

# They've gotta listen

Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Young People  
in Out of Home Care



## **“They’ve gotta listen” Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Young People in Out of Home Care**

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### Project team

This research project was conducted by the Institute of Child Protection Studies, ACU National with funding from the ACT Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services.

The ICPS was established in 2005 to promote and enhance the safety of children, young people and families through quality research, training and community education. Driven by a child-centred philosophy, the Institute is committed to ensuring that children remain at the centre of social policy and practice and work with governments and services to promote their interests and well-being.

The project team consisted of: Tim Moore, Bindi Bennett and Dr Morag McArthur and youth leaders, Jad King, Chelsea Yarrie, Greg Ryan and Saul Sambono with support from OCYFS staff, particularly Terrence Williams, Christine King, Maria Williams and Joseph Kapeen and hip-hop artists, Mistery and BRB.

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## ARTWORK

Artwork found in this report was created by young people as part of this project. Photographs were mostly captured by children and young people using disposable cameras or at the Cultural Gathering.

## 1. Introduction

In August 2004, the ACT Government in response to *The Territory as Parent Report: A Review of the Safety of Children in Care of ACT and the ACT Child Protection Management ("Vardon") Report* developed an Implementation Strategy outlining a 2-3 year reform program for the care and protection of children and young people, their families and carers in the ACT. A key goal of the implementation strategy was to 'Improve service responses for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people and their families' and to 'Strengthen participation of children and young people in decision-making that affects their lives' (ACT DHCS 2006, p2).

This project related to these aims and built upon work completed by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services (ATSIS) and the Vardon Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Reference Group. The project aimed to:

- Expand and enhance service delivery responses;
- Expand and enhance consultation mechanisms for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people to be heard;
- Document real experiences through case studies; and
- Provide a qualitative evaluation of service delivery as reported by participants.

## 1.1 Project Background

### Issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Individuals and Communities

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people belong to strong and vibrant communities with rich cultures and histories. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience many of the same issues that affect the broader Australian community which are further exacerbated due to past injustices and ongoing marginalisation. As a result, Aboriginal people have become the single most vulnerable and disadvantaged group in Australia today.

With poorer psychosocial, health and educational outcomes, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are particularly at risk. They are more likely to experience homelessness and family separation and their marginalisation leads many to assume risk-taking behaviours and to experience mental health problems. Aboriginal children and young people are thus over-represented in the child protection and juvenile justice systems (Jarrett 2000; Beresford & Omaji 1996).

### *Child abuse and neglect*

In 2005–06 Indigenous children in all age groups were much more likely to be the subject of child abuse substantiations than non-Indigenous children. In the ACT there were 99 substantiated reports of child abuse or neglect of Indigenous children aged 0-16 received in 2005-2006 (AIHW 2007, p.27). This represents a rate of 56.8 children per 1000 children compared with 10.9 per 1000 for other children. Although the small numbers involved in the ACT means that these figures should be interpreted



cautiously there remains a very substantial over representation of Indigenous children in substantiated reports and at every level in the child protection system.

### *Out of home care*

In all jurisdictions there were higher rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out of home care than other children (AIHW Table 4.8). The national rate of Indigenous children in out-of-home care was over 7 times the rate for other children. In the ACT in 2005-2006 there were 82 Indigenous children (point in time) in out of home care, a rate of 43.7 per thousand children compared with 4.1 per thousand for other children (AIHW, 2007, p. 57).

### *Juvenile justice*

During the period from 2000 to 2002, Indigenous children between 10 and 14 years of age were detained at around 30 times the rate of other Australian children. State and territory information indicates that Indigenous children are not only over-represented in juvenile detention centres but are also overrepresented among those charged by the police, those facing court, and those placed on community-based orders (AIHW 2005).

### *Indigenous education*

The proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children achieving Year 7 national literacy benchmarks in 2004 remained well below the proportions for all students, despite some improvements in achieving reading benchmarks in recent years. Three key factors were found to be significantly associated with Indigenous students' academic performance: risk of emotional or behavioural difficulties, absence from school and education of their primary carers.

## 1.2 Engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people

The areas of child protection and out of home care have been well researched in the past three decades, particularly in regards to good practice in supporting children, young people and families. However, missing from this understanding is an analysis of how children and young people, themselves, understand and perceive their experiences within the system. Although organisations such as the CREATE Foundation (that works to support and advocate for children in care) have attempted to rectify this situation, the particular voice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people have been relatively unheard.

In a recent paper, the Australian Institute of Family Studies suggests that there are several reasons for this, including “difficulties in gaining access to information; and complexities in interviewing children with special needs”, the apprehension of children to raise issues for fear of repercussions and the challenges of accessing children and young people in care (Higgins, Higgins, Bromfield, & Richardson, 2007, p3). It appears that these barriers are particularly challenging when attempting to consult with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.

## 2. Our Approach

The project was developed as a participatory action learning process which incorporated multiple cycles of planning, observation, action and critical reflection. By conceptualising the process in this way, the complex social situations young people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds experience were explored and discussed. Young people’s meaningful participation was an essential aspect of the project and helped to identify ways to improve the quality of services that are designed to support them.

## 2.1 Principles Underpinning Our Approach

This project was developed to ensure the safety of participants, and to guarantee that their engagement was meaningful, appropriate and responsive to their needs.

The project team attempted to be culturally congruent and to place the participants' involvement within a broader cultural context. An Aboriginal project officer was employed to guide the project, to promote positive links with the local Indigenous communities and to ensure that participants' needs and wishes were met. The project officer was assisted by a group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people who were engaged as youth leaders were provided training and ongoing supervision and who co-facilitated workshops and helped analyse the data.

Initially, it was intended that youth leaders would not only be Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander young people but that they would also have had experienced living in care. It was hoped that these young people could help the project team ensure that research tools were appropriate and responsive while providing participants with role models from whom they could learn. Two of the four young people who were engaged as youth leaders had been through the care system while the remaining two had not. These two youth leaders had expressed an interest in supporting the project and who had experience in community work and communication.

The young people's engagement proved to be invaluable as an openness developed between the team, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers and communities. The project officer and young people also helped other team members to understand cultural nuances and supported the positive engagement of participants.

It was hoped that as well as enhancing the project, youth leaders themselves would benefit from the experience. As such, youth leaders were remunerated for their

involvement, gained training and expertise in working with other young people and communities, and had the opportunity to see how their participation positively affected their own lives and those around them. The project team benefited from a more inclusive and responsive model that was shaped by consumers and attracted greater participation by other young people. The project itself was therefore richer and more successful in meeting service outcomes.

### **Partnership**

This project was developed as a partnership between the ACT Office for Children, Youth and Family Support and the Institute of Child Protection Studies. Throughout the course of the project, members of both teams spent significant time organising events, developing consultation tools and facilitating groups and drew from each other's strengths and resources. In this collaboration, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal workers were confronted by cultural challenges including differing communication styles and approaches; differing priorities; and differing ways of working with young people and communities.



### **Learning from Experience: Working with one, working for all**

When negotiating the Wreck Bay activity there was some disagreement about how the Youth Forum should operate. On one hand, community members were keen to ensure that all Aboriginal young people in the local area could participate in the Youth Forum rather than just those living in care. This was because they believed that all young people had something important to share and, more importantly, would benefit from the opportunity to participate in a group and would enjoy the various activities organized for the day. They were operating from the cultural view that resources and opportunities should be shared and that the interests of an individual needed to be understood and explored in a broader context.

At the same time, project staff were concerned that they did not have the resources (either financial or human) to facilitate a day for up to 150 young people who might attend and that the outcomes required of the day (data from interviews etc) might be jeopardized. However, in negotiation with the ATSI unit and the Wreck Bay Community Council, it was decided that government staff would support the activity and that youth workers from Lifeline Canberra would be invited to co-facilitate the day so that both the community's and the project team's needs were being met.

In addition, the team invited the whole community to enjoy breakfast and lunch with the youth participants and to listen to performer Emma Donovan and her band. Feedback from the community was incredibly positive, with a number arguing that because they had been engaged appropriately their children had more confidence in the process and were more likely to participate more fully in activities.

In addition to working with the ATSI unit, the project team developed working relationships with key organizations such as the Wreck Bay Community Council, Winnunga Nimmityjah, Gugan Gulwan, and the Yurauna Centre (CIT) and was supported to engage Indigenous children and young people. Workers from Lifeline Canberra and hip-hop artists from Metaphysical Productions and from Brethren also played a crucial part in facilitating groups and were integral to the project's success. Adopting such a collaborative approach proved to be invaluable as members learnt from each other and drew from each other's strengths.

The project team also benefited from the support of Aboriginal community members. Mrs (Aunty) Agnes Shea was an ongoing supporter of the project while Joseph Brown and the Wreck Bay Community Council offered support and guidance in preparation for the second forum. The importance of engaging the local community in activities was evidenced by the large number of participants at the Out of Home Care Conference and by the level of discussion and debate that followed.

### Safety

Working with young people who lived in families who often had experienced significant disadvantage and had been exposed to a range of traumatic experiences required us to ensure that our methodology was appropriate and that activities were provided by skilled and qualified workers. Appropriate supports and services for children and young people who became distressed through their involvement in the project were also identified and promoted to participants. Youth leaders and staff constantly 'checked in' with participants to ensure that they were safe and that they were given opportunities to raise their concerns. Young people were also encouraged to contact an identified service if they experienced any distress after the activity. To the best of our knowledge, no young person took up such a service.



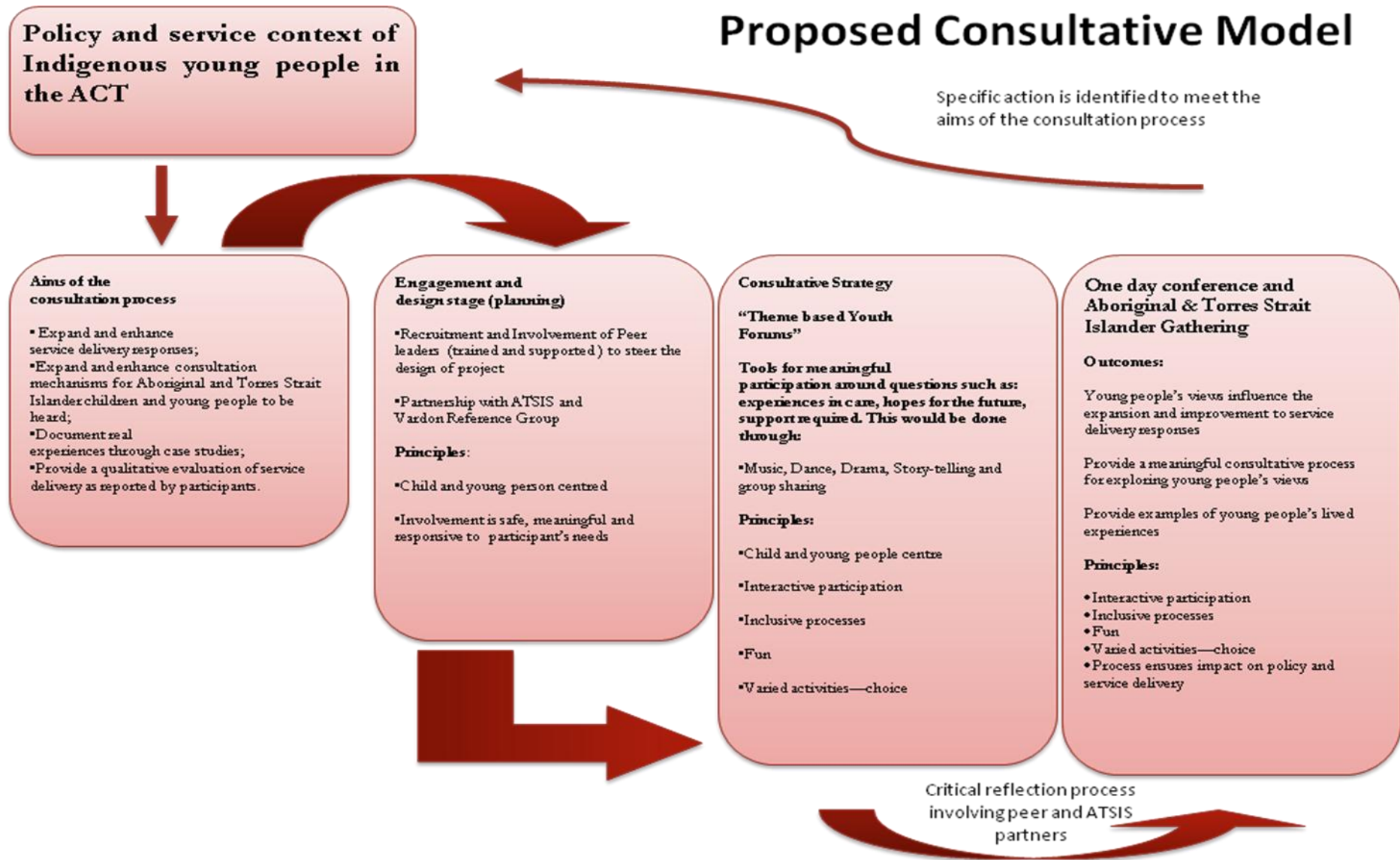
## Choice

The project team felt that children and young people should have total control over their involvement in our activities. As such, all young people were fully informed about the intent and scope of our activities and how and why they were being asked to participate. They were then given the opportunity to choose whether and how they participated in our activities (including the choice to stop participating at any stage).

Our experience in engaging children and young people (particularly those who are vulnerable) had shown that it was vital to provide participants with a wide range of choices in how, when and where they might participate (Moore, Noble-Carr, & McArthur, 2007). We believe that choice is important as it gives young people some control over their involvement, redresses power imbalances inherent in consultative processes and affirms the value that we place on young people and their stories. As such, we developed a consultation plan with young people that maximised both variety and choice for participants.

In practice, allowing children and young people to choose how they might participate proved to be both challenging and beneficial. At the Birrigai forum, for example, many of the young people decided to leave the planned activities but were soon engaged in alternative options such as sport, team games and informal discussions. To ensure that the necessary information was gathered, team members interviewed small groups of young people engaged in these alternate activities and were able to capture participant's thoughts in spaces where they felt more comfortable to engage. This required more resources and a greater flexibility but meant that many young people who would not have participated otherwise were able to have their say on the issues discussed.

# Proposed Consultative Model





### 3. Youth Forums

Two youth forums were held: one at Birrigai Outdoor Centre and another at Wreck Bay Community Centre. These forums allowed young people to participate in a relaxed environment using culturally congruent and youth-friendly methods.

The aim of the forums, were to provide opportunities for young people to share the issues of family, of community and their experiences in the Out of Home Care system in the ACT. To explore these issues the young people were directly engaged in a range of activities.

#### 3.1 Recruitment of participants

Fifty-two children and young people participated in this project. All children and young people identified as being of Aboriginal or Torres Islander descent.

Thirty young people participated in the forum at Birrigai Outdoor Centre, and included: young people aged 12 to 17 and 11 young men and 19 young women.

Twenty-two young people participated in the forum at Wreck Bay, and included children and young people aged from 7 to 16, 12 young women and 10 young men



**Young people at the Birrigai & Wreck Bay Youth Forums, 2007**

### **Involvement with the Care and Protection System:**

Approximately one-third of the participants identified as currently being within or having been in the Out of Home Care system. In addition, another one-third identified as living with or having lived with another family member or friend other than their parent although not 'officially' being placed in care.

Most of the remaining children and young people reported having some connection with the system, often living in families where cousins or other Aboriginal children and young people were placed during periods of difficulty.

### **3.2 Birrigai Outdoor Centre – 16<sup>th</sup> July 2007**

The first of the two forums was conducted at Birrigai Outdoor Centre with young people aged 14 to 18 who were engaged in Aboriginal programs or who were being supported by staff from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services (ATSIS) in the Office of Children, Youth and Family Support.

The day's program began with a short briefing where the aims of the project were identified and where the team explained the value that was placed on young people's participation. However, many of the participants were late in arriving and missed this session, requiring the team to briefly explain the purpose of the day in an uncoordinated and ad hoc way. Although letters had been sent to young people in care and fliers were circulated to Aboriginal organisations, many of the young people were not completely sure about the purpose of the day and were sometimes confused about their involvement.

After the briefing, the workshop continued with a welcome to country by Ngunnawal elder, Mrs (Aunty) Agnes Shea who welcomed participants to country and encouraged them to actively participate in what she considered to be an important process. Youth leader, Jad King, replied to Mrs Shea, thanking her for her welcome and inviting her to visit his people's country. This interplay was both an acknowledgement of the traditional ownership of the land but also illustrated the team's recognition of and respect for traditional cultural customs. Although an often forgotten practice, the importance of formally replying was acknowledged.

After the welcome and reply, young people were broken into groups and participated in an art activity where it was hoped that they would explore issues of family and community. It was intended that young people would be encouraged to paint images portraying their family relationships and to understand what importance these relationships (if any) played in their lives.

For a variety of reasons, this activity was changed by the artist employed to facilitate the workshop and focused more on the art rather than the discussions we had hoped would ensue. Many of the young people did not fully engage in the activity and left to play sport or to meet with friends outside. Although this was challenging for the project team, the decision was made that, in line with our commitment to choice, young people were given the opportunity to participate in their own way. Individual and small group

I'd like to thank Aunty Agnes for welcoming us to Ngunnawal land and would like to acknowledge that this is Ngunnawal country. We are grateful for the opportunity to walk in your land and to be able to share and help one another.

Also I'd like to extend an invitation to you – you are always welcome in my country, my land, Larrakia and Warramanga where you will be shown the same hospitality as you have gracefully offered to us. We would also like to acknowledge the ancestors of this land and their spirit here with us.



**Jad King replies to Welcome**

discussions replaced a number of the planned sessions and provided the team with useful although somewhat limited information.

At lunchtime, young people were entertained by local dance group, Wirradjuri Echo who performed a number of dances. A group of international students who were participating in a study camp also at Birrigai were invited to join the audience while young people were encouraged to join the dancers and to learn traditional moves. This mixing of cultures proved to be positive, with the Aboriginal young people expressing cultural pride while the foreign students appeared to appreciate the exposure to Aboriginal culture.

After lunch, hip hop artists Mistery and BRB worked with young people to develop their stories using rhymes. These stories were further explored in a large group discussion where the young people were asked to identify key messages for policy makers and service providers. The large group discussions were dominated by a small group of participants although some of the quieter young people did make some important observations after the discussions were completed.

In recognition of their participation, young people were given a 'show bag' produced by ATSIIS which included a beanie, drink bottle, wristband, notebook, stress ball and lanyard. This relates to the cultural giving of gifts when people travel to participate in meetings. It also strengthens the cultural practices of reciprocity.



Youth forum logo designer, Bryce

### 3.3 Wreck Bay Forum – 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2007

The forum at Wreck Bay was somewhat different to that held at Birrigai. Firstly, the participants were younger and included children as young as 7. As a result, more time was spent introducing participants to the aim and focus of the day and with 'icebreaker' and energiser games.

Realising the importance of community to the young people in Wreck Bay, the team encouraged local people to participate in the day, to share meals and hear Emma Donovan and her band play during the lunch break. This was not only culturally congruent, but also proved to be invaluable with many of the older community members encouraging children to participate and to show courage and leadership so that future generations might learn from their experiences.

Although there were many more adults present at the Wreck Bay forum, sessions were generally run without adults present. This appeared to allow the younger participants more space to talk about issues, although the older young people were resistant to raise their concerns about the local community. In the one session where a teacher from the school participated, young people were encouraged to talk about their concerns but were only marginally more open.

*"You young fellas have got to be courageous. Stand up for each other and for all those that come after you. Don't be shame. Tell em how it is so they can make it better... This is for you to talk about what you want for the future. Don't be shame. Talk about the issues, talk about the future. Be a leader, don't be a follower. You wanna be able to leave it for the younger ones. Look forward don't look back."*



Joseph Brown, Traditional Owner

## ***Welcome***

As with the Birrigai forum, the day began with a welcome to country by Wendy Brown from the Wreck Bay Aboriginal Community Council. Youth leader Jad King replied to Wendy and thanked her for her support of the day. Traditional owner, Joseph Brown and his group then performed a number of dances, during which he encouraged the young people present to fully participate in the day and to share their views.

## ***'Supporting Your Friends' – Lifeline***

Lifeline Canberra participated in the youth forum by sending two youth workers to facilitate a session where young people talked about how they coped and supported their friends during difficult times. Interestingly, the workers noted that the children in Wreck Bay reported that they would most likely talk to adults during difficult times rather than immediately talking to their friends. They reported that this was different to other groups of Australian young people as found in research (see Rickwood, for example) and practice.

## ***Art***

Jad King and Bindi Bennett led participants through an activity where he shared with them his people's traditional artwork and the way the artwork connected him to land, law, culture, totems and Dreamtime. Young people were then supported to paint their own stories of their connections to these things, especially to their family and totems. They were also encouraged to talk about their experiences in care. The young people discussed culturally specific topics such as where they belonged (country) and what their totems were. Young people were given their totems where possible or encouraged to discuss with the appropriate elder. One participant asked his Aunty when she arrived and then painted the answer. Whilst painting, the young people were encouraged to discuss their experiences of care and how that had affected their families as well as

what answers they felt could be recommended. The young people were taught how to paint with ochre, sticks and other materials that did not cost money to encourage them to continue this form of cultural activity. Jad took the opportunity to discuss the didgeridoo with the pre-school children present in a 'swap' for the school allowing he and Bindi to use the sandpit for demonstrations. The pre-school children were also told a dreamtime story of Tiddilick the frog

### *Hip-hop*

Participants were encouraged to talk about their experiences as young Aboriginal people and to identify ways in which services and systems might be improved to better support them. Hip-hop artists Mistery and BRB helped young people construct their own rhymes after a general discussion about life in the area provided content. Although the young people found the activities to be engaging, there was some reluctance amongst older participants to talk about problems. Younger children, however, talked about issues of alcoholism and violence – which the older young people felt were similar to those experienced in the broader community.

### *Disposable cameras*

At the Wreck Bay forum, a number of young people were given disposable cameras and were asked to capture 'key and important moments'. These young people were often chosen because they seemed disconnected from the process in an attempt to engage them and to communicate the value the team placed on their involvement. This technique built on our experience in the Homeless Children's project (Moore, Noble-Carr, & McArthur, 2007) and again proved to be invaluable – particularly when young people were asked to explain the photos they took. Photos captured on the day have been used throughout this report.





**Hip-hop artists BRB and Mistery helped young people develop rhymes and Abbey Tizzard from Lifeline runs games with children**



**Jad King and Bindi Bennett lead young people through an art activity**

#### 4. What we discovered

The following sections discuss the major themes that emerged from both forums. The themes were developed from data collected from individual, small and large group discussions. Some discussions with young people were taped with their permission and sometimes we took notes while involved in conversation with small groups. At Birrigai Tim Moore led a whole group discussion where the young people's views were recorded on butcher's paper.

As discussed above a wide range of young people attended the forums with a diversity of experience. The forums and the activities used to illicit discussion about young



people's experiences of out of home care reflects a qualitative approach. Qualitative research concentrates on words and observations to express reality and attempts to describe people in natural situations. The key element here is the involvement of the young people where their views and experiences are encouraged in a supportive environment. As Kreuger (1988, p28) suggested:

*(qualitative approaches) tap into human tendencies where attitudes and perceptions are developed through interaction with other people. During a group discussion, individuals may shift due to the influence of other comments. Alternately, opinions may be held with certainty.*

The prime focus is on the young person's experiences not on the facts of each different situation, or how the situation could be understood or interpreted differently. Instead we simply report the young people's views and experiences.

Although key themes emerged strongly and there was substantial agreement across the groups of young people due to the forum format the depth and detail of experiences of young people is limited. We have also included some specific issues that arose in the forums related to the particular context of either Canberra or Wreck Bay.

#### **4.1 The importance of family**

Young people stressed the importance of family in each activity and interview. Family was often defined broadly, and included both biological relatives and, in Wreck Bay other important adults in the community. They felt that family provided them with support, with belonging and often identified family as being the most important thing in their lives.

*“The reason I’m so strong is because of my Mum. My Mum helped us go through lots of hard stuff. My Dad was never around so there’s no one else. Family’s what gets you through”*

When entering care, young people identified family as being the group they missed the most and expressed feelings of grief and loss.

### The importance of supporting family early

A number of young people believed that more support could have been provided to their parents to help care for them and that this may have prevented them having to enter the care and protection system. Many felt strongly that in their view workers had not determined whether other strategies might have worked, particularly in regards to resourcing the family to meet their own needs. Instead, young people felt that workers ‘broke up their [nuclear] families’ and did not fully appreciate the impact that this had on their lives. Some believed that this was racially motivated and that they were being overscrutinised and judged because of their Aboriginality.

Young people felt that financial assistance; support finding appropriate housing and

*We took on looking after the younger ones. They need us to help look after em. They get too scared if we’re not there.*



*We used to cry ourselves to sleep because they wouldn’t let us see Mum or the other kids.*

helping parents develop their parenting skills would be helpful in keeping families together.

### Siblings

Young people voiced the view that they wanted to be placed with their siblings or, at least, to be able to stay in constant contact during their placement. Older siblings reported feeling anxious about the younger children, believing that it was their responsibility to protect and support them during what they described as a stressful period. Likewise, younger siblings said that they relied on their older siblings and felt safer and less afraid when they had them for support. A number of young people, however, reported being disconnected from their families and, in a number of cases, discouraged from maintaining contact.



Although the system sometimes was unable to provide young people opportunities to stay connected with their siblings, a number of participants talked about how they themselves had worked hard to make sure that they talked to, visited and helped their other family members. One young woman, for example, talked about running away from her foster placement and travelling across Canberra to spend time with her younger siblings.

*“We got to see my brothers and sisters and that was important. To stay in touch, to help each other out.”*

#### KEY MESSAGES RELATING TO FAMILY

##### Young people stressed:

- the need for supports to be provided to families early so that they can deal with key challenges
- young people stress the importance of being placed with or supported to remain connected to siblings and other family
- the need to identify strengths and resources in the family

## 4.2 Connections to culture

Culture played an important part in the lives of young people before and during their time in care. For many young people, culture represented the positive parts of their community, their sense of being connected to others and the joint ways they did things:

- “culture holds you together, keeps you going”
- “it’s like what helps you through”
- “culture is who you are, so if you don’t know it you don’t know who you are”
- “it’s like your family, where you come from, something you’ve got in common, it’s like everything”
- “culture’s the thing that makes us different to other [young people]”

They believed that it was a great strength for them and the key thing that differentiated them from non-Aboriginal young people. A number expressed concern that often their Aboriginality was presented as a weakness or a threat:

*We’re strong and we’re  
courageous. We’re  
deadly, man and we’re  
gonna fight for our  
people. We’re not gonna  
lie down*

One young woman said that she felt sorry for non-Aboriginal young people because they didn’t have ‘a real culture’ while others said that they didn’t feel sorry for them at all ‘they don’t respect culture so why should they get it’.

Young people stressed the value that they placed on the support that they received from their communities – the advice and guidance they received from elders and other important

adults and the care they received from the community more broadly. They felt that often workers did not fully appreciate the resources available in the community and that if they did better links might be made to ensure that they were having their needs met.

### *Considering culture*

Young people believed that a key consideration when placing and supporting Aboriginal young people was connections to their culture. Those who had been raised with strong cultural ties believed that this was important not only because 'it's who we are' but also because it meant that they had continued connections with other Aboriginal people, relatives and community activities. Those who had not been raised in such a way reported that they appreciated the opportunity to learn their culture and to meet 'their people' and valued workers who assisted them in doing so.

Young people also argued that it was important for workers to talk to the young people and their communities about their culture before developing plans to maintain their connection. A number, for example, reported that they were placed within Aboriginal families with different cultural backgrounds and that although it was positive to live with other Indigenous people that their cultural ties also needed to be maintained and developed and done so in line with their family's wishes. Those that heard about the introduction of cultural plans felt that this would assist workers understand their background and their broader cultural needs.

### *Aboriginal placements*

Young people strongly argued that being placed within an Aboriginal family was more preferable than being placed in a non-Indigenous family. However they felt that it was important that these families be given appropriate levels of supervision, training and

resources to ensure that they had their needs met. Young people reported that often Aboriginal foster carers were not given this support and that they missed out on things as a result. One young woman, for example, said that when she was placed with her Aunt the family often ran out of money and struggled significantly. Others talked about living in over-crowded houses and felt that Aboriginal foster families should be assisted to secure larger accommodation in recognition of the cultural reality that large numbers of children often stayed with aunts or grandparents for extended periods of time.

*“They would probably get along better with Aboriginal families more than other families. They know what you’ve gone through and who you are. They know culture, they’re your family.”*

### ***Training for staff on working with Aboriginal foster carers***

Young people felt that care and protection workers needed to be given training on how to work appropriately with Aboriginal foster carers. A number reported times when workers did not raise concerns with Aboriginal foster carers when they were not adequately caring for their foster children. The young people felt that this was because workers did not have the skills or knowledge to raise issues in a culturally congruent way and therefore did not intervene. One young man reported, for example, that his Aboriginal foster carer occasionally hit him but that his worker did not respond when she found out. He said that in that circumstance he would have preferred to have been placed with a white family ‘cos at least then someone would’ve done something about it. They wouldn’t let a white carer do something like that’. His sentiment was that a ‘bad Aboriginal carer is worse than a bad white one cos at least you can get rid of the white one’.

It is important to note that young people felt that such foster carers would be better able to cope with the challenges of raising a child if they were given more support and supervision.

### **Racism**

A number of young people reported being bullied at school because of their Aboriginal heritage. They felt that this made it harder for them to connect with other young people and often got in trouble when they retaliated violently. Young people reported that 'racism is everywhere' and felt as though they were often treated differently because they were Aboriginal. Some young people felt that sometimes racism or a lack of cultural sensitivity led workers to downplay their Aboriginality or to discard its importance, particularly when young people are fairer skinned. Three young people shared that they often felt like they didn't fit into the Aboriginal community for the same reasons and that they needed encouragement and support to do so.

Acknowledgement from others (particularly, but not just from Aboriginal people but also non-Aboriginal people) was particularly sought:

*They treat you different because of your skin. Just the way they look at you – expecting you'll be different. That you'll automatically be a problem. That's shit. They gotta look past it – maybe even see being Black as a good thing. [laughter] nah, that's too much to ask!... But they should at least try to treat you the same as another kid.*





*They don't respect the culture. They used to call us medium blacks – that we weren't like fully Aboriginal or something.*

## KEY MESSAGES RELATING TO CULTURE

### Young people stressed:

- the need to identify young people's cultural needs and wishes
- the need to identify possible resources available to young people from their local community
- the need to keep young people connected to their communities, particularly through cultural gatherings and activities
- the need to provide appropriate levels of support to Aboriginal foster families to ensure that they can meet the needs of the children (including financial support, respite, supervision and training)
- the need to provide training to staff on how to appropriately work with Aboriginal foster carers to ensure that they are able to meet the needs of foster children

### 4.3 Participation

Unless a conscious effort is made to ensure children and young people's participation in processes that impact upon them their voices and experiences are often overshadowed or ignored. Sinclair (1998) argues that participation by children and young people and listening to the 'voice of the child' achieves positive outcomes for children and young people, both as a group, and individually. As a group, participation helps to uphold

children and young people's rights as citizens and service users; fulfils legal responsibilities; and improves the quality of services. Listening to children also improves the accuracy and relevancy of decision-making about *individual* children therefore increasing the likelihood that they will be protected. Participation enhances their individual communication skills, their self esteem and their sense of self efficacy. A recurring theme of abuse inquiries has been the failure to listen to children (Waterhouse 2000 in Sinclair, 1998, Utting, 1997)

Young people involved in the forums strongly stressed the importance of providing young Aboriginal people with information about what was happening to them and to involve them in decision-making about their lives. Discussions primarily focussed on the consumer level, with participants wanting to influence decisions about their own lives and those of their siblings and families rather than a broader or organisational level. This is not to imply that participation at these levels was not valued by young people, but that further investigation about these themes is required.

### Entering care

A number of the young people reported that they were given little if any information about when or why they were being placed into care. This was distressing for some, particularly those who did not believe that things were bad at home. Some of the young people reported being picked up from school or of having a care and protection worker turning up unannounced to take them away from home. They understood that for some children a quick response to take them away from an unsafe situation as soon as possible might be required but, in the main, they did not believe that they had been in those circumstances. Not knowing what and why removal was happening was in their view unwarranted and understandably caused unnecessary fear and distress.



Two young people reported how they felt that they needed to go into care because their parent was unable to care for them. They felt listened to by workers when they raised their issues and believed that the decision to be placed with foster carers was the right one for them. They did not contradict others in the large group discussion who raised their concerns about being in care but suggested that one reason why other young people may feel negatively about their out of home care experience was because they did not see any need to be removed and had therefore not agreed with the decision for them to go into foster care.

### Decision-making

Young people generally did not believe that they had any meaningful opportunities to participate in decision-making. Those who asked about their opinions often felt that this was a token 'tick the box' exercise because their views were not often acted upon. On a number of occasions, young people reported that they felt workers had a preconceived idea about what should happen and 'manipulated' their stories to fit with their goals and plans. Young people felt that this was both disrespectful and disempowering – particularly when they were told how important participation was.

*"We just got picked up from school and no one told us what was happening. It was scary. We didn't know 'em and we didn't know what was happening... We couldn't understand it because Mum never did anything wrong – we never saw it. So we didn't know why we couldn't go home"*

Young people said that they would like to have more say on where they were placed, who they were placed with and what contact they would have with their families. They felt that currently, everyone else had a say in these matters and

that their view was of secondary consideration. One young woman, for example, said that foster carers had a choice as to whether they would 'keep you' or not but that young people had no choice as to whether they were happy to stay with particular families:

*"Everyone else gets a say. Your worker decides where you get put and your foster carer chooses if they want to keep you. They even ask their kids. But what about us? Who cares if we wanna stay or not?"*

### Information

Young people reported that often they were not given information about their situation, where their siblings were or whether they were going to return to their parents. They said that this was stressful and felt that all children and young people should be given all the information that they felt they wanted and needed when they asked for it. They believed that because the information was about them they had a right to access it and that 'no one should stop you'.

*"You need to know what's going on. Where you're going to stay, how long... Or you freak out cos you don't know what's going on."*

*It's not a safe place when they're saying stuff about your Mum, getting the facts wrong, not knowing what's really happened.*

### Action

Young people felt that for participation to be meaningful, workers needed to not only listen but also take their views into consideration and, where possible, act upon them.

Too often, however, young people reported that workers and services engaged them in discussions and processes where they were asked their opinions but had them ignored or downplayed when care plans were developed or decisions made. Young people felt undervalued by this and were sometimes angered by the fact that they had invested considerable time and energy into a process that was eventually fruitless for them:

*They expect us to put in so much effort, it's such a drain, but then they don't do anything with it.*

*Our stories are too hard, you've got to laugh about it or you're just gonna cry... But you gotta talk about it. And people've gotta listen... and do something about it!*

## KEY MESSAGES RELATING TO PARTICIPATION

### Young people stressed:

- the need to provide young people with information before, during and after leaving care (particularly about where they are being placed, where their siblings are placed and their rights)
- the need to give young people opportunities to make decisions (or play a part in decision-making) about issues that affect their lives (including where they are placed, what arrangements they have for contact and in identifying their cultural needs)

#### 4.4 Collaboration

To be child centred recognises the importance of knowledge and expertise being actively shared between professionals who are involved with children and young people at each stage in assessment, case planning and service delivery. An ongoing dialogue with other professionals, including feedback about critical decisions, is an essential part of protection and support. Professionals from different systems (for example: education, health, police) who are involved with children and young people need to share knowledge and expertise and cooperate closely at every stage of intervention. Previous studies and inquiries clearly demonstrate, however, that cooperation between professionals, including information sharing, is very patchy and tends to deteriorate after the early stages of intervention (Winkworth and McArthur, 2006).

The young people recognised the importance of organisations and agencies working together collaboratively. They reported times when organisations helped each other with positive benefits for young people and their families but also gave examples of when programs did not talk with each other and when they have different and sometime contradictory goals.

Young people also stressed the importance of non-Aboriginal programs developing relationships with the community and with Aboriginal programs. They believed that sometimes non-Aboriginal services did not fully appreciate their circumstances and that they could benefit from having connections with Aboriginal workers and community members could help them develop knowledge and skills to more appropriately and sensitively work with Aboriginal young people. They also believed that non-Aboriginal

services were often unaware of the potential opportunities and resources within the Aboriginal community (such as support from family and friends) that should be taken into consideration when deciding where children were placed and when care plans were being developed.

### KEY MESSAGES RELATING TO PARTICIPATION

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- the need to give young people opportunities to make decisions (or play a part in decision-making) about issues that affect their lives (including where they are placed, what arrangements they have for contact and in identifying their cultural needs)

#### 4.5 Other specific issues

##### Marlow Cottage

A number of the young people who had been placed at Marlow Cottage were unhappy likening the facility to the juvenile detention centre (Quamby). They couldn't understand why young people should be 'punished' by being placed there. They felt 'like criminals' when they stayed there and felt that this made their already stressful lives even more difficult. In particular, they felt that children in the facility had little choice

and were controlled by the program structure. Some reported being locked in rooms and being told that they were not allowed to leave. They believed that this was not appropriate for young people in foster care.

### **Involvement with police**

Some of the young people reported having negative interactions with police. Generally this was when they had absconded from foster care or when an emergency removal occurred late at night. Young people found this interaction frightening and wondered why police were involved 'when we've done nothing wrong'.

### **Turnover of staff**

A number of the young people reported that the high turnover of staff was difficult for them and how frustrated they were not knowing who their workers were or whether they would stay involved in their lives for any length of time. They reported that sometimes things were forgotten or not followed up during 'handover' of cases.

### **Training of staff**

Young people believed that staff needed more training on how to work with young people. They reported valuing older staff that had their own children because they knew how to talk to and support young people but believed that younger workers might also be given the skills to do so also.

Young people often reported a lack of respect from workers and felt that they had been treated badly in the past. They felt that workers needed to develop their empathy skills and to appreciate both the difficulties that young people experienced but also their strengths and resources. They felt that having staff move from one case to another also





limited their capacity to make strong connections and that this might improve if their involvement with individual young people continued.

The above themes formed the structure and focus of the out of home care conference discussed in a later section.



## 5. What we learned about engaging young people

### 5.1 The value of engaging youth leaders & using youth friendly methods

To effectively gather information from groups of young people, researchers must spend time building rapport and trust. This can often be difficult, particularly when working with vulnerable groups, if participants feel threatened or intimidated by research processes. To minimise this concern, youth leaders played an active part at the youth forums and were available to explain the process to young people who wanted more information about what was happening. Being Aboriginal, the youth leaders and our project officer were also able to vouch for the cultural appropriateness of the project and were able to connect more quickly with young people.

This project also confirmed the value of engaging young people using youth-friendly approaches that responded to their individual interests and wishes. At both forums, young people enjoyed the art and music workshops and appeared more comfortable with interactive activities that allowed them a high level of choice and flexibility. This was important as many young people wanted to be able to move in and out of activities as well as decide the extent of their participation when involved.

### 5.2 Avoiding “Shame”

A number of the young people reported some difficulty talking about their experiences and felt that this was because of “shame” – which they described not only as an emotion but their discomfort in talking about issues that were considered private to family or their communities or those that would make people think differently about

them or others. Vallance and Tcharcos (2001) describe this shame as *“that strongly negative sense of stepping outside one’s limits”*.

Aboriginal workers explained that “shame” is used to help guide young people post-puberty and is used instead of physical punishments when they act inappropriately or unsafely. It plays on the importance that young people place on community, belonging and their connection to culture and helps them understand the consequences of their actions. “Shaming” or “shame jobs” have been used to protect families by encouraging young people not to talk about sensitive issues to outsiders and those whose knowing might negatively influence their community.

In this project, we were talking about sensitive issues and those that were squarely placed within the private realm of family and community. Although Aboriginal elders in both Canberra and Wreck Bay gave their permission for young people to discuss issues, many still felt uncomfortable in doing so. As one worker suggested,

*“these kids have been taught that it’s not ok to talk about this stuff and it’s hard for them, even when they’ve been told it’s alright for them to do so. It’s kinda like if you’re raised not to have your elbows on the table and then on holidays you’re told it’s OK. Well, you’re probably still not going to put your elbows on the table ‘cos it doesn’t feel right. You don’t feel comfortable with it. It’s the same with this kinda thing”.*

As such, this “shame” needed to be overcome before young people would talk with the project team in any meaningful way. In some cases, young people felt more comfortable talking one-on-one or in small groups with only researchers, while others felt more comfortable talking with a worker present. In many cases, researchers did not fully understand this experience and may therefore not have dealt with it in a responsive



way. Further discussions with young people are therefore required to fully appreciate and understand this cultural challenge and to identify appropriate ways of responding both within a research context but also when providing support to young people generally.



### Learning from Experience: "Shaming"

On a number of occasions, groups of young people reported that they did not feel comfortable or able to talk about issues that were affecting them or their communities. One group of young women (aged 16+) whose younger siblings (aged 12 to 14) had raised a number of problems that their communities were facing (i.e. alcohol abuse, violence etc) said that 'there really aren't any issues' for their families and that even if there were 'you'd be too shame to say anything'. Instead, they highlighted only the positive aspects of their communities. Later in the discussion, the girls seemed torn when they were asked about what types of support and services might assist their families because as one observer noted, "the girls really want things to get better but can't really ask for help without admitting there's a problem".

Recognising this dilemma and the young women's discomfort, we offered young people an opportunity to raise concerns indirectly by asking them what issues other communities might experience and what supports might assist them in responding to these challenges. They were also asked for feedback on what types of programs / activities had been useful in the past and what things they would like to see available to other communities. Participants answered these questions more readily but continued to appear apprehensive.

### 5.3 Engaging workers

A large number of workers were present at the Birrigai forum, which had positive and negative implications for how the day evolved. Workers helped project staff by encouraging young people's involvement and by providing advice and support throughout the day. Others, however, were somewhat skeptical about the process and the role of the project team and, at times, distracted the young people and did not help them to participate. In most cases, this seemed to be because workers were protective of their clients and wanted to ensure that they were safe.

Some young people were comfortable with workers being present and were happy to talk about their lives while others did not share their experiences until staff left the room. In some cases this was because young people were not keen to discuss sensitive issues with others around, but it appeared that many were uncomfortable with the number of adults present at any one time. This discomfort appeared to dissipate in small group discussions where only one or two team members worked with pairs, threes and fours of young people.

The difficulty in engaging some of the young people was exacerbated by the reservations staff from community-based Aboriginal services had about the day and how it would be facilitated. The opportunity to meet with these organisations and more actively engage them in the planning of the forum may have rectified some of these issues. This process would have led to a more cohesive approach which in turn may have increased the participation by some of the young people. It may also have been



helpful to have respected Aboriginal 'champions' available to support the project team and to assure other Aboriginal participants that the consultations were appropriate and supported.

#### **5.4 The challenges of engaging young people in large groups**

The methodology proposed in the original tender document required the project team to conduct youth forums where young people from a variety of programs and backgrounds would come together to discuss their issues. There was in our view limited lead-in time where we could have engaged and build rapport prior to the event. This proved to be problematic as there were young people at the Birrigai forum who were confused about why they were at the day and being asked questions about their lives. We assume this was because they had not been briefed beforehand but, instead, had literally been dropped off at the forum without any explanation.

In some cases, young people seemed reluctant to speak in groups because they did not know their peers, while others appeared to be reluctant to engage for fear of how others in the group who they knew might react to their responses.

At the Wreck Bay forum, more time was spent explaining the process and the session began with a series of 'icebreaker' games to help the team get to know and to connect with the young people in a fun and relaxed way. This proved to be invaluable as staff built on this initial connection throughout the day.

#### **5.5 Concerns about culture and cultural appropriateness**

Prior to the Birrigai Forum, the project team spent some time discussing how the forum would be facilitated to ensure that it was both culturally congruent and accessible to

young people. In these discussions, it was felt that the Aboriginal workers should play an active and visible role in facilitating the day while non-Aboriginal workers would work in the background to help the day flowing.

Although this approach displayed the team's commitment to ensuring that the process was very much facilitated by Aboriginal people themselves, it also proved to be problematic as non-Aboriginal workers felt unable to fully engage in the process and, in taking a step back, felt unable to assist the Aboriginal project officer when help in managing the group and keeping them to task was required. Similarly, the Aboriginal project officer felt pressured by the responsibility, particularly when Aboriginal workers from other agencies did not engage in the way that had been anticipated. All staff were apprehensive about being culturally inappropriate and reported feeling their responses were often counter-intuitive.

After significant discussions, it was decided that a team approach would be more effective at the Wreck Bay forum – even though we were aware that we would be working within an even more defined cultural context. This approach enabled non-Aboriginal staff to use their skills, talents and experience to help facilitate the forum but to do so with the support and guidance of the Aboriginal project officer who also benefited in working together. This approach also allowed participants to see that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal workers could work together respectfully and gave the team an opportunity to model respectful ways of working.

For non-Aboriginal workers, this process was also beneficial because the community and the young people were able to see that the Aboriginal project officer and youth leaders had confidence in them and helped relieve any of the concerns that they might have about non-Aboriginal workers running activities.





This process has provided significant learning for non-Indigenous workers/researchers about how to support and work with Aboriginal young people and workers. The fear of doing “the wrong thing” (something culturally inappropriate) led to not doing what needed to be done. This is a theme that emerged strongly in the out of home care forum which is discussed below.



## 6. Out of Home Care Conference

On Thursday 6<sup>th</sup> September, the Institute of Child Protection Studies and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services convened a one day conference entitled “Listening and Responding” to further explore the issues for Aboriginal young people in out of home care and:

- To talk to service providers and other community members about the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people
- To understand the challenges workers and services face when responding to needs and issues
- To develop strategies for government, for services and organisations, and for workers and decision-makers

The conference was held at the Tuggeranong Homestead, a centre set in a relaxed environment.

### 6.1 The Participants

72 workers participated in the Out of Home Care conference. Participants came from a variety of organisations and services, including:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services (ACT DDHCS)
- Commission for Children and Young People
- Communities@ Work
- Galilee Inc



- Gugan Gulwan
- Karinya House
- Lifeline Canberra
- Northside Community Services
- Office of Multicultural, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (ACT DDHCS)
- Women's Rights and Legal Centre
- Youth Coalition of the ACT
- YWCA Canberra
- Australian Catholic University
- Yurauna Centre, CIT

## 6.2 The Process

The Out of Home Care Conference was developed to promote young people's voices and to provide community members and workers an opportunity to explore ways of better supporting young people. The day was framed around the key themes that emerged from the young people's forums. The proceedings included:

- *Welcome to Country* by Mrs (Aunty) Agnes Shea;
- *Reply to address* by Jad King;
- *Dance and song* by Wirradjuri Echo;
- *An address by Martin Hehir, Department of Disability Housing and Community Services* focusing on the government's commitment and response to issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in care;
- *A keynote presentation by Muriel Bamblett, Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care* who spoke about the need for services and systems to develop



cultural competence and to recognise the specific needs and service responses for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families;

- *Reflections* by youth leaders Jad King and Chelsea Yarrie. Jad spoke about the importance that culture played in the lives of the young people who participated in the project while Chelsea highlighted the difficulties of living without connections to family, culture or place and the ongoing loss experienced by young people in care;
- *Brief summaries of issues* were presented by Bindi Bennett and Tim Moore on the issues of family and culture, collaboration and participation. These summaries included stories and observations from the youth forums;
- *Participant workshops* were held and focused on the key issues of family and culture, collaboration and participation. Participants talked about their experiences in regards to the issue and then identified ways that they thought that individuals, programs and the system might better respond to challenges and problems arising. Workshops were facilitated by Aboriginal workers, youth leaders and Institute and ATSI unit staff; and
- *Future cards* were completed by participants who were asked to identify what they think would help improve the system, particularly what things *they* could personally do to encourage better outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people.

### What emerged

This section summarises the discussions held in participant workshops and in presentations around the themes of culture, family, participation and collaboration. Foster carer support is also discussed as it emerged from participant's discussion. It is important to note that participants fully supported young people's views in regards to the key areas, although some participants reported that they were unaware that young people felt the way they did about the issues raised.



### 6.3 Culture and Family

Issues of culture were a major focus at the conference and were stressed in each presentation and discussion. Muriel Bamblett argued that connections to family and community strengthened children's resilience and provided them with opportunities to grow and develop and argued that when these connections were not supported or encouraged children experienced a form of abuse:

*"When it comes to questions of abuse for our children what puts our kids most at risk is cultural abuse and a culturally incompetent service system which demonises rather than treats the core problem. When the culture of a people is ignored, denigrated, or worse, intentionally attacked, it is cultural abuse. It is abuse because it strikes at the very identity and soul of the people it is aimed at; it attacks their sense of self-esteem, it attacks their connectedness to their family and community."*

During workshops, participants identified the importance of culture and felt that second to safety and protection, connection with culture was of utmost importance. Rather than seeing it as an 'add on' or an afterthought, participants saw that culture needed to be inherent in service delivery with Aboriginal families and that its inclusion needed to be clearly articulated and planned. Participants from non-Aboriginal agencies agreed to look specifically at how their current practice supported young people's connection to culture and to work with Aboriginal organisations to identify ways to enhance their current practice.

Bamblett argued that this was essential in minimising risk and maximising positive outcomes for children:

*“If you don’t have an approach in place which mitigates against cultural abuse you are therefore creating cultural risk. Cultural risk means that you are adding to the vulnerability of the child by not taking into account cultural differences, particularly in relation to the power dynamics of society”.*

Participants recognised that as there are a number of Aboriginal cultures and cultural groups services need to ensure that young people are supported to connect with the most appropriate people and communities. This requires discussions with the young person, their families and key people in that young person’s cultural life. A greater awareness of cultural issues is needed and for non-Aboriginal services to acculturate themselves into the local ‘scene’. As one Aboriginal participant observed:

*“You need to get out there. It might feel uncomfortable, but drop in on services. Have a yarn. Find out who’s who. Build the connections.”*

It was also important to note that participants recognised the type and level of connection that a young person had with their culture and that this needed to be negotiated with the young person to ensure that it met their needs and wishes. This view acknowledges that young people have different expectations and that ‘one size doesn’t fit all’. Some participants felt that young people needed significant amounts of time to learn cultural practices and to feel connected with their people and their environment while others felt that knowing that support was available was enough for them. Engaging young people in this way was also important as ‘there is a difference between what white people thought was a successful placement and what [Aboriginal] people saw as a successful placement.’

Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants agreed that it was important to give young people choice and to consider their views in regards to how they might connect

with the community. There was some disagreement about whether young people who were not interested in developing a cultural plan should be required to do so, however participants agreed that the merits of participating should be communicated to young people and their involvement strongly encouraged. With such a diversity of strong views in evidence the Office may need to have more discussion with agencies and workers to build consensus about this key element of young Aboriginal people's care plan.

Participants felt that conversations about young people's cultural needs should be ongoing and should recognise that young people might want and need different things at different times. As such, it was felt that cultural plans needed to be 'living' and be easily modified over time and that a range of parties needed to have the capacity (through information and training) to further the plans with young people. To achieve this, it was felt that workers across agencies needed to be given training on how the plans are developed and implemented and how to support young people to fully engage in the process.



## 6.4 Developing cultural pride

Aboriginal workers were concerned that some young people were apprehensive to connect with their communities because they had not developed a sense of cultural pride. They argued that although some young people might feel ashamed of being Aboriginal, other young people were apathetic because they had not been exposed to the richness of culture and community and therefore may not be as keen to engage in cultural activities. The importance of providing young people with opportunities to experience the vibrancy of their culture was stressed – be it at cultural gatherings, in meeting Aboriginal icons (such as local sportspeople, music artists etc) or through workshops focusing on strengths. Participants recognised the value of the youth forums and the upcoming cultural gathering and felt that there needed to be a commitment from government and from community organisations to facilitate such activities on an ongoing basis. Participants felt that some young people needed to be given a variety of opportunities to participate before the positive outcomes could be sustained (i.e. a sense of belonging to the community and the development of cultural knowledge and skills).

Participants also felt that young people needed encouragement to participate in these activities, reporting that some did not feel as though they belonged or were not welcome to participate. It was reported, for example, that one young man who went to the youth forum left early because he didn't think 'he looked Black' and because he felt that he didn't belong because he had light skin. Participants felt that young people like this young man need constant assurance and support and for key people to acknowledge that young people belong and are valued. It was suggested that actively recruiting and supporting mentors (i.e. young people who were connected to the





community supporting young people in care and those who had limited connections with the community in the past) is an important strategy to help enable this sense of welcome and belonging.

### 6.5 The importance of family and of maintaining family links

Participants recognised the importance of family in the lives of children and young people. They accepted that families often provided children with a sense of identity and connection with their communities and that maintaining links was essential for most children and young people in out of home care.

Participants highlighted the fact that older siblings often were given the responsibility of caring for younger siblings and felt that this practice (though not exclusive to Aboriginal families) was not fully appreciated within the service context. In some situations, service providers were keen to relieve older siblings of their responsibilities believing that the pressure of assuming such roles was too great. Other participants reported the difficulties of placing siblings together in a service context where many foster carers were only able to care for one or two children at a time. For kinship carers, taking more than one child at a time was also difficult as they often had their own children to care for. As such, participants stressed the importance of providing birth families opportunities to regularly meet. There was a strong view care plans must include strategies and resources (for costs such as transport and food) to ensure that this was possible. As well as maintaining links between siblings, the importance of supporting children and young people to stay connected to their parents and broader families was also raised. Participants argued that this requires a willingness of services and families to recognise the importance of these relationships and in investing time and resources. The challenges of working with parents who were incarcerated or in some form of

rehabilitation were raised with a number of participants arguing for further consultation and research on how to best facilitate these connections in a positive and meaningful way.

### KEY MESSAGES RELATING TO CULTURE & FAMILY

#### Workers and community members stressed that:

- Culture needs to be recognised as an integral part of young people's lives and for a young person's cultural needs to be identified and responded to in assessments, planning and service delivery. This should be done with young people to ensure that it reflects their needs and wishes.
- Providing and supporting opportunities for young people to participate in cultural activities and the cultural life of the community is essential and should be reflected in practice
- All Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal services are responsible for the safety and wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people and services must develop cultural competence and courage (through training, learning circles and mentoring) if they are to respond appropriately and to avoid further cultural abuse
- Maintaining links with families, particularly siblings, is essential for Aboriginal young people and must be integrated into case planning. This might require additional resources and the provision of transport.

## 6.6 Participation and Collaboration

### *Engaging young people*

Participants were positive about the youth forum process and felt that it demonstrated young people's capacity to talk about issues that were important to them while demonstrating their desire to participate in decision-making on issues affecting their lives.

Participants recognised that young people's needs and capacity in regards to decision-making ranged significantly and that there was no single approach that could be applied to all. They argued, for example, that young children might not benefit from being given too much information about their family's circumstance but that this should not mean that they should be completely uninformed. Instead, it was argued that a child's needs and wishes should be taken into consideration and that time be spent meeting these in a developmentally appropriate way. Some services felt that they would benefit from training or resources to give them strategies on how to most appropriately raise issues with children and young people or argued that an Indigenous position be funded to assist services in engaging them in this way.

The importance of building relationships with young people and spending time building trust was emphasised. Participants reported that this was difficult for organisations such as Care and Protection but also within some community agencies, due to the high turnover of staff and when staff were moved from one position to another.

Participants also maintained the importance of being honest with young people and of explaining limitations (in worker's roles, relationships and services) so that expectations

weren't raised and young people let down. Providing young people with feedback about how their views and wishes had been considered and acted upon (or not) should also be provided so that they felt engaged in the process and that their involvement wasn't token or undervalued. A number of the participants agreed to look at their current practice and to identify ways to increase young people's real participation. They also called on government organisations to clarify how they were responding to young people's wishes and to document this for the young people and their families.

### *Developing cultural competence and collaboration*

To confidently provide opportunities for young people to connect to their communities and to provide services that responded to their cultural needs, participants argued that organisations needed to have developed a level of cultural competence.

Participants argued that although many non-Aboriginal workers and organizations were keen to support Aboriginal families they felt unable to do so. Many feared being culturally inappropriate and felt that they did not have the skills or knowledge to adequately respond to Aboriginal families needing support. As a result, some referred clients to overloaded Aboriginal services while others did not engage in ways that they might with non-Aboriginal families. Those that did support Aboriginal families directly reported that they were often second-guessing themselves and felt inhibited and were worried that they were doing the wrong thing. They believed that this often kept them from fully engaging with Aboriginal families.

In her presentation, Muriel Bamblett argued that this experience was common amongst service providers who were at 'culturally pre-competent stage' in their development of cultural competence (a continuum that ranged from cultural destructiveness to cultural proficiency - see Appendix) and that organisations needed to engage in processes that

helped them develop their skills and awareness of cultural issues so that their fears and concerns might be overcome and better outcomes achieved.

Aboriginal participants felt that non-Aboriginal workers needed to be courageous and to take risks. They believed that if non-Aboriginal workers were respectful of their culture and valued its role in a young person's life they would be supported by the community even if they made mistakes – particularly if they were open to criticism and being guided by Aboriginal people. Non-Aboriginal workers found this reassuring and felt that this message needed to be spread widely so that others too might endeavor to further engage in cultural issues.

They also called for more training and for the identification of key people who might assist them to meet their client's cultural needs. Many valued the opportunity (such as that provided at the conference) for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal services to meet together to identify challenges and solutions and, as importantly, to develop relationships. They suggested that more regular opportunities (i.e. an annual conference) would help facilitate and sustain such relationships, as would the development of a network of Aboriginal services to enhance relationships within the sector. Another mechanism that was viewed favorably because of its cultural appropriateness was the use of learning circles where workers could gather to talk through their experiences, reflect on challenges and identify new ways of working. Although this would require organisations to invest staff resources and time, it would help workers at varying stages of their cultural development to learn and grow.

Collaboration was seen as being imperative part of service delivery to Aboriginal families – as participants recognised that Aboriginal workers and key Aboriginal leaders were already stretched in regards of time and resources and that workers and carers felt unable to respond to issues alone. Collaborative practices is also required due to the multifaceted nature of issues facing young people and their families. No one



organisation can effectively work on their own in this context. There was a feeling, however, that together they could appropriately respond for the children.

Aboriginal workers argued that it was important for non-Aboriginal services to make connections with key community members and, where possible, employ them to provide critical advice. They also stressed the importance of non-Aboriginal workers who have strong connections with the Aboriginal community to use these relationships and knowledge to assist their peers, to help develop further connections between players and to share their

experiences with others. These 'champions' could take some of the pressure off Aboriginal workers and services and may be more approachable by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people looking for support. Sharing the responsibility for developing non-Aboriginal workers' cultural competence also recognises the 'drain' that many Aboriginal workers feel when discussing cultural issues which are often personal and sometimes distressing.

For this to be successful, champions would need to be culturally courageous, be willing to make mistakes and to be continually reflective of their behaviour and approach. Aboriginal workers suggested that services would be supportive of them and could help them further grow.

"We need to get to know one another in order to collaborate. We all need to take responsibility to make it happen. Everyone is very busy, maybe you need to give invitations to people to chat. We need to build the cobweb, there always has to be the first person...It will help, we'll be able to do things we couldn't before. It will help".

*'Change comes because we are all in it together- this project is a good example'*



## KEY MESSAGES RELATING TO PARTICIPATION & COLLABORATION

### Workers and community members stressed that:

- Young people have the capacity and willingness to participate in decision-making and need information about their situation to make choices and to deal with their circumstance
- To alleviate frustration and further harm, services working with young people need to appropriately engage young people and provide them opportunities to discuss their issues and to make decisions in regards to their case plans
- Non-Aboriginal workers have an important part to play in supporting Indigenous young people and have the support from the Aboriginal community to do so if done respectfully and, preferably, with guidance and in collaboration with/ from Aboriginal people;
- Collaboration enhances Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal services capacity to meet young people's needs but has to be fostered through respectful relationships with ongoing opportunities to meet and share ideas (i.e. conferences and learning circles). Non-Aboriginal services could benefit from ongoing training and development relating to cultural competence.
- Non-Aboriginal 'champions' have an important part to play in bringing Indigenous and non-Indigenous workers together, in fostering relationships and resolving cultural tensions. They should be guided and supported by Aboriginal leaders.



## 6.7 Supporting Aboriginal foster carers and staff

In a number of the small group discussions, the issues facing Aboriginal foster carers were discussed at length. In addition to the challenges that many foster carers experience, participants felt that Aboriginal carers often faced a number of cultural issues that affected them significantly and needed to be acknowledged and anticipated by services and agencies.

Firstly, Aboriginal carers were more likely to know and be known by their communities. Participants felt that this could be challenging, with many foster carers feeling uneasy about caring for children who had been forcibly removed from their families. In some instances, foster carers felt as though they were colluding with 'the system' but took the children because they were concerned for their safety. In such circumstances, they reported feeling judged by other community members and sometimes felt isolated as a result.

For kinship carers, these challenges were often intensified as they cared for their sibling's or own children's children. The emotional challenges of doing so were often great, but according to participants, were often misunderstood or underappreciated by workers in the care and protection system. This, they maintained, led to family disharmony and personal conflict.

Secondly, participants felt that Aboriginal foster carers did not always receive the same level of assistance as non-Aboriginal carers. They believed this was because mainstream services did not feel culturally equipped to support Aboriginal foster carers and often waited for Aboriginal workers to take the lead and respond. Due to the limited number of Aboriginal staff engaged in the system, participants reported that assistance provided



to Aboriginal carers was either intermittent or non-existent and that mainstream services needed both the training and the cultural courage to work with families to ensure that the needs of the children were being met.

Aboriginal carers felt that they missed out on training opportunities and information because services were waiting for specific programs to be provided. In one group, three carers reported that they had never received an induction pack, training or supervision and that they felt that this was disempowering. They also argued that although they may have had their own children and have their own connections with the community, they needed support, guidance and encouragement to ensure that what they were doing for their foster children was appropriate and sufficient and in line with the child's birth parent's wishes. Without such support, a number argued feeling disempowered and anxious.

A number of participants raised these issues, phrasing them as issues of social justice. They believed that although services attempted to be culturally congruent, in reality they were failing to provide Aboriginal carers and children the resources and opportunities that they required and which were freely provided to non-Aboriginal families. In the interest of equity, participants argued that services needed to 'just do their job, don't worry we'll tell em if they're not doing right by culture – but doing nothing doesn't help neither'.

Participants felt that an additional need of Aboriginal carers was for personal support and counselling. With many Aboriginal people having experienced removal as children (or having their own children removed at different times), the process of caring for a child in out of home care was sometimes distressing as it brought up their own personal issues and experiences. As such, allowing Aboriginal foster carers the opportunity to



work through their own issues was seen as being essential to ensure that placements were successful and sustainable. As one participant suggested 'you can't care for others if you can't care for yourself'.

Although participants recognised that non-Aboriginal carers may experience similar challenges, they felt that Aboriginal foster carers were particularly concerned about young people after they had been removed from their placement or who had exited care. They believe that they had made a lifelong commitment to the young people, which was both a personal and cultural commitment, Aboriginal foster carers reported feeling some anxiety and concern for them and expressed feelings of loss and grief. In other literature, this experience has been described as 'ambiguous loss' (Boss, 2004; Thomson, unpublished)

Recognising the challenges of raising foster children, carers and other participants argued that it was important for foster carers to be given feedback and encouragement in regards to their support for children and young people, many of whom increasingly had a range of high and complex needs. They felt that this reassurance was essential, particularly as many felt unsure as to whether they were doing the right thing for their foster children and their families or whether they needed to do things differently.

Other participants felt that this would be helpful more generally – non-Aboriginal workers wanted guidance on their practice and Aboriginal workers wanted support and recognition.



## KEY MESSAGES RELATING TO ABORIGINAL FOSTER CARERS

### Workers and community members stressed that:

- Aboriginal foster carers often experience similar challenges to those of non-Aboriginal foster carers (in regards to receiving adequate training, resources and support) which can be exacerbated because of financial constraints and which are often not resolved due to non-Aboriginal workers and organisations not feeling competent to work with Aboriginal families
- Aboriginal foster carers often have to manage personal relationships with their foster children's birth parents and relatives (particularly in kinship arrangements) and often this can be stressful
- Aboriginal foster carers may need additional support and counselling so that they can deal with their own emotional needs (particularly in regards to their own and their community's experiences with child removal)

## 6.8 Feedback from participants

Participants reported that they were pleased with the Out of Home Care conference and that they believed that it would lead to positive outcomes for Aboriginal young people and the Out of Home Care system. In particular, participants felt personally committed to responding to the issues presented and made a number of pledges in regards to what they would now do:

*"[It] highlighted the need for cultural action for my kids – the need for this to occur ASAP: this action is MY responsibility"*

*"I will go back and be more courageous"*

*"I'm going to talk to my organisation and work out how we can become more culturally competent. I learned that it's not about leaving it to Aboriginal services – it's about all of us working to help the young people"*

*"Look, listen and learn... and act. We need a contact list from people here today so we can be champions:"*

A number of Aboriginal participants noted that conferences that focussed on Indigenous issues were often difficult for Aboriginal people – because they were deeply personal and required Aboriginal people to expose themselves and their communities and to invest significant energy and 'intellectual capital' to help non-Aboriginal people understand their situation.(some would argue this is our "job" to help our own people...) There is an ongoing emotional cost for Aboriginal people to constantly play the role of educating white workers. However, Aboriginal participants stated that they were



heartened by the openness of non-Aboriginal people at the conference to hear their stories and believed that positive change was possible. They also believed that they had been touched by some of the presentations, particularly that of the youth leaders.

As well as taking on their own personal commitments, participants voiced a hope that the findings of the project would lead to an enhancement of the system and encouraged organisations and governments to take seriously young people's messages. As one participant wrote:

*"Our kids have spoken out, now let's start listening to them and put things in place for them so that their lives can make a difference"*

Further feedback can be found in Attachment 2.

### **Cultural Gathering**

On Saturday 22<sup>nd</sup> of September, a Cultural Gathering was held at Boomanulla Oval and provided the local community an opportunity to come together and celebrate young people. Chief Minister Jon Stanhope launched the event after being welcomed by Mrs (Aunty) Agnes Shea and with a reply from Jad King. The aims of the project were briefly discussed and the findings posted on information boards.

As with other events, culture held a central place in the day with participants enjoying traditional food (from the Torres Strait Islands also the local stuff?), dance, music and games. Aboriginal artists Dale Huddleston, Emma Donovan and her band, hip-hop group Carter and puppetry group, Gracie Productions entertained the audience while an informal game of touch football was played by young people. The importance of promoting positive images of youth was a central theme in most performances.

“Today is a day for celebrating the survival and the uncrushable spirit of this city’s Indigenous people, and the growing spirit of collaboration and respect between that community and the government and non-government agencies that serve it, particularly in the critical area of child protection... It is an opportunity to share stories of what works and also to tease out where the gaps still exist, to build relationships and partnerships, and to remind ourselves of the richness and complexity of our Indigenous community’s cultural heritage. Thank you all for the work you do, the effort you put in and the difference you make.”



**Chief Minister Jon Stanhope speaking at the Cultural Gathering**

Over the course of the day approximately 120 children, young people, family members and Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal workers participated in the activities. Early in the day, a delegation from China also enjoyed their exposure to Aboriginal culture and participated in the dancing.



**Ngunnawal elder Mrs (Aunty) Agnes welcomed participants to country at the Birrigai Youth Forum, Conference and Gathering**



**Emma Donovan performed at both youth forums and at Cultural Gathering**





**Families enjoyed a range of cultural and child-friendly activities  
at the Cultural Gathering**



## 7. What we learned about working with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community

In addition to developing our understanding of the issues affecting young people in the Out of Home Care system, we learned a great deal about working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. In this section we will briefly discuss some of our learnings

### 7.1 Collaboration and 'champions'

This project would not have been possible if not for the support we received from a large number of Aboriginal workers and services. Having an Indigenous worker on the project allowed non-Aboriginal team members the opportunity to develop their knowledge and skills and to gain insight from ongoing reflection.

Having 'champions' within the community who vouched for the project and its staff also proved to be invaluable and allowed us access to young people and to knowledge that would not otherwise be available. In particular, we benefited from the support from Mrs (Aunty) Agnes Shea, staff from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services (DDHCS) and from the Wreck Bay Community Council. These community leaders gave young people both permission and encouragement to participate and helped resolve any cultural issues that arose.

As we were supported by these Aboriginal 'champions', so was there a call for us to use the knowledge and linkages that we had developed to support further partnerships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Aboriginal services and programs. As noted in the discussion about collaboration, the value of non-Aboriginal



services working with the community to enhance partnership was evident in this project as was the goodwill of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal workers and their eagerness to resolve any challenges that arose.

## 7.2 Developing cultural courage and cultural competence

Zubrzycki and Bennet et al (2006) call for 'culturally courageous and collaborative practice'. This is a form of practice that is underpinned by a commitment and an ability to develop and apply the knowledge, skills and values that incorporate both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal ways of understanding and working. This would mean that families and children are supported to be involved in all stages of the program development and any further evaluative processes. This approach to practice fits well with the participatory action research approaches the Institute uses.

Developing the cultural courage to work with Aboriginal Australians in the human services requires Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal workers to develop and integrate into their practice a clear understanding of the historical and contemporary context of their work.

This involves grappling with concepts such as whiteness and recognising that the problems experienced by Aboriginal Australians impact on the lives of all Australians. In this way being culturally courageous means acknowledging the shared humanity and human rights of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. For non-Aboriginal human service workers cultural courage is also built on an understanding about how to work collaboratively and engage in practices that ensure cultural safety. For Aboriginal workers the ability to make a difference means working through the complex issues of identity and role. These are the foundations upon which both groups of workers need to



develop in order to engage in a process that is hopeful and empowering for them and for the Aboriginal people with whom they work.

In this project, non-Aboriginal staff needed to 'get over' their fear of working in a culturally inappropriate way and, with support from our Indigenous worker and our 'cultural supporters' to work outside of our comfort zones. Throughout the process there were times that we misunderstood cultural cues and, ultimately made mistakes, but having these champions around us meant that we could resolve difficulties and work in a more appropriate way.

To achieve this outcome, we needed to ensure that time; energy and resources were invested into ongoing communication and reflection. It also required all parties to be flexible and tolerant and to work through any issues together.

### **7.3 Recognising the importance of cultural knowledge and of feeding back**

This project required a great deal of openness and courage on the part of participants and the local community. Sensitive issues were discussed and time and energy was invested with the understanding that the project would help deliver a set of ideas and strategies to governments and those working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people, families and communities. Throughout the project, staff members needed to be mindful and respectful of this investment and this commitment. Often we spoke about our wish that we would not be 'seagulls flying into the community, taking what we wanted and leaving nothing in return' but instead to work with the community to support change.

It is anticipated that after the release of this report, we will work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services to feed back our findings to the young people in the



project and to the local communities in Wreck Bay and Canberra. We have also produced a CD with a number of hip hop tracks that encapsulate young people's stories which we will distribute to participants and make available to the community as a powerful expression of their experiences.



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## Attachments:

### Attachment 1: Lyrics from hip hop track: "I Love the Hip Hop Set"

Yo yo I love the hip hop set  
I do, I do, if you looking for some set,  
My name is Jemma Dean,  
a lot of you are my fans  
I love living in this land  
All I do is play down by the bay all day  
Perhaps we'll all go away  
What do you say?

Yo yo I love the hip hop set  
I do, I do, if you looking for some set

My name is Teneeka  
And I like wearing my sneakers  
You can hear me rap right through these speakers  
I like to sing just like Beyonce  
Come on all, I'm looking for a fiancé

Yo basketball is my favourite sport  
I like it when you dribble up and down the court  
I keep it so fresh on the microphone  
You'll hear my name on every sports report

Yo yo I love the hip hop set  
I do, I do, if you looking for some set

My name is Keeden  
I like to go riding, reading  
My favourite colour is blue  
and I like to go riding

Yo yo I love the hip hop set  
I do, I do, if you looking for some set  
OK OK, check it over here

## Attachment 2: Lyrics from hip hop track: "There's nothing wrong about being Black"

There's nothing bad about being black  
We just, you know, try to help each other

My name is Chelsea, I'm from Brissy  
Taken from my Mum when I was real young  
Grew up in care, was really unfair  
White mum, white dad,  
Black culture never had  
Feeling all alone with no one to phone  
Missing my mum, and often feeling real numb  
Excluded from my mob,  
others failing in their job

See its your family,  
you grow up you learn from them  
You should teach them how to be a good  
mother, a good Mum  
Try to help each other  
There's nothing bad about being black  
There's no need to separate 'em

My name's Shenea  
I'm an Australia girl  
Playing at the rock game  
My first name was cool  
So I didn't need a rap name  
I'm sporty and I'm spicy  
But don't call me a spice girl  
I'm naughty and a gangsta  
So don't call me a nice girl!

There's nothing bad a bout being black

I'm the man and I'm representing my mob  
from the Wiradjuri Clan  
I'm a shaka, I'm a slacker, aint no shy guy  
Went to the forum at Birrigai  
Played touch footy  
Had a big feed  
Memorised all the lines with my eternal speed  
There's was a guy with a yellow shirt and  
he fell over and hurt is toe in the dirt  
You know, we're just trying to help each other

There's no need to separate 'em  
There's nothing bad about being black

I'm the man  
I'm a young koori from ...  
Most of the victims think I'm fly  
I'm only 14 but I'm trying to raise my little  
brother, he's like no other  
It's hard enough for us  
Maybe I should wish  
Maybe I would have a better life  
But I'm going to make the most of it  
What I've got  
So I'm so hot  
I hate the playing, hate the game  
Some of you mob want to diss me  
But all you groups really wanna kiss me  
Don't act  
But give the brother some slack  
Cos I'm wiggity black not whack y'all

Institute of Child Protection Studies ACU National





**ATTACHMENT 3: Jon Stanhope's speech, Boomanulla Oval, 22/9/07**

**Jon Stanhope** MLA  
*CHIEF MINISTER*

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**Speaking notes for the  
*Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Cultural Awareness Gathering*  
10am, Saturday 22 September 2007  
Boomanulla Oval, Goyder Street, Narrabundah**

I acknowledge the Traditional Owners of this land - the Ngunnawal people, past and present. I respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this city and this region.

There are a lot of people who are not great fans of government inquiries, government reviews, government reports.

They see such things as mechanisms for delaying action, avoiding accountability, passing responsibility to a later government, a later generation.

Perhaps reviews and reports can be manipulated in such ways.

But they can also be galvanising documents, defining moments in a community's life, calls to action.

We are here today because of a review and a report – into children in care.

The title of the report was *The Territory as Parent*.

In these days of creeping paternalism in Indigenous affairs, the title has both positive and negative resonance.

The word parent carries with it positive connotations of nurturing, shielding, supporting and enabling. But it shares linguistic genetic material with paternalism: control, prescription and proscription, the scorning of initiative, the rejection of risk, the crushing of independence.

Perhaps, for policy-makers and service providers, it is important and useful to have those mixed meanings lurking and jostling in our awareness.

The ambiguity of the phrase – the Territory as Parent – can perhaps keep us from paternalism and hold up instead those more noble characteristics of parenting, which contain within them the inevitability of maturity and eventual release.

It is difficult to stand before an audience such as this and dwell on achievement, because this audience knows better than any that whatever our shared achievements, there is so far still to travel.

Yet we ought not minimise what we have managed to do, in partnership.

We now have, at the most senior levels of the ACT public service, a special taskforce chaired by the Chief Executive of the Department of Disability Housing and Community Services, Ms Sandra Lambert, and drawing together around a single table the heads of that department and the chief executives of the departments of Health and Education.

This taskforce provides high-level advice to me on service delivery issues across these three critical agencies, ensuring, as far as possible, a seamless wrap-around of services, particularly for young Indigenous men and women who are either already involved in the care and protection system, or who are at risk of becoming so involved.

These days, every time a decision is made regarding care arrangements for a young person, an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Plan is drawn up.

We have established an ATSI reform Implementation Group made up of government and non-government agencies, which meets to consider and tackle service delivery issues relating to young Indigenous Canberrans and their families.

We have greatly enhanced early intervention and prevention activities in our primary and secondary schools, and of course our five Koori Pre-schools continue as a wonderful parallel stream to mainstream preschools across the city.

Indigenous families are making great and increasing use of our two magnificent Child and Family Centres and Gugan Gulwan and Galilee continue to offer a range of specialised and successful intervention programs for young Canberrans.

As you may know, the Government is determined to establish, in collaboration with the community, an Indigenous-specific drug and alcohol rehabilitation service and I hope to be able to make further announcements on this within a few months.

And I look forward to the election, midway through next year, of a representative Indigenous organisation that will become the principal Indigenous advisory body in the Territory – the first time an elected body has been given voice since the Howard Government's abolition of ATSIC.

Today is a day for celebrating the survival and the uncrushable spirit of this city's Indigenous people, and the growing spirit of collaboration and respect between that community and the government and non-government agencies that serve it, particularly in the critical area of child protection.

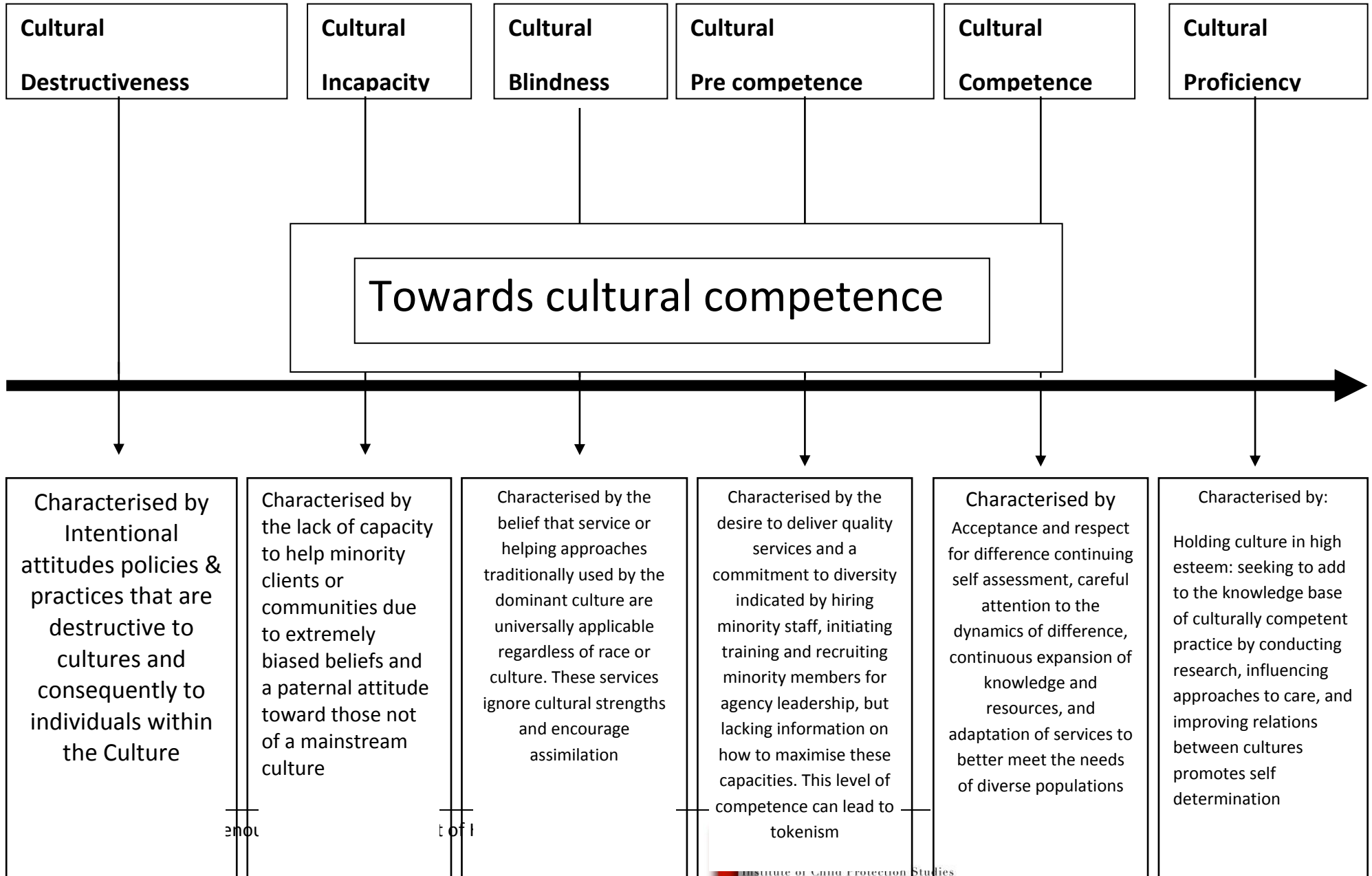
It is an opportunity to share stories of what works and also to tease out where the gaps still exist, to build relationships and partnerships, and to remind ourselves of the richness and complexity of our Indigenous community's cultural heritage.

Thank you all for the work you do, the effort you put in and the difference you make.

Have a great and inspiring day.

ENDS

**ATTACHMENT 4: "Towards cultural competence" – Muriel Bamblett**



## ATTACHMENT 5: FEEDBACK FROM YOUNG PEOPLE

From young people

- *It was good to meet other Koori kids. Since I gone into care I don't get to see many people – not like this.*
- *We're strong and we're courageous. We're deadly, man and we're gonna fight for our people. We're not gonna lie down*
- *It's good that you're talking to the young fellas. You need to hear from 'em. Find out what's goin' on. I reckon what you doing is beaut.*
- *You young fellas have got to be courageous. Stand up for each other and for all those that come after you. Don't be shame. Tell em how it is so they can make it better*
- *It was wicked cos people were listening. It's the first time anyone's asked about what we think.*
- *The rappin' was mad!*

**ATTACHMENT 6: COMPILED EVALUATIONS OOHFC FORUM****EVALUATION****Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Out of Home Care Forum****ACU****1) What were some of your expectations for today's forum?**

- I had the expectation that this forum would bring up “too hard” questions with no solutions, or that it would be another day of talking with no action or follow through
- Information
- Inspiration
- To connect with like minded members of community support. Ideas to take away and implement
- To join together in the care of the students – a holistic approach
- For both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff / services to work better together for our kids
- Sharing information of ideas and ways to work with children and community
- To learn about the issues facing Indigenous young people in out of home care
- To explore improvements to services
- To find out, on behalf of myself and the children and young people's commissioner what the key issues are in relation to Aboriginal children in out of home care, and what role the commission may have in regard to assisting the community to provide care for children
- To gain information for working with kids
- To network
- More knowledge about how we can acknowledge, support and work with Aboriginal communities

## 2) What were the three most useful aspects of the workshop for you?

- Discussion groups
- Tim talking about the kids and their views
- Participation – ‘cards’ and talk from Christine
- Highlighting need for cultural action for my kids – need for this to occur ASAP: this action is MY responsibility
- Meeting amazing people
- Listening to the stories
- Making connections / awareness of community
- Discussions regarding collaboration between carious workers – shared work load
- To get a copy of Cultural Competencies continuum
- Find the Big Red Book directory
- Fuel for my existing passion
- Well organised – great venue & food
- Meeting others in the area / field
- Validation of my work
- Listen more to kids
- Hearing new ideas
- What other services can offer
- How to use the resources we have and get it to grow; working with other services
- Strategies for improving service delivery
- Networking with workers from other agencies
- Increasing cultural awareness
- Making contacts and learning who to contact to get further information
- Learning what is needed to help children and carers to retain their culture while in care
- Finding out from carers what they need to keep providing care
- The awareness that other services (non Aboriginal) need to take responsibility for Aboriginal families, young people and children
- Listen, learn and take action
- Sharing from Aboriginal workers
- Meeting a variety of different people from the Aboriginal community
- Ideas on what we can do to support
- Communication! It’s easy, don’t be afraid

## 3) Please rank the following statements:

- i) **My knowledge about the issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in the Out of Home Care system has increased (please rank)**

| Agree strongly | agree | disagree | disagree strongly |
|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|
| 6              | 4     | 1        |                   |



(NB disagree – I have worked with these young people for 8 ½ years)

ii) **I feel that I had the opportunity for my thoughts and views to be heard**

| Agree strongly | agree | disagree | disagree strongly |
|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|
| 5              | 5     | 1        |                   |

iii) **I have made links with other services and workers that will assist me to improve services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people**

| Agree strongly | agree | disagree | disagree strongly |
|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|
| 2              | 9     |          |                   |

3) **Feedback on the forum's structure (large group presentations and small group discussions, activities)**

- Excellent, Held interest, Good mix
- Excellent, well organised
- All in all it was very good – only hope there is action on what was discussed
- It was all great. Great setting, very informative
- I learnt from the whole day. My awareness of Aboriginal cultures and needs has been heightened
- Excellent!
- Heating would have been good
- The structure worked really well. I wouldn't change a thing, Food was excellent too!
- I thought it was well planned and done very well
- Very good. Can we do it again to follow up next year?
- Good structure – interesting topics. More communication between workers to share the work load of clients

5) **What would have improved the workshop?**

- More variety of workers - more on the educational side
- A guarantee of more / clearer communication between agencies to lower work loads and to improve outcomes for students and families
- More time – make it a couple of days long
- Nothing – today was well executed
- For it to have been longer
- More time!