

## **JUNCTION AUSTRALIA**

### **Inquiry into the application of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle in the removal and placement of Aboriginal children in South Australia**

#### **Acknowledgement**

We acknowledge that we walk, live and work on traditional Aboriginal lands, and we pay our respects to elders past, present, and emerging.

Junction celebrates the diversity, strength, and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We acknowledge the grief, trauma and loss of past and present harm and are committed to working together to create opportunities for healing, learning, growth, and a brighter future.

#### **Junction's work with Aboriginal Children and Young People**

Junction has delivered Out of Home Care Services for the Department for Child Protection for 15 years and support to homeless young people for 40 years. More recently Junction has built our capacity to provide Specialist Family Violence Services for Children and Young People and expanded our work within Out of Home Care into Foster Care. Junction also is a provider of Community Centres in Kangaroo Island and Onkaparinga which are vibrant community spaces with active community programs, delivered for and by community targeting children, families and vulnerable adults.

Alongside our direct work with children Junction is a Tier One Housing Service Provider with a portfolio is more than 2500 across Affordable, Social, and Community Housing that supports approximately 4500 Individual and Families across Metropolitan and Regional Adelaide.

Throughout our long history with working Children and Young People Junction has always worked with Aboriginal Children and Young People and provided opportunity for connection with culture and prioritising leadership by Aboriginal led organisations and Peer Workers. The prioritisation of cultural connection has fundamentally changed the way in which Junction operates.

To embed this operation into the way we work Junction developed and has successfully implemented its first Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP). Have successfully delivered our initial RAP in 2022 Junction is continuing to build our cultural competency by delivering on the following strategic priorities:

- Reconciliation Australian and Board Endorsement of Innovate 2.0 that seeks to accelerate Junction on its reconciliation journey.
- Building a Cultural Governance Framework that seeks to strengthen our commitment to cultural safety and ensuring that Aboriginal people are making decisions about Aboriginal children, families and vulnerable adults in all our services. Via this work we will implement the core principles of the ATSI CPP at an operational and strategic level.
- The development of an Aboriginal Workforce Strategy that includes a focus on the development of emerging leadership and development via an Aboriginal Employee Network that enhances voice and ensures direct access to senior leadership and Board.

- Aboriginal Scholarship sponsorship with universities to support a robust Aboriginal workforce in a diverse range of fields that intersect with the ATSI CPP implementation including allied health staff.
- Partnering with Housing Institute to develop network of Community Housing providers on developing and implementing Reconciliation strategies to address safe and secure housing as a core foundation for health and wellbeing (prevention).

Junction is focused on integrating the five elements of the ATSI CPP into our daily practice and strategic direction across our continuum of services. As a mainstream organisation, Junction is humble in our progress and achievements so far, but we are committed to ongoing learning and partnership with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and the Aboriginal Community.

### **Structure of the Submission**

The submission was developed in consultation with Junction’s Aboriginal Children and Young People and staff. The input was gathered through consultation, private interview, and written submissions, with the consultations and interviews being led by our Senior Aboriginal Staff.

The staff interviewed workers within our Out-of-Home-Care Programs, and both speaks from the perspective of working to support a young person to build and maintain cultural connection, and from the perspective of the young person being able to build and maintain connection to culture, particularly within a residential care setting.

### **Voices of our Young People**

*What would you like to tell the Commissioner about your experience with the removal and placement of Aboriginal Children in South Australia?*

The children in our care identified that the experience of being removed and placed in residential care services often results in being disconnected with their identity as an Aboriginal person, but also from family and community. They also identified that often the placement could increase disconnection from culture, particularly when placed within a residential home or with non-aboriginal families in foster care. For example, young people may no longer be in contact with Aboriginal people, Elders, or family. They may be isolated from language, customs and key kinship relationships.

This is particularly true for young people who are placed under emergency circumstances where there is no information regarding their Aboriginality. This lack of information means that staff are unable to create a safe cultural space for them early on. Some children reflected that this was not the case when their cultural identity was identified and explored early in their placement, or if Aboriginal staff were on shift in their placement.

Emergency removal is known to be very stressful for all children. For Aboriginal children the sense of loss, trauma and isolation is exacerbated as they are often placed in mainstream organisations that are in different geographic locations with few Aboriginal staff and links to Aboriginal community.

*How were Aboriginal family and community involved in discussions and decisions about the care and placement of the child(ren)?*

The children in our services said that their experience of being included in placement decisions was “not great”. One young person revealed that they had not been consulted as part of the process of leaving the care of their parents. During the very sudden removal process, the social worker provided them with contact details for relatives they had never met. The young person revealed that they were required build that connection with the family members with little support. This experience was

exacerbated by the parent's reluctance to provide information on their family and the young person's culture.

Once a relationship was built with the parents, Junction learnt more about the Young Person's family and cultural connections and were able to support them to make contact. Since the young person has created these connections, the team have observed that:

*"They are starting to ask more questions around their culture, where as before, they were very disconnected."*

Staff believe that enhancing cultural connections is a key outcome for this young person and their care plan, as connection with culture is a protective factor in the lives of Aboriginal children.

#### *In your experience what worked well?*

When our young people had advocates for them (either family, staff, and in one instance the foster carer) they had the space to explore and build connection with their culture. This advocacy involved these individuals acting as allies in their journey to build cultural connection and identity. Importantly, these individuals needed to understand and view connection to culture as a strength and important part of overcoming challenges in life. This advocacy was strengthened where they were positive community relationships in place to build their engagement and promote education and understanding for the adults and carers in the children's lives.

One child also identified being placed close to kin (geographically) enabled them to remain connected with family, but safe within the home. This also facilitated relationships not just with their kin, but the broader Aboriginal community and enabled them to continue to access cultural resources and relationships.

When placed in foster carers, children told us that carers with cultural understanding promoted a shared understanding about the bonds of kinship and the profound importance both within the Aboriginal and Māori cultures. Carers who saw culture as a strength, and presented this view to the child, were of great importance and helped established a sense of cultural safety and healing.

#### *In your experience what didn't work well?*

Many of the Aboriginal children in our care reflected on their experience of disconnection or isolation from culture through the placement process. During investigations, removal and placement, children often felt lost in bureaucracy and processes that they did not understand. Sometimes children arrived into placements at short notice with little explanation to themselves, or the people that were caring for them. Importantly, children told us that their cultural identity was treated as separate from placement decisions and not central to their safety and wellbeing.

Staff also reflected that trauma informed practice with a cultural lens was lacking across the system. Practitioners need to be able to work in a way that takes into account intergenerational trauma and the current injustices faced by Aboriginal children and families experience in the child protection system. Supporting and training foster carers and residential staff to understand intergenerational trauma is an important prerequisite for the implementation of the APP. This includes understanding how this trauma may be expressed in children's behaviour and choices in relation to their current experiences of racism and injustice.

Of note, staff reflected that Aboriginal children's experiences with the process of removal were very diverse. Some children were well prepared for decisions concerning placement with adequate

information provided to the carers. In other instances, the opposite was true. In this, the role of culture in placement decisions seems to be inconsistently applied in practice.

*What do you think can be done to improve things?*

The children identified having strong advocacy in place, and in some instances identified specific roles that support connection to culture was key in maintaining and building their connection. To build out the system's capacity for advocacy and education there needs to be more resources and people available to support this work. In Non-government agencies, cultural positions are often not funded by government grants that only pay for direct service provision or are even based on fee for service arrangements. Funding for cultural consultants should be considered to be core business and included in operational costs. What is more, staff and carers should have access to trainings in tools that assist children to be connected to culture such as cultural mapping and family finding. Staff and carers need to feel confident to be able to talk to children about cultural connections and know who can help in community to strengthen relationships.

Importantly, children wanted to see other Aboriginal people in their care environment. In residential care, this means having Aboriginal staff who can relate to the child and provide role modelling and connection. One child who spoke with us was in foster care. They reflected that it took time to build a relationship with other Aboriginal children in placement. However, once this relationship was established, they felt this greatly assisted in cultural connection and established an ongoing interest in building cultural identity. They shared that being able to identify and recruit foster carers with cultural understandings would be valuable for children in similar circumstances.

### **Staff experiences in Embedding the elements of the principle**

*What would you like to tell the Commissioner about your experience with the removal and placement of Aboriginal Children in South Australia?*

Overarchingly, Junction's experience with the placement of Aboriginal children and young people into our care has been of inconsistent approaches between DCP offices. Typically, this may look like being provided with limited information regarding the child's cultural identity and connection, and in some cases, Junction not being informed that the child being placed in our care with being provided any information regarding Aboriginality, culture, community, or mob. This has been exacerbated by inconsistent involvement from specialist DCP roles such as The Principle Aboriginal Consultant (PAC) and Aboriginal Family Practitioner. For example, in one home when the team followed up regarding the Young Person's Aboriginality, they discovered that the PAC had not been included in the placement process. This resulted in Junction leading the process with DCP and undertaking significant advocacy to build trust with the Young Person and their family in Tasmania who, due to intergenerational trauma, has significant distrust of 'welfare people'. This advocacy was led by our Operations Manager, a Palawan woman who worked within our existing partnerships and community connections to support the young persons to connect with family and create pathways to visit their country in Tasmania.

In another case, Junction was only informed of the young person's Aboriginality after they had been placed in our care. This left the staff feeling unprepared and negatively impacted their initial interactions with the young person as they were required gather information from the young person themselves. This interaction interrupts the growth trust and cultural safety for the child. What is more, this circumstance prevents staff from matching the needs of the incoming child with children already

in the home. For example, placing Aboriginal children with non-Aboriginal children who are known to hold racist views is important to prevent.

*How were Aboriginal family and community involved in discussions and decisions about the care and placement of the child(ren)?*

As discussed above, Junction have had children placed in our care who have experienced limited or no involvement in the decision making around their placement. Where the child(ren) entered the program with exiting connection to culture and/or had proactive engagement with the PACs and/or the Aboriginal Family Consultant our teams found both the child's connection, and their ability to facilitate that connection significantly improved.

*In your experience what worked well?*

In some instances, Junction was able to work with DCP to identify family connection and facilitate the building of relationships and create genuine curiosity and engagement with their cultural identity. Our teams identified the benefit of having Aboriginal identifying staff, in particularly leadership, to *"talk with, consult and for her to advocate has been so beneficial to the young people wanting to learn about culture"*.

The advocacy has been critical in promoting the voice of the young person both internally and externally. Furthermore, it has created opportunities to build relationships with DCP and Aboriginal Led organisations to create a shared the opportunity for self-determination for both the young person and their community.

The teams and carers also identified access to training such as CUBE delivered by KWY was fantastic and built strong foundational understanding of Aboriginal culture and experiences. They also identified a need for ongoing training and development that was specific to their roles.

*In your experience what didn't work well?*

Where our teams have been unable to get appropriate, relevant, or detailed (where available) information, it is significantly impacted their ability to support the young person build cultural connection. This was particularly true for non-aboriginal staff, who identified the need for cultural supports to be in place, noting that whilst Junction's training in cultural awareness had given some tools, but *"not all that was needed"*.

For the Foster Carers, they felt the bureaucracy of the process placed significant burden on them and they *"felt they were being judged on the whole life"*. This presented a challenge for them in engaging not only with the child's cultural identity, but the system more broadly.

*What do you think can be done to improve things?*

Our teams identified the importance of not only having the information but have culturally appropriate persons and tools to assist in accessing and navigating information to ensure the information is provided to the young person, and they are equipped to facilitate the connection.

There needs to also be more dedicated roles within the department and other organisations who engage in advocacy and capacity building. Roles that had the knowledge and positional authority to advocate for change were effective but stretched.

For Foster Care the process needs to be simpler, particularly for carers who have cultural similarities in their backgrounds to Aboriginal children. They Carers felt we are potentially losing good carers because of the scope of the process.

The Carers also wanted to see stronger investment from the Department in prioritising connection to country and support the child and their carers to meeting their mob on country. They wanted to create connection and bonds with the child's country before he turned 18 to ensure, that should he want to return to country, that the connection was there.

## **Other Considerations for the Commission**

### *Information Sharing*

As discussed, Junction has identified consistent challenges in accessing information regarding the children in our care cultural identity.

*“There needs to be more collaboration and being supported in accessing culturally appropriate and safe information and support. Having plans and information available for the young people and discussions. Also, where information can be accessed from.”*

Whilst the capacity to find and access information is conditional on resourcing, it is critical there are clear systems and mechanisms in place to not only access information but use it safe and meaningfully to enable connection and self- determination for the children in our care and their communities.

### *Prioritising Lived Experience and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCO's)*

Whilst Junction is committed to equipping and empowering our staff on our cultural learning journey, we also recognise that the design and delivery of services and supports must privilege the cultural knowledge of Aboriginal People and ACCO's. It is critical ACCO's are resourced to enable meaningful and effective partnerships with other service providers to improve cultural competency across the sector.

Furthermore, internally organisations in the Child Protection space need to build capacity for engaging authentically with Lived Experience and Peer Led work to improve cultural capacity and create safe spaces for the children in our care to engage in culture. The capacity to undertake this work is dependent on organisational resourcing and ability to engage in the work.