AIATSIS

Setting the foundations for Aboriginal community-led child protection research.

NSW Child, Family and Community peak Aboriginal Corporation

AbSec

UTS Jumbunna
Institute for Indigenous
Education and Research

Acknowledgement of Country

Those involved in this report would like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work and pay respect to Elders past, present and emerging. Weacknowledges the Stolen Generations who never came home and the ongoing impact of government policy and practice on Aboriginal children, young people and families.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are warned that the following project report may contain images of deceased persons.

This project was undertaken as a partnership between the NSW Child, Family and Community Peak Aboriginal Corporation ('AbSec') and the Child Protection Research Hub at the Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research, University of Technology Sydney.

We thank Aboriginal community members across NSW who contributed to this project through its various stages, and will use the insights gained to advocate for strengthened systems, processes, and improved investment in Aboriginal community–led child and family research.

Who we are

AbSec is the peak organisation concerned with the welfare of Aboriginal children, young people and families. We advocate for their rights, while supporting carers and communities. Our main priority is to keep children and young people safe, with the key goal of also keeping them within their family and community. It is vitally important that young people grow up surrounded by those who understand them, comfortable within their own culture where they will thrive.

AbSec ensures Aboriginal children, young people, families, carers and communities have access to services and support that give them the best possible chance to fulfil their potential.

For media inquiries and further details, please contact: media@absec.org.au

The Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research aims to produce the highest quality research on Indigenous legal and policy issues and to develop highly skilled Indigenous researchers. The Child Protection Hub is focused on working in service of Aboriginal communities and their organisations to transform child protection systems and practice for the benefit of Aboriginal children, families and communities.

For media inquiries and further details, please contact: jumbunna@uts.edu.au

Additional content

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Background

The over-representation of Indigenous children in child protection systems remains a pressing human rights issue facing Australia today.[1] With its roots in past policies of protectionism and assimilation, numerous reviews have urged structural and practice reforms to address this challenge.[2] However, this over-representation continues to rise, with the number of Indigenous children in out-of-home care expected to double in the next decade.[3]

Child protection systems have been criticised as lacking transparency and accountability and failing to uphold the rights and interests of Indigenous children and families,[4] with outcomes for Indigenous children in OOHC described as "particularly poor"[5]. With almost one in two Aboriginal children in NSW "screened-in" at Risk of Significant Harm (ROSH) by the age of 5,[6] new policy settings, systems and practice frameworks, supported by localised evidence, are needed to address these inequalities.

The recent *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* has included a child protection target for the first time, and identified the need for further development of data and evidence including a focus on safety and wellbeing for children and young people.[7] Building on the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap, the Safe and Supported: National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031* includes within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan actions directed towards building an evidence base that reflects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge, expertise and worldviews. The aim of this action is to

"…ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people determine, collect and use their own data, and lead their own research to inform and determine policies and programs based on evidence and data led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people".[8]

In NSW, significant research projects in this area have been criticised for failing to adequately reflect Aboriginal community priorities or perspectives.[9] The Department of Communities and Justice has included in their *Research Strategy 2020-2025* a priority

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[1] Gooda, M. (2015) *Social Justice and Native Title Report 2015,* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Australian Human Rights Commission, pp. 138.

[2] Davis, M. (2019) *Family is Culture: Report of the Independent Review of Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care,* New South Wales.

[3] SNAICC (2019) *Family Matters Report 2019*.

[4] Davis, M. (2019) *Family Is Culture Report*.

[5] Tune, D. (2016) *Independent Review of Out-of-Home Care*, NSW Government.

[6] Falster, K. and Hanly, M. (2019) *'Childhood child protection services involvement and developmental outcomes among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Kindergarten children in New South Wales: Findings from a population based, cross-sectoral data linkage study (The Seeding Success Study)',* Report for the Family is Culture Review. Sydney, UNSW, cited in ibid.

[7] National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

[8] Safe and Supported: *The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan 2023-2026*, pp.29.

[9] Davis, M. (2019) *Family is Culture: Report of the Independent Review of Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care*, New South Wales. Page 35-37.

to 'support Aboriginal-led research and the principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty' although there are no clear actions or investment directed towards supporting Aboriginal community-led research. While governments have invested in research targeted towards their policy objectives, including the Pathways of Longitudinal Care Study and the Institute of Open Adoption, commitments to Aboriginal-led research have not stepped beyond mere rhetoric.

This is despite the significant need (and rhetorical commitment) to address the over-representation of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care, contrasting with the $2.85m invested in 2015 to establish an independent research institute directed to adoption research, despite 'only a handful' of children experiencing adoption each year (in 2021/22, and 2022/23, 89 and 60 children were adopted from OOHC), and acknowledgement that adoption is not appropriate particularly for Aboriginal children in OOHC. While Aboriginal community organisations are engaged in innovative approaches, and supported by broad policy and program guidance from the Aboriginal peak body, AbSec, there is a pressing need to support Aboriginal communities to direct and undertake research that is aligned to their values, perspectives, priorities and aspirations.

Scholarship and policy frameworks emphasise that self-determination and the reassertion of Indigenous knowledge systems and world views as critical to healing and child protection reform[10]. Research represents a critical activity in the development of evidence-based systems, policy and practice. However, despite commitments towards developing new approaches to address the disproportionate and harmful impact of Settler-led child protection systems and practices on Aboriginal children, families and communities, and acknowledgement for the need to centre self-determination and accountability, there remains an absence of investment in Aboriginal community-led research.

Research is a key pillar for transforming child protection systems and practice, addressing systemic racism, and improving outcomes for Aboriginal children, families and communities.

The project seeks to address sector concerns about limited opportunity for community-led research and the prevalence of government or researcher-led initiatives that may further entrench systemic harms, aiming to better align research activities with the priorities, aspirations and knowledge systems of Aboriginal communities.

This project will build on the strong foundations of the NSW Aboriginal community-controlled child and family sector as part of the necessary enabling environment for Aboriginal community-led research grounded on principles of self-determination, accountability, and Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Indigenous Data Governance. In doing so, it seeks to ensure that research is aligned to the perspectives, priorities and aspirations of Aboriginal peoples, informing the development of Aboriginal community-led systems, policies and practice that improve outcomes for our children, families and communities.

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[10] Fitzmaurice-Brown, L. (2023).'Te Rito o Te Harakeke: Decolonising child protection law in Aotearoa New Zealand'. Victoria University of Wellington Law Review, 53(4), 507–542.

Specifically, this project will engage with Aboriginal child protection stakeholders through a series of focus groups and forums to:

- Identify the desired structures, supports and resources to enable community–led research regarding child protection systems and practice.
- Develop research priorities and strategies to attract investment.
- Develop a high–level outcomes framework for Aboriginal children, families and communities to support and guide evidence building across the sector.

The aim of the project is to strengthen the capacity and capabilities of Aboriginal community-controlled organisations and the broader sector to direct and undertake research that informs the development and continuous improvement of child protection systems and practice for Aboriginal children, families and communities. Through outlining the structures and developing resources to guide future research in this space aligned to shared principles and values, and articulating clear community–led research priorities, the project seeks to embed Indigenous governance and leadership not only in this project, but in shaping future initiatives in this critical sector, providing a foundation for future investment in community–led research.

This project acknowledges that while many Aboriginal community controlled organisations display innovative practices and approaches across the child protection continuum, many lack the resources and capabilities to undertake high quality research alongside their primary service delivery functions. At the same time, research projects are often aligned to government and researcher priorities that may not align with the perspectives or aspirations of Aboriginal communities, with many researchers unsure of how to effectively engage with Aboriginal communities to support community research priorities. This project seeks to address these challenges, providing the foundations for future investment in Aboriginal community–led research regarding child protection systems and practice.

Approach

This project includes three key stages, intended to ensure that the project is driven by and for Aboriginal communities.

Stage One: Stakeholder forum

The first stage, involved a forum of Aboriginal community-controlled child and family organisations, advocates and other Aboriginal stakeholders. The forum was hosted by the membership-based NSW Aboriginal child and family peak organisation, AbSec.

The opening forum was focused on:

- setting the direction for the project, and included testing the proposed project methodology,
- providing a briefing on common principles and approaches to Indigenous-led research using local and international examples,
- with the aim of developing broad principles to take forward to the community engagements.

Stage Two: Community consultations (up to 10)

The second stage included direct community engagement, with Aboriginal community organisations inviting AbSec and the researchers to hold local conversations about child and family research. These community engagements will be focused on:

- testing the principles developed in the first Stakeholder Forum,
- identifying research priorities,
- as well as the processes and resources necessary to promote Aboriginal community-led research.

Stage Three: Stakeholder forum

The third stage of the project consolidated the principles, priorities and processes identified through the community engagements into key outputs, including an Aboriginal community-led research framework, research agenda, and indicative high level outcomes framework to guide Aboriginal community-led evaluation efforts, These outputs were tested with Aboriginal community stakeholders through a second Stakeholder Forum, ensuring that the project outputs reflect the perspectives and aspirations of Aboriginal communities.

This broad approach is consistent with that undertaken by AbSec to develop the Aboriginal Case Management Policy and associated Rules and Practice Guidance.

These stages were complemented by a brief survey directed to Aboriginal community-controlled child and family organisations. The survey was intended to benchmark research involvement and attitudes to inform the current project as well as provide opportunity for later comparisons to measure change over time in response to future implementation and further development of research processes and infrastructure.

	Outputs	
Baseline date		Sector-led research framework
Sector-led research strategy and priorities		High-level outcomes framework
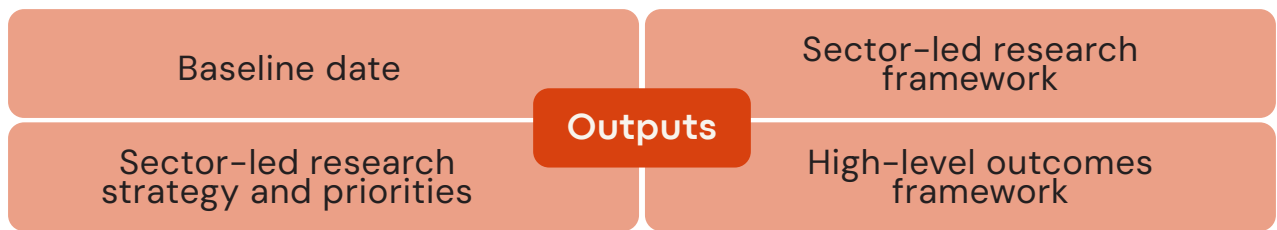
These stages will be outlined in the following section, reflecting the iterative and participatory nature of the project.

Stage One: Establishing Principles

The project was developed as a three stage, iterative project, funded by an AIATSIS Research Exchange Grant, and conducted in partnership with AbSec as the NSW Aboriginal child and family peak body. Consistent with this, the project was approved by the AIATSIS HREC (EO281-20210727).

The Stakeholder Forum was hosted online on 20 May 2022, facilitated by AbSec and UTS Jumbunna. Aboriginal community-controlled organisations across NSW were invited to participate in the Stakeholder Forum through the NSW Aboriginal child protection peak, AbSec. A group of 7 representatives joined AbSec to participate in the discussion. It was acknowledged that it remains a challenging period for engagement, with multiple processes underway including Closing the Gap and a DCJ-led consultation regarding legislative changes recommended by the Family is Culture report. Further, many communities are adapting to COVID-related changes or recovering from recent devastating natural disasters, which all affect the capacity of Aboriginal communities to participate in such processes.

The stakeholder forum focused on three key areas. First, the overall proposed research approach, second, developing draft principles for testing, and third, confirming the semi-structured interview frameworks that would be utilised during the community engagements. In addition, stakeholders wished to explore in more detail the feedback received on those elements, and other comments made by stakeholders, are outlined below.

Proposed Project Approach

The three phases of the research were outlined to stakeholders, noting the iterative and community-led nature of the research approach.

Broadly, participants were supportive of this approach.

Stakeholders noted with frustration ongoing processes of review and government-led research that repeatedly covers and re-litigates the same issues, generating more and more reports and findings, but achieving little in terms of substantive change. There was a feeling that such approaches are not only unproductive but actively harmful, and there was an interest both in enabling Aboriginal community-led research to drive community advocacy and decision making about systems, policies and practices that affect our children, but also preventing harmful research, by empowering Aboriginal communities to collective decline research that is not considered to be in the interests of the community. This withholding or withdrawal of consent should be respected, and prevent the research project from moving forward to include or make findings about Aboriginal children, families and communities.

Principles for Aboriginal Community-led Research

To assist stakeholders in identifying principles to be tested through community engagements, the research team presented a brief overview of principles and approaches to Indigenous–led research and ethics frameworks. This included the AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research, the Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council Ethical Guidelines: Key Principles, the five key principles of the Lowitja Institute, and the core values and principles outlined by the National Congress of American Indians Policy Research Center.

Key principles of the AIATSIS Code of Ethics and Guide to Applying the AITSIS Code of Ethics were shared.

With reference to this framework, it was discussed that self–determination refers to the collective right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to make decisions about their communities, reflecting both individual and collective rights, diversity of communities, and valuing Indigenous knowledge systems. This includes having written agreements to govern the research at the collective community level, in addition to common safeguards for individual participants.

Indigenous leadership was framed as referring to decision making responsibility resting with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, with research aligned to their priorities, values, perspectives and voices.

Impact and value was discussed in terms of the benefits of the research for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, including that they are not harmed or disadvantaged by the research.

Sustainability and accountability referred to ensuring that research is environmentally, culturally, socially and economically sustainable, with the knowledge produced providing a beneficial asset to current and future generations. This emphasises the importance of appropriate community governance, demonstrating clearly the interrelated nature of the responsibilities outlined through the AIATSIS model.

The presentation also noted the Key Principles of the Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council Human Research Ethics Committee, which notes:

- Net benefit for Aboriginal communities – addressing an identified issue in a way that creates a benefits for individuals and communities after considering known risks.

- Community control of research – Aboriginal communities are fully informed about and agree with the purpose and conduct of the research, with meaningful oversight and governance across all stages, supported by formal agreements.

- Cultural sensitivity in research – cultural values are respected through the research approach.

- Reimbursement of costs – research does not impose an undue burden on communities and individuals.

- Enhancing skills and knowledge – research activities develop the capacity of communities, including in leading research.

Also noted were the six core values of the National Health and Medical Research Council, reflecting spirit and integrity in research affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, as well as values of cultural continuity, equity, reciprocity, respect and responsibility, as well as the key principles outlined by the Lowitja Institute: beneficence, leadership, engagement of research end users, development of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research workforce, and measurement of impact.

These models were discussed to inform stakeholders of current standards and approaches with respect to research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, noting the similarities across each.

Finally, an international example was also shared, presenting core values and guiding principles for the National Congress of American Indians Policy Research Center.
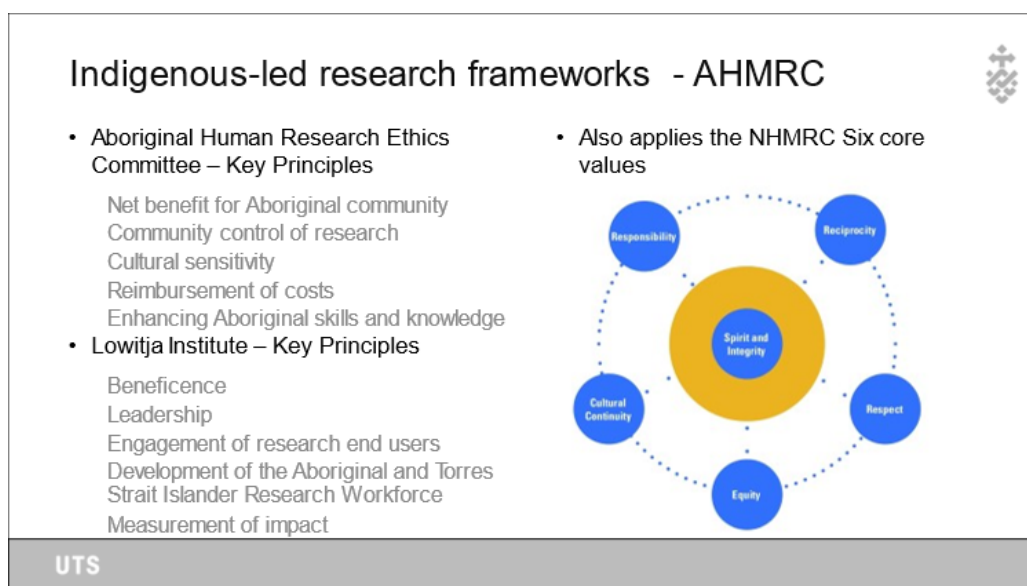
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11 See National Congress of American Indians Policy Research Center (2018) *Core Values and Guiding Principles,* available: https://archive.ncai.org/policy-research-center/about-prc/NCAI_Policy_Research_Center_Core_Values_and_Guiding_Principles_1_12_2018.pdf

Indigenous-led research frameworks – National Congress of American Indians

- Outline core values and guiding principles for their Policy Research Center

Core Values	Guiding Principles
Communities drive the research work – research and policy by us, for us	Nationally focused
Knowledge in service to wisdom	Result in improved quality of life
Honor sovereignty, and facilitate better decision-making	Timely, relevant and proactive
Tribes own their own data	Advance community discussion about policy/the future
Value Indigenous knowledges	Closely aligned to Indian Country (two way)
Preserve culture or it does not add value	Honor ownership of data, role of community
Honor cultural values of sharing and respect	From a Native perspective
Be solutions focused, responsive to community policy agenda	Credible – high quality research
Collaborative – coordinate and leverage opportunities	Build capacity and leverage partnerships

With remarkable similarities with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander frameworks, this example noted the need for community leadership and governance of research that honours the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples and is positioned to facilitate good governance and policy development for the benefit of Indigenous people. This includes respect for Indigenous knowledges and culture, and retains ownership of data by Indigenous peoples.

Five core values were also noted arising from training resources that emphasise the validity of Indigenous knowledge, acknowledges that research is culturally informed, not culturally neutral, that responsible stewardship includes the understanding data and research, and the foundations of sovereignty and collective benefit.

Indigenous-led research frameworks – National Congress of American Indians

- Five Core Values for research
  1. **Indigenous knowledge is valid and should be valued**
  2. **Research is not culturally neutral**
  3. **Responsible stewardship includes the task of learning how to interpret and understand data and research**
  4. **Tribes must exercise sovereignty when conducting research and managing data**
  5. **Research must benefit Native people**
- Have a five module training program to support communities with undertaking their own research.
- Not about imposing any given approach, but informing community decision making about research

UTS

Following this discussion, stakeholders were asked 'what should be the key principles for research affecting Aboriginal children and families, particularly in the child protection sector?'

Through this approach, consistent emergent themes including:

- the central issue of self-determination and community-control of research,
- that research should be grounded in and reflect Aboriginal community values and perspectives, and respect and contribute to Indigenous knowledge systems,
- that research should contribute to community governance, building knowledge and evidence that contributes to improving the outcomes for Aboriginal people and communities.

Stakeholders expressed support of these values, however were reluctant to establish a specific set of principles with set wording for the next stage. Instead, the proposed broad descriptions of values that could be tested for agreement and workshopped through those consultations, with wording finally established through the second Stakeholder Forum, following the community engagements.

Values expressed by stakeholders to be tested with communities included that:

1. Research should be community-led, reflecting principles of self-determination/sovereignty, and respect communities as experts in their own lives

Stakeholders noted in particular a distinction between community and government understandings of what constituted 'Aboriginal-led'. Stakeholders spoke of the need for authority to come from community, through community-based processes, with direct accountability back to community. The positioning of Aboriginal employees within non-Indigenous structures and processes as 'Aboriginal-led' was challenged by stakeholders. Stakeholders further noted that structures must guard against Aboriginal community voices being co-opted by the state, or over-consulted and marginalised through research processes in ways that doesn't ultimately improve systems and practices for, and therefore outcomes experienced by, Aboriginal children, families and communities.

Research processes should be grounded on respect, and honour the decisions of communities. Ultimately, there were repeated references regarding the need to centre Aboriginal communities within research processes, driving research priorities and implementation, exercising authority and ownership over research processes and outcomes affecting their communities, and reflecting community perspectives, values, and aspirations. Stakeholders emphasised that research processes should actively uphold principles of self-determination in how research affecting Aboriginal communities is undertaken and by whom, drawing a distinction between valuing sovereignty and being sovereign. This reflects a similar criticism outlined in the Family is Culture review, which noted that DCJ 'valuing' self-determination such as in the Aboriginal Case Management Policy is insufficient, setting standards for how this important principle is enacted in systems and practice.

2. Research should value and centre culture, and as such should be aligned to the knowledges, culture and protocols, priorities and aspirations of Aboriginal communities

Stakeholders emphasised that research should be aligned with Aboriginal community perspectives, priorities and aspirations, valuing Aboriginal ways of being and knowing and contributing to policy and program development that is grounded in Aboriginal community worldviews. It was noted that too often evidence reflects non-Indigenous

systems and programs, and this is further disempowering for Aboriginal communities. Stakeholders pointed to Family Group Conferencing as an example of these challenges, with a particular model or approach being imposed on Aboriginal communities in a way that takes power away from communities.

System and program design and implementation should empower Aboriginal community decision making, and enable evidence-based systems and practices that is grounded in Aboriginal community and cultural values. Stakeholders agreed with existing frameworks that noted that research is not culturally neutral, and research processes should acknowledge these biases and support Aboriginal community-led approaches that are framed by Aboriginal communities, rather than non-Indigenous stakeholders/researchers and governments.

3. The research scope should not be unduly narrow or beholden to non-Indigenous assumptions and approaches

Stakeholders were clear about the potential limitations of positioning the research within the existing child protection sector, which carries with it certain non-Indigenous assumptions and approaches that stakeholders found counter-productive. Consistent with the above point about centring Aboriginal standpoints, Aboriginal stakeholders urged that the project should include a broad, holistic approach that stretches beyond government 'silos' and is focused on social and emotional wellbeing across the life course. Stakeholders were clear that research should recognise the 'whole person', but also across time and across generations, creating a broad research scope that challenges existing government-led approaches and the assumptions reflected therein.

4. Prioritise benefits for Aboriginal children, families and communities, and challenge existing systems and injustice

Stakeholders unanimously endorsed the view that research should be directed to achieving tangible benefits for Aboriginal children, families and communities. This is directly linked to the value identified above by communities about the needed research not being too narrow and confined in a way that does adequately reflect their needs and aspirations. In doing so, they acknowledged that there was a need for research to be focused on the entire family and community around children and not just children alone. This recognised that there is often emphasis in the child welfare space on the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal children but in a way that does not consider the broader needs of the child's family or culture.

Aboriginal communities should have ownership over those outcomes, including how outcomes are defined and understood in building evidence. This includes the perspective of those children and families directly affected by child protection systems, as well as the collectively impact on communities who have a stake in and responsibilities to the welfare and wellbeing of their children, and their families. Stakeholders identified that this must include challenging existing disparities and injustice inherent within existing systems, and elevate voices that frequently are not listened to or even heard. Stakeholders appreciated the positioning of example frameworks of knowledge in service to wisdom, and wisdom in service of community, emphasising the translational or applied

focus of research to benefit Aboriginal communities, challenge and overcome existing disparities, and realise approaches that are more just, effective and accountable to Aboriginal communities.

Community Engagement Prompts

The semi-structured interview plans were shared with Aboriginal stakeholders, who were invited to provide feedback on whether these were the right prompts to frame community conversations regarding research priorities, structures and supports, and sector outcomes.

In general, stakeholders supported the prompts for the community engagement phase.

They particularly noted that managing the expectations of stakeholders would be an important part of the project, making clear the possible limitations of project outcomes. For example, it was noted that while communities may identify particular priorities, and researchers and their partners may advocate strongly for research activities to align to those priorities, we are not able to guarantee that priorities identified by communities will be pursued. It was acknowledged that government-led investment in research has largely ignored and neglected Aboriginal community priorities and perspectives, and while the current research strategy noted a commitment to Aboriginal-led research, stakeholders present could not identify specific examples. It was noted that while the outputs and resources, along with the process itself, may contribute foundations and momentum to underpin Aboriginal community advocacy about the need for research, resources for research would need to be secured from governments, research grants or philanthropic engagements, which could not be guaranteed. It was noted that these limitations, and the intended use of the resources not only in planning but in system advocacy, should be openly stated during the community engagement. The importance of setting appropriate expectations was acknowledged. Stakeholders suggested that researchers be prepared to further describe and discuss these issues as part of eliciting responses in the community engagements.

Stakeholders also emphasised the need to clarify in the community engagements that the frame of Aboriginal 'child protection sector' need not be constrained to the current boundaries of child protection, but can be reframed and redefined by and for community. Stakeholders emphasised the need to clearly enable a broader context both with respect to the system but also conceptualisations of 'wellbeing' to reinforce to respondents that the project is actively centring Aboriginal perspectives and knowledges while simultaneously challenging non-Indigenous systems and assumptions, as discussed through the principles above. Stakeholders suggested that researchers should keep in mind long-held community priorities for prevention and preservation, and the need to intervene in existing escalating pathways of Aboriginal children and families through the child protection system into out-of-home care.

Finally, stakeholders emphasised that outputs from the project should be designed both to communicate to Aboriginal communities, but also to achieve change through advocacy with government. This means designing outputs in a way that are likely to be persuasive to government, while maintaining the integrity of the Aboriginal community-led approach that is central to this project. This will require considerable translational work, including how differing data sets are navigated and communicated, towards achieving a community-led approach that is respected and authoritative, and able to engage effectively with government towards shared outcomes.

Stage Two: Community Forums

Eight community forums were held in a number of communities across NSW. Participant numbers varied from fewer than five, to more than ten, at each session. Sessions were hosted by a local community organisation, who provided community consent for the research to occur. These discussions were held prior to the community forum, which were advertised through the sector networks of the community partner, AbSec.

Before each session, the participant information sheet was discussed, with an opportunity for all present to ask questions or raise concerns. Consistent with the principle of consent, the session only went ahead with the agreement of participants. On three occasions, participants first sought a full discussion of the research information and background, and asked that the researchers come back to undertake the formal research session, which was accepted.

The session was organised as follows. First, the key themes and values developed through Stage 1 were presented to participants. Participants were asked to comment on those principles and values, with notes recorded. Second, participants were asked to identify key areas for research affecting Aboriginal children and families in the child protection system. Sessions were given the opportunity to organise responses in terms of universal, secondary and tertiary aspects of the system, or to organise in their own way. Follow ups included if any were more important, or if there are any other considerations needed to avoid potentially harmful consequences for Aboriginal children, families and communities. Third, participants were asked how they expect Aboriginal child and family research to be conducted in NSW, given the principles and values identified in part 1, including processes of community control, dissemination of learnings, and resources and training that communities need to do so. Finally, participants were asked to identify what they see as the key outcomes for consideration in the child protection sector. Comments were captured on a visible whiteboard or butcher's paper, allowing all participants to see what was being recorded, and to refine or build on those themes. These then represented the primary data arising from each session.

The project included a brief online survey intended to be completed by relevant Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations providing services to children and young people across the continuum from early intervention to out-of-home care. The survey was intended to complement other project stages, and potentially provide a 'baseline' for research participation and experience.

The response to the survey was weak. This is consistent with resourcing concerns identified throughout the project, as well as the imposition of other community-based and system-related issues that draw from the time and capacity of Aboriginal community controlled organisations. Given this small participation rate, it is not meaningful to report on the rate or proportion of various responses as intended for a 'baseline' report. However, the data collected was considered and reported in qualitative terms alongside other data collected through forum sessions.

The following themes emerged across those stages.

Review of Principles

Stage 1 identified the following principles and themes, which were presented at community forums:

- Self-determination and community-control of research central.
- Research should be grounded in and reflect Aboriginal community values and perspectives, and respect and contribute to Indigenous knowledge systems.
- Research should contribute to community governance, building knowledge and evidence of systems/practice to improve outcomes for Aboriginal people and communities.

Values – Research should...

1. be community-led, reflecting principles of self-determination, sovereignty, and respect communities as experts in their own lives.
2. value and centre culture, and as such should be aligned to the knowledges, culture and protocols, priorities and aspirations of Aboriginal communities.
3. not be unduly narrow or beholder to non-Indigenous assumptions and approaches
4. prioritise benefits for Aboriginal children, families and communities, and challenge existing systems and injustice.

Community forum participants expressed general agreement with these principles and values. Consistent with these principles, community forum participants noted the desire to keep the principles within a clear 'Aboriginal frame', reflecting the importance of this work in creating a space that is governed by our communities and reflects our ways of being and knowing. Related to this, some community forum participants suggested an explicit mention of holistic notions of child, family and community wellbeing, and respecting and contributing to local community research capacity, emphasising governance as a process of local control. Community forum participants also noted that it is important that communities are recognised in research outputs and publications. This important point was considered as part of reporting and dissemination discussed below.

Community forum participants raised significant questions related to data sovereignty and ownership, including the positioning of cultural and intellectual property associated with research activities, and that data should be returned to and remain in community hands. It was considered important that research collected community-determined data and measures, and was able to access and utilise data collected by others about their communities, including government departments. This should not be limited to aggregate data, but is intended to enable Aboriginal communities to utilise data to develop concepts and evidence that reflect their views and aspirations. This is an extension of the principles and value of self-determination and sovereignty.

Related to this point, some participants suggested that even 'community-controlled' may not be positioned precisely, emphasising the need for community leadership and governance of research. Community forum participants made clear that this community governance and leadership of research includes determining the 'who' – that is, who is permitted to undertake research in service of community aspirations, priorities and goals. This must respect the governance across communities, with governance that is aligned to the community. This place-based or community-based framing means that research and evaluation efforts should respect the authority and aspirations of those communities, and not impose 'external' frameworks. Further, the need for transparency across research

(including purpose, outcomes, ownership and impact) was also noted as a possible omission.

Some participants urged a shift in the language with respect to the expression of 'benefit' for children, families and communities in the fourth value. While the intent of this value was affirmed, there was a view that the underlying intent of informing systems, policy and practice to deliver the best possible outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people, their families and communities, might be stepped out in more detail. Related to this, others expressed that it is important that our language throughout resists and challenges deficit discourses, which forum participants suggested could be common. Community forum participants particularly emphasised the need for research to be impactful, contributing to action that improves the lives of children and families. It was considered important that research is accountable to communities for its associated outcomes or impacts.

While there was agreement, community forum participants also urged consideration for building knowledge, awareness and capacity of relevant systems about these principles and values to ensure that they are properly implemented.

Based on this feedback, the principles and values were updated as below, to be tested in the final Stakeholder Forum.

Consistent with related research ethics frameworks, Aboriginal child and family research should be guided by the following principles:

- Self-determination and community-control of research are central.
- Research should be grounded in and reflect Aboriginal community values and perspectives, and respect and contribute to Indigenous knowledge systems.
- Research should be impactful, contributing to achieving the goals and aspirations of our communities. It should contribute to community governance, and build knowledge and evidence of systems and practice to improve outcomes for Aboriginal children, families and communities.

In light of these principles, Aboriginal child and family research should:

1. be community-led, reflecting principles of self-determination, sovereignty, and respect communities as experts in their own lives. This includes determining priorities, approaches, measures, and research team, respecting and building the capacity of Aboriginal communities in research. Data, knowledge and insights developed through the research belong to those communities, and should be transparently reported to the community in an appropriate way.

2. value and centre culture, and be aligned to the knowledges, culture and protocols, priorities and aspirations of Aboriginal communities.

3. not be unduly narrow in focus, reflecting holistic notions of wellbeing and the interconnections between individual and community wellbeing, and include individual, family and community strengths, rather than being limited by non-Indigenous assumptions and approaches related to 'child protection'.

4. prioritise delivering positive impact for Aboriginal children, families and communities, and challenge existing systems and injustice.

Priorities

When indicating domains or areas for future research, forums and surveys indicated a broad range of areas, spanning universal, secondary and tertiary responses, systems transformation, program evaluation and data linkage. It was seen as critical that research is oriented to Aboriginal community priorities, with Aboriginal communities involved from the earliest point to direct effort to the highest priority, engage the relevant community and research expertise, and ensure appropriate governance and oversight throughout the life of the project.

Across the community forums, a wide variety of research questions were put forward as being important to promoting improved systems and practice. Some sessions found it useful to discuss these in terms of different segments of a public health approach to child protection and child and family services, however it was noted that research is needed to assert Aboriginal ways of being, doing and knowing, reshape systems, structures and practice, and build the evidence for Aboriginal models of care and service delivery across the continuum. Others tended to organise research according to broad themes or focus areas, including evaluation of programs, accountability and critique of child protection systems, and defining and developing Aboriginal conceptual and theoretical frameworks (for example, related to ideas of wellbeing, permanency, participation, etc).

Community forum participants noted that research must be synthesised across the child and family system, as it is all interrelated and combines to shape the experiences, opportunities and outcomes of children and families. Further, there should be inclusion of narratives and the stories of Aboriginal children and families, including intergenerational experiences. Further, while there was a focus on prevention, family preservation and restoration, consistent with the advocacy of Aboriginal communities over an extended period of time, community forum participants pointed out that there remains an obligation to improve systems and practices, and through them the lives and outcomes, for children and young people in OOHC.

Research priorities included:

Building the evidence, noting particularly the prioritisation of Aboriginal community-led approaches.

- Evaluation across the continuum of response – what are the outcomes that are being achieved through system responses/practice?

- Development and evaluation of parent and family support to promote family preservation and restoration, aimed at preventing harm and intervention, including particularly how to support families in the first instance before crisis or 'ROSH'

- Universal and Targeted Earlier Intervention programs, including parenting programs.

- Responding effectively to intergenerational cycles of risk – healing-focused approaches.

- Experiences of families:
  - ◇ Family responses to risk, including networks/community-based care, key elements and impact.
  - ◇ Family-led action plans and links to change.

- Opportunities to improve holistic responses.

- Outcomes achieved through OOHC, including experiences of young people and

their ongoing connection to family, community, culture and Country.

- Evaluation of leaving/after care supports.
- Review and evaluation of decision making processes.
- Practice for achieving permanency (as defined by Aboriginal communities).
- Understanding the experiences of staff/practitioners.
- Effective advocacy and support for parents and families navigating the system.

Structural redesign of the child and family/child protection system, including how we build the evidence for achieving change.

- Critique of settler systems, including entrenched racism and bias in the child protection system, approaches to reform, and contribute to advocacy for change.
- Development of approaches to end the ongoing imposition of settler power and authority, and respect for the inherent authority of Aboriginal peoples.
- Systems and practices for effective, holistic approaches – how do systems work effectively together:
  - ◇ Links with health, including perinatal health.
  - ◇ Links with education, police etc.
  - ◇ Challenge the logics that creates silos, or the circumstances in which silos emerge.
- Funding models.
- Decision making processes.
- Court Processes (including Care Lists) – the burden of court processes, exercise of control, inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives.
- Processes and practice in the identification of Aboriginal children and families.

Accountability of child protection system.

- What's happening for children, parents and families, including the impact of removal (focused on experience, not point-in-time):
  - ◇ Trajectories through the system and across generations, including system responses and their impact, and possible points of change.
  - ◇ Intergenerational impacts – addressing or perpetuating cycles of risk.
  - ◇ Impact of the system on Aboriginal children, families and communities.
- Accuracy of data.
- Access and cultural safety within the current system.
- Accountability of decision making processes regarding Aboriginal children
- Challenge stereotypes and racism, including structural racism.
- Implementation and impact of policy, practice and reforms, including the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle (ATSICPP), and Family Finding etc. These aspects emphasised the importance of ongoing family and cultural connections.

Hearing the voice of the child.

Development of culturally valid assessment processes and tools.

- Includes assessment of risk, needs, etc, that is grounded in cultural models and conceptual frameworks.

- Carer assessment.

Conceptual and theoretical frameworks.

- Decolonise child protection systems, defining what an Aboriginal system should be like from a cultural standpoint.
- Developing and reasserting self-determination – how communities may effectively govern, gather and use data, develop and implement systems and practice.
- Examination of assumptions – safety, risk and risk of significant harm, etc:
  ◇ Conceptual basis of risk, considering issues of family story/intergenerational involvement, poverty, homelessness, and links to outcomes.
  ◇ Understanding 'safety' from the perspective of Aboriginal communities, including cultural safety.
  ◇ Conceptual framing of 'permanency' from the perspective of Aboriginal communities.
  ◇ Wellbeing frameworks and implications in the child and family/child protection space.
- Legal frameworks grounded in Aboriginal perspectives.
- Reclaiming Blak motherhood and fatherhood – reasserting cultural practices, including Aboriginal parenting/child rearing practices.
- Models of responding effectively to children and families, Aboriginal models of family and community support/Aboriginal models of care.

Educating community about the system, including rates/incidence of risk and harm, responses, experiences and outcomes. However, care must be taken to avoid further entrenching deficit language.

Some community forum participants noted that local priorities are likely to differ, and they should be determined by local people; children, families and communities at the local level.

In one community forum, four key 'focus areas' were identified:

1. Systems, including decision making, service system design, and systems change.
2. Practice, including effective communication, pathways, and experiences.
3. DCJ, referring to current service provision, expectations and outcomes, and the experiences of children and families, and,
4. Connection, including connection to culture, Country and kin, as well as staff connectedness.

Consistent with other advocacy, community forum participants consistently emphasised that shifting the focus of the system towards early experiences of risk and responding effectively to prevent them escalating to crisis, or to prevent intervention and removal, is a significant priority.

Many community forum participants similarly noted the need to include economic impacts which, while not a high priority for community forum participants who were more interested in wellbeing outcomes, were nevertheless recognised as an important aspect of political advocacy in achieving the necessary change. This is related to a general principle and recurrent theme in the conversations – that the whole intent of research in this space is to underpin substantive change for children, families and communities; research is deeply intertwined with advocacy and activism.

Community forum participants also made clear that it was important to position international research and evidence properly, taking care to understand the implications and applicability to Aboriginal communities. Importantly, Aboriginal communities themselves are best place to understand the relevance of international (and even other national) findings with respect to their circumstances.

Community forum participants again reinforced that research priorities should reflect the principles and values discussed above, including approaching research questions in a strengths-based way.

Structures & Supports

Community Forum participants were asked about the structures and processes that are relevant to enabling research that is consistent with the principles and values outlined above. At the same time, some expressed scepticism at the potential impact of research as a process for change, given the unavoidable interface with governments, who continue to stand in judgement of Aboriginal communities and impose their will upon them. That is, while there was general agreement about the important role of research in improving systems, practice, and outcomes for Aboriginal children and families, there was also scepticism expressed both through the community forums and online survey. This doubt broadly reflected the poor positioning and impact of research for Aboriginal communities. This included the concern expressed across the sessions that research to date has tended to focus on the interests of others – including government agencies and researchers – and have not adequately delivered for Aboriginal communities. For example, responses across the survey and community forum indicated concern about the propensity of research to be initiated external to Aboriginal communities and their organisations, and is frequently not responsive to their perspectives, interests or input. Many expressed their view that there is a significant gulf in research priorities between governments and Aboriginal communities, contributing to this misalignment is existing research. Despite this well-founded doubt, many still felt that research should play a critical role in re-shaping systems, policy and practice, if it is properly directed.

The political and structural nature of this challenge is well known. It is important therefore that structures and supports are established in a way that acknowledges and seeks to mitigate the adverse impacts of these processes for Aboriginal communities. Research has significant potential to drive evidence-based change, however participants are right to be wary of the realisation of those benefits through settler political processes. Evidence of the compounding harms of contemporary approaches has been repeatedly noted through inquiries and reports, and yet there has been little change. While this report has no power to address this, it nevertheless acknowledges that given these foreseeable impacts of current policies, it cannot be claimed that those impacts are unintended (Ref).

Through our community forums and survey it was clear that there is significant variability with respect to present involvement in research, ranging from very little involvement, to some Aboriginal community organisations being involved in multiple projects at different points in time. This is consistent with our experience within the sector, with some organisations having established robust structures to manage and direct research involvement, while others have not had the resources or opportunity to do so. These

research activities may span the child protection service continuum, from early intervention and family support, through to OOHC. This includes the DCJ-led Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study, which many organisations were aware of, although there was mixed involvement in the study.

Aligned to the mixed views regarding the value of research, contrasting with common experiences of research being externally-led and failing to deliver adequate positive impact for Aboriginal children, families and communities, there were similarly mixed views expressed in forums and the survey about increased involvement in research. That is, while there was an expression of wanting to be involved in more research, this was also tempered.

The community forums and survey also identified a number of barriers that undermine the opportunity for relevant, impactful, and Aboriginal community-led research. This included poor access for communities to research funding and other resources, and limited time or opportunity for already stretched community resources and organisations to formulate research, successfully apply for funding, and undertake research. Relationships with supportive researchers were also seen as a potential barrier, with community forums commonly emphasising the importance of culturally safe and responsive researchers to undertake research projects in support of Aboriginal communities and organisations. This included in particular supporting the ongoing development of Aboriginal researchers within the sector, who can work in community to deliver impactful research aligned to community-identified research questions and approaches.

Additionally, many respondents in other parts of the conversation pointed out that Aboriginal child and family research must occur through an Aboriginal ethical framework, minimising the risk of potential harmful consequences that had been associated with past and present research structures. Some participants pointed to those models that have already been developed elsewhere, including the AIATSIS Code of Conduct and the AHMRC HREC Key Guidelines.

1. Governance and community control

Consistent with previous conversations, many respondents across all community forums noted the importance of self-determination, Aboriginal community autonomy and self-governance, and data sovereignty and governance as guiding principles that should shape structures for the governance of Aboriginal child and family research. This means putting Aboriginal child and family research processes and resources in the hands of communities. This requires effective community-led government structures, with local processes contributing to a state-wide network, as well as funding models that are transparent and reliable.

Community forum participants identified various strategies for implementing these principles in practice. This included a centralised hub to coordinate commissioning processes, dissemination strategies, and ongoing support of research, supporting localised governance structures as part of a statewide network. This could also promote efficiencies and coordination of research, in service of local communities. Many participants stressed that these localised governance structures must represent the communities they serve, and the distributions of authority in those communities, taking into account historical, political and cultural factors. This might even include multiple governance processes in the same geographical area, however this would only be effective with clear protocols for engagement and authority. For many, this extended beyond individual Aboriginal community controlled service providers. This might mean grounding research governance

in local structures that have already been established, including local alliances or emerging Aboriginal Community Controlled Mechanisms associated with the Aboriginal Case Management Policy. Importantly, these bodies must be closely connected to, and accountable to, the communities they serve, which requires their structural independence from DCJ and other government agencies. In short however, there was wide consensus that local processes are needed to determine local research. These local processes should be broadly representative, including the voices of those directly effected by child protection systems, and particularly young people. This reflects the view that the mandate for research comes from the community, and requires processes for communication with their local community, including local meetings and newsletters. These local engagement and reporting processes are also an important transparency and accountability mechanism.

Again, respondents were clear to point out that all research must be linked to genuine positive change (as determined by those communities) for Aboriginal children, families and communities.

Considering this conversation, it was suggested that a network of Community Research Committees are developed, with appropriate resources (discussed in more detail below), to administer local research. These Committees would consider Indigenous Knowledge Systems and community needs and priorities, to strategically invest in research and development activities. The potential long-term benefits of these structures include the acceleration of Aboriginal systems, services and approaches that underpin improvements in the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal children, families and communities. Importantly, this governance must align with local community governance structures, including matriarchs and Elders.

2. Research Processes

Reflecting the principles above, community forum participants consistently emphasised the need to establish research processes that are determined by Aboriginal communities themselves. Further, this must start from a point of recognition that Aboriginal communities are already organising and collaborating towards ensuring that systems and services are accountable and evidence-based. Rather than commencing from a 'blank slate', developing Aboriginal child and family research processes should acknowledge and where possible formalise and build on those processes that already exist. This will likely require both enabling structures and resources for Aboriginal community-led research, as well as robust processes to protect communities from the potential harms of non-Indigenous or more general research that may affect or disproportionately involve Aboriginal children, families and communities. This is consistent with broader frameworks such as the AHMRC HREC Key Principles which emphasise the need for ethical review and oversight by Aboriginal ethics processes where research is focused on, or likely to have a significant impact on, Aboriginal communities.

As such, in addition to the governance processes outlined above, an independent Aboriginal ethics process could be developed. This might be achieved through engagement with the existing AHMRC HREC, which largely focuses on health research, but could be further developed and resourced to provide a formal role in Aboriginal child and family research. Alternatively, a distinct HREC might be established, either independently, or under the auspices of a relevant organisation, to provide independent ethical oversight. This is likely to be more resource intensive in both establishment and ongoing administration, but would provide a focused and experienced panel for ethical oversight of Aboriginal child and family research in NSW.

Research processes must start with local communities, identifying local strategic priorities that respond to their community circumstances, resources, and needs. However, they could also be complemented by a distributed peer network to offer collaborative and critical peer review of research proposals and methodologies, with the intent of strengthening all research initiatives. While this may initially create some challenges, as networks establish and research development pathways strengthen local community resource, access to peer review will increase and the relative burden will decrease.

Some participants noted that research processes could include an Aboriginal Impact Statement element, ensuring that all research in the child protection sector consider the possible implications of the project on Aboriginal children, families and communities before it can be approved by DCJ. This could provide a 'brake' for non-Indigenous research projects early in their development to ensure that impacts are considered, and the appropriate processes followed. DCJ already administer research approval processes for research affecting their service system, or children and young people in OOHC. This could be further developed to provide a clear 'gate' that research projects must pass through. While this process would not be intended to create an unwieldy administrative burden that provides a chilling effect on child and family research generally, it may serve to better safeguard Aboriginal children, families and communities, and contribute to improved research through peer-review processes during development. Importantly, those participants pointed out that such processes must involve relevant Aboriginal community stakeholders, independent of DCJ, reflecting the importance of direct community accountability through their own representatives and processes.

Community forum participants noted that research processes should properly position research efforts within the self-governance of Aboriginal communities. From this perspective, research activities are intended to contribute to improvements in systems and processes for Aboriginal children and families, as well as providing mechanisms for transparency and accountability. In this view, research is an ongoing process of development and continuous improvement, as distinct from an external and inconsistent cycle of intervention and monitoring.

3. Sharing Benefits

Community forum participants agreed that sharing research findings and outputs across communities represented an important opportunity to accelerate system and practice change in the interests of Aboriginal communities. Participants noted there should be multiple platforms for sharing research findings and other outputs, and that these should be open access for Aboriginal communities. This could include establishing a database or clearinghouse of past and current research, allowing communities to search for related projects and insights. However, community forum participants also noted that it is not as simple as putting things online – a multi-modal approach is needed, including opportunities for discussion and in-person sharing. Many community forum participants suggested this could include regional and state-wide events to showcase new and emerging research across communities, and the development of regional communities of research practice to support local community researchers to develop and build their expertise. As noted above, a small and efficient centralised hub could hold responsibility for managing these databases or clearinghouse, providing a clear contact point for local communities seeking information or support. These structures will also likely contribute to the development of research co-operatives or collaborations, with different communities joining together to develop solutions to common challenges.

Community forum participants also noted the opportunity to use existing networks, such as local interagencies, to communicate research findings. Similarly, resources to support local communities to share their research through state and national conferences (such as those hosted by AbSec and SNAICC) might also assist in sharing the positive benefits of research across communities in a community-led way.

The sharing of research benefits is not viewed as an abstract or academic exercise, but one that is action-focused, supporting the rapid translation of research findings across the state in a community-led way.

4. Resource Needs

Community forum participants identified a range of resources that would be helpful in enabling their leadership and effective management of impact-focused research. This included local human resources, funded roles within communities responsible for local research (under local governance processes/Community Research Committees), with efforts to build the skills and expertise of community members to design research, and to gather, develop and use data and evidence. Many community forum participants identified the need to establish pathways for 'upskilling' local people, including young people, to drive local research. This might include training and resources, education and career pathways, and mentoring and active support from experienced researchers.

In addition to human resources, community forum participants noted the need for adequate resources to undertake research activities. This includes both investment in developing research infrastructure (establishment), ongoing investment in research activities and translation (administration), and investment in training and development pathways. Importantly, funding structures should respect the principle of self-determination, including an Aboriginal-led commissioning or grants process that allocated resources across communities in a fair and transparent manner, as an enabling environment for local and broader regional/state-wide research initiatives, aligned to community priorities. Some community forum participants were very clear that they did not want structures or processes that interfered with the community governance of research, including DCJ-led grant or tender processes (which also position Aboriginal communities in competition with each other for grossly inadequate resources provided by DCJ) and the funding of consultants to support community initiatives on a case-by-case basis. This approach violates the broader principle of sustainable development for communities individually and collectively.

Properly resourcing Aboriginal community-led research also requires valuing the time and expertise of Aboriginal community members involved in supporting research. For example, governance committees require administrative supports to effectively deliver on their mandate. This is in stark contrast to existing processes which, in many instances, expect Aboriginal community participation without adequate reimbursement, creating significant challenges for communities and their organisations.

Community forum participants also noted that these processes must offer Aboriginal communities the time and space necessary to undertake research at their own pace. They emphasised that external time pressures can create tensions that contribute to bypassing key processes for engagement and accountability, and represent a risk.

Community forum participants also suggested that guidance materials might assist communities in implementing research projects and strategies. These materials could step communities through the stages of research. Communities might also benefit from

access to external expertise provided by Aboriginal researchers or research institutions. However, community forum participants stressed that such processes must respect local authority and decision making, operating on an invitation model that allows local communities to set the terms of engagement with external expertise. This would promote partnership approaches that reflect cultural practices and values, with external researchers being positioned in service of communities. Additionally, strategies to further develop community skills should be included in these processes, underpinning local sustainability. All of these aspects were identified as possibly being offered alongside an Aboriginal-led commissioning model, through a small and efficient centralised body that is intended to enable, but not control, local research processes.

Outcomes Framework

Community forum participants were also asked to identify the outcomes that evaluation processes should keep in mind if they are to examine the things that matter to Aboriginal communities. While participants throughout emphasised that local communities have the right to shape these frameworks in their own way, consideration of a high level elements might be useful in providing general guidance to governments about these processes. However, consistent with the above, local evaluations should be determined through local processes. Further, it was noted that individual metrics are difficult to interpret. Rather, a range of measures are needed to provide a rich picture of the experience and outcomes of Aboriginal children, families and communities. Again, Aboriginal communities themselves must own, manage and use this data, to ensure it is analysed and applied in a way that respects the rights, interests and perspectives of communities. That is, outcomes must be understood and measured 'our way'.

Community forum participants identified a range of elements important to considering outcomes for Aboriginal children, families and communities. Importantly, for many, these spanned both individual (child and family) and collective (systems and governance) dimensions. Many indicated support for existing models of social and emotional wellbeing, understood to span physical, mental, social and emotional, individual, familial and community, and even political dimensions. For some, this was part of reasserting nationhood as Aboriginal peoples, exercising their inherent right to autonomy and self-governance. This is consistent with the existing evidence regarding the important role of 'cultural continuity' in improving outcomes for children and young people.

Given the reality of ongoing statutory interventions in the lives of Aboriginal children and families, many participants noted the need at the most basic level to orient towards family-led measures and goals, and keeping families strong and together, on Country. They wanted to see families that are strong, healthy, happy, and safe, as part of strong and connected communities. Identity and belonging was also acknowledged as a key outcome domain. Successful engagement and trust of families and communities was considered a key measure. This could include measures of service engagement and usage, particularly voluntary engagement to address emerging needs prior to crisis. Measures should also include hearing directly from children and families, recognising individual and family agency as a key outcome.

Many respondents also acknowledged the role of established system measures, such as rate of notifications, incidence of ROSH, rate of removals, restoration and re-reports, as well as presence of familial and cultural connections and enjoyment of culture for children in OOHC. Ultimately, all respondents wanted to see fewer kids reported, fewer kids removed, towards all Aboriginal children growing up safe and supported at home with their family

and community. However, it was acknowledged that these were system-oriented, and are at best imperfect proxies for the experiences and outcomes of Aboriginal children and families. Further, these measures would need take into consideration Aboriginal cultural perspectives and the development of culturally valid measures and tools. For example, some participants noted that notions of safety are too narrowly focused on physical safety and material neglect, while ignoring family strengths and risks associated with emotional and cultural harms of disconnection and denial of identity and culture. By better considering this more holistic understanding of safety, harms associated with family policing and intervention could be better recognised, informing and improving decision making.

Participants also noted that measures should respect the holistic perspective of Aboriginal communities, including an array of relevant indicators spanning education, health and wellbeing, as well as a lifecourse and multi-generational perspective.

Understanding the impact of 'family strengthening' initiatives is likely to require consideration of relational and service components, noting the importance of connections in healing and wellbeing, and the role of services in supporting families. Measurement of connections or connectedness was repeatedly mentioned as a core measure, demonstrating the link between individual and collective or community outcomes.

Collective outcomes were also seen as critical. This includes the development of indicators associated with the enjoyment of self-determination, affirmation of culture and identity at the community or social level, and the opportunity to have a voice in matters that affect them. Collective measures might also include the expression of Aboriginal cultural values, aligning with priorities around reclaiming Aboriginal parenting and child rearing practices, Aboriginal motherhood and fatherhood. It should be noted this operates at the individual level as well, with restoration of community and cultural ways and connection and affirmation of identity underpinning experiences of wellbeing. Accountability of systems and practice was also seen as a critical aspect of institutional wellbeing, particularly given the significant impact of these systems on the lives of Aboriginal children and families, including how those impacts ripple across generations. Related to this, some participants indicated that measures could also include the extent of bias and structural racism across systems, although others wondered if it was possible to meaningfully measure this, or if it was preferable to focus on accountability for bias, to allow its impacts to be mitigated.

Other key areas arguably operate at the individual and collective level simultaneously. For example, addressing 'trauma' and promoting healing are widely regarded as including individual and collective communities from the perspective of Aboriginal communities, reflecting the intrinsic relationship between the self and community.

Spanning the individual and collective dimensions, many community forum participants pointed to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle as providing some organisation and guidance of relevant outcome domains. Many were insistent on the role of all elements of the ATSICPP in promoting positive outcomes for children and families, as well as being deeply concerned about implementation and compliance of government and other agencies with the principle.

Participants considered the opportunity to include measures of structural and systemic change, reflecting the desperate need for this change, and longstanding frustrations across Aboriginal communities at the slow rate of change, or even that change is in the wrong direction.

Some participants pointed to the National Agreement on Closing the Gap and the Social and Economic Outcomes Targets, as well as NSW priorities, as possible frameworks to support alignment of outcomes between local and national frames. This linked Aboriginal outcomes, including structural change and shifts in the political relationship between Aboriginal communities and settler governments, within outcomes frameworks.

Stage Three: Consolidation Review

The final stage of the project took place as part of a regularly scheduled sector forum attended by a range of stakeholders, but predominantly representatives of Aboriginal community controlled child and family organisations, with more than 20 individuals participating in the session. The session provided consolidated feedback from the first two stages to this audience (which included participants from earlier stages as well as 'new' participants), providing an opportunity for refinement and finalisation of key themes and approaches. Similar to the community forum sessions in stage 2, this included reviewing the principles and values for research, research priorities and how they might best be presented, structures and supports to facilitate community-led child and family research, and high-level guidance regarding outcomes.

This following section outlines the feedback that we received from this final forum. This feedback provided broad endorsement for the need for an Aboriginal child and research body that was led by and for Aboriginal people in NSW.

Principles to Guide Research

Participants were presented with updated language of the principles and values to guide Aboriginal child and family research in NSW. The edits were emphasised through strikeout and text colour to draw attention to the changes developed through the stage 2 series of community forums.

What have we heard to date: Principles to guide research

Consistent with related research ethics frameworks, Aboriginal child and family research should be guided by the following principles
• Self-determination and community-control of research are central
• Research should be grounded in and reflect Aboriginal community values and perspectives, and respect and contribute to Indigenous knowledge systems
• Research should be impactful, contributing to achieving the goals and aspirations of our communities. It should contribute to community governance, and building knowledge and evidence of systems, and practice to improve outcomes for Aboriginal people children, families and communities

UTS

What have we heard to date: Principles to guide research

In light of these principles, Aboriginal child and family research should

- be community-led, reflecting principles of self-determination, sovereignty, and respect communities as experts in their own lives. This includes determining priorities, approaches, measures, and research team, respecting and building the capacity of Aboriginal communities in research. Data, knowledge and insights developed through the research belong to those communities, and should be transparently reported to the community in an appropriate way.
- value and centre culture, and be aligned to the knowledges, culture and protocols, priorities and aspirations of Aboriginal communities
- not be unduly narrow in focus, reflecting holistic notions of wellbeing and the interconnections between individual and community wellbeing, and include individual, family and community strengths, rather than being limited by or beholder to non-Indigenous assumptions and approaches related to 'child protection'
- Prioritise benefits delivering positive impact for Aboriginal children, families and communities, and challenge existing systems and injustice

UTS

In general, participants agreed with the revised values and principles, although emphasised the need to strengthen the language – in particular, that 'should' sets too low a bar, and 'must' is better language. Stakeholders particularly emphasised that that the importance of proposed research being impactful, demonstrating a benefit for Aboriginal children and families before proceeding. This was considered important for all research that might impact on Aboriginal children, families and communities, not simply limiting it to those that are Aboriginal community-led or specifically exploring issues for these populations. Participants drew on a governance process similar to that discussed above with the impact statement, whereby the proposed benefits and impact on Aboriginal communities must be considered and research agreed prior to any research going ahead.

Forum participants acknowledged that it was important for research to recognise the significance of Aboriginal community knowledge, ways of doing and expertise in efforts to build a contemporary evidence base. Further, and consistent with previous stages, participants identified that it was important that any Aboriginal child and family research complemented existing community governance mechanisms, noting broader initiatives towards the respect for Aboriginal community governance and transfer of authority.

It was also stressed that decisions about data storage must be resolved before research begins and that this needs to suit the differing needs and capacity of Aboriginal communities.

Structures & Supports to Drive Research

Based on the previous stages, core findings were presented about the process and structures for Aboriginal community-led research.
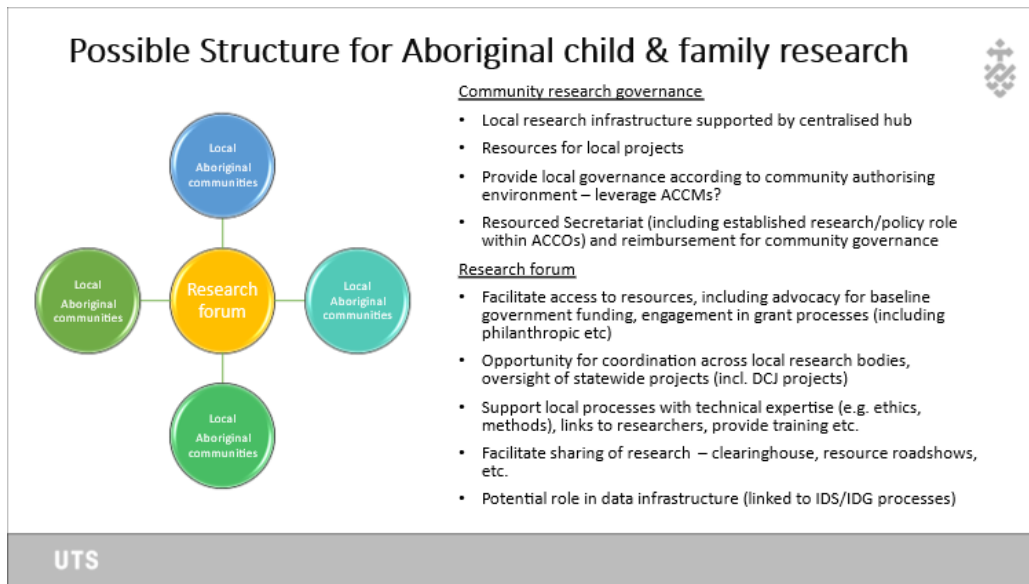

Based on these findings, a proposed model was also explored. This included a proposed state-wide Aboriginal community research forum, attended by local Aboriginal community research bodies. Consistent with the priority for local community governance of research, the proposed model includes the development of local Aboriginal community controlled research infrastructure, supported by a centralised 'hub'. It was proposed that local research infrastructure would exercise control of local projects, including the allocation of resources to undertake research consistent with community priorities. This localised research infrastructure could include a research and policy officer placed within a local Aboriginal community controlled child and family organisations to coordinate local research and translation activities.

These local research bodies would come together as a statewide research forum to share ideas and opportunities, facilitate access to resources, and collaborate on advocacy and grant processes. The forum could support local research bodies through access to technical expertise, training and researchers, as well as supporting dissemination, research translation and policy development based on research findings.

Possible Structure for Aboriginal child & family research

Community research governance
- Local research infrastructure supported by centralised hub
- Resources for local projects
- Provide local governance according to community authorising environment – leverage ACCMs?
- Resourced Secretariat (including established research/policy role within ACCOs) and reimbursement for community governance

Research forum
- Facilitate access to resources, including advocacy for baseline government funding, engagement in grant processes (including philanthropic etc)
- Opportunity for coordination across local research bodies, oversight of statewide projects (incl. DCJ projects)
- Support local processes with technical expertise (e.g. ethics, methods), links to researchers, provide training etc.
- Facilitate sharing of research – clearinghouse, resource roadshows, etc.
- Potential role in data infrastructure (linked to IDS/IDG processes)

Research forum / Local Aboriginal communities

UTS

Participants were asked whether this proposed approach was appropriate and consistent with the values and principles outlined, including whether the research forum would be best placed to consider state-wide research initiatives, including those initiated by DCJ, and how local research might be best resourced, and the appropriate ethics processes that should be engaged (for example, whether a distinct Aboriginal child and family human research ethics committee should be developed, or through engagement with existing processes such as the Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council HREC).

Participants generally agreed with the proposed model, noting its consistency with the principle of local Aboriginal community control of research, while providing processes for sharing and support. Participants reiterated the need to ensure that existing mechanisms were harnessed but also recognising that communities currently differ in their resources and infrastructure to facilitate community research processes. Establishing such a model will take some time, with a clear resourced strategy, to build these foundations of research infrastructure. Stakeholders emphasised the importance of strong processes being in place for both local and state-wide research proposals, including those initiated by DCJ, particularly where existing infrastructure might be under-resourced and lack capacity to be involved in ongoing research. Safeguarding Aboriginal children, families and communities from the harms of externally imposed research was a critically urgent issue requiring an immediate response. Further, participants identified that adequate resources were required to enable local research activities. Aboriginal-led commissioning processes could be a solution, consistent with other advocacy from the sector, however it was difficult to determine what approach might be best suited without further clarity about funding parameters. Locally-based roles were seen as an important element in building research capacity and coordinating efforts locally and statewide.

Finally, community stakeholders identified that it was important to translate research outcomes into an evidence base that could in turn service the Aboriginal community, leading to better outcomes and reducing harm.

Research Priorities

Drawing on the previous stages, research priorities were broadly presented. It was shared that community forums has identified a broad range of research priorities, focused on asserting Aboriginal ways of being, doing and knowing, reshaping systems, structures and practice, and building the evidence of Aboriginal models of care across the continuum. Further, community forums emphasised the need for a holistic perspective, centring the stories and experiences of children and families, and should have a focus on prevention, family preservation and restoration, and healing, as part of an obligation to improve OOHC outcomes.

Consistent with this, five broad areas of 'priorities' were presented and discussed within this forum.

Defining Priorities

- Priorities can assist in focusing effort and investment – but wary not to have it constrain local governance of research

- One option is to have a broad and inclusive set of research focus areas, within the broader framework, this could include:

Accountability of current systems	Conceptual Foundations	Transforming current systems	Building the evidence – what works	Hearing the voices of children and families
• Trajectories through the system • Intergenerational impacts • Data accuracy • Challenge racism and structural harm • Implementation of policy – ATSICPP, ACMP etc	• Decolonise child protection • Re-asserting self-determination • Conceptual basis of risk, safety, permanency, best interests etc. • Rethinking legal frameworks • Reclaiming Blak motherhood and fatherhood	• Critique of current systems • Design of new models and approaches • Development of funding models – Aboriginal-led commissioning • Holistic approaches • Transforming decision making (Courts etc)	• Evaluation of approaches and responses • Responding effectively to cycles of risk • Outcomes for children and families • Achieving permanency – as we mean it • Culturally valid tools and assessment	• Narratives • Experiences • Outcomes

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There was broad agreement about the existing research priorities that had been identified to this point, and the way that had been organised through the project. Consistent with the expressed principles, participants were content with a broad approach to priorities that offered guidance about the types of issues and questions that are of interest to our communities, while enabling local communities to exercise their own authority about their specific priorities.

There was particular importance placed on the need for research to decolonise current child welfare practises and that this could be achieved in a research sense by reclaiming First Nations approaches that have kept our communities strong for millennia. These efforts were deemed as critical for addressing cultural disconnection which has occurred through the intervention of settler systems. Forum stakeholders also emphasised the importance of ensuring that definitions of 'community' in community led research was inclusive, particularly of those who may be harder to reach and who may be particularly vulnerable.

High-level Outcomes

Broad findings were presented based on community forum responses about the scope of 'outcomes' deemed to be of interest. This included a view that existing 'outcomes' were considered to be limited, poorly focused, and do not adequately value the perspectives of Aboriginal communities. Across the earlier stages, participants expressed that outcomes were understood broadly and across individual and collective levels, an emphasis on local community leadership with a range of measures aligned to a theory of change, and a shift to strengths-based framing. In general, the Social and Emotional Wellbeing framework developed by Gee and others was broadly supported, noting the relational perspective and the inclusion of broader contextual factors including social, cultural, historical and political determinants of wellbeing.

What we heard: Outcomes framework

- Outcomes were understood broadly, across multiple levels (individual and collective considerations)
- Emphasised that local communities need to drive local outcomes – but could be supported by a consistent, high-level framework
- Understanding outcomes requires a range of measures and a clear theory of change
- Broad support for Social and Emotional Wellbeing models which span individual, collective and contextual factors, and consider them relationally.
- Existing 'outcomes' were considered to be limited, poorly focused, and do not adequately value what matters from an Aboriginal perspective. They have a role, but need to be expanded.
- Need to shift to strengths framing

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Based on these ideas, a broad outcomes framework was suggested spanning both individual and collective or structural aspects, consistent with the social and emotional wellbeing model. This approach is intended to recognise that individual outcomes are influenced (both promoted and/or constrained) by those broader structural factors, and that this structural context must change to promote healing and improved outcomes for Aboriginal children and families. This means that measures should be developed and implemented to monitor individual-level facts such as health and wellbeing, identity, agency, achievement of goals etc, as well as collective or system-level change, including enjoyment of self-determination and 'cultural continuity' (understood in terms of governance of systems, access to lands and enjoyment of culture etc), addressing discrimination and racism in systems, and staff wellbeing and cultural safety of systems.

Broad Outcomes framework

SEWB Diagram adapted from Gee et al., (2014)

Child	Family	Community
Health and wellbeing (various)	Family Wellbeing, strengths	Self-determination – community governance and autonomy ('cultural continuity')
Identity and belonging	Identity and belong	Equitable investment in services
Family preservation	Connection to community	Partnership with relevant child and family bodies (PR3/ATSICPP)
Voice in decisions	Voice in decisions, participation	Cultural reclamation
Education (incl. Culture)	Achievement of family goals	System wellbeing (staff, culturally responsive process)
Incidence of risk, rates of family preservation and restoration	Incidence of risk, rates of family preservation and restoration	Incidence of risk, rates of family preservation and restoration

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Broad Outcomes framework

Collective
- Governance
- Self determination
- Political determinants
- System
- Social determinants and risks (incl. notifications, ROSH, substantiations)
- Family preservation and restoration
- ATSICPP compliance
- System wellbeing (staff, culturally responsive processes, accountability)

Child and Family
- Health and wellbeing- relational
- Identity and Belonging
- Family preservation
- Family voice – decision making, experiences
- Family Strengths
- Participation
- Achievement of family goals

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This approach is presented as high-level guidance only, reserving the right of local communities to define their own outcomes. However it emphasises to governments that outcomes focused only on individual child outcomes is too narrow in scope, failing to recognise the critical role of systems. Indeed, there is concern that this individual-focused approach problematises Aboriginal children and families yet further, while settler-colonial systems of intervention that are associated with harm are rendered invisible and outside the scope of evaluations and the construction of evidence.

Conclusion

Research remains an area of considerable conflict for Aboriginal communities. While community stakeholders recognised clearly the value of research in driving policy and practice change for the benefit of Aboriginal people and communities, the experience of research was still somewhat negative, driven by non-Indigenous research structures and researchers, and positioning Aboriginal communities as objects of external research rather than as participants and knowledge holders. Aboriginal participants emphasised strongly the need for greater respect for Aboriginal knowledge systems and world views, as well as strengthening local community governance of both the conduct of research, and ownership of the outcomes of research. Based on these conversations, a general model of research systems, structures and resources has been developed, including priorities and outcomes.

Consistent with the aims of this project, this research provides the foundations for future work by AbSec and the sector to advocate for realisation of these systems, building on present commitments from governments through the Research Strategy and Safe and Supported. It is expected this future work will include developing a strategy for gaining investment and support, and a business case to realise this vision over the medium to longer term, while agreeing immediate safeguards to ensure all research adheres to the expectations of communities, and existing standards.

NSW Aboriginal Child and Family Research Principles

Consistent with related research ethics frameworks, Aboriginal child and family research must be guided by the following principles:

- Self-determination and community-control of research are central.
- Research must be grounded in and reflect Aboriginal community values and perspectives, and respect and contribute to Indigenous knowledge systems.
- Research must be impactful, contributing to achieving the goals and aspirations of our communities. It must contribute to community governance, and build knowledge and evidence of systems and practice to improve outcomes for Aboriginal children, families and communities.

In light of these principles, Aboriginal child and family research must:

- be community-led, reflecting principles of self-determination, sovereignty, and respect communities as experts in their own lives. This includes determining priorities, approaches, measures, and research team, respecting and building the capacity of Aboriginal communities in research. Data, knowledge and insights developed through the research belong to those communities, and are transparently reported to the community in an appropriate way.
- value and centre culture, and be aligned to the knowledges, culture and protocols, priorities and aspirations of Aboriginal communities.

- not be unduly narrow in focus, reflecting holistic notions of wellbeing and the interconnections between individual and community wellbeing, and include individual, family and community strengths, rather than being limited by non–Indigenous assumptions and approaches related to 'child protection'.

- prioritise delivering positive impact for Aboriginal children, families and communities, and challenge existing systems and injustice.

Process & Structures

All child protection research in NSW is likely to have a significant and disproportionate impact on Aboriginal children, families and communities. As such, existing research processes administered by the Department of Communities and Justice should be reviewed and revised to include key safeguards, consistent with the above principles, but also relevant guidelines including the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, and existing guidelines for the ethical conduct of research. This should include processes to inform Aboriginal communities affected by the research, and to enter into a formal agreement about the conduct of each process consistent with principles of Aboriginal community governance and free, prior and informed consent, before any research can move forward. This is in addition to processes for ethical review, which must include review by the AH&MRC HREC.

Consistent with these ethical processes, the process of coming to an agreement on research is to include:

- engagement with Aboriginal communities affected, including Aboriginal community controlled organisations and established processes for research governance.

- identification of an appropriate Aboriginal governance body that represents the communities affected, as agreed by Aboriginal communities themselves.

- the opportunity to review all aspects of the proposed research and to shape the most appropriate approach for their community.

- consideration of any risks for individual participants or communities.

- agreement about ownership of data and the products of research, as well as the dissemination of findings back to community.

- any additional requirements developed by Aboriginal communities or relevant HRECs.

Local Aboriginal Child and Family Research Committees are also proposed, representing local communities and exercising governance about research projects at the local level. These bodies will be supported by a research and policy officer positioned within local Aboriginal community controlled child and family organisations who demonstrate appropriate processes for community governance. These roles are intended to coordinate local research governance, including Elders, families and young people, translation of research findings into practice for local ACCOs and other partners, and contribute to statewide research coordination and sharing of findings through the Aboriginal Child and Family Research Forum.

The Aboriginal Child and Family Research Forum provides statewide support for local community research committees, including training, access to technical expertise and support, sharing of research opportunities (for example advertising of available grants), and developing relationships with researchers that might be of benefit to local communities. Supported by AbSec, this forum provides an opportunity for local committees to come together to share experiences and provide governance of statewide
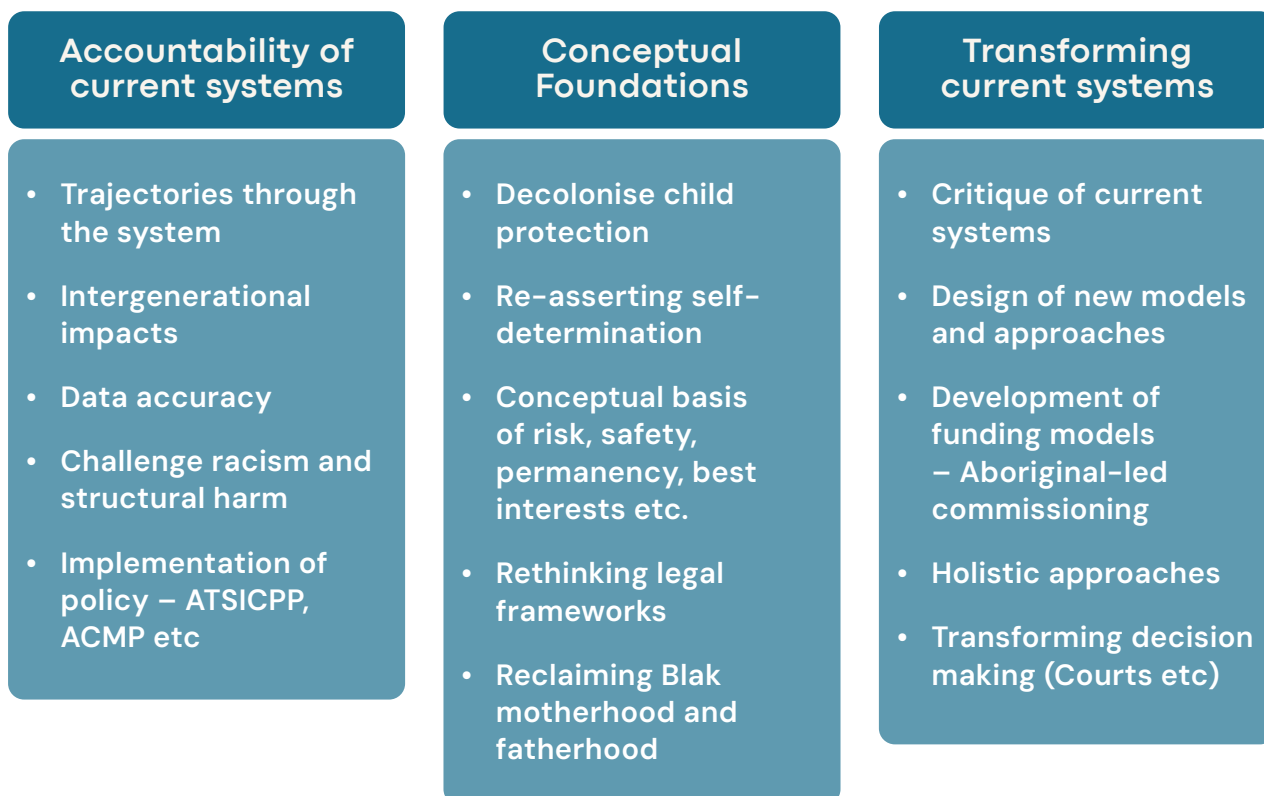
research. This would build on existing processes such as the Aboriginal governance panel of the Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study recently established by AbSec.
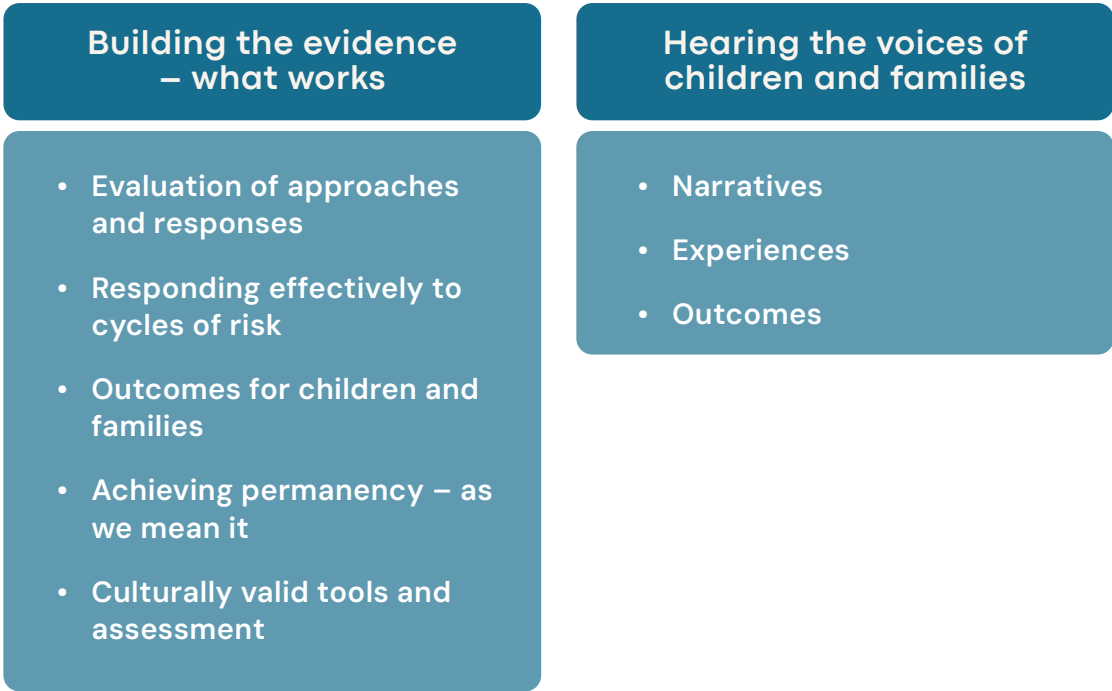
Importantly, both processes must be adequately resourced, as well as consideration for access to specific research funding as part of Aboriginal community governance of child and family systems and practice. This baseline investment provides a critical local resource for research and translation, as well as enabling local communities to apply for research funding through existing processes.

Research Priorities

Defined Research Priorities are intended to provide guidance to researchers and government about the areas that are of interest to Aboriginal communities. Consistent with the principle of self-determination, it is acknowledged that local communities have their own priorities and may express these. This broader framework is intended to be generally inclusive, covering those main areas of interest expressed by Aboriginal communities. These include research focused on:

- Accountability of current systems
- Conceptual foundations of child and family systems and practice
- Transforming current systems
- Building the evidence of what works
- Hearing the voices of children and families

Accountability of current systems

- Trajectories through the system
- Intergenerational impacts
- Data accuracy
- Challenge racism and structural harm
- Implementation of policy – ATSICPP, ACMP etc

Conceptual Foundations

- Decolonise child protection
- Re-asserting self-determination
- Conceptual basis of risk, safety, permanency, best interests etc.
- Rethinking legal frameworks
- Reclaiming Blak motherhood and fatherhood

Transforming current systems

- Critique of current systems
- Design of new models and approaches
- Development of funding models – Aboriginal-led commissioning
- Holistic approaches
- Transforming decision making (Courts etc)

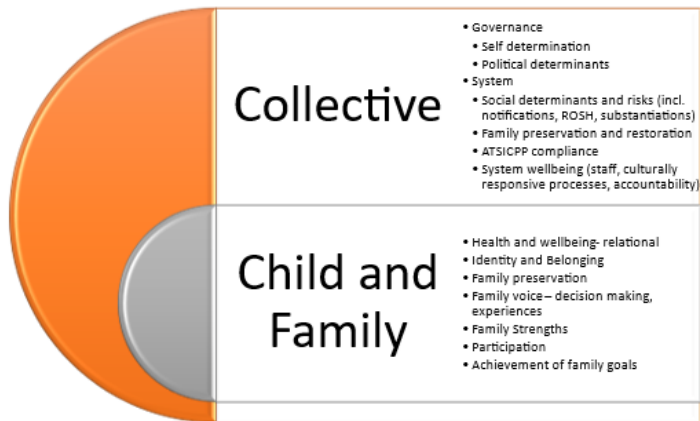| Building the evidence – what works	Hearing the voices of children and families
• Evaluation of approaches and responses • Responding effectively to cycles of risk • Outcomes for children and families • Achieving permanency – as we mean it • Culturally valid tools and assessment	• Narratives • Experiences • Outcomes

Outcomes

Similar to research priorities, the presentation of an Outcomes Framework is intended as guidance to inform about the scope of evidence and policy change, while preserving the right of local communities to determine and articulate outcomes according to their own values and aspirations.

Importantly, it reflects the view of Aboriginal communities of wellbeing in both individual and collective terms simultaneously, consistent with social and emotional wellbeing models. This makes clear that efforts to improve outcomes for Aboriginal children, families and communities must not be limited to narrow individual frameworks, but also include efforts to transform systems, including respect for Aboriginal self-determination and self-governance in the design and administration of child and family systems.

Broad Outcomes framework

Collective
- Governance
- Self determination
- Political determinants
- System
- Social determinants and risks (incl. notifications, ROSH, substantiations)
- Family preservation and restoration
- ATSICPP compliance
- System wellbeing (staff, culturally responsive processes, accountability)

Child and Family
- Health and wellbeing- relational
- Identity and Belonging
- Family preservation
- Family voice – decision making, experiences
- Family Strengths
- Participation
- Achievement of family goals

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