EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Introduction, aim and approach

Increasing access to and engagement with child and family services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders peoples is vital to address the significant poverty and disadvantage they experience. In this paper SNAICC builds upon previous research that highlights the barriers for families in accessing services and recognises two key approaches to increasing their access and engagement:

- working within a cultural competence framework; and
- engaging in effective partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations.

SNAICC contends that genuine and respectful partnerships between mainstream service providers and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations (ACCOs) have multiple benefits including:

- cultural competence development for mainstream service providers;
- governance and service capacity development for ACCOs;
- development of shared capacity to respond to community needs; and
- development of individual and community capacity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in areas including workforce and community leadership.

This is consistent with broad-level government policy frameworks that acknowledge the need for, and support, a partnership-based approach with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations for targeted services.

In order to advance efforts to achieve these potential outcomes through partnerships, however, SNAICC identifies the need to unpack what genuine partnership requires at different stages of partnership development, operation and management; the resources and practical support that are required to enable effective partnerships; and the practices that contribute to 'good practice' partnerships between ACCOs and mainstream service providers.

In this paper SNAICC uses a case study analysis approach to explore these issues, focusing in particular on practical steps that mainstream service providers, ACCOs and government can take to develop and support genuine partnerships, thereby increasing the quality and choice of culturally appropriate services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. Interviews with service providers have contributed to nine different case studies that demonstrate success in the development and management of good practice partnerships, and inform this paper. The full case studies are included in Appendix A and a summary version in Appendix B.

2. Partnership principles

The current paper draws, from good practices identified in the case studies reviewed, the core principles that underpin genuine and successful partnerships between ACCOs and mainstream service providers. These are:

1. Commitment to developing **long-term sustainable relationships** based on **trust**.
2. **Respect** for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural knowledge, history, lived experience and connection to community and country.
3. Commitment to **self-determination** for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
4. Aim to **improve long-term well-being outcomes** for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities.
5. **Shared responsibility and accountability** for shared objectives and activities.
6. Valuing **process elements as integral** to support and enable partnership.
7. A commitment to **redressing structures, relationships and outcomes** that are unequal and/or discriminatory.
8. Openness to **working differently** with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, recognising that the mainstream approaches are frequently not the most appropriate or effective.

These principles are interconnected and interdependent, with the case studies demonstrating that they must all be present and integrated within each partnership stage to achieve potential partnership outcomes. This paper contends that these principles form the bedrock of genuine and successful partnerships, and that they have major implications for partnership development, operation, management and resourcing.

3. Partnership development

(a) Relationship building and development

The case studies reveal that a significant commitment to and investment in developing relationships of trust is necessary to enable genuine and respectful partnerships. This is especially important for mainstream service providers that need to re-establish trust that has been damaged by the history of mistreatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Practices contributing to positive relationship development include: mainstream partners making long-term commitments to relationships; establishing a strong community presence and participation; and tailoring support to community need based on requests from ACCO partners.

(b) Negotiation and agreement making

Formalising partnerships through agreements and incorporating partnership processes and activities into the policies and procedures of partnering organisations are recognised by participants in this research as important practices. Participants

identify that these practices are necessary to: ensure that partnerships are sustainable; clarify commitments and resource allocation; and promote mutual accountability for shared objectives. Agreements rarely drive the relationship and their quality reflects the processes of relationship building, and open and honest negotiation that underpin the agreement. Partners recognise that special attention is needed to incorporating ACCO perspectives in agreements, including recognition from mainstream partners of the important leading role of ACCOs in identifying needs, and designing and delivering responses for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

4. Partnership management

(a) Ongoing partnership management

Participants identify that regular and open communication is vital to the ongoing management of a partnership. The ability to raise and work through challenges and issues in a frank and open way both enables and reflects a respectful working relationship. Informal and flexible planning processes in partnerships allow space for discussion and planning at the community level to feed into and guide partnership work. Staffing arrangements that facilitate linkages, relationship building and learning across organisations have been described by participants as centrally important, and formed an element of practice for almost all partnerships within the case studies.

(b) Resourcing and facilitating partnerships

The case studies suggest strongly that a significant investment of time and resources is required to enable effective partnerships. Efficiency benefits of partnerships tend to be long-term and result from good process. SNAICC identifies a widely recognised need to fund process elements of partnership development and management. SNAICC also identifies that a number of models have shown promise in taking a partnership-based approach to service integration and providing dedicated resources for partnership development and management. Within the case studies considered, these models have provided platforms for relationship development. Partnership facilitation and brokering roles have been critical to the success of these approaches. SNAICC notes, however, that the efforts of 'facilitating partners' in developing cultural competency and respectful relationships have also been critical to enabling successful and genuine participation of ACCOs within partnership structures.

(c) Monitoring and evaluation

No partners in the case studies reviewed have conducted a significant review of partnership relationships and their impact on outcomes, which SNAICC argues, again, reflects the lack of resources available to support partnership process elements. Evaluation was conducted of service outcomes for services delivered in partnership. ACCOs commonly identify significant differences in cultural understanding of, and approaches to, evaluation between ACCOs and mainstream partners. These differences create challenges for evaluation of partnership projects.

Practices that include significant participation of all partners in the design of evaluation processes have shown promise for overcoming challenges.

5. Partnership outcomes

(a) Collective innovation and advocacy

This paper highlights various ways in which partnerships provide forums for developing shared understanding about community needs, as well as responses that are effective and culturally appropriate. Shared understanding has enabled the development of joint strategies and new service models and approaches. Resourcing genuine partnership development between ACCOs and mainstream service providers creates space for the development of local, responsive strategies. Participants further identify that partnerships provide opportunities for larger mainstream partners with significant influence to 'back-up' or advocate on behalf of their ACCO partners. In this way, mainstream partners have acted as conduits to represent 'on-the-ground' realities in higher-level policy debate.

(b) Cultural competency development for mainstream service providers

Participants identify both the need for a commitment to developing cultural competency to enable partnership with ACCOs, and the significant opportunity that exists for mainstream service providers to develop cultural competency in partnership with ACCOs and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The approach to developing cultural competency cannot be a finite checklist, but requires a broad focus on the attitudes, behaviours and policies necessary for an organisation and its staff to work effectively in cross-cultural situations. It is critical that the approach includes recognition of, and value for, the cultural knowledge and skills of ACCOs and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples that are crucial for appropriate service provisions for children and families. The case studies also reinforce that a commitment to self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples underpins culturally competent practice.

Practices identified by participants that contribute to cultural competency for mainstream service providers through partnership include: local cultural awareness training with direction, guidance and/or participation of ACCO partners; integrated staffing arrangements that provide opportunities for shared learning; employment of local Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander staff by mainstream partners; development of organisational cultural competency frameworks; and cultural advice services provided by ACCO partners to support mainstream partners working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

(c) Capacity building for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations

It is important to recognise that multiple capacity development benefits accrue for both partners in all the case studies considered, and many of the capacity benefits for mainstream partners are reflected on in relation to cultural competency in the previous section. The focus in this section is on governance and service delivery

capacity development for ACCOs through partnerships. Mainstream participants in this study identify that capacity challenges for their ACCO partners largely relate to the extent of community need and the large service delivery demands placed upon those organisations. Capacity building is strongly recognised in the case studies as enabling an enhanced role for ACCOs and empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Mainstream partners have provided significant support to build capacity for ACCO partners in areas including: training and local workforce development; mentoring of staff; governance systems development; and support for obtaining sustainable funding.

Successful and respectful partnerships regularly have a strong focus on a transfer of resources, leadership and responsibility for service provision for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families to ACCOs. In line with the principle of self-determination, participants highlight that this transfer should happen at the request of ACCOs and accompanied by support to ensure sustainability. Partnerships that participated in this study commonly featured a commitment to building Aboriginal service capacity for the long-term, while working together to address immediate needs and meet expectations.

6. A promising approach

The Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care Secretariat, New South Wales (AbSec) and the Association of Children's Welfare Agencies (ACWA) have commenced a process for developing new Aboriginal community-controlled Out-of Home Care (OOHC) services through a partnership-based capacity building model. The approach shows significant promise for building state-wide capacity for the provision of OOHC services by ACCOs. Promising aspects include: an Aboriginal peak body leading the process to ensure appropriate service provision for Aboriginal children and families; a funded role for partnership brokering and facilitation; agreements negotiated to identify shared goals and commitments at the outset; and a tailored approach to ensure relevance to local community contexts.

7. Conclusion and recommendations

The case studies reviewed reveal good practices that support partnerships, but also the ongoing struggles of both partners to realise the good practice principles within their services and in engagement with each other. Implementation of the principles is inhibited by deeply embedded approaches that take time, commitment and persistence to change, as well as inconsistent government structures and demands, and an absence of resources required for their realisation.

Ultimately, practice demonstrates that where the eight principles identified are embedded in the structures, processes and practices of partner organisations, supported by upper management and consciously filtered through to staff at other levels of service delivery, they contribute to improved service development and delivery for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

Importantly, this paper unpacks key practices that illustrate *how* services can reflect these principles in their practice. These practices provide clear guidance to inform

and support partnership development for children and family service providers. A matrix that describes clearly the practices that promote each of the identified principles at different stages of partnership development is included in Appendix D.

The practices and principles identified also highlight important priorities for government policy development to promote good practice partnerships in the child and family service sector that are detailed in the included recommendations. Government action is required in key areas including the identification of remaining capacity gaps and development of responsive programs that utilise the benefits of partnership, and research and monitoring of innovative partnership practices. SNAICC also recommends various strategies for the Government to strengthen and enable the facilitation of good practice partnerships, including through regulation, service contract models, provision of relevant resources and support for services to engage in genuine partnerships, and enabling a sufficient level of cultural competency across the sector. SNAICC also considers the next three-year plan for the National Framework for the Protection of Australia's Children 2009-2020 as an opportunity to capitalise on the potential of good practice partnerships. In particular, recommendations strengthen existing initiatives aimed at producing strong outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families through culturally appropriate and responsive integrated services.