

# **‘Changing the Balance’:**

## Research Project Final Report

Undertaken by Families Australia for the Department of Social Services

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# Acknowledgement

Families Australia celebrates more than 65,000 years of custodianship and connection to lands and sea country of First Nations people.

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and pay our respects to Elders and Ancestors.

For millennia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have been nurturing children and young people through lore, kinship systems and the powerful cultural role of Elders.

The wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, children, and young people is fundamental to the health and prosperity of this country.

Families Australia's purpose is to improve the wellbeing of all families.

To achieve this, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities must be at the forefront of policy and community conversations on strengthening all families.



## With thanks....

### Valuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voices

While the *Changing the Balance project* scope and consultations were asked to consider the impact of redesign on the non-Indigenous NGO sector, we were fortunate to have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives from Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) attend many of the sector consultations and share their perspectives, wisdom and expertise. 10% of survey respondents also identified as being from an ACCO or First Nations organisation.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants stressed the importance of recognising and valuing the knowledge, expertise, skills and experience held by ACCOs. The direct involvement of ACCOs and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives at decision making tables and increased funding to 'scale up' and deliver the services that they want to deliver for their communities, will produce better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, children and young people.

Robust discussions throughout the project informed, corrected and challenged perceptions, beliefs and misconceptions held by some across the non-Indigenous NGO sector. We thank Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants and representatives from ACCOs for sharing knowledge, experience and views to shape a comprehensive and considered roadmap for transition.

### Additional Acknowledgments

We are also thankful for the contributions of all organisations who participated in this project. A full list of participating organisations can be found at Attachment B. We particularly acknowledge the support extended to the project from the following organisations and representatives:

- The SNAICC – National Voice of our Children project team leading the development of the National Child and Family Investment Strategy;
- Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Protection Peak (QATSICPP);
- Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA);
- Members of the project's advisory group;
- Child and Family Wellbeing Association of Australia (CAFWA) members including:
  - Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, Victoria/Tasmania;
  - PeakCare, Queensland;
  - Child and Family Focus, South Australia;
  - Association of Children's Welfare Agencies (ACWA);
- Western Australian Council of Social Service (WACOSS);
- Safe and Supported governance partners mechanisms;
- Families and Communities Group, Department of Social Services;
- All states and territories who responded to our request for information.



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## Executive Summary

Australia is in the early stages of a profound transformation in child and family services to implement its commitments under the nation's Closing the Gap strategy. This transformation will see the transition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family support service delivery to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) over the coming years.

The Australian Government has engaged with the ACCO sector to identify actions, and support needs to assist the ACCO sector to prepare for this important transition. This report, *Changing the Balance*, is a complementary project to understand the potential impact of the transition on non-Indigenous Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) – and make recommendations to enhance success in the transition.

Prepared by Families Australia for the Department of Social Services, this report is the result of a 6-month consultation and research project. Decision-making mechanisms, policy development processes and funding profiles across the sector will soon change significantly. These changes will implement:

- the Closing the Gap Strategic Priority Two: *Building the Community-Controlled Sector*;
- Action Two of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan of *Safe and Supported*; and
- related initiatives at Commonwealth, State and Territory levels.

Alongside other sector leaders, Families Australia recognises the National Child and Family Investment Strategy is more than a programmatic transition – it is a transformation of the sector. In partnership with the ACCO sector, we share a deep commitment to placing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, families, children and young people at the forefront of the sector's work – and to doing things differently to achieve better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, children and young people – and, indeed, for all Australian families, children and young people.

As the sector's national peak body, Families Australia has a key leadership role in conversations across the sector about the coming funding transition. These changes will be profound for many non-Indigenous NGOs, including our members (who are currently at a variety of levels of readiness for transition). The change process needs to be navigated wisely and well – with continuous clear communication, transition resourcing for the sector, and strong support for both individual organisations and the sector. A successful transition will rely on our sector's openness to change, guided by principled national leadership and a shared commitment to better outcomes for First Nations children, young people and families.



Across the sector, it is broadly acknowledged that the pace of this change in recent years has been much slower than many people had hoped – or expected. Greater effort and urgency are needed from both the non-Indigenous NGO sector as a whole and from governments to speed the pace of this change. These reforms will support the self-determination aspirations of First Nations people and deliver better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, families and children.

The sector consultations which inform this report identified the key operational challenges for non-Indigenous NGOs that need to be managed carefully in the transition of services, staff and funding. It is important to note that with strong and continuous communications in the change process, advance notice ahead of major transition points, transitional resourcing arrangements, and a strong spirit of goodwill, none of these operational challenges are insurmountable. As these national commitments by governments begin being implemented at pace and scale, the non-Indigenous NGO sector has a key responsibility in strong partnership with the ACCO sector to help drive this transition and maximise its success.

As one sector consultation participant observed, for most non-Indigenous organisations, the ‘why’ of this change is not being questioned – it is just the detail of ‘how’ that needs to be worked through.

The goals of this *Changing the Balance* project were to:

- identify primary organisational and operational challenges faced by mainstream NGOs from the transfer of funding allocations to ACCOs; and
- identify potential issues in future funding sustainability for mainstream NGOs in the child and family services sector.

To inform this report, Families Australia gathered information in a detailed national survey, undertook 14 sector consultations, conducted multiple in-depth interviews and researched two case studies spanning all States and Territories.

The key findings and recommendations below offer a guide on how to support the sector through this profound transition.



## Key Findings

1. Non-Indigenous NGOs support the transition of services and strengthening of the ACCO sector, while also noting:
  - many non-Indigenous NGOs are still awaiting key details on the 'how' of the transition process;
  - organisations are at different levels of preparedness for the transition; and
  - the impact of change will be uneven across the sector – and particular attention needs to be paid to service delivery in rural and remote communities.
2. Non-Indigenous NGOs advocate for the needs of families, children and young people to be placed front and centre and noted:
  - excellent community consultation will be needed to manage the transitions at a local level; and
  - diverse communities will have different needs – and flexibility in approaches will be key.
3. Transition is a change management process requiring clear and consistent communication about proposed changes, including a clear need for:
  - advance notice and clearer detail on the exact quantum and timelines for changes; and
  - centralised information and consistent documentation to be made accessible through a shared resource repository.
4. Great care will need to be taken to ensure the transition process does not exacerbate existing workforce shortages and issues, particularly in regional and remote areas.
5. Coordination with States and Territory transition plans will be crucial for a successful transition.
6. The transition process is a change management process that will incur extra short-term costs for all parties (including in human resources, data transfer, legal agreements, time taken to develop partnerships and transition clients).
7. It is difficult for non-Indigenous NGOs to identify the impact of these changes on their future funding sustainability until the quantum and nature of changes is known, however, potential issues of future funding sustainability for NGOs in the child and family services sector will likely include a loss of economies of scale which could mean change is felt in areas beyond just the funded service.



## Recommendations

1. First Nations representative bodies should be at the decision-making table as transition arrangements are determined, including on the reallocation of funding and contracts.
2. Leaders and organisations in the family and child services NGO sector should be invited to publicly pledge their support for the transition in formal statements of commitment.
3. Governments should give the sector advance notice of key decisions on how the rollout will occur to enable NGOs to assess, plan and navigate change and ensure continuity in service delivery.
4. Decisions on how services and funding will be transferred should be evidence-based and informed by accurate data, community demographics and regional service profiles.
5. Governments should develop and deploy an evolving communications strategy to inform the sector of key changes at each stage throughout the change process.
6. Governments should commit transitional resourcing to support the sector to implement the changes (delivered in the form of funding for whole-of-sector transition services rather than as bridging funding for individual NGOs).
7. Governments should establish a central resource hub to support the transition, including, for example, fact sheets, briefing notes, implementation timelines, funding formulas, legal advice, industrial relations advice, best practice guides, model templates and agreements that can be adapted by NGOs.
8. Noting governing bodies and senior management in smaller NGOs will need additional access to support in business continuity planning, industrial relations, and financing transition, governments should create additional supports such as:
  - A centralised advice line for employers, employees, volunteers and field workers directly affected by the changes – Commissioning, procurement and funding processing requires greater capacity to accommodate localised arrangements – systems need to respond to community-led processes.
  - Regional transitions officers to support partnerships/transitions in rural and remote areas.
  - Positions to support the coordination of communities of practice/expert groups.



## Background

The National Child and Family Investment Strategy (the Strategy) is a key component of Action 2 of the *Safe and Supported: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan 2023-26*. This Strategy will focus on a clear set of national principles and actions to drive funding priorities within the child and family service system. The Strategy will support the shift towards proportionate and coordinated funding of early, targeted, holistic and culturally safe support services.

A further core focus of the Strategy is to develop principles and guiding materials to support the phased transfer of funding and services to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) for service delivery to First Nations children and families.

A key element of the future funding changes in the child and family sector will be the impact on non-Indigenous non-government organisations (NGOs) that currently receive funding and provide services to First Nations communities. Complimenting the drafting of the National Child and Family Investment Strategy, Families Australia has been engaged to undertake a research report – *Changing the Balance* – on the impact of the proportionate transition of funding from non-Indigenous NGOs to ACCOs.

The core requirements of *Changing the Balance* were to:

- Detail the primary organisational and operational challenges to be faced by mainstream NGOs from the transfer of funding allocations to ACCOs.
- Detail potential issues of future funding sustainability for mainstream NGOs in the child and family services sector.
- Provide recommendations to governments to support addressing potential risks to be faced by the sector, such as potential changes/disruptions to workforce, service delivery and/or organisational financial viability.
- Highlight regions/locations where mainstream NGOs are in a position to be early participants in funding transfers to ACCOs.

*Changing the Balance* is a contributing data and information source to the development of the Child and Family Investment Strategy (CFIS). CFIS is a broad strategy that will guide and inform actions of the Commonwealth, and the States and Territories, in scaling up and increasing the footprint of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector. Acknowledging there will be differences in how each jurisdiction will develop and implement their respective strategies, all parties are committed to pursuing change.



## Methodology

To comprehensively document and analyse the anticipated organisational and operational challenges to be faced by non-Indigenous NGOs – and potential issues of future funding sustainability for them – Families Australia undertook the following evidence gathering activities:

- fourteen face-to-face group consultation sessions – including in remote/regional settings – to elicit granular insights as well as data and timeframes. This enabled a well-rounded view on the challenges differing service providers, operating in different locations, must navigate in the transition;
- extended interviews with four non-Indigenous NGO providers – large and small – to gather even further granular insights on the types of transition issues anticipated across organisations of differing size, scale and geography;
- research and presentation of two case studies highlighting the issues faced by organisations at different stages of transition;
- national online survey of the sector;
- a desktop review of the jurisdictional plans in each State and Territory for transition arrangements and implications for organisations;
- a validation workshop to check and confirm key insights for accuracy, robustness and the likely scale of impact across the sector;

The development of this project’s final report captures key findings of consultations with the non-Indigenous NGO sector and contains clear, actionable recommendations for governments.



## Chronology of Work Completed

The following work was undertaken on this project:

- A Project Plan submitted on 15 December 2023 and subsequently approved by DSS;
- A Project Advisory Group was established in February 2024. Two meetings were held, and project Advisory Group members were invited to attend the Validation Workshop;
- Regular communication and meetings with the SNAICC CFIS project team, including a joint meeting with DSS;
- An online project briefing/consultation forum for National Coalition members (and interested parties) was held on 15 February 2024;
- In March, letters were sent to jurisdictions and DSS requesting information on their planned transition arrangements. All States and Territories and DSS provided a response;
- Four in-depth organisational interviews were conducted;
- Two case studies were completed;
- Additional to consultation with the National Coalition, commencing on 19 March, Families Australia held 14 consultations (a mixture of in person and online) in all States and Territories (see the table at Attachment C for a detailed breakdown). A total of 312 participants from over 150 organisations participated (both ACCOs and non-Indigenous NGOs were represented). (For detailed information on the workshops, please see Attachment A);
- A National *Changing the Balance Survey* was released on 3 April. The survey closed on Friday 10 May 2024. 60 responses were received. For a detailed information on the workshops please see Attachment B);
- A validation workshop was held on 3 June 2024 and was attended by 11 sector leaders from 10 organisations including non-Indigenous NGOS and ACCOs.



## Findings

### Overarching themes

#### **The growth of the ACCO sector is supported, organisations are seeking detail on the ‘how’**

The *Changing the Balance project* was well received. A number of representatives of non-Indigenous NGOs stated that the move towards growing the ACCO sector was both welcome and necessary.

*“It is about time”* and *“It will be challenging to adjust but we have done this, and more quickly than has occurred over recent years”* being examples of the type of sentiments expressed.

Some of the identified benefits of the scaling up of ACCOs, the transition process and a redesign of the system more broadly, include opportunities for:

- greater self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, families, children and young people
- better outcomes for children and families.
- better collaboration and partnerships between non-Indigenous NGOs/ACCOs generally
- improving ways of working alongside and supporting ACCOs – in an effective way
- diversifying existing service provider footprints
- .... there is an opportunity to consider the future direction of our non-Indigenous NGO and lean into other service types where relevant, such as aged care and disability services....
- improved, more flexible and responsive government systems & funding models that have greater capacity to support response to local community aspirations and need.

Questions raised by organisations about the changes included whether:

- community consultation had occurred, particularly in regional and remote areas;
- whether adequate data was available to inform a proper needs analysis to support evidence-based decision making;
- funding for ACCOs will be additional to the existing non-Indigenous NGO service funding pool;
- transition and system re-design will be predicated on flexibility and include scope for different models to be put in place based on communities identifying their own solutions.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> SNAICC – National Voice for our Children work on [Kids Come First: The Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations Leadership Transition Framework](#) and [Funding Model Options For ACCO Integrated Early Years Services](#) final report and Wunan Foundations [Stronger ACCO's, Stronger Families](#) (Part 2) project are valuable reference resources.



- For example, transition models could include:
  - service transition to ACCOs in the immediate to short-term;
  - ongoing partnerships between ACCOs and non-Indigenous NGOs where services and resources are shared on an ongoing basis and both parties are equal/equitable;
  - co-delivery of different program/service elements on a ‘fee for service’ arrangement; and
  - in some regions, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities may wish to play a formal decision-making role in identifying services for the community but a limited role (or no role) in direct service delivery.

### **Community consultation is required: Families, children and young people must be placed front and centre**

Organisations emphasised the fact that at the centre of the proposed transition of services are families, children and young people who are experiencing, or are at risk of experiencing, vulnerability. This is within the current context of a cost-of-living crisis and an increased demand for NGO services which has been unprecedented in recent years. A few organisations were of the view that, to date, there has been limited canvassing of what people living in regional and remote communities would prefer in terms of accessing services. They stressed that both First Nations peoples and non-Indigenous persons living in regional and remote communities:

- must be consulted to understand what services they would like to see in their community; and
- if change is to take place, be consulted about how the changes will affect them.

A number of organisations stressed the need for a community consultation process be developed to engage with and provide information about changes for service users and community members – including children and young people. This would provide an avenue to discuss how the changes will impact them.

#### *Views of young service recipients*

On a very small scale to demonstrate the kind of consultation which could take place, Families Australia staff met with some young service users to hear their views on potential service transition. They expressed many of the same concerns as the service providers had shared, but from a service recipient perspective. The young people, who all had lived experience of out-of-home care, explained that given they had already experienced significant change in their life, any additional changes can be especially challenging for them. They were happy with the service they were using and preferred there to be no change. If change must occur, they suggested that it would be best supported through sufficient advance notification (e.g. 6 months at minimum). This would allow time to research, visit and familiarise themselves with a new service. This process would need to be supported by a support worker with whom they have developed a trusting relationship.



*“What gets lost in [the transition process] is the service recipients. It is just too easy to underestimate the importance of relationships between service recipients and organisations, particularly workers.”*

Organisations pointed out that all NGO service recipients– both First Nations and non-Indigenous– want and need to have choice. The reasons for choosing a service are complex. The growth of the ACCO sector should be an opportunity for increased choice of a mix of services for all.

### *Challenges of maintaining service recipient choice in rural and remote communities*

There is a considered view that the proposed policy change will impact ‘thin markets’ in rural and remote communities harder than city/metropolitan. Some advocated that an overall increase in services and supports in rural and remote communities is required to meet unmet demand and address the capacity constraints of the current system. An increase in service volume, as well as changing the mix of providers is required.

The consultations revealed a degree of nervousness and hesitation amongst some providers in engaging with change due to downstream impacts. Concerns raised primarily related to being able to continue to provide a full range of services to dispersed geographic locations (small towns/micro communities). In this vein, the capacity to leverage benefits from combining multiple program/activity streams – the ‘sum is greater than the individual parts’ could be reduced when a contributing element is removed from the equation.

### *A recognition that solutions must be tailored to community needs*

A view expressed by some First Nations leaders is that a partnership approach can facilitate the transition process and address long-standing issues in the sector. As one First Nations leader stated:

*“We cannot do it by ourselves, unless we have, obviously, white Australia come along on this journey. Most of my life working in [my ACCO] I've had so many people that come across from government and mainstream organisations, and we wouldn't be the organisation we are today if we didn't have that. And so, I think it's got to be worded as a partnership. We're on the journey together; government, the ACCOs and the mainstream organisations, so we're not going to get there unless we all come together.”*

There is a lot of recognition that partnerships are effective when there is equitable power sharing, and decisions making systems and agreed outcomes/shared goals that have been negotiated. However, partnerships can sometimes reinforce existing power imbalances and structural exclusion. For example, when the impact of past – and current – policy, administration and funding considerations are not acknowledged and redressed. A non-Indigenous NGO is more likely to be the dominant and privileged entity and has a greater obligation to create an equitable outcome.



There are an extremely broad range of partnership arrangements in place between NGOs with each other, between NGOs and philanthropic/corporate supporters, and NGOs and governments. If a partnership approach between an ACCO and non-Indigenous NGO is chosen as the approach to facilitate transition/re-distribution of funding and local service delivery arrangements service, it should be a community-led process.

First Nations communities, First Nations NGOs and representative bodies must be asked about what they would like for their communities, what solutions and services will best meet their aspirations and needs, and non-Indigenous partners need to actively assist to facilitate community-led responses and solutions.

While partnerships models are an important aspect of service delivery models, a partnership approach may not be what a First Nations community and/or an ACCO wants to pursue or have in place. Direct/full transfer of funding, resources and program responsibilities to an ACCO from a non-Indigenous provider maybe the most appropriate way to achieve better outcomes for Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander families, children and young people (and the broader community as a whole).

*Supporting the growth of the ACCO sector and recognising our obligation as non-Indigenous NGOs to proportionally shift funding, resources and to cede power and authority to First Nations communities and ACCOs is a justice and equity issue.*

*Achieving better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children (all children) at scale, rather than primarily focusing on the financial change, will assist governing bodies, Boards, CEOs and NGO leadership teams to understand the changes better.*

It is critical that funding models support and allow for local solutions to emerge.

#### *Transition plans should be backed data*

Some services sought information on the level of data mapping and analysis that DSS have, or will be, undertaking to assess the current program footprint of services DSS funds. This includes an assessment to support the identification of where non-Indigenous NGOs are providing services to predominantly First Nations communities. The later would provide an indication of areas more likely to be impacted by a proportional shift in funding.

Organisations also questioned if DSS had undertaken appropriate mapping of current First Nations organisations and which organisations are already delivering services to non-Indigenous children and families.



Discussion points and questions raised include:

- Are there areas with service need, where there is no – or very limited – current service provision and could this process also take the opportunity to address service gaps?
- Not all recipients of services delivered by First Nations organisations will necessarily be First Nations children and families – sufficient resources must be provided to the ACCO to support delivery to service users from the community who choose to attend that ACCO.
- Similarly, non-Indigenous NGOs need an appropriate level of funding to provide services to community members regardless of their Indigeneity, race, faith or cultural background – consumer/service user choice must be maintained.
- Are projected population growth, expected increases in service demand, and changing community/regional demographics being taken into account? If the system is being overhauled, can some future planning be incorporated as well?

### Recommendations

- Overlay community consultation data with a mapping exercise to understand how areas of service need align with existing – and projected future – funding footprints.
- Adequately fund both ACCO and non-Indigenous NGO services in regional and remote areas to increase service system capacity and improve the mix of service choice.
- Allow flexibility in funding guidelines to allow local solutions to emerge (and avoid a one-size-fits-all approach).
- Ensure that any communication plans include specific comms for service user recipients.

### Organisational readiness to transition services to ACCOs varies greatly

#### *Many non-Indigenous NGOs are already taking steps towards transition*

Non-Indigenous NGOs were at various stages of preparedness. Some stated they had commenced transitioning services or formed partnerships with ACCOs with the view to transferring services in the short to medium term. Multiple respondents to the *Changing the Balance survey* reported they are already working towards supporting the transition of services to ACCOs, for example:

- Just over a quarter of respondents reported having started conversations internally but not yet engaging with ACCOs.
- Approximately 40% of responding organisations are already reaching out to ACCOs and/or are actively implementing changes with ACCOs.
- 13% describe themselves as ‘well advanced’/have transitioned some/all services.



### *Types of activities already being undertaken towards transition of services*

For organisations already actively working towards transition, the *Changing the Balance* survey showed that, activities already being undertaken include:

- Developing formal partnership agreements with ACCOs (62%).
- Workforce training and development (45%).
- Creating policies on information sharing and service recipient data transfer (26%).

### *A smaller number of organisations are unprepared for transition*

A smaller number of organisations were at the early stages or had not yet engaged with the upcoming changes in detail. Others expressed surprise at the impending changes. The *Changing the Balance* sector consultations were the first time some organisations became aware of the proposed transitions. For others, the consultations were the first confirmation that the transition was “definitely” going ahead. This made it difficult for some consultation participants to ‘shift gears’ from first hearing about the changes, to sharing their views about how the changes may impact their organisation.

Of organisations responding to the survey:

- 15% reported that they have not yet commenced activities to support the growth of the ACCO sector;
- 23% reported that they have not yet had discussions about the transition of services; and
- 20% stated they were ‘unprepared’ i.e. did not have a plan in place and would struggle to provide services while supporting the growth of the ACCO sector.

Uneven levels of awareness and preparedness across the sector highlighted the need for a communication plan and associated change management resourcing as discussed in the next sections below.

### *Transition is a change management process: Consistent communication about ‘what’s going on’ is required*

The transition process is a change management process and needs to be treated as such. It will take time, energy and resources. Survey responses repeatedly returned to the overarching concern that the transition needs to be treated as a sensitive change management process.

Respondents emphasised that change management:

- is complex and needs to be done properly at all levels, from government to community;
- requires time;
- requires adequate resourcing and finances;
- relies on clear and transparent communication;
- requires careful overarching planning to consider all impacts;
- relies on strong buy-in and clear roles;
- recognises that there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach;



- recognises that timeframes may vary between organisations. As one experienced provider stated: *“It takes longer than anticipated, make sure you have the right people involved, ask questions – don't assume, see change as positive, be respectful not judgemental, work at a slower pace to get it right.”*
- recognises that it will impact every area of an organisation’s “staff, culture, finances, profile, communications.”
- requires staff training and development and ongoing coaching support throughout the process; and
- requires mechanisms for organisations and staff to ask questions and raise concerns.

Thematically, key elements and processes required to support structural changes that were frequently commented upon included:

- **Transition Planning:** Develop a detailed transition plan that outlines the steps involved, the timeline, and the responsibilities of each party. This helps to ensure that the transition is well-organised and executed smoothly.
- **Continuity of Service:** Ensure that there is minimal disruption to services during the transition period. This may involve implementing temporary measures or workarounds to maintain service levels.
- **Feedback Mechanisms:** Establish a feedback mechanism to gather input from stakeholders about the transition process. This can help to identify areas for improvement and make adjustments accordingly.
- **Risk Management:** Identify potential risks associated with the transition and develop strategies to mitigate them. This can help to minimise disruptions and ensure that the transition stays on track.
- **Training and Support:** Provide training and support to staff who will be affected by the transition. This can help them to adapt to new processes or systems more easily and reduce resistance to change.
- **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Monitor the progress of the transition and evaluate its effectiveness. This can help to identify any issues early on and make adjustments as needed.

A recurring theme raised throughout consultations and the survey is that organisations need accurate and detailed information about the intended changes, as decisions are made and as implementation models evolve.

Comments raised included:

- “Early and comprehensive planning and continuous communication to all stakeholders.”
- “Effective and transparent communication, acknowledgement of the challenges and ensuring people are able to ask questions and raise concerns.”
- “Community-based communications plan.”
- “Take time to explain any transition to families that may have well-developed relationships with our community support staff.”



### *A centralised shared resource repository is required*

Non-Indigenous NGOs indicated that they are eager for guidance, supports or information to better engage with the transition process, including:

- Partnership/MOU principles, guidance or templates (70%)
- Cultural awareness and competence training or workshops to support working in culturally responsive ways with First Nations organisations (33%)
- Business development and or business diversification (21%)
- Legal advice (14%)
- Financial advice (10%)

Additional suggestions included pairing specific resources developed for the transition process (such as the DSS FAQ sheet) with some of the existing available resources on topics such as workforce development. Other ideas for what could be included in the resource repository as they relate to specific areas of concern are detailed in subsequent recommendations made in this report.

Many services have called for a centralised shared resource repository comprised of information and resources related to transition. This may be a webpage or website coordinated and maintained by either a federal government department or a community partner, such as a peak body. Ideally the website would provide service providers undergoing transition with a reliable and central place to access tools and information.

Some organisations further suggested that there should be a central helpline or transition officers to assist the transition process. Others suggested expert groups or communities of practice be set up across the sector such as:

- Transition Reference Groups
- Knowledge Groups
- Champions Groups



## Recommendations

- The Child and Family Investment Strategy requires all the support expected to come along with a change management process, including communication, information, resourcing strategies, including:
  - **Clear Communication:** Ensure that all stakeholders are informed about the transition plan, including the reasons for the change, the timeline, and how it will affect them. This helps to manage expectations and reduce uncertainty. Government needs to invest in a communication plan as early as possible which includes:
    - A well-promoted, user-friendly source (portal) for all communication relating to this process;
    - greater socialisation of the changes being pursued – Some have suggested that the proposed changes would be more accurately described as a “system redesign” than “transition”);
    - framing change from an equity lens which holds the wellbeing of families, children and young people front and centre;
    - message guides tailored to cohorts of people at all levels of the change process;
    - the progressive release of details about transition funding and timing (as soon as practicable once decided) in order to enable NGOs to prepare; and
    - lead times prior to implementation allowing for socialisation of ideas, adaptation to the new environment and at least 12 months for organisations to consider, adjust and respond.
  - **Stakeholder Engagement:** Involve stakeholders in planning process to both inform and gain input, this will assist in building support. This should include:
    - consultation with First Nations communities at local/regional levels;
    - sector/jurisdictional consultation and briefings at regional levels;
    - contact officers/transition teams with governments – nominated staff that ACCOs and non-Indigenous NGOs can contact for detailed information, updates, ask questions, access resources (template agreements, centralised advice etc);
  - **a Centralised ‘source of truth’:** develop a central repository of trusted information to support non-Indigenous NGOs with transition. This could include elements along the following lines:
    - Fact sheets (such as the DSS Fact Sheet);
    - Example MOUs and/or MOU templates;
    - Practice Guides for consistent approach during the transfer;
    - Co-Design Guides;
    - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Strategy;
    - Cultural Safety Framework;
    - Workforce Plan;



- Cultural Learning Strategy;
  - Cultural Safety Practice Guideline, including Safe work environments checklist and Cultural profile;
  - History Project;
  - Aboriginal Engagement Statement;
  - information on data sovereignty; and
  - protocols on data transfer.
- Information supports should be backed by change management/transition officers who can support communities, answer questions and oversee communities of practice (such as the RAP, Knowledge and Champions group mentioned above).

## **Primary organisational and operational challenges arising from the transfer of funding allocations to ACCOs**

*As a large non-Indigenous NGO provider across multiple Indigenous communities, we support and fully expect to be impacted by the structural shift that will occur. But we need to be told well in advance of what's coming down the pipeline. We need this so that we can plan, adapt and remodel other activities of the organisation so that we can continue to run a viable, quality service to those who access our services. My organisation is already – now – undertaking business and operational planning for 2026, and beyond; the transition is a big unknown.*

*Again, we are supportive and committed to the outcome trying to be achieved, – it is critical that we know what is being planned at the earliest opportunity so that we can plan.*

Organisational and operational challenges to be faced by mainstream NGOs from the transfer of funding allocations to ACCOs are broad ranging, starting first and foremost with concerns over the impacts on service recipients/community. Organisations are concerned about how changes to current funding profile will impacting broader service provision of their organisations. However, without knowing the scale or quantum of change that will impact upon them, considered assessment and detailed planning at an individual organisational level cannot be undertaken at this stage.

In most consultation sessions held, there was discussion on how funding amounts allocated to support programs/services in scope for transition would be calculated.



Participant questions included:

- What are the assumptions are being made in determining how 'proportional' is defined or calculated and what amount of funding will be allocated to programs that are moved to other providers (ACCOs)? Will the formula be based on:
  - whether the current program is considered an Indigenous specific program or primarily aimed at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families' children and young people?
  - the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families' children and young people accessing services now?
  - a set percentage of a program stream's overall finding amount being set aside for First Nations providers/applicant only?
  - the population of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members in an area/region?
  - the funding base of many programs have been eroded over recent years – will the transition process address this and provide additional funding as well?
  - will supplementary funding be provided to assist receiving ACCOs to expand their infrastructure capacity in addition to direct service delivery cost – new equipment, upgrade to IT systems, increased data/information recorded keeping requirements?

Hence, a very strong call from the sector is to be advised on an ongoing basis how government transition plans and implementation timeframes are developing. Organisations need to be told the details of the changed arrangements in advance, with sufficient notification, to enable appropriate planning and adjustment strategies to be developed.

#### *Timeframes for transition need to be flexible and responsive to community needs*

While Families Australia emphasised the non-immediate nature of the changes proposed by DSS, and the broader National Child and Family Investment Strategy, in general (with contracts changing from 2027 as stated on the DSS fact sheet), many organisations still viewed this as a very short timeframe.

Many suggested that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community readiness should be the primary consideration of the timeframes and pace of transition processes, followed by service and operational continuity requirements across local service systems and government/funder timelines.

Organisations commented upon the need for an iterative process that was sufficiently flexible to encompass local community/ regional service capacity and to allow for trusted relationships to be fostered and developed.

Comments included:

- Having enough time to move at the pace of trust and relationship is important.
- Transitioning services too fast poses significant risk that organisations won't be able to deliver needed services effectively. Planning and time are needed to build capability and roll out alternative approaches.



- We have learnt that respectful two-way learning conversations are vital in the early stages of collaborations and that this can take some time to develop trust.
- create spaces for ‘deep’ listening and discussion that builds honesty, truth-telling, respect, and understanding of what is required to manage change. There is a need for restorative and robust conversations, supported by strategies to constructively analyse and respond to any conflicts and disagreements.
- Time for non-Indigenous NGOs to support ACCOs where they have expertise/knowledge which the ACCO would like them to share (e.g. HR, financial, data, evaluation and governance policies and procedures).
- Introducing a new program into our service take time and energy, as does winding down or transferring a program to someone else. Management and administration of the change is a task in its own right – happy to take this but additional support will be required to avoid service users and clients being disrupted or negatively impacted.
- Consultation and survey respondents also pointed out that important lessons can be learnt from a detailed analysis of New Zealand’s transition to first nations-led services. One participant (who identified as Māori) had worked for a Māori-led organisation in NZ at the time of transfer of services. She noted that a too-fast transfer process for her organisation had fractured relationships with non-Indigenous NGOs, which then took many years to rebuild.

As one participant stated:

*Let's actually just do it properly and do it once [in a way which] sets everyone up to succeed. Rather than establishing another process, then in another few years, we're going to say – well, we tried something, and that didn't work – let's just do it properly.*

*But it's not an overnight fix, it's very big change. A rushed and unsupported process is not going to serve anybody and actually will harm the people you're intending to assist. My dearest hope is it's done well, so it serves the people who need it to work.*

### **Recommendation**

- Flexibility within existing funding agreements will be required to create the space and capacity of organisations to establish/strengthening of relationships and trust between entities transitioning programs and service.

### *Workforce: If not managed properly, the transition process may exacerbate existing workforce shortages and issues*

Many organisations were deeply concerned about workforce challenges for the NGO sector generally and the child and family sub-sector (these are even more pronounced in regional and remote areas). Some organisations suggested assumptions have been made by decision makers that the existing workforce has sufficient capacity to facilitate structural change without disruption. They are concerned this is not the case.



Key issues of concern raised by organisations included:

- Increased HR support will be required to process potential changes to contracts, staff redeployment, redundancies staff re/training (incl. cultural awareness training).
- Experience and corporate cultural knowledge may be lost as staff transition: non-Indigenous NGOs are keenly aware of the importance of supporting service recipient choice by continuing to provide a service which is as culturally appropriate as possible and therefore will need to invest in staff training, etc on a reduced budget.
- increased staffing may be required to support the transition of programs. (Who foots the bill?)
- EAP and pastoral support will be required during the transition and implementation period.
- Risks of not being able to staff existing contracts: Some staff may choose to leave contracts early if they know the program they are working on is likely to end.
- Risks of further reducing NGO sector workforce. Staff may decide to exit the NGO sector, and it may be difficult to attract new staff to the sector at a time of change.
- Providing supporting for volunteers affected by the transition.
- Organisations are likely to be financially liable for redundancies, or partial redundancies even if a new position is found.
- Organisations are concerned that the HR costs associated with transition will be substantial and will be expected to be 'absorbed' by the organisations.
- maintenance of staff conditions if existing staff transition to a different provider, (e.g. portability of accrued benefits, etc).

Some of the issues raised and discussed in this area in this area align / are documented in further detail in the *Trends and needs in the Australian child welfare workforce* paper<sup>2</sup>.

The authors write:

“The results from our study are sobering. They demonstrate the significant hurdles that need to be overcome before change can happen. That change encompasses a well-prepared, educated and supported child welfare workforce that can effectively deliver the preventative strategies and support programs necessary to reduce the prevalence of child abuse and neglect in Australia.” (p.5)

Proposed solutions and suggested initiatives included:

- Supporting the unique needs of First Nations workers currently working for non-Indigenous NGOs. (e.g. holding tailored consultation processes in which First Nations workers can discuss their concerns and hopes in a culturally appropriate and safe way, independent of general consultation mechanisms).

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<sup>2</sup> Russ, Erica & Morley, Louise & Driver, Mark & Lonne, Prof Bob & Harries, Maria & Higgins, Daryl. (2022). Trends and needs in the Australian child welfare workforce: An exploratory study. 10.24268/acu.8x396.



- The introduction of regional/jurisdictional community-based transition support roles – key contact officers that ACCOs and non-Indigenous NGOs could call upon for information, access to resources, to facilitate community briefings and the like.
- Greater pastoral and workplace support for workers and volunteers impacted by structural changes. Ideas suggested included supporting a centralised employee advice line, measures to increase access to EAP programs.
- Funding scholarships for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers seeking to formalise qualifications and undertake further study (such as social work degrees).
- Governments investing in incentives to attract people to NGO sector employment opportunities in regional and remote locations.
- Sharing workers across non-Indigenous NGOs and ACCOs is a solution that some organisations have found has worked successfully including:
  - in regional and remote areas; and/or
  - where a transitioning service is not enough to make up a full-time workload

### Recommendations

- A National workforce plan is required for the community services sector;
- An appropriately resourced communications strategy needs to be targeted to workers and volunteers;
- Commission specific consultation forums for First Nations Workers;
- The aforementioned proposed shared resource repository should include links to relevant workplace legislation, Fair Work guidelines, employee and employer bodies;
- additional resourcing for sector training initiatives – worker upskilling, micro credentialling, redeployment assistance should be considered to assist facilitate the transition; and
- consider providing NGOs additional funding to cover the costs of supporting staff with transfer of entitlements, redeployment or redundancy – (accrued entitlements of an individual carried forward may not necessarily be fully provisioned for at the point transition).

### *Risk and governance: Boards need to be prepared*

Survey participants were asked to ‘describe the level of awareness you feel your board or guidance committee has about supporting the growth of the ACCO sector (including changes to NGO sector funding profiles)’. Responses revealed an approximate 50/50 split between organisations with very limited awareness and those with quite strong awareness and involvement. Suggestions for Boards included:

- ensuring First Nations/ACCO representation in governing and planning forums of non-Indigenous NGOs, such as involvement of Elders on Boards and forums, adoption of First Nations Advisory Committees and recruitment of cultural advisors;
- Adding funding transition as an ongoing agenda item on the organisations’ risk register;
- Have reporting mechanisms in place for the board/governing body to monitor progress in the organisation.



## Recommendations

- Ensure that specific messaging for boards is included in transition support communications.
- The aforementioned shared resource repository needs to include specific information for board governance. This may include suggestions for improving representation on the Board and information on how to include the transition on the Board agenda, risk register, etc.

### *Data sovereignty and transfer*

*“There should be consideration given as early as possible to the data collection methods required to demonstrate outcomes in a culturally appropriate way, while maintaining the flexibility for ACCOs to respond to service recipient and community needs as they change.”*

Non-Indigenous organisations are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of data sovereignty for First Nations peoples, communities and organisations. They are also aware that any transfer of services will likely require a transfer of service recipient files/ data collected by one provider to another. This will require significant time and energy on behalf of both the transferring and receiving organisations to ensure the correct processes are in place. The proposed overhaul of the federal privacy act will further affect how organisations collect, use and manage data.

A number of organisations participating in the consultations indicated that they were starting to think about complex issues related to data which need to be worked through including ‘ownership’ (client or provider considerations), consent/client permission to share information, confidentiality of case notes (case files), data privacy requirements and trailing information/record keeping obligations.

One organisation reported that their biggest concerns in forming a partnership with an ACCO had been data sharing but that they were able to work together to find a solution:

*“We wondered: Where do we store our joint service user information? And that's taken us a long time to fix, we've only just fixed that now. Service users' confidentiality is a big consideration. And then there's the infrastructure. And then there are considerations of how we report, how we gather data, how we extract data from our databases to report to funders, and how we write reports. At the start we had concerns as an organisation about the integrity of our database if we shared it.*



*But we've worked out that we can we lock down our database to give the ACCO access to our database within a confined and locked down capacity. And that's what we've managed to do, which is, I think, phenomenal and quite groundbreaking.*

*But there was no funding for [the time and energy we put into navigating the issues and finding a solution]. It was self-funded.*

Sector support in the form training to increase capacity, information and advisory resources – at a regional or community level – was repeatedly raised as a potential solution to issues related to data and information management.

### **Recommendations**

- The aforementioned shared resource repository should include:
  - information on data sovereignty;
  - information on data transfer; and
  - guidance on privacy and record keeping obligations.

### *Developing the relationships required to support transition and work collaboratively has costs and takes time*

Services explained that developing the sector partnerships and trusting relationships required for the successful transition of services takes time and incurs costs for both organisations which are unfunded. Building and maintaining those relationships with a view to the facilitated transition of funding and services does take some time, energy and effort. Both First Nations and non-Indigenous organisations are wondering if they are to be expected to incorporate that time and energy within their existing service funding profile.

Several large non-Indigenous NGOs have already formed strong working relationships with First Nations organisations in their region and areas and have indicated that while they had to make a conscious effort to budget for the time and financial costs of doing so, they recognise this is not possible for all organisations.

Providers stressed that service recipient transfer should also be an iterative, case by case process, with a warm hand over rather than an end date of one service and the start of another. In practice, a solution may be, for example, to fund both the transitioning NGO service and the ACCO receiving service recipients for a period of time.

### **Recommendations**

- Establish a funding reserve to support two organisations to work together concurrently for short periods of time (e.g. up to a 6-month period) during program handovers.
- The transition process should also:
  - incorporate external coaching/mentoring supports with a focus on how to enact best practices in collaborations and develop partnerships in a culturally safe way;
  - have capacity for organisational staff and volunteers to participate in sector development initiatives – e.g. learning circles, practice networks. Joint training initiatives that provide access to broader insights, practices, and resources to foster stronger collaborations should be prioritised.



### *Loss of economies of scale*

The loss of funding for a specific program has impacts upon an organisation beyond the direct scope of the program being transitioned. It is a standard practice across the sector that a percentage of all grants coming into an organisation contribute towards an organisation's administration and overheads.

A reduction of overall funding to an organisation (e.g. via transitions of a discreet program to an ACCO provider) is likely to result in reduced financial contributions to general operational costs of the entity. The fixed costs of, for example, HR and payroll systems, compliance and risk management process and rent will remain. This means there is a loss of economies of scale. Organisations are aware that change and adjustment will need to be managed in order to limit the impacts of any individual service transition across the organisation.

### **Questions around transition of resources**

Organisations are also seeking clarity on how resources and equipment of an existing program or service will be treated during the transfer of the program/service to another provider. In part this is a scope of impact consideration: Will equipment and resources purchased by a program be transferred across with the service delivery funding?

It is particularly pertinent when equipment and resource costs have been met from contributions from different funding agreements/sources within an organisation and then utilised as a shared organisational resource. Transport – such as a small bus or multi-people mover – was put forward as an example where initial costs may have been shared across multiple programs and cost centres and then used to support the delivery of multiple programs.

*The young men's lifestyle program and the young mum's program shared the cost of program vehicle that they both use. If one program is transferred to an ACCO, will funds be provided to the ACCO to purchase a vehicle to support delivery of the program they are taking on? If the vehicle goes to the ACCO with the program – which we would support in principle – how do, we continue to deliver the program that has stayed with us without a vehicle? Could we share the vehicle with the ACCO?*

*Being told how things like this will be managed and supported is important for everyone to know.*

These examples show how ACCOs and non-Indigenous organisations will likely have to continue to share resources in partnership models over time.



## Potential issues of future funding sustainability for mainstream NGOs in the child and family services sector

Most organisations consulted during the project recognised that they would be directly impacted – in some way – by a proportionate and structural change to the current funding profile of the sector. While this was recognised and supported, many indicated that it was very difficult for organisations to discuss the impacts on future funding sustainability until the quantum of change is known. Notwithstanding, respondents to our survey indicated their organisations were already considering how the changes would impact their organisations with:

- 75% feeling at least moderately prepared to maintain continuity of their service (and, of those, 28% feeling well prepared or very well prepared);
- 70% have begun discussing and/or planning how they would respond to changed financial circumstances; and
- 36% felt cutting back service provision and diversifying their current footprint would be a likely outcome.

A variety of views were expressed, with some organisations advocating for non-Indigenous NGOs to be able to continue at their current level of funding and that the growth of the ACCOs sector should occur outside of the existing funding envelope for the sector. In this way, ‘growth and new funding’ coming into services systems in the years ahead would be directed towards or heavily weighted to ACCOs and First Nations providers. Some expressing this view reasoned that non-Indigenous NGO services were already at capacity and will continue to be under increasing demand (especially given the cost-of-living crisis) and that ACCOs, with their expertise, will likely reach new service recipients not currently serviced by non-Indigenous NGOs, but who require assistance.

Response to the survey demonstrated that many organisations have started diversification of services into new cohorts or programs (46%); and

Approximately 20% of organisations indicate that they would consider supplementing funding by increasing philanthropic funding, establishment of a social enterprise arm to support community programs or consolidating services with another provider.

### *Coordination with states and territories is required*

Most organisations attending the consultations would not be heavily affected by the DSS funding profile change in and of itself, however, they expressed concern that cumulative changes to funding profiles – if several similar changes were carried out at Commonwealth and state levels simultaneously or in close succession – could greatly impact their ability to provide services.



Given that many non-Indigenous NGOs and ACCOs alike rely on a mix of state & federal funding, there is a concern that transition processes need to be coordinated. Non-Indigenous NGOs and ACCOs will need to plan for the impact of both federal and jurisdictional government transition plans.

### Recommendations

- Ensure the greatest possible coordination across respective federal and jurisdictional implementation activities; cordinated planning, messaging, timing and support is needed from government at all levels to ensure a smooth transfer process.
- Implementation timeframes require a degree of flexibility to accommodate localised solutions and supporting process – rates of / capacity to progress change will differ from community to community.
- Draw upon key learnings from the jurisdictional/Commonwealth transition processes of recent times – utilise lessons learnt.

### *There are unique impacts on organisations operating in rural and remote areas*

A number of organisations operating in rural and remote areas – with both large and with small footprints – who currently service a large proportion of First Nations service recipients are extremely concerned about the proposed changes to funding levels.

While supportive of the intent and longer-term outcomes of greater service provision in a more culturally appropriate way by ACCOs to First Nations communities, their concerns and questions included:

- The adequacy of current system capacity and ability to appropriately respond to – and meet – community need. Will service gaps/limitations be addressed, or will some of the problems ‘just be shifted’;
- How will regions with no alternative ACCO provider or where the ACCO does not wish to take a program or service on be accommodated? Especially if a ‘one size fits all’ or ‘whole of funding stream’ is adopted?
- loss of economies of scale and consequential scaling back of other activities/service of the organisations (see page 24); and
- developing expertise and scaling up of delivery skills within a provider – ACCO or otherwise – takes time, especially if programs and services require specialist skills (e.g. psychologists, senior social workers, etc). If existing staff on these programs choose to move across to the ACCO – the skill/competency profile of the non-Indigenous NGO could be reduced:

*I would support my current staff to transfer to the ACCO and follow the service – if that is what everyone wanted. But we need to also retain accreditation in some areas of my organisation. If specific skill sets are lost – and we all know hard recruitment is in regional/ remote settings to start with – I worry about recruitment.*



Discussions with non-Indigenous NGO service providers in rural and remote areas indicate they would like to see:

- community consultations to understand the views and concerns of all service users;
- service recipient choice maintained through a diversity of services offered;
- adequate funding to ensure service continuity; and
- support to foster ongoing partnerships with First Nations communities and ACCOs to tailor local solutions.

### *Government procurement and contract management models need to be examined*

During the consultation process we did come across a few organisations who, in a state context, wanted to transfer services early but expressed frustration that existing funding models did not allow for early transfer.

A number of non-Indigenous NGOs provided examples of instances in which they had developed a strong relationship with a local First Nations provider. In these cases, the NGO provider and the ACCO believed all the right conditions were in place for a transition of funding and services to occur. However, when the two organisations have approached funding bodies and requested flexibility in funding to voluntarily start an early transition of services and funding to the ACCO this was not possible due to the existing conditions of the tender and inflexibility on behalf of funding providers. As one provider stated:

*I've had several situations where we have wanted to transition and we have been just told, 'oh, well, we can't do that until you know, can't do that mid contract. Might do that next...' It just goes on and on and on because the departments don't have the resources and flexibility. But it's very frustrating. And these are these are not high-risk situations. Everyone's in agreement. I think relying on big scale commissioning tender processes as your only mechanism to achieve this transfer is really problematic and unnecessary and I think it probably reflects on the commissioning resources of the departments. But there are some easy wins that could be had and some progress that could be made that could speed this up if we could do that."*

Systems and processes need to have much greater flexibility and capacity to achieve and enable a variety of outcomes to occur.

Organisations raised issues about the way that government contracts are managed. A number of views have been put forward including:

- "Government needs to change its procurement and contract management to suit consortia rather than a lead agency that has the financial and administrative power over the other partner or partner(s)..."
- "There should be consideration given as early as possible to the data collection methods required to demonstrate outcomes in a culturally appropriate way."
- "Government policy, particularly service contracting, has been the main barrier, plus challenges of competition for limited resources."



- “The government is asking for stronger partnerships while continuing a grants process that is adversarial and unnecessarily competitive.”
- “The challenge is with the way governments (and DSS for the Federal government) are creating unnecessary contestability between mainstream and ACCO services. We need more of both, not one played off against the other. What do communities want? We know there are many in community that want choice, and this is self-determination.”
- “Aligning with an ACCO to provide advice on cultural safety and appropriate service delivery would be more productive as we would be coming together as equal partners in the delivery of services which can be measured from both sides to ensure that a distorted view isn’t given by the ‘lead’ agency.”

The picture emerging is that there are a variety of ways that the transition and implementation of programs will vary from community to community, region to region, and between First Nations providers and non-Indigenous providers.

## **Highlight regions/locations where mainstream NGOs are in a position to be early participants in funding transfers to ACCOs**

### *Organisations self-selecting for voluntary early transfer*

During the consultation phase of the project a small number of non-Indigenous organisations told us that they felt prepared for transition and were actively working with an ACCO towards transition. Our survey indicated that approximately 30% of responding organisations reported either ‘actively implementing changes with ACCOs’ or having ‘already transitioned some/all services’. This includes 13% who have already ‘smoothly transitioned services’.

Funders could seek interest from communities and non-Indigenous NGOs, who believe they are ready or are keen to transfer services at pace, and proactively actively support the process. Such organisations were seeking information on how to indicate their readiness to governments (at either a Federal or jurisdictional level) to actively assist and facilitate arrangement within existing funding arrangements and administrative arrangements.

As mentioned in the last section, a few organisations provided examples where they felt there was strong support for the transfer of a program/service at a local level – the ACCO was supportive and wanted to take on the program, the non-Indigenous NGO was committed to transferring the program and associated resources to the ACCO but administrative limitations (such as procurement and grant guidelines) stymied efforts.’

Governments adopting a more proactive position of *‘this could be made to work if...’* and allocating dedicated resources (staffing positions/transitions teams) to work alongside providers to facilitate changes within current funding process and agreements, would be of benefit. This may enable solutions for proposals previously seen as too difficult to accommodate to be achieved and would provide additional impetus to facilitating change amongst providers.



Other factors that will assist in identifying areas in which the conditions are more suitable for early transfer include:

- a desire and preparedness of First Nations communities and ACCOs to take on and deliver the program/services – is it something the community wants?
- illicit direct commitments from non-Indigenous NGO governing bodies and executive management teams to actively transition programs/services as an organisational priority in a timely manner;
- with appropriate notice, taking advantage of existing (pending) funding renewal cycles – seek incremental change in the medium term will the overall Child and Family Invest Strategy and as jurisdictional transition arrangements evolve and are finalised:
- service system maturity, the degree to which:
- previous collaborative work and or partnerships are in place;
- there is capacity to draw upon/ extend existing MOUs;
- there is an understanding of, or access to information and advice, on service recipient/data transfer protocols.

#### *State experience of transition may impact preparedness for transfer of services at a Commonwealth level*

There are different levels of preparedness for transition between the various states and territories. Some organisations – both ACCO and non-Indigenous NGOs – explained that they had recent negative experiences of the transition of services at a jurisdictional/state level. In these jurisdictions, repair work and healing may need to occur prior to a federal transition process being progressed. An example comment being:

*“Conditions are currently not right in [our state] for DSS to find the right level of receptiveness [among ACCOs and non- ACCOs] and collaboration of service providers to implement these changes effectively.”*

#### **Recommendations**

- Ensure that commissioning arrangements contract and funding agreements and processes have capacity for local solutions and, and for early transition to occur without the need for arduous redesign of parameters;
- Use data mapping to find areas of systems maturity, saturation of services and prioritise the transfer of services accordingly. (Clearly organisations in remote areas where there are currently no viable ACCOs will not be “first cabs off the rank”); and
- Create contract conditions which are conducive to partnership models and/or the early transfer of services.



## Conclusion

Overall, the findings of the *Changing the Balance* research project indicate that the majority of organisations consulted to date understand the importance of, and support, the growth of the ACCO sector. The change management process required to achieve change will be best supported by clear, early and continual communication from Government. Cooperation and alignment between the Commonwealth and the jurisdictions will be important. And sector leaders will also have an important role to play in messaging and leading the charge.

The needs of communities, families, children and young people must be at the forefront of change, and there should be scope and flexibility for local and regional solutions to occur – A one size fits all approach is inadequate. Change needs to occur at a manageable pace for all organisations involved and solutions will likely need to be bespoke and tailored. Changes are best made – as one participant observed – on “a service by service, community by community, region by region basis” if a smooth transition and continuity of choice for service recipients is to be maintained.

Particular attention needs to be given to rural and remote regions to ensure service recipient choice and service continuity are maintained. Many organisations are keen to collaborate and form partnerships between ACCOs and non-Indigenous organisations, if ACCOs in their region see this as a good way of achieving great outcomes for families, children and young people.

Supports will ideally include clear communication and a shared resource repository and additional resources to support the transition, such as helplines and transition officers. There may also be a need for additional financial supports directly to organisations (both non-Indigenous and ACCOs) to cover the cost of change management and thereby ‘fund the transition’. Change will also be supported by a flexible approach to contract and procurement processes.



## Case study I:

### ‘Stepping up’ by stepping back: a pathway to transition

This Case Study shows that, with the right commitment, ACCOs and non-Indigenous NGOs can willingly shift decision making and resources to ACCOs – sooner rather than later.

#### **Getting the foundation right...**

The partnership began with a conscious decision to strengthen the existing relationship between the non-Indigenous NGO and an ACCO.

Both organisations recognised that local First Nations people would benefit from increased ACCO involvement in the service delivery of the current program in their community.

The non-Indigenous NGO acknowledged the interest and aspirations of First Nations community members could be met more effectively, and more appropriately, through an ACCO, than they may be able to achieve as a non-Indigenous provider.

Through a series of meetings over several months, the two organisations took the time to build relationships, listen to each other, and ensure that there was an agreed understanding of what each party was seeking to achieve. Meetings and discussions canvassed topics including:

- Discuss historical and community context;
- Understand partnership aspiration;
- Establish commitment to work together;
- Develop partnership vision;
- Alignment and agreement on partnership principles and values;
- Mapping the unique strengths, challenges and barriers of each organisation;
- Discuss initial opportunities for knowledge / resource sharing and transfer; and
- Confirming elements of partnership agreement, including financial and governance decisions.

Keys to this process was equal involvement in planning and decision-making processes, documentation of decisions and agreement reached, a genuine preparedness to work through challenges in a productive and respectful manner, and willingness to do things differently.

*“We were prepared to encounter hiccups along the way and to take the time to have difficult conversations and work through issues if needed. We saw we had a responsibility to engage in the process and, supported by senior management and our governing body, we want to provide better services to community, including having services we have been provided being delivered by others.”*

#### **Decision making, transferring funds and resources in the short term...**

Through a collaborative (and documented) process, ACCO representatives are now directly involved in the delivery and administration of various elements of the program and services offered.



With agreement of the funding provider, a proportion of program funding originally granted to the non-Indigenous NGO has been transferred to the ACCO to support their involvement, participation in and work on the program.

*“We didn’t need to renegotiate the contract or go through another funding process. As the lead agency, we were accountable for the money in a reporting and accountability sense per our agreement. However, the funder could clearly see that ACCO involvement would result in better outcomes for children, young people and the community, and for both organisations.”*

*“The lesson for us was that – when government conditions are flexible – it’s possible to ‘walk the talk’ now, without waiting for a new funding round or being reactive to an external change in policy. We wanted to pursue change now and worked out a way to do so.”*

### **Continuing the journey in the longer term...**

Program adaptation, ACCO representatives being at the program’s decision-making table, transferring financial resources and increasing ACCO led involvement program delivery to community, have been incorporated with existing funding/program parameters. They will remain in place for the remainder of funding agreement period held by the non-Indigenous NGO, a further 18 months.

When the funding for the program comes up for renewal in (12-18 months), the two organisations will use the opportunity to further strengthen the role of the ACCO. Both entities have committed to the submission of a ‘joint bid’ in the upcoming commissioning process as equal partners.

#### **Key takeaways:**

- The interests of community and service user must be put front and centre.
- Robust and honest conversations must be had – prepare to be challenged.
- non-Indigenous NGO have a responsibility to seek out and incorporate Indigenous-led responses and solutions.
- Decision making authority and resourcing must be shared in periods of transition.
- Leadership and the authority to pursue change – the commitment and support of governing bodies of non-Indigenous NGOs (Directors/Committees of Management and Senior Managers) – is key.
- If you put in the effort and meet your commitments, change can be achieved quickly.

*The case study is provided as one example of a partnership supporting a progressive or staged transition approach. There are a variety of partnership and collaborative approaches that could be drawn to support the scaling up ACCOs, including direct transfer of funding and service delivery responsibility to an ACCO/ First Nations provider.*

*Non-Indigenous NGOs need to ask First Nations communities and First Nations organisations their ideas are and what would work best for their community and actively support an Indigenous led response.*



## Case Study II:

### A large NGO's journey towards reconciliation

The case study explores the reconciliation journey of a large non-Indigenous non-government organisation (NGO) with a national footprint. It demonstrates the importance of strong organisational leadership, commitments and processes in order to embed new ways of working, develop formal agreements, and actually transition resources and services to ACCOs over time. The NGO provides multiple family support services designed to strengthen families and protect children to tens of thousands of service recipients. The organisation's revenue sources are federal and state/territory funding supported by fundraising.

More than a decade ago, the NGO began their journey with a Statement of Reconciliation. This created a clear organisational commitment to improving the lives of children and young people and upholding the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to grow up safe and remain connected in their own families, communities and culture.

*“The Statement of Reconciliation is a vital foundation for our organisation, given that more than a quarter of our children and families identify as First Nations peoples.”*

The NGO have continued – and built upon this commitment – and have now developed their third Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) – a Stretch RAP to support the vision of an Australia where First Nations children and young people enjoy the same opportunities in life as their non-Indigenous peers.

*“Our work is based on the concept of bi-cultural or ‘two-way’ practice, where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people walk side by side and learn from each other as equals.”*

The NGO has developed a formal practice framework to guide their work with Aboriginal peoples and weave together all planning, policies, practices, structures and initiatives.

Highlights of their work include:

- building Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives into leadership
- strong Aboriginal representation on the Board of Directors
- establishing an Aboriginal Cultural Unit, led and staffed by First Nations peoples.

One of the NGO's most successful transition projects involved using an auspicing arrangement as a stepping stone to assist the emergence of an independent ACCO. The auspicing arrangements for an Aboriginal out-of-home care and family preservation organisation, within the NGO focused on empowering the service to become an independent Aboriginal corporation, which was successfully achieved after several years.

The move was celebrated by the Board of Directors, Executive Leadership and frontline workers who all saw the benefits for the children and families in the local community.



In other contexts, the NGO has worked towards a slower transition process by formalising a commitment to ongoing partnerships through working with ACCOs to develop Memorandums of Understanding (MoU). These documents formalise both the working relationship and the provision of significant resources being provided to the ACCO from the NGO to support the development of the ACCO service and support them to take accept more service recipients as they are ready.

The MoU formalises a commitment to:

- respecting Aboriginal Peoples' inherent right of self-determination;
- upholding the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People principle;
- developing work plans that include agreed priorities, actions and timing;
- working together to plan placement arrangements and commit to the transition of Aboriginal children to ACCOs; and
- working together in a way that is underpinned with respect and collaboration.

The MoU is supported by:

- regular meetings between the two organisations' senior management;
- financial agreement underpinning the formal the work plan;
- provision of resources to the ACCO as requested; and
- shared activities and events.

*“A key learning is that, even with an MOU in place, we need to keep working on and developing the connection and relationship.”*

**Key takeaways:**

- A strong and clear commitment to Reconciliation and supporting the growth of the ACCO sector must be driven by the NGO executive and adopted at all levels of the organisation.
- Engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and peoples in non-Indigenous NGO leadership is key to success.
- There is no 'one size fits all' approach to the development of relationships with ACCOs with a view to transition, even within the one NGO. Solutions can vary from region to region and can range from auspicing with a view to independence to partnerships with a slower transfer of services at a pace set by the ACCO.



## Commonwealth and Jurisdictional Investment Plans for Growing the ACCO Sector

As part of the information gathering exercise undertaken for the *Changing the Balance* project, Families Australia wrote to all states and territories and the Commonwealth seeking general information on their respective current – and intended – efforts in providing increased funding to ACCOs for the provision of Early Child and Family Support Services. We also requested that they provide an overview of recent activities and an update on the status of the development of specific transition efforts or plans, including:

- Previous / recent deliberative efforts to increase funding to ACCOs in early child and family support services;
- stated commitments or intended efforts to transition a greater proportion of funding to ACCOs – including an indication of time frames (e.g. commencement/ transition dates if known);
- The level of work undertaken to date to select or identify program streams where the transition of proportional funding to ACCOs is likely to occur in the immediate or near term;
- the status and scope of transition strategies and plans in place (or under development);
- anticipated opportunities and challenges that non-Indigenous non-government organisations (NGOs) will need to address through the transition process; and
- change management support strategies being considered to facilitate a smooth transition process.

All States and Territories, and the Commonwealth, responded to the information request, providing an overview of efforts and work undertaken in their respective jurisdictions.

Information provided by governments in response has been drawn upon and informed comment across various sections of the *Changing the Balance* report. Detailed analysis of individual responses by respective governments, or comparative analysis of submitted information was not in scope.

In summary, there are a variety of models and approaches being used across states, territories and the Commonwealth to increase the amount of funding being extended to ACCOs and First Nations organisations.

While some jurisdictions include investment in new services as to meet investment goals, the transition of funding through grant recommissioning is a primary method of reinvestment. In broad terms, measures to increase funding to respective ACCO sectors included:

- growing investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specialist programs;
- localised recommissioning of services to ACCO funding as opportunities arise;
- reviewing commissioning policies and practices to ensure they facilitate investment in ACCOs as a priority;
- formal agreements and frameworks to guide aims and actions;



- the development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-focused procurement plans; and
- establishing consultation processes, partnerships and peak bodies to guide transition.

All governments indicated that they are developing strategies and communication resources to engage and inform both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous sector about intended plans and programmatic changes being developed and implemented. Various, the types of approaches and supports referenced include:

- direct engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and bodies in service and system redesign;
- increasing flexibility in procurement, commissioning and administrative processes and procedures;
- recognition that a narrow 'lift and shift' approach to the transition of program and services is insufficient – re-design, adaption and methodological changes need to be incorporated;
- regular and ongoing sector engagement with current service providers is required;
- engagement with relevant advocacy/representative organisations (peak bodies, Unions, employer bodies) as needed; and
- administrative/bureaucratic imposts of the transition need to be minimised.

All government re-affirmed their commitments to scaling up and growing the scope of the Aboriginal community-controlled sector, and we can see that all states and territories have embarked upon efforts to do so – noting that the pace of progress needs to increase significantly beyond current levels.

The Child and Family investment strategy will assist and speed up the process of redesigning the system, growing the funding base of Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, and put more service delivery, funding and policy design processes into the hands of First Nations representatives, especially for programs and services that impact First Nations communities.



## Attachment A: Sector Consultations

Table 1: Dates, locations and attendance numbers for the consultations held are as follows:

Date	State	Target Audience	Venue	Attendance
15 February	National	National Coalition	Online	116
19 March	VIC	Melbourne Metro	CFEFCW	12
19 March	VIC	Vic Regional	Online (run from CFEFCW)	10
20 March	SA	Adelaide Metro	UCity SA	17
20 March	SA	SA Regional	Online (run from UCity SA)	10
3 April	QLD	Brisbane Metro	Victoria Park	27
3 April	QLD	QLD Regional	Online (run from PeakCare)	31
16 April	WA	Perth Metro	WACOSS	24
16 April	WA	Group interview with young service users	Perth	7 (young people and workers)
16 April	WA	WA regional	Online (run from WACOSS)	14
17 April	WA	Geraldton Regional	Geraldton Multipurpose	12
22 April	NSW	Sydney Metro	Sydney Masonic Centre	12
22 April	NSW, TAS & ACT	NSW, TAS & ACT Regional	Online (run from the Sydney Masonic Centre)	19
22 May	NT	Whole of NT	Online (run from Families Australia)	1

All consultations followed the same format, as outlined below:

- Overview of Families Australia
- Overview of the National Coalition
- Overview of the CFIS project lead by SNAICC
- Overview of the *Changing the Balance project*, including objectives and scope (DSS FAQ sheet)
- Group focus sessions to elicit response to the following questions:
  - views on key issues the non-Indigenous NGO sector must consider as sector funding profiles change. Including:
    - Opportunities for better practice; and
    - How best to accommodate change
  - Key organisational/operational challenges that could arise for non-Indigenous NGOs;
  - Priority concerns key issues or themes that need to be addressed by non-Indigenous NGOs;
  - Potential solutions – suggestions on what could assist non-Indigenous adapt to the changes in funding profiles;
  - Planning and preparations – required information, knowledge and useful advice for the non-Indigenous NGO sector.



Communications relating to the consultation sessions stated that while all are welcome, the sector consultations are primarily addressed to non-Indigenous NGOs receiving Commonwealth Department of Social Services (DSS) funding for child and family services. This ensured that organisations in scope for the DSS changes (as outlined on the fact sheet) were targeted. At the same time, it allowed scope for participants from organisations who would be affected by the broader remit of the National Child and Family Investment Strategy. Also, organisations who had valuable parallel experience of transitions to also attend and share their experiences as ‘lessons learnt’, contributing to a richer dialogue. This included participants with experience from Australian state government transition processes as well as those with international experience, such as a workshop participant who had worked for a First Nations organisation in New Zealand at a time of transition of services to Māori-led organisations.

Public facing messaging about the consultations also emphasised that the development of the National Child and Family Investment Strategy includes general and specific consultation mechanisms led by SNAICC. And that State and territory governments are also developing engagement strategies related to this matter for their respective sectors.

Most consultations included a small number of representatives from ACCOs who provided valuable input by sharing their perspectives, as detailed in the “Valuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives” section below.



## Attachment B: List of Participating Organisations

While every effort has been made to capture as many organisations as possible who were consulted through this project, the list is non-exhaustive. Please also note that participation in the National Survey was anonymous.

54 Reasons	Aboriginal Family Legal Services
AC Care	ACOSS
ACT COSS	Act For Kids
ACT HRC	ACWA
Allambi Care	Alternate Care
Anglicare Central	Anglicare Southern Queensland
Anglicare Sydney	Anglicare Vic
Anglicare Western Australia	ARACY
Arches Accommodation	Australian Association of Social Workers
Australian Catholic University	Australian Foster Care Association
Australian Institute of Health and Welfare	Australian Migrant Resource Centre SA
Baptist Care	Barnardos
Benevolent Society	Bravehearts
Brotherhood of St. Laurence	Bundiyarra Aboriginal Corporation
C&K	CAFWA
Carers WA	Carly Ryan Foundation
Carnarvon Family Support Service	Catholic Care Vic
Catholic Care Wilcannia-Forbes	Catholic Social Services Australia
Centa Care	Centacare Brisbane
Centacare Catholic Country South Australia	Central Australian Aboriginal Congress
Centrecare (WA)	Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare
Children's Ground	Child and Family Focus South Australia
Churches of Christ	Choices
Commissioner for Children and Young People (TAS)	CIS Group
Community Care	Communities WA
Community Legal WA	Community Skills WA Connect Groups
Curtin University	Create Foundation
Early Learning and Care Council of Australia	Daniel Morcombe Foundation
Frameworks Institute	Family Day Care Queensland
Family Inclusion Strategies	FAMS
FAMS	First Nations NGO Alliance
Flinders Education	Focus Connect
Foundations Care	Family & Relationship Services Australia
Goodstart Early Learning	Griffith Education
Healing Foundation	Health Justice Australia
Helping Minds	Hope Community Services
Human Rights Government	HYPAR
Infinity Community Solutions	Interrelate
ITEC Group	Junction Australia
Key Assets	Kimberley Community Legal Services
Kin Advocacy	Kinship Carers Victoria
KWY	KWY Aboriginal Corp
Langill Partners Consulting	Larrakia Nation



Life Without Barriers (Brisbane, QLD)	Life Without Barriers (NSW/TAS/ACT)
Lifestyle Solutions (Adelaide)	Lifestyle Solutions (Brisbane, QLD)
Live Better	Lutheran Care
MacKillop Family Services	Maitland Family Support (MFSS)
Mercy Care	Mercy Community
Migration council	Mind Australia
Mission Australia (Geraldton)	Mission Australia (NSW/TAS/ACT)
Mission Australia (VIC)	Multicultural Australia
Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network	NAPCAN
NCOSS	Neami National
NGLA	No To Violence
Northwest Accommodations Service Inc	NSW Civil and Administrative Tribunal
NSW Department of Communities and Justice	NSW Health
NT Gov	Oz Child
Parenting Research Centre	Parkerville
PeakCare	Playgroup ACT
Playgroup NWS	Playgroup WA
QATSICPP	Queensland department of Children, Youth Justice and Multicultural Affairs (CYJMA)
Queensland Family and Child Commission	Queensland Health
Queensland Youth Services	RAATSICC
Real Support Services	Relationships Australia NT
Relationships Australia SA	Relationships Australia VIC
Relationships Australia WA	SA Gov
Safe Steps Family Violence Response Centre	SDN Children's Services
Settlement Services International	Siblings Australia
Skylight	SNAICC
Southern Cross Support Services	StandbyU
STAY Geraldton	TASCOSS
Tasmanian Department of Justice	Team Health
The Arches Foundation	The Pyjama Foundation
The Reily Foundation	The Smith Family
The Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency	Thrive House
Thriving Queensland Kids Partnership	Toy Libraries Australia
UC Community QLD	UnitingCare Australia
Uniting NSW/ACT	Uniting Care South Australia
Uniting Western Australia	Uniting Vic.Tas
Uniting Country WA	University of Western Australia
University of South Australia	Victorian Aboriginal Childcare
VANISH	Wanslea
WACOSS	Warrama-Li
Waratah	YCSS
Yalga Connect	Yorganop
YFS	Youth Law Australia
Youth Advocacy Centre	



## Attachment C: National Survey

A national *Changing the Balance online* survey was designed for this project. The survey was open 3 April – 10 May 2024 and promoted widely via Families Australia/National Coalition networks. In addition to questions seeking contextual and demographic information, the survey included the following questions:

- What activities are your organisation currently undertaking to support the growth of the ACCO sector?
- How well prepared do you think your organisation is to maintain continuity of your service while supporting the growth of the ACCO sector?
- In your experience, what works best to support collaboration within the sector?
- What efforts has your organisation already made towards the transition of services to ACCOs?
- What challenges or lessons learnt have you encountered in collaboration between First Nations and non-Indigenous NGO services?
- Describe the level of awareness you feel your board or guidance committee has about supporting the growth of the ACCO sector (including changes to NGO sector funding profiles).
- In transitioning, what do you see as the biggest change to operations for your organisation?
- What guidance, supports or information could assist your organisation and/or region to better engage with the transition process?
- Have you/your organisation considered how you would respond to changed financial circumstances?
- What changes are most likely to be considered by your organisation in transition of services?
- In consideration of the impact of potential changes on your organisation, what benefits or opportunities could be pursued?
- In consideration of the impact of potential changes on your organisation, what concerns you the most?
- If you have been involved in a change management process of a similar nature previously, what worked well or were key lessons learnt?
- In your view, what are the types of arrangements or conditions that need to be in place to support a smooth transition of a proportion of services?



The survey attracted sixty (60) responses with broad representation across Australia including response from:

- all states and territories
- regional, remote and metropolitan locations (with 60% of survey respondents operating across all three locations)
- large and small organisations (approximately half of responding organisations had below a \$10 million annual turnover.)

In summary:

- 90% of responding organisations identified as non-Indigenous NGOs/non-Indigenous.
- 10% of respondents reported being from Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander led organisations.
- 75% of responding organisations listed Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities as part of their target demographic.
- Most of responding organisations (77%) are funded through a combination of Federal and State/Territory government grants.
- Responding organisations were largely staffed by non-Indigenous employees with 83% of organisations reporting employing less than 25% Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff and 10% of orgs reporting having no Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff.
- Most respondents reported that at least part of their funding was for child and family early support services. Approximately one-fifth reported that only <10% of their funding was for child and family early support, while the majority reporting at least 25% or more, and 13% reported that these services make up 100% of their funding.