

Sector Strengthening Plan: Early Childhood Care and Development

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Acronyms

ACCO	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisation
ACFC	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child and family centres
AICCA	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Care Agency
ACECQA	Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority
BBF	Budget Based Funding Program
CCS	childcare subsidy
CCCF	Community Child Care Fund
CCCF R	Community Child Care Fund Restricted
DSS	Department of Social Services
ECEC	early childhood education and care
MACS	multifunctional Aboriginal children's services
National Agreement	National Agreement on Closing the Gap
National Framework	<i>Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031</i>
NQF	National Quality Framework
NQS	National Quality Standards
The Plan	Early Childhood Care and Development Sector Strengthening Plan

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Executive Summary

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations play critical leadership and service delivery roles across the country to support the safety, wellbeing, health and development of children in their early years. This Early Childhood Care and Development Sector Strengthening Plan takes a particular focus on building the community-controlled sectors that address:

- early childhood education and care (ECEC) and integrated supports to children and families to support child development
- child protection and family support services that focus on the needs of children and families experiencing vulnerability and/or who are in contact with child protection systems.

The plan also considers the intersection of these services with other priority sectors for strengthening to be addressed in other plans, including health, housing and disability.

The community-controlled ECEC sector encompasses a very broad range of educational and development support programs across the country, ranging from small community-based playgroups to fully integrated early education, development and family support hubs. Fundamental to all of these services is the application of Indigenous learning principles and values that focus on the ecosystem of the child in the context of family, community and culture. The community-controlled family support and child protection sectors provide holistic wraparound supports to families that respond to the ongoing impacts of the Stolen Generations, prevent child protection intervention, support self-determination in child protection and work to ensure children are connected to their families, communities, cultures and Country.

This plan is informed by extensive consultations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations across Australia. This included consultations by SNAICC – National Voice for Our Children in early 2021 to inform the development of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy and *Safe and Supported: National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031* (National Framework). To facilitate input to this plan, there were also dedicated national workshops, attended by over 150 people, and opportunities to provide written feedback.

The sector strengthening plan aims to achieve increased service delivery, coverage, capacity, quality and resources for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations in alignment with Priority Reform 2 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (the National Agreement). Its objectives are supported by 36 key areas of action (18 for ECEC services and 18 for family support and child protection services), targeting sector growth and development across areas of workforce, capital infrastructure, service delivery, governance, consistent funding model and peak bodies.

The identified key areas of action are for further consideration and development, as relevant by all levels of government, peaks and the community-controlled sector. They provide individual jurisdictions with the flexibility to consider how actions may be implemented and the sequencing of priorities, based on their local context and capacity. Jurisdictional Closing the Gap implementation

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plans will be the key avenue for the progression and reporting of actions, particularly those to be led by individual jurisdictions.

The plan provides meaningful actions and strategies that can be progressed in partnership between governments and the sectors. Concerted efforts to progress the priorities identified in this plan will ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations are able to take leading roles in achieving targets for children in the National Agreement, including reducing over-representation in out-of-home care, and increasing children on track on all developmental domains.

National Agreement on Closing the Gap

The new National Agreement was executed in July 2020. This agreement was developed in partnership between all Australian Governments and the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations.

At the centre of the National Agreement are four Priority Reforms that focus on changing the way governments work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. They are:

1. strengthen and establish formal partnerships and shared decision-making
2. build the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector
3. transform government organisations so they work better for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
4. improve and share access to data and information to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to make informed decisions.

The Parties agreed to identify sectors for joint national strengthening effort every three years through sector strengthening plans, which will identify actions against the strong sector elements outlined in the National Agreement. The initial sectors are: early childhood care and development; housing; health; and disability (Clauses 48-50). These sectors were chosen due to their potential to impact a range of Closing the Gap targets and enable positive structural change in the most immediate and relevant policy areas.

The Parties may consider pursuing joined-up effort in other sectors (Clause 54).

Clause 45 of the National Agreement states that elements of a strong sector are where:

- a. there is sustained capacity building and investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations, which deliver certain services and address issues through a set of clearly defined standards or requirements, such as an agreed model of care
- b. there is a dedicated, appropriately trained and identified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce (that complements a range of other professions and expertise) and where people working in community-controlled sectors have wage parity based on workforce modelling commensurate with need

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- c. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations that deliver common services are supported by a peak body, governed by a majority Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander board, which has strong governance and policy development and influencing capacity
- d. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations that deliver common services have a dedicated, reliable and consistent funding model designed to suit the types of services required by communities, responsive to the needs of those receiving the services, and is developed in consultation with the relevant peak body.

Governance of the Plan

Joint Council, through PWG, is the governance mechanism for the SSP, and is responsible for monitoring implementation of the National Agreement including progress by the Parties. All Parties will report on implementation of the early childhood care and development (ECCD) Sector Strengthening Plan (the Plan) in their National Agreement Implementation Plan annual reports, which are provided to PWG and Joint Council.

Jurisdictions, in collaboration with relevant stakeholders, may consider and prioritise implementation of different Sector Strengthening Plan actions at different times, depending on the local context and capacity of the sector. This will be reflected in their respective Annual Report contributions and Implementation Plans.

A Policy Partnership for Early Childhood Care and Development is also due to be established by the end of 2022. The Policy Partnership will bring together representatives from all governments and Peak Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members to ensure a joined up approach to early childhood care and development. The Policy Partnership will have oversight and drive development of policy reforms proposed as part of this Sector Strengthening Plan.

Further consideration is required as to how governance of the Plan will align to governance models and actions in children, family and workforce strategies across the Australian Government and the states and territories, and how to harmonise across multiple processes, including particularly:

- National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy
- *Safe and Supported: National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031*
- Closing the Gap jurisdictional implementation plans
- *Shaping our Future* National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy.

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Review of the Plan

Progress on implementation of the Plan will be reviewed annually through PWG and Joint Council consideration of Closing the Gap annual reports. PWG and Joint Council will consider at that time whether any updates are required to the Plan and highlight key areas where Parties can work together to achieve shared outcomes.

Reporting of the Plan

All Governments and the community-controlled sector will report on progress against actions in the Plan in their Closing the Gap implementation plans and associated annual reporting.

The template for Closing the Gap Implementation Plan annual reports includes reporting on progress of each Plan.

In line with the National Agreement, a partnership approach between the community-controlled sector and governments is critical to delivery of the Plan for early childhood care and development. It is expected that jurisdictions will engage early with Peaks and community-controlled organisations as part of their annual report preparation and budget processes and that the views of community-controlled organisations are reflected in these reports. The Coalition of Peaks also prepares an annual report, which may include more in-depth analysis of any community-controlled sector views on Sector Strengthening Plan implementation.

Sector snapshot: key challenges, relevant data, timeframes

A. Sector definition and scope of the Plan

The early childhood care and development sector is a broad sector that encompasses a range of organisations and services that impact on children in their early years. There is no commonly accepted definition of the sector – indeed for the most part, early childhood development is an umbrella term encompassing a number of different sectors. In 2011, a Productivity Commission workforce review¹ included the following as elements of the early childhood development sector:

- early childhood education and care (ECEC)
- child health services
- family support services.

In addition, it is considered that the child protection sectors, including jurisdictions' statutory child protection systems, as well as the early childhood early intervention sector for children with a disability, social and emotional wellbeing and maternal health services, given their high level of focus and impact on early care and development, are also to be included in the broader definition. Separate sector strengthening plans for health, housing and disability are being developed concurrently and will be aligned to ensure community-controlled supports for children in their early years. There is a clear need to focus on plans for development of the early childhood education and

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care, and child protection and family support sectors that sit outside the primary scope of those plans. This approach and focus are consistent with the scope of the Early Childhood Care and Development Sector Strengthening Plan as agreed by the Partnership Working Group. At the same time, it is important to ensure that the different sector strengthening plans align, do not reinforce sector siloes, and promote holistic and place-based responses to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families in the early years.

B. ECEC community-controlled sector snapshot

The ECEC community-controlled sector encompasses a very broad range of educational and development support programs across the country, ranging from small community-based playgroups to fully integrated early education, development and family support hubs. Fundamental to all of these services is the application of Indigenous learning principles and values that focus on the ecosystem of the child in the context of family, community and culture. With a view to ensuring and building on holistic place-based responses to early developmental needs, this plan focuses particularly on the community-controlled services that provide centre-based day care and/or pre-school education services, alongside other integrated supports to address the needs of families and young children.

There are currently less than 100 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-focused integrated early years services nationally. These include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child and family centres (ACFCs), multifunctional Aboriginal children's services (MACS) and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-operated long day care centres. Of these services, it is estimated that just over half are community-controlled services in line with the definition in the National Agreement while the others are operated through a range of governance structures by non-Indigenous organisations and governments, with various Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community advisory and input arrangements. In some states and territories, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations also deliver pre-school or kindergarten services, and while the number of these services nationally is small, a strong Aboriginal community-controlled pre-school sector operates in New South Wales, with more than 20 service providers.

Initially, there were 38 ACFCs established through the 2008 National Partnership Agreement on Indigenous Early Childhood Development, and they continue to operate with state and territory government funding. Programs delivered in the ACFCs are supported through a variety of state, territory and Australian Government funding arrangements, including the Indigenous Advancement Strategy, Australian government childcare funding, and state and territory education and community services. Approximately half of ACFCs are operated by community-controlled organisations. Notably, the nine ACFCs in New South Wales have transitioned to community control, the Northern Territory government is expanding its centres and transitioning these to community control, and the Queensland government continues to fund 10 centres, six of which are operated by community-controlled organisations.

MACS were first funded in 1987 and — along with mobile services, playgroups, crèches and long day care centres — were then funded under the Budget Based Funding Program (BBF), which was

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designed to support the delivery of a range of quality childcare, early learning and school-aged care services in a limited number of approved locations where the market would otherwise fail to deliver services to meet the needs of children and families. This program ended in 2018 and these services were transferred to the childcare requirements of the mainstream ECEC system. Previously, there were 37 MACS, while today fewer than 30 MACS remain.

The small number of these services and limited coverage means that most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children do not always have access to a dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander integrated early years' service.

Currently, not every state and territory has a dedicated and funded peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood education and care. In Victoria, the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc. provides support and representation to the sector, but is not funded by government as a peak. At the national level, SNAICC operates as the peak body for the sector, but does not currently receive dedicated core funding by government to undertake this role. The Australian Government provides funding to support SNAICC to deliver a range of national projects and initiatives to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and services.



Figure 1 Location of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander integrated early years services working with children and families across Australia

Source: Various sources. Figure includes a range of services, including community-controlled services and ACFCs operated by mainstream organisations and state/territory governments

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Workforce

There is a lack of current and comprehensive workforce data across the ECEC sector, particularly the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce. There also is no specific data available on the workforce in community-controlled ECEC services, and many of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services that were part of the BBF program were not included in the 2016 ECEC National Workforce Census. However, it will be possible to obtain a richer dataset from the results of the 2021 National Workforce Census, which are due in mid-2022, including on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce across community-controlled organisations.

The available data from the 2016 Early Childhood Education and Care National Workforce Census shows that 2.0% of paid workers in ECEC services were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. Of this 2.0%:

- 11.7% were working in remote or very remote areas
- 80.8% were qualified at Certificate III level or above (an increase of 15.3% since 2010)
- 6% of qualified staff held a bachelor's degree or higher.ⁱⁱ

The shift to the National Quality Framework (NQF), the national system of regulation, assessment, and quality improvement for the early years, included increased requirements for qualifications for educators, which has led to significant increases in the number of Certificate III qualified educators. From the same dataset, we know that in 2016, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff were qualified at the same rate as non-Indigenous staff at the Certificate III level. However, this has not continued at the diploma or advanced diploma level (26.8% compared to 35.5%), or at the bachelor degree level and above (6% compared to 11.9%).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early years services consistently identify workforce attraction, retention and qualification development as major challenges. This is particularly the case for regional and remote services that are often reliant on an external workforce and see limited opportunity and support for the development of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff who have the requisite cultural knowledge, community connections and skills, and the long-term commitment to supporting their community.

Standards and requirements for the sector

ECEC-approved services operate under the NQF, which encompasses the national law, standards and regulations for the sector and an agenda for quality improvement. Not all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services are approved services under, and in the scope of, the NQF. As a result, they are not assessed under its National Quality Standard (NQS). This includes the former BBF program, which was also out of scope of the NQF, with an exemption in place since that program ended in 2018. In 2021, there were 154 services, including 94 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led services that were funded through the Community Child Care Fund Restricted (CCCF R) program, of which 59 are out of scope of the NQF. To the extent that these services deliver integrated family support and child health services, they also fall under various state and territory regulatory systems. However, all services funded through the CCCF R program are required to meet minimum requirements around

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safety, quality and insurances and are required to implement a quality improvement plan so that they gradually align their practice with the NQF.

As the NQF and NQS were deliberately framed around meeting the needs of all children attending approved services, there are no specific or dedicated standards for out-of-scope Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander integrated early years services. This is due to current mainstream quality and regulatory frameworks not being specifically targeted to their circumstances and needs. This can contribute to a lack of clear definition, identity and cohesion for the community-controlled sector and limits the focus on and can act as a barrier to sector development and quality improvement.

The NQF, which includes the NQS and the Approved Learning Frameworks, provides the impetus for a culturally competent approach to early childhood education and care through its guiding principles “that the principles of equity, inclusion and diversity underlie the Law” and that “Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are valued”. The NQS in Quality Area 5 requires positive and responsive relationships with children that uphold the dignity and rights of each child, and engages and supports each child to feel secure, confident and included. Quality Area 6 requires collaborative partnerships with families and communities that ensures the expertise, culture, values and beliefs of families are respected and families share in decision making about their child’s learning and wellbeing. In the Approved Learning Frameworks (currently under review), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander past, present and contributions into the future are acknowledged and valued, and it is acknowledged that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are the owners and custodians of all their cultural tools. However, there is currently no specific provision in the NQF and NQS for how these principles and standards could best be achieved or assessed, including on cultural competence with respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people or services.

While many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services are excelling in service delivery and supporting improved outcomes, they also commonly identify that they require supports to address the needs of higher proportions of children with complex needs. The challenges that they face are often compounded by working in rural or remote communities and/or communities experiencing disadvantage that impact financial viability, opportunities for workforce development and retention, and the ability to meet quality standard requirements for approved services.

Inclusion of out-of-scope Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services within the NQF provides important opportunities to support quality improvement. However, further work is needed to examine the requirements of the NQF in partnership with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sector. Consideration must also be given to particular service types and contexts for which the NQF may not provide the appropriate regulatory framework. An examination of the NQF would help to identify entry requirements and what supports are needed to assist out-of-scope Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services to successfully operate under that quality improvement system or whether a bespoke quality improvement system should be considered. There is also an opportunity to look at the supporting assessment and guidance material across the ECEC quality system to better enable services to meet quality requirements and consider when they would be ready to be assessed and rated under the NQF, as well as to equip regulators and authorised officers to appropriately assess Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services. This would support the ECEC quality system to appropriately acknowledge and appreciate the unique strengths, background,

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ethos and practice approaches of community-controlled services, and the ways in which these may differ from non-Indigenous services. While a review process for the NQF has been underway since 2019, including a broad public consultation process, further targeted examination of how a quality system could support and address the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services, children and families is required.

Dedicated, reliable and consistent funding model

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled ECEC services are uniquely placed to break down barriers to access and deliver culturally safe holistic supports to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. These services are also uniquely positioned to provide vital integrated child development and family supports beyond mainstream childcare and early learning programs as they are trusted by families and the communities in which they operate.

While the MACS and ACFC services historically were part of dedicated Australian government and/or state and territory funding programs, they now are incorporated within mainstream ECEC funding streams and their child and family support functions are funded differently depending on which government funds the programs. New South Wales, Queensland and the Northern Territory have maintained dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child and family centre programs that fund community-controlled agencies.

The Australian Government invests in a range of areas that support the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in ECEC, including \$10.3 billion in 2020–21 childcare subsidy (CCS) and associated CCS safety net measures, which contribute to providing additional support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services, families and children particularly in regional and remote areas. Safety net measures include the Additional Child Care Subsidy, which provides additional financial support to supplement the CCS for eligible families and the Community Child Care Fund (CCCF). The CCCF R program is primarily focused on supporting former BBF childcare and Indigenous Advancement Strategy services to support their viability under the new childcare arrangements.

CCS safety net programs are providing additional support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services, families and children particularly in regional and remote areas. However, service providers consistently state that significant challenges remain to establish a viable and appropriately targeted operating model. This is particularly difficult for services that focus outside of the mainstream either geographically (in other words, rural and remote) or demographically (in other words, specialist cultural services and populations impacted by trauma and experiencing disadvantage). There is opportunity to strengthen integration of child, family, early childhood and care, and health services to respond to the holistic needs of families for their children.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC services have noted the impact of the shift from a dedicated funding model to CCS, with fees now dependent on enrolments and attendance. In particular, former BBF and Indigenous Advancement Strategy services who still receive a similar amount of funding through the CCCF R and CCS, have noted that their attention has shifted from supporting the most vulnerable children and families within their communities to thrive, to meeting the needs of working families – the key target group for CCS. Many of these services also

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report reduced attendance by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families related to additional challenges and barriers to access childcare funding and attend their early education and care service. Most recent quarterly data reflects an increase of 9.3% in attendance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the March quarter of 2021, and in 2020 over 17,500 Indigenous children were enrolled in the Year Before Formal School (an increase of over 1,500 children compared to 2018). However, most recent annual data shows that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children attend child care at approximately 65% the rate of non-Indigenous children (Report on Government Services 2021, Table 3A.11) Of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children accessing early childhood education and care services, most participate in mainstream services in urban areas and not through the CCCFR funded services.

Service providers and other stakeholders have identified that further resources would enable services to more effectively address the access barriers to quality early childhood education and care that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families experience. These barriers can include affordability, service quality, transport and geographical location.

This Plan presents an opportunity to improve the support and sustainability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC community-controlled services in line with the objectives set out in clause 45 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, including supporting a “dedicated, reliable and consistent funding model designed to suit the types of services required by communities, responsive to the needs of those receiving the services, and [that] is developed in consultation with the relevant Peak body”. This will assist in the provision of accessible, flexible, quality early ECEC for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

New measures

The Australian Government will expand the CCCFR program in up to 20 additional locations with prioritised delivery through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations, and mainly in remote and very remote areas with low or no supply of CCS approved childcare. The measure will help reduce barriers to accessing childcare including a lack of transport or culturally appropriate services. The overall expansion of the program will benefit up to 3,500 mostly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Through the Connected Beginnings program, the Australian Government provides funding to support the community-led integration and coordination of early childhood, maternal and child health and family support services in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The program adopts a collective impact approach to connect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-controlled services, service providers, schools, community groups, elders and leaders to create a joint-action plan based on the needs and aspirations of local children and families. The program currently services 23 sites and supports over 5,313 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

The Australian Government has announced that it is expanding the program to an additional 27 sites, and up to 50 sites nationally by 2025, supporting up to 18,900 (20%) of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. The expansion will ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a greater say in how the program is delivered to their people, in their own places, and on their own country. It will also support a strong community-controlled sector through capacity

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building and investment, including a dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce stream to employ local people.

The expansion of the Connected Beginnings program will further build the capacity to support partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and services. The funded backbone organisation will be an Aboriginal community-controlled organisation (ACCO) or a consortium/partnership arrangement with an ACCO where they are assessed through community consultation and assessment processes as the most appropriate and suitable organisation to lead the project. This approach will strengthen the alignment of the program with Closing the Gap Priority Reforms to ensure continued community and stakeholder buy-in for the model.

The Australian Government is also committed to ensuring that, where possible, Aboriginal community-controlled organisations have greater involvement in CCCF R grant-funded childcare services. A current communities of practice program for CCCF R providers aims to build capability through education and collaboration, and by providing opportunities to build networks between community-controlled organisations.

C. Family support and child protection community-controlled sector snapshot

The community-controlled sector in child protection and supporting families has its roots in the emergence of the Aboriginal community-controlled health organisations in the early 1970s and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Care Agency (AICCA) movement, with the establishment of the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) in 1976 and SNAICC as the peak agency for AICCAs across the country from 1981. AICCAs were established by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to provide holistic supports to families, responding to the impacts of the Stolen Generations and preventing ongoing child protection intervention. Many of the current community-controlled sector services were established as AICCAs and/or Aboriginal community-controlled health organisations in the 1970s and 1980s, and a range of new providers have emerged since that time.

The community-controlled family support and child protection sector is primarily funded through state and territory government departments with primary responsibility for these service systems, as well as a range of federal government programs aimed at supporting families, including Department of Social Services (DSS) funding under the Families and Children Activity, and parenting support services provided through the National Indigenous Australians Agency Indigenous Advancement Strategy.

There is significant variability across states and territories in the number of organisations and level of funding provided for community-controlled service delivery across these sectors. Higher levels of service delivery through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector organisations is evident in some states and territories. In **Victoria**, 15 community-controlled organisations operate state-wide to provide services spanning areas including family support and intensive family support, child protection advice and referral, out-of-home care case management, and delegated statutory authority for children in out-of-home care. The state government has committed to the transfer of case management for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children

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on child protection orders to community-controlled organisations. In **Queensland**, 33 community-controlled family wellbeing services operate state-wide to provide supports to families experiencing vulnerability while 15 community-controlled agencies deliver the Family Participation Program to facilitate and enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family participation in decisions about child safety and wellbeing. Trial delegation of aspects of statutory authority for child protection to community-controlled organisations has commenced.

There is significant under-development of and investment in the community-controlled sector across the country. For example, in **Western Australia**, only one community-controlled organisation provides out-of-home care services in the south-west of the state, and one consortium of community-controlled organisations provides in-home family support services in the Perth Metropolitan Region. In **Tasmania**, one community-controlled organisation is funded through the Department of Communities to provide an intensive family engagement service, and similarly in the **ACT**, one Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisation is funded to provide an intensive family support service.

The Australian Government funds a number of community-controlled organisations to deliver families and children services through the Families and Children Activity, which involves more than \$290 million a year to provide early intervention and support for disadvantaged families, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families.

In early 2021, SNAICC led consultations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations across the country to inform development of the National Framework. Extensive gaps in appropriate roles and resources for the community-controlled sector to respond to child and family needs were identified by stakeholders. Resources were identified as disproportionately low when compared with the level of child protection intervention for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. In particular, it was identified that a large proportion of resources in the sector sit with mainstream agencies that lack the cultural capability to support and engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. Transferring resources to community control was highlighted as a key priority for improving the service system, particularly recognising that 41% of children in out-of-home care are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanderⁱⁱⁱ.

Peak bodies for the community-controlled sector exist in **New South Wales** through the New South Wales Child, Family and Community Peak (AbSec) and **Queensland**, through the Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Protection Peak (QATSICPP), while **Victoria** also funds significant high-level policy functions for community-controlled agencies through VACCA and the Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance (VACYP). **South Australia** has recently initiated a process for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and the sector to develop a child and families' peak body, while expanding its community-controlled sector through new kinship care programs and family support services. SNAICC operates as the national peak for the sector. SNAICC receives year-to-year funding to provide secretariat services related to the National Framework and related project funding.

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Workforce

There is a lack of available data nationally and in most states and territories on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce and the workforce for community-controlled organisations in child protection and family support services. The sector tends to be crisis-driven and complex, with the workforce at all levels “required to manage complex situations in difficult circumstances under high levels of public scrutiny”.^{iv} It is made up of people employed in government agencies, non-government organisations, and Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, in both professional and para-professional roles.

A culturally capable and appropriately qualified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce is vital to achieving better outcomes for children and families. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff bring cultural knowledge, cultural safety and a deep understanding of the continuing impacts of intergenerational trauma, discriminatory government policies and the Stolen Generations.

A national analysis of the child protection workforce was undertaken in 2012^v. While this did not focus on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce, it did note that “difficulties in recruiting Indigenous staff occur across the nation and degree requirements can shut out Indigenous workers”. It also recognised that “recruiting, retaining and developing Indigenous people to undertake child protection work was a major concern in all jurisdictions” and that Indigenous workforce capacity and need are matters raised in a range of reviews into child protection systems.

Nearly ten years on, several subsequent child protection reviews have identified the same challenges and made similar recommendations^{vi}. Challenges continue to include poor retention, heavy caseloads, poor supervision, burnout, and lack of accountability, with specific challenges for those working in rural and remote settings. Specific challenges for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers include that some non-Indigenous colleagues have poor cultural understanding and insensitivity; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers experience negative reactions within their own community; and workers become conflicted in providing support and advice to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and advising the state child protection agency.^{vii} Poor managerial support also affects performance, recruitment and retention^{viii}, as does an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander worker being made to feel they are an ‘affirmative action’ appointment, hired solely to demonstrate an organisation’s ‘cultural competency’.

Recommendations to address these challenges include: addressing the under-representation of Aboriginal people in child protection management and leadership positions as this “attract[s] other Aboriginal staff to seek employment in that organisation”^{ix}; ensuring sustained funding models for recruitment, training and retention; developing Aboriginal workforce strategies that address all aspects of the employee lifecycle; tailoring professional support, fostering professional development and creating career pathway plans; actively addressing recruitment and retention barriers; and ensuring non-Indigenous staff have the capabilities to provide effective collegial support. The Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry “recognised that more qualified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff working in child protection improves the delivery of culturally-appropriate services and supports families to live safe, healthy and strong lives”.

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While state, territory and federal departments now have internal Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce development strategies, there is a seeming lack of these strategies for the community-controlled and non-government sectors. At the same time, as efforts increase to meet Closing the Gap and pre-existing government commitments, there will be significant growth of the community-controlled sector. This includes through Victoria's and New South Wales' transfers of case management of Aboriginal children in child protection to Aboriginal agencies, and the Western Australian *ACCO Strategy to 2022*^x to increase Aboriginal agencies delivering services in child protection and family support. While sector growth is critically needed, this will also lead to increased demand for qualified staff and pressure on existing staff in a sector already facing challenges.

In New South Wales, AbSec developed the *Aboriginal Workforce Development Statewide Strategy 2020-2025*, based on consultations with the community-controlled sector. This strategy identifies the lack of baseline Aboriginal workforce data; a clear need for significant scale-up to meet policy commitments; and a broad range of actions to progress workforce development.

In late 2018, a VACCA review to understand VACCA's future workforce needs found that Victoria's Roadmap for Reform would lead to substantially more demand for ACCO-delivered child and family services and out-of-home care staff. Challenges in meeting this demand include a workforce pool where demand increasingly exceeds supply; staff being drawn into competing sectors; growing intra- and inter-sector competition; remuneration inequality between government, CSOs and ACCOs; resource limitations in scaling up good practice; and the emergence of digital poverty and digital exclusion. The study identified multifaceted countermeasures such as the importance of creating a work environment where staff can provide quality services in a stress-free manner; the need to support staff's wellbeing, mental health and resilience alongside building effective and efficient organisational systems and core infrastructure; actively recognising the importance of culture, identity and the impacts of lived experience and intergenerational trauma; enhanced people management and empathic supervision; the importance of embedding a learning culture while recognising that qualifications do not override cultural competency; and the growing importance of improving ACCOs' and staff's technological capabilities.

Given the high number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families in contact with the child protection system, it is important for non-Indigenous sector workers to be supported in developing their cultural competencies. This cannot be achieved through one-off or single-day workshops, but requires sufficient resourcing and a demonstrated commitment to ongoing cultural supervision, reflective practice and quality training that aligns with good practice and place. For example, cultural capability development could be incorporated within relevant tertiary qualifications, including information on the value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations and the roles they play.

Strengthening the child and family sector workforce capability to better support children, young people and families experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage is a key focus area under the new National Framework. Through the new National Framework, the Australian Government will work closely with state and territory governments in areas of joint effort to build the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce in the child and family sector.

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Standards and requirements for the sector

Standards for child protection, and family support services are provided for under a variety of state and territory based regulatory frameworks, and vary significantly depending on the jurisdiction and types of services provided.

For example, in New South Wales, Aboriginal out-of-home care providers are accredited through the New South Wales Children's Guardian, and in Queensland and Victoria there are common quality standards and requirements for a broad range of organisations through the Human Services Standards and Human Services Quality Framework respectively. National standards for out-of-home care were developed under the first National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children in 2010, which the Australian Government reports on through annual indicators, published on the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's website. However, there are no accompanying regulatory requirements and the extent of their application is unclear.

There are few examples of regulatory standards and requirements that have been developed with a significant focus on the community-controlled sector or on services delivery for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. The Victorian Human Services do include specific guides and tools for applying the standards and developing cultural competence in services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Uniquely, in Queensland, QATSICPP has developed dedicated standards for the community-controlled sector that apply to community-controlled organisations, providing dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs, including the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Family Wellbeing Services and Family Participation Program. These standards provide a valuable example of a community-led and controlled approach to standard setting for the sector.

Dedicated, reliable and consistent funding model

A dedicated, reliable and consistent funding model requires that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations are appropriately resourced to provide holistic supports to children and families in alignment with the five elements of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle. This scope of functions covers:

- **Prevention** services to support and strengthen families, addressing drivers of child removal and preventing child protection intervention.
- **Placement** services for the identification, assessment, and support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kinship carers and other carers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.
- **Connection** services that provide cultural care and connection planning and implementation and reunification supports for children in out-of-home care.
- **Participation** services that facilitate the participation and control of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families in decisions about child safety and wellbeing.

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- **Partnership** services that enable community-controlled organisations and representatives to participate in and have control over decisions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

Some states and territories provide dedicated funding programs for community-controlled organisation to provide some of these core functions. Examples include:

- Kinship care **placement** services in the **Northern Territory** and **South Australia** are provided through dedicated community-controlled organisation programs that provide kinship carer recruitment, assessment and supports.
- In **Queensland**, dedicated funding is provided for **prevention** services through 33 community-controlled family wellbeing services and for services that facilitate family **participation** in child protection through community-controlled Family Participation Program services.
- In **South Australia**, 30% of its non-government organisation funding for intensive family support has been directed to community-controlled organisations, with two community-controlled organisations funded to provide these services to families and children at risk of entering out-of-home care.
- Community-controlled case management services support **connection** to family and culture for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in **New South Wales, Victoria** and one region of **Western Australia**.
- Delegation of statutory authority is significantly increasing **partnership** and control in child protection for community-controlled agencies in **Victoria**, with trials of statutory delegation to community-controlled organisations also commencing in **Queensland**.

Data on investment in community-controlled organisations is not consistently available across the country. However, six states and territories provided investment data to inform the 2020 Family Matters Report. In 2018-19, New South Wales reported the highest overall investment in community-controlled organisations as a proportion of expenditure on all state child protection and family support services (5.95%), while Queensland had the highest reported investment in community-controlled organisations for family support (14.7%) and intensive family support (24.7%).^{xi} Victoria also invests in community-controlled service delivery at a high rate, but data on the level of investment is not publicly available.

D. Cross-cutting focus areas for the early childhood care and development sectors

There are a broad range of cross-cutting and intersecting sectors and areas of focus that impact children in their early years that must be considered in the development and implementation of the Plan. These include a joined-up and holistic approach, with intersectionality to health, disability and housing.

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National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy

The Australian Government in partnership with SNAICC has developed the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy.

This strategy focuses on the priority areas of health, education, cultural connection, safety and building a better service system. It intersects with many key early childhood policy areas such as workforce, disability, prenatal care and healing. It aims to align and coordinate cross portfolio effort across whole of government and the early childhood systems and sectors.

The strategy identifies a range of policy priorities and opportunities and builds on existing Australian Government investments across multiple portfolios, and commitments under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. It also complements the opportunities outlined in this Early Childhood, Care and Development Sector Strengthening Plan, and all Closing the Gap Parties Implementation Plans to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children thrive in their early years.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled health sector has an important role in early childhood development. A focus on the provision of culturally safe, accessible and effective prenatal and antenatal health and support services is essential to support healthy development in early childhood. The health sector is also prioritised for sector-strengthening action under the National Agreement with the Health Sector Strengthening Plan identifying priorities and actions to build the capability and further strengthen investment in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community health sector. Actions in the Health Sector Strengthening Plan will aim to accelerate the delivery of high-quality primary care and health outcomes including for children and families.

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Objectives of the Sector Strengthening Plan and Measures of Success

Key objectives of the Plan are to achieve:

- increased service delivery coverage, capacity, quality and resources for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations
- development of dedicated, reliable and consistent funding models for the relevant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sectors
- increased Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood education and care, child protection and family support workforces
- increased relevant qualifications and skills of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce, alongside professional recognition of cultural knowledge, skills and relationships that are essential to effective service delivery
- community-controlled organisations are able to attract, support and retain adequate workforce capability to match their current and future workforce needs.

In consultations that informed the Plan, representatives from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sectors and governments provided guidance on what potential success of the Plan would look like.

Input on the potential measures of success and performance indicators that would demonstrate progress are reflected in the table below. This area requires further development in future iterations of the Plan as stakeholders must consider existing baseline data and realistic monitoring mechanisms, along with alignment with Closing the Gap data activities and resourcing implications.

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Measures of Success	Key performance indicators
Increase in the number, coverage and capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander integrated early years services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families supported by community-controlled integrated early years services • Number and coverage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled service providers delivering childcare and or pre-school services integrated with other child and family supports • Demonstrated service capacity and quality improvements
Increased number of qualified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early educators, including at the diploma and degree level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of qualified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early educators by level of qualification (certificate, diploma, degree)
Increased number and qualifications of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce in community-controlled early childhood care and development agencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff employed by community-controlled organisations • Level of qualification for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff
Increased proportion of government funding directed towards early intervention and prevention services delivered by community-controlled organisations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proportion of investment in early intervention and prevention services in child protection systems • Proportion of early intervention and prevention investment delivered through community-controlled organisations
Increase number of mainstream organisations facilitating transfer/transitioning programs, resources and funding to ACCOs to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and manage child protection cases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of mainstream services transitioned to community-control • Proportion of mainstream funding transitioned to community-control • Number of community-controlled services co-designing, managing and delivering programs, funding and resources

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Measures of Success	Key performance indicators
Increase the number of community-controlled organisations designing, managing and delivering programs, resources and funding to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and manage child safety cases	
Data on community-controlled sector and workforce needs and progress to address is made available to peak bodies and the sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishment of a baseline and regular reporting against the Plan's KPIs
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled early childhood care and development stories of success are captured, told by the community-controlled sector and available to inform program and service development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resources provided to support monitoring and evaluation for community-controlled organisations

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Key Areas of Action

The key actions identified below are for further consideration and development, as relevant by all levels of government, peaks and the community-controlled sector. Acknowledging the variation in sector maturity, sector and community needs, and progress in particular areas covered by the actions, individual jurisdictions maintain the flexibility to consider how each of the actions will be implemented as well as the sequencing of priorities, based on their local context and capacity. Jurisdictional Closing the Gap implementation plans will be the key avenue for the progression and reporting of actions, particularly those to be led by individual jurisdictions.

Actions

E. Workforce

Goal: A dedicated and identified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce, with specialist skills and training relevant to the sector, with wage parity.

Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce Development

No.	Action	Description	Responsibilities	Resources	Timelines
A1	Examine 2021 National ECEC Workforce Census data to develop an accurate picture of the current Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC workforce across Australia, and the workforce for	<p>The current understanding of the workforce is limited with available data out of date and incomplete.</p> <p>The 2021 National ECEC Workforce Census has included out-of-scope services and will provide the opportunity for data extraction to examine the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce and the workforce for community-controlled organisations.</p> <p>Key elements of the analysis could include:</p>	<p>Australian Government</p> <p>In collaboration with state and territory governments and sector representatives</p>	Existing or to be determined by the parties	Short term

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No.	Action	Description	Responsibilities	Resources	Timelines
	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scope: all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC services regardless of funding source. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce in mainstream ECEC • Current workforce data: age; gender; qualification level; length of service; employment status; Indigenous status • Future work force need: anticipated future workforce demand • Qualitative data: Recruitment challenges; workforce shortages; professional development needs; cultural competence/safety; staff experiences within the sector; training and education challenges and opportunities. 			
C X GVGB V,	Support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander career development through secondary school career engagement, preparation of the workforce, on the job staff development, mentoring, career development and progression	<p>Support career development through secondary school career engagement, preparation of the workforce, on the job staff development, mentoring, career development and progression. This could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scholarships for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC workforce to undertake further study, including tertiary and graduate studies • Enabling access to professional development programs or on-the-job training for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC staff focused on realising the potential of individuals • Building Leadership Skills – access to initiatives which actively identify Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff to build leadership skills and progress into leadership positions 	All governments and sector representatives	Existing or to be determined by the parties	Short to medium term

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No.	Action	Description	Responsibilities	Resources	Timelines
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leveraging existing government schooling and tertiary support programs, scholarships and subsidies. • Increasing completion rates. 			
A3	Support for tertiary qualification pathway programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early educators in line with promising practice	<p>This could involve strategic partnerships between the community-controlled sector, universities and/or training providers to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to enter and progress through tertiary education. Could also include support for rural and remote locations.</p> <p>Initiatives to consider and reflect the broad identified features of promising and successful programs, which include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengths-based approach • The combination of on-country, online, and on-campus tuition • Residential programs • Support to meet entry requirements • Local mentors and/or study groups • Face-to-face visits from lecturers/trainers • Financial support for study costs, including food, accommodation, and transport • Close involvement of academic staff specialising in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. 	All governments and sector representatives	Existing or to be determined by the parties	Short to medium term

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No.	Action	Description	Responsibilities	Resources	Timelines
A4	Development of long-term Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce development plan that identifies priorities and actions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce development, in conjunction with the implementation of the National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy.	<p>The <i>Shaping our Future</i> - National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy has been developed in partnership with all governments, the children's education and care sector and other key stakeholders, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders. This strategy aims to support the recruitment, retention, sustainability, and quality of the children's education and care educators and early childhood teachers, including the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce. An implementation plan to guide collaboration between all stakeholders to achieve this strategy's aims is being developed by ACECQA (Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority) and will be delivered to governments in mid-2022.</p> <p>In addition to <i>Shaping our Future</i>, a targeted implementation plan to meet Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce development objectives could be developed to support a long-term approach to workforce planning and development to facilitate strategies to increase the pool of vocational-education-and-training (VET) and tertiary qualified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early educators overall and to establish a sustainable workforce for the community-controlled sector into the future.</p>	All governments and sector representatives	To be determined by the parties	Medium to long term
A5	Support, develop and resource community-based workforce development initiatives led by Aboriginal and Torres	There are a range of promising local programs led by community-controlled services to mentor and support career progression and higher-level qualifications for local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members working in early childhood centres. Limited government programs and resources are available to support community-based workforce development initiatives like these.	All governments and sector representatives	To be determined by the parties	

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No.	Action	Description	Responsibilities	Resources	Timelines
	Strait Islander early childhood education and care services	Consideration of resource needs could include backfill for educators to devote time to mentoring and developing staff, backfill for staff participating in higher education programs, and on-site technology for staff engaging in remote learning.			

Family support and child protection workforce development

No.	Action	Description	Responsibilities	Resources	Timelines
A6	Scope current Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and community-controlled child protection and family support workforce and projected workforce development needs in line with sector growth under Priority Reform 2 of the Closing the Gap Agreement	<p>Work to align with the new <i>Supported: National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031</i>, to deliver on the Focus Area 3, which seeks to build workforce capability.</p> <p>Scoping should include mapping of current and future capacity, coverage, and funding, as well as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population growth corridors. Mapping should also consider the specific workforce challenges and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and the supports required to address these.</p> <p>Attention is required to consider pay equity between the community-controlled sector, government, and mainstream services, including consideration of 'cultural loading' to recognise cultural knowledge and skills in the community-controlled workforce.</p>	All governments and sector representatives	To be determined by the parties	To be determined
A7	Develop and implement strategies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait	Work to align with the new National Framework to deliver on the Focus Area 4, which seeks to strengthen the child and family sector and workforce capability.	All governments and sector	To be determined	To be determined

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No.	Action	Description	Responsibilities	Resources	Timelines
	Islander and community-controlled sector workforce development	<p>These strategies would be implemented through the National Framework, and/or through jurisdictional Closing the Gap implementation plans and annual reports.</p> <p>Strategies should consider current and future capacity, coverage, and funding, as well as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population growth corridors.</p>	representatives	by the parties	
A8	Develop the cultural competency and trauma responsiveness of the child and family sector workforce engaged through DSS grant funding	This initiative will focus on developing the cultural competency and trauma responsiveness of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous child and family sector workforce engaged through DSS grant funding in prevention and early intervention services in the child and family support sector working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients.	Australian Government In collaboration with state and territory governments and sector representatives	\$7.7 million over 3 years	2021-2022 to 2023-2024
A9	Assess the needs of and increase the involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations in the child and family sector	This initiative will assess the needs of and increase the involvement of Aboriginal community-controlled organisations in child and family services funded by the Commonwealth Department of Social Services.	Australian Government In collaboration with state and territory governments and sector	\$3.2 million over two years	2021-2022 to 2022-2023

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No.	Action	Description	Responsibilities	Resources	Timelines
	(specific initiative led by DSS)		representatives		
A10	Priorities for action under <i>Safe and Supported: National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031</i> to be developed	Strengthening the child and family sector and workforce capability is a focus area under the new National Framework. The new National Framework recognises that the nongovernment sector is a key partner in delivery of the Framework, and it is important to build on the work that has already occurred to develop workforce capability across the child and family welfare sector.	Community Services Ministers	To be determined by the parties	The first implementation plan will be from 2021-2026

F. Capital Infrastructure

Goal: Capital infrastructure needs identified and consistent funding stream

Early childhood education and care capital infrastructure development

No.	Action	Description	Responsibilities	Resources	Timelines
B1	Identify capital infrastructure gaps for community-controlled ECEC services and support capital	All governments to consider appropriate opportunities to provide grant funding to support capital infrastructure development in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector, including at the Australian Government level through the (CCCF) program. Capital funding is available to eligible applicants to CCCF	All governments, in consultation with sector representatives	To be determined by the parties	Ongoing

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No.	Action	Description	Responsibilities	Resources	Timelines
	infrastructure development through relevant programs to address gaps	Open Competitive and Special Circumstances sub programs, and to existing recipients of CCCF R grants State and territory efforts to be identified. Investigation be given to workforce housing issues in remote and regional communities, including through existing workforce and housing strategies/frameworks.			
B2	Scope service gaps to inform roll out of future community-controlled integrated early years' services in locations of high Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population and high child vulnerability	This could include scoping need and available funding for capital infrastructure for future community-controlled integrated early years', including but not limited to services as part of CCCF Restricted Expansion. State and territory efforts to be identified.	All governments and sector representatives	To be determined by the parties	Medium term
B3	Identify and plan for opportunities to transfer land and building ownership to community-controlled early years services to support their long-term sustainability and security	Community-controlled organisations identify that not having control over land and buildings limits their opportunities for long-term planning and sustainability. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations are at a disadvantage when compared to mainstream organisations that have had historical opportunities to acquire, build and retain property assets, and entry to the property market is unattainable without government assistance. Opportunities for transfer of land and building ownership may be available, particularly for government owned properties.	State and territory governments	To be determined by the parties	Medium – Long-term

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Family support and child protection capital infrastructure

No.	Action	Description	Responsibilities	Resources	Timelines
B4	Map and review existing infrastructure for multi-functional community hubs that can address the multiple psychosocial needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children delivered through community-controlled organisations. Consider opportunities to address infrastructure gaps and needs.	<p>The impact of multi-functional community-controlled hub services has been recognised for their capacity to provide wrap-around supports that respond to the holistic needs of children and families in early childhood. Community-controlled child and family hub services exist to varying extents across Australia, and opportunities could be identified to increase the number and coverage of service hubs.</p> <p>Review of capital infrastructure could include mapping of ACCO service infrastructure needs to expand current or provide new hub services, including the need to provide services in identified population growth corridors.</p>	To be determined	To be determined by the parties	To be determined

G. Service Delivery

Goal: Clearly defined standards and requirements for service delivery

Early childhood education and care service delivery

No.	Action	Description	Responsibilities	Resources	Timelines
C1	Undertake an assessment of the supporting materials and resources, and Authorised Officer training	Each State and Territory Regulatory Authority employs and trains authorised officers who undertake the regulatory	All governments and sector representatives.	To be determined by the parties	Short to medium term

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No.	Action	Description	Responsibilities	Resources	Timelines
	under the NQF and NQS to address gaps and ensure they provide quality, culturally appropriate and accessible supports to Authorised Officers and services for the regulation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector	<p>functions under the NQF, including approval of services, monitoring and compliance, and assessment and rating.</p> <p>ACECQA provides training and support for Regulatory Authorities' Authorised Officers to reliably undertake the assessment and rating function. ACECQA also convenes the Regulatory Practice Committee as a national mechanism to discuss regulatory practice.</p> <p>ACECQA also provides a range of support, research and resources for approved services to be able to improve quality delivery against the NQF and to support them in conversations with families.</p> <p>An assessment of these materials and training to identify and address priority gaps to ensure they are meeting the needs of the community-controlled sector and Authorised Officers, including ensuring they reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural frameworks in early childhood education and care.</p> <p>Engagement with the ECEC community-controlled sector to inform the assessment and development of resources will be critical.</p>	ACECQA, in collaboration with all governments and sector representatives, for elements of the action within their areas of responsibility.		
C2	Provide support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations to operate within the scope of	The Australian Government has engaged ACECQA to design, develop and deliver a Quality and Safety Training Package for CCCF Services to help CCCFR services enhance and maintain quality care and safety.	All governments and sector representatives, in collaboration with ACECQA	Australian Government funding of \$1.5 million for the Quality and	2021-21 to 2022-23

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No.	Action	Description	Responsibilities	Resources	Timelines
	the NQF, where appropriate, and to meet and exceed standards against the NQS	<p>It should be noted that the focus of this project is on professional development and building understanding and knowledge of best practice in the areas of safety and supervision. This would assist in supporting services should they in the future be able to transition, if they met the eligibility thresholds of the NQF.</p> <p>Further Commonwealth, state and territory-led efforts to support this action to be identified.</p>		<p>Safety Training Package</p> <p>Further resources to be determined</p>	
C3	<p>Support for the Aboriginal community-controlled ECEC sector through expansion of existing programs and services</p> <p>(Note: Action overlaps significantly with E3 below)</p>	<p>The Australian Government will continue to work in partnership with SNAICC, other sector representatives and Aboriginal community-controlled organisations and services on the delivery of new and expanded initiatives to ensure the programs align with the Priority Reforms and support community-led decision-making and service delivery by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled services. The Australian Government is committed to ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations lead and manage Community Child Care Fund (CCCF) grant funded child-care services and Connected Beginnings program where they are assessed through community consultation and assessment processes as the most appropriate and suitable organisation. State and territory-led efforts to be identified.</p>	<p>All governments in consultation with sector representatives</p>	<p>Connected Beginnings \$81.8 million</p> <p>CCCFR \$29.9 million</p> <p>State and territory support to be determined</p>	<p>2021-22 to 2024-25</p> <p>New CB and CCCFR sites will be progressively rolled out from 2021 to 2025</p>

Sector Strengthening Plan: Early Childhood Care and Development

Child protection and family support service delivery

No.	Action	Description	Responsibilities	Resources	Timelines
C4	Develop and implement strategies to build community-controlled sectors to respond to child and family needs at levels aligned to engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children with child protection systems	Assess existing community-controlled capacity and develop funding prioritisation policies, and sector development support mechanisms to increase the proportion of services delivered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, particularly community-controlled organisations. This includes to identify, support and implement processes and timeframes to allocate a meaningful proportion of funding to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations with relevant expertise, particularly community-controlled organisations.	State and territory governments	To be determined by the parties	Short term plan development Medium to long term service development
C5	Identify opportunities to progressively transfer authority in child protection to community-controlled organisations	Delegation of statutory authority to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations has commenced in Victoria and demonstrated positive early outcomes to support safety, wellbeing and connection to culture for children while supporting self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in child protection. Queensland has also commenced trials of delegated statutory authority to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agencies. Identify opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations to exercise increasing authority in child protection in line with their growth and capacity development provides the opportunity to build on the	State and territory departments with responsibility for child protection and family support	To be determined by the parties	Short to long-term depending on jurisdictional community-controlled sector baseline

Sector Strengthening Plan: Early Childhood Care and Development

No.	Action	Description	Responsibilities	Resources	Timelines
		success of models in Victoria and support self-determination in alignment with the Closing the Gap Agreement.			
C6	Improve multidisciplinary responses to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families with multiple and complex needs	<p>Funding over five years to improve multidisciplinary responses to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families with multiple and complex needs, by redesigning service models to effectively respond to multiple and interrelated issues in families (such as family violence, mental and physical health problems, substance use and disability) that may lead to child abuse and neglect. A provider will be competitively selected to lead the process in each location. Funding of ACCOs will be a priority in this initiative to build the community-controlled sector. If the provider is not an ACCO, the provider will need to work with an ACCO.</p> <p>This includes embedding the five elements of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle in the service model re-design. This funding is subject to state and territory governments agreeing to participate in implementing the redesigned service models.</p>	Commonwealth Department of Social Services and state and territory governments and sector	\$49 million	2021-2022 to 2025-2026

H. Governance

Goal: Governance of individual organisations, including compliance with sector-specific regulatory systems.

Sector Strengthening Plan: Early Childhood Care and Development

Early childhood education and care governance

No.	Action	Description	Responsibilities	Resources	Timelines
D1	Investigate mechanisms to consolidate and streamline reporting and compliance requirements for community-controlled integrated early years services	Community-controlled organisations identify a high reporting and compliance burden associated with accessing and reporting on the multiple funding streams through various state, territory and Commonwealth agencies that they require to deliver integrated responses to family needs. Better coordination between governments agencies could be explored to reduce the compliance burden for service providers.	All governments and sector representatives	To be determined by the parties	To be determined
D2	National, state and territory community-controlled peak organisations provide direct supports for quality governance development, with government resources and support	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled agencies have unique forms of governance reflecting community ownership, cultural governance, and self-determination. Dedicated support through peak organisation could assist organisations in meeting regulatory governance requirements while developing and maintaining unique cultural governance. This action intersects with the development of state/territory intermediary organisations at F1 below.	All governments and sector representatives	To be determined by the parties	To be determined

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Family support and child protection governance

No.	Action	Description	Responsibilities	Resources	Timelines
D3	Governance measures under <i>Safe and Supported: National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031</i>	There is a commitment under the new National Framework to develop governance measures specific to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples consistent with the National Agreement.	Community Services Ministers	To be determined by the parties	To be developed alongside the First Action Plan
D4	Investigate mechanisms to consolidate and streamline reporting and compliance requirements for community-controlled child protection and family support services	Community-controlled organisations identify a high reporting and compliance burden associated with accessing and reporting on the multiple funding streams through various state, territory and Commonwealth agencies that they require to deliver integrated responses to family needs. Better coordination between governments agencies is needed to reduce the compliance burden for services providers.	All governments and sector representatives	To be determined by the parties	
D5	Investigate the development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led standards for the community-controlled sector in each state and territory	There are few examples of regulatory standards and requirements that have been developed with a significant focus on the community-controlled sector. In Queensland, the Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Protection Peak has developed dedicated standards for the community-controlled sector that apply to community-controlled organisations providing dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs. In New South Wales, AbSec, in collaboration with government and the sector has developed the Aboriginal Case Management Policy to	All governments and sector representatives	To be determined by the parties	

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No.	Action	Description	Responsibilities	Resources	Timelines
		<p>guide practice for community-controlled organisations, alongside all government and non-government practitioners working to support Aboriginal children and families. A community-led approach to setting standards and requirements ensures that they are matched to the needs of the community-controlled sector in supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.</p> <p>This action could be investigated under the National Framework or through individual state and territory Closing the Gap implementation plans.</p>			

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I. Consistent Funding Model

Goal: Across the early childhood care and development sector, funding for organisations is available/predictable and supports organisations to be responsive to the needs of those receiving the services.

Early childhood education and care funding model

No.	Action	Description	Responsibilities	Resources	Timelines
E1	Review early childhood education and care program and funding arrangements, including in Implementation Plans, to determine and implement changes needed to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled ECEC services	<p>All government and non-government stakeholders may review and consider the opportunities that fall within their jurisdiction responsibilities and levers to work towards ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled ECEC services have access to sustainable funding streams for providing holistic responses to child, family and community needs.</p> <p>Review could also aim to identify where funding and procurement policies can be implemented to prioritise funding to community-controlled agencies for service delivery to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.</p>	All governments and sector representatives	To be determined by the parties	To be determined

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No.	Action	Description	Responsibilities	Resources	Timelines
E2	Increased Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled service delivery	<p>All governments to work in partnership with SNAICC, other relevant sector representatives and Aboriginal community-controlled organisations and services on the delivery of existing, new or expanded initiatives to ensure the programs align with the Priority Reforms and support community-led decision-making and service delivery by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled services.</p> <p>The Australian Government is committed to ensuring that, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations lead and manage CCCF grant funded child-care services and Connected Beginnings program sites where they are assessed through community consultation and assessment processes as the most appropriate and suitable organisation. State and territory-led efforts to be identified.</p>	All governments and sector representatives	<p>Connected Beginnings \$81.8 million CCCFR \$29.9 million</p> <p>State and territory led efforts to be identified</p>	2021-22 to 2024-25
E3	Develop an agreed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled early childhood education and care sector definition and scope to inform efforts to	Stakeholders in consultations identified that efforts to access appropriate government supports to deliver culturally appropriate and holistic early years services are hindered by a lack of recognition of a distinct and defined Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector that has unique strengths and resourcing needs. The role of community-controlled agencies is overlooked in broader conversations about mainstream early education policy and programming. Clearer definition of the sector could assist to target efforts to build and strengthen the community-controlled sector.	All governments and sector representatives	To be determined by the parties	2021 - 2022

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No.	Action	Description	Responsibilities	Resources	Timelines
	build and strengthen the sector				
E4	Reduce service gaps and establish new Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled integrated early years' services in locations of high Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population and high child vulnerability	Scope service gaps: All parties could review and consider opportunities that fall within their jurisdiction responsibilities and levers to share data and undertake genuine engagement and partnership to assess gaps and needs, including but not limited to approach to expansion of the Connected Beginnings and CCCFR programs. State and territory led efforts to be identified.	All governments and sector representatives	To be determined by the parties	Ongoing

Family support and child protection funding model

No.	Action	Description	Responsibilities	Resources	Timelines
E5	Develop jurisdictional plans for developing and resourcing	Service model and funding aligned to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement principle provide opportunities for community-controlled services to deliver:	State and territory child		

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No.	Action	Description	Responsibilities	Resources	Timelines
	community-controlled organisation functions aligned to the five elements of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prevention services to support and strengthen families, addressing drivers of child removal, and preventing child protection intervention • Placement services for the identification, assessment, and support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kinship carers, and other carers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children • Connection services that provide cultural care and connection planning and implementation, and reunification supports for children in out-of-home care • Participation services that facilitate the participation and control of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families in decisions about child safety and wellbeing • Partnership services that enable community-controlled organisations and representatives to participate in and have control over decisions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families 	protection departments		
E6	Assess the needs of and increase involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations in	This initiative will assess the needs and increase the involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations in the child and family sector.	Australian Government Department of Social Services	\$3.2 million over two-years	2021-2022 to 2022-2023

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No.	Action	Description	Responsibilities	Resources	Timelines
	delivery in Commonwealth child and family sector programs (specific initiative led by DSS)				
E7	In line with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, increase the proportion services delivered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations	Develop and implement funding prioritisation policies that require decisions about the provision of family support and child protection services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities to preference community-controlled organisations.	All governments		

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J. Peak Body

Goal: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations which deliver common services are supported by a peak body.

ECEC peak body

No.	Action	Description	Responsibilities	Resources	Timelines
F1	Develop a national and state/territory intermediary model to strengthen and represent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC community-controlled services	<p>Establishment of a national intermediary model to strengthen capability and capacity of, and represent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood, education and care services to deliver high quality, responsive and accessible services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families across Australia.</p> <p>Priorities for the intermediary would include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Networking & service integration: information consolidation; facilitating warm referrals; identifying needs and coordinating supports; building the capacity of other services • Program and education design: Support services to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Programming, including local culture; and support quality and effective ECEC systems, policies and processes • Leadership Support: coordinate clear, consistent information provision, networking and service coordination 	<p>Sector-led action in collaboration with:</p> <p>National Indigenous Australians Agency</p> <p>Commonwealth Department of Education, Skills and Employment</p> <p>State and Territory Governments</p>	<p>Sector Strengthening Joint Funding Pool (pilot establishment and evaluation) to be supplemented by additional investment by other relevant portfolios and philanthropy</p> <p>Australian Government, state and territory Departments of Education</p>	<p>Short-term pilot, medium to long-term expansion and ongoing operation</p> <p>Pilot in 3 states/territories 2021 - 2023</p>

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No.	Action	Description	Responsibilities	Resources	Timelines
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Workforce Planning and Development: support the ECEC Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector and services to undertake workforce planning and development activities (this is further outlined below) <p>This action will support implementation of actions across this plan, including in areas of workforce development, quality improvement and, governance development for community-controlled organisations</p>			

Family support and child protection peak body

No.	Action	Description	Responsibilities	Resources	Timelines
F2	Develop a plan to support and enable community-led development of a peak body in each state and territory	<p>Currently Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peaks for children and families exist and receive state funding in Queensland and New South Wales. There is also significant resourcing for peak functions through lead Aboriginal agencies in Victoria. South Australia is currently supporting the development of a new peak. Other states and territories currently do not have a peak or a resourced plan for establishing one.</p> <p>Development of peak bodies must be a ground-up process driven by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations. Peaks are to set out with a clear purpose and set of principles that are</p>	<p>State and Territory Governments where peaks are not yet established or in development (Western Australia, Northern Territory, Australian Capital Territory, Tasmania)</p> <p>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander</p>	To be determined by the parties	To be determined

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No.	Action	Description	Responsibilities	Resources	Timelines
		decided by the community that it represents. Governments have a responsibility to provide resources and opportunity for peak development, and to strongly engage with the peak, including genuinely listening to and considering what the peak is advocating and/or advising.	communities and organisations		
F3	Support adequate and sustainable funding for existing peak bodies	<p>Review current funding arrangements and ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families peaks at the state, territory and federal level have adequate and sustainable funding to perform core peak body functions, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Representing and supporting members • Advising governments on policy and program improvements • Undertaking shared decision-making processes with governments • Supporting the growth and development of community-controlled sectors 	All governments in consultation with sector representatives	To be determined by the parties	To be determined
F4	Develop a strong evidence base for best practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	There is a clear role for peak bodies to build the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander evidence base of what works in culturally safe and community-led service delivery for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.	All governments and sector representatives	To be determined by the parties	Ongoing

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No.	Action	Description	Responsibilities	Resources	Timelines
	community-controlled service delivery through peak bodies	This includes supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led monitoring, evaluation and research projects with the sector, as well as providing resources to support capacity development for monitoring, evaluation and documentation of best practice across the community-controlled sector.			

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ⁱⁱ Social Research Centre. (2016). *Early Childhood Education and Care National Workforce Census*, September 2017, www.dese.gov.au/uncategorised/resources/2016-national-early-childhood-education-and-care-workforce-census-report

ⁱⁱⁱ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2021). *Child protection Australia 2019-20*. Available at: www.aihw.gov.au/reports-data/health-welfare-services/child-protection/overview

^{iv} Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry. (2013). *Taking Responsibility: A Roadmap for Queensland Child Protection*. www.childprotectioninquiry.qld.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/175398/Chapter-8.pdf

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^{vi} Davis, M. (2019). *Family is Culture: Independent Review of Aboriginal Children in OOHC*. www.familyisculture.nsw.gov.au; South Australia Child Protection Systems Royal Commission (2016); Victorian Commission for Children and Young People. (2015). *In the Child's Best Interests Inquiry into compliance with the intent of the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle in Victoria*; Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry (2013).

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^{viii} *ibid*

^{ix} Victorian Commission for Children and Young People. (2015). *In the Child's Best Interests Inquiry into compliance with the intent of the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle in Victoria*.

^x Government of Western Australia Department of Communities. (n.d.). Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation Strategy to 2022 www.dcp.wa.gov.au/ChildrenInCare/Documents/ACCO%20Strategy%20to%202022.pdf

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ADDENDUM – Engagements

The Plan is informed by extensive consultations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations and governments across Australia.

Key sources for understanding needs and priorities of the sector included consultations held by SNAICC in early 2021 to inform the development of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy and *Safe and Supported: National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031*. Approximately 200 people participated in SNAICC's workshops to inform these plans and 890 people completed SNAICC's online surveys. Consultation reports are available from the SNAICC website: www.snaicc.org.au.

SNAICC also held four dedicated national workshops in September 2021 to review a draft of this plan and facilitate input from community-controlled sector organisations across the country. These workshops were attended by over 150 people. Sector representatives also had the opportunity to provide written feedback to the draft plan.

A Sector Strengthening Plan Working Group, co-chaired by SNAICC and the Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment, met monthly between June and November 2021. This also provided opportunities for sector representatives and government representatives from every jurisdiction to offer guidance to the development of the Plan.