



# What Matters to Aboriginal Children and Young People, their Families and Communities

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**South Australia's Commissioner for Aboriginal  
Children and Young People Inaugural Report  
December 2019**

**'Be Seen. Be Heard. Flourish.'**



**Note regarding language:** The Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young Person uses the term 'Aboriginal' to refer to people who identify as Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, or both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. This term is preferred by Aboriginal South Australians and the Commissioner. The terms 'children' and 'young people' are used interchangeably to refer to all children with whom the Commissioner engaged.

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Commissioner for  
Aboriginal Children  
& Young People

31 December 2019

The Honourable John Gardner MP  
Minister for Education  
GPO BOX 1563  
Adelaide SA 5001

Dear Minister Gardner

I am pleased to present to you the Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People's Inaugural Report outlining the activities undertaken from December 2018 to December 2019. The Report centres on the outcomes of the first of 'Be Seen. Be Heard. Flourish.' community engagement processes that concluded on 31 October 2019 and incorporates other activities I have conducted over the last twelve months to promote the role of the Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People.

The 'Be Seen. Be Heard. Flourish.' engagement focussed on the wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people, and upholding the right of Aboriginal children and young people to be safe and secure in culturally informed ways. The engagement was undertaken through youth and community forums.

The Youth Forums highlighted key areas related to their rights as Aboriginal children and young people that were reinforced through the Community Conversation Forums: 1) right to family and culture, 2) right to have voice, 3) right to be free from racism, and 4) right to a supported and respected cultural identity that sustains cultural knowledges.

The Community Conversation Forums centred on child protection issues, revealing three overarching themes: 1) an inherent right to family and cultural identity, 2) agency of Aboriginal voice and leadership and 3) social justice in service delivery.

Recommendations are provided as a 'roadmap for action' to tackle issues that 'matter to Aboriginal children and young people, their families and communities'.

I look forward to discussing the Report with you.

Kind regards

**April Lawrie**  
*Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

I would like to acknowledge the Kaurna people as the Traditional Owners of the lands and waters of the Adelaide region on which the office of South Australia's inaugural Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People is established.

I also acknowledge all other Traditional Owners throughout South Australia for whom I seek to serve the best interests of their Aboriginal children and young people. In doing so, I pay respect to Elders and families, both past and present, and pay reverence to today's Aboriginal children and young people as they emerge as our future leaders.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the many South Australian Aboriginal children and young people, and the wider community, for being generous with their time in having difficult conversations about their experiences with the various services and systems impacting Aboriginal children and young people, their families and their communities.

The on-ground support provided by the Community Ambassadors was invaluable, as their contributions ensured successful outcomes from all of the forums.

Sincere thanks to Arrin Hazelbane for his project support throughout the planning stages and assistance with the youth forums and community visits.

I also acknowledge and express deep gratitude to Uncle Brian Butler and Sandra Miller for their leadership, wisdom and facilitation throughout the 'Be Seen. Be Heard. Community Conversation.' forums.

In the spirit of Reconciliation, I acknowledge the efforts of the broader community who are working with Aboriginal people to make a difference in the lives of Aboriginal children and young people.

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# ABOUT THE COMMISSIONER



## **April Lawrie**

*Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People,  
South Australia*

**I am a proud Aboriginal woman who heralds from the Mirning and Kokatha peoples from the Far West Coast of South Australia. I live and work in Adelaide with my husband (Ercole) and three sons (Seb, Luis and Stefan).**

In 1990 I attained a Social Work degree. My early career highlights have been in front line Aboriginal child and family services and foster care work. Over the past 30 years, I have contributed to the formation of policy at the state and national level, and excellence in service innovation and community development in regard to Aboriginal health, education, child and family welfare, foster care, and youth justice services across metropolitan and regional areas, including rural and remote South Australia.

The work I have undertaken over the years has led me to a range of executive leadership roles in the South Australian Government, including four years as the Aboriginal Justice Director in the Attorney General's Department, ten years as SA Health Aboriginal Health Branch Director, and two and a half years as Director, Aboriginal Education.

As an Aboriginal person, I understand the roles and responsibilities that are intricately provided by family and community. I acknowledge their stories and experiences, and strive to respond to them meaningfully through policy and practice change that places a high value on culture.

I am passionate about creating change through the voices of our Aboriginal children and young people in South Australia. The development of culturally informed and culturally safe child and family policy and services must include their voices.



# MESSAGE FROM THE COMMISSIONER FOR ABORIGINAL CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

**“South Australian Aboriginal children and young people deserve the best so that they can be their best.”**

On 3 December 2018, I commenced my appointment as South Australia’s inaugural Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People of South Australia (the Commissioner). It is my job to advocate for change in the inequalities that impact the most vulnerable people in the Aboriginal community – Aboriginal children and young people.

In my capacity as Commissioner, I provide agency for Aboriginal voice in promoting the safety and wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people alongside the importance of family, community and culture. My role is to address policy and practice issues across health, education, youth justice and child protection to improve outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people.

My first task as Commissioner was to hear the voices of Aboriginal children and young people, and to understand their experiences and what was important from their perspectives.

In April 2019, I began the ‘Be Seen. Be Heard. Flourish.’ engagement process across South Australia, listening to the views and concerns of our Aboriginal young people about what mattered to them. I focussed on how Aboriginal children and young people looked at their wellbeing, and involved the Aboriginal community in looking at ways of upholding the rights of Aboriginal children and young people to be safe and secure in culturally informed ways.

I spoke with over 430 Aboriginal children and young people at targeted youth forums held at primary and high school settings in metropolitan and country locations. I heard our young people speak strongly about their hope for the future, articulating what mattered to them such as the love they have for their family and culture, pride in their Aboriginal identity, caring for country and recognizing family pets as having a positive impact on their mental health and wellbeing.

*“Family - it makes me happy and feel welcome to my life, and I love my Aboriginal family.” (Aboriginal young person, Murray Bridge)*

Racism and its negative impacts were raised by Aboriginal young people and at community level. Both expressed the importance of Aboriginal Youth Hubs and Community Centres to bring about unity and create a crux for Aboriginal leadership at the local level to be a source of help, drive community pride and build a sense of future.

Importantly, the findings and recommendations gained from the forums are presented in this report and will inform the work priorities of my office for the future.

When reading this report, please respect and value the voices and contributions of the Aboriginal children and young people, as they are the vessels for holding family, community and culture together. Their inspiring messages of hope for a better future inform the need to give agency to Aboriginal young people’s voice, and to ensure the voice is directed to law makers, government and funded services, as well as the Aboriginal community.

# THE ROLE OF THE COMMISSIONER

**The call for Aboriginal children and young people to have their own dedicated advocate came from 30 years of persistent, determined and unwavering lobbying by past and present Aboriginal leaders in South Australia.**

Finally, in October 2018, the South Australian Government established the role of the Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People (the Commissioner), reflecting bipartisan commitment to positive change for Aboriginal children and young people living in South Australia. April Lawrie formally commenced in the role in December 2018.

The creation of the role was a very important step towards ensuring Aboriginal children and young peoples' voices are being heard firsthand and not separated off, considered an afterthought or excluded entirely as witnessed too many times in the past.

The Commissioner is an independent officer responsible to the Minister for Education, with headline functions to address systemic policy and practice barriers to improving outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people under 18 years of age in the areas of health and wellbeing, education, youth justice and child protection.

The Commissioner was appointed under the Constitution Act 1934 (South Australia), which excludes the granting of powers and functions that would usually occur if appointment was made through the Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016. Therefore, the Commissioner performs the duties with no statutes; however, performs the important functions of developing culturally safe and informed strategies and promoting Aboriginal voice with regard for the safety and wellbeing of all Aboriginal children and young people.

Community expectation is that the role of Commissioner be legislated with the necessary powers to effectively improve better outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people.

The functions of the Commissioner are underpinned by the articles and principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)<sup>1</sup>, including the right to be heard in Article 12:

*"Every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously".*

In addition to the UNCRC, the right to maintain connection to culture is a human right as identified by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP)<sup>2</sup>. It also upholds the Commissioner's role within South Australia to promote the wellbeing of Aboriginal children, their culture, and both their rights to Aboriginality and indigeneity.

Whilst the Declaration is non-binding, Australia is a signatory and has accepted its framework for better recognising and protecting the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.





# 1: OVERVIEW

**The first of Aboriginal engagement processes, 'Be Seen. Be Heard. Flourish.' commenced in April 2019 and concluded October 2019.**

It involved six months of extensive engagement through targeted Youth Forums and Community Conversation Forums undertaken across the state, speaking first hand with Aboriginal young people and community in relation to 'Aboriginal South Australian children and young people's wellbeing and their right to grow up safe and secure in culturally informed ways'.

The views of the Aboriginal children and young people inspired us. At times they challenged the views of community members. Despair and hopelessness did not feature as an issue for Aboriginal young people. Aboriginal young people instilled in the community participants a sense of hope and optimism that things would inevitably change for the better. Radical optimism featured as a position of strength and determination by Aboriginal young people across the participating communities.

## 1.1 WHY DID WE NEED TO HAVE CONVERSATIONS WITH ABORIGINAL CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE, FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES?

**Aboriginal children and young people inherit over 60,000 years of cultural identity and form part of over 38,000 Aboriginal people living in South Australia.**

Yet their place in South Australia represents marked inequity compared to non-Aboriginal South Australians as a consequence of 240 years of colonisation. This is evident through this brief profile of their current circumstances.

- According to the 2016 census, Aboriginal people make up 2.0% of the total population in South Australia.<sup>3</sup>
- About 50% of Aboriginal South Australians live in metropolitan Adelaide with the other 50% dispersed across regional and remote areas.<sup>4</sup>
- Almost 55% of South Australia's Aboriginal population is under the age of 24 years.<sup>5</sup>
- The median age of Aboriginal people in South Australia is 23 years.<sup>6</sup>
- In 2017, there were 1,028 births registered in South Australia where one or both parents identified themselves as Aboriginal, representing 5.4% of all births.<sup>7</sup>
- One in six (16%) of live born babies to Aboriginal mothers in South Australia during 2016 were low birthweight, a higher rate than the 12.5% recorded nationally for Aboriginal children.<sup>8</sup>
- In South Australia, Aboriginal children make up a third (33%) of children and young people in out-of-home care, and over half of these children are in non-Aboriginal care. Further, at 30 June 2018, 31% of Aboriginal children and young people had been in continuous out-of-home care for two to five years.<sup>9</sup>
- In 2017-2018, Aboriginal children and young people comprised two-thirds (66%) of the daily average number of children aged 10-17 years in detention in South Australia.<sup>10</sup>
- In 2018, close to 50% of Aboriginal children enrolled in the first year of school were assessed as having a learning vulnerability in one or more areas.<sup>11</sup>
- In 2019, 393 Aboriginal students achieved SACE qualification, including 159 from country South Australia – an increase on the 364 from 2018.<sup>12</sup>

## 1.2 GETTING OUR APPROACH RIGHT

Our engagement was the first of its kind. First and foremost, it gave preference to the voices of Aboriginal children and young people, which is the key element to staying true to the agenda and purpose of the Commissioner's role. It was designed to hear directly from Aboriginal children and young people about their experiences and to hear their views about how things could be improved for them.

We were aware that many Aboriginal children and young people in the child protection and youth justice systems across metropolitan Adelaide have family and cultural connections to other parts of South Australia, and sometimes interstate. It was therefore important that we reached many Aboriginal children and young people, families and communities from other regions and groups across the state.

The first of a series of targeted Youth Forums was held with the South Australian Aboriginal Secondary Training Academy (SAASTA) students. Seventy-five Aboriginal high school students from across South Australia were present.

During the forum, students raised the importance of the Commissioner engaging with all South Australian Aboriginal children and young people, and to include their parents, families and the wider Aboriginal community. They wanted the views and concerns of the Aboriginal community to be represented to ensure their voices were included in addressing policy, practices and laws affecting them as Aboriginal children and young people.

*"Everyone should be involved... The Commissioner should meet with everyone – children, families and groups." (Age 16, SAASTA student)*

They also thought it prudent that Aboriginal Elders play an integral role in the 'Be Seen. Be Heard. Flourish.' engagement process, and that Aboriginal children and young people be given a variety of ways to interact with the Commissioner.

*"Young people should get a choice whether they want to talk by themselves, or with an Elder or in a group." (Age 17, SAASTA student)*

*"Our children and young people respect Elders and it is only natural they wanted Elders and community leaders be part of this process. This is part of our culture. This is a way of passing on knowledge and about how we bring about change". (Aboriginal Education Officer, Murray Bridge)*

We listened to the advice and leadership provided by the SASSTA students and developed the 'Be Seen. Be Heard.' Community Conversations. We engaged two esteemed Aboriginal Elders, Brian Butler and Sandy Miller to help facilitate local and regional level forums, and tailored 'Be Seen. Be Heard.' Youth forums to entail face to face and individual engagement.

The Community Conversations also supported the overwhelming number of requests we received from Aboriginal communities to visit and discuss their concerns regarding the safety and wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people.





# 1: OVERVIEW

## 1.3 WHO DID WE MEET?

We convened 8 'Be Seen. Be Heard. Flourish.' Youth Forums at schools in several regions, including: SAASTA, Mount Barker, Port Augusta, Whyalla, Murray Bridge, Warrapiendi Aboriginal School, Kadina Memorial School and Central Yorke Area School. In total, we reached over 430 Aboriginal children and young people.

We convened 16 'Be Seen. Be Heard.' Community Conversation Forums in several regions, including the: Far West Coast, Upper Spencer Gulf, Far North, South-East, Yorke Peninsula, Riverland, Fleurieu Peninsula, Murraylands, Adelaide Hills and metropolitan and peri-urban Adelaide. In total, we reached over 362 Aboriginal people, as well as some non-Aboriginal people who play a key role in the lives of Aboriginal children and young people.

## 1.4 SUMMARY OF KEY LEARNINGS

**It was evident from the stories and experiences shared by South Australian Aboriginal children and young people, their families and communities that there has been limited improvement in South Australia since the Bringing Them Home report was tabled in 1997.<sup>13</sup> In fact, they demonstrate that our State still has much to do to truly support Aboriginal families and to prevent another wave of Stolen Generations.**

We recognise some gains have been achieved for Aboriginal children and young people in early childhood and education.<sup>14</sup> However, we cannot ignore that the current overall picture for South Australian Aboriginal children and young people outlined in Section 1.1 demonstrates limited change, particularly in relation to ongoing and unacceptable over-representation in child protection, out-of-home care and youth detention. Poorer health, wellbeing and education outcomes further compound the vulnerability experienced by Aboriginal children and young people. This raises the necessity of culturally safe and culturally informed reforms in child and family statutory services, as current interventions are "band-aid solutions" that will not resolve the deeper issues.<sup>15</sup>

During the forums and conversations, we heard heartfelt stories of family loss and grief through Aboriginal child removals and juvenile detention. We were moved by the testimonies of overcoming adversarial systems and practices. We were reminded how the interpersonal relationships that Aboriginal

children and young people have with their kin must be taken into consideration. Aboriginal children and young people continue to be separated from and consequently dislocated from family, community and culture, which leads to a fractured cultural identity.

Aboriginal children and young people are yearning for their cultural identity to be developed and nurtured, whether through family, community, education and the other systems with which they are forced to interact with, including child protection, out-of-home care and youth justice. They view this as vital to their health, wellbeing and successful future.

The forums allowed Aboriginal children and young people, their families and communities to share their stories and experiences and have in-depth discussions about how policy decisions have directly impacted them.

A key learning from the forums was that to improve outcomes and services for Aboriginal children and young people, we must hear and acknowledge their families' stories, and act upon them meaningfully through policy and practice change so Aboriginal children and young people, their families and communities are seen, heard and actively involved in decisions that affect their livelihood.

Despite the challenges they face, Aboriginal children and young people demonstrated radical optimism in the face of the challenges they experience. The forums reminded us to never give up on Aboriginal children and young people. Their optimism, combined with the everyday realities of Aboriginal children, young people and families' lives and the learnings gained from the forums, present a compelling case for change in South Australia. Our commitment is to pursue that change through every avenue available to us.

Be Seen.

Be Heard.

## Community Conversations



- |   |               |    |                                     |
|---|---------------|----|-------------------------------------|
| 1 | Whyalla       | 9  | Barmera / Riverland                 |
| 2 | Point Pearce  | 10 | Coober Pedy                         |
| 3 | Port Pirie    | 11 | Oodnadatta                          |
| 4 | Port Augusta  | 12 | Gawler                              |
| 5 | Mount Gambier | 13 | Victor Harbor                       |
| 6 | Murray Bridge | 14 | Salisbury – Northern Metro Forum    |
| 7 | Port Lincoln  | 15 | Port Adelaide – Western Metro Forum |
| 8 | Ceduna        | 16 | Noarlunga – Southern Metro Forum    |

# 1: OVERVIEW

## 1.5 RECOMMENDATIONS

### Recommendation 1: Establish a consumer led Peak Body

South Australia requires an Aboriginal consumer-led Peak Body that preferences and privileges the voices of Aboriginal children and young people, their families and communities, which will be pivotal to bringing their voices to the forefront.

Establishing a consumer-led Peak Body will serve as an advocate for system change, contribute to policy development, and monitor the performance of agencies to ensure they act in a culturally-informed manner in achieving safety, care and wellbeing outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people.

The Peak Body will be representative of Aboriginal family and community voices, and will contribute to policy and service development in areas affecting Aboriginal children and young people. It will provide recommendations to government on overcoming issues and barriers impacting on Aboriginal children and young people, and promote Aboriginal family practices and philosophies of care.

A key mandate of the Peak Body will be to acknowledge the views and concerns of Aboriginal children and young people, as referenced within this report, and develop protocols to ensure their representation is central to the Peak Body's key objectives.

### Recommendation 2: Establish Aboriginal Family Care Committees

Establish local level Aboriginal Family Care Committees (FCC) to provide a mechanism for Aboriginal community expert knowledge and advice, which will also contribute to child and family policy and service development.

The FCCs will be formal consultative bodies that support families, advise services and provide leadership in keeping Aboriginal children and young people safe in culturally informed ways.

### Recommendation 3: Legislate the role of Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People

The Aboriginal community and its leaders identified the importance of having the role of Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People enshrined in the Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016. This will reinforce this government's commitment to Aboriginal children and young people and their communities, and will empower the Commissioner to work collegiately and with shared purpose alongside other Commissioners with the same powers to investigate and make representations for the explicit and overt purpose of addressing matters that affect Aboriginal children and young people of South Australia.





## 1.6 ROAD MAP FOR ACTION

### Office of the Commissioner for Aboriginal children and young people's priorities

The stories and experiences of Aboriginal children and young people, their families and communities show that South Australia has much to do in addressing the safety and wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people. This is crucial given Aboriginal children are the vessels for Aboriginal culture moving forward.

To improve outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people, we need a system that builds on the strengths, resilience and lived experiences of our Aboriginal community. This was reflected in the heartfelt stories of family loss and grief and the intergenerational trauma that continues to impact young peoples' rights to be seen, be heard, flourish.

If we are to be serious about prioritising outcomes and services for Aboriginal children, we must recognise the solutions coming from community. In doing so, we acknowledge that the recommendations provide a roadmap for action and reform which truly reflects what matters to Aboriginal children and young people, their families and communities.

To achieve this, a collective approach is needed. The Commissioner's office commits to working in partnership at a statewide level through the following work priorities:

1. Lead reform in Aboriginal family and community engagement in the child protection system in line with Recommendations 1 and 2.
2. Following implementation of Recommendation 3, conduct a review into Aboriginal community identified priority areas, and provide recommendations for services reform and system wide policy and practice changes that improve outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people – this will include to:
  - examine the nature and extent of adherence to the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle, including cultural maintenance, family preservation and/or reunification plans for every identified Aboriginal child in out-of-home care and/or supported through pre-statutory services
  - examine the policies, procedures and practices regarding the statutory removal of Aboriginal babies from the care of their mothers whilst inpatients of birthing and ante-natal care units
  - examine the policies, procedures and practices regarding the placement of siblings into care arrangements, and the extent of contact between siblings who are separated in care arrangements.
3. Advocate for reform of state government policies and practices that impact the cultural safety and wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people.
4. Provide leadership on the 'Family Matters Campaign' by ensuring its vision and targets are promulgated within South Australia and initiatives are developed to address the over-representation of Aboriginal children in the care and protection system.
5. Advocate for the legislating of family led decision making to uphold the integrity of family participation throughout policy, practice and procedures.
6. Develop a proposal to introduce an Aboriginal Panel to assess court applications for long term Care and Protection Orders for Aboriginal children.
7. Collaborate with relevant partners to develop a proposal for a therapeutic model as an alternative response for Aboriginal young people involved with the youth court.
8. Work with the Department for Education on developing engagement agreements between schools and local representative Aboriginal community groups regarding language and cultural education for Aboriginal children and young people.

# 2: ABORIGINAL CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE 'YOUTH FORUMS'

## 2.1 ENGAGEMENT PROCESS FOR THE YOUTH FORUMS

Three main activities were created to optimise input from the Aboriginal children and young people that could be translated into meaningful areas of focus for change:

1. **What's Important to Me?:** This task set the context for the forum as it identified what was important to them, and ignited discussion from the hearts of Aboriginal youth as to what mattered to them.





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## 2: ABORIGINAL CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE ‘YOUTH FORUMS’

### 2.2 WHAT DID WE HEAR FROM ABORIGINAL CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE?

The Aboriginal children and young people who attended the forums generously shared their stories and experiences with the Commissioner, either privately or openly amongst their peers in group settings.

They raised three key messages and asked them to be tabled at Community Conversations, as a request to their families and communities.

#### **1: Will Aboriginal leaders ‘show up’ to challenge injustices that impact on Aboriginal children and young people?:**

Aboriginal children and young people wanted Aboriginal leaders in their communities to demonstrate the same level of dedication in addressing the injustices that impact them as Aboriginal children and young people as they do in advocating for other issues, such as native title. They are asking the Aboriginal community and Aboriginal leaders to ‘show up’ in respect to advancing their rights and needs as Aboriginal children and young people.

*“The amount of energy that these fellas put into native title issues around here. This same amount of energy and time should be helping us with our youth centre.” (Aboriginal young person, Yorke Peninsula)*

#### **2: Will you help protect Aboriginal children and young people’s distinct rights under the United Nations Conventions and Declarations?:**

Aboriginal children and young people stated that they felt the distinct rights afforded to them by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>16</sup> and United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is under threat. An example included their distinct right to develop a positive cultural identity, with access to culture and a strong sense of community. Another example is the constant wrongful reinforcement of disadvantage and poverty as defining Aboriginal cultural identity.

*“Something that would make life better for youth in my community would be if media and government stop only seeing the negative stuff like housing, drugs and alcohol from Aboriginal people.” (Student, Mount Barker Primary and High School)*

#### **3: Will you stop seeing us as a problem and celebrate our successes? Will you see us as part of the solution that will support the whole Aboriginal community?:**

Aboriginal children and young people expressed how they did not want the experience of disadvantage to define who they are amongst their family and society, and the systems with whom they interact. They wanted to be viewed as strong Aboriginal children and young people who are proud, hopeful and heading toward a positive future where healing is possible.

*“Do not give up hope. We can repair the damage of the past.” (Aboriginal young person, Mount Barker)*

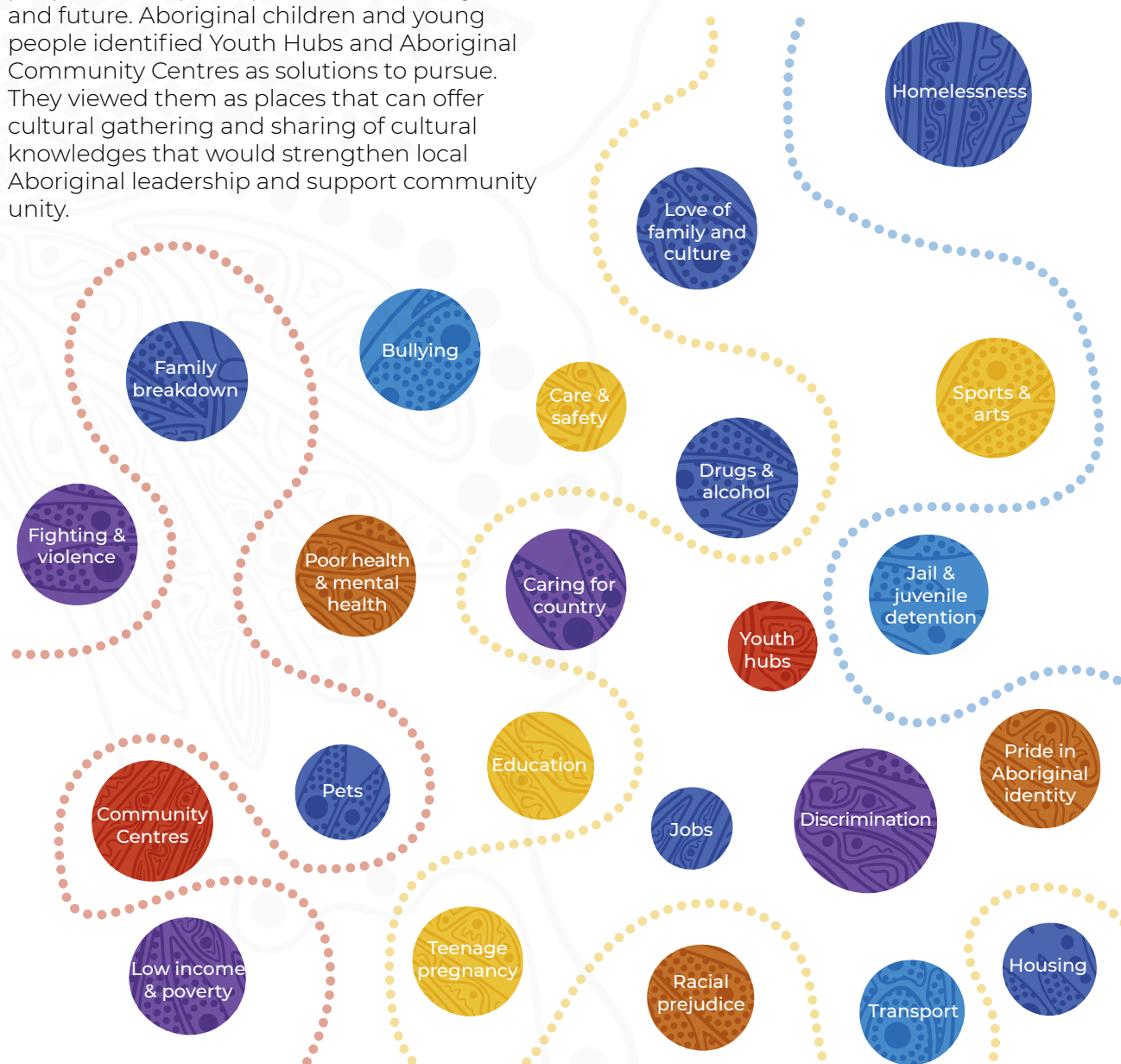


During the forums we found that Aboriginal children and young people exuded a strong sense of radical optimism, reflecting the need to not give up hope despite the challenges facing them. Hearing about their achievements reminded us that there are many stories of strong and proud Aboriginal children and young people who are successful amongst themselves, their families and their communities.

However, the reality remains that many issues worry Aboriginal children and young people, and impact upon their wellbeing and future. Aboriginal children and young people identified Youth Hubs and Aboriginal Community Centres as solutions to pursue. They viewed them as places that can offer cultural gathering and sharing of cultural knowledges that would strengthen local Aboriginal leadership and support community unity.

An important area they wanted to achieve was effective ways of passing down cultural values and knowledges, so they are kept protected and practiced into the future and support their cultural identity. They also highlighted their love and respect for their family pets made them happy, having a positive impact on their mental health and wellbeing.

The issues identified by Aboriginal children and young people are captured in the following illustration.





## 2: ABORIGINAL CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE 'YOUTH FORUMS'

### 2.3 PRIORITIES FOR ABORIGINAL CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

The following seven areas represent the range of priorities raised by Aboriginal children and young people and their implications.

#### Area 1: Aboriginal youth voice

The voices of Aboriginal children and young people have been absent for too long, or as 25-year-old Isiah Dawes, CEO of ID Know Yourself, said at the SNAICC Conference 2019, *"the voices are there, but they need a platform"*. As half of the Aboriginal population within South Australia is under 24 years of age, the value of their voice cannot be ignored.

*"Without a specific focus on Aboriginal adolescents, Australia will not redress Aboriginal inequalities." (Dr Peter Azzopardi, South Australian Health and Medical Research Institute)*

Aboriginal young people deserve to have a voice and be part of policy and program development that impacts them, their families and communities. However, Aboriginal young people signalled there were a lack of meaningful opportunities for them, their families and the broader Aboriginal community to contribute to policy and participate in not just discussions, but decision-making about issues that affect their lives.

*"It's important to me to: (a) feeling the connection of belonging to culture, family and friends, (b) passion for success in life, (c) goals to achieve, and (d) to always stand up, to have my own voice, to be heard when I have something to tell everyone!" (Aboriginal young person, Murraylands)*

While there may be recent positive developments in policy and programs, marginalised children, specifically Aboriginal children, continue to be overlooked in consultation, let alone decision-making, about policy and programs related to them.<sup>17</sup>

The voices of our Aboriginal children and young people, their families and communities heard through the 'Be Seen. Be Heard. Flourish.' Conversations will inform our work plan in the future. However, in order to prioritise and privilege the voices of our Aboriginal children and young people on matters that affect them on a broader scale, as noted during the Community Conversations, a platform is needed for centring the voices of Aboriginal children, their families and communities.

Providing Aboriginal children and young people with a meaningful and genuine platform for stating their opinions and sharing their experiences will have multiple positive impacts. It will create a sense of belonging and inclusion through opportunities to express their opinions without fear, share their experiences and identify improved methods for service implementation, starting with a focus on their most urgent needs for improving their safety and wellbeing. Critically, it will lead to more effective implementation of policy and programs.

#### Area 2: Cultural identity

The concept of cultural identity was raised by Aboriginal children and young people all across South Australia. They described how cultural identity provides them with a connection that defines who they belong to and where they belong. It creates a heightened sense of 'spirit', self-esteem and social and emotional wellbeing.

*"Culture - it gives me a sense of who I am and makes me proud to be black." (Aboriginal young person, Maitland)*

Culture is fundamentally essential for them – this pointed to how the future of Aboriginal cultures lies in their hands. However, they felt their cultural identity is negatively impacted through their experiences with the education, employment, child welfare and youth justice systems.

Aboriginal children and young people shared many stories that reflected efforts by these systems to separate or remove them from their family, therefore from their Aboriginal cultural identity. They believed their right to positive cultural identity development, culture and community is under threat.





## 2: ABORIGINAL CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE 'YOUTH FORUMS'

### Area 3: Non-Aboriginal care and youth detention

Aboriginal young people were cognisant of the number of their Aboriginal peers who are growing up in non-Aboriginal families and are culturally disengaged or having contact with the youth justice system.

*"Family – it's important to me because they take care of us every day."  
(Aboriginal young person, Murray Bridge)*

Their observations reflect the over-representation of Aboriginal children and young people in both non-Aboriginal care and secure care who are not having enough contact with their Aboriginal families and relatives or with Aboriginal workers.

*"Too many kids get locked up. It's wrong to imprison children" (Aboriginal child, Kadina/Yorke Peninsula)*

*"Every Aboriginal kid deserves an Aboriginal worker. How else are we going to get to know our mob and where we from." (Aboriginal secondary student, Port Pirie)*

*"I don't know why they put me in the care of white families. I have my own Aboriginal family and relations. I keep on running back to my mob, especially to my Mum. I feel good when I am home. They just don't get it!" (Aboriginal young person, Upper Spencer Gulf)*

*"I have a little brother and sister living with other families. My sister and me sometimes talk through skype, but I haven't seen my little brother since he was one. He's three now and he's growing up not knowing me. I haven't done anything wrong. Why do they do that? Keeping him and my sister away from each other?" (Aboriginal young person, Fleurieu Peninsula)*

*"We need more Aboriginal foster carers."  
(Aboriginal child, Murraylands)*

*"Getting locked up is not home-away from home. My big cousins wouldn't say they were residents there (Cavan). Only family homes and my community can make you feel like you are a resident, not lock up." (Aboriginal secondary student, Adelaide)*

### Area 4: Transmission of Aboriginal cultural knowledge

The lack of transmission of Aboriginal cultural knowledge from parents, family, Elders, community and cultural educators to Aboriginal children and young people reflects the impacting legacy of dispossession, segregation and the Stolen Generations policy and practices inflicted upon Aboriginal people that have disrupted Aboriginal ways and knowledge of teaching culture to the next generation of younger people which causes significant impact upon them.

*"I know I am Aboriginal, but I don't know what that really means. I just know I am. I'm proud of who I am. I wish I knew my culture though. My family don't know much. We come from the Stolen Generations mob. SAASTA kids are like family and community to me." (Age 16, SAASTA student)*

Through the disengagement of Aboriginal children and young people from their families, there has been a loss of cultural knowledge in many communities. This loss can disrupt traditional Aboriginal cultural values and beliefs about appropriate social behaviour being transferred verbally from one generation to the next.<sup>18</sup>

A traditional and vital value for Aboriginal people is the interconnectedness of family and non-family community members, everyone playing a fundamental role in the child's socialisation and culture. Therefore, disengagement of family and culture is making Aboriginal children vulnerable to the youth justice system.<sup>19</sup>



*"I like coming to school. We learn about culture. We have a day where our family and mob can come into school and teach us. This keeps me out of trouble."*  
(Aboriginal young person, Oodnadatta)

Aboriginal young people explained that they are yearning for the transfer of cultural knowledge to build their cultural identity and their role as future leaders. They specifically directed us to raise this request with their Aboriginal families and communities at the Community Conversation Forums.

### Area 5: Racism

Aboriginal young people spoke about the growing level of systemic racism and policy that is deeply embedded in government funded agencies and the business sector.

*"If you 'look Aboriginal' there is no chance of getting a job in these shops."*  
(Aboriginal young person, Upper Spencer Gulf)

They were concerned about their treatment across several fronts, highlighting the prejudice against them as young people that is exacerbated by experiences of racism as an Aboriginal person.

*"It should not matter if your skin colour is different from everyone else."*  
(Aboriginal primary school student, Kadina)

*"Something that would make life better for youth in my community would be to start calling out racism and bullying in schools."* (Aboriginal secondary school student, Mount Barker)

*"I don't like ignorance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and history. Ignorance breeds fear and fear breeds racism."* (Aboriginal primary school student, Mount Barker)

### Area 6: Cultural knowledges in education

There are approximately 13,000 children and young people across South Australia who identify as Aboriginal enrolled in early years services and schools.<sup>20</sup>

During the Youth Forums, significant concerns were raised about the lack of Aboriginal knowledges in the education curriculum and the lack of Aboriginal people in the education workforce. Forum participants believed the current school system is failing them and expressed their desire for greater inclusion of culture in the curriculum.

*"I'm from a community with strong language, but in Adelaide I don't speak my language. I had it as a child. I've lost it. We should learn our language. Maybe through schools."* (Aboriginal secondary student, Adelaide)

They also identified that the knowledge and wisdom of Aboriginal community members and Elders would contribute significantly to the development of their positive cultural identity.

*"We need Elders and Aboriginal role models in schools, in paid positions to support students and staff. The young mob that will have all this knowledge from Elders will strive and flourish."*  
(Aboriginal young person, Murray Bridge)

Their statements indicated a strong desire to learn about the 'true history' of Australia. Aboriginal students identified themselves as being the vessel of Aboriginal culture in the 21st Century. They want their identity to be respected and learning outcomes developed that incorporate Aboriginal languages, cultures, country and histories.

## 2: ABORIGINAL CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE ‘YOUTH FORUMS’

Most of the feedback provided by Aboriginal children and young people indicated they were proud and happy to identify as Aboriginal, but many did not understand what it means to be Aboriginal within an Aboriginal community and cultural context. Some spoke of their school community and how interaction with other Aboriginal students and educators provided them with a sense of community and connection to culture.

*“My school community (through SAASTA) gives me a sense of identity and belonging.” (SAASTA student, Berri)*

*“[We need to] learn more about our culture ‘throughout our schooling’ because a lot of knowledge was lost within families and they have no way to learn or teach.” (SAASTA student)*

The forums provided Aboriginal young people a platform to discuss the positive impact Aboriginal school officers and educators have on their successes and positive cultural identity development.

*“I think that over the last few years the amount of work that has been done to accept us and others into the school and community, it has been really good. There has been a huge change and I am now prouder than ever to say I am proud to have the blood of the First Nations people in me.” (Aboriginal secondary student, Mount Barker)*

### Area 7: Aboriginal Community Centres and Youth Hubs

Aboriginal young people felt that any potential to prioritise the needs of Aboriginal children and young people at a local or regional level was marred by the lack of Aboriginal community unity, which strengthens cohesive Aboriginal leadership. They yearned for the establishment of Aboriginal Community Centres in regions across the state that incorporated Youth Hubs.

Aboriginal young people believed Aboriginal Community Centres would bring diverse Aboriginal identities together to work in unity for their benefit. Further, it would help support and strengthen Aboriginal children and young people, their families and communities to address the barriers they face.

*“We want somewhere to go that is available to all community mob. Community means being close to your community and having strong connections.” (SAASTA student, Adelaide)*

*“A connected community allows bonds to be formed and connections made. We can grow in strength and love together, instead of apart.” (Aboriginal young person, Mount Barker)*

*“When there is prejudice against us Aboriginal youth in our town, who speaks up for us. Who helps us speak up for ourselves? Lots of us youth are poor, have trouble at home and there is heaps of struggles. One youth worker can’t do it all on their own. The education mob don’t help. They want us out of their way or leave it up to us. The youth centre is a start though. We feel good here – it is for us youth. But will there be other change out there?” (Aboriginal young person, Whyalla)*







# 3: ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

## 3.1 ENGAGEMENT PROCESS FOR THE COMMUNITY CONVERSATION FORUMS

In every community, a local Ambassador was engaged to ensure that “Be Seen. Be Heard. Flourish” Community Conversations were Aboriginal-led and respectful of community protocols. Several Ambassadors also co-hosted local forums, which enhanced community awareness and accessibility, ensuring as many Aboriginal people as possible had an opportunity to participate in the forums.

It was important to centre the Community Conversation Forums on the voices of Aboriginal children and young people. Therefore, we tabled the three key messages raised at the Youth Forums that Aboriginal children and young people want their community members to hear and address:

- 1: Will Aboriginal leaders ‘show up’ to challenge injustices that impact on Aboriginal children and young people?**
- 2: Will you help protect Aboriginal children and young people’s distinct rights under the United Nations Conventions and Declarations?**
- 3: Will you stop seeing us as a problem and celebrate our successes? Will you see us as part of the solution that will support the whole Aboriginal community?**

We expanded on this by describing why Aboriginal children and young people put forward the three messages:

- They want the level of leadership, participation and passion shown in land and native title matters to be shared on defending and advancing the rights of Aboriginal children and young people.

- They want greater understanding of their rights to culture and identity. They are yearning for language and knowledge about family, place, belonging and country. In their words, *“it is more than wearing red, black and yellow”*. They know their cultural identity distinguishes them from other children and young people but are saying, *“don’t assume that we know what it is to be Aboriginal in today’s modern world”*.
- They want to be taught - for cultural knowledge to be transferred to them; this is their inherent right as Aboriginal children. They said *“if you as community members don’t have the knowledge, then advocate for others to do this work in the schools and through cultural camps”*.
- They want family and community members to understand the radical optimism they hold as children and young people for a positive future, and that their view is *“the damage of the past can be repaired”*.

We explained that what we heard from Aboriginal children and young people, combined with what family and community members shared, would shape the development of this report and the work plan ahead.

Following this introduction, Brian Butler and Sandy Miller facilitated broader community discussion on the wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people, and upholding the right of Aboriginal children and young people to be safe and secure in culturally informed ways.

Overall, the message from Aboriginal people was clear. It was acknowledged and reinforced by Aboriginal families and communities wherever the Community Conversation Forums were held. It was this - despite the many things that currently present barriers:

*“Nothing should get in the way of keeping Aboriginal children and young people safe, with a strong sense of family, belonging and cultural connection.” (Aboriginal community worker, Mt Gambier)*



The Community Conversation Forums were a process of deep storytelling, which spoke to the need for a form of Aboriginal voice that is legitimate and acceptable for Aboriginal children and young people, their families and communities, and that can inform the State of South Australia. They also allowed us to connect with Aboriginal communities across South Australia and bring visibility to the inaugural role of the Commissioner.

It was evident that not all communities and regions have the same level of resources to combat the systems that negatively impact Aboriginal children and young people, however they consistently shared the same concerns. Aboriginal community members are concerned by government departmental failure to comply with legislation relating to the protection of Aboriginal children and young peoples' cultural rights. The most distinct pressing issue was the lack of adherence to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle (ATSICPP).

The strong level of engagement and the quality of feedback during the Community Conversation Forums underlines the views and concerns relating to the safety and wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people in South Australia, and the importance of their right to family, community and culture.

*"This is the first time we have been able to get together to have a proper meeting with everyone at the table to bring to light the things that are impacting our young people's safety and wellbeing. There are a lot of kids doing it tough in this town and we need a collective voice to fight for the best outcomes for our young mob." (Aboriginal community member, Port Augusta)*

Currently, Aboriginal voice is fragmented and lacking the political capital necessary to advocate for substantial policy reform. The Community Conversation Forums were an important start to hear from the Aboriginal community about advancing the wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people, but as a one-off process, are insufficient by themselves.

## 3.2 WHAT DID WE HEAR FROM ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY MEMBERS?

Concern about the removal of many Aboriginal children and young people from their families, communities and culture were expressed in all community engagement forums.

*"They (welfare services) think our Aboriginal children are children of a lesser God." (Aboriginal community leader, Far North)*

In combination, Aboriginal children and young people's perspectives coupled with the Community Conversation Forums revealed three overarching themes: 1) inherent right to family and cultural identity, 2) agency of Aboriginal voice and leadership and 3) social justice in service delivery.

The themes highlight that South Australia has a long way to go to prevent further injustices being inflicted upon Aboriginal children and young people, and to combat harmful systemic policy and practice that is entrenched throughout child and family service systems.

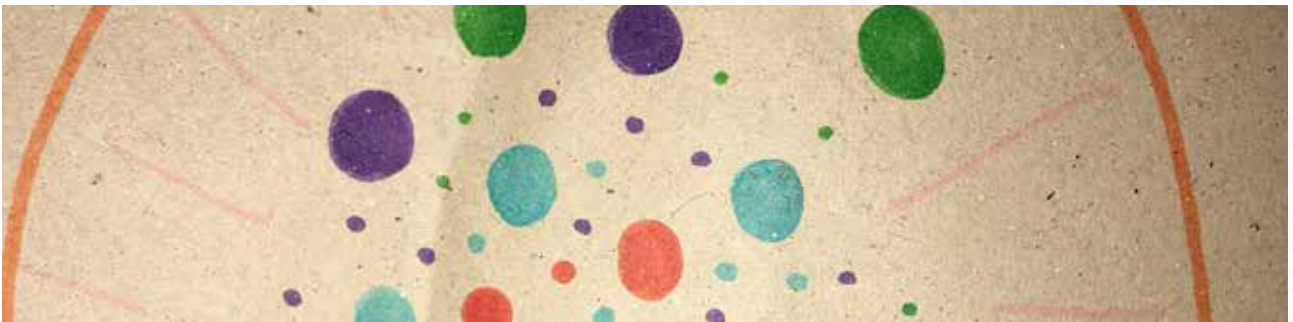
When the Bringing Them Home Report into the Stolen Generations was released in 1997, the general Australian community was shocked to learn that Aboriginal children represented at least 20 per cent of children living in out-of-home care.<sup>21</sup> However, despite the many legal and policy frameworks designed to reduce the number of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care, Aboriginal children were 10.2 times more likely to be residing in out-of-home care compared to non-Aboriginal children in 2018.<sup>22</sup>

*"We know that if a child is not loved, the child will not learn. We have far too many Aboriginal children being unnecessarily taken away from the Aboriginal community and culture that loves them." (Aboriginal Elder, Uncle Brian Butler, Adelaide)*

# 3: ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

## 3.3 PRIORITIES FOR ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY MEMBERS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

### Theme 1: The inherent right to family and cultural identity



#### A right to grow up with family

On almost every single facet of intervention and service response, Aboriginal children and young people are more than often denied their rights to family. As a result, they frequently become disengaged from their families and communities, and in many cases, separated from siblings and everything that is familiar to them.<sup>23</sup>

When this is happening on a daily basis and is widespread throughout child and family services, Aboriginal children and young people are denied their rights to their community, culture and 'country', and ultimately their Aboriginal identity.<sup>24</sup>

*"They (welfare workers) play God with our Aboriginal kid's lives." (Aboriginal Elder, Southern Adelaide)*

*"Our families do not even have a say. Not even asked. We are experiencing the Stolen Generations happening again." (Aboriginal mother, community member, Whyalla)*

*"Our community and especially our little ones are up against attitudes and practices to erase Aboriginal identity. They still trying to conduct assimilation through our little kids here in this town. They use child protection to do that. After going through a full on foster care assessment over a couple of months, including a blood test to see if I took drugs, the Social Worker told me she lost my paperwork and that tomorrow she was in Court to make the Aboriginal infant permanent with the white foster family in Adelaide. She had no intention of baby coming into my care nor returning to his community where his full siblings and family all lived. She was giving me the run-around. As the relative, I feel downtrodden and helpless. The odds are stacked against us, our Aboriginal babies and families. Imagine what the Aboriginal mother is going through. The worker and the Department probably think they are saving the baby." (Aboriginal community member, Upper Spencer Gulf)*

## Theme 1: The inherent right to family and cultural identity

Reunification ought to be the primary priority for children living in out-of-home care. Aboriginal community members are concerned that Aboriginal children who are removed and placed in out-of-home care arrangements grow up with someone that is not their family and not their culture.<sup>25</sup>

*"They (welfare workers) exclude Aboriginal family and culture from the safety and wellbeing of the Aboriginal child. They actually believe Aboriginal family and culture is harmful for Aboriginal children, and our little babies will have a better life being taken away and cared for by white families. They don't realise Aboriginal culture is a strength and makes for strong resilient children and families." (Aboriginal young health professional, Northern Adelaide)*

### Unprecedented removals

Aboriginal children are four times more likely than non-Indigenous children of being investigated for suspected neglect or abuse at home.<sup>26</sup> Aboriginal community members are deeply concerned about the high rate of removal of Aboriginal children and young people from their families and communities. The consequences of removing an Aboriginal child are profound. It devastates families, deepens intergenerational trauma, severs cultural bonds and triggers poor life outcomes.<sup>27</sup>

*"Stolen Generations is about what we know took place in the past. But its impact is present today and we need to take every measure necessary to prevent future stolen generations." (Aboriginal Elder, Sandra Miller)*

The current removal of Aboriginal children from community, country and culture is entrenching the disempowerment and trauma inflicted upon Aboriginal families and communities by past policies. Aboriginal community members raised the need for communities to focus on healing themselves from past discriminatory policies, which greatly impacted their identity and connection with their kin and culture. However, they were conflicted as to how healing can occur when the hurt inflicted by removals is still prominent, and Aboriginal children and young people continue to be removed and placed in out-of-home care arrangements.

Aboriginal families and communities discussed the longstanding effects that removals are having on their ability to maintain strong cultural ties and transfer Aboriginal knowledge and culture to the next generation of Aboriginal young people. Acknowledging the past and recent history of Australia's Stolen Generations - the generations of Aboriginal children and young people continuing to be removed from their families and communities against their wishes - the main priority should be to keep Aboriginal children and young people at home, with their families and in their communities connected to culture.<sup>28</sup>

*"Removal and whitefella policies are disguised throughout many service sectors, which include child protection and others who are supposed to help families. They are in fact inflicting pain and trauma on families and communities." (Aboriginal community member, Coober Pedy)*

### 3: ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

In South Australia, the two most prevalent justifications triggering 50% of removals are neglect and family violence.<sup>29</sup> Yet, there is a significant lack of domestic violence (DV) family support services and therapeutic healing services for Aboriginal families in our state.

***"These Nunga mums in DV situations don't need their kids removed. They need their bloke removed. To take the kids, that's soul destroying for the mum and her kids." (Aboriginal grandmother, Noarlunga)***

Far too often, Aboriginal children are removed and relocated away from family. They and their family having little or no say over this and ongoing decisions that deeply impact their lives and cultural wellbeing.

***"At the point of first contact, at the point of a report or notification, the family is not talked to and the child protection department actively avoids us. They have a preconceived perception of us." (Aboriginal community member, Mount Gambier)***

The unprecedented level of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care speaks to the disregard and failure of government strategy to implement Aboriginal people's cultural advice on reform across policy, services and practices. Optimising Aboriginal leadership and engagement in the system requires immediate action so that culturally informed decisions are fulfilled. South Australia must not relinquish its duty to provide Aboriginal children and young people with outcomes that allows them to flourish with their safety and cultural wellbeing supported together, and in balance.

#### Vulnerability and disadvantage

There is a distinct link between high levels of stress from poor socio-economic conditions and high levels of child protection interventions; these conditions include inadequate accommodation, little or no income, or alcohol and drug abuse.<sup>30</sup> Many Aboriginal families live in poor socio-economic circumstances, so Aboriginal children and young people are more vulnerable to being removed from family and community.

***"Stop punishing vulnerable Aboriginal children and young people. They need to be with their families and community." (Aboriginal young person, father, Mount Gambier)***

The many Aboriginal children and young people removed from their families, either through child protection or youth justice, are vulnerable in their new circumstances. Once in the system, community members were gravely concerned that Aboriginal children and young people then "fall through the cracks". They believed diversion policy, practice and programs are needed to prevent them from both the child protection and the youth justice systems, and therefore, the criminal justice system.

However, the unprecedented removal of Aboriginal children and young people by child protection services will not change until underlying problems are addressed, such as: intergenerational trauma, racism and xenophobia, dispossession and socio-economic disadvantage.<sup>31</sup>

Dr Ngaire Brown reports there is an "increasing body of evidence demonstrating that protection and promotion of traditional knowledge, family, culture and kinship contribute to community cohesion and personal resilience", which acts as part of the antidote to vulnerability and disadvantage.<sup>32</sup> A strong cultural identity and a sense of belonging have been associated with better outcomes in education, justice, health and wellbeing and employment.<sup>33</sup>



## Theme 1: The inherent right to family and cultural identity

### Non-compliance with the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle

The single most common concern for Aboriginal families and communities, consistent with experiences in other parts of Australia, was the disregard of, and non-compliance with the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle by government departments and agencies.<sup>34</sup>

The Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (June 2013) published a report to improve greater understanding of the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle and to improve its application across children's services. The Aboriginal Child Placement Principle contains five core elements: prevention, partnership, placement, participation and connection.

Aboriginal families and communities discussed what the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle means to them, which included but is not limited to the following points.

The Aboriginal Child Placement Principle:

- was founded with an intent to bring about systemic change and combat the embedded racism motivating the removal of Aboriginal children and young people from families and communities
- values the vital role that Aboriginal children, families and communities must have in participating in decisions that impact the safety and wellbeing of Aboriginal children and values and respects this input
- appreciates and values Aboriginal kinship systems
- significantly increases reunification
- aims to keep Aboriginal families together and if that is not possible, places the child with their extended families or communities, allowing the preservation of the child's cultural identity<sup>35</sup>
- contains more measures to ensure that Aboriginal children in out-of-home care maintain connection to family, community, culture and country, whether they are in Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal placements.

In addition to the five elements of the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle, 'cultural identity' emerged through the discussion as a sixth element that completes the concept of the Aboriginal child's rights. In many ways 'cultural identity' is to be woven throughout the five other elements as the Aboriginal belief of 'cultural identity' is inherent to the child's spirit and wellness.

While the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle exists in legislation and policy in all Australian jurisdictions, and its significance is acknowledged in many boards of inquiry and reviews into child protection and justice systems, there are however, substantial and ongoing inconsistencies in its implementation. A study undertaken by the Australian Centre for Child Protection South Australia indicated that the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle had been fully applied in only 13% of child protection cases concerning Aboriginal children<sup>36</sup>. This outcome is clearly unacceptable.

It is pertinent that initiatives like the Family Matters Campaign bring a sharper focus to the needs of Aboriginal children. More needs to be done with family and community participation in decision making that keeps Aboriginal children safe, connected and proud of who they are.



### 3: ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

A non-Aboriginal Foster Carer for Aboriginal children and young people who attended a Community Conversation Forum as a representative for Aboriginal children in care, shared the issues she encounters with the Department for Child Protection. Specifically, her important and repeated requests for information are continually declined such as, refusal to provide her with photographs of the child's Aboriginal family, refusal to allow the child to regularly meet with their Aboriginal family, failure to provide information that helps her connect with Aboriginal Elders and failure to provide relevant cultural information.

Overall, this emphasises a lack of commitment to placing Aboriginal children's needs first and engaging in culturally informed and safe practice. It is essential that the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle is implemented to ensure Aboriginal children are placed in safe and supportive living environments that promote a sense of belonging and cultural identity.

#### Cultural identity

The experiences of Aboriginal community members who participated in the 'Be Seen. Be Heard.' Community Conversation Forums exemplified how the child and family welfare sector in Australia is largely a non-Indigenous establishment with attitudes and practices that are far removed from the cultures of Aboriginal children.<sup>37</sup>

*"Meaningful change can only occur when unconscious bias in the child protection system is addressed and the people tasked with applying them questioned." (Aboriginal community member, Port Pirie)*

There were alarming accounts from all Aboriginal people consulted about the growing practice of 'white workers' asking Aboriginal children and young people to choose to be Aboriginal or not, treating Aboriginality as optional. The attitude and behaviour of questioning Aboriginal identity is unfair, unjust and racist - no other cultural group would be treated in this manner.

*"They are still trying to assimilate us Aboriginal people. Sometimes they (welfare) are deliberate in their actions but they wouldn't call it assimilation. They call it child protection removal. Sometimes they are unaware of what they are doing and therefore oblivious to the destruction of our identity." (Aboriginal community member, Port Augusta)*

Aboriginal peoples are the longest continuous culture on earth. Therefore, cultural connectedness must be a priority for Aboriginal children and young people so that Aboriginal culture continues. Aboriginal community members believed this concept was difficult for the white mainstream population to accept or understand.

*"In this community we have kids in care that come from a remote community that has strong traditional cultural practices and still speak their tribal language, but these kids are now living with white families. How does that happen today?" (Aboriginal community member, Far West Coast)*

#### Supporting self-determination through family-led decision making

Family-led decision making is very important, as families are experts in their own experiences. However, current practices and attitudes of practitioners exclude and alienate the families of many Aboriginal children and young people. Decisions are therefore made without informed discussion, and child removals occur quickly with little or no family involvement in planning and decision-making. Prioritising cultural and community connection by allowing family-led decision making will ensure all Aboriginal children and young people are cared for effectively.<sup>38</sup>



## Theme 1: The inherent right to family and cultural identity

Too many Aboriginal children and young people are in the care of non-Aboriginal families and providers. Control over 'family-finding' and 'decision-making' about protective care for Aboriginal children and young people must shift away from child protection services and be placed in the hands of the Aboriginal families and communities. Aboriginal families and communities know and understand the importance of culture and identity to wellbeing. The application of the Aboriginal Child Placement Principal is inherent in the way Aboriginal society lives through its family customs and child rearing practices. It is Aboriginal families that can assist and provide in finding the best suitable out-of-home care. They are invested like no other in getting the best outcome for their child(ren); inclusive of cultural outcomes in terms of identity and sense of belonging.<sup>39</sup>

Furthermore, Aboriginal families and communities should be included and engaged in decision-making about legislation and policy reform in a meaningful way. In practical terms, this would result in identified concerns and suggestions for addressing them being respected and implemented in future decisions.<sup>40</sup>

A key discussion point at the 'Be Seen. Be Heard.' Community Conversation Forums was the importance of 'self-determination' for Aboriginal children and young people, their families and communities. Aboriginal people's right to be self-determining is reinforced by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.<sup>41</sup> Better outcomes are achieved for Aboriginal children and young people when Aboriginal people provide expert local knowledge and apply it to local issues.<sup>42</sup>

It is unequivocal that Aboriginal people have the strengths and an undeniable right to lead positive change for their own children through family led decision-making.

*"We have a right to be self-determining peoples. The current intervention measures in the child protection department does not recognise this. It is a Western System governed by their practices and procedures on what they think is 'right for us'." (Aboriginal community member, Murray Bridge)*

### Cultural knowledges in education

As of November 2018, Aboriginal employees represented 2.5% of the Department for Education's workforce.<sup>43</sup> Whilst acknowledging the positive impact of the current Aboriginal education workforce, Aboriginal community members wanted greater focus on creating opportunities for Aboriginal communities to engage in teaching and delivery of Aboriginal cultural knowledge and language within school settings for the benefit of Aboriginal children and young people. This is vital for developing and/or strengthening cultural identity.

*"The teaching of language is key to the many successes achieved in this region. Aboriginal Elders have a strong presence and the kids really value and appreciate this." (Aboriginal Elder, Victor Harbor)*

*"There should be school agreements for cultural Elders to teach Aboriginal students Aboriginal languages and Aboriginal ways." (Aboriginal Elder, Cultural Educator, Oodnadatta)*

*"The culture in our kids is not lost. It's just asleep. It needs to be woken." (Aboriginal community member, Adelaide)*

*"Don't assume that 'identifying as Aboriginal' means that you know what it is to be Aboriginal with a sense of culture, community and country. Schools cannot do that. It is the responsibility of the Aboriginal family and becoming more so a responsibility of the Aboriginal community and our Aboriginal workers these days." (Uncle Brian Butler, Aboriginal Elder, Adelaide)*

# 3: ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

## Theme 2: Agency of Aboriginal voice and leadership



### Aboriginal Community Voice

Aboriginal families and communities reiterated that Aboriginal voice is often marginalised or absent in policy and decision-making about Aboriginal children and families. Due to funding decisions, much of the previous structures and government support for Aboriginal organisations to manage and provide advice on Aboriginal child and family policy no longer exist in South Australia.

Aboriginal families and communities advocated for the urgent need for change and for organisations and the South Australian Government to commit to listening to the voices of Aboriginal people on how best to respond to the needs of their children and families.

When Aboriginal Elders, community members and families are provided with opportunities to be involved in a consultative process, the most important needs of the Aboriginal children and young people within the community can be identified. If they are also involved in the development and decision-making process, the most suitable method of execution is more likely to be implemented.

Ultimately, consulting and working with, rather than doing to or for, Aboriginal children, young people and families will allow:

- the identification of important needs
- use and expansion of existing networks, resources and services
- the development of more effective and efficient policy and programs.<sup>44</sup>

### Aboriginal governance and leadership

*"We have Aboriginal leaders. We have the knowledge and the understanding, whereas whitefellas are identifying our kids as a number and not allowing local Aboriginal knowledge to play a part in the discussions and decision making process." (Aboriginal community member, Port Lincoln)*

Aboriginal governance and leadership must be developed at the community and state level. This will provide Aboriginal people the power to make decisions about their children and young people, family and community. As a small and marginalised population who is often overlooked, it is challenging for Aboriginal people to have their voices heard. Despite government's stated good intentions, meaningful inclusion of Aboriginal voices is rarely realised.

Aboriginal leadership and advocacy will help empower and build strong Aboriginal communities. Without self-determination, it will be difficult for Aboriginal people to fully overcome the impact of colonisation and dispossession.<sup>45</sup> The right of self-determination reflects that everyone should be able to enjoy their own culture, practice their religion and make decisions based on their own values and beliefs.<sup>46</sup>

## Theme 2: Agency of Aboriginal voice and leadership

Aboriginal leadership and advocacy at a community and state level will empower communities by helping gain back the right of living according to Aboriginal cultural values and beliefs.<sup>47</sup> This will empower the community to have ownership and control over decision-making regarding their lives, and in particular, will teach young future Aboriginal leaders the spirit of Aboriginal self-determination.

### Aboriginal community unity

*“Our community needs to be unified to address our issues and work together to move forward. Once our issues are tabled, strategies, funding and resources need to be injected for positive change.” (Aboriginal young law and justice professional, Whyalla)*

Throughout the forums there were consistent stories about splits and divisions in Aboriginal communities; a lack of Aboriginal community harmony was observed.

Supporting Aboriginal communities to be independent by providing ‘localised youth services, transport, economic opportunity, recreational opportunity and culturally safe spaces for young people’ will allow Aboriginal governance and leadership to be strengthened.<sup>48</sup> This is consistent with the concept of Aboriginal Community Centres discussed in the Youth Forums.

For many participants, the fundamental principle underpinning the foundation of an Aboriginal Community Centre would be unifying the development of positive cultural identity and strengthening Aboriginal families and communities to not only voice issues for change, but also lead solutions.

*“We are using our native title focus to think about our children. We need to come together for the sake of the children. What’s the point of native title if you don’t recognise the needs of your children in the community?” (Aboriginal community leader, Berri)*

Aboriginal families and communities described how an Aboriginal Community Centre would be a place for all people to visit and gather to connect, share, learn and, most importantly, feel safe.

*“A community hub could be an Aboriginal space run by Aboriginal people.” (Aboriginal Elder, Port Adelaide)*

*“Don’t let native title get in the way of building up our services for our Aboriginal young people at risk. We have a safe space for kids in this town, what about a space for the rest of the Aboriginal community.” (Aboriginal community member, Whyalla)*





# 3: ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

## Theme 3: Social justice in service delivery



*"It's a no brainer. We need an Aboriginal social justice framework in child protection and youth justice systems."  
(Aboriginal community member, Port Augusta)*

The stories shared by Aboriginal families and communities provided further insight into the vast impact of past governmental policy and practices enforced on Aboriginal people that have caused intergenerational trauma and impoverished experiences over generations. They included injustices in service delivery and outcomes, and the expectation is that Aboriginal people receive fair treatment and improved outcomes.

Aboriginal families and communities strongly believed that government continually intervenes unnecessarily and excessively when responding to the needs of Aboriginal children and families. They talked about how unfair treatment, racist attitudes and behaviours towards them are barriers to making any difference to their family and bringing about the needed change for their children.

*"The ongoing racism and prejudice which labels us in the system. The unnecessary 'over' intervention needs to stop."  
(Aboriginal community member, Ceduna)*

The statistics for Aboriginal children and young people across the child welfare and youth justice systems support their concerns. The level of Aboriginal people's mistrust towards statutory services is justified and understandable.

Child protection and youth justice statistics are a reflection of Aboriginal people's experience of historical social and economic disadvantage, which has besieged many Aboriginal families with intergenerational poverty, trauma and dysfunction. This has given rise to community-wide problems such as: domestic violence, alcohol and drug abuse, poor health and mental health and poor school attendance.<sup>49</sup>

Experiences of abject poverty and racism were often raised and discussed at the Community Conversation Forums. There was a call to action for resourcing Aboriginal community-controlled services to increase their services to vulnerable Aboriginal children and their families. This was consistent with Aboriginal community members' understanding of achieving positive and meaningful change through Aboriginal services leading the way.

Aboriginal families with lived experience of the child protection and youth justice systems discussed the importance of engagement and support with Aboriginal staff and organisations to assist Aboriginal families address factors that contribute to vulnerability, such as domestic and family violence, substance abuse, and mental health.

## Theme 3: Social justice in service delivery

*“Government got to stop punishing our poor Aboriginal families. Many of them need help, not taking their kids away. Where are these so called ‘early help’ Aboriginal family services? It’s that old story ‘removals beget removals’. This government don’t know any different. That’s why I left government work. I wanted to work to help our mob keep our children safe, but not the way they go about it.” (Aboriginal community worker, Adelaide)*

### Targeted and sustained help

The stories are profound. Aboriginal families and communities want to see government transition from focusing solely on the removal of Aboriginal children as the solution, and instead invest in implementing strategies that support ‘early help’ and keep Aboriginal children and young people with their families and communities. It was acknowledged that there were families that needed more help than others; and that the help needed to be early, targeted and sustained over time in order to build family capabilities.

*“In all of their (Department of Child Protection) policies and procedures there is no proper support for the family, for Mum, for Dad, to build the family up in a cultural way.” (Aboriginal Elder, Port Adelaide)*

### Support for young parents – early help

It is widely acknowledged that the first three years for a child are very important in determining their future capabilities and the establishment of the parent or carers’ role.<sup>50</sup> Without access to focussed programs, the stigmas associated with young parenthood can be challenging and difficult; this is especially the case for Aboriginal young parents.

*“All our parents need is help. Systems need to help women from the community who actually ask for help.” (Aboriginal community member, Noarlunga)*

Aboriginal community members often discussed the heightened anxiety that Aboriginal young mothers experience when seeking help from mainstream services, as Aboriginal identified services were lacking. When looking for ‘early help’, if support is not developed appropriately, the experience of seeking support can further entrench disadvantage for both the Aboriginal child and their family.

*“Sometimes our parents and families just need a little bit of help and support. They aren’t bad parents and they do not require removal, that’s extreme intervention.” (Aboriginal community member, Salisbury)*

### Racist practice and attitudes

During the Community Conversation Forums, there were repeated stories and accounts of Aboriginal families’ experiences of racism and victimisation with their contact with statutory services.

*“I could tell when she (social worker) came up to me she was frightened. She was walking real scared-way towards me. I’m the one terrified of this worker in front of me telling me they are taking my kid. The other worker was even worse. She was cheeky and talking rough with me. Telling me ‘my baby’s going to be better off’ and that my baby won’t be affected. After that I never saw or heard from them workers again. A Nunga worker came and seen me a couple of days later. My baby is now living with whitefellas forever.” (Aboriginal young mother, Adelaide)*

In the midst of these accounts, an alarming finding was the overwhelming ‘sense of fear’ and ‘racist attitudes’ that Aboriginal people observed in the behaviour of ‘helping professionals’, such as welfare workers, health staff and education officers.

### 3: ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

Social workers in the child protection system hold considerable power, exercising rights over the final destination of Aboriginal children. Overlay this with the veneer of racism and the odds are stacked against Aboriginal children and their families.<sup>51</sup>

*"Out of courtesy we told the welfare worker that we were having my granddaughter's birthday party and that her mother and father could turn up. I've been caring for my grannie since she was a baby. During the party I thought we had a weirdo filming us from his car on the street. We called the police and discovered the social worker got someone to film us in order to breach us about a possible contact. They wanted a reason to remove my grannie from our care." (Aboriginal Elder, grandmother, Adelaide)*

It is also the noted experience of Aboriginal people that racism and xenophobia is widespread across the front-line workforce of child and family services, as well as with many other agencies and services that are meant to help Aboriginal families.



Many Aboriginal community members talked about how systems fail to engage with them, and how they sense social workers fear them yet behave in ways that avoid and alienate Aboriginal families from involvement in discussion and decisions about their children. As a result, serious life course decisions are made about their Aboriginal children without their or their community's involvement; therefore, in the absence of Aboriginal cultural values and intelligence. They want action taken to overcome and mitigate the impact of racism and xenophobia across child and family services.

*"I left work – got out altogether. On a daily basis I was battling the attitudes and unprofessionalism of white workers on 'power trips', judging our families and 'playing God' like they know what is best for our kids and families. I had no say. My advice and knowledge were not valued. We got lots of poor Nunga families that need lots of extra help. We got Nunga mums in bad relationships and they need culturally appropriate DV response services. These welfare workers, they say cruel things about Aboriginal young mums and families. I know for a fact they make up stuff in reports. They have never really met Aboriginal people, only through welfare work. These workers have all this power and they don't know how to work with our mob or to respect me as a Nunga colleague. They are not interested in involving Aboriginal families. They reckon they can't find Aboriginal families, when really they haven't tried. They say they care, but they go about it the wrong way. They always stereotyped our mob. I felt they resented Aboriginal people and their situation of poverty, which they ignore anyway." (Aboriginal community member, Adelaide)*



## Theme 3: Social justice in service delivery

Community members want the fundamental social issues faced by Aboriginal families that contribute to the growing level of mistrust to be addressed. This includes the:

- power imbalances
- lack of Aboriginal case workers and Aboriginal advocates
- lack of Aboriginal leadership in senior positions across government.

This must happen in order for meaningful change and reconciliation to occur.

***“We need to stop the Stolen Generation happening again. It is the same policy. Just a different face.” (Aboriginal community member, Port Pirie)***

Whilst there is much work to be done to address and change racist practices and attitudes towards Aboriginal children and families, there is a strong value placed on Aboriginal frontline workers in child and family services by the Aboriginal community. Community members often discussed the presence of Aboriginal staff in statutory services, with the concern being the lack of Aboriginal staff in front line child protection work. Whilst acknowledging the challenges and impacts this posed for Aboriginal staff, the lack of Aboriginal staff yielded far more serious consequences for Aboriginal children and families.

Another concern was how Central Office Aboriginal Senior Consultants are engaged by non-Aboriginal staff to proxy as the Aboriginal family's voice; they advise and support removals without having met the Aboriginal child and their family or affording the actual Aboriginal family a voice in the process.

***“They are removing our kids by stealth. Our Aboriginal Consultants don't even know it. They are in it, but can't see how they have been used (by DCP Office) to justify their actions.” (Aboriginal community member, metropolitan Adelaide)***

A larger Aboriginal workforce promotes culturally safe services and tackles systemic racism; currently, Aboriginal employees make up 4.7% of the state's Department of Child Protection workforce.<sup>52</sup> While a larger proportion than Aboriginal representation in the South Australian population, this is still markedly lower than the proportion of Aboriginal children and young people in the child protection system.<sup>53</sup>

Increasing the Aboriginal workforce is critical, as the Aboriginal workforce are committed to promoting appropriate and safe cultural policy and practices. Furthermore, as Aboriginal children and young people have said, “Aboriginal kids deserve an Aboriginal worker”. They are acutely aware of the cultural benefits, and the Aboriginal links and connections made through their relationship with Aboriginal staff, which may not otherwise be possible during their experience of ‘removal’.

### Knowing your rights

There were comparable discussions throughout the forums which accentuated that Aboriginal community members want to know their rights, and who can assist and advocate for them.

***“In broad daylight, while shopping, me and my kids were harassed by police. I placed a complaint in regard to the incident. Whilst lodging my complaint, the officer had the cheek to accuse us of stuff and did not take my concerns seriously. In the end, they (SAPOL) didn't even respond to my complaint.” (Aboriginal mother, Port Pirie)***

### 3: ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

Aboriginal families and communities want to see more specialised programs developed to assist them in navigating the current complaint processes, some of which are complex and technical. The desire to be better informed was based on the many experiences where Aboriginal community members believed their rights were ignored and practices by statutory services were questionable.

*"I lodged a complaint about the Social Worker saying she lost my completed Aboriginal foster care assessment forms, which took months to do the assessment, and that in any regard she was still putting the little Nunga baby permanent with this white family in another town away from his siblings, family and Aboriginal community. My complaint did not change anything. What's the point of complaining; it's a superficial set up." (Aboriginal Auntie, Upper Spencer Gulf)*

Community members want to see an improvement in the responsiveness to complaints made by Aboriginal families and communities. Some Aboriginal families expressed concern that complaints are not addressed unless you have legal representation and this needs to change. Depending on your location, access to an advocate is restricted and an individual's capacity to act without representation or support greatly effects their ability to follow a complaint through.

Government agencies and non-government organisations need to work with Aboriginal communities and organisations to develop accessible processes for Aboriginal people to lodge complaints. Improvements are necessary and must be twofold: 1) service sectors must be open to developing appropriate complaints processes and 2) the Aboriginal community must have knowledge of and confidence in who to complain to and who can assist them. There must be a resolution-based approach to complaints, so issues are resolved and concerns addressed in a respectful and meaningful manner.

*"We do not have support up here. If you are discriminated against or not afforded due procedure, no one has capacity to help. There is a complaint process but never any outcome." (Aboriginal community member, Cooper Pedy)*

### Theme 3: Social justice in service delivery





## 4: SUMMARY

**An essential feature of the stories and experiences shared with us was about the disregard and lack of respect for Aboriginal culture and identity, leading to limited Aboriginal engagement and marginalised Aboriginal involvement in critical decision-making moments in Aboriginal children's contact and journey within pre-statutory and statutory service responses.**

Transforming Aboriginal child welfare outcomes is a commitment to preventing further Stolen Generations. This will require a genuine commitment to supporting Aboriginal self-determination, understanding and dealing with family poverty, challenging systemic racism and lessening the presence of racially discriminatory attitudes and behaviours towards Aboriginal families, so respect and inclusion of Aboriginal people is embedded throughout the spectrum of child and family services.

What is needed is a system that builds on the strength and resilience of Aboriginal people, and recognises that Aboriginal knowledge systems enable them to navigate their own path through the modernity of this century. Central to this is the value and importance of Aboriginal frontline workers, Aboriginal community-controlled services and reunification of Aboriginal children with their families, community and culture, where this is possible as defined by the Aboriginal community.

The injustice and unfairness of the treatment of Aboriginal children and young people and their families and the inequitable outcomes it creates are unacceptable. Families need to be central participants in decision making around the Aboriginal child. There also needs to be a stronger investment in prevention and getting in early with targeted and sustained family support services that are child focussed, culturally informed and build on Aboriginal strengths.

The importance of Aboriginal self-determination in the provision of child welfare services to Aboriginal families is fundamental. In harnessing self-determination, a convergence of strategies is required to "undo" the unprecedented levels of removals of Aboriginal children into care, particularly into non-Aboriginal care. This means wherever possible, actuating Aboriginal decision-making and a commitment to shifting power and control to the Aboriginal community. In addition, a provision of resources and advocacy services that informs the rights of family's and importantly the rights of the Aboriginal child to their family.

We trust that government sees and values the enormous benefits this will have for Aboriginal children, families and communities and the improved capacity of its funded systems and programs to operate in culturally informed and safe ways.



# 5: OUTLINE OF KEY ACTIVITIES

## OUTLINE OF KEY ACTIVITIES UNDERTAKEN BY THE COMMISSIONER

- o More than 430 face to face consultations with Aboriginal children and young people in various schools across regional and metropolitan South Australia.
- o Convened 16 Forums in 16 locations connecting with more than 362 Aboriginal families and communities across regional and metropolitan South Australia locations.
- o Engaged with more than 400 Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people and organisations regarding the safety and wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people.
- o 27 keynote speaking engagements / presentations.
- o 12 Media Interviews (including radio, newspaper and television) regarding the inaugural role of Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People, promoting the 'Be Seen. Be Heard. Flourish' community engagement process and upcoming visits', Youth Treatment Orders Program (Controlled Substances Act 1994), establishment of a National Indigenous Children's Strategy, South Australia's Adoption Laws, a new intensive Aboriginal family support service in western metropolitan Adelaide, Aboriginal Child Protection and Youth Justice (Call for a National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Children's Commissioner).
- o Provided 5 submissions (verbal and/ or written)
  - Aboriginal Lands Parliamentary Standing Committee (Parliament of South Australia)
  - Joint Committee on the Social Workers Registration Bill 2018 (Legislative Council)
  - Children and the Law Committee, Law Society of South Australia
  - Midterm review of the Children and Young People (Safety) Act 2017
  - Review findings of the Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016.
- o Addressed 15 individual advocacy cases involving children's matters in either regional or metropolitan Adelaide, South Australia.
- o Facilitated an Aboriginal youth panel at the SNAICC Conference, Adelaide Convention Centre, September 2019.
- o Authored and co-presented a paper at the 5th International Indigenous Voices in Social Work Practice Conference, Hualien, Taiwan, August 2018. The title of the paper: 'Stolen Generations: The past is in the present, but not the future'.
- o Attended 3 Australia and New Zealand Children Commissioners and Guardians Forums.
- o Advocacy meetings with the Minister for Child Protection and the Minister for Human Services.
- o Regular meetings with: Minister for Education, Chief Executive - Department for Education, Chief Executive and Deputy Chief Executive - Department of Child Protection, Aboriginal Education Expert Advisory Panel, Director - Family and Community Services, Department of Human Services, Housing and Homelessness Taskforce, Health Performance Council - Aboriginal Leaders Network meetings.
- o Along with Victorian Aboriginal Children's Commissioner, met with Federal Aboriginal Affairs Minister, Hon Ken Wyatt regarding the call for a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Commissioner.
- o Coordinated the first meeting of the 3 Aboriginal Children's Commissioners in Australia from South Australia, Victoria and Queensland.

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### ***“Be Seen. Be Heard. Flourish”***

*The artwork by Jordan Lovegrove, a young Ngarrindjeri man, was created for April Lawrie, Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People.*

The creative art piece depicts the butterfly symbolically representing Aboriginal children and young people. The butterfly is illustrated as large and central in the art piece so as to emphasise the importance and priority needs of Aboriginal children and young people – and to accentuate the message that we need to be “child centred” in all that we do – and we need to see the children and hear their voices.

In order for a butterfly to emerge from its chrysalis, it needs to be protected so it can grow into its own being and reach its fullest potential – we want the same for Aboriginal children and young people.

A butterfly’s wings are symmetrical and our Aboriginal children and young people need the balance of safety and wellbeing with culture and identity, to ensure a path to success. Without the balance their wellbeing and their inherent rights as Aboriginal children and young people cannot be fully realised.

The circles are the families and communities which Aboriginal children and young people are connected to, and, need to be with as they are critical to the child’s sense of belonging. The patterned colours (with dots in them) that are touching the circles and surrounding the butterfly represent the various sectors, agencies and workers interacting with Aboriginal children and young people, their families and communities.

The black background that surrounds the whole art piece symbolises the creation of the Commissioner’s role to uphold and influence safety and wellbeing outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people.

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**Commissioner for Aboriginal  
Children and Young People**

GPO Box 1146  
Adelaide SA 5001

**E** [CommissionerACYP@sa.gov.au](mailto:CommissionerACYP@sa.gov.au)

**W** [www.cacyp.com.au](http://www.cacyp.com.au)