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‘People don’t trust those pieces of paper that are provided’: A qualitative study of cultural planning and outsourced out-of-home care services in Western Australia

Sharynne Hamilton
The Kids Institute Australia, University of Western Australia, Australia
University of Canberra, Australia

Larissa Jones
The Kids Institute Australia, University of Western Australia, Australia

Millie Penny
The Kids Institute Australia, University of Western Australia, Australia

Charmaine Pell
The Kids Institute Australia, University of Western Australia, Australia

Sarah Maslen
University of Canberra, Australia

Carol Michie
The Kids Institute Australia, University of Western Australia, Australia

Raewyn Mutch
The Kids Institute Australia, University of Western Australia, Australia
Perth Children’s Hospital, Australia

Melissa O’Donnell
University of South Australia, Australia

Carrington Shepherd
The Kids Institute Australia, University of Western Australia, Australia
Curtin Medical School, Curtin University, Australia

Brad Farrant
The Kids Institute Australia, University of Western Australia, Australia

Abstract

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children continue to be removed at high rates from their families by child protection services, placing them at elevated risk of adverse long-term life outcomes. Cultural connection in out-of-home care is essential for mitigating the impacts of trauma from removal, emphasizing the importance of ensuring that cultural planning is rigorously undertaken. This article explores the provision of cultural plans in an era where out-of-home care services are outsourced by government, but where government holds onto the responsibility for developing cultural plans for children in care. We examine the views of out-of-home care agency workers and non-Indigenous foster carers about receiving cultural information for children in their care. The findings suggest that government has failed to provide leadership and guidance or be responsive, and reveal a shift in the missions of non-governmental organizations and their commitment to providing culturally secure services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Keywords

Aboriginal, foster care, outsourcing, cultural connection, cultural planning

Introduction

The Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission ‘Bringing Them Home’ Report (1997) was the first systematic and large-scale documentation of the many harmful impacts experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children forcibly removed from family, kin and Country. These children are understood today as ‘The Stolen Generation’ and the trauma and harm incurred now spans multiple generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families; since the release of the 1997 report, the unabated removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children continues (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2022). Recommendation 43c of the Bringing Them Home Report (1997) called for ‘the transfer of police, judicial and/or departmental functions to an Indigenous community, region or representative organisation’ (p. 510). Nationally, there is a commitment to child protection reform through the Australian Government’s Closing the Gap Initiative (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2025). In Western Australia where this research was undertaken, Aboriginal community members and representative organizations have repeatedly called for legislative, policy and human rights changes in the child protection sector (see McGlade, 2019). Across Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organizations and peak bodies continue to extensively advocate for community-led reform and engagement that promotes self-determination and autonomy (Davis, 2019; Hamilton et al., 2022; Hamilton et al., 2025; Jones et al., 2025; McGlade, 2019; SNAICC, 2017; SNAICC, 2022; White & Gooda, 2017).

Corresponding author:
Sharynne Hamilton, The Kids Institute Australia, University of Western Australia, Nedlands, Perth, WA, Australia; University of Canberra, Canberra, ACT, Australia.
Email: sharynne.hamilton@thekids.org.au

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are admitted to out-of-home care (OOHC) at over 10 times the rate of their non-Indigenous peers (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2022). They are twice as likely to experience poor long-term health and well-being outcomes than their non-Indigenous peers (Australian Government, 2017; Bailey & Clark, 2024; Darwin et al., 2023). Removal into OOHC generates poor outcomes across multiple domains of health, mental health, cultural connection and well-being (Darwin et al., 2023; Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, 1997), with higher rates of poverty and disadvantage (Bennett et al., 2020) and higher risk for involvement in youth and adult criminal justice settings (Baidawi & Ball, 2023). These imposed and harmful outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were seeded at colonization (Gee et al., 2023; Paradies, 2016; Sherwood, 2013).

To mitigate the effects of past harm, and prevent future harm occurring, cultural planning has become the main mechanism for supporting the continued cultural connections of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children following removal into OOHC. Ideally, a cultural plan should include all information about connections to a child's kin, family, culture, community and their ancestral lands. They should be developed with OOHC stakeholders and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and contain distinct priorities, tasks and goals that assist to maintain, develop and encourage strong cultural identity and connection (Liddle et al., 2022). Responsibility for maintaining cultural connections, as well as cultural planning, is the duty of government child protection authorities, both in their statutory role and as part of their responsibilities to support and strengthen families where children have been removed (Newton et al., 2024). Cultural planning is guided through the implementation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle (ATSICPP), which mandates the requirement for cultural plans for any children in OOHC irrespective of their permanency status (SNAICC, 2017). Outcomes from limited investigations into the way that cultural planning is undertaken suggest that cultural plans are not reliably implemented in a way that promotes and safeguards the cultural rights and identity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children involved with Australian child protection systems (Hamilton et al., 2025; Krakouer, 2023).

Globally, in the last four decades, governments have outsourced social services, including the care of children removed by child protection services. The paradigm of substantive OOHC service delivery existing within non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is underpinned by neoliberal logics, and since it has been implemented, there has been an exponential increase in child removals (Department of Social Services, 2020; Foote, 2022). In this article, we examine the way cultural planning is derived, developed and delivered with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to address past harms, and to prevent additional harm being incurred by children and communities subject to child protection interventions. We give consideration to the arguments on the benefits of outsourcing and explore some of the problems identified in the literature, including whether outsourcing affects the expertise and capability of government to perform its functions, steer services and be held accountable. Further, we examine the risk of NGOs moving away from the missions of their organizations, losing the ability to be responsive to their communities and to hold respectful relationships that facilitate information sharing, all of which are critical for providing safe, stable, connected and accountable OOHC arrangements for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Literature review: New public management

A new public management (NPM) agenda, including outsourcing services previously delivered by the state to NGOs, was implemented four decades ago in many Western countries to decrease public spending and foster greater flexibility, efficiency and responsiveness (O'Flynn & Wanna, 2008). Government systems and actors were seen as slow, inflexible, too focused on processes and procedures, indifferent to results or consequences and lacking accountability. In contrast, NGOs were considered flexible, had specific knowledge of their client base, were able to tailor services specific to the needs of their client groups, and offered greater value for money (O'Flynn & Wanna, 2008). Governments perceived NGOs as committed to high-quality service delivery and better placed to serve vulnerable groups, especially when aligned to the communities' ideological values. Outsourcing services would enable governments to 'steer' outsourced services by managing and directing NGOs rather than 'rowing' or providing services itself. Governments in theory could focus on core functions such as policy and programme development (Fredericksen & London, 2000).

NPM scholars raised concerns about accountability and governance, fearing outsourcing could result in a lessening of central capacity and control from government (Shergold, 2010; Wanna et al., 2010). Decentralizing government services were predicted to result in a loss of organizational knowledge, specialist skills and expertise (Milward & Provan, 2000) and impede the functions of the state, including keeping NGOs accountable (Verspaandonk, 2000). Scholars raised particular concerns for vulnerable citizens, highlighting the difficulty of monitoring aspects of service delivery that cannot easily be set out in contracts, such as courtesy and respect and how clients are treated (Verspaandonk, 2000). A combination of fragmented service delivery and eroded accountability limits the administrative ability of governments to steer services (Cook et al., 2012). The shift to NPM was challenged in regard to who holds culpability for risks associated with the outcomes for high-risk and vulnerable populations. Scholars predicted that the NPM programme would engender a complex network of institutions and public–private partnerships, leading to confusion about who is accountable and responsible (Verspaandonk, 2000).

Government outsourcing to NGOs has led to new ways of conceptualizing relationships, with 'partnerships' and 'collaboration' forming increasingly dominant narratives (McNabb & Swenson, 2021; Van Gestel & Grotenbreg, 2021). Consultative forums that support relationships and partnerships between the state, NGO providers and citizens are critical components for successful outsourcing and offer significant opportunities for debate, floating new ideas and initiating change. Government partnerships and consultations must be carefully brought about so that responsibility and accountability of outcomes are not conceded to the private sector. Governments need to remain ultimately responsible for the risks associated with processes and services particularly for vulnerable citizens, where the risks are highest (Senge et al., 2015). Ideally, vigorous and productive relationships between governments and NGOs are based on jointly agreed aims and objectives, pursued through mutual understanding, whilst paying attention to power (im) balance, mutual respect, equal participation in decision making, mutual accountability and transparency (Bates, 2021; Lægreid & Rykkja, 2022; McNabb & Swenson, 2021).

NPM scholars raised concern that reporting and contractual requirements designed to ensure adequate performance of NGOs could influence a shift in organizational missions and values (Cook et al., 2012), also termed ‘mission creep’ (Ramus & Vaccaro, 2017). This occurs due to a loss of independence and the accumulation of new goals, tasks and programmes that are beyond the original missions of organizations (Haugh & Kitson, 2007; Jonker & Meehan, 2008). NGOs could progressively and subtly be transformed by the need to secure funding, reducing organizational capacity to continue providing existing levels of service provision to vulnerable community members and lessening accountability. Negative impacts from outsourcing are reported widely on issues such as service quality, staff dissatisfaction and compromised well-being, including the well-being of clients (Åhlin et al., 2017; Baines & Cunningham, 2017; Henderson et al., 2018). Trust-based partnerships, therefore, are critical to successful collaboration, which is important for suppressing opportunistic behaviour, encouraging cooperation and promoting quality relationships (Crosby et al., 2017; Hwang et al., 2022; Martins et al., 2017; Van Gestel & Grotenbreg, 2021).

To fulfil organizational missions and meet their clients’ needs and outcomes, NGO actors often need to find ‘workarounds’ (Alter, 2014; Huuskonen & Vakkari, 2013; Koopman & Hoffman, 2003). Workarounds are methods for substituting ways of working that facilitate the continuity required to undertake and realize tasks (Koopman & Hoffman, 2003), and are observed or described behaviours that may differ from organizationally imposed or expected processes (Koopman & Hoffman, 2003). Workarounds circumvent workflow hindrances in order to meet or achieve goals more readily, to evade difficult rules or find solutions to a range of problems (Tucker & Edmondson, 2003). Complex service delivery, poor leadership, lack of staff involvement in decision making, lack of staff support and lack of role clarity all increase the likelihood that workarounds will be used (Espin et al., 2006; Halbesleben, 2010; Tucker & Edmondson, 2003; Wheeler et al., 2012). Using workarounds in health and social services can have consequences, even when undertaken with good intentions, because they interfere with processes designed to ensure safety, they can create gaps in documentation and processes, can also impair communication and cause harm to clients (Fraczkowski et al., 2020).

Scholarly exploration of the impact of outsourcing Australian OOHC services is limited. Australian child protection policy and practice is complex, fragmented, erratically regulated, crisis-driven, and staff fatigue and burnout are common (Braithwaite, 2021; Hawkes et al., 2024). Outsourcing has been found to diminish and undermine trust-based collaboration, partnerships and engagement, ultimately negatively impacting the quality of services for children in state care (Foote, 2022). In a 2022 study, Foote argued that government relied on the use of power and authority, as it sought to bring contracted NGOs into line with government policy through coercion rather than collaboration (Foote, 2022). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander principles of self-determination and sovereignty consistent with those sought through the ATSCIPP (Davis, 2019) were poorly executed, and lack of trust built through collaboration led to increasing government control, while divesting itself of responsibility of both the provision of OOHC and accountability to children (Foote, 2022). Government employees were found to lack the necessary training for monitoring NGO compliance, which led to poor communication with NGOs, an inability to collect data, track children, and effectively evaluate programmes (Auditor-General, 2019). Failures in the outsourcing of OOHC services were attributed to a failure to plan and execute frameworks for quality assurance (Foote, 2022). Systems designed to inform case management and case planning were not reliable, and the subsequent lack of correct information about children and their families reduced the capacity of NGOs to fulfil their role and responsibilities (Auditor-General, 2019; Foote, 2022).

There is a paucity of work that explores the challenges for non-Indigenous NGOs providing services on behalf of the state to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. The aim of this research is to understand more about the barriers and facilitators to culturally secure service provision for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the care of non-Indigenous foster carers. We explore the views of NGO workers and non-Indigenous foster carers regarding receiving information through cultural plans, and whether they can facilitate connection for children in their care to kin, culture and Country.

Methods

The Ngulluk Moort Ngulluk Boodja Ngulluk Wirin (Our Family Our Country Our Spirit) study is being conducted between 2022 and 2026 in partnership with three mainstream OOHC agencies managing Aboriginal children living in non-Indigenous care arrangements in Perth, Western Australia, and surrounding districts. There were no Torres Strait Islander children in this study, so we refer only to Aboriginal children when referring to the study and participants.

Using culturally secure research methods and practices, and including Indigenous perspectives in research, is critical to protecting people from research harm (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2018; Evans et al., 2014; Sherwood, 2013). Research, therefore, needs to be conducted in a way that is sympathetic, respectful and ethically sound from the perspective of participants as well as prioritizing Indigenous world-views, wisdom, knowledge and science to inform ways of growing up Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2018; Farrant et al., 2019; Hamilton et al., 2020).

This research, led by the Ngulluk Koolunga Ngulluk Koort (Our Children Our Heart) Elder child protection expert knowledge holders, places the community at the centre by using an Aboriginal Participatory Action Research (APAR) framework (Dudgeon et al., 2020; Hamilton et al., 2024). Using an APAR process supports relationship building, knowledge sharing and learning, shifts power, shares resources, and establishes community ownership over research outcomes (Dudgeon et al., 2020). Using a strength-based co-designed APAR approach recognizes the cultural wisdom and knowledge held by the Elders, and positions ideas of family and cultural aspiration as central to the wellbeing of the child within the collective context of their whole community and a flourishing future.

Participants

Between November 2022 and March 2023, OOHC agency staff participated in structured focus groups, led by the Elder child protection expert knowledge holders and Aboriginal research team members. The aim was to elucidate the barriers and facilitators to culturally secure service provision for Aboriginal children in the care of non-Indigenous foster carers across three themes: cultural connections, cultural knowledge, and cultural activities. A short presentation was given at the beginning of the focus groups outlining the aims of the research and three discussion points. All focus groups were given the same presentation and themes for discussion.

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants. Initial planning for focus groups occurred in discussions with the research team and the OOHC agency leaders. OOHC agency leaders identified relevant participants and provided them with a participant information and consent sheet for the scheduled focus group. All participants provided informed consent. We recruited a total of 39 participants across four focus groups, with participants mainly employed to manage foster care arrangements with Aboriginal children. In addition, 30 individual interviews were undertaken with OOHC agency staff, as well as 27 interviews with foster carers. Interviews focused on establishing individual perspectives using the same three themes of the focus groups: cultural connections, cultural knowledge, and cultural activities.

Data Collection

A research topic yarning (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2018) approach was used for both focus groups and interviews. Yarning has become an established research method, both in Australian and global Indigenous studies (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2018). Yarning is a fluid process of knowledge sharing and respectful communication that is flexible, allowing for adaptations that might be required to support language or literacy difference, and is suitable for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants (Hamilton et al., 2020). Using yarning as a data collection method allowed for providing context around the complexities that exist in this work for participants.

Data Analysis

Two researchers independently reviewed all data to identify key themes, with preliminary analysis immediately following data collection. A coding framework was developed and applied to all transcripts, and data were analysed using thematic network analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001) and triangulated across all groups. Research team members together with the Elder child protection expert knowledge holders and advisory group members regularly met and reviewed data themes. These reviews helped to ensure consistency in data interpretation through multiple perspectives and iterations. The lead researcher and team members also conducted multiple analysis reviews at regular time points over six months to confirm and develop final data interpretations.

Ethics

This research has ethical approval from the Western Australian Aboriginal Health Ethics Committee (#1137) and reciprocal ethical approval from the University of Western Australia, and conducted in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council's National Statement for Ethical Conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research (National Health and Medical Research Council et al., 2023). Fully informed written consent was obtained from all study participants. Participants were provided with an information statement and consent form and given the opportunity to ask questions about the research before providing written consent. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the research at any point without negative consequence and were given an assurance of confidentiality in all publicly available information and peer-reviewed publications. The study honours the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to have control over their cultural intellectual property, communities, resources and Country in the creation, collection, access, analysis, interpretation, management, dissemination and reuse of data (Maiam Nayri Wingara Indigenous Data Sovereignty Collective, 2018).

Findings

In Western Australia (WA), the primary source of information about kin, family, community and cultural connections available to non-Indigenous foster carers about the Aboriginal children in their care is through information provided by the WA Department of Child Protection in the form of cultural plans (WA Government, 2023). We explore how NGO workers and carers are provided with leadership, guidance and direction from the WA Government with regard to cultural planning for Aboriginal children in OOHC.

We present our research findings in relation to government: 1) leadership and guidance, 2) efficiency and responsiveness, and 3) accountability. We categorize the source of the information from three sets of perspectives: agency focus group participants, individual interviews with agency workers, and interviews with non-Indigenous foster carers looking after Aboriginal children in OOHC. These data are presented as collective views, and are deidentified both for participants and for the agencies.

1) Leadership and Guidance

Providing leadership and guidance requires governments to facilitate processes with the OOHC sector to develop cultural plans that contain accurate, detailed and meaningful information about children and their families. We explored the provision of these cultural plans. In many cases there was no cultural plan available, or no knowledge of whether or not there was a plan:

> *We ask them for a cultural plan for a child and they often go oh, we don't have one.* (Agency worker, Interview 22)

> *I don't think we had a cultural care plan for any of them. We didn't have a cultural support plan from the Department for [two] Aboriginal boys. And then we had siblings … none of them had cultural plans.* (Carer, Interview 11)
>
> *Maybe we do [have a cultural plan] and I'm not aware of it. We just raise [Name]. We just ask to be left alone to raise her … we just get on with what we're doing usually. I'm quite happy with the way it is.* (Carer, Interview 14)

The lack of cultural plans meant that agency staff and foster carers did not have up-to-date or accurate information that they needed to ensure the connection of children to their kin and family members:

> *I feel like I'm working with half the information about a child.* (Participant, Focus Group 4)
>
> *… we don't know that information either … not enough information for us to be able to go with this couple or any couple for that matter.* (Participant, Focus Group 2)
>
> *There wasn't a lot to it [cultural plan]. It was pretty bare. So there was not a lot of family history or anything like that, about Country …* (Carer, Interview 16)
>
> *… we often don't have the information we need to know where to go, who is the best placed person for this young person … and getting that information from the Department sometimes is difficult.* (Participant, Focus Group 4)
>
> *… they [cultural plans] don't come with anything that I can use that says to them, this is who you are, and this is where you're from. I don't know any of those things …* (Carer, Interview 5)
>
> *The cultural plans that are done by the districts … some of them are really good, some of them are really not so great, and some of them will go for years and years and years and not be updated at all.* (Agency worker, Interview 7)

Leadership and guidance require government actors to facilitate processes that allow OOHC agency staff and carers to access cultural information and be steered and directed by governments to ensure that the children they are responsible for are connected to culture. Participants described their experiences of seeking information and cultural plans from government actors, often using a narrative of hard labour:

> *I think that's one of the chores of my role, is to continuously nudge caseworkers, 'Hey, the care plan's out of date.'* (Agency worker, Interview 10)
>
> *We're chasing cultural plans. We don't know anything about families.* (Participant, Focus Group 1)
>
> *Like I'm still chasing them, they've nearly been with us for a year, and we shouldn't have to keep chase, chase.* (Participant, Focus Group 3)
>
> *DCP have to follow through, don't they, and do some family mapping … none of them do … I've been asking and asking.* (Carer, Interview 18)

> *We pushed at the last care plan meeting, which was last week which no one from the Department showed up to.* (Carer, Interview 17)
>
> *One child; I've tried and tried and tried multiple people, different places … very basic stuff, and we don't even have that.* (Participant, Focus Group 1)
>
> *I think we went through five caseworkers. You didn't know who you were talking to. We only dealt with them when they said they were coming around. I carried on, I just did my own thing and tell them afterwards.* (Carer, Interview 11)

Aboriginal practice leads (APLs) are employed by government, part of their role being to provide relevant information for the development of cultural plans. Participants described high staff turnover and insufficient staff:

> *Well yeah, yeah. A new APL every couple of weeks that, you know.* (Participant, Focus Group 3)
>
> *The bugbear for me is you've got one or two APLs in the Department for each district, two maximum but usually one, over 450/500 kids … decision making, endorsing decisions and overseeing cultural plans. (*Agency worker, Interview 19)
>
> *The APL never has a name. They continue referring to 'we liaised with the APL'. That seems to be like a throwaway line … they don't value it.* (Carer, Interview 9)

2) Efficiency and Responsiveness

Effective leadership and guidance require government actors to facilitate processes that are efficient and responsive to NGOs' needs for providing quality services to children. Participants described not being responded to:

> *I think the hard thing for that is they're the holder of the knowledge and so we kind of wait on them to develop cultural plans or give us the background.* (Participant, Focus Group 2)
>
> *We asked for family as well, extended family … but they just don't reply. We just get no response.* (Carer, Interview 17)
>
> *They didn't seem to have anything their [cultural plan] and it's oh, I'll get back but never get back to you. When you ask for it, there's still crickets coming back.* (Carer, Interview 9)

They described inefficiency:

> *They [department] said in the last care plan meeting that they were looking at an aunty [to care for child]. They've been looking into her for two years.* (Carer, Interview 7)
>
> *I've got three kids who have been waiting for at least four years for some form of genogram … the one that they sent to me was a scribble.* (Participant, Focus Group 2)
>
> *We've had a case now for three years. We still cannot get the name of all the siblings.* (Participant, Focus Group 1)

The purpose of outsourcing is to embrace flexibility and use the knowledge and connections NGOs have of the community members they serve. Participants did not feel like they were trusted:

> *It's about trust, yeah. People don't trust those pieces of paper that are provided. It [cultural planning] just feels very disjointed that it's an us and them feeling instead of us being together and respecting each other and being part of a team and trust. We trust people to look after the children. They [carers] do all of the things they need to do and yet, they still don't have trust to make a very simple decision. It seems ridiculous …* (Participant, Focus Group 1)

3) Accountability

Ultimately, participants described poor leadership by government actors and a failure to facilitate processes to provide OOHC agency staff with cultural plans that provided accountability to children in care:

> *He [child] has got absolutely nothing. He needs somebody, you know, like an aunty or something that he can be with. I don't know what. I don't know anything about it. We don't know anything really; we haven't got the information …*(Carer, Interview 3)

> *Some of it [cultural planning] feels quite tokenistic and, and you know, that's just like ticking boxes. It's not genuine. When you read these cultural plans and there's nothing to them. And it's just like, we're not actually getting the information, that history, that identity is it's lost, and their kids don't have it and yeah.* (Participant, Focus Group 2)

> *The cultural plans, they're very tick and flick. They're not reviewed. They're not updated enough. They're vague. I've got some kids that have never had cultural connection. They're not good documents.* (Agency worker, Interview 21).

> *Who do we go to when we want to challenge a decision that's made because we don't feel it's culturally appropriate or safe. We don't have anyone with capacity to go and advocate on behalf of the child and us. It's a piece of paper. I get, a cultural plan on a piece of paper. But it's very, very sporadic and that's not enough.* (Carer, Interview 5)

In the absence of cultural plans, carers explored ways to keep children in their care connected to culture and activity:

> *… we kind of filled in [cultural plan] out ourselves … we've cobbled it together.* (Carer, Interview 1)

> *There's never been a Cultural Plan. We would get books and stuff from the library which in hindsight wasn't necessarily a good thing because obviously different mobs, their language is different, their beliefs are different.* (Carer, Interview 12)

> *We've had nothing [from the department] … everything we've done ourselves. So, we just look for things in the community that we can do.* (Carer, Interview 17)

A lack of leadership and guidance from government left carers apathetic:

> *They [Department] like to talk the talk and say all the right things, but when it comes down to the nitty gritty, they do nothing … it's very long, drawn out. It's enough to put people to say I can't be bothered.* (Carer, Interview 11)

Agency workers want cultural planning to be a meaningful exercise, consistent with their mission to support the well-being and connections of Aboriginal children. Agency staff want to do better, but the way cultural planning and information sharing was practised by government took them away from their organizational mission:

> *And not seeing Mum and Dad. What else can we do to link them into the positive aspects of their community because there's so much richness that they're being denied because we don't know who to link them with. And part of that is that we only get very limited information about the family. Very limited information about the family.* (Participant, Focus Group 4)
>
> *So, at the moment, in terms of procedures and things, the cultural plans are Departmental cultural plans. However, we can't just rely on one document from the Department. Because we don't necessarily always have those documents and sometimes, we have them and they're not too detailed. For me, then the question is where do we get that information … we can't go directly to the families.* (Agency worker, Interview 19)

Agency workers described the ways in which the responsibilities that are handed down to them transform the cultural planning from something meaningful into something bureaucratic. They are wanting to tailor their services specific to their client's needs, but are prevented from doing so because the information that they need is not being made available to them:

> *So, it feels like it's a tick box job … it's just a tokenistic piece of paper. It doesn't mean anything without the context of going back a little bit and putting your heart into it really and what that means for this child growing up.* (Participant, Focus Group 1)
>
> *One of mine [child in care] at the moment, he came to us when he was five months old. It's prime time to be introducing heaps of things and sometimes we're like how? What do we do? Where do we go? When you do eventually get a cultural plan … it's just a bit of paper that ticks the box, which is really disappointing.* (Agency worker, Interview 14)

In some cases, agency workers felt they needed to take on the responsibility for cultural planning and provided examples of circumstances that, ultimately, circumvent the principle of outsourcing:

> *I also have been stopped, you cannot take this child to see their mother or their father or nana without the department's say so. And I have a good relationship with all of them. And that barrier is then put in place. I'm not allowed to do it, and these children could have a very natural relationship with their family if they allowed, they trust me enough to care for them.* (Participant, Focus Group 1)
>
> *Some [cultural plans] can be just the bare bones. Some are a little bit more detailed … it should be a non-negotiable when they come over here from the Department. I think if a Cultural Plan*

> *comes over to us and it's not complete, we need to do something. We can't just say, 'oh it's the Department's role'.* (Agency worker, Interview 24)

The purpose of cultural plans is that they are put into practice. Participants provided evidence that this was not happening, and as a result, the cultural connection for children was lost:

> *There certainly weren't any efforts made to keep a connection going. I am so disappointed that these connections for these children weren't established and maintained.* (Agency worker, Interview 3)
>
> *… the Department did zero work with the mother. They did zero work on cultural planning. They did zero work to support the kids. And then, the carer said, because they were quite complex … I can't do it anymore because I'm not meeting their needs.* (Agency worker, Interview 2)
>
> *A lot of mine don't have contact with their families at the moment, which is quite sad. One of mine doesn't have a cultural plan and he's been in care for a while. He's 14 … he doesn't have one, no matter how many times we ask for it.* (Agency worker, Interview 14)
>
> *A couple of us have had kids that have been in care since they were 9 months old, and nobodies contact family. Ever.* (Participant, Focus Group 3)

This led one participant to suggest:

> *I think we're going to 'go guerilla'. We just figured let's pick some kids and carers where we think it's really needed and then just do the work and say to the Department this is what we've done.* (Participant, Focus Group 2)

Discussion

Participants in this study consistently spoke negatively of cultural planning. Despite the requirement to provide meaningful and detailed cultural plans, participants consistently recounted that they had little to no cultural information about the children in their care. As a result, children had little to no connection with kin, family, culture and Country. The findings suggest that there has been an erosion of government accountability, fragmented service delivery, and few mechanisms to support partnerships (Milward & Provan, 2000). Overall, this clearly indicated that governments have difficulties in attempting to steer services and lead and guide the cultural planning and connection of children. Prior to outsourcing OOHC services, knowledge and skills for cultural planning did not exist in government services due to the predominant ideas of assimilation and eradicating culture through the forced removal of children (Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, 1997). Small numbers of APLs who 'never have a name' suggest that there have not been any concerted efforts to implement and support an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce within child protection services (Davis, 2019; White & Gooda, 2017). The findings also indicate that governments have failed to provide leadership, particularly in terms of the funding and facilitation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in the development of cultural plans and ensuring they are updated and accurate across a child’s time in OOHC.

The quality of cultural plans heavily depends on the knowledge and competency of workers to engage in processes of meaningful family finding and ascertaining knowledge of children’s ancestry and traditional country. For cultural plans to be effective, early and ongoing engagement with the families and communities of origin is required (Newton et al., 2024). Yet, the findings show that current practices to effectively engage families and extended families are inconsistent or culturally naïve, to the detriment of the child and the stability and continuity of their relationships and connections. Moreover, there was a lack of clarity about whose responsibility it was to connect children. Government persistence in maintaining control over information about families and cultural planning has led to significant omissions and vulnerabilities across the NGOs and this reflects a major failure of government to show leadership and governance in the provision of cultural plans despite its obligations for adhering to the ATSCIPP (Liddle et al., 2022; SNAICC, 2017), or to pay attention to the continuing calls from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members and representative organizations for child protection reform and engagement with the community (Davis, 2019; Hamilton et al., 2022; Hamilton et al., 2025; Jones et al., 2025; McGlade, 2019; SNAICC, 2022; White & Gooda, 2017). To the frustration of participants, cultural plans often did not exist. When they did, they contained inconsistent or incorrect information, or scant meaningful information about children and their families. In some cases, this resulted in carers who could not ‘be bothered’ or who were ‘happy with the way it is’ or who did ‘their own thing’. In other circumstances descriptions by participants suggested that they worked hard to try to obtain the information they needed, to no avail.

Participants described having to ‘chase, chase’, and spend time ‘asking and asking’. They often had to try multiple times and involve multiple government actors. This is reflective of poor mechanisms for collecting and sharing information, and inefficient processes, despite this being a key benefit espoused in the NPM agenda for outsourcing services (O’Flynn & Wanna, 2008). In addition, trust-based partnerships are critical to successful collaboration (Crosby et al., 2017; Hwang et al., 2022; Martins et al., 2017; Van Gestel & Grotenbreg, 2021) and in this research, NGO actors did not feel trusted to connect with families or to have the information needed, resulting in little to no collaboration between government actors and NGOs.

All of the NGOs in this study provide statements on their websites that describe their mission and vision, including recognition that their staff live in the communities where they work, providing a depth of understanding and knowledge about their clients; acting with cultural sensitivity and respect; fairness and equity; responsivity and flexibility; and working in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in ways that foster hope and aspirations and assist toward Elder and community self-determination (Key Assets Australia, n.d., McKillop Family Services, n.d., Life Without Barriers, n.d.). Agency workers wanted cultural planning to be a meaningful exercise, consistent with their mission to support the well-being and connections of Aboriginal children. Both workers and carers wanted to do better for Aboriginal children in their care; however, these aspirations were compromised by a lack of government leadership, and it was evident that agency workers experienced a shift in their mission (Jonker

& Meehan, 2008; O'Flynn & Wanna, 2008; Shergold, 2009). Operating responsively and with flexibility were identified as the reasons for outsourcing these services in the first place (Fredericksen & London, 2000; O'Flynn & Wanna, 2008). Yet the findings from this study suggest that operating responsibly or flexibly was made difficult by 'tick box' and 'tokenistic' cultural plans, lack of information available about children's culture and families, lack of respectful communication, and insufficient access to Aboriginal professionals within the government child protection service. For agency workers to act in a way that is consistent with their mission, they are required to either adopt bureaucratic processes or find workarounds such as 'carrying on and doing their own thing' (Alter, 2014; Huuskonen & Vakkari, 2013; Koopman & Hoffman, 2003), or resorting to subversive practices like 'going guerilla'. Workarounds are common in many areas of practice and yet reflect a problem with processes and procedures at an organizational level. While workarounds are likely inevitable in this context, for workers to be able to perform their roles, they predictably result in diminished responsibility and accountability for fulfilling the cultural needs of children and families. This can also mean that the implications of using workarounds are not grasped in relation to broader systems of work. There is potential for wrong connections to be made, putting both children and workers at risk. Moreover, there is potential for important connections and relationships to be overlooked.

Conclusion

To ensure that cultural plans contain correct, comprehensive and meaningful information about children and their families and support children's connections with culture, kin and community, there is an urgent need to create Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-led forums for collecting cultural information about children and their families and informing the culturally secure care of children while they are living away from their kin, Country and community in non-Indigenous foster care arrangements. Cultural planning is the linchpin in supporting cultural connectedness for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who are at distinct risk of disconnection from kin, culture and Country, and associated long-term harms. Forums that support relationships and partnerships between government and NGOs offer significant opportunities for sharing knowledge and information and initiating change, and the findings from this research suggest that there is a need to outsource both the care and the cultural planning of children to NGOs, who are best placed to know and serve their communities.

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Author Contributions

The authors contributed in the following ways: Conceptualization SH, LJ, MP, CP, SM CM, RM, MOD, CS, BF; Methodology, LJ, MP, CP, CM, RM, MOD, CS, BF; Original and Final Draft, SH; Writing, Reviewing and Editing SH, LJ, MP, CP, SM, CM, RM, MOD, CS, BF, project administration SH, LJ, CM, BF; Funding Acquisition SH, CM, RM, MOD, CS, BF.

Ethics statement

This research has ethical approval from the Western Australian Aboriginal Health Ethics Committee (#1137) and reciprocal ethical approval from the University of Western Australia, and conducted in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council's National Statement for Ethical Conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2023). Fully informed written consent was obtained from all study participants. Participants were provided with an information statement and consent form and given the opportunity to ask questions about the research before providing written consent. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the research at any point without negative consequence and were given an assurance of confidentiality in all publicly available information and peer-reviewed publications. The study honours the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to have control over their cultural intellectual property, communities, resources and Country in the creation, collection, access, analysis, interpretation, management, dissemination and reuse of data (Maiam Nayri Wingara Indigenous Data Sovereignty, 2018).

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ORCID iD

Sharynne Hamilton https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3057-8992

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Author biographies

Sharynne Hamilton is an Adjunct Professor, University of Canberra, and Senior Research Fellow, The Kids Research Institute Australia. Her research area is child protection and justice, focusing on positive health and wellbeing for Aboriginal children.

Larissa Jones is an Aboriginal Researcher. Her research area is child protection and strength-based approaches for Aboriginal child health and wellbeing.

Millie Penny is an Elder Co-researcher, providing cultural governance and leadership for research with Aboriginal children and families.

Charmaine Pell is an Elder Coresearcher, providing cultural governance and leadership for research with Aboriginal children and families.

Sarah Maslen is Professor of Sociology at the University of Canberra. Her research examines knowing, the senses, and the relationality of the human and non-human in various fields of activity.

Carol Michie is the Co-Head, Aboriginal Health and Wellbeing, The Kids Research Institute Australia. Carol co-ordinates Aboriginal Elder and community engagement.

Raewyn Mutch is a Clinical Associate Professor and a Paediatrician. Her research spans general medicine, refugee, neurodevelopmental medicine, FASD, OOHC and Justice.

Melissa O'Donnell is a professor in child protection at the University of South Australia. Her research focuses on child maltreatment and children and families facing adversity.

Carrington Shepherd is a research professor in the Indigenous Health Research at Curtin Medical School. His research focuses on critical health issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Brad Farrant is an Associate Professor whose research focuses on Elder- and community-led participatory action research for Aboriginal child health and wellbeing.