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| Aboriginal Children’s Forum  July 2025 |
| Communique |
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The 32nd Aboriginal Children’s Forum (ACF) was held on the lands of the Gunaikurnai People and hosted by the Gippsland & East Gippsland Aboriginal Co-operative (GEGAC). The ACF theme of ‘Critical Enablers – Workforce, Infrastructure & Research’ drove robust discussion around the sustainability of ACCOs and the challenges that lie ahead. This theme allowed ACF members to highlight what is happening in their local communities and emphasise how critical enablers would bolster the support ACCOs are able to provide to their community, children and families.

Participants were warmly welcomed by respected Elder Aunty May Pearce as well as Peter Harrison and Zac Stewart. Over the last 6 months, young people from the local community have been learning Aboriginal dance through GEGAC’s cultural workshops. The young people and the leaders of this initiative, Alice-Ann Pepper *(women and girls)* andRobert Bamblett *(men and boys),* proudly participated in a series of cultural dances for the ACF.

Bonnie Dukakis, CEO of the Koorie Youth Council was welcomed and is now an ongoing member of the ACF. The strength of the youth voice in the room at this ACF was acknowledged and welcomed.

Congratulations to GEGAC who hosted an incredible ACF, including the pre-ACF twilight dinner at the GEGAC Cultural Centre – Krowathunkooloong Keeping Place. A highlight was the powerful speech from Kenton Winsley, CEO of GEGAC, that set the scene and emphasised that self-determination is a right, not something that can be ‘granted’ to Aboriginal people. Kenton announced to the ACF that GEGAC will play a greater role in caring for and supporting Aboriginal children and families through GEGAC’s Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care (ACAC) program, *Wangun Lidj*, which means “Boomerang” and “Child” in Gunaikurnai language.

*“To our partners in government, thank you,”* Kenton said*. “But I say this with respect: Trust us. Trust in our leadership. Trust in our knowledge. Trust that our way works. Don’t just fund the work. Believe in and back our vision.”*

Presentations from ABSTARR Consulting on the Statewide Aboriginal Sector Workforce Strategy and the Victorian Aboriginal Child & Community Agency (VACCA), Victorian Aboriginal Children & Young People’s Alliance (VACYPA) and the University of Melbourne on the Aboriginal Beginning Practice highlighted the necessity of Aboriginal sector consultation to get things right for community, and that authentic consultation takes time. VACCA and VACYPA also discussed the legal and contractual work completed to ensure Aboriginal intellectual property is owned by ACCOs.

Workshop sessions identified how the Statement of Recognition legislation and principles have started to be implemented in each division, and practical ways this can be accelerated at the local level. It was also acknowledged that there is a long way to go to address historical government wrongs, which reiterated to July ACF members the importance of engaging ACCOs at the outset to ensure legislation supports self-determination.

The ACCO Caucus has developed a list of Wungurilwil Gapgapduir budget priorities for the 2026/27 state budget, which the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing will reflect in the upcoming budget process. Given the tight fiscal environment, the ACCOs prioritised the WWGGD priorities that require investment for implementation. At the top of the list was renewed and strengthened investment in ACAC which is due to lapse at the end of 2026-27.

A key takeaway of this ACF was the strong focus on culture - with acknowledgement that the foundational critical enabler to all work with Aboriginal children and families *is* culture. The starting point must always be culture.

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