to family support funding.

Building on the success of the four child protection diversion programs piloted across VACCA, BDAC, Njernda and Goolum Goolum, documented in the evaluation undertaken by the University of Melbourne in 2022, ARED is a promising funding approach. ACCOs spoke positively about their ARED programs. While strongly supportive of the self-determination embodied in being provided the opportunity to choose what service model to provide within ARED funding, some ACCOs expressed a degree of wariness about the pressure they experienced to choose a program model and implement that model, so that effective services could be delivered to their communities within reasonable timeframes. Unsurprisingly, ACCOs drew heavily upon the evidence available from the University of Melbourne's 2022 evaluation (Wise, S. and Brewster, G. 2022). Adopting successful programs from other local ACCOs for replication helped provide a sense of security for ACCOs as they embarked on establishing new programs. VACYPA's staff certainly offered support and advice to assist ACCOs choose their models, though the scale of support necessary is greater than two staff members can realistically offer to fifteen Member ACCOs.

Recommendation 5:

In addition to growth funding directly to ACCOs, DFFH must provide additional resourcing to provide advice and support, as well as allowing sufficient lead time, in the development of Aboriginal-led models.

Not only women's business

Some ACCOs noted the importance of supporting Aboriginal men as parents and caregivers. Men's groups are often provided by ACCOs through ACCO Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB) programs. The extent that SEWB programs were integrated with family support services varied across ACCOs. ACCOs pointed out the importance of offering support for men in ways that are not stigmatising or suggestive of a deficit approach. ACCOs spoke of the need to fight against negative stereotypes as well as reinforcing the rewards experienced by fathers. Sharing culture, language, and traditions is central to Indigenous fathering.

Voluntary kinship care

Through a separate but related project undertaken by VACYPA, we consulted Member ACCOs about how kinship care should be supported in culturally grounded ways. One of the recommendations ACCOs made through that project was that government should fund and support ACCO models of voluntary kinship care.



Voluntary kinship care refers to arrangements where Aboriginal families care for children and young people outside of formal child protection processes - driven not by statutory orders but by cultural responsibility, connection and Lore. It is the primary form of care in many communities and reflects a deep-rooted commitment to keeping children safe, close, and connected to their culture and Country. It is also the contemporary representation of kinship as a cultural practice, rather than a statutory service delivery option. These arrangements are informal but important because they work as early intervention and prevention for Aboriginal families, children, and young people becoming involved in the child protection system. They are acts of cultural continuation, where care is understood not as a service, but as a shared responsibility.

Voluntary kinship care is an intrinsic part of providing an extra hand when it is needed, for as long as it is needed. ACCOs do whatever it takes to support families in their communities.

Recommendation 6:

Recognise voluntary kinship care by establishing an ACCO-managed support stream, with practical aid, small brokerage and brief casework to keep families out of the statutory system.

Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care (ACAC) and Community Protecting Boorais (CPB)

This project captures the aspirations of VACYPA Members. It updates aspirations expressed in 2022. Aspirations have been central to the ACAC journey since section 18 was included in the *Children, Youth and Families Act* in 2005. The second reading speech in the Victorian Parliament stated, 'Consistent with our aim of empowering community decision making, a **longer-term reform** is to transfer the responsibility for making decisions about Aboriginal children to Aboriginal communities.' Aboriginal communities and the ACCOs they control are all too familiar with 'longer-term reform' and being assured that the longed-for reform will be sooner rather than later. ACCOs have been very patient.

ACAC has been an aspirational idea that both ignites hope while filling hearts with dread. Who would not be wary of assuming responsibility for administering colonial laws that have overseen the numbers of Aboriginal children in care grow year in, year out? But there is no stronger incentive for change than the prospect of ending the shameful over-representation of Aboriginal children in care. Gaining true authority and decision-making power over child protection holds that hope.

It is important to note that Member ACCOs aspire for the children and young people in their communities to thrive and be raised safely in Aboriginal families and communities, without any contact with child protection. ACCOs put early intervention and prevention as their priority. They have seen the failure of government provided Child Protection, as well as government's inability to implement its own stated aspirations for early intervention and prevention. Despite promising prevention, government continues to grow the Child Protection system. Understandably, State Budgets necessarily find funding to look after the abused child rather than fund the seemingly intractable causes that led to the abuse and neglect. ACCOs know what they want: prevention and early intervention. They don't want to be stuck in the same trap as government, servicing a funding black hole that sucks in endless mountains of money.

Since 2022-23, there has been a shift in communities as people hear that ACAC is not simply ACCOs 'doing the government's dirty work for them'. The ACCOs that are providing ACAC in their communities are demonstrating the difference an ACCO can make when child protection is Aboriginal-led. Through this project, ACCOs spoke of the importance of doing things the Aboriginal way, bringing cultural authority to decision making, genuinely listening to parents' stories and making sure they understand, and giving Aboriginal families the respect and care they deserve.

The 2023 project reported on ACCOs' desire to expand ACAC into child protection investigations and protective intervention. ACAC providers often felt they were taking on authorisation for children and young people after harm had been done that could have been avoided. VACYPA is pleased to see the legislative change implemented to enable that growth, as recommended by the 2023 ACCO Rights and



Aspirations project. Changes to the CYF Act to enable ACCOs to undertake that front end work has enabled the Community Protecting Boorais (CPB) program to be piloted on Dja Dja Wurrung Country by BDAC and on Wurundjeri Country by VACCA.

Regarding ACAC aspirations, some ACCOs that are not ACAC providers expressed cautious interest in undertaking Community Protecting Boorais before they took on ACAC, so they could influence the decision making and services provided to families at beginning of child protection intervention. In conversation, that perspective opened into consideration of ACAC delivery; as well as appreciation of the challenges of commencing provision of statutory child protection at the initial investigation stage, particularly regarding the impact on local communities. Aspirations for CPB were therefore curtailed to accept that supporting children and young people on protection orders through ACAC is a preferable starting point rather than CPB.

The following ACCOs expressed an interest in delivering ACAC, if not as soon as funding is available, in the ACCO's own time and only when their communities agree it is right for them:

- Gunditjmara Aboriginal Co-operative Ltd
- Mallee District Aboriginal Service
- Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-Operative
- Winda-Mara Aboriginal Corporation.

ACAC delivery at Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation requires further consideration.

All current ACAC providers have aspirations to provide CPB when funding allows.

VACYPA respects the decision made by Njernda to cease its ACAC program. Community control is the backbone of ACCOs and community representatives make the decisions for their communities.

DFFH must respect local ACCO authority

At the time of the 2023 ACCO Rights and Aspirations report, the potential was raised for another ACCO to provide ACAC on another ACCO's Country if the local ACCO had no aspirations for ACAC.

Recommendation 7 of the 2023 report in part recommended that DFFH, 'consider the merits of a neighbouring or state-wide ACCO providing the service and, where agreed, establishing a review process including the potential for future local service delivery'.

Current ACAC providers that are VACYPA members said they could not envisage providing ACAC on another ACCO's Country.

In cases where a local ACCO does not hold aspirations to provide ACAC, or any other service, VACYPA Members do not support a statewide ACCO providing the service on their Country without the written agreement of their Board.

ACCOs also pointed out that circumstances change over time and that while an ACCO may not have aspirations for ACAC now, their communities may change their position in the future. In circumstances where an ACCO enters another ACCO's Country to provide ACAC, as is currently the case, there should be a provisional transition plan to transfer ACAC to a local ACCO in the future, if sought by the local ACCO.

Recommendation 7:

DFFH must not fund an ACCO to provide a service on the Country of another ACCO without written approval from the Board of the local ACCO.

Support for Aboriginal-led policy

As ACAC expands across so-called Victoria, there is a growing need to establish ACCO-led policy and program development to support the program. VACYPA notes the recent funding DFFH provided to our organisation to support ACAC. We are already seeing a change in the way ACAC providers engage with



policy and program development. VACYPA acknowledges DFFH's support that is progressing towards ACAC to be a self-determined model.

Recommendation 8:

DFFH must continue to support ACCO led policy reform. Existing funded positions need to be ongoing and additional positions are required to enable ACCOs to lead policy development and implementation for ACAC.

ACAC Model Flexibility

As we progress towards Aboriginal designed and led services, there will inevitably be modifications and adjustments to the ACAC model to support local circumstances. In some areas, the number of Aboriginal children involved with child protection is relatively small. For instance, service redesign will be required in Wimmera South West area to accommodate issues associated with scale and multiple ACCO providers. Adjusting the model to accommodate small scale as well as large scale will be necessary if those communities are to have their rights and aspirations met.

Recommendation 9:

DFFH must support ACCO-designed variations to the ACAC service model to enable ACAC to be tailored by local ACCOs to their individual circumstances.

ACAC After Hours

A related issue as ACAC grows is the dependency that ACAC currently has on the Child Protection After Hours Service. Some ACAC providers spoke of problems they encountered from After Hours, with staff that fail to understand ACAC and the authority provided to ACCOs through section 18, or that each ACAC provider is a separate organisation, responsible to its local community. One ACCO expressed aspirations to establish an ACAC After Hours response so that no ACAC families were ever required to use DFFH Child Protection services.

Recommendation 10:

DFFH should explore the potential for an ACAC After Hours response.

Financial delegation for ACAC case planners

A major issue affecting all ACAC providers is the disconnect between authorised functions and powers for child protection case planning, without authorised financial delegation. For Child Protection, the Secretary delegates functions and powers under the CYF Act, as well as her functions and powers under the Financial Management Act 1994, to appropriate levels of DFFH public servants. Unfortunately, section 18 of the CYF Act allows her to authorise functions and powers under the CYF Act to the principal officer of an ACCO (the CEO), but she cannot authorise her functions and powers under the Financial Management Act.

The consequence of that incapacity is a disconnect between decisions that are made for the safety and wellbeing of authorised Aboriginal children and young people and the funding required to implement those decisions. A common example relates to approval of higher-level caregiver allowances for kinship carers. Currently, if an ACAC case planner (Team Leader) determines that a kinship carer for an ACAC client should receive a higher level of caregiver allowance, she must make an application to the DFFH Child Protection Director to approve the higher-level allowance payment. It is important to note that Child Protection will have no involvement with either that child or the child's kinship carer, yet the delegation for payment authorisation rests with the DFFH Director, who must review the application and approve the higher payment in the Client Relationship Information System (CRIS).

Needless to say, this process runs contrary to the principle of self-determination on which ACAC is founded. It frustrates ACAC practitioners at all levels, is confusing for kinship carers who are now working with an ACCO rather than with DFFH Child Protection, and it can jeopardise the stability of



kinship placements when payments are delayed or declined. DFFH Child Protection Directors quite rightly find the process frustrating also, as they have no oversight of those cases and do not make any case planning decisions that relate to those clients.

Despite attempts to work around this shortfall through policy advice, such as stating in the care allowance guidance, 'When providing financial approval for an ACAC client, the departmental officer is not required to reassess the assessment made by ACAC, ACAC is responsible for undertaking comprehensive assessment of eligibility for higher level care allowance', departmental officers understandably feel that their financial delegation requires that they assess eligibility, and not take an ACAC Team Leader's assessment as sufficient merit for the application. Indeed, an auditor may well agree that due diligence on the part of the financial delegate requires they reassess each decision. At the least it is confusing and a waste of their time, at the worst, it results in decisions being overturned by DFFH that ACAC case planners have made.

Caregiver allowances are only one example of this problem. The same difficulty arises when an ACAC client requires payments to support their health and wellbeing that are beyond the level of client expenses allocated to the ACAC provider for each client. DFFH allocates approximately \$1,367 per client for client expenses. Client expenses can cost vastly more than that amount. DFFH acknowledges that there will be cases where DFFH will need to reimburse an ACCO for additional client expenses. Requests for additional assistance are considered by DFFH on a case-by-case basis and assessed in the same way as requests to meet the needs of other child protection clients. DFFH considers requests to:

- support additional health and medical needs of the child not covered by any medical allowance, Medicare, or private health insurance
- assist with costs related to childcare beyond other subsidies
- assist with services essential to support the client or the client's placement
- assist with legal expenses required as a consequence of contested hearings.

But just as with caregiver allowances, DFFH Child Protection is not the case planner for the child. ACAC case planners have a legislative responsibility to make decisions that are best for the child, but the responsibility to pay for those decisions rests with DFFH. That disconnect needs to be corrected. DFFH has advised ACAC providers many times that the issue requires a legislative amendment to fix the problem.

Recommendation 11:

DFFH must amend the Financial Management Act 1994, or implement an alternative solution, to allow ACAC case planners to make financial decisions to support the case planning decisions they make.

ACAC providers must be authorised to use CRIS for multiple purposes

DFFH has multiple functions that it necessarily undertakes in the process of planning, funding and delivering services to families, children and young people. Many of those functions are assisted by data collected in the process of service delivery and recorded in the Client Relations and Information System (CRIS). ACAC providers are not permitted to use data recorded in CRIS for any purpose other than performing the functions and powers authorised under section 18 of the CYF Act.

While it may seem obvious that DFFH refers to aggregate deidentified data when it makes bids for funding, or allocates funding on an area basis, or to monitor the proportion of Aboriginal children in care with a cultural plan, or to count the number of Aboriginal children reported to Child Protection that are investigated, none of those functions may be undertaken by ACCOs. Clearly, as ACCOs take on policy and program development for ACAC, data will need to be used to inform ACCO work.



Recommendation 12:

DFFH must amend the CYF Act to enable ACCOs to utilise data for purposes associated with policy and program development, including quantitative planning measures, quality assurance and meeting regulatory requirements.

Authorising non-Aboriginal CEOs for ACAC

Section 18(5) of the CYF Act says that the Secretary of DFFH can only authorise the Principal Officer (the CEO) to undertake functions and exercise powers under the CYF Act if the CEO is Aboriginal. That legal requirement limits the aspirations of ACCOs to deliver ACAC if their CEO is not Aboriginal.

Section 18(5) could have implications down the track for ACAC providers if, at some point in the future, the Board chooses to appoint a non-Aboriginal CEO. If that were to occur under current legislation, children authorised to the ACCO would have to have their authorisation revoked and responsibility would need to return to DFFH or to another ACAC provider. (The CYF Act allows for an interim CEO that is not Aboriginal.)

At its October 2022 meeting, the Aboriginal Children's Forum agreed that the CYF Act should be amended to allow non-Aboriginal CEOs to be authorised to deliver ACAC. VACYPA is willing to offer any support required to government to progress this recommendation as soon as possible.

It is important to note that internal delegations within the ACCO locate case planning decision making at an operational level (generally Team Leader for most decisions). Maintaining separation between the CEO and the decision maker is important so that if a parent or child appeals a decision, the appeal can be dealt with inside the ACCO by a senior executive without having to have the appeal heard by the Victorian Civil Appeals Tribunal (VCAT). At a practical level, provided the ACCO has processes that allow for a senior Aboriginal person or panel of Aboriginal people to determine case planning appeals, the ACCO can genuinely say that its ACAC decision making is Aboriginal-led, even if the CEO is not Aboriginal.

Without legislative amendment, Goolum Goolum Aboriginal Cooperative, which is in ACAC Pre-authorisation now, is unable to be fully authorised.

Recommendation 13:

As soon as possible, Government should amend the CYF Act to enable the Secretary to authorise a non-Aboriginal principal officer to undertake powers and functions under section 18 of the Act.

ACAC Growth Plan

A clear message from ACCOs from VACYPA's review of ACCO Rights and Aspirations is that, while seeking an Aboriginal-designed, led and delivered system, ACCOs support transfer of authority, power and resources to ACCOs now. ACAC is the best example of self-determination in child protection available for Aboriginal families. ACCOs, particularly the ACCOs that have committed to ACAC, seek growth that enables every Aboriginal child who enters the child protection system to have their case planning decisions made by ACCOs instead of DFFH Child Protection. Aboriginal children and young people will be better supported to stay with their families, they will be better connected to culture and their long-term happiness will be better through ACAC.

At 30 June 2024, there were 3,541 Aboriginal children and young people on protection orders. 3,047 of those were in care. To enable those children to be supported through ACAC, 98 teams would be required. Current funding will support 24 teams, when growth funding provided in the 2023-24 State Budget is allocated in July 2026. An additional 74 teams will be required.

In 2023-24 there were 5,618 investigations of allegations of abuse or neglect reported to Child Protection. Under the current Community Protecting Boorais modelling – which is acknowledged to be an estimate



based on a range of assumptions – the number of CPB teams required to undertake those investigations is 65. Current funding provides for six teams. An additional 59 CPB teams will be required.

ACCOs remain committed to early intervention and prevention. Our goal is to put statutory child protection out of business, but in the meantime, until ACCOs are funded to provide the support for their communities to stem the flow of children and young people into child protection, we seek ACAC and CPB growth to enable every Aboriginal child and young person in child protection to receive culturally grounded assistance through ACAC and CPB.

That will require growth of an additional 133 ACAC and CPB teams.

Working with the state while we work with community

As mentioned above, the CYF Act places many obligations on Child Protection regarding Aboriginal children and young people. As a consequence, program structures have been developed over time to enable those obligations to be met. While not every ACCO delivers every DFFH program, the following DFFH programs, funded by DFFH, are delivered by ACCOs:

- Family Finding
- Cultural planning
- Aboriginal Child Specialist Advice and Support Service (ACSASS)
- Aboriginal Family-Led Decision Making (AFLDM)
- Permanent Care Assessments for the Children’s Court.

Family Finding

For each Aboriginal child, young person or parent who identifies as Aboriginal, but lives without the knowledge that links them to their forebears, the pain is unimaginable. Addressing that pain is part of the journey towards healing. Further work is required to develop clear mechanisms and agreed positions about identification. VACYPA supports Aboriginal-led policy development that provides clarity for ACCOs and respects their self-determination so that questions of identification can be resolved wherever possible. **Family Finding is part of that solution.**

VACYPA notes that the Wungurilwil Gagapduir Action Plan includes an action to expand Family Finding, and ACCOs support development of a model that enables linkages between ACCOs to maximise local knowledge and support each other in the task.

Every Member ACCO aspires to deliver Family Finding support to help Aboriginal people who lack clarity about their identification to make connection to their Aboriginal family.

VACYPA notes that the 2023 ACCO Rights and Aspirations report recommended (recommendation 6):

As part of the review of the Family Finding service consider the:

- *merits of the Family Finding service being delivered locally by ACCOs aspiring and ready to deliver such activities and*
- *feasibility of a statewide genealogical database being effectively run by one ACCO with input from local ACCOs.*

This recommendation has not progressed. ACCOs support DFFH undertaking a feasibility study regarding establishment of a genealogical database and encourage the study to consider how the Koori Heritage Trust could support such a database.

Recommendation 14:

DFFH must allocate dedicated funding to support Family Finding services for all VACYPA members.



Cultural Planning

Section 176 of the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* requires the DFFH Secretary to provide a cultural plan to every Aboriginal child in care. The Cultural Planning Program is established to support the development and implementation of cultural plans.

ACCOs raised the obvious linkages between cultural planning and family finding. Identification is central to development of cultural plans. ACCOs raised issues regarding the capacity to undertake cultural planning adequately under current funding levels, and questioned the capacity to expand cultural planning into family finding without additional resources.

ACCOs raised concerns about the way cultural planning is framed by Child Protection and mainstream CSOs in that a cultural plan is often conceived as an add-on activity to address a deficit, rather than as articulation of the right of every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child and young person to grow up with understanding and pride in their identity. The opportunity to influence future generations of parents through strength in culture was also raised.

The following ACCOs that do not currently deliver Cultural Planning aspire to do so:

- Dandenong and District Aboriginal Cooperative
- Dhauwurd-Wurrung Elderly and Community Health Service
- Winda-Mara Aboriginal Corporation.

The following ACCOs seek to expand the capacity of their Cultural Planning services:

- Ballarat and District Aboriginal Cooperative
- Bendigo and District Aboriginal Cooperative
- Njernda Aboriginal Corporation
- Mallee and District Aboriginal Services
- Rumbalara Aboriginal Cooperative
- Ramahyuck Aboriginal Cooperative
- Gippsland and East Gippsland Aboriginal Cooperative
- Goolum Goolum Aboriginal Cooperative
- Gunditjmara Aboriginal Cooperative.

Recommendation 15:

DFFH must expand the Cultural Planning program, enabling all ACCOs that seek to provide the program to deliver the program for their communities. Capacity within existing providers must be expanded to meet demand, so that Child Protection can meet its legislatively mandated responsibilities.

VACYPA notes that the 2023 ACCO Rights and Aspirations report recommended (recommendation 7) that DFFH and ACCOs, 'explore alternate approaches (including funding) to support and connect children to culture where a specific service cannot be offered by the local or alternate ACCO (such as the local ACCO visiting the child or connecting them to other ACCO services)'. This recommendation was framed around the need to connect children to culture in instances where the child is in care, but the care provider – either kinship care, foster care or residential care – is not an ACCO. Clearly, concern about connecting Aboriginal children in care to their culture is the reason behind the legislative requirement for cultural plans for every Aboriginal child in care.

As noted above, culture is not a funded activity in ACCOs, despite it being central to all ACCO business. Connecting Aboriginal children and young people to culture is an ongoing part of ACCOs' work. Cultural planning focuses on developing cultural plans for Aboriginal children and young people in care, though the small amount of funding allocated to support cultural plan implementation is embarrassingly low.

When the 2016 cultural planning model was implemented, brokerage funding was provided to each ACCO that received funding for a Senior Adviser, Cultural Planning. Brokerage funding is provided to



support the implementation of cultural plans and is flexible in its application. No specific budget was allocated to brokerage; rather, brokerage was determined by what was left over once the allocations were made for staff. That meant the level of brokerage per child was tiny, in the order of \$400 - \$450 per child.

Very little meaningful activities can be funded with that small amount of money. For example, Return to Country visits generally cost many times more than that. The 2018-20 Return to Country Southern Pilot Program supported Return to Country (RtC) for 22 children and young people. The cost for twelve of those RtCs was up to \$3,000, the cost for six RtCs was between \$4,000 and \$6,000 and the cost for four of those RtCs was between \$7,000 and \$11,000 (DFFH, 2020 unpublished). It is hard to imagine much being provided in the way of cultural activity for \$400-\$450.

ACCOs expressed a clear need to substantially increase the level of cultural planning brokerage funding and to fund positions in ACCOs to connect Aboriginal children and young people to culture. Connection to culture is a critical protective factor for Aboriginal children and young people. Aboriginal children who are not connected to culture or to their local ACCOs require additional support.

Recommendation 16:

DFFH must substantially increase the level of brokerage funding provided to ACCOs to support cultural plan implementation. Cultural planning brokerage funding must be flexible in application and also support ACCOs to connect Aboriginal children to culture who they are not working with directly. DFFH must support ACCOs to build those connections through whatever means ACCOs find effective.

Aboriginal Child Specialist Advice and Support Service (ACSASS)

The legislative basis for ACSASS is described above.

As Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People, Uncle Andrew Jackomos commissioned two pivotal systemic inquiries by the Commission for Children and Young People into Aboriginal children and young people in so-called Victoria: *In the child's best interests* (CCYP, 2016) and *Always was, Always will be, Koori Children* (CCYP, 2016).

Always was, Always will be, Koori Children (CCYP, 2016) made the following recommendation about ACSASS:

6.5 DHHS to review and implement improvements to ACSASS to ensure the program has the capacity to meet current and anticipated demand, and to actively engage in key decisions relating to Aboriginal children in out-of-home care in a timely manner. It is recommended that for every increase in staffing to the child protection workforce there is a corresponding increase in the ACSASS workforce.

Improvements should include the opportunity for ACSASS delivery by local ACCOs in regional Victoria to enable local knowledge of the child and family to be considered in decision-making and to increase family engagement.

The first part of that recommendation was partially implemented and led to State Budget growth funding for ACSASS of \$1.8 million per annum. The recommendation that ACSASS funding be linked to growth in the child protection workforce was never implemented. Had ACSASS funding been linked to child protection staff growth, which has grown an additional 655 FTE since 2016, ACSASS funding would have increased approximately \$2.6 million per annum by 2025. However, had ACSASS funding been linked to the number of Aboriginal children in care, ACSASS funding since 2016 would have grown by approximately \$15.4 million per annum by 2025. In fact, there has been zero growth in ACSASS funding since 2016.



The second part of that recommendation was implemented in 2018, when the department sought expressions of interests by local ACCOs to provide ACSASS. That process resulted in BDAC and Njernda taking on delivery of ACSASS in Loddon Area on Dja Dja Wurrung, Wollithiga and Yorta Yorta Countries. Since then, VACCA has transferred ACSASS delivery in Goulburn Area on Yorta Yorta Country to Rumbalara Aboriginal Cooperative. With Mallee District Aboriginal Services, a long standing ACSASS deliverer, four VACYPA ACCO members now provide ACSASS in addition to VACCA.

All four of those ACCOs report significant difficulty meeting demand for ACSASS consultations. Given the growth in the number of Aboriginal children involved with child protection, that is not surprising. Nevertheless, those ACCOs remain committed to providing locally informed advice and support to Child Protection on their Countries to help improve outcomes for those children and young people. However, ACCOs know they are unable to meet the demand, and therefore DFFH Child Protection is unable to meet its legislative requirement to consult with ACSASS on all significant decisions.

VACYPA understands that ACSASS consultation is not required for children authorised to an ACCO through Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care (Section 18) or Community Protecting Boorais. Over time, as ACAC and CPB grow, demand for ACSASS will diminish. But right now, and for many years to come, ACSASS is an essential legislatively mandated requirement.

Recommendation 17:

DFFH must increase funding for ACSASS to enable the service to meet demand, and so that Child Protection meets its legislative responsibilities.

All Member ACCOs that do not currently deliver ACSASS aspire to deliver the service in their local communities, subject to funding being sufficient to enable them to meet demand.

Recommendation 18:

DFFH must either seek expressions of interest from ACCOs that wish to provide ACSASS in areas outside Metropolitan Melbourne or facilitate the transfer of ACSASS from VACCA to local ACCOs.

Aboriginal Family-Led Decision Making

In 2001, Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative and the Hume Region Child Protection Program developed the pilot Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Family Decision-Making Program. The Shepparton AFLDM program had a strong emphasis on involving Elders and other members of the local Aboriginal community. AFLDMs became a statewide program in 2004.

As noted above in the sub-section about the CYF Act, Aboriginal Family-Led Decision Making (AFLDM) meetings are supposed to be the primary decision-making process for Aboriginal families. AFLDMs in so-called Victoria operate a co-convenor model in which a DFFH Child Protection Practitioner and a Community Convenor employed by an ACCO co-convene AFLDMs. For AFLDMs to be able to make case planning decisions (which are ALL significant decision about a child protection client), AFLDMs needs to be co-convened by a DFFH Child Protection Child Protection Practitioner at the level of CPP5 or above, as that is the level of delegation for case planning. Victoria's co-convenor model of AFLDMs is unique in Australia.

Key characteristics of AFLDMs are:

- AFLDMs are co-convened by a DFFH Child Protection Convenor and an ACCO Community Convenor
- AFLDMs require significant preparation, including contacting family members to share concerns and plan for the meeting
- Meetings are held in culturally safe places and should include catering
- Elders should attend meetings
- The need for family members to bring a support person should be explored



- Kinship carers should attend. Participation by foster carers is a case-by-case consideration
- Professionals working with the family should attend
- Legal representatives do not attend
- Meetings include information sharing so that everyone is aware of the concerns and the context
- Convenors set bottom lines
- Meetings include private family time for the family to develop a plan that addresses the worries and meets the bottom lines
- Convenors and any professionals do not participate in private family time. If family members have questions, convenors are readily at hand to assist
- Elders may participate in private family time, provided that all family members feel comfortable
- The plan developed by the family is considered by the Child Protection Convenor and if it meets bottom lines, it is endorsed as the Child Protection Case Plan.

AFLDMs help families to be in control of the planning process. Families are the experts in their own lives and, when given the opportunity, families come up with plans that work for them and are effective. They promote participation, partnership and connection in line with the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle.

The Program Requirement for AFLDMs were revised in 2017 through a process that included a Project Control Group comprised of ACCO representatives. ACCOs supported the co-convenor model, as without that model, decisions made by families at an AFLDM would need to be endorsed after the meeting by a CPP5 who had not participated in the meeting, a disempowering process.

As stated in the AFLDM Program Requirements, AFLDMs are the prime case planning process for Aboriginal families. AFLDMs maximise opportunities for planning and decision making in child protection cases to be Aboriginal-led and culturally safe – if they are delivered in accordance with the principles and procedures described in the Program Requirements.

There are challenges in running effective AFLDMs that comply with the Program Requirements. Through VACYPA consultations, VACYPA was advised that AFLDMs are failing to meet some of the basic AFLDM requirements. For instance, VACYPA has been made aware that:

- Community Convenors are often treated as token participants by Child Protection and AFLDM meetings are effectively convened by the Child Protection Convenor
- There are insufficient resources to come anywhere near the demand for AFLDMs
- AFLDMs are going ahead without any family members present – not even the child or parent
- Child Protection treats AFLDMs as if they are standard Case Planning meetings
- No consideration is given to meeting in a venue that is culturally safe
- Families are not prepared for the AFLDM meeting (that is, they are not told what the process is or given an understanding of the protective concerns)
- Meetings run without defined ‘bottom lines’
- Meeting run without Private Family Time.

But the greatest fault with the AFLDM program is the lack of adequate resources to do the job properly. Responding to criticism of decision-making for Aboriginal children from the Protecting Victoria’s Vulnerable Children inquiry, additional funding was provided to the AFLDM program in 2012. Growth funding provided in 2012 was sufficient for ACCOs to employ 16.5 FTE ACCO Community Convenors. Other than CPI increases, there has been no additional funding to the AFLDM program since 2012.

Given the commitment to provide an AFLDM meeting following substantiation for every Aboriginal family, the number of substantiations is the critical variable for costings. The number of substantiations of Aboriginal children and young people for the 2011-12 year was 997 children and young people. In 2024-25, the number of substantiations of Aboriginal children and young people was 2,113. Growth in demand for AFLDMs has more than doubled since 2012, the last time that there was any growth funding for AFLDMs. It is not surprising that Child Protection finds it impossible to meet the Program Requirements, which are founded on legislative provisions.



Major investment in AFLDMs is required to meet the current demand. Implementation of Wungurilwil Gagapduir Action 1.4 to 'Hold an AFLDM before substantiation' will require an even greater investment.

Recommendations 19:

DFFH must use data on substantiations to seek growth funding for the current AFLDM program to enable Child Protection to meet its legislative and policy requirements.

Recommendation 20:

DFFH must work with ACCOs on a model of AFLDMs to be provided for Aboriginal families prior to substantiation, and seek growth funding based on that model so DFFH can meet its commitment to the Aboriginal Children's Forum to implement Wungurilwil Gagapduir Action 1.4.

Permanent Care Assessments for the Children's Court

The issue of permanency for Aboriginal children and young people is a sensitive matter in Aboriginal communities. When placing an Aboriginal child outside parental care, placement within the child's Aboriginal family is the preferred first choice, as described in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle. However, very often placement with non-Aboriginal family, or even with strangers, is the best home that Child Protection can find. If parental reunification has not been possible and if permanent care would be the best option for the child, Child Protection or ACAC can seek a Permanent Care Order (PCO) from the Children's Court.

In cases where Child Protection or ACAC seek a PCO for an Aboriginal child with a non-Aboriginal person, CYF Act Section 323 puts a restriction on making a PCO. The CYF Act requires the Children's Court to receive a report from an Aboriginal agency that recommends the placement before it can make a PCO.

VACCA is the only ACCO funded by DFFH to undertake assessments of applications for PCOs and provide advice to the Children's Court. ACAC providers can also undertake those assessments within their authorised powers.

VACYPA supports development of alternative approaches and models to support Aboriginal children and young people who are unable to live with their parents. However, within the confines of existing legislation, PCOs can provide good outcomes for some Aboriginal children.

Most PCOs result from kinship placements. For Aboriginal children in those placements, generally the case management will have been contracted to an ACCO, though there are cases where DFFH Child Protection may hold case planning and case management. If a local ACCO holds case management, those workers will know the child/young person and family well. That local knowledge means they are best placed to assess the appropriateness of the placement, inclusive of a cultural assessment.

The Commission for Children and Young People (the Commission) undertook an inquiry into the implementation of the permanency amendments to the CYF Act in 2017. In its report from that inquiry, known as '...safe and wanted...', the Commission recommended (Recommendation 29) that the department:

- *Ensures VACCA has the resources to undertake timely, permanent care assessments for Aboriginal children*
- *In consultation with ACCOs, develops a plan to **extend the capacity of local ACCOs so they have the authority and necessary funding to undertake permanent care assessments for Aboriginal children***
- *In partnership with the Aboriginal Children's Forum, reviews the operation of the permanent care panel for Aboriginal children to ensure that its processes are not leading to delays in obtaining permanent care orders for Aboriginal children for whom permanent care is appropriate.*



The Commission's 2016 inquiry into Aboriginal children in care, *Always was, always will be Koori children* also made a recommendation (6.21) regarding local ACCOs' involvement in processes for permanent care:

To promote self-determination and local community input, prior to a permanent care application being made to the Children's Court, endorsement for the permanent care application must be sought from a panel/s comprising:

- *Relevant and local Aboriginal community members*
- *VACCA and local ACCOs from across the state*

This must be done before an application is made to the Children's Court. Legislative change to the CYF Act 2005 is required to enable the establishment and authorisation of this panel.

VACYPA proposes that, rather than VACCA undertaking PCO assessments of placements, local ACCOs undertake those assessments for children and young people living on their Country, if they so choose. ACCOs should be funded and supported to undertake PCO assessments, which should be on a fee for service basis and unit price.

If the child or young person is in a kinship or foster care placement, supported by a local ACCO, staff working with the child and family are well placed to undertake an assessment of the suitability of the carers as well as a cultural assessment. Local ACCOs staff know the family and can incorporate that local knowledge into an assessment.

DFFH Child Protection is responsible for case planning decisions, including the decision to apply for a PCO. It is not uncommon for Child Protection to have failed to undertake necessary steps in the lead up to applying for a PCO. Child Protection may have failed to seek the participation of the family through an AFLDM Meeting, or they may have neglected to pursue comprehensive family finding to locate potential carers. Active efforts towards reunification with birth parents may also be lacking. Consequently, although Child Protection may make a case planning decision to apply for a PCO, when an ACCO assesses the case, the ACCO may not support the decision without further work by Child Protection.

Regardless of the quality and completeness of Child Protection's work, the needs and best outcomes for Aboriginal children, young people and families are best served through ACCO delivered comprehensive assessment, inclusive of cultural concerns.

When offered to undertake a PCO assessment, a local ACCO can determine the appropriateness of accepting that work given their knowledge of the carers as well as other competing demands.

In addition to VACCA's Permanent Care Panel, some ACCOs are establishing their own local Permanent Care Panel or Cultural Authority Panel. Local panels that include community Elders are important as a means of providing cultural authority to decisions made by the ACCO about families, children and young people.

As noted above, the Commission recommended that, before a decision is made to seek a PCO, there should be endorsement from a panel that includes relevant and local community members, VACCA and the local ACCO. However, there would be no need for VACCA to be involved if the local ACCO is enabled to undertake assessments and provide advice to the Children's Court.

Given the relatively few numbers of assessments likely to be made at the local level, Permanent Care Panels or Cultural Authority Panels would only need to meet infrequently.



Recommendations 21:

DFFH should enable VACYPA Members to undertake cultural assessments and provide advice to the Children's Court regarding applications for Permanent Care Orders (PCOs) by undertaking the following:

- DFFH should seek approval from the Governor in Council to authorise all ACCOs as Aboriginal agencies under section 6 of the *Children Youth and Families Act 2005* should their Boards agree. Gazettal under s.6 of the CYF Act would allow ACCOs to provide a report to the Court that recommends the making of a PCO under Section 323 of the CYF Act.
- In cases where a decision is made by a case planner to seek a PCO and a local ACCO has case management of the child, the local ACCO should be asked to undertake the permanent care assessment and provide the report to the Court. ACCOs may decline.
- Where cases have not transitioned to ACCOs and case management sits with Child Protection or a CSO, Child Protection should engage local ACCOs to undertake a cultural assessment for those cases who are case planned for permanent care. The permanent care assessment can be undertaken by Child Protection or a CSO (unless otherwise agreed) and the ACCO will complete the cultural assessment and make the recommendation to the Court.
- ACCOs may choose to establish their own local Permanent Care Panel or Cultural Authority Panel. While VACCA has established a panel to approve permanent carers, this is not a legislated requirement and ACCOs who undertake to provide a report to the Court will consider what is an appropriate process in their communities.
- VACCA should continue to provide this service for the six metro areas of Melbourne where there is no local ACCO, or if a local ACCO declines to undertake an assessment. In Southern Melbourne and Bayside Peninsula areas, Dandenong and District Aboriginal Cooperative should be considered for these assessments.
- The current funding provided to VACCA for Permanent Care Assessments should be reviewed to allow VACCA to meet demand in metropolitan Melbourne areas, but consideration will need to be given to a more equitable distribution of resources across the state.
- DFFH should consider funding development of a training program for permanent care assessments.

DFFH should establish unit prices for permanent care assessments and cultural assessments.

Aboriginal Maternal and Child Health

Aboriginal Maternal and Child Health (AM&CH) services are vitally important universal services that support families with young children to meet their developmental milestones and provide parenting support. The Department of Health funds AM&CH in the following Member ACCOs:

- Bendigo and District Aboriginal Co-operative
- Gippsland and East Gippsland Aboriginal Co-operative
- Goolum Aboriginal Co-operative
- Gunditjmara Aboriginal Co-operative
- Mallee District Aboriginal Service
- Njernda Aboriginal Corporation
- Murray Valley Aboriginal Co-operative
- Ramahyuck District Aboriginal Corporation
- Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative
- Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-Operative
- Winda-Mara Aboriginal Corporation.

Ballarat and District Aboriginal Co-operative receives Commonwealth funding for its AM&CH.



Through consultations, ACCOs stressed the importance of AM&CH. ACCOs are aware of the high proportion of reports made to Child Protection about Aboriginal children. As noted above, most concerns about Aboriginal children are firstly reported when they are aged 2 years or under, while concerns about non-Aboriginal children are mostly reported when they are at primary school.

Building strong relationships between AM&CH providers and parents through culturally safe and trusted services helps set up families to be happy and thriving, with less likelihood of reports being made to Child Protection.

The following ACCOs that are not currently funded to provide AM&CH aspire to do so:

- Dandenong and District Aborigines Co-operative Ltd
- Dhauwurd-Wurrung Elderly and Community Health Service
- Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation

Expanding AM&CH to these ACCOs is supported by Wungurilwil Gagapduir Action 1.5: Expand Aboriginal Maternal and Child Health Services and Koorie Maternity Services in ACCHOs/ACCOs that provide child and family services.

Recommendation 22:

The Department of Health must expand Aboriginal Maternal and Child Health Services to ACCOs that aspire to deliver that service.

Looking after children so they heal and grow strong in culture

There were 3,037 Aboriginal children and young people in care as of August 2025. Leaving aside the shocking scale of that number, and the devastating impact on Aboriginal families that results from child removal, the wellbeing of each and every one of those children demands attention. Section 174 of the CYF Act lists responsibilities of the Secretary regarding children in care. The Secretary:

must make provision for the physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual development of the child in the same way as a good parent would.

Many parents of children in care are likely to take issue with the Secretary's performance on that front. Indeed, the state can never replace the love and care of a parent. Acknowledging that shortfall, the state falls back on policies and procedures to fill the gap left by parents, who hold a lifetime of understanding, knowledge, planning and boundless loving kindness to apply to the task of raising children.

To fill that gap, around 2001 the then Department of Human Services implemented a comprehensive program to assess each child in care against empirically supported, age-specific health and wellbeing indicators. The Looking After Children (LAC) program was developed by the Dartington Research Unit in conjunction with the UK Department of Health. The Department of Human Services purchased a contract to deliver LAC from the UK Department of Health. LAC involves a range of age-specific tools, the prime one being a set of *Assessment and Action Records*. Those records cover seven health and wellbeing domains:

- Health
- Education
- Identity
- Family and social relationships
- Social Presentation
- Emotional and behavioural development
- Self-care skills.

In each domain, there are questions for the case manager, carer and child to complete, covering the range of factors that caregivers need to cover to attend to the child's health and wellbeing. They cover



everything from dentist appointments to extra-curricular activities. Given the comprehensive nature of these records, there is a considerable administrative impost on case manager time to complete the LAC documentation.

LAC is compulsory for all children in foster care and residential care, but is optional for children in kinship care placements. The primary rationale for LAC being optional in kinship care was that, as Child Protection Practitioners are most commonly case managers for children and young people in kinship care, the administrative burden of LAC would be impossible for Child Protection Practitioners to meet.

LAC has come under criticism from Aboriginal communities for failing to understand or represent Aboriginal culture. The 'identity' domain is general in nature and written in the UK. The reality in practice is that LAC is rarely used for children in kinship care. Despite its limitations for Aboriginal children and families, there are clear benefits to systematising care so that needs are met. But, as case managers report, the administrative burden of LAC takes time from other case management responsibilities. Some make the point that there is no value having a system that calls out what needs to be done if there is not time and resources to actually do what needs to be done.

An alternative framework that could be adopted for Aboriginal children in care is the Department of Health's Balit Murrup, Aboriginal Social and Emotional Wellbeing Framework. Most VACYPA Members receive funding from the Department of Health to deliver social and emotional wellbeing services, and are familiar with Balit Murrup.

The Balit Murrup framework promotes seven dimensions of Aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing, which are:

- Connection to spirit, spirituality and ancestors
- Connection to land
- Connection to culture
- Connection to community
- Connection to mind and emotions
- Connection to body.

While Balit Murrup was not developed with the social and emotional needs of children in care in mind, the seven dimensions may resonate more powerfully with Aboriginal communities than the seven LAC domains and associated procedures. There is certainly merit in considering adaptation of Balit Murrup for Aboriginal children and young people in care, particularly if an approach can be developed that capitalises on ACCO experience with the framework, and is not overly burdensome in its record keeping requirements. Given that most children in care are in kinship care, and consequently are not benefiting from any aspect of LAC because it is optional, a purposeful adaptation, led by ACCOs, could have significant benefits for a very vulnerable cohort of children and young people

Recommendation 23:

DDFH should investigate the potential to adapt Balit Murrup for application with Aboriginal children and young people in care as an alternative to Looking After Children.

Kinship care

Since the commitment that all Aboriginal children in care will be case managed by ACCOs, kinship care has been the focus of attention. A decade ago, most child protection clients in care – whether Aboriginal or not – were case managed by Child Protection Practitioners. Child Protection Practitioners, generally working with impossibly high caseloads, were unable to provide kinship carers with the support they needed, or ensure that the developmental needs of children and young people in kinship care were met. Aboriginal children and young people in kinship care placements were particularly disadvantaged as their connection to culture, community and Country was jeopardised by being out of parental care. Prior to



legislative change in 2016, only Aboriginal children on what were then known as Guardianship Orders were required to have cultural plans.

ACCOs were right to demand that Aboriginal children in care be case managed by ACCOs, but to achieve that transition, ACCOs needed to be funded to provide case management for children and young people in kinship care. Currently there are 813 Aboriginal children and young people in ACCO-led kinship care placements (including ACAC), which is 51 per cent of all Aboriginal children and young people in kinship care (DFFH data provided to the October 2025 Aboriginal Children's Forum).

Most VACYPA Members provide kinship case management. It is important to acknowledge the significant challenges faced by children and young people in kinship care, and the complexity of supporting kinship carers. Family members often feel conflicted in their roles, meeting their responsibilities to the child, while holding a familial tie to parents. ACCOs navigate that complexity, while – unless they are ACAC providers – not holding case planning decision-making responsibility. Kinship case management is contracted to ACCOs from Child Protection, an arrangement that puts a lot of pressure on ACCOs as the intermediary between carers and Child Protection.

VACYPA undertook an Aboriginal-led review of kinship care in 2025, hearing directly from Member ACCOs, kinship carers and ACCO case managers. Kinship case managers spoke of a care system that is undervalued and under resourced. Carers, who are often aging, poor and bewildered by a tightly rule-bound, legalistic child protection system, struggle to meet the needs of the children and young people in their care. They are also treated differently from foster carers regarding their training and support, as well as their access to higher levels of caregiver allowance.

Recommendation 24:

DFFH must guarantee access to core supports for kinship carers. This must include adequate allowance for respite, as well as funding for carer peer support groups, cultural mentoring, reflective supervision, and family day events.

Recommendation 25:

DFFH must standardise kinship carer onboarding (orientation and cultural practice pack) and annual refreshers. This includes carers access to ACCO-run training equal to (or better than) foster-care offerings.

Recommendation 26:

DFFH must address the lack of parity between carer payments for kinship and foster carers, aligning kinship allowances with foster care levels at commencement, based on child needs, not receipts, and removing the current default Level 1 allowance for kinship carers. Brokerage must be increased so that it works, including establishing flexible ACCO-held brokerage for urgent essentials (beds, transport, health) to prevent placement breakdowns.

Reunification with parents is always the first goal when children are removed from parental care. Kinship care is always the preferred placement. Understandably, the distress experienced by children, parents and kinship carers in the early stages of a placement, as well as the uncertainty around case direction, Court orders and extent of worries in the family mean that case management can't be contracted straight away. Indeed, data provided to the October 2025 Aboriginal Children's Forum by DFFH shows there were 949 Aboriginal children and young people, most of whom are in kinship care, whose cases were 'Court active', which meant that they could not have their case management contracted to an ACCO.

DFFH funds Kinship First Supports to help carers and children with the multiple issues they face. Some ACCOs are First Supports providers, though all ACCOs are able to undertake tasks that support kinship placements, even if not contracted to undertake case management.



VACYPA supports involvement of ACCOs as much as possible to undertake functions and roles when Aboriginal children and young people are placed in kinship care. Case management is not the only option. Engagement with a local ACCO is in the best interests of Aboriginal children and young people. That is particularly important in cases where Aboriginal children are placed with non-Aboriginal kinship carers.

Recommendation 27:

DFFH must explore options to refer case tasks, functions and roles to ACCOs, regardless of whether case management can be contracted. Family services funding should be enabled for this purpose, or direct allocation of client expenses to an ACCO.

Foster care

The following Member ACCOs currently deliver Foster Care:

- Gippsland and East Gippsland Aboriginal Co-operative Ltd
- Mallee District Aboriginal Service
- Njernda Aboriginal Corporation
- Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative
- Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-Operative.

Two of the ACCOs above are questioning the viability of continuing their Foster Care program, as they have experienced great difficulty recruiting appropriate foster carers. Difficulty recruiting foster carers is a well-known problem. Future projections of foster care demand and foster carer capacity are very pessimistic. The cohort of people who have time, resources and inclination to become carers is shrinking. Small scale programs find themselves under particular stress, due to the need to employ foster care support staff, regardless of the numbers of carers.

VACYPA participated in a series of meetings in 2023 facilitated by the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare and a representative from DFFH. The aim of the meetings was to explore any potential mechanisms to recruit more foster carers in ACCOs. Senior Executives and Managers from the CSOs that provide foster care attended, and spoke of their own difficulties recruiting and holding onto foster carers.

Through those meetings, DFFH proposed that enquiries and referrals of prospective foster carers received by Fostering Connections (the central foster carer inquiry line) and CSOs be transferred to ACCOs delivering foster care until such time as the number of carers within each ACCO reflects, or slightly exceeds, the number of funded targets.

VACYPA supported that policy but proposed that it be implemented for three months out of every four months. That is, the policy would apply in January, February, March, May, June, July, September, October and November. In April, August and December, current policy would apply. This would enable referrals to continue to flow to CSOs for one quarter of the year.

Neither DFFH's nor VACYPA's proposed policy changes were supported by CSOs. CSOs maintained that they are also suffering from a lack of carers and that they need to fill their targets too.

In light of the difficulties experienced with the Foster Care program now, it is not surprising that only one ACCO expressed interest in taking on the program. Dandenong and District Aboriginal Cooperative would like the opportunity to consider Foster Care.

The following three ACCOs said that there would need to be an Aboriginal Foster Care model developed before they could consider delivery of Foster Care:

- Ballarat and District Aboriginal Co-operative
- Goolum Goolum Aboriginal Co-operative
- Gunditjmara Aboriginal Co-operative.



The following ACCOs have no foreseeable aspirations to deliver Foster Care:

- Bendigo and District Aboriginal Co-operative
- Dhauwurd-Wurrung Elderly and Community Health Service
- Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation
- Murray Valley Aboriginal Co-operative
- Ramahyuck District Aboriginal Corporation
- Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative
- Winda-Mara Aboriginal Corporation.

Residential care

All ACCOs are acutely aware of the problems experienced with Residential Care. Consequently, no ACCO held aspirations to deliver Residential Care in its current form. However, VACYPA Members are aware of the project undertaken by VACYPA to develop an Aboriginal model of Residential Care. The following ACCOs said that there would need to be an Aboriginal model of Residential Care available before they could consider delivery:

- Ballarat and District Aboriginal Co-operative
- Bendigo and District Aboriginal Co-operative
- Gunditjmara Aboriginal Co-operative
- Njernda Aboriginal Corporation
- Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative
- Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-Operative

Gippsland and East Gippsland Aboriginal Cooperative said that Residential Care required further consideration.

Despite all the problems with Residential Care and the often poor outcomes for young people who live in Residential Care, there is likely to be a small cohort of Aboriginal children who are unsuitable for Foster or Kinship Care. We owe it to those children to do everything we can to provide a home that is culturally safe, physical safe and home-like. VACYPA holds great hope for the model developed in 2025 and looks forward to the new model being implemented as soon as budget allows.

Recommendation 28:

DFFH must seek funding to offer the VACYPA residential care model to ACCOs that are interested in providing an Aboriginal residential care model.

Separating case management from care and caregiver support

The 2023 ACCO Rights and Aspirations report recommended (recommendation 14) that DFFH implement funding reform to separate the functions of case management from carer support and carer recruitment and development. Foster care funding guidelines combine all these functions within the single price. Residential care guidelines allow for case management to be paid separately, but not separated from the residential care agency. However, if case management were separated from the other functions, it could be paid for separately and ACCOs could be recruited to deliver that case management.

There is an existing precedent for separating case management from care provision and carer support in ACAC, where case management always sits with ACAC, no matter what the care type.

Fifteen Aboriginal young people are currently in residential care placements managed by CSOs.

Despite years of work that has been devoted to trying to encourage foster carers for Aboriginal children and young people to shift from mainstream CSOs to ACCOs, 186 Aboriginal children and young people in foster care continue to be looked after by CSOs. Those foster carers are unlikely to ever shift to an ACCO.



Agency (Non-ACCO)	Number
Anglicare Victoria	30
MacKillop Family Services Ltd	27
Berry Street Victoria Inc	24
St. Luke's Anglicare	24
Children Australia (Oz Child)	12
Key Assets TCSP (Aus) LTD	10
Glastonbury Community Services	10
Brophy Family & Youth Services	10
Upper Murray Family Care	8
UnitingCare Gippsland	7
Child & Family Services	6
Wesley Mission Melbourne	4
Mallee Family Care Inc.	4
Life Without Barriers	2
Concern Australia	2
The Lighthouse Foundation Inc	1
MASP	1
Anchor Inc	1
Quantum Community Care Inc	1
Baptist Community Care Ltd.	1
Melbourne City Mission Inc.	1
Total	186

Separating case management from caregiver support, recruitment and development would enable those 186 children to have their case management transition to ACCOs.

A further change (as recommended by the 2023 ACCO Rights and Aspirations report in recommendation 10) would need to amend the foster care case management performance target that requires that 80 per cent of children on final orders placed for over six months be case managed by the agency.

These funding changes are doable now and would enable 186 Aboriginal children and young people in foster care and fifteen in CSO delivered residential care to be supported by and connected to their local ACCOs.

Recommendations 29:

DFFH must undertake funding reform that enables separating care, carer support, recruitment and development from case management of Aboriginal children in foster and residential care. This will allow ACCOs to assume case management functions without providing care and placement support, where desired.

DFFH must amend the foster care case management performance target that requires 80 per cent of children on final orders placed for over six months to be case contracted to the agency.

Targeted Care Packages

ACCOs consulted through this project spoke positively about the benefits of Targeted Care Packages to support young people and attend to their particular needs, while keeping them out of residential care.

Seven ACCOs that currently deliver Targeted Care Packages seek growth funding for more packages. However, three of those ACCOs noted that an additional support role is required to administer the packages. One ACCO said they were promised a support worker position, but the position was never funded. The eight ACCOs that seek growth are:

- Ballarat and District Aboriginal Co-operative
- Bendigo and District Aboriginal Co-operative
- Dhauwurd-Wurrung Elderly and Community Health Service



- Gippsland & East Gippsland Aboriginal Co-operative
- Goolum Aboriginal Co-operative
- Gunditjmara Aboriginal Co-operative
- Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative
- Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-Operative

Mallee District Aboriginal Service delivers Targeted Care Packages currently, and does not seek growth at this time.

The following ACCOs do not deliver Targeted Care Packages, but have aspirations to do so:

- Dandenong and District Aborigines Co-operative
- Njernda Aboriginal Corporation
- Winda-Mara Aboriginal Corporation.

The following ACCOs have no foreseeable aspirations to deliver Targeted Care Packages:

- Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation
- Murray Valley Aboriginal Co-operative

Recommendation 30:

DFFH must expand provision of Targeted Care Packages across ACCOs that aspire to deliver them and ACCOs that seek growth.

Whatever it takes to keep our young people safe and guide them to become proud adults, strong in culture, walking confidently in both worlds

A common theme from consultations for this project was the desire by each ACCO to do more for Aboriginal young people. We held conversations about young people who are finding it hard to feel accepted, who experience racism, who sometimes care for an adult relative at home, who struggle with poverty and housing stress, who have no heroes, who prefer to hang around in the street rather than in their own homes, who dream small. These were hard conversations, filled with frustration, worry but most of all, with hope.

ACCOs spoke of the daily demands on reception staff and other outward facing roles who are confronted by the impact of colonisation, racism, inter-generational poverty as well as fractured relationships and excessive substance use to numb the pain.

ACCOs aspire beyond the day-to-day desperation. They see a better future. Indeed, without hope, how can anyone go on?

For many ACCOs hope lies in the bright faces filled with energy with which young people navigate their worries from home, their connection to Country and desire for a better future.

ACCOs spoke of the importance of youth programs that bring young people closer to their Elders and culture. Culture is a protection against what feels like bad luck, but is in reality predictable behaviour from generations of settler Australians who count history in hundreds of years rather than thousands.

But funding for youth programs is scarce. DFFH funds support for young people leaving care, but not to support young people in the care of their families. The Department of Justice and Community Safety fund some youth diversion programs, some with the flexibility that ACCOs seek, but much more is needed. Some ACCOs use their Social and Emotional Wellbeing funding from the Department of Health to run youth programs.

Unfortunately, the picture painted by ACCOs of government support for Aboriginal young people is a dismal one. In light of the Allen Government's decision to renege on raising the age of criminal responsibility to 14 years of age, followed more recently by its decision to treat young offenders as if they



were adults in the criminal justice system, it appears that young people have been relegated to the too-hard basket. Future generations will look upon these decisions with shame. These are the decisions made by government that future governments will apologise for.

But ACCOs will not give up on their youth. On the contrary, ACCOs will do whatever it takes to support their young people. Community expects that they do so. For instance, one ACCO explained that every school holiday period they run holiday programs for young people at their own expense, because community expects it. Other ACCOs spoke of providing breakfast clubs, after school care and social activities – all of which were unfunded.

According to 2021 census figures, there are only 4,958 young people aged 14-17 years of age who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander in so-called Victoria. That is a number small enough to fit in the Kia Arena at Melbourne Park. Given the alarming rate of young people in care – one in ten – we owe it to these young people to do whatever it takes to keep them happy, healthy, connected to culture, and engaged in their futures. ACCOs urgently call for funding to enable them to support their young people and keep them out of harm's way.

Common sense has long pointed out that nine-to-five service delivery fails to match young people's needs. DFFH funds the Young People's Outreach Team (formerly known as Streetworks Outreach Team) in Melbourne to support young people who are DFFH clients in the CBD and environs, but no Aboriginal model exists, and no service exists outside Melbourne. Mallee District Aboriginal Services (MDAS) provides a community bus in evenings to transport young people home, but also provide a culturally safe place for Aboriginal young people on the streets as well as cultural authority to engage young people. Many ACCOs seek to provide their own local version of the MDAS community bus. Local solutions exist, but funding does not.

ACCOs told us that the need for cultural authority to be enlivened in local communities is called for, not just by community members and their Elders, but by young people themselves. Young people are searching for ways to connect to culture, to get to know their Elders and to feel the strength that comes from being part of community and Country.

Recommendation 31:

DFFH must urgently fund ACCOs to provide culturally grounded youth support services.

Take Two for Aboriginal children and young people

ACCOs raised the need for Aboriginal children and young people who are Child Protection clients to get access to culturally safe counselling and support to help them heal.

When Robin Clarke and her colleagues wrote *When Care is Not Enough* for the then Department of Human Services in 1999, recommending dedicated counselling services for children and young people who are child protection clients, there was no analysis of what Aboriginal young people might need. Take Two was established as a statewide service in 2005, but has failed to receive growth funding since then to enable it to keep up with demand.

VACYPA Members are well placed to provide local dedicated, culturally safe, counselling services for Aboriginal child protection clients. Existing arrangements that require ACAC providers to negotiate access to Take Two via area-based Child Protection Principal Practitioners is no more than a rationing system designed to make it hard to access the service. Indeed, it might be argued that the resources dedicated to rationing Take Two would be better spent in delivering additional Take Two services.

ACCOs and Child Protection alike are in furious agreement about the dire lack of counselling services for child protection clients. No one argues that these children and young people are not desperately in need of counselling and support. No one wants them to miss out or be put on waiting lists, but that is what happens every single day.



To deny the need for cultural safety in addition to physical and emotional safety for these vulnerable young people would be shameful. Despite best intentions and genuine compassion on the part of local DFFH practitioners, Take Two is woefully underfunded, and inaccessible for Aboriginal children and young people.

Recommendation 32:

DFFH must urgently increase funding for Take Two and allow local ACCOs to provide the service for Aboriginal children and young people in their communities.



Knots to untangle

The 2023 ACCO Rights and Aspirations report identified ten challenges to transitioning of case management to ACCOs:

Legislative challenges

1. The inability to transfer children to ACCOs until they are placed on a final protection order preventing earlier intervention and diversion.

VACYPA comment: This barrier has been addressed by amending section 18 of the CYF Act to enable authorised ACCOs to undertake investigations of reports of allegations of abuse and neglect.

2. Section 18(3) of the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* (CYF Act) requires that the Principal Officer of an Aboriginal agency accepting authorisation is Aboriginal.

VACYPA comment: As noted above VACYPA supports legislative amendment to enable authorisation of Aboriginal agencies with a non-Aboriginal CEO. The amendment should be made as soon as possible, as Goolum Goolum Aboriginal Cooperative is unable to proceed to full authorisation until the CYF Act is changed.

System and programmatic challenges

Lack of Aboriginal-designed and led models

3. Current programs and models of care have not been Aboriginal-led and are not considered culturally sound, holistic or responsive to community needs. This affects the willingness of many ACCOs to provide existing services.

VACYPA comment: VACYPA agrees with this statement. Our experience speaking to ACCOs about their service aspirations that ACCOs are very reluctant to take on service models that are not Aboriginal designed and led. Residential care is the prime example. ACCOs see a care model that fails Aboriginal young people and is universally condemned. VACYPA acknowledges the support of DFFH to our organisation to work with ACCOs on an Aboriginal-designed residential care model and a theory of change for kinship care.

The Aboriginal Rapid Engagement and Diversion program is another example where DFFH is actively supporting ACCOs to come up with service models that work for their local communities.

VACYPA supports the current policy direction and encourages DFFH to continue.

Funding models require review

4. Current funding models and procurement approaches do not:
 - align with self-determined, holistic, community-led approaches
 - support ACCOs' sustainability and development of organisational capacity.

VACYPA agrees with this statement. There is a fundamental difficulty providing joined-up, integrated services when funding is split between DFFH, Department of Health and Department of Education.

There are numerous other challenges that stem from government funding models and procurement approaches.

As stated at the start of this report, culture is not funded, yet it is the defining characteristic of ACCO community support.

ACCOs told us they frequently are left cobbling together funding to provide services their communities need and expect. ACCOs also raised concerns about the adequacy of funding – both in the quantity of services that are funded and regarding whether funding is sufficient to pay for the service being provided. The latter of these problems is the subject of the True Cost, Fair Price project at VACYPA, funded by



DFFH, that is examining the true cost of service delivery amongst Member ACCOs. ACCOs report that funding formulae often short-change ACCOs in remote locations, where goods and services bear a premium because of scale, transport and storage.

Fourteen of our fifteen Member ACCOs are located in regional and rural areas. Unsurprisingly, VACYPA ACCOs object to what is generally a city-centric view of service planning and delivery in so-called Victoria. Metropolitan Melbourne has a range of social challenges that come with dense population, such as social isolation, homelessness and concerns for safety; but population scale enables Melbourne to be served by a range of Aboriginal organisations, some of which are very large enterprises. That is a good thing, however politicians and bureaucrats need to remember that service access declines the further you travel from the Melbourne GPO, and that ACCOs have evolved to fill service gaps in creative ways wherever they can. The effective way ACCOs manage funding arrangements is often despite government processes rather than because of it.

Recommendation 33:

The following recommendation (recommendation 13 from the 2023 report) should be implemented:

Progress reforms to departmental procurement and funding processes that:

- **Include criteria or weighting that supports ACCOs to deliver additional or new services (and therefore increase proportional funding to ACCOs) rather than only weighting service delivery experience.**
- **When building program models and budgets, consider the viable (rather than minimal) staff needed to sustain service delivery. Factor in vacancy management and include establishment and infrastructure costs and funding to support community communication strategies**
- **Consider the additional need ACCOs have for:**
 - **specialist legal positions**
 - **principal practitioners**
 - **positions to manage regulatory burdens, additional risks and develop capabilities in working with complex or high-risk clients.**
- **Consider the merits of providing additional funding in program budgets to areas with significant travel needs (that is, where a radius of more than 50 kilometres is usual).**
- **Consider including funding for overtime in relevant program budgets where it is considered necessary to provide on call, recall and regular overtime.**

Separating case management from care and caregiver support

5. Current policies and funding approaches prevent ACCOs from providing support, case management and care planning to children without providing their day-to-day care.

VACYPA agrees with this observation. Our recommendations above under the sub-heading, 'Separating case management from care and caregiver support' propose solutions to address this problem.

Workforce challenges

6. Challenges attracting, recruiting and retaining an appropriately trained and experienced workforce in the children and families sector – and in particular ACCOs.

VACYPA agrees. Workforce challenges remain the most significant concern for the transfer of authority, power and resources to ACCOs. Those challenges are much more significant for ACCOs in regional and rural areas. It is very difficult to attract, recruit and retain appropriately skilled and experienced people to undertake what can be the most challenging work imaginable, while living and working in the same Aboriginal community that you are employed to serve.



VACYPA acknowledges the work underway through the Aboriginal Strategic Governance Forum to develop a multi-portfolio Aboriginal Workforce Strategy. But the task is gargantuan. ACCOs prefer to employ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people if possible, but given the growing demand for Aboriginal services (note that if ACAC were to be available for every Aboriginal child and young person on a protection order and for every investigation of allegations of abuse and neglect, an additional 133 ACAC and CPB teams would be required), finding appropriate staff is very difficult.

Many ACCOs spoke about their concern on the workforce front. Attracting people to rural centres is particularly difficult when there is an existing chronic shortage of housing and schools are in hot demand. VACYPA looks forward to the Workforce Strategy, but we need to acknowledge in advance that there are going to need to be incentives built into the strategy, funded by government, to find and fill the vacancies that are expected.

Practice challenges

Greater transparency is needed at the local level about Aboriginal children in care and on protection orders

7. Child Protection's lack of capacity to identify children for transition or prepare the case for transfer in a timely manner.

VACYPA notes that since the 2023 report, DFFH has invested in additional positions in DFFH offices to undertake administrative functions that are part of transition. However, ACCOs report that there is still a lack of transparency and dedicated planning put into identifying children for transition. Our experience is that this issue is treated differently across different areas.

ACCOs seek a return to the provision of lists of Aboriginal children and young people at the local area level who are in care, or who are on protection orders (for ACAC), and those lists are discussed regularly between DFFH area senior management and ACCO senior staff.

The 2023 report recommended a process be implemented through which ACCOs are informed about every Aboriginal child or young person who enters care.

Children and young people on protection orders living interstate

8. The inability to transition and support Aboriginal children on protection orders living interstate to ACCOs.

VACYPA notes that this issue has been discussed at more than one Aboriginal Children's Forum. Member ACCOs have discussed this issue, and the proposed solution offered in the 2023 report, and agreed that the solutions should progress, albeit on a case-by-case basis.

ACCOs raised sensible concerns about their capacity to support children and young people on protection orders living long distances from the local ACCO. However, they acknowledge the huge breakthroughs in technology that took place in the pandemic that make it much easier to stay in touch. Though ACCOs maintain that some face-to-face contact will always be necessary, and that DFFH would need to pay for the associated travel costs that ACCOs would incur.

ACCOs are also mindful that holding case management for long distance children bears an additional risk for the organisation, though risks vary from case to case, hence the need to discuss each potential transition on a case-by-case basis.



Recommendation 34:

The following approach to transition of case management to ACCOs for children living interstate, as proposed in the 2023 report and discussed at the Aboriginal Children's Forum, should be implemented on a case-by-case basis:

- That operational divisions be advised there is no legal basis for not pursuing the authorisation or transfer of case management to ACCOs of children subject to Protection Orders living interstate.
- That the following tiered approach be progressed (this was to have commenced from October 2022).
 - i. That each division consider the merits of authorisation and case contracting of each child on a Protection Order living interstate with the most relevant/local ACCO on a case-by-case basis considering their:
 - community connection,
 - proximity of the ACCO to the interstate address,
 - benefits and risk associated with contractingutilising existing kinship funding, Reunification Response targets, 200-hour targets, ACAC or TCPs subject to the characteristics of the case
 - ii. That where the local ACCO most connected to the child is unwilling/unable to accept case management or authorisation, that an ACCO close to the relevant interstate border consider the merits of accepting authorisation or contracted case management for all children living close to the border and or in the adjoining State utilising kinship funding/targets, Reunification Response targets, 200-hour targets, ACAC or TCPs subject to the characteristics of the case.
 - iii. That VACCA as a statewide service consider assuming responsibility for all children on protection orders residing interstate where the ACCO from the child's community or close to the border is unwilling/unable to assume responsibility. Targets and funding for such a specialist service could be from underutilised kinship targets or via provision of new kinship targets allocated for Aboriginal children residing interstate where options (i) and (ii) are not possible. Alternatively, Reunification Response targets, 200-hour targets, ACAC or TCPs could be utilised subject to the characteristics of the case.
- Program requirements and appropriate policies will be revised including
 - i. Amending the program requirements and Human Service's standards for visitation and to include remote contact via phone and skype etc
 - ii. Ensuring ACCOs providing services are allocated brokerage to support interstate travel etc and able to access existing funding/targets including for Targeted Care Packages for complex matters.
- Where the case is contracted to an ACCO the ILO or area CPP will support the ACCO and progress the transfer to the case to the appropriate State or Territory wherever possible.

ACCOs need additional resources to help heal the most complex Aboriginal children and young people

9. Inadequate resourcing for ACCOs to manage and develop capacity to support high-risk and complex children and young people.

ACCOs speak about the few Aboriginal children and young people who are not living in the parents' care, and whose needs require extensive tailored support services. These children would be labelled 'high-risk' in the Child Protection system. Child Protection often uses language for these kids that treats them like criminals, such as 'abscond'. These are kids desperately in need of healing and connection to culture and Country.



Currently, ACCOs are likely to hold reservations about taking on case management for young people if they don't have sufficient resources to devote to the young person's care and wellbeing. Child Protection may use additional services such as Intensive Case Management Services, which have lower caseloads and staff with additional skills and experience.

ACCOs ask whether an Aboriginal -designed and led intensive support service could be established. ACCOs were not keen to replicate existing models. Indeed, one of the policy issues that arose from ACAC providers in this regard was that ACAC is not permitted to case contract an ACAC client to another service, even if the service is in-house. Further exploration is necessary on this issue, but ACAC providers were adamant that there is a need currently that is not being met for these troubled young people.

Recommendation 35:

DFFH must fund ACCOs to develop an intensive support service for Aboriginal children and young people experiencing high needs or challenging behaviours. DFFH must seek funds to implement that Aboriginal intensive support service.

Identification requires Aboriginal-led solutions

10. The complexity and challenges associated with ACCOs confirming some children's Aboriginality and the subsequent willingness of some ACCOs to provide services to these children.

As noted above in the Family Finding sub-section, additional support is needed across all VACYPA ACCOs to undertake Family Finding activities. The issue of improving identification processes also requires careful, dedicated, Aboriginal-led policy work. Governments cannot lead that work. VACYPA looks forward to Gellung Warl considering this issue when it becomes operational in 2026.



Conclusion: Towards an Aboriginal-designed, Aboriginal-led and Aboriginal-delivered System

The rights and aspirations outlined in this report are wide-reaching and ambitious. This is how it should be – ACCOs should and do aspire to do their best for their communities. However, they are not insurmountable and there are concrete steps government can take now towards achieving each and every recommendation in this report.

This final chapter highlights key actions that can be prioritised to achieve the greatest progress as quickly as possible.

Shifting existing funding towards ACCOs

Throughout our consultations with VACYPA Members in this project, ACCOs raised many areas where funding falls short of need. Member ACCOs have been calling for rights-based funding for many years. This report truthfully reflects calls from ACCOs to address shortfalls, gaps and a shift in priority to early intervention and prevention.

VACYPA Members understand the financial pressures that the Victorian Government faces. ACCOs strongly support existing commitments made by the Victorian Government through Wungurilwil Gaggapduir. After working with government and CSOs on the current Action Plan, which included funding several initiatives, VACYPA and our Members accepted the budget reality that saw a revision post 2024 State Budget that adjusted actions in light of funding availability. VACYPA Members are realists and have demonstrated patience.

However, ACCOs spoke to VACYPA of frustration when they see funding in the mainstream system being spent on Aboriginal families, children and young people that they know would help those families better if ACCOs delivered the services families need. The frustrations stem from the furious agreement between all parties to Wungurilwil Gaggapduir that Aboriginal families are best supported by ACCOs. Everyone agrees, but there is slow progress on doing what needs to be done to make that possible.

Wungurilwil Gaggapduir Action 4.3 commits parties to the Agreement to:

Facilitate the ACCO-informed transfer of proportionate government and CSO investment to ACCOs to enable them to support their Aboriginal children and families.

In December 2025, the Wungurilwil Gaggapduir Executive Committee endorsed an interim policy that enables that action to be implemented. The policy is deliberately ‘interim’ to allow for improvements down the track, but to respond to the urgent need now and commence work on transferring resources from government and CSOs to ACCOs.

VACYPA looks forward to working with government in 2026 to define ‘proportionate funding’. We expect there will be some robust debate, a process that is only possible because of the strength of our partnership with the Victorian Government, supported through Treaty. We acknowledge DFFH’s commitment to Action 4.3 and its willingness to get moving, rather than wait any longer to shift resources to ACCOs.

VACYPA also acknowledges the leadership shown by some CSOs, who have made their own commitments to transferring resources to ACCOs. VACYPA looks to other CSOs to follow that lead.

We encourage the Victorian Government to look at existing allocations for services delivered through government and CSOs as a source from which to respond to demands for additional funding to ACCOs, described in this report and elsewhere. New funding is always preferable but transfer of funding is also necessary in an environment where funding is limited.



Transfer of proportionate funding must consider not just the transfer of like-for-like funding from CSOs to ACCOs but must also consider the need for sufficient resourcing to cover the cost of culture in ACCO service delivery, as outlined in this report.

Prioritising flexibility in funding and program design to enable self-determination in early intervention and prevention

There are numerous examples in this report of ACCOs facing barriers in delivering the services they aspire to deliver, and that their communities need, due to limitations on how funding is provided and can be used. This particularly impacts on ACCOs' ability to deliver locally relevant early intervention and prevention that will work for their community.

Examples include:

- Failure to acknowledge the role of, and fund, culturally grounded programs as a form of prevention and early intervention (recommendation 1)
- Lack of cross-portfolio funding arrangements to support the infrastructure needs and ongoing funding arrangements for integrated early years hubs (recommendation 2)
- The need to resource advice, support and appropriate lead-time to enable Aboriginal-led models of early intervention and prevention (recommendation 5)
- Lack of funding to support voluntary kinship care as a preventative and protective measure against child protection intervention (recommendation 6)
- The need to improve how AFLDMs operate and expand their availability to pre-substantiation matters (recommendation 20), and
- The need for investment in locally tailored and culturally grounded youth support services (recommendation 31).

Removing restrictions on how funding can be used, properly supporting APSS to allow flexible program design and delivery, and working across portfolios to address the need for holistic approaches to children's needs are things government can do to enable the achievement of many of this report's recommendations. The implementation of the government's revised Strategic Framework for Family Services presents an opportunity to embed flexibility, recognition of cultural costs, and self-determination within funding approaches. VACYPA encourages government to take this opportunity to work with ACCOs on meaningful reform.

Continuing the implementation of ACAC and Community Protecting Boorais and addressing identified limitations

As explained above, VACYPA Members remain committed to early intervention and prevention. Our goal is to put statutory child protection out of business, but in the meantime, until ACCOs are funded to provide the support for their communities to stem the flow of children and young people into child protection, we seek ACAC and CPB growth to enable every Aboriginal child and young person in child protection to receive culturally grounded assistance through ACAC and CPB.

Our estimate, outlined above, is that **an additional 133 ACAC and CPB teams** would be required to enable ACAC and CPB to support every Aboriginal child and young person on a protection order and every investigated report relating to Aboriginal children and young people. VACYPA does not expect growth of that order to happen quickly. Indeed, VACYPA Members hope that investment in Aboriginal-led and delivered early intervention and prevention will reduce the demand for ACAC and CPB.



VACYPA remains committed to the Wungurilwil Gagapduir Action 2.1, which commits parties to the Agreement to:

Continue the implementation of ACAC and Community Protecting Boorais

Meeting that commitment is best undertaken through a comprehensive long-term growth plan that takes the aspirations of VACYPA Members described in this report into account, as well as issues that affect implementation, addresses existing challenges, and commits to growth at a pace that workforce demands can accommodate. DFFH must work with ACCOs on this planning, address the issues and limitations impacting ACAC and CPB as highlighted in this report, and continue to support policy development and program support in VACYPA and ACCOs to preserve and strengthen the self-determinative nature of ACAC and CPB as they grow.

Progressing recommendations from the 2023 Rights and Aspirations Project

The 2023 ACCO Rights and Aspirations report proposed a mechanism to progress ACCO aspirations. Recommendation 3 said,

Commence strategic conversations between DFFH and ACCOs at the area level to develop plans that promote attainment of ACCOs stated aspirations including:

- *DFFH (areas) partnering with each ACCO to consider their organisational readiness to provide the desired service against program requirements. Where the ACCO is ready, identify appropriate funding sources to enable service delivery.*
- *Where further capability building is identified, DFFH and the ACCO will develop a transition plan that includes partnership or mentoring approaches with agreed feedback and review points.*

Unfortunately, this recommendation was not implemented. Discussions at the area level have been limited to programs that are currently funded, rather than what ACCOs' aspirations are. No implementation plans have been developed. It appears to VACYPA that local Agency Performance and System Support (APSS) teams are reluctant to entertain discussions about ACCO aspirations in the absence of DFFH Central Office authority. Indeed, it might be a reasonable that APSS teams are cautious about raising expectations that ACCO service aspirations will be funded, when they know very well that service growth can only happen with funding provided through the State Budget.

However, VACYPA recommends that Area APSS teams do start talking with their ACCOs about what they aspire to deliver. ACCOs understand that funding will need to be sourced before it can be allocated. But holding strategic discussions at the area level, in which ACCOs are acknowledged as the experts about their communities, and are empowered to speak on community behalf, strongly making the case for the services they need.

ACCOs hold serious reservations about many existing area or divisional family and community planning processes. Too often, mainstream CSOs dominate planning processes at the local level, leaving ACCO interests out in the cold. When it comes to planning services for Aboriginal families, children and young people, that approach needs to be turned on its head, with ACCOs taking the lead, not being treated like the poor relation.

VACYPA supports this recommendation, but it requires support from government to progress, backed by preparedness to fund initiatives. Otherwise, conversations about aspirations could be hollow.

Moreover, local discussions should not be framed from a deficit perspective, as if local ACCOs 'lack the competence or capacity' to deliver services for local communities. Rather than framing service around ACCOs delivering mainstream models or programs with strict program requirements, discussions should acknowledge ACCOs' expertise in serving their own communities and support ACCOs to respond in ways they know work best. DFFH must empower local areas to engage local ACCOs in these strategic conversations about Aboriginal-led approaches to service reform and growth. Empowerment requires



policy support that enables decisions about local service delivery for Aboriginal people to be led by ACCOs.

Don't shelve this

VACYPA and Member ACCOs were asked what our aspirations are for the Aboriginal families, children and young people. We have high expectations. This report records those hopes, dreams and heart-felt longing for a brighter future for the next generation. It also provides guidance about how these can be achieved. Out of respect for the fifteen ACCOs that contributed to this report, one final request from VACYPA is that government provide a detailed response to this report, outlining support for the aspirations, or rejection or have other views.

Victoria has always led the way in child and family services reform, particularly for Aboriginal communities. Let us not lose that title. May the Victorian Government continue to honour Aboriginal self-determination, may we progress the work of Wungurilwil Gagapduir and beyond that, achieve the ACCOs aspirations. We are after all, in the Treaty Era.



Appendix 1

Summary of ACCO aspirations for their families, children and young people

EAST & NORTH ACCOs	<i>Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation</i>	<i>Rumbalara Aboriginal Coop</i>	<i>Njernda Aboriginal Corporation</i>	<i>Bendigo And District Aboriginal Coop</i>	<i>Mallee District Aboriginal Services</i>	<i>Murray Valley Aboriginal Coop</i>
Koori Supported Playgroups	Deliver now. Maintain	Deliver now. Seek growth	Deliver now. Seek growth	Deliver now. Seek growth	Deliver now. Maintain	Deliver now. Maintain
Parenting Support	Aspire to deliver	Deliver now as part of Koorie Families as First Educators Seek growth	Aspire to deliver	Aspire to deliver	Aspire to deliver	Aspire to deliver
Family Services	Deliver now. Seek growth	Deliver now. Seek growth	Deliver now. Seek growth	Deliver now. Seek growth	Deliver now. Seek growth	Deliver now. Seek growth
Aboriginal Child Specialist Advice and Support Service (ACSASS)	Aspire to deliver	Deliver now. Seek growth. Inadequate funding	Deliver now. Seek growth. Inadequate funding	Deliver now. Seek growth. Inadequate funding	Deliver now. Seek growth. Inadequate funding	Aspire to deliver
Aboriginal Family-Led Decision Making (AFLDM)	Deliver now. Seek growth	Deliver now. Seek growth. Seel model change	Deliver now. Seek growth	Deliver now. Seek growth	Deliver now. Seek growth	No foreseeable aspirations
Cultural Planning	Deliver now. Maintain	Deliver now. Seek growth	Deliver now. Seek growth	Deliver now. Seek growth	Deliver now. Seek growth	No foreseeable aspirations
Family Finding	Aspire to deliver	Deliver now through Integrated Model of Care	Aspire to deliver	Aspire to deliver	Aspire to deliver	Aspire to deliver

EAST & NORTH ACCOs	Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation	Rumbalara Aboriginal Coop	Njernda Aboriginal Corporation	Bendigo And District Aboriginal Coop	Mallee District Aboriginal Services	Murray Valley Aboriginal Coop
		pilot Funding not likely to be adequate to meet demand				
Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care (ACAC)	Needs further consideration	Deliver now. Seek growth	No foreseeable aspiration	Deliver now. Seek growth to match demand	Aspire in own time	No foreseeable aspirations
Community Protecting Boorais (CPB)	Needs further consideration	Aspire to deliver	No foreseeable aspiration	Deliver now. Seek growth to match demand	Aspire in own time	No foreseeable aspirations
Targeted Care Packages	No foreseeable aspirations	Deliver now. Seek growth	Aspire to deliver	Deliver now. Seek growth. Needs additional support role	Deliver now. Maintain	No foreseeable aspirations
Better Futures	Aspire to deliver	Deliver now. Seek growth	Deliver now. Seek growth	Deliver now. Seek growth	Deliver now. Seek growth	Aspire to deliver
Kinship Case Management	Aspire to deliver	Deliver now. Seek growth	Deliver now. Seek to grow post ACAC	No foreseeable aspiration	Deliver now. Maintain	Deliver now. Seek growth
Foster Care	No foreseeable aspirations	Deliver now. Maintain	Deliver now. Questioning viability	No foreseeable aspiration	Deliver now. Questioning viability.	No foreseeable aspirations

EAST & NORTH ACCOs	Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation	Rumbalara Aboriginal Coop	Njernda Aboriginal Corporation	Bendigo And District Aboriginal Coop	Mallee District Aboriginal Services	Murray Valley Aboriginal Coop
Residential Care	No foreseeable aspirations	Need Aboriginal model before can consider	Need Aboriginal model before can consider	Need Aboriginal model before can consider	Deliver now. Aspire to deliver Aboriginal model	No foreseeable aspirations
Permanent Care	No foreseeable aspirations	Aspire to deliver fee for service model	Aspire to deliver fee for service model	No foreseeable aspiration	Aspire to deliver fee for service model	Aspire to deliver fee for service model
Youth Programs	Deliver now Seek growth	Deliver now Seek growth - Run Observers Program for youth to sit on Board and see how things are run - Significant need for expansion of youth early intervention programs including support for families to better support their children at risk of entering justice system		Aspire to Youth Hub - Bus - After hours response	Aspire. Have Homework Club, Breakfast Club, After School Care, Holiday Program (all unfunded) that Community expects	

EAST & NORTH ACCOs	Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation	Rumbalara Aboriginal Coop	Njernda Aboriginal Corporation	Bendigo And District Aboriginal Coop	Mallee District Aboriginal Services	Murray Valley Aboriginal Coop
Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB)	Deliver now Maintain	Deliver now. Build and maintain the infrastructure needed for long term community growth, including a new medical clinic that supports additional GP's and allied health services. This includes bringing all of health and wellbeing services under one location	Separate. Use IFS 10 hours flexibly	Deliver now Seek growth	Provides flexibility. Important not to stigmatise or people won't come	Provides flexibility
Pre-Prep/Kindergarten	Deliver now	Aspire to deliver	Have bush kinder	Deliver now	Aspire to deliver	Deliver now
Child Care	No foreseeable aspirations	Aspire to deliver	Deliver now	No foreseeable aspirations	Aspire to deliver	
Best Start	Aspire to deliver		Deliver now	Deliver now Maintain		
Maternal & Child Health	Deliver now	Deliver now Maintain & integrate		Deliver now Maintain	Deliver now	

EAST & NORTH ACCOs	<i>Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation</i>	<i>Rumbalara Aboriginal Coop</i>	<i>Njernda Aboriginal Corporation</i>	<i>Bendigo And District Aboriginal Coop</i>	<i>Mallee District Aboriginal Services</i>	<i>Murray Valley Aboriginal Coop</i>
Healing/Family Therapy/Counselling		Deliver now Seek growth Fund from combined service areas and funders. It's a more cobbled approach that often requires "approval" from the funders rather than developed and delivered with true self-determination. This is also a core cultural practice and community need and is great prevention and early intervention.	Aspire - Psychologist implementing Aboriginal model to address trauma	Aspire to have Principal Practitioner		

EAST & NORTH ACCOs	<i>Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation</i>	<i>Rumbalara Aboriginal Coop</i>	<i>Njernda Aboriginal Corporation</i>	<i>Bendigo And District Aboriginal Coop</i>	<i>Mallee District Aboriginal Services</i>	<i>Murray Valley Aboriginal Coop</i>
Integrated Early Years Centre		Aspire to deliver Not just fund mainstream or a partnership. It needs to be developed by the ACCO to meet specific local needs and ways of doing.		Aspire to deliver	Aspire to deliver	Aspire to deliver
Current Employees	35	314	147	215	276	56

SOUTH & WEST ACCOs	<i>Dandenong & District Aborigines Coop</i>	<i>Ramahyuck District Aboriginal Corporation</i>	<i>Gippsland & East Gippsland Aboriginal Coop</i>	<i>Goolum Goolum Aboriginal Coop</i>	<i>Dhauwurd-Wurrung Elderly and Community Health Service</i>	<i>Winda-mara Aboriginal Corporation</i>	<i>Ballarat and District Aboriginal Coop</i>	<i>Wathaurong Aboriginal Coop</i>	<i>Gunditjmara Aboriginal Coop</i>
Koori Supported Playgroups	Aspire to deliver	Deliver now. Seek growth	Deliver now. Maintain	Deliver now. Seek growth	Deliver now. Maintain	Deliver now. Seek growth	Deliver now. Seek growth	Deliver now. Seek growth	Deliver now. Seek growth
Parenting Support	Aspire to deliver Youth requested parenting program for their parents	Aspire to deliver	Aspire to deliver	Aspire to deliver Deliver unfunded program	Aspire to deliver	Aspire to deliver	Aspire to deliver	Aspire to deliver Particularly youth. DE funds parenting program for 0-5	Aspire to deliver
Family Services	Deliver now. Seek growth	Deliver now. Seek growth	Deliver now. Seek growth	Deliver now. Seek growth	Deliver now Seek growth	Deliver now. Seek growth	Deliver now. Seek growth	Deliver now. Seek growth	Deliver now. Seek growth
Aboriginal Child Specialist Advice and Support Service (ACSASS)	Aspire to deliver	Aspire to deliver	Aspire to deliver	Aspire to deliver	Aspire to deliver	Aspire to deliver	Aspire to deliver	Aspire to deliver	Aspire to deliver
Aboriginal Family-Led Decision Making (AFLDM)	Aspire to deliver	Deliver now. Seek growth	Deliver now. Seek growth	Deliver 2 models now	Aspire to deliver	Aspire to deliver	Deliver now. Seek growth	Deliver now. Seek growth	Deliver now. Seek growth
Cultural Planning	Aspire to deliver	Deliver now. Seek growth	Deliver now. Seek growth	Deliver now. Seek growth	Aspire to deliver	Aspire to deliver	Deliver now. Seek growth	Deliver now. Seek growth	Deliver now. Seek growth

SOUTH & WEST ACCOs	<i>Dandenong & District Aborigines Coop</i>	<i>Ramahyuck District Aboriginal Corporation</i>	<i>Gippsland & East Gippsland Aboriginal Coop</i>	<i>Goolum Goolum Aboriginal Coop</i>	<i>Dhauwurd-Wurrung Elderly and Community Health Service</i>	<i>Winda-mara Aboriginal Corporation</i>	<i>Ballarat and District Aboriginal Coop</i>	<i>Wathaurong Aboriginal Coop</i>	<i>Gunditjmara Aboriginal Coop</i>
Family Finding	Aspire to deliver	Aspire to deliver	Aspire to deliver	No foreseeable aspirations	Aspire to deliver	Aspire to deliver	Aspire to deliver	Aspire to deliver	Aspire to deliver
Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care (ACAC)	No foreseeable aspiration	No foreseeable aspiration	Deliver now. Seek growth to match demand	Deliver now. Seek growthy to match demand	Aspire in own time	Aspire in own time	Deliver now. Seek growth to match demand	Aspire in own time	Aspire in own time
Community Protecting Boorais	No foreseeable aspiration	No foreseeable aspiration	Aspire in time	Aspire in time	Aspire in own time		Aspire to deliver	Aspire in own time	Aspire in own time
Targeted Care Packages	Aspire to deliver	No foreseeable aspiration	Deliver now. Seek growth	Deliver now. Seek growth	Deliver now. Seek growth	Aspire to deliver	Deliver now. Seek growth. Needs additional support role	Deliver now. Seek growth. We would like to see consistent funding for TCPs, not having to employ with minimal notice and no real commitment each	Deliver now. Seek growth. Needs additional support role

SOUTH & WEST ACCOs	<i>Dandenong & District Aborigines Coop</i>	<i>Ramahyuck District Aboriginal Corporation</i>	<i>Gippsland & East Gippsland Aboriginal Coop</i>	<i>Goolum Goolum Aboriginal Coop</i>	<i>Dhauwurd-Wurrung Elderly and Community Health Service</i>	<i>Winda-mara Aboriginal Corporation</i>	<i>Ballarat and District Aboriginal Coop</i>	<i>Wathaurong Aboriginal Coop</i>	<i>Gunditjmara Aboriginal Coop</i>
								time there is a referral	
Better Futures	Aspire to deliver	Aspire to deliver	Aspire to deliver	Deliver now. Seek growth	Aspire to deliver	Aspire to deliver	Deliver now. Seek growth	Deliver now. Seek growth	Deliver now. Seek growth
Kinship Case Management	Aspire to deliver	No foreseeable aspirations	Deliver now. Maintain	Deliver now. Scale down as ACAC grows	Aspire to deliver	Deliver now. Seek growth	Deliver now. Scale down as ACAC grows	Deliver now. Maintain	Deliver now. Maintain
Foster Care	Aspire to deliver	No foreseeable aspirations	Deliver now. Maintain	Need Aboriginal model before can consider	No foreseeable aspirations	No foreseeable aspirations	Need Aboriginal model before can consider	Deliver now. Maintain	Need Aboriginal model before can consider
Residential Care	No foreseeable aspirations	No foreseeable aspirations	Needs further consideration	No foreseeable aspirations	No foreseeable aspirations	No foreseeable aspirations	Need Aboriginal model before can consider	Need Aboriginal model before can consider	Need Aboriginal model before can consider
Permanent Care	No foreseeable aspirations	No foreseeable aspirations	Aspire to deliver fee for service model	Aspire to deliver fee for service model	No foreseeable aspirations	Aspire to deliver fee for service model	Aspire to deliver fee for service model	Aspire to deliver fee for service model	Aspire to deliver fee for service model

SOUTH & WEST ACCOs	<i>Dandenong & District Aborigines Coop</i>	<i>Ramahyuck District Aboriginal Corporation</i>	<i>Gippsland & East Gippsland Aboriginal Coop</i>	<i>Goolum Goolum Aboriginal Coop</i>	<i>Dhauwurd-Wurrung Elderly and Community Health Service</i>	<i>Winda-mara Aboriginal Corporation</i>	<i>Ballarat and District Aboriginal Coop</i>	<i>Wathaurong Aboriginal Coop</i>	<i>Gunditjmara Aboriginal Coop</i>
Youth Programs	Have Youth Hub (Justice \$) as great foundation	Deliver now. Seek growth	Have Youth Refuge	Aspire to do everything it takes to support young people	Seek growth Currently self-fund	Seek Growth Currently self-fund		Seek Growth Currently self-fund Specific funding around justice prevention would be great	
Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB)		Deliver now. Seek Growth. Integrate Co-locate Growth		Growth and integrate with F'ly Services	Deliver now Seek growth			Deliver now Seek growth	
Men's Programs	Growth	Aspire to deliver		New program being delivered	Deliver now Seek growth	Growth		Currently self-funded Seek growth	
Kindergarten		No foreseeable aspirations	Have but Growth					Aspire to deliver	Aspire to deliver
Child Care		Deliver now. Maintain	Aspire to deliver					Aspire to deliver	Aspire to deliver
Best Start	Maintain	No foreseeable aspirations		Deliver now				Deliver now	

SOUTH & WEST ACCOs	<i>Dandenong & District Aborigines Coop</i>	<i>Ramahyuck District Aboriginal Corporation</i>	<i>Gippsland & East Gippsland Aboriginal Coop</i>	<i>Goolum Goolum Aboriginal Coop</i>	<i>Dhauwurd-Wurrung Elderly and Community Health Service</i>	<i>Winda-mara Aboriginal Corporation</i>	<i>Ballarat and District Aboriginal Coop</i>	<i>Wathaurong Aboriginal Coop</i>	<i>Gunditjmara Aboriginal Coop</i>
Maternal & Child Health		Deliver now. Maintain	Issues - Aspire	Deliver now Seek growth				Deliver now Seek growth Significant ACCO contribution to funding	Have, but issues with mainstream
Healing/Family Therapy/Counselling		Delivery now. Seek Growth	Aspire to deliver	Deliver now Seek growth	Aspire to deliver SEWB funded currently			Aspire to deliver	Aspire to deliver
Integrated Early Years Centre		Need Aboriginal model before can consider	Aspire to deliver	Aspire for Family Services Integrated Hub	Aspire to deliver	Aspire to deliver	Aspire to deliver	Aspire to deliver	Aspire to deliver
Current Employees	45	100	156	65	72	86	240	207-250	82

Appendix 2

Summary of ACCO Aspirations from the 2023 ACCO Rights and Aspirations report

East Division – status and aspirations of ACCOs for service delivery (2022)

Early help	Rumbalara Goulburn	VACCA Inner East Melb	VACCA Outer East Melb	VACCA Ovens Murray	Mungabareena Ovens Murray
Koorie Supported Playgroups	Y ●	D ★	D ★	D ★	Y ▼
Parenting Support	D ●	N ★	N ★	N ★	Y ▼
Targeted and Specialist Support	Rumbalara Goulburn	VACCA Inner East Melb	VACCA Outer East Melb	VACCA Ovens Murray	Mungabareena Ovens Murray
Individual child and family support	Y ●	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y* (VACCA) ★
Specialised interventions	Y ●	Y ▼	Y ▼	N ★	N ★
ACSASS	Y* (VACCA) ★	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y* (VACCA) ★
AFLDM	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y* (Mungab)?	Y ▼
Cultural Planning	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y* (Mungab)?	Y ▼
Family Finding	Y* (VACCA) ★	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y* (VACCA) ★
ACAC	Y PA ▼	N ★	N ★	N ★	N ●
Continuing Care	Rumbalara Goulburn	VACCA Inner East Melb	VACCA Outer East Melb	VACCA Ovens Murray	Mungabareena Ovens Murray
Targeted Care Packages	Y ●	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y* (VACCA) ●
Better Futures	Y ●	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y* (VACCA) ★
Kinship Care	Y ●	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y* (VACCA) ★
Foster Care	Y ●	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y* (VACCA) ★
Residential Care	N ●	N ★	N ★	N ★	N ★
Permanent Care	Y* (VACCA) ★	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y* (VACCA) ●
CIRC Educational Support	N ●	N ★	N ★	N ★	N ★

KEY:

- Y Delivered by the ACCO
- Y* Delivered in the area by another ACCO
- ★ Aspirations to commence within the next 3 years
- ▼ Aspirations to expand within the next 3 years
- Aspirations to design and deliver a culturally appropriate service within the next 3 years
- W Would like to deliver a partnership model within the next 3 years

- N Service not currently offered in the area by an ACCO
- D Delivering but unfunded or funded by another department
- No aspiration to commence or expand services within the next 3 years
- PA ACAC pre-authorisation
- NS Current legislation or policy does not support non-Aboriginal CEO, if legislation/policy changed would consider
- ? Further consideration required by the ACCO.

Source: Transition of Aboriginal Children to Community Controlled Organisations: Rights and Aspirations project report April 2023

South Division – status and aspirations of ACCOs for service delivery (2022)

Early help	VACCA Bayside Peninsula	VACCA Inner Gippsland	Ramahyuck Inner Gippsland	GEGAC Outer Gippsland	Ramahyuck Outer Gippsland	VACCA Southern Melb	DDACL Southern Melb
Koorie Supported Playgroups	N ★	N ★	N ?	N ★	N ?	Y ●	Y* (VACCA) ●
Parenting Support	N ★	N ★	N ?	N ★	N ?	N ★	N ★
Targeted and Specialist Support	VACCA Bayside Peninsula	VACCA Inner Gippsland	Ramahyuck Inner Gippsland	GEGAC Outer Gippsland	Ramahyuck Outer Gippsland	VACCA Southern Melb	DDACL Southern Melb
Individual child and family support	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y ?	Y ▼	Y ?	Y ▼	Y ▼
Specialised interventions	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y ?	Y ▼	Y* (GEGAC) ?	Y ▼	Y* (VACCA) ●
ACSASS	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y* (VACCA) ?	Y* (VACCA) ★	Y* (VACCA) ?	Y ▼	Y* (VACCA) ●
AFLDM	Y ▼	Y* (RAC) ?	Y ?	Y ▼	Y* (GEGAC) ?	Y ▼	Y* (VACCA) ●
Cultural Planning	Y ▼	N ?	N ▼ NS	Y ▼	Y* (GEGAC) ▼ NS	Y ▼	Y* (VACCA) ●
Family Finding	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y* (VACCA) ?	Y* (VACCA) ★	Y* (VACCA) ?	Y ▼	Y* (VACCA) ●
ACAC	N ★	Y ●	Y* (VACCA) ?	N ★	N ?	N ★	N ●
Continuing Care	VACCA Bayside Peninsula	VACCA Inner Gippsland	Ramahyuck Inner Gippsland	GEGAC Outer Gippsland	Ramahyuck Outer Gippsland	VACCA Southern Melb	DDACL Southern Melb
Targeted Care Packages	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y* (VACCA) ?	Y ▼	Y* (GEGAC) ?	Y ▼	Y* (VACCA) ●
Better Futures	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y* (VACCA) ?	Y* (VACCA) ★	Y* (VACCA) ?	Y ▼	Y* (VACCA) ●
Kinship Care	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y* (VACCA) ●
Foster Care	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y* (VACCA) ●	Y ●	Y* (GEGAC) ●	Y ▼	Y* (VACCA) ●
Residential Care	N ★	Y ▼	Y* (VACCA) ●	N ●	N ?	Y ▼	Y* (VACCA) ●
Permanent Care	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y* (VACCA) ?	Y* (VACCA) ★	Y* (VACCA) ?	Y ▼	Y* (VACCA) ●
CIRC Educational Support	N ★	N ★	N ?	N ★	N ?	N ★	N ●

KEY:

- Y Delivered by the ACCO
- Y* Delivered in the area by another ACCO
- ★ Aspirations to commence within the next 3 years
- ▼ Aspirations to expand within the next 3 years
- Aspirations to design and deliver a culturally appropriate service within the next 3 years
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- N Service not currently offered in the area by an ACCO
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- No aspiration to commence or expand services within the next 3 years
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- NS Current legislation or policy does not support non-Aboriginal CEO, if legislation/policy changed would consider
- ? Further consideration required by the ACCO.

Source: Transition of Aboriginal Children to Community Controlled Organisations: Rights and Aspirations project report April 2023

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North Division – status and aspirations of ACCOs for service delivery (2022)

Early help	VACCA Hume Moreland	Njernda Loddon	BDAC Loddon	MDAS Mallee	MVAC Mallee	VACCA NEMA
Koorie Supported Playgroups	Y★	N●	N?	Y?	Y* (MDAS)★	Y▼
Parenting Support	N★	N★	N?	N?	N●	N★
Targeted and Specialist Support	VACCA Hume Moreland	Njernda Loddon	BDAC Loddon	MDAS Mallee	MVAC Mallee	VACCA NEMA
Individual child and family support	Y▼	Y▼	Y?	Y?	Y▼	Y▼
Specialised interventions	Y▼	Y▼	Y?	Y?	Y* (MDAS)★	Y▼
ACSASS	Y▼	Y▼	Y* (Njernda)★	Y?	Y* (MDAS)★	Y▼
AFLDM	Y▼	Y▼	Y?	Y?	Y* (MDAS)★	Y▼
Cultural Planning	Y▼	Y▼	Y?	Y?	Y* (MDAS)★	Y▼
Family Finding	Y▼	Y* (VACCA) ?	Y* (VACCA) ?	Y* (VACCA) ?	Y* (VACCA)●	Y▼
ACAC	Y●	Y PA ▼	Y?	N●	NNS	Y●
Continuing Care	VACCA Hume Moreland	Njernda Loddon	BDAC Loddon	MDAS Mallee	MVAC Mallee	VACCA NEMA
Targeted Care Packages	Y▼	Y●	Y?	Y?	Y* (MDAS)★	Y▼
Better Futures	Y▼	Y* (BDAC)★	Y?	Y?	Y* (MDAS)★	Y▼
Kinship Care	Y▼	Y▼	Y●	Y▼	Y▼	Y▼
Foster Care	Y▼	Y▼	Y* (Njernda)★	Y●	Y* (MDAS)★	Y▼
Residential Care	Y▼	N?	N●	Y●	Y* (MDAS)★	Y▼
Permanent Care	Y▼	Y* (VACCA) ?	Y* (VACCA)★	Y* (VACCA) ?	Y* (VACCA)●	Y▼
CIRC Educational Support	Y▼	N?	N?	N?	N●	Y▼

KEY:

- Y Delivered by the ACCO
- Y* Delivered in the area by another ACCO
- ★ Aspirations to commence within the next 3 years
- ▼ Aspirations to expand within the next 3 years
- Aspirations to design and deliver a culturally appropriate service within the next 3 years
- W Would like to deliver a partnership model within the next 3 years
- N Service not currently offered in the area by an ACCO
- D Delivering but unfunded or funded by another department
- No aspiration to commence or expand services within the next 3 years
- PA ACAC pre-authorisation
- NS Current legislation or policy does not support non-Aboriginal CEO, if legislation/policy changed would consider
- ? Further consideration required by the ACCO.

Source: Transition of Aboriginal Children to Community Controlled Organisations: Rights and Aspirations project report April 2023

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West Division – status and aspirations of ACCOs for service delivery (2022)

Early help	Wathaurong Barwon	VACCA Brimbank Melton	BADAC Central Highlands	VACCA Western Melb	DWECH Wimmera South West	Goolum-Goolum Wimmera South West	Gunditjmara Wimmera South West	Windamara Wimmera South West
Koorie Supported Playgroups	N ★	Y ●	D ▼	N ★	D ●	D ★	Y ▼	N ★
Parenting Support	D ●	N ★	N ★	N ★	D ●	D ★	N ★	D ★
Targeted and Specialist Support	Wathaurong Barwon	VACCA Brimbank Melton	BADAC Central Highlands	VACCA Western Melb	DWECH Wimmera South West	Goolum-Goolum Wimmera South West	Gunditjmara Wimmera South West	Windamara Wimmera South West
Individual child and family support	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y ▼	N ★	Y ▼	Y ●	Y ▼
Specialised interventions	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y ▼	N ●	Y ▼	Y ●	Y ?
ACSASS	Y* (VACCA) ?	Y ▼	Y* (VACCA) ★	Y ▼	Y* (VACCA) ●	Y* (VACCA) ●	Y* (VACCA) ●	Y* (VACCA) ★
AFLDM	Y ●	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y* ●	Y ●	Y ▼	Y* ★
Cultural Planning	Y ●	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y* ●	Y ●	Y ●	Y* ★
Family Finding	Y* (VACCA) ★	Y ▼	Y* (VACCA) ★	Y ▼	Y* (VACCA) ●	Y* (VACCA) ●	Y* (VACCA) ★	Y* (VACCA) ★
ACAC	N ●	N ★	Y PA ▼	N ★	N ●	N ★ NS	N ●	N ?
Continuing Care	Wathaurong Barwon	VACCA Brimbank Melton	BADAC Central Highlands	VACCA Western Melb	DWECH Wimmera South West	Goolum-Goolum Wimmera South West	Gunditjmara Wimmera South West	Windamara Wimmera South West
Targeted Care Packages	Y ●	Y ▼	N ★	Y ▼	Y ●	Y ▼	Y ●	Y N
Better Futures	Y ●	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y* ▼	Y ●	Y ●	Y* ★
Kinship Care	Y ●	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y ▼	Y* ●	Y ●	Y ●	Y ▼
Foster Care	Y ●	Y ▼	N W	Y ▼	N ●	D W	N ●	N ●
Residential Care	N ●	Y ▼	N W	Y ▼	N ●	N ●	N ●	N W
Permanent Care	Y* (VACCA) ?	Y ▼	Y* (VACCA) ●	Y ▼	Y* (VACCA) ●	Y* (VACCA) ●	Y* (VACCA) ●	Y* (VACCA) N
CIRC Educational Support	N ?	N ★	N ●	N ★	N ●	N ?	N ●	N ★

KEY:

- Y Delivered by the ACCO
- Y* Delivered in the area by another ACCO
- ★ Aspirations to commence within the next 3 years
- ▼ Aspirations to expand within the next 3 years
- Aspirations to design and deliver a culturally appropriate service within the next 3 years
- W Would like to deliver a partnership model within the next 3 years
- N Service not currently offered in the area by an ACCO
- D Delivering but unfunded or funded by another department
- No aspiration to commence or expand services within the next 3 years
- PA ACAC pre-authorisation
- NS Current legislation or policy does not support non-Aboriginal CEO, if legislation/policy changed would consider
- ? Further consideration required by the ACCO.

Source: Transition of Aboriginal Children to Community Controlled Organisations: Rights and Aspirations project report April 2023

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Appendix 3

VACYPA response to the 2023 ACCO Rights and Aspirations recommendations

The comments below were provided to DFFH following the release of the 2023 ACCO Rights and Aspirations report.

Findings/Recommendations

1. Amend the CYF Act to enable the Secretary of DFFH to authorise approved Aboriginal agencies to conduct investigations and protective interventions for Aboriginal children and their non-Aboriginal siblings. This will allow ACCOs to support children at the earliest point of statutory involvement.

VACYPA response: This recommendation is complete.

2. Amend the CYF Act to enable the Secretary of DFFH to authorise non-Aboriginal principal officers of Aboriginal agencies to undertake specified powers and functions. This would be subject to Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care (ACAC) program guidelines detailing requirements for mandatory delegation of specified decisions to specified Aboriginal staff.

VACYPA response: This recommendation was agreed by the ACF. What is Government's response to this recommendation and what is the implementation plan? The ACCO and Aboriginal legal services can consider this issue further if required.

3. Commence strategic conversations between DFFH and ACCOs at the area level to develop plans that promote attainment of ACCOs stated aspirations including:
 - DFFH (areas) partnering with each ACCO to consider their organisational readiness to provide the desired service against program requirements. Where the ACCO is ready, identify appropriate funding sources to enable service delivery.
 - Where further capability building is identified, DFFH and the ACCO will develop a transition plan that includes partnership or mentoring approaches with agreed feedback and review points.

VACYPA response: This recommendation is supported and is in line with the VACYPA reform agenda supporting local ACCO led decision making. What is DFFH's implementation plan and how will it ensure consistency or partnership processes at the local level?

4. Support, authorise and fund ACCOs to develop culturally appropriate strategies and evidence-based responses for holistic and integrated early intervention and prevention services. These will ultimately divert children from the child protection system.

VACYPA response: This recommendation is supported and is in line with the VACYPA reform agenda of keeping families together and out of the statutory system. Will Government include funding bids to support implementation?

5. Confirm that ACAC providers can give advice to the Children's Court under section 323(2) of the CYF Act on the appropriateness of a permanent care order.

VACYPA response: This is a question for Government.

6. As part of the review of the Family Finding service consider the:
 - merits of the Family Finding service being delivered locally by ACCOs aspiring and ready to deliver such activities and



- feasibility of a statewide genealogical database being effectively run by one ACCO with input from local ACCOs.

VACYPA response: Members support Family Finding being delivered locally by ACCOs. Members support DFFH undertaking a feasibility study regarding establishment of a genealogical database and encourage the study to consider how the Koori Heritage Trust could support such a database.

7. Commence strategic conversations between DFFH and ACCOs' executives (and Boards where appropriate) that do not aspire or intend to provide current transition services to:
 - discuss the potential to address any barriers to service provision, including model revisions
 - consider the merits of a neighbouring or state-wide ACCO providing the service and, where agreed, establishing a review process including the potential for future local service delivery
 - explore alternate approaches (including funding) to support and connect children to culture where a specific service cannot be offered by the local or alternate ACCO (such as the local ACCO visiting the child or connecting them to other ACCO services).

VACYPA response: Members do not support a statewide ACCO providing the service. The VACYPA position regarding local decision making requires that, if the local ACCO does not choose to deliver a service, written permission is required from that ACCO for any other ACCO or provider to deliver the service in that local area.

8. Engage an ACCO-led consultancy to research and design new models of foster care and residential care that are culturally appropriate and support ACCOs providing such models.

VACYPA response: This recommendation is supported and members propose that the VACYPA undertake this role. This is in line with the VACYPA reform agenda on carer equity.

9. Revise, develop and implement Aboriginal-led policies and approaches to support ACCO foster carer recruitment and carer transitions from CSOs to ACCOs.

VACYPA response: This recommendation is supported. The VACYPA has provided a policy response to address this recommendation. This is in line with the VACYPA reform agenda on carer equity.

10. Revise the foster care case management performance target from 80 per cent of children on final orders placed for over six months to contracting all appropriate Aboriginal children by ACCOs and consider associated funding requirements.

VACYPA response: This recommendation is supported. What is the DFFH implementation plan?

11. Support training of ACCOs to develop their capabilities in submission writing or fund time-limited employment of staff where needed to improve the competitiveness of ACCOs in procurement processes (or both).

VACYPA response: Members note that time-limited positions are not sustainable. Resourcing a dedicated grant writer position for the VACYPA can support training of Members who currently do not have this resource, including the development of tools.

12. Progress reforms to departmental procurement and funding processes that:
 - Include criteria or weighting that supports ACCOs to deliver additional or new services (and therefore increase proportional funding to ACCOs) rather than only weighting service delivery experience.
 - When building program models and budgets, consider the viable (rather than minimal) staff needed to sustain service delivery. Factor in vacancy management and include establishment and infrastructure costs and funding to support community communication strategies
 - Consider the additional need ACCOs have for:



- specialist legal positions
 - principal practitioners
 - positions to manage regulatory burdens, additional risks and develop capabilities in working with complex or high-risk clients.
- Consider the merits of providing additional funding in program budgets to areas with significant travel needs (that is, where a radius of more than 50 kilometres is usual).
 - Consider including funding for overtime in relevant program budgets where it is considered necessary to provide on call, recall and regular overtime.

VACYPA response: This recommendation is supported. What is the DFFH implementation plan?

13. Develop information exchange and referral procedures that support local ACCOs being advised of all children in care. This would allow ACCOs to consider opportunities to support each child, increase children's connection to culture and promote transitions.

VACYPA response: This recommendation is supported. Members propose that DFFH also improve identification and recording of Aboriginality. Provision of this information at the local level can assist local responses and planning which is in line with the VACYPA reform agenda on local ACCO led decision making.

14. Undertake funding reform that enables separating care, case planning and case management of Aboriginal children in foster and residential care. This will allow ACCOs to assume case management functions without providing care and placement support, where desired.

VACYPA response: This recommendation is supported and is an interim measure until an Aboriginal led service system is in place. What is the DFFH implementation plan?

15. Consider resourcing the development of an Aboriginal-led workforce recruitment and retention strategy based on population projections and demographic need.

VACYPA response: Wungurilwil Gagapduir has an action to develop a long-term workforce plan that has not been initiated. Workforce is more than recruitment and retention. Members support development, funding and implementation of a long-term workforce plan. This is in line with the VACYPA reform agenda on equitable and sustained workforce investment to ACCOs for child and family services.

16. Support ACCO staff involved in child protection practice to routinely undertake Beginning Practice and co-design and fund a training module to support the ACCO workforce undertaking or seeking to undertake contracted case management.

VACYPA response: This recommendation is underway.

17. Consider:
 - The merits of dedicated positions within each child protection area (both within child protection and the ACCO) to support case identification, information exchange and governance arrangements that support the transition of children.
 - Designing and implementing partnerships between ACCOs, CSOs and operational divisions to enable monthly reviews at area level of all children in care not supported by an ACCO to consider the merits of and address barriers to transition. Where transition is not possible, consider how the ACCO might promote the child's culture and connection.
 - Establishing dedicated positions within child protection to support file preparation so that transfers are timely and appropriate.
 - Reviewing the adequacy and placement of resources for cultural planning and Aboriginal family-led decision making to promote compliance.



VACYPA response: Dedicated positions are supported, though members note this recommendation is for DFFH. Monthly reviews of Aboriginal children, including sharing of data on all Aboriginal children in care, was routine practice that has dropped away and is inconsistently applied. Members support return to local governance arrangements where ACCOs have insight and oversight of Aboriginal children in their local areas. This is in line with the VACYPA reform agenda and refresh of the ACF and Wungurilwil Gagapduir governance.

Regarding the adequacy of resources for cultural planning, members support a review, not only of the adequacy of cultural planning services, but ACSASS and AFLDM services. The VACYPA is developing an issues paper regarding cultural planning to address multiple program deficits.

18. Develop approaches and guidelines to support case management of children living interstate (as agreed at the October 2022 ACF) by:
- Advising ACCOs and operational divisions there is no legal basis for not pursuing the authorisation or transfer of case management for children subject to protection orders living interstate.
 - Implementing a tiered approach to progress contracting:
 - Each division and relevant ACCO considers the merits of authorisation and case contracting children on a protection order living interstate on a case-by-case basis. They will look at their community connection, proximity of the ACCO to the interstate address, benefits and risks associated with contracting.
 - If the local ACCO most connected to the child is unwilling or unable to accept case management or authorisation, an ACCO close to the relevant interstate border considers the merits of accepting authorisation or contracted case management for all children living close to the border and or in the neighbouring state using kinship funding or targets. Alternatively, use reunification response targets, 200-hour targets, ACAC or targeted care packages (TCPs) – subject to the characteristics of the case.
 - As a statewide service, the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) consider assuming responsibility for all children on protection orders living interstate if the ACCO from the child’s community or close to the border cannot or will not assume case management responsibility.
 - Funding for this activity is to be sourced from underused kinship targets or
 - through provision of new kinship targets allocated for Aboriginal children living interstate. Alternatively, use reunification response targets, 200-hour targets, ACAC or TCPs – subject to the characteristics of the case.
 - If agreed, this would need the following:
 - Amend the Human Services Standards, program requirements and policies about the frequency of face-to-face contact and approve contact using phone and skype (and so on).
 - Allocate brokerage or client support funding for interstate travel (and so on) to ACCOs providing services. Ensure they can access TCPs for complex matters.
 - Where the case is contracted to an ACCO, the interstate liaison officer (ILO) or area child protection practitioner (CPP) will support the ACCO and progress case transfer to the appropriate state or territory wherever possible.

VACYPA response: This recommendation was discussed and supported by the ACF. What is the DFFH implementation plan?

19. Collectively consider the merits of establishing a principal practitioner in each ACCO to:
- promote capacity building in respect to the case management of high-risk children and young people
 - develop expertise in specialist areas like family violence and sexual assault.



VACYPA response: This recommendation is supported.

20. Collectively review current data regarding high-risk young people who need intensive responses, including dual clients of Youth Justice (YJ). Consider the need for a dedicated Aboriginal intensive case management service (ICMS). If ICMS is needed, co design and consider funding the service with the involvement of YJ.

VACYPA response: This recommendation is supported. Government should consider whether the CCYP should undertake that review. This is in line with the VACYPA reform agenda in delivering holistic, therapeutic services for young people.

21. Develop an Aboriginal-led policy (and associated procedures) that identifies actions to be taken when a child's Aboriginality cannot be confirmed and whether it is appropriate for these children to transition to an ACCO. The policy and associated procedures should be endorsed by the Aboriginal caucus of the ACF.

VACYPA response: This recommendation is supported. Development of standalone legislation potentially provides an opportunity to progress this issue.

22. Resource the development, design and implementation of Aboriginal-led care service alliances that forge area- based partnerships between ACCOs, CSOs and Child Protection at area level to:
- strategically contribute to the resolution of identified system and practice barriers affecting transition at the area level
 - assertively support ACCOs to achieve their aspirations and implement strategies to equitably distribute existing and future resources to improve outcomes for Aboriginal children. Such partnerships would benefit from the support of the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Services and the Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance (VACYPA).

VACYPA response: The VACYPA has provided a position regarding local decision making that supports this approach. What is DFFH response?

23. Design, establish and fund the ongoing operations of an Aboriginal knowledge and practice centre to support development of evidence-based practice and policy around Aboriginal children and their families.

VACYPA response: Members seek advice from DFFH regarding implementation of the Aboriginal Knowledge and Practice Centre.

24. Seek ongoing funding of the Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance to:
- continue their current role and functions associated with the transition of children to ACCOs
 - become an incorporated body to strengthen support for their members' organisational growth and system reform.

VACYPA response: This recommendation is supported. This is in line with the VACYPA reform agenda to have a peak body for ACCOs providing family, child and youth services.



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