



# **Aboriginal Cultural and Spiritual Identity Forum**

for the Quality Assurance Framework for statutory OOHC

November 2016

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## What is the Quality Assurance Framework?

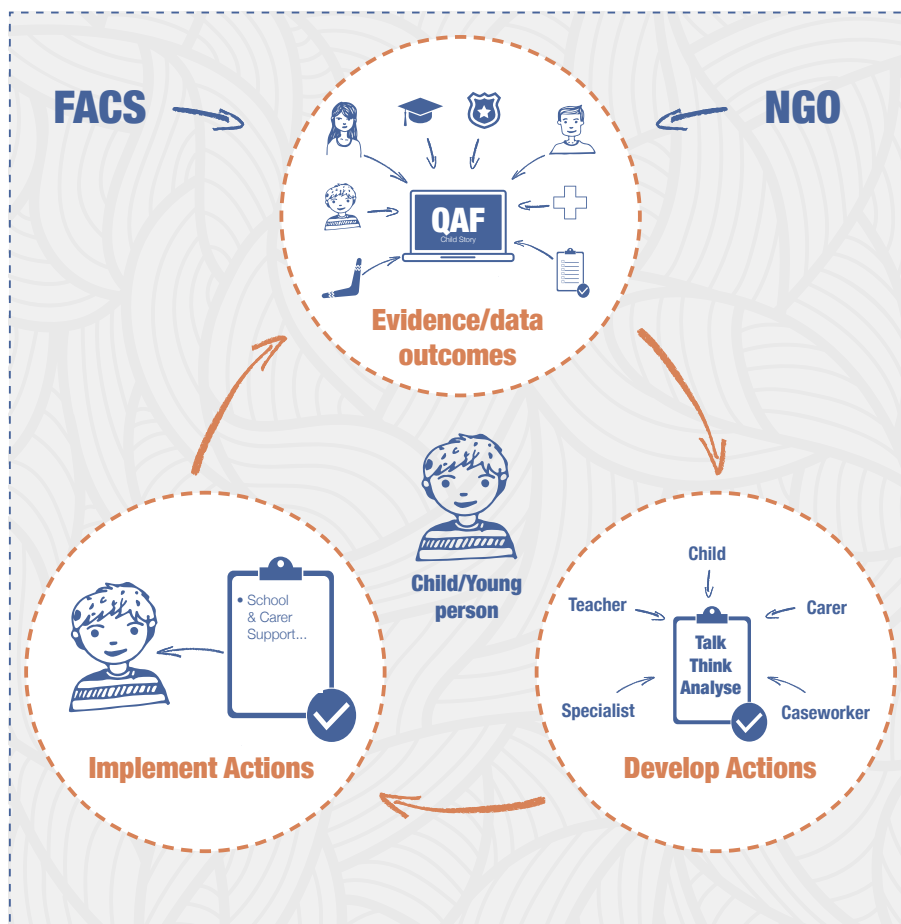
The Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) has been designed to collect, hold and standardise information from various sources on the safety, permanency and wellbeing of children in statutory out-of-home care (OOHC) in NSW.

The QAF will provide a central point where consistent, comprehensive and integrated information is held, and will assist frontline staff with developing individual case plans. The information will also be used to inform best practice and policy development.

The aim of the QAF is to make the experience of children who are in OOHC the best we possibly can and in doing so, focus on improving their outcomes.

FACS and the Parenting Research Centre (PRC) are trialling the QAF, with three NGOs and one FACS site taking part:

- MacKillop Family Services
- Key Assets Australia
- Burrun Dalai Aboriginal Corporation Inc.
- Mid North Coast FACS District



## Cultural and Spiritual Identity

A sense of cultural and spiritual identity is important for the health and wellbeing of children in OOHC, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. FACS has recognised how integral this connection to culture and spirituality is and has incorporated an outcome domain focused on culture in the QAF. FACS will develop this domain in partnership with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.

The first step in the design of a cultural and spiritual domain was to gain an understanding of what culture and spiritual identity means to Aboriginal people. A forum was held to ask the question: *What does cultural and spiritual identity mean to you?*, and this report is a summary of the forum.

## Key Findings

Overall, forum participants said that culture is a part of you and that ‘it’s in our everyday living; a natural way to be.’ What’s important to understand is that being Aboriginal influences “how we interact with the world.” The general consensus was that being Aboriginal is “not the colour of your skin, but it’s what you know in your heart.”

Key Messages:

- Regular connections to culture
- Knowledge of culture
- Connection to kin “Cultural and spiritual identity of Aboriginal children is vital for their sense of belonging, connection and an enriched future.”

**“Culture is like an iceberg, to an outsider you only see the tip but underneath deep values and relationships exist.”**

**“Cultural and spiritual identity of Aboriginal children is vital for their sense of belonging, connection and an enriched future.”**

## What we did

As part of the QAF design process, a forum was held on 16 November 2016 that brought together 57 Aboriginal people to ask them: *What does cultural and spiritual identity mean to you?*

Attendees reflected the diversity of NSW Aboriginal communities, FACS districts (metro, urban, rural and remote), ages, gender and experience.

We invited each of the seven FACS District clusters to send an Aboriginal employee and community champion. We also invited colleagues who work with the department on relevant projects, such as FACS Care and Cultural Plan, the FACS Aboriginal Reference Group (ARG), GMAR NSW (Grandmothers Against Removal), Baabayn Aboriginal Corporation, and Goori Galbans Aboriginal Corporation, Kempsey.

### Session Statistics

**57**

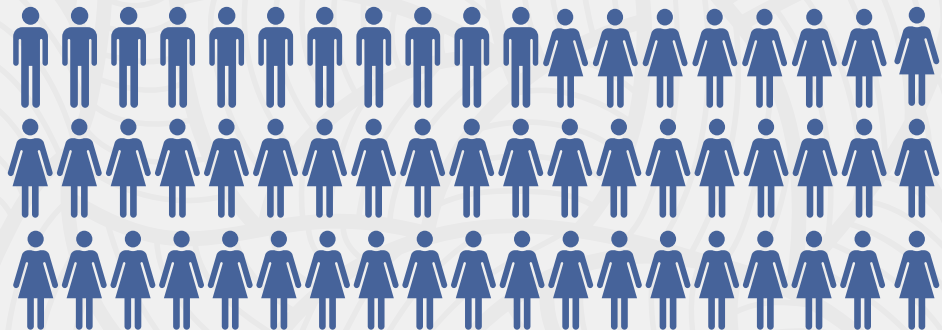
Attendees

**45** Aboriginal

**12** Non Aboriginal

**11** Males

**46** Females



**18** 

NGO Attendees

**16** 

Elders in the Community

**25** 

FACS Staff



17 Participants identify with the following nations/land/people/clan:

Wiradjuri  
Yuin  
Walgalu  
Yamatji  
Gundungarra  
Dharug  
Danigatti  
Gamilarray  
Muruwari

Biripi  
Kalarie  
Dhuliiny  
Dunghutti  
Worimi  
Gadigal

## About the day

The forum was facilitated by Rowena Lawrie, Darkingyung, Director Yamurrah, and her co-facilitator Cleonie Quayle, Barkindij.

Anne Weldon, a Board Member and Cultural Representative of the Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council welcomed everyone to Gadigal land of the Eora Nation.



Facilitators Rowena Lawrie (front) and Cleonie Quayle (back).

Each participant was asked to introduce themselves to the group and place a key value in the Coolamon. 24 per cent of attendees noted 'Respect' as the most key value to them, followed by 'Honesty'.



## Academic Research

Our guest speaker for the day was Professor Cheryl Kickett-Tucker from Curtin University, in Western Australia. An academic and an expert in her field, Professor Cheryl presented on “*Aboriginal Identity: The Seed for Wellbeing*”. It was a summary of her work on “*Racial Identity and Self-Esteem for children 8-12 years (IRISE\_C)*”, a project which measures cultural understanding and self esteem in children.

Cheryl’s work centres on the sense of self, identity and self-esteem of urban Aboriginal children and explores how urban Aboriginal children think and feel about themselves in the world they live in, and how this affects their lives.

Cheryl was invited to present at the forum because her work has been tested on hundreds of children, and is considered valid and reliable, and the closest thing in Australia that reflects what the QAF is trying to achieve – defining and measuring cultural and spiritual identity for children in statutory OOHC.

Professor Cheryl discussed research that states “*Identity is important for building self-identity, self-worth, self-belief, getting the kids to understand who they are and be able to walk in two worlds. This provides strategies for dealing with discrimination and the challenges of daily life.*”

Professor Cheryl also discussed how being connected to culture acts as a “buffer against suicide and self harm.”



Professor Cheryl Kickett-Tucker

## Panel Presentations



*‘Without strong identity young people may be an arrow with no target.’*

### Professor Cheryl Kickett-Tucker

Dr Cheryl Kickett-Tucker is a Noongar woman with traditional ties to the Wadjuk, Ballardong and Yued peoples.

*“Some parents don’t have racial coping strategies themselves and thereby are unable to teach children and young people how to manoeuvre around racism and discrimination.”*



*“We can’t change the past but can shape the future to strengthen Aboriginal cultural identity.”*

### Dana Clarke

Dana Clarke is the CEO of Burrun Dalai OOHC and Family Support Service and a Chair of AbSec NSW.

*“Staff are regularly torn between a decision that may affect a child or young person’s wellbeing, such as the decision whether to place a child with Aboriginal carers off land or country or place the child with a non-Aboriginal carer on country.”*





## Dixie Link-Gordon

Dixie Link-Gordon is an Aboriginal woman who has lived all her adult life in Redfern. Her six children have grown up in the community and Dixie is a strong advocate, promoting the cultural values of 'sharing, caring and respect'. Dixie works for the Aboriginal Legal Services NSW.

*“Care and respect is essential to working with Aboriginal people. There needs to be acknowledgement of a persons trauma in order to provide effective support.”*



## Professor Juanita Sherwood

Juanita is a registered nurse, teacher, lecturer, researcher and manager with an depth of working experiences of some thirty years in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and education. Juanita is the Academic Director, National Centre for Cultural Competency at Sydney University.

*“When you’re damaged you don’t want to participate in being supported.”*



## Aunty Millie Ingram

Millie Ingram was CEO of Wyanga Aboriginal Aged Care Program in Redfern for 10 years. Millie was born and raised on an Aboriginal reserve called Erambie, in Wiradjuri country (Cowra) in central NSW. She has worked in Aboriginal affairs all of her life, at a community level and in government.

*“Identity and family is what is important and we need to focus on the future whilst understanding the past and knowing where we came from.”*



## James Williams

James Williams is an Aboriginal Caseworker, Cultural Connections for FACS. James played a key role in the 1988 Bicentennial celebrations with Aboriginal people who gathered from all parts of Australia

*“...culture is about six ‘L’s’ Law, Love, Look, Listen, Learn, Lead.”*

<b>1</b>	<b>Law</b> , spiritual law, good governance, cultural identity and respect for nature and each other	<b>3</b>	<b>Look</b> to the spirit, for opportunities and positive outcomes	<b>5</b>	<b>Learn</b> from the spirit, elders, experts, community and each other
<b>2</b>	<b>Love</b> is a doing word! Love for the spirit, each other, community, our work and our land.	<b>4</b>	<b>Listen</b> to the spirit, elders, experts in their field, our community and each other	<b>6</b>	<b>Lead</b> by example with integrity and honesty

## What does Culture and Spirituality mean to you?

In small groups, we brainstormed “*What does culture and spirituality mean to you?*” Forum participants explained that it was hard to define culture and spirituality, saying “it can’t be drawn; you only know”. Some described culture as “being something bigger than yourself”, something that “we live and breathe”. Others said it was “part of our genetic makeup”, “a feeling in your soul”, “an essence of your being”.

Participants reported that spirituality is “everyone’s personal experience” and that it “can’t be separated”.

**“Spirituality is entwined with culture.”**

Spirituality was also described as a “connection to land” and “knowledge”. Others said spirituality was “knowing important places of belonging – nature, healing, seasons, water”.

**“Knowing how stories are linked, sky-geography, groups-family, dance.”**

The groups expressed that it’s the ‘responsibility of Aboriginal people to pass on knowledge’. Children need to have Aboriginal culture ‘in their house everyday’.

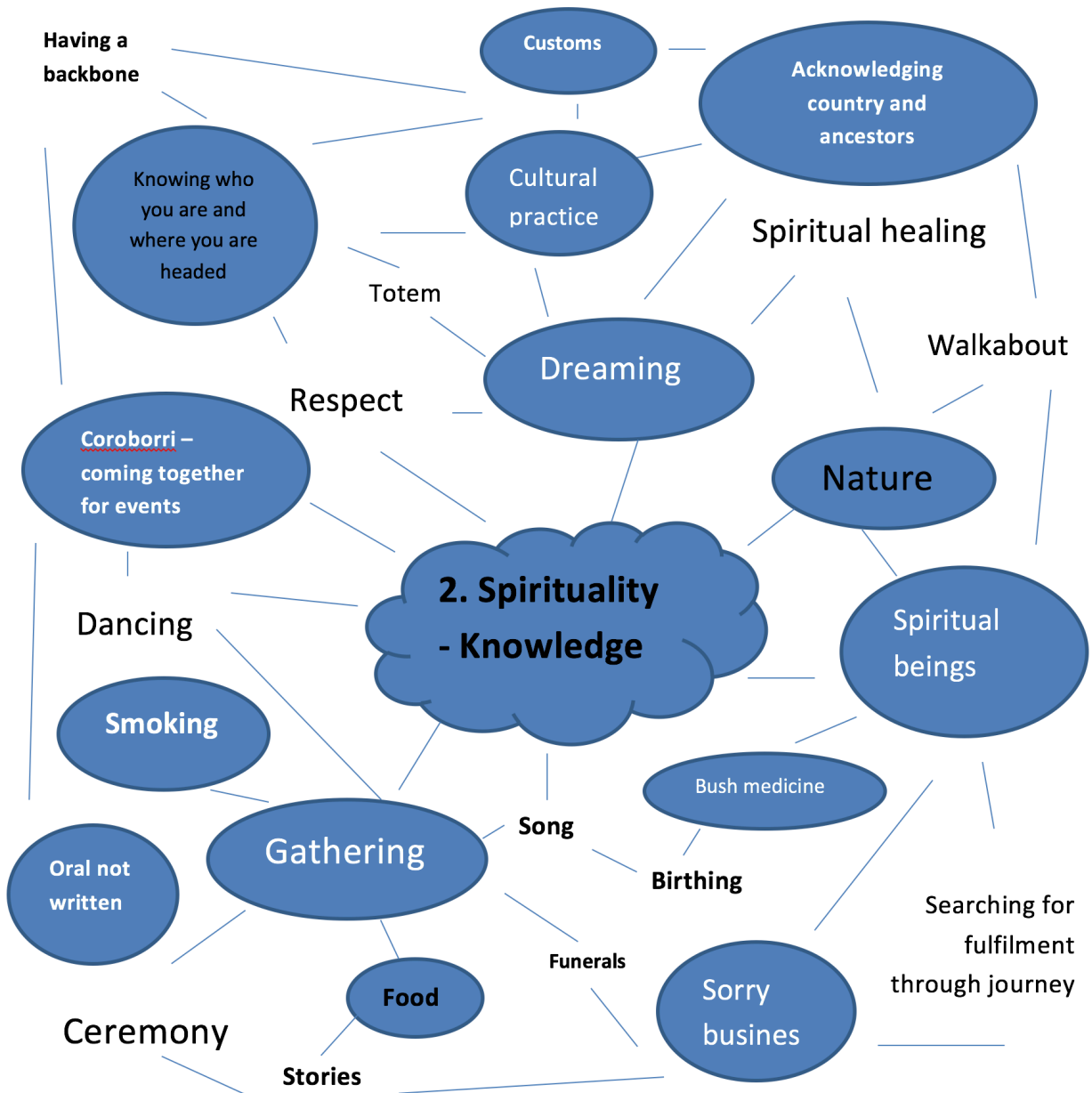


Matt Cutmore and Lyn Lawrie

## What does culture mean to you?



# What does spirituality mean to you?



## Closing the day

To close the day, forum participants gathered in a circle and read a line each of Dadirri – Listening to one Another.

### Dadirri – Listening to one Another

Dadirri. A special quality, a unique gift of the Aboriginal people, is inner deep listening and quiet still awareness. Dadirri recognises the deep spring that is inside us. It is something like what you call contemplation.

The contemplative way of dadirri spreads over our whole life. It renews us and brings us peace. It makes us feel whole again. In our Aboriginal way we learnt to listen from our earliest times. We could not live good and useful lives unless we listened.

We are not threatened by silence. We are completely at home in it. Our Aboriginal way has taught us to be still and wait. We do not try to hurry things up. We let them follow their natural course – like the seasons. We watch the moon in each of its phases. We wait for the rain to fill our rivers and water the thirsty earth. When twilight comes we prepare for the night. At dawn we rise with the sun.

We watch the bush foods and wait for them to open before we gather them. We wait for our young people as they grow, stage by stage, through their initiation ceremonies. When a relation dies we wait for a long time with the sorrow. We own our grief and allow it to heal slowly. We wait for the right time for our ceremonies and meetings. The right people must be present. Careful preparations must be made.

We don't mind waiting because we want things to be done with care. Sometimes many hours will be spent on painting the body before an important ceremony. We do not worry. We know that in time and in the spirit of Dadirri (that deep listening and quiet stillness) the way will be made clear.

We are like the tree standing in the middle of a bushfire sweeping through the timber. The leaves are scorched and the tough bark is scarred and burnt, but inside the tree the sap is still flowing and under the ground the roots are still strong. Like that tree we have endured the flames and we still have the power to be re-born.

Our people are used to the struggle and the long waiting. We still wait for the white people to understand us better. We ourselves have spent many years learning about the white man's ways; we have learnt to speak the white man's language; we have

listened to what he had to say. This learning and listening should go both ways. We would like people in Australia to take time and listen to us. We are hoping people will come closer.

We keep on longing for the things that we have always hoped for, respect and understanding. We know that our white brothers and sisters carry their own particular burdens. We believe that if they let us come to them – if they open up their minds and hearts to us. We may lighten their burdens. There is a struggle for us, but we have not lost our spirit of Dadirri.

There are deep springs within each of us. Within this deep spring, which is the very spirit, is a sound. The sound of Deep calling to Deep. The time for re-birth is now. If our culture is alive and strong and respected it will grow. It will not die and our spirit will not die. I believe the spirit of dadirri that we have to offer will blossom and grow, not just within ourselves, but in our whole nation.

*Edited version adapted from the writings of Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr.*

## Outcomes

We surveyed participants following the forum and below is their feedback:

- 58 per cent said the forum exceeded their expectations
- 33 per cent said the forum met their expectations
- 8 per cent said the forum was below expectation

We asked participants what elements of culture and spirituality would be the most beneficial for children in OOHCH. Overall, the feedback was around:

- “Maintaining close links with their mob”
- “Reconnecting with their family”
- “Having real relationships with positive Aboriginal role models” such as “interaction from elders from their language groups” or “role modelling and mentoring”

Overall, the feedback stressed the importance of knowledge and maintaining links with family and mob in order to strengthen “belonging, connection and identity”. Feedback also emphasised the importance of “children having a good understanding of who their mob is, including all family connections, names country, learning the language and spending time with the family”. Other feedback said “living with an Aboriginal family and learning from an Aboriginal family was important to cultural and spiritual identity”.

## What will we do next?

The valuable information and insights gained from the forum have been used to inform the trial of the QAF. We are continuing the design stage by working with a small group of Aboriginal representatives in a Cultural and Spiritual identity Task Team.

The Task Team is made up of representatives from AbSec, Burran Dalai, FACS Cultural Connections Team Western, Aboriginal Policy Unit, FACS Aboriginal Reference Group, Parenting Research

Centre and Professor Cheryl Kickett-Tucker and members of the FACS QAF team.

The Task Team had its first meeting in February 2017 and is reviewing a first draft of the domain. Task Team members will provide feedback on the draft at the second meeting at the end of March 2017.



## Thank you

Thank you to all forum participants who shared their experiences and insights with us. We feel very privileged to talk with such a dynamic and interesting group of people.

Thanks to Rowena and Cleonie who facilitated the day.

Thank you to the panel: Cheryl Kickett-Tucker, Dixie Gordon-Smith, Juanita Sherwood, Dana Clarke, Aunty Millie Ingram and James Williams.

And thank you to all the participants who travelled to be with us. Your support has facilitated better connections, and this has led to great discussions.

## Would you like to know more?

If you were a forum participant and would like to have a chat about the report, you can email us at [QAF@facs.nsw.gov.au](mailto:QAF@facs.nsw.gov.au)

If you would like to know more about the QAF, visit the FACS website: [www.facs.nsw.gov.au/QAF](http://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/QAF) or email [QAF@facs.nsw.gov.au](mailto:QAF@facs.nsw.gov.au)



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