

## Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs)

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AbSec is committed to ensuring all Aboriginal children, families and communities in NSW have access to the services and supports they need to keep Aboriginal children safe and families strong and provide them the best possible opportunities to fulfil their potential within a culturally enriched framework offered by ACCOs<sup>1</sup>.

AbSec defines an ACCO in the Aboriginal child and family sector as:

- An independent, not-for-profit organisation, that is incorporated as an Aboriginal organisation
- Has been initiated by, and is controlled and operated by Aboriginal people; thereby acknowledging the right of Aboriginal peoples to self-determination
- Is based in a local Aboriginal community, or communities
- Is governed by an Aboriginal Board which is elected by members of the local Aboriginal community or communities where it is based; and decision making of the Board is determined by Aboriginal Board members
- Delivers services that build strength and empowerment in Aboriginal communities and people.

Local Aboriginal governance processes are a central element of an ACCO, providing a clear mechanism for Aboriginal self-determination. This includes empowering Aboriginal communities to participate directly in the design and delivery of services within their community, defining priorities, outcomes and approaches from an Aboriginal community perspective, as well as ensuring service delivery is directly accountable to the Aboriginal community or communities served. ACCOs are therefore distinct from other organisations that may be Aboriginal owned or controlled, but not include any community governance process, or Aboriginal units or organisations within non-Aboriginal organisations, which do not reflect the principle of Aboriginal self-determination. AbSec is supportive of other Aboriginal owned enterprises and acknowledges their potential to contribute across the service system. However, it is important that decisions about the design and delivery of local services are determined by local governance processes, such as those within ACCOs. For this reason, AbSec prioritises the role of ACCOs within local service systems.

### Aboriginal organisations in the NSW Child Protection System

Aboriginal self-determination is also a central principle of NSW Government policy, reflected in the all-of-government OCHRE strategy as well as in Family and Community Services (FACS) policies. FACS have identified that “organisations run by and for Aboriginal people have the greatest promise of providing the best possible outcomes for vulnerable Aboriginal children, individuals, families and communities”<sup>2</sup>. Further, this policy emphasises that Aboriginal organisations must demonstrate a connection to the community they serve, reflecting the principle of self-determination and community empowerment. In AbSec’s view, the best way to demonstrate connection to community is through the local governance processes of ACCOs, providing a clear and transparent mechanism to represent the voice of Aboriginal people in service design and delivery and accountability to the local community.

The *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998* emphasises the importance of Aboriginal self-determination in the care and protection of Aboriginal children and young people, empowering

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<sup>1</sup> AbSec (2016) Caring for Aboriginal children, families and communities: AbSec Reference Guide

<sup>2</sup> FACS (2015) Services For and By Aboriginal People: Identifying Aboriginal Organisations. Pp. 5

communities to collectively determine the policies, programs and practices that impact on Aboriginal children and families. Specifically, the Act provides for Aboriginal “representative organisations” such as ACCOs to be given the opportunity to participate in all significant decisions made under the Act concerning their children and young people<sup>3</sup>.

Despite this commitment, implementation remains inconsistent across the state, with more effort needed to identify relevant ACCOs and ensure their participation across all levels of service delivery and funding. Further, the capacity and capability of ACCOs varies significantly across the state. Both of these concerns need to be addressed in order to achieve genuine self-determination in Aboriginal child and family service delivery, improving outcomes for Aboriginal children and families.

### In Practice

In order to further enhance Aboriginal self-determination within the NSW child and family sector, there is a need to better appreciate the importance of ACCOs, being those organisations that facilitate the involvement of local Aboriginal communities in the design and delivery of services. This can be achieved by:

- FACS accepting AbSec’s definition of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation and prioritises their role within local service system design, on the basis of the local governance mechanism they represent.
- A clearly articulated policy by FACS that requires the involvement of ACCOs in local service design and delivery, including consultation processes across the continuum of care, that respects the presence of local governance processes that exist
- Establishing targets for investing in ACCOs to deliver services across the continuum of care, commensurate with identified need, with clear strategies to achieve them.
- Ongoing investment in the capacity and capabilities of ACCOs to participate fully in the child and family sector, spanning the continuum of care, such that the local service system is responsive to the social and cultural realities of local communities across NSW
- Greater transparency of services funded to deliver to Aboriginal children and families, including publication of a list of all organisations funded to deliver services to Aboriginal children and families, to inform communities and empower them to hold service providers accountable.
- Non-Aboriginal service providers can demonstrate their commitment to Aboriginal self-determination by developing clear, time limited strategies to transition existing funded services to a relevant ACCO. Organisations can partner with AbSec to identify relevant ACCOs and develop effective supported transition strategies.

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<sup>3</sup> S. 12, *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998*