

# FIBRE 4 ABORIGINAL WORKFORCE

## FIBRE 4

Aboriginal workforce: commitment to developing and maintaining a sustainable Aboriginal child and family workforce.

**Nukara** is the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre's community-led strategy and action plan for implementing the Tirrina model and transferring responsibility for Aboriginal child safety to the Aboriginal community.

**Our vision** is for all Aboriginal children living in Lutruwita to be safe and well in the care of their families, proudly connected with and strongly supported by their community, culture and country. **Tirrina** is the Tasmanian Aboriginal community's model for achieving this vision.

The eight fibres of **Tirrina** provide a strong foundation for the structure of every part of the model, interwoven with the principles of self-determination and truth-telling. While adapted for local application, the fibres are consistent with the eight focus areas of the <u>Safe and Supported Aboriginal and Torres</u> <u>Strait Islander First Action Plan 2023-2026</u> (Our Safe and Supported Action Plan).

The Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre acknowledges Aboriginal community members who contributed to this report and have since passed away. We thank the families for giving permission to include their photos.

NUKARA

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Aboriginal workforce: commitment to developing and maintaining a sustainable Aboriginal child and family workforce.

The importance of investing in and continuing to grow and strengthen the skills and resources of a qualified Aboriginal workforce, dedicated to keeping Aboriginal children safe in the care of their families, is acknowledged by governments and First Nations communities at international, national and state levels.

At the same time as responsibilities for keeping Aboriginal children safe are progressively taken on by the Aboriginal community in Lutruwita, the statewide coverage, skills, training and number of Aboriginal workers needed to deliver a timely and responsive range of Aboriginal-led service programs must also progressively increase.

Consultation and research on Australian and other First Nations communities overseas highlight the critical need for a strong and sustainable Aboriginal workforce that understands the interplay and interconnectedness of community, culture and country in keeping Aboriginal children safe. Achieving this goal requires a long-term workforce strategy, backed by a culturally-informed practice framework. Together, the Aboriginal workforce strategy and practice framework will provide strong foundations for achieving more positive outcomes, for greater numbers of Aboriginal children.

The Tasmanian Government has committed to taking actions under the national Safe and Supported *Partnership Agreement*, including Action 4 of our *Safe and Supported Action Plan*, which is to develop a national approach to continue building a sustainable Aboriginal child and family sector workforce.

This document summarises consultation and research findings and proposes strengthening the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre (TAC)'s workforce, beginning with an audit of the current state to inform short and long-term planning and support delivery of the *Tirrina* model's four service programs – Kani Pama, Ningina, Palawa Partnership Team and Takariliya Taypani – ensuring that:

- strategic workforce planning is evidence-based (audit, research and consultation findings) and designed to meet current and future needs
- culturally aligned and responsive individuals are recruited, supported, trained and retained
- the Aboriginal workforce is adequately resourced, funded and supplemented as necessary, including through the transfer of identified Aboriginal and/or non-Aboriginal positions (including incumbents if suitable) from government and non-government organisations (NGOs)
- professional development and supervision include requirements for child-centred, traumainformed practice that build on the strengths, active participation and voices of children, families and community

- mechanisms are in place for workforce monitoring, evaluation and accountability
- active efforts are mandated for consistent and effective application of the Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Placement Principle (Placement Principle)
- the voices and wishes of the Aboriginal community are sought and incorporated into current and future requirements for workforce planning and professional practice.

# CURRENT SITUATION

Throughout the community forums held to develop *Nukara* and *Tirrina*, there was a strong sense of pride in the establishment and continued growth of TAC's Aboriginal workforce, especially in relation to keeping Aboriginal children safe in the care of their families. Discussions highlighted TAC's crucial role as a grassroots, community-controlled entity, consistently advocating for and supporting children and families. The community acknowledges the significant strengths and advantages of the TAC workforce, grounded in community connection and trust, cultural knowledge and lived experience. These unique characteristics are seen as critical in supporting and upholding the rights of Aboriginal children and their families.

With the transfer of responsibilities through implementation of *Nukara*, the TAC workforce must be well-positioned to grow, with sufficient capacity and capability to deliver the evidence-based service programs of the *Tirrina* model statewide. Workforce planning must focus on recruitment, training, support, retention and professional development. This will require ongoing funding and long-term resource planning.

The existing non-Aboriginal TAC workforce is supported by Aboriginal staff and mentors to ensure a culturally informed, respectful approach when working with Aboriginal children and families. An Aboriginal workforce strategy, along with a child-safe practice framework grounded in Aboriginal knowledge, traditions, and principles of self-determination, is essential for delivering child-centred, trauma-informed, and effective care. This approach will build on the existing supports that have proven successful.

By investing in both workforce development and practices, we can create a system that truly upholds the rights of Aboriginal children, strengthens families and supports the achievement of positive life outcomes.

## CONSULTATION FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

### Voices of the weavers

#### **Community voices**

The Aboriginal community recognises the importance of workforce planning and professional development. Consultations found that the community also recognises that investment in the number and skills of frontline workers must be supported by equal levels of investment in other TAC workforces - such as management and administration, human resources, training and support, information and communications technology (ICT), financial management, policy development and other functions.

Due to being a small community, it was emphasised that high standards of privacy and confidentiality need to be applied and adhered to when collecting, storing, sharing and managing sensitive and personal information about children and their families. The community expressed the view that if children and families believe that confidentiality will be breached, they will not openly engage with or trust workers. If children and families believe their personal and sensitive information will be appropriately protected and safeguarded, the community feels that they will be much more likely to seek support, trust and engage more openly with TAC staff and service programs.

While recognising that some information must be shared with co-workers and others as appropriate, community sentiment is that worker education and training should include guidance for protecting privacy and avoiding inappropriate information-sharing (for example, not talking about children and their families with other workers).

The overarching community sentiment is that more Aboriginal workers are needed to deliver services in a culturally safe, child-centred manner, when and where they are needed. That includes the need to ensure that families are allocated designated workers, wherever possible, to provide ongoing support at an individual level. This approach can help to prevent unnecessary access by multiple workers to a family's sensitive and personal information. This is a particularly important consideration when there are social and family connections between TAC workers and families participating in service programs.

<u>Feel safe. Are safe. Our Practice Approach</u> establishes the Tasmanian Government's standards of practice for child safety service practitioners. *Standard 4: cultural safety for Aboriginal families* aims to ensure that the cultural identity and needs of Aboriginal families are recognised and respected, including when decisions are made that impact the lives and living arrangements of Aboriginal children. Consultation with community suggests the need to strengthen adherence to and consistency in the application of this standard by government and NGO providers.

Consultation revealed community perceptions that, at times, some TAC staff did not appear to always have the experience or training needed for their roles. Community perception is that if families do not have confidence in the ability of workers, then they may decide not to seek help. In proposing solutions, community highlighted the benefits of providing regular, formal and informal opportunities for families to get to know TAC staff. Community also emphasised the importance of staff undertaking specialist training and professional development, then communicating the achievements and expertise of individual staff to the broader community.

Bolstering the number, skills and availability of Aboriginal carers for short and long-term placement, was also identified as a community 'If TAC had not stepped in, welfare would've taken my newborn away from me and put him into care. I don't know when I would've been able to see him again.'

priority. Community members agreed that urgent work was needed to build the numbers, capacity and capabilities of Aboriginal carers to support the needs and living arrangements of Aboriginal children in respite, emergency, temporary or permanent accommodation, when they are unable to live safely in the family home.

In community forums, many reminisced about the adult hostel that TAC previously managed, suggesting that similar, statewide facilities could be established for children and families. There was also the suggestion of always having an 'Elder in residence' in those facilities to share their cultural knowledge, wisdom and advice. The community agrees that this proposal would be dependent upon 24/7 availability of trained and skilled staff.

Community raised concerns regarding Aboriginal-identified positions within government and NGOs, noting there is often a lack of clarity about each position's purpose, workplace location, the current position holders and how to get in touch with them. It was suggested that an audit of these positions should be undertaken, with consideration given to transferring the physical location and/ or organisational responsibility for the positions to TAC. This would help to deepen position holders' understandings of community issues, while promoting and enhancing the purpose and effectiveness of their roles.

Community believes that TAC, as a Registered Training Organisation (RTO), is ideally positioned to deliver Aboriginal child-safe training for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal workers. This would not only provide TAC workers with ready access to specialist education and training in a culturally safe learning environment, but would bolster workplace retention by building the confidence of individuals to seek out opportunities for personal growth and further education in the community development or child and family support sectors. Other workforce benefits would include enhancing the skills of workers in areas such as family conferencing, trauma-informed practice, vicarious trauma and self-care, family violence and dysregulated behaviour management.

The community identified problems with housing, employment and poverty as common issues experienced by Aboriginal families. To address complex and urgent needs in these areas, members proposed that priority should be given to increasing the number and skills of TAC workers, while supporting them to provide meaningful, culturally responsive care that truly meets the needs of Aboriginal children and families. To further strengthen the TAC workforce, it was suggested that TAC should expand its RTO scope to include training and qualifications in childcare, youth and community services.

Drawing from their lived experiences, members of the community shared concerns that government and non-government workers often lack the cultural safety and awareness needed to work effectively with Aboriginal families in a self-determining manner.

Some community members suggested the establishment of an *Elders Advisory Group* to provide cultural guidance, share knowledge and offer advice, as well as support TAC workers on home visits to build trust and provide reassurance.

#### TAC staff voices

TAC staff discussions focused on the critical importance of expanding and strengthening the TAC child-safe workforce, as well as the importance of developing a practice framework and policies. Staff agreed that further workforce development and planning would enhance current and future capacity and capabilities aligned with the cultural values, needs and self-determination of the Aboriginal community. The experience of TAC staff is that Aboriginal families are much more likely to trust and engage with services led by their own people, resulting in significantly improved outcomes for children. The successful transfer of responsibility for keeping Aboriginal children safe must be accompanied by investment in a skilled, sustainable workforce that understands local contexts and needs, at the same time creating new employment opportunities within the Aboriginal community statewide.

While community advocates for a strong focus on strengthening Aboriginal leadership and workforce participation, members also recognise that non-Aboriginal staff can bring valuable skills, knowledge and expertise that may complement the work of Aboriginal staff. Whatever the ratio of Aboriginal to non-Aboriginal staff in TAC's future workforce, non-Aboriginal staff must always work under the guidance of Aboriginal leaders to ensure cultural integrity and adherence to the principle and practices of self-determination.

Consultation with staff found there is overwhelming support for TAC to develop an Aboriginal childsafe practice framework and policies. This would ensure that day-to-day implementation of service programs remains aligned with the values and needs of Aboriginal families, fostering higher levels of trust and engagement and child-safe practices tailored to incorporate Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing. In this context, staff believe there is value in incorporating a 'group of communitybased decision-makers' into the practice framework. This group of Elders and other respected community members could further enhance decision-making by sharing cultural wisdom and guidance. Staff also identified that a documented family-finding process would support Active Efforts to apply the Placement Principle.

Staff proposed that action is needed to ensure better knowledge of, and access to Aboriginalidentified positions within government and NGOs should be prioritised. Identifying and getting in contact with the people working in these roles can be challenging, as this often depends on those workers' abilities to make themselves known within the Aboriginal community and being available for time-sensitive consultations and appointments. TAC staff believe that these roles would be much more effective if they were co-located and/or integrated into the TAC workforce.



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Staff share the same strong view as community on the importance of maintaining high standards of privacy and confidentiality. This is viewed as a critical component of effective and trusted practice, fostering stronger relationships, open communication and greater community confidence in seeking TAC support. Staff emphasise the need for families to feel safe, supported and empowered to retain control over their personal information and the ability to decide how, when and to whom their stories are shared.

Ongoing training and professional development are viewed as essential for upskilling personnel and fostering workforce growth. Staff also suggested that community members, including parents, should be given opportunities to participate in TAC-led training to empower them, boost their confidence in parenting and potentially inspire workforce participation.

Staff also discussed strategies to position TAC as an employer of choice for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal workers, recognising the importance of attracting and retaining highly skilled staff. Key suggestions include offering competitive salaries, professional development opportunities, career progression pathways, ongoing cultural training, mentorship programs and fostering a sense of purpose through strong connections between staff and the community.

Ensuring the safety and wellbeing of Aboriginal children is recognised as a collective responsibility shared by all TAC staff, reflecting the core belief that 'it takes a village to raise a child'. A cited example of the successful acceptance of shared responsibility is the former TAC childcare bus service, where the bus driver played a key role in engaging with families and monitoring the safety of children during pick-ups and drop-offs.

### Voices of other stakeholders

Stakeholders consulted emphasise the need for government to provide ongoing, adequate funding to develop and implement an Aboriginal workforce strategy. Stakeholders wholeheartedly agree that this is essential to ensuring the short and long-term success of the *Nukara* strategy and *Tirrina* model.

Stakeholders discussed the reallocation of funding from NGOs to TAC, agreeing that this would help TAC to expand, build the workforce, offer more services and enhance their status as an employer of choice. It was suggested that TAC – as an RTO – should be supported to offer in-house child-safe training and that TAC workers should also be given opportunities to access education and training courses offered by government and non-government institutions.

The stakeholders have limited knowledge of Aboriginal-identified roles in government and NGOs but recognise the potential benefits of integrating these roles into TAC.

There is broad support among other stakeholders for transitioning Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff and funding from other organisations to TAC, acknowledging that the current shortage of frontline workers could pose a significant challenge to the successful implementation of *Nukara*. To attract and retain the right people, TAC must offer competitive employment conditions and salary packages while also providing a safe and nurturing workplace. This includes guiding non-Aboriginal staff with an Aboriginal practice framework to ensure the delivery of culturally informed and effective care to Aboriginal children and families.

## JURISDICTIONAL SCAN AND ANALYSIS

### Aboriginal workforce strategies

#### Victoria

The <u>Victorian Aboriginal Health and Wellbeing Workforce Strategy 2022-2026</u> was developed to attract and grow workforces to deliver holistic health and wellbeing services to Aboriginal people in Victoria. The success of this strategy can be largely attributed to shared commitment and joint responsibility for implementation. The strategic partners recognise that building a strong and sustainable workforce requires genuine collaboration, and that effective Aboriginal workforces must be grounded in community-led, place-based solutions, which must include education and training for all workers, including measures to increase the skills and ability of non-Aboriginal staff to provide culturally safe services.

#### Western Australia

In 2023, the Aboriginal Health Council of Western Australia developed a four-year <u>Aboriginal</u> <u>Workforce Engagement and Development Strategy</u>, reinforcing a commitment to being a diverse, inclusive and culturally safe employer of choice, and a recognised community leader. The strategy prioritises the employment of local Aboriginal community members. A key component of the strategy is development of a mentorship program for Aboriginal workers, aimed at fostering a strong sense of identity and supporting early career development.

Both the Victorian and Western Australian strategies recognise the importance of employing Aboriginal community to ensure that services are delivered in a culturally safe and relevant way. They also emphasise that growing and upskilling the Aboriginal workforce is essential to building sustainable workforces and effectively supporting their communities.



## Aboriginal practice frameworks

#### International

In 2023, Candice Butler published her Churchill Fellowship report on <u>Reclaiming Child Protection</u> <u>Decision Making</u>. In her research, Butler considered and reported on the importance of a developing a strong First Nations practice framework when reclaiming and exercising child safety powers and functions. Butler's findings support development of an Aboriginal practice framework that features:

- Aboriginal leadership in developing and overseeing implementation of, and adherence to practices under the framework
- Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal practitioner roles
- government agencies working with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) to embed strong Aboriginal child-safe practice across all workplaces and service programs
- ACCOs providing training, supervision, coaching and guidance to their teams
- accountability mechanisms to ensure new practices are safely implemented
- Active Efforts as the gold standard of practice
- senior practitioners ensuring that connections to community, culture and country remain at the forefront
- guidance on how to work effectively alongside Aboriginal families
- commitment of all stakeholders to transformative change.

### Alignment with national and state commitments and enablers

The *Safe and Supported* initiative, along with other Australian Government and national programs, offers a clear pathway for national and state governments to invest in the Aboriginal child and family sector workforce, with robust monitoring and reporting mechanisms to monitor progress and outcomes. While new investment is necessary to enable the implementation of *Nukara*, the redirection of existing streams of funding, currently allocated to government and NGO service providers, is also critical. Some NGOs – such as Life Without Barriers – are already leading the way with a commitment to progressively transition workforce resources to ACCOs.

The Tasmanian Government has made formal commitments to *Safe and Supported* and other significant national and state agreements and initiatives to build a sustainable Aboriginal child and family sector workforce. The most relevant of these are summarised in the table on the following page.

INITIATIVE	COMMITMENT
Safe and Supported Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan 2023-2026	<ul> <li>Action 4 (a):</li> <li>Scope current/future Aboriginal workforce needs via workforce development report</li> </ul>
	Action 4 (b): Targeted Aboriginal workforce strategies developed
	<ul> <li>Action 4 (c):</li> <li>Actions under the Early Childhood Care and Development Sector Strengthening Plan implemented</li> </ul>
	<ul> <li>Action 4 (d):</li> <li>Actions under the Disability Sector Strengthening Plan aligned/ supported</li> </ul>
Safe and Supported Action Plan 2021-31	<ul> <li>Action 3 (c)(i):</li> <li>Workforce best practice capacity building report developed and delivered</li> </ul>
	<ul> <li>Action 3 (c)(ii):</li> <li>Cultural awareness training framework, including training modules and other resources created</li> </ul>
	<ul> <li>Action 3 (d):</li> <li>Scope national accreditation of child safety/family services workforce</li> </ul>
Commission of Inquiry report findings and recommendations	<ul> <li>Recommendation 9.15(a):</li> <li>Increase investment in Aboriginal-led early intervention and prevention services</li> </ul>
	<ul> <li>Recommendation 9.15(e)(iii):</li> <li>Invest in ACCOs' capacity to ensure their workforces are fully equipped and supported for Aboriginal-led decision-making</li> </ul>

## INITIATIVE

## COMMITMENT

Closing the Gap	Clause 49:
National Agreement reforms, targets and sector strengthening plans	<ul> <li>All Australian governments have committed to joint sector strengthening efforts and measures to build sector capability and capacity</li> <li>Priority Reform 2: building the community-controlled sector, for workforce development across early childhood care and development, housing, health and disability</li> </ul>
	Early Childhood Care and Development Sector Strengthening Plan:
	A1 examine workforce data
	<ul> <li>A2 Aboriginal career development</li> </ul>
	<ul> <li>A4 workforce development plan</li> </ul>
	<ul> <li>A5, A7 community based workforce development</li> </ul>
	<ul> <li>A6 scoping current state and future needs of ACCOs (child safety and family support)</li> </ul>
	<ul> <li>A8 cultural competency and trauma responsiveness of child and family sector workforces</li> </ul>
	Disability Sector Strengthening Plan:
	<ul> <li>A2 map existing Aboriginal workforce strategies</li> </ul>
	<ul> <li>A2.3 develop principles and accountability requirements of workforce plans to ensure the inclusion of Aboriginal people with disability who want to work in the sector</li> </ul>
	<ul> <li>A2.4 identify opportunities for reviewing and refreshing existing Aboriginal and disability workforce plans (strategies and frameworks) to ensure principles and accountability requirements are embedded</li> </ul>
Family Matters 2024	Recommendation 2:
	<ul> <li>Australian Government to commit to leading design and implementation of a national, systematic and sustainable approach to funding ACCO-led, integrated early years services, focusing on ensuring equitable access and national coverage</li> </ul>

## THE WAY FORWARD

## Workforce strategy

A comprehensive workforce strategy is required to grow, upskill and support sustainability of the Aboriginal child-safe workforce. This is a critical component of the *Nukara* strategy and action plan.

TAC must be well-positioned and fully resourced to take on responsibilities for keeping Aboriginal children safe, consistent with national investment strategies and recommendations, including the *Safe and Supported National Investment Strategy* and Commission of Inquiry recommendations.

TAC's Aboriginal workforce strategy must:

- be Aboriginal-led
- uphold the views and knowledges of the Aboriginal community
- include a long-term vision for a sustainable, skilled and statewide workforce
- integrate approaches for transitioning and/or relocating identified Aboriginal positions to TAC and/or recruiting non-Aboriginal staff as or where required
- be supported, and committed to, by government and NGO service providers.

## Practice framework

As part of the implementation of the *Nukara* strategy and *Tirrina* model, TAC will develop and implement an Aboriginal practice framework that is child-centred, trauma-informed, culturally safe and ensures that practices and decision-making processes:

- prioritise the child's voice, choice and wellbeing
- emphasise the importance of keeping children with their families wherever possible
- ensure cultural considerations are central to practice, with guiding principles aligned with community values
- recognise and build on family strengths
- remain community-driven, reflecting and upholding community knowledge in the delivery of all service programs.



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## Next steps

- Confirm Tasmanian Government commitment to funding the implementation of *Nukara*.
- Establish a reference group to support development of the strategy.
- Audit and assess the transition of identified Aboriginal positions within government and non-government organisations to the TAC.
- Develop an Aboriginal workforce strategy that includes:
  - a long-term vision
  - commitment by government and investment in a strong and sustainable Aboriginal workforce
  - plans to transition relevant human, financial and other resources from existing child and family services to the TAC
  - a community service delivery model for continuous care and support for Aboriginal children; recruiting, training, and supporting Aboriginal carers; and establishing statewide short-term and urgent Aboriginal-managed accommodation for the care and wellbeing of Aboriginal children and families
  - the requirement for adherence to culturally-appropriate Aboriginal child-safe practice framework, including active efforts to apply all elements of the Placement Principle.
- Communicate and consult with stakeholders.

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