



Evaluation of the Homelessness Industry and Workforce Development Strategy

Final Report

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For Homelessness NSW

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Acronyms and abbreviations used in this report

ACCO	Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation
ACCORD	Redressing Aboriginal Homelessness Accord
AHURI	Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute
ASES	Australian Service Excellence Standards
CALD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CIMS	Client Information Management System
CoP	Community of Practice
DCJ	NSW Department of Communities and Justice
DFV	Domestic and Family Violence
Future Strategy 2020-2024	Homelessness Industry and Workforce Development Strategy 2020-2024
IP	Industry Partnership
JWA	Joint Working Agreement
L&D Framework	Learning and Development Framework
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and other sexuality, sex and gender diverse
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
MTS	Managed Training Services
RAP	Reconciliation Action Plan
SHS	Specialist Homelessness Services
Strategy 2017-2020	Homelessness Industry and Workforce Development Strategy 2017-2020

Executive summary

The Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) has been contracted by Homelessness NSW to evaluate the Homelessness Industry and Workforce Development Strategy 2017-2020 (Strategy 2017-2020). The evaluation had five key components:

1. Impact and process evaluation of the Strategy 2017-2020 (Did the Strategy achieve its goals?)
2. Formative evaluation and training needs assessment of the NSW homelessness services workforce (Did training and workforce development meet sector needs?)
3. Assessment of the organisational sustainability across the NSW Homelessness Industry (Are organisations sustainable?)
4. Input to formation of the future NSW Homelessness Industry and Workforce Development Strategy 2020-2024 (Future Strategy 2020-2024) (What needs to happen in the next strategy?).

A further goal relating to the competence of the sector in providing culturally appropriate and safe services to Aboriginal clients was added in response to initial consultation findings.

5. Assessment of the competence of the sector in providing culturally safe and competent services for Aboriginal clients and communities (How competent are services in serving Aboriginal clients and communities?)

The evaluation used a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods. It conducted a survey of both managers and practitioners in the NSW specialist homelessness services (SHS) workforce, examined administrative and secondary data relating to homelessness programs, consulted with key representatives of Aboriginal homelessness service providers, and conducted focus groups of managers to discuss the needs for a future strategy.

Findings for goals 1-3 and goal 5 were published in separate reports. This final report summarises the results of the evaluation across all activities and adds findings that relate to goal 4. The final report should be read in conjunction with the previous evaluation reports.¹

How well was the strategy delivered and communicated to the sector?

Overall, the evaluation found that the Strategy 2017-2020 was implemented and delivered well, with most managers (85%) thinking it was effective or very effective in responding to sector needs. The impact of COVID-19 on the sector was widely acknowledged.

Overall, IP initiatives and messages were well communicated to the sector. However, not all messages from the IP reached all parts of the sector workforce equally. As a result, not all sections of the workforce are aware of all IP initiatives and opportunities that were relevant to them.

¹ Brackertz, N (2021) *Evaluation of the Homelessness Industry and Workforce Development Strategy Findings of the NSW Homelessness Sector Workforce Survey 2021*, AHURI Professional Services for Homelessness NSW, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne; Brackertz, N., Alves, T., Coghill, P (2022) *Evaluation of the Homelessness Industry and Workforce Development Strategy Aboriginal Consultation Report*, AHURI Professional Services for Homelessness NSW, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne.

Did the Strategy 2017-2020 achieve its intended goals and what are future priorities?

Below are key findings in relation to each of the Strategy 2017-2020 goals and resulting key priorities for the Future Strategy 2017-2024.

Goal 1 – Service quality, sustainability, and good practice

The IP provides supports that aim to improve service quality, sustainability, and good practice.

Maintain a focus on ASES and provide more support to smaller organisations

ASES and ASES supports are a key tool to help organisations continuously improve their services and achieve service standards. The evaluation found that these were well utilised and received by the sector. However, some smaller organisations were challenged by the resource commitment required to achieve ASES accreditation.

Recommendation 1: Maintain a focus on enabling SHS organisations to deliver quality supports and services by becoming ASES accredited and provide continued support for smaller organisations to achieve this accreditation to ensure they do not get left behind.

Review and reinvigorate communities of practice

Communities of Practice (CoPs) are an important mechanism for collaboration, learning and sharing of good practice. The evaluation found that while CoPs generally met sector needs, about 1 in 5 workers do not have access to a CoP and around a third found that CoPs did not meet their needs.

Recommendation 2: Continue to support existing CoPs but review all existing CoPs with a view to improve relevance to regional and remote areas and strengthening facilitation of the groups.

Sustainability coaching

Sustainability initiatives met the needs of most (73%) of practitioners but only 29 per cent of managers.

Recommendation 3: Review sustainability initiatives to ensure they meet the needs of both, managers and practitioners.

Goal 2: Service integration, networking and collaboration

Continue and strengthen support for collaboration between agencies, programs, and practitioners

Effective collaboration is key to the sustainability of the sector as it enables pooling of resources, facilitates better services and better client outcomes and allows services to support each other. The evaluation found that all programs collaborate with other organisations in formal and informal ways. The IP already provides a range of initiatives to facilitate and support collaboration (e.g., CoPs, Network Meetings).

Recommendation 4: Improve and continue support for collaboration via CoPs and Network Meetings and address ways to increase awareness of the latter and address barriers to attendance.

Goal 3: Outcomes indicators and measurement tools

Review or supplement client satisfaction survey questions

The annual client satisfaction survey is a key mechanism to measure the outcomes and impact of SHS. Most of managers (61%) and practitioners (92%) thought the client satisfaction survey provided them with information that met or partially met their needs, but the IP should review the survey to ensure its ongoing currency and relevance, especially to managers.

Recommendation 5: Consult with the sector to review and revise the client satisfaction survey to identify areas for improvement and ensure its ongoing currency and relevance.

Goal 4: Workforce development

The IP provides a range of activities that support workforce development, including the Learning and Development Framework (L&D Framework), the Managed Training Services (MTS) Training Calendar and the Workforce Capability Framework (Capability Framework), which are cornerstones of the IP and remain relevant to the ongoing strategy.

The evaluation found a high awareness of and satisfaction with these initiatives across the sector, but several areas are identified for strengthening and improvement and are outlined below.

Develop and implement a formal mechanism to review the L&D framework

The IP currently has no formal mechanism in place to review the L&D framework. This is a gap which constrains the IP's ability to keep the current and refresh the framework as needed.

Recommendation 6: The IP should develop and implement a formal mechanism to review the L&D framework.

More relevant induction training

Induction training is frequently accessed by new staff and is generally well received, but more than a quarter of managers thought it does not meet their program's needs.

Recommendation 7: Review the induction training component of the L&D Framework and MTS training for currency and relevance.

Virtual and face-to-face training offerings

Online delivery of training in response to the COVID-19 pandemic broadened access for those in rural and regional areas. Yet, face to face training continues to be important as it facilitates networking and collaboration, and people have different learning styles.

Recommendation 8: Review the L&D Framework and MTS training with a view to providing a mix of face-to-face and online delivery modalities to increase accessibility of MTS training.

Flexibility in times and frequency of training

Barriers to accessing MTS training include courses often being booked out, courses being not available when and where needed, and practitioners and managers lacking time to access training.

Recommendation 9: Increase the flexibility of how, how often and when MTS training courses are provided.

Diversified training for experienced practitioners

Many NSW SHS workers have been in the sector for a long time and have already completed most MTS training. There is an appetite for more diversified training, especially around advanced and specialist skills.

Recommendation 10: Increase access to advanced and specialist training, either through MTS or partnerships with other training organisations (e.g., professional associations, universities, TAFEs).

Consider ways to better utilise highly educated staff

The NSW SHS workforce is highly educated, yet many workers feel their skills are not being fully utilised, which impacts the wellbeing, capacity and utilisation of the workforce.

Recommendation 11: Address how existing workforce skills can be better used to create more effective and supportive work environments.

Improve cultural competence training and CALD specific training

The L&D Framework needs to remain current and relevant to the cultural competences required to provide support to those with CALD backgrounds.

Recommendation 12: Revise MTS training content and availability in relation to the skills required to deliver support for those with CALD backgrounds.

Culturally safe services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Issues around culturally safe and competent services emerged as a key theme in the evaluation.

Recommendation 13: Include the provision of culturally safe and appropriate services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as one of the goals of the Future Strategy 2020-2024.

Specific initiatives are detailed below.

Improve capacity to provide culturally appropriate services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

The NSW homelessness sector is nominally committed to providing culturally appropriate support to Aboriginal people. The evaluation identified that despite some exceptions, many programs and organisations could improve how they collaborate with Aboriginal communities and provide support.

Recommendation 14: The IP should provide leadership, education and training to assist NSW homelessness sector organisations to further develop and strengthen their capacity to provide culturally appropriate services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Providing culturally appropriate services

The evaluation found that many organisations and programs had a limited understanding of what culturally appropriate support looks like and there were few examples of genuine engagement with local Aboriginal communities.

Recommendation 15: Supporting and train leaders in NSW homelessness sector organisations to develop and strengthen their capacity for meaningful engagement with Aboriginal communities, and to strengthen the provision of culturally appropriate services for Aboriginal clients by building upon and extending models that already successfully do this within the NSW homelessness sector.

Localised cultural competence training

The evaluation found that MTS cultural competence training was widely accessed, but often did not fully meet organisations' needs, and two thirds of practitioners had accessed cultural competence training in other ways. Aboriginal consultations highlighted a need for locally specific and meaningful cultural competence training, and greater involvement with local culture and communities.

Recommendation 16: Review the content and mode of delivery of cultural competence training, including relevance of content and delivery partners.

Refresh, promote and operationalise ACCORD

The ACCORD is an important document and set of guiding principles intended to close the gap in Aboriginal homelessness. The evaluation found that, awareness of the ACCORD was uneven across the sector and that it has not always been implemented in meaningful ways, which has limited the impact of the ACCORD.

Recommendation 17: The IP should refresh the current ACCORD to ensure ongoing currency.

Recommendation 18: Promote and provide education and training about the ACCORD to increase knowledge across all levels of the sector, and especially among practitioners, and to assist organisations to implement the ACCORD in meaningful ways.

Recommendation 19: Link the ACCORD to practical strategies that will enable organisations to implement and embed the ACCORD in ways that impact organisational ways of doing things.

Supporting Aboriginal workers

The evaluation found that Aboriginal workers face unique challenges. A low proportion of Aboriginal workers within the sector, a large number of Aboriginal clients, and strong community ties and cultural obligations mean that Aboriginal workers carry a disproportionate load.

Recommendation 20: Develop advocacy, education and training material for the sector to enable Aboriginal workers to be better supported. This could include, but is not limited to, cultural support and supervision, culturally specific employee assistance programs, and keeping staff safe from expectations to be too personally involved.

Attracting and retaining Aboriginal staff

The evaluation found that most NSW homelessness sector organisations have a very low proportion of Aboriginal staff. Recruitment of Aboriginal staff occurs mainly for entry level roles, and more Aboriginal people are needed in senior and executive roles and on boards.

Recommendation 21: Consult with organisations that are leaders in Aboriginal employment to develop and support approaches to increase the proportion of Aboriginal workers in the NSW homelessness sector.

Growing the capacity of Aboriginal organisations

The evaluation found that Aboriginal organisations are not well integrated into the NSW homelessness sector. While Aboriginal organisations are viewed as an important resource to the sector, they are not part of the sector and don't play lead roles. Most do not receive direct funding from DCJ to provide homelessness services. This creates equity issues and constrains organisations' capacity to deliver the needed quantum and intensity of services required by Aboriginal clients, most of whom experience complex issues. It is important to ensure that subcontracting and collaborative arrangements do not lead to adverse outcomes for Aboriginal organisations.

Recommendation 22: The Future Strategy 2020-2024 should have a view as to how contracts and funding can effectively build capacity in Aboriginal organisations so they might aspire to take on greater responsibilities around service provision in future.

Some Aboriginal organisations, especially smaller ones, struggle to achieve ASES accreditation, which constrains their ability to bid for funding contracts, build capability and remain sustainable.

Recommendation 23: The Future Strategy 2020-2024 should commit to providing additional support to Aboriginal organisations to achieve ASES accreditation.

At the time of writing, subcontracting JWAs were a key mechanism by which to integrate Aboriginal organisations into the NSW homelessness sector. This evaluation found that while JWAs worked well for some organisations at the operational level, in many instances JWAs did not benefit Aboriginal organisations. Limited resourcing for capacity building and training contributes to the failure of JWAs to provide a mechanism by which to grow the capacity of Aboriginal organisations.

Recommendation 24: Undertake a systematic review of subcontracting arrangements (especially JWAs) to assess whether their continued use benefits Aboriginal organisations and what alternatives are available. This could form part of the impending review by DCJ of the NSW Homelessness Strategy and/or Evaluation of the SHS program.

Ensure SHS across NSW are sustainable

The draft Future Strategy 2020-2024 includes a goal to ensure SHS across NSW are sustainable. This goal is supported by evaluation findings, which identify several issues that should be a priority for the sustainability of the NSW homelessness sector.

Defining sustainability

The evaluation finds that the IP at present has no clear definition of what sustainability means (e.g., financial, workforce, cultural, organisational). This constrains the IP's ability to target and develop initiatives to assess and strengthen sustainability of the sector.

Recommendation 25: Clearly define what sustainability means, how it can be measured and what activities will support increasing sustainability of the sector for both, large scale and smaller organisations.

Assess financial sustainability of the sector and diversify income base

The evaluation finds that the NSW SHS sector is heavily reliant on government funding, with 90 per cent of organisations citing government income as their primary funding source. Risks arise where organisations or programs cease to receive government funding, which can imperil their ability to continue to deliver services and remain sustainable. The heavy reliance on government funding has implications for the way in which services are delivered and outcomes accounted for, as service models tend to be prescribed by funding contracts.

Recommendation 26: Develop a clear understanding of the sustainability of the NSW homelessness sector's funding base and investigate avenues to diversify revenue income sources, especially for smaller organisations.

Consider an enhanced role for Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations within the sector

Despite the high proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients, few Aboriginal controlled organisations receive funding direct from the NSW Government to provide homelessness services. The evaluation questions whether an SHS sector, which relies heavily on Aboriginal organisations to provide culturally specific support yet places Aboriginal organisations at the periphery of the sector in terms of funding and support given to them to operate and grow their capacity, is sustainable.

Recommendation 27: The IP should advocate to DCJ to develop new ways of contracting Aboriginal organisations in the provision of SHS services with a view to enabling greater access to direct and adequate funding for these organisations and ensuring recognition, sustainability and safety for Aboriginal staff.

Increase Aboriginal staff including in leadership

The evaluation finds that there is a need to increase the numbers of Aboriginal staff, especially in leadership positions and on boards.

Recommendation 28: Develop the capacity NSW SHS organisations to recruit and retain Aboriginal staff.

Promote entry of newer employees to replace those ageing out of sector

There are low numbers of new workers entering the NSW SHS workforce and some organisations are struggling to find qualified staff to fill positions. The sector has an ageing workforce and rejuvenating the workforce is important for sustainability.

Recommendation 29: Address workforce renewal, including strategies to improve the attractiveness of the sector for new and younger workers and to develop pathways for job progression.

1. Introduction

Homelessness NSW is contracted by the NSW Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) to deliver the Homelessness Industry and Workforce Development Strategy (Strategy), on the understanding that this is done under auspice, and in partnership with, Domestic Violence NSW and Yfoundations. In 2014, these three homelessness peaks entered into a Joint Working Agreement (JWA) to coordinate sector development and support to specialist homelessness service (SHS) providers delivering specialist, youth, and domestic and family violence services. This partnership is termed the Industry Partnership (IP). The peaks conducted their first Industry Partnership Sector Development Project in 2014-2017. This was then followed by the NSW Homelessness Industry and Workforce Development Strategy 2017-2020 (Strategy 2017-2020), and the NSW Homelessness Industry and Workforce Development Strategy 2020-2024 (Future Strategy 2020-2024). At the time of research and writing, the Future Strategy 2020-2024 had already been drafted, but had not been formally adopted or published due to delays caused by COVID-19. It is the intention that the findings from this evaluation will inform and refine the draft Future Strategy 2020-2024 before it is formally implemented.

The 2014-2017 Sector Development Project was evaluated by ARTD Consultants.² They found a high awareness of sector development activities among providers and high practitioner participation and satisfaction. The report identified that there was scope to improve sharing of specialist knowledge, networking and collaboration, building organisational capacity for learning, professionalisation and evidence building around workforce capability. The subsequent Strategy 2017-2020 reflected many of these ideas and had the following goals:

- **Goal 1 – Service quality, sustainability, and good practice:** To provide quality services to service users that are trauma informed, sustainable and demonstrate good practice
- **Goal 2 – Service integration:** To provide service users with integrated services coordinated at local, district and state levels, that are accessible from multiple points of entry (i.e., embodies a ‘no wrong door’ approach)
- **Goal 3 – Outcomes indicators and measurement tools:** To work towards standardised, measurable outcomes for service users to assess the effectiveness of the sector
- **Goal 4 – Workforce Development:** To ensure a highly skilled, motivated and stable homelessness workforce.

The goals proposed by the draft Future Strategy 2020-2024 are similar, though it introduces new areas of emphasis, including collaboration, networking and cultural safety/competence for Aboriginal Clients:

- NSW SHS are equipped to deliver quality supports and services, within a trauma informed framework
- NSW SHS are equipped to measure and demonstrate the outcomes and impact of their service
- NSW SHS workforce is skilled and capable at all levels, including leadership
- SHS within NSW are supported to network and collaborate
- SHS across NSW are sustainable
- across NSW, SHS provide culturally safe and competent services for Aboriginal clients and communities.

² ARTD Consultants (2017) *Evaluation of the NSW Homelessness Industry and Workforce Development Strategy, Final Report*, report prepared by ARTD Consultants for the NSW Homelessness Industry Partnership, Sydney.

Although the goals have been reworded, operationally the Strategy is being delivered as a continuation of projects under the previous strategy, with space to introduce new projects in later years. Since 2016, several initiatives have been introduced under the NSW Homelessness Industry and Workforce Development Strategy:

- support for service providers to achieve requirements of the Australian Service Excellence Standards (ASES)
- SHS Learning and Development Framework (L&D Framework).

Homelessness NSW contracted the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) to evaluate the Strategy 2017–20 and provide research to support the development of the Future Strategy 2020–24.

This is the final report of the Evaluation. The report brings together the findings from all five evaluation activities relating to:

1. Impact and process evaluation of the Strategy 2017-2020 (Did the Strategy achieve its goals?)
2. Formative evaluation and training needs assessment of the NSW homelessness services workforce (Did training and workforce development meet sector needs?)
3. Assessment of the organisational sustainability across the NSW Homelessness Industry (Are organisations sustainable?)
4. Input to formation of the future NSW Homelessness Industry and Workforce Development Strategy 2020-2024 (Future Strategy 2020-2024) (What needs to happen in the next strategy?).

A further goal relating to the competence of the sector in providing culturally appropriate and safe services to Aboriginal clients was added in response to initial consultation findings.

1. Assessment of the competence of the sector in providing culturally safe and competent services for Aboriginal clients and communities (How competent are services in serving Aboriginal clients and communities?)

Items 1 to 3 and 5 were already addressed in the Findings of the NSW Homelessness Sector Workforce Survey 2021 report and in the Aboriginal Consultation report,³ the findings of which are summarised here. The original contribution this report makes to the evaluation is in relation to Item 5, by synthesising and interpreting the findings to identify issues and priorities for the future NSW Homelessness Industry and Workforce Development Strategy 2020-2024.

³ Brackertz, N (2021) *Evaluation of the Homelessness Industry and Workforce Development Strategy Findings of the NSW Homelessness Sector Workforce Survey 2021*, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, Melbourne; Brackertz, N., Alves, T., Coghill, P (2022) *Evaluation of the Homelessness Industry and Workforce Development Strategy Aboriginal Consultation Report*, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, Melbourne.

2. Methodology

Table 1 lists the research questions for each of the five evaluation activities, and the main data sources used to address those questions.

Table 1: Research Questions and methods used by evaluation domain

Evaluation activity	Research Question	Data sources
Impact and process evaluation	What impact did the Strategy 2017-2020 have on the NSW Homelessness Service Sector?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Workforce Survey
	How well were the Strategy 2017-2020 and its projects implemented and delivered?	
	How effective were communications?	
Formative evaluation and training needs assessment	What are the characteristics of workers in NSW homelessness services (gender, age group, indigenous status, cultural and linguistic diversity, roles, type of service work, size of service work, client work, level of experience, qualification)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Workforce Survey AIHW data
	How well do the existing L&D Framework and Capability Framework meet the needs of different segments of the NSW homelessness sector (uptake, appropriateness, comprehensiveness of courses offered, facilitators and barriers to participation, improving staff competency, staff wellbeing practices, leadership)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Workforce Survey
	What are the priority training areas across the NSW homelessness service workforce for the Future Strategy 2020-2024?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Workforce Survey
	How can the SHS L&D Framework and Capability Framework be strengthened?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Workforce Survey Aboriginal Consultations
Assessment of organisational sustainability across the NSW homelessness industry	What are the characteristics of the NSW homelessness services (structure, size of organisation, location, function/type, client groups, Aboriginal led)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> NSW DCJ data AIHW data
	How sustainable are NSW homelessness service providers strategically, financially and organisationally?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Workforce Survey
	What are the main risk factors to sustainability and what would help overcome these risks (especially Aboriginal led organisations and organisations sub-contracted to provide homelessness services)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Workforce Survey Aboriginal Consultations
Assessment of the competence of the sector in providing culturally safe and competent services for Aboriginal clients, communities and workers	How effective are the services in improving cultural competency?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Workforce Survey Aboriginal Consultations

Evaluation activity	Research Question	Data sources
Formation of the Future Strategy 2020-2024	How has the SHS Program and the environment in which it operates changed?	• Focus Groups
	What are the priority areas for development or improvement across the NSW Homelessness Industry? (Especially for implementing ASES standards and moving to outcomes measurement?)	
	What support does the SHS Program need to meet these priorities?	

The evaluation used a mixed method approach, drawing on both quantitative and qualitative methods. The project involved quantitative analysis of the following sources:

- an online survey of NSW SHS provider organisations and staff (Workforce Survey).
- secondary datasets (see below section 2.2).

In addition, qualitative analysis drew on three key sources:

- direct consultations with Aboriginal organisations and workers.
- focus groups with mainstream service providers, sector representatives and key stakeholders.
- one-on-one interviews with key informants where they were unable to participate in group consultation processes.

The following sections summarise the design and implementation of data collection and the analysis of data.

2.1 Workforce survey

The Workforce Survey aimed to gather information from a wide sample of NSW homelessness sector organisations and their workforces, using an online survey tool. The survey was developed and administered in collaboration with Homelessness NSW and was designed to be aligned with previous surveys and other data collection tools used by them. AHURI designed and executed the survey using Qualtrics software. Homelessness NSW distributed the survey to the NSW homelessness sector through its networks.

The survey had two components. One part collected data from Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) and senior managers (for example, the state manager, human resources manager, or finance manager) at the organisation level on a range of topics (e.g., funding, capacity, sustainability, workforce development needs). The second part collected data from practitioners (senior officers, lead practitioners, managers and frontline staff) about their individual experiences of working in the sector, including their skills, wellbeing, access to training and training needs. **For ease of reference, the term ‘manager’ is used throughout the report to refer to responses gathered from CEOs and senior managers; ‘practitioner’ is used to denote data gathered from practitioners, managers and frontline staff.** Survey questions for managers and practitioners were structured to allow for cross-comparisons.

Survey questions were based on those drafted by Homelessness NSW and were refined by AHURI in consultation with the IP through iterative processes and workshops. A final draft version of the survey was piloted with members of the project steering group, prior to minor changes being made before the survey was distributed to the sector by Homelessness NSW. Homelessness NSW maintains a contact list of NSW homelessness organisations, which formed the basis for distributing the survey electronically.

Overall, 43 different organisations provided responses. There were 236 respondents in total. This comprised 210 practitioners and 26 senior managers and executives. Data was analysed using Excel. This data set was used in relation to the first four evaluation domains, including to evaluate the impact and process of the Strategy 2017-2020, formative evaluation of training needs, sustainability of the Strategy 2017-2020 and assessing cultural competence. Detailed findings from the survey (including charts relating to each of the survey questions) were provided in the *Findings of the NSW Homelessness Sector Workforce Survey 2021*.

2.2 Other datasets

The evaluation drew from two other sources of data for quantitative analysis:

- AIHW data on clients of SHS in NSW (2020-2021).⁴ This data was useful in understanding trends in service usage in NSW and the distribution of demand across different locations and client groups.
- Administrative data from the DCJ on contracted providers in the homelessness services providers, including both lead providers and subcontracted providers. This data included information about size of provider, location, client specialities, ASES accreditation and Aboriginal led organisations.
- This information was used in contextualising the demands on organisations (e.g., as part of understanding the needs of the workforce for particular types of training) and as part of understanding the sustainability of organisations (e.g., in terms of size of organisation and capacity to sustain high quality workforce).

2.3 Aboriginal consultations

Findings from the Workforce Survey highlighted that cultural competence and the provision of culturally appropriate services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, and the role of Aboriginal organisations within and ancillary to the sector were areas of concern. As a result, this was added as a focus area for the evaluation. The research approach was revised to include a series of consultations with Aboriginal stakeholders.

The Aboriginal consultations consisted of 2 group interviews and 4 individual interviews with representatives from 8 Aboriginal organisations in NSW and representatives from the Aboriginal Community of Practice (CoP), which included workers in mainstream as well as Aboriginal organisations. Table 2 shows the organisations that were interviewed and the funding/partnering arrangements they use for service provision.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic AHURI researchers were unable to travel to NSW to undertake the consultations face-to-face. To facilitate this Homelessness NSW engaged Lanigiroba Consulting's Paula Coghill, who was well connected within the sector and who facilitated access to key stakeholders and organisations. AHURI Partnered with Paula, and together with the Senior Aboriginal Project Officer at Homelessness NSW AHURI developed a series of questions for the Aboriginal consultations. Paula led the engagement with Aboriginal organisations and Aboriginal workers in the NSW homelessness sector, provided guidance on issues of relevance and assisted with the analysis.

Conversations in the focus groups and individual interviews were organic and free-flowing, and the questioning guide provided in Appendix 1 was used primarily as a starting point for discussion. The reason discussions were loosely structured was to enable participants to freely share their experiences without being constrained by interviewers' preconceived ideas.

Interviews were done jointly between AHURI researchers and the Aboriginal consultant using video conferencing. Where this was not possible, the consultant conducted interviews face to face or over the phone.

The organisations included in the consultation differed in their size, scope and funding (Table 2). To preserve the anonymity and confidentiality of consultation participants, their names and positions are not identified in this report. Participants represent a range of different job roles, including CEOs, senior managers, and front-line workers.

⁴ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2021) *Specialist homelessness services annual report 2020-21*, AIHW, Australian Government, accessed 12 May 2022.

Table 2: Aboriginal consultation participants

Organisation name	Partnership / funding	Number of consultation participants
Casino-Boolangle LALC	JWA with Momentum Collective	2
Aboriginal Corporation for Homeless and Rehabilitation Community Services	Receives assisted support funding directly from DCJ	1
Women Up North	JWA with Momentum Collective	1
Gurehlgam Corporation	JWA with Momentum Collective	2
Bungree Aboriginal Corporation	Standalone agency that receives direct funding from DCJ	1
Platform Youth Services (Uniting) (mainstream organisation)	Receives direct funding from DCJ	1
Momentum Collective (mainstream organisation)	JWA with Casino-Boolangle LALC, Women Up North, Gurugram Corporation	1
Warlga Ngurra Women's and Children's Refuge	Standalone agency that receives direct funding from DCJ	1

The outcomes of these meetings were recorded, analysed and key findings were illustrated using quotations. A detailed account of the research approach and analysis of key findings is provided in the *Aboriginal Consultation* report.

2.4 Focus groups – SHS organisational leaders

In early November 2021, the AHURI led three focus groups with leaders in the NSW SHS sector (Table 3). The focus groups aimed to further triangulate findings from the survey and Aboriginal consultations and identify priorities for the Future Strategy 2020-2024. Focus groups were conducted via Zoom. Guiding questions for the focus groups are provided at Appendix 1.

Table 3: Focus groups with organisational leaders

Focus group	Number of participants	Represented organisations
8 November 2021	5	Anglicare, Wollongong Emergency Family Housing, Link Wentworth Housing, Neami National, YPSpace
9 November 2021	6	Samaritans Foundation, Newton Neighbourhood Centre, The Gender Centre, Housing Plus, Nova for Women and Children, The Burdekin Association
11 November 2021	8	South East Youth Accommodation Service, Domestic Violence NSW, Muslim Women Australia, Haymarket Foundation, YFoundation, Twenty 10, Domestic Violence NSW, Department of Communities and Justice

The focus groups were recorded, transcribed, analysed, and key findings are illustrated using quotations. Key findings from these focus groups were integrated into the final chapter of this report as part of articulating priorities for the Future Strategy 2020-2024.

3. Impact and process evaluation of the Strategy 2017-2020

This section addresses evaluation activity 1, which is the impact and process evaluation of the Strategy 2017-2020. It assesses the extent to which the IP delivered the activities it set out to do as part of the Strategy 2017-2020 and evaluates the on the industry and workforce. The guiding questions is: Did the Strategy achieve its goals?

3.1 IP Initiatives

To meet the goals of the Strategy 2017-2020, the IP delivered a range of initiatives including the following.

Redressing Aboriginal Homelessness Accord

The Redressing Aboriginal Homelessness Accord (ACCORD)⁵ was developed by the NSW SHS Aboriginal Reference Group in November 2017. It is intended to be an active guiding document to assist organisations to close the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. It does this by taking a holistic and human rights approach to redressing Aboriginal homelessness.

Australian Service Excellence Standards

The Australian Service Excellence Standards (ASES) is a step-by-step program designed to develop the capacity of community organisations to strive towards continuous improvement in quality service delivery. DCJ requires all NSW SHS to become accredited by 30 June 2024.

Homelessness NSW provides a range of resources to support SHS organisations to achieve ASES accreditation. This includes 'how to' guides, the ASES Help Centre, the BNG SPP Portal (an online tool that assists with self-assessment against ASES standards) and ASES support grants.

Learning and Development Framework and Managed Training Services Training Calendar

The Learning and Development Framework (L&D Framework) is part of the IP's Strategy 2017-20 and aims to support systemic improvements in industry and workforce capability. It supports Goal 4 of the Strategy, which is Workforce Development.

The framework provides:

- a staged approach that builds towards qualifications
- flexible and accessible programs
- masterclass webinars and recordings

⁵ Homelessness NSW (2017) *Redressing Aboriginal Homelessness Accord*, Sydney, Australia. <https://homelessnessnsw.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Redressing-Aboriginal-Homelessness-Accord.pdf>.

- just-in-time, online self-help tools
- access to other funding (such as Smart and Skilled) where possible
- training specific for meeting the needs of client groups at different levels, for example induction, intermediate and advanced.

Training is delivered through a combination of face-to-face training and online training. During the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the training was delivered online.

DCJ funded workers and managers can enrol in subsidised courses. The training is delivered through the Managed Training Services (MTS) Training Calendar and online portal. Coursework and training are targeted to different skill levels:

- induction training for those new to SHS
- core skills for SHS
- specialist and advanced skills for client groups
- training for managers and emerging leaders
- qualifications and recognised prior learning.

NSW SHS Workforce Capability Framework

The NSW SHS Workforce Capability Framework⁶ (Capability Framework) describes the broad capabilities required for different levels of the NSW SHS workforce (frontline staff and practitioners, senior officers and practitioners, managers and lead practitioners, CEO, leadership and board members). The purpose of the Capability Framework is to assist the SHS workforce to:

- support client outcomes through targeted skill development
- understand the capabilities required to work at their current level / a different level
- identify opportunities for training and development or any gaps in skills, knowledge and behaviours that need addressing
- provide evidence of Recognition of Prior Learning when applying for entry into courses
- allow for cross sectoral career pathways
- allow for movement between types of service delivery and types of clients
- increase collaboration across different organisations.

The Capability Framework also contains a range of tools that can be used by organisations, managers and practitioners.

Communities of Practice

The Industry Partnership supports Communities of Practice (CoPs) for specialised responses in key areas (Aboriginal, CALD, LGBTQI, Together Home, Assertive Outreach, DFV, Youth). CoPs promote sharing of best practice; collaboration to address issues across the sector; contribution to reports and advocacy opportunities; discussion of areas of interests; and connection with other SHS sector professionals.

⁶ Homelessness NSW (2018) *NSW Specialist Homelessness Services Workforce Capability Framework*, Sydney, Australia, <https://homelessnessnsw.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Workforce-Capability-Framework-2018.pdf>.

Client satisfaction survey

The SHS Sector Client Satisfaction Survey has been run by the IP and the NSW Community Housing Industry Association (CHIA) since 2018. The survey measures satisfaction with services and client outcomes from accessing SHS.

JWA support

The IP manages a JWA support service for service packages that are being delivered through JWAs. This support is provided through Connect Consulting and includes support with:

- contract changes and managing disputes and breaches
- assistance with take-overs, wind downs, and changes to organisational structures
- opportunities to source financial advice, legal advice, strategic planning including advice related to service viability or issues or questions related to the future of service packages
- assisting Board members, management committees and/or staff with Fair Trading obligations
- identifying opportunities to partner with other organisations
- in some cases, negotiating with DCJ.

JWAs are structures for collaboration between organisations for the provision of services and can range from informal alliances, through to the joint delivery of a project. A JWA is the document that covers the roles and responsibilities of each party. Agreements may be non-financial and/or financial depending on their purpose.

JWAs may also be formed for the purpose of contracting with government agencies. The three types of working arrangements most commonly seen with homelessness service providers are alliance, consortium and joint venture.⁷

Sustainability coaching

The IP offers a range of tools and programs to assist NSW SHS organisations with business continuity and to ensure ongoing high quality provision of services for clients and communities. This includes planning for service sustainability, assistance with funding agreements and contracts (including JWAs and subcontracting) and subcontracting templates and checklists.

Network meetings

The IP convenes the biannual NSW Homelessness Network Meeting for CEOs and other SHS staff of Service Support Fund organisations, and lead and sole agents. The meeting helps to facilitate greater cross sector communication, networking and feedback between staff across the sector.

COVID-19 initiatives

The Homelessness NSW website provides a range of resources to support SHS while working through the COVID-19 pandemic. These include the latest public health advice, DCJ policies and announcements, resources for staff wellbeing, working from home templates, and resources for service providers. In addition, Homelessness NSW has e-learning resources, webinars and COVID-19 training.

⁷ NSW Department of Family and Community Services (2016) *Joint Working Agreement Guide for Homelessness Services*, Sydney, https://www.housing.nsw.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/387131/Final-Joint-Working-Agreement-Guidelines-for-Homelessness-Services.pdf.

3.2 How well were the strategies and its projects implemented and delivered?

The evaluation found that the Strategy 2017-2020 was implemented and delivered well and was well received by the sector. Overall, 85 per cent of managers consulted as part of the Workforce Survey thought that the IP had been effective or very effective in responding to sector needs in the past 12 months.

The Workforce Survey demonstrated that the IP's ASES initiatives (ASES webinars, ASES policy and procedure manual, ASES how-to guides, BNG Portal) met the needs of a high proportion of both managers and practitioners (Table 4). Conversely, Sustainability Coaching met the needs of only 29 per cent of managers but was useful to 73 per cent of practitioners.

Table 4: Did the IP initiatives meet your program's / your needs?

	Managers		Practitioners	
	N	% met needs	N	% met needs
ASES How-to Guides	11	82%	29	79%
ASES Policy and Procedure Manual	11	82%	30	77%
ASES Webinars	15	93%	32	66%
BNG Portal	12	83%	11	82%
Communities of Practice	15	67%		*
ASES Good Practice Guidelines	16	69%	34	79%
JWA Support	6	67%	21	52%
Network Meetings	12	75%		N/A
Sustainability Coaching	7	29%	11	73%

* See figure 1 below.

Source: IP Workforce Survey.

3.2.1 Continuous improvement in service quality

Achieving ASES accreditation remains bureaucratically difficult, especially for smaller organisations but also for larger organisations reporting to multiple portfolios

As indicated above, the evaluation found that ASES was generally well received by the sector and that the supports provided by the IP to support organisations to achieve ASES accreditation were appropriate. Focus groups heard that the initial experience of the ASES help-desk was less than favourable due to staff lack of experience in accreditation processes, whereas ASES grants to enable organisations to hire their own expertise were better. There was potential for the IP to better inform the sector about progress on accreditation processes.

The evaluation heard that the resource commitment required to undertake ASES accreditation was onerous for smaller organisations, and some continued to struggle with this despite the resources being directed towards this part of the sector. Focus group participants from some smaller organisations indicated they felt high pressure around the accreditation process and that the ASES requirements could have been moderated for smaller organisations. One organisation that had completed the ASES the process felt it was about 'ticking boxes' and that much work remained in implementing and embedding practices.

Some focus group participants indicated that the structure of their organisation required them to comply with a variety of different accreditation standards, which caused considerable bureaucratic complexities. For example, some organisations were SHS as well as community housing providers and thus needed need to be registered through community housing registration as well as ASES. At the same time, some SHS providers are not subject to important and relevant standards (e.g., around domestic and family violence). There is a need for Homelessness NSW to continue to work on ways to harmonise or rationalise accreditation processes with other government departments and registration bodies as well as require appropriate standards.

One participant in the Aboriginal consultations, a representative of a larger ACCO, felt strongly that ASES was key to growing the capacity of Aboriginal organisations, while another representative (from an organisation with only few staff) felt ASES was prohibitive and the resources, policies and procedures required detracted from the core mission of the organisation, which was to assist its clients.

Sustainability coaching

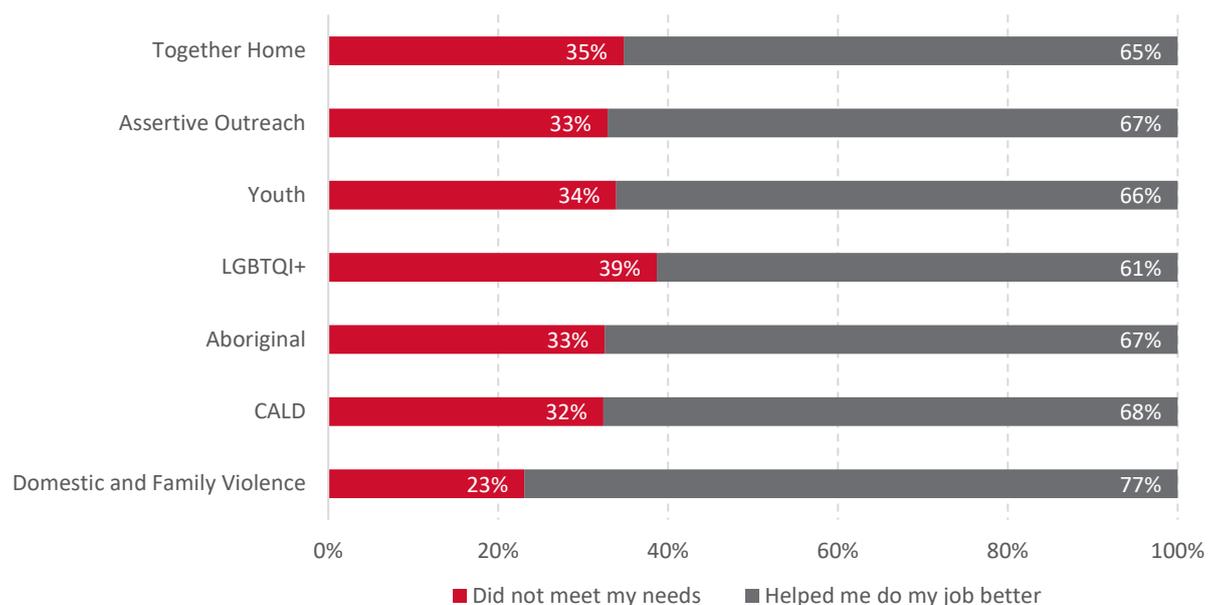
The Workforce Survey found a disparity in how the IP's sustainability coaching was perceived by managers and workers. While 73 per cent of practitioners answered that sustainability coaching met their needs, this was the case for only 29 per cent of managers. This indicates a need to investigate why sustainability coaching is not meeting managers needs and adjust the initiative to meet this gap.

CoPs are beneficial but there is room for improvement in terms of access, facilitation and clarity of purpose

The IP has supported seven Communities of Practice (CoPs) for specialised responses in key areas (Aboriginal, CALD, LGBTQI+, Together Home, Assertive Outreach, DFV, Youth). CoPs promote sharing of best practice; collaboration to address issues across the sector; contribution to reports and advocacy opportunities; discussion of areas of interests; and connection with other SHS sector professionals.

The Workforce Survey found that CoPs met the needs of most managers and practitioners and helped sector staff to do their job better. The DFV CoP was seen to be particularly effective (77%).

Figure 1: How effective are the following CoPs in meeting your needs?



However, 23% of managers in the Workforce Survey indicated that staff did not have access to a CoP. Participants in focus groups found CoPs to be beneficial as a peer group for general information, sharing resources and lobbying, especially for regional participants who felt disconnected from other networks. Nevertheless, some felt they could be better facilitated so purposes of the meetings were clearly communicated, and some frustration that the CoPs were often working in silos and were not communicating with each other effectively.

Focus group participants identified that some CoPs could be city-centric and that some could be improved in terms of facilitation. COVID-19 impacted CoPs as meetings were required to be held online, making meetings more ad-hoc and impacting opportunities for networking and collaboration.

3.2.2 Networking, collaboration and coordination initiatives

Network meetings are beneficial but should be more widely communicated

The IP convenes the biannual NSW Homelessness Network Meeting for CEOs and other SHS staff of Service Support Fund organisations, and lead and sole agents. The meeting helps to facilitate greater cross sector communication, networking and feedback between staff across the sector. The evaluation through the Workforce Survey found that Network Meetings are effective in communicating up-to-date sector information. However, around a third of respondents were unaware of Network Meetings.

Redressing Aboriginal Homelessness Accord

The Redressing Aboriginal Homelessness Accord (ACCORD)⁸ is intended as an active guiding document to assist organisations to close the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples and was developed by the NSW SHS Aboriginal Reference Group in November 2017. It takes a holistic and human rights approach to redressing Aboriginal homelessness. The evaluation (Workforce Survey, Aboriginal consultation and focus groups) identified issues with the communication and uptake of the ACCORD across the sector, its ongoing perceived relevance and monitoring of progress. There were low rates of awareness about the ACCORD among practitioners. These issues are further detailed in section 6.

Supporting sub-contracting

The IP manages a subcontracting support service for Joint Working Agreements (JWAs). JWAs are a key mechanism for contracting with Aboriginal organisations and services. The IP provides support for JWAs, which is provided through Connect Consulting. This includes the following types of support:

- contract changes and managing disputes and breaches
- assistance with take-overs, wind downs, and changes to organisational structures
- opportunities to source financial advice, legal advice, strategic planning including advice related to service viability or issues or questions related to the future of service packages
- assisting Board members, management committees and/or staff with Fair Trading obligations
- identifying opportunities to partner with other organisations
- in some cases, negotiating with DCJ.

Several focus group participants argued that JWAs had enabled them to contract with regional organisations and thereby increase the organisations outreach. However, Aboriginal consultation participants highlighted that JWA's did not grow the capacity of Aboriginal organisations and rather kept them on the periphery of the homelessness system. These issues are further discussed in section 6.

⁸ Homelessness NSW (2017) *Redressing Aboriginal Homelessness Accord*, Sydney, Australia, <https://homelessnessnsw.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Redressing-Aboriginal-Homelessness-Accord.pdf>.

3.2.3 Support SHS providers to demonstrate service outcomes

The client satisfaction survey largely meets needs of sector but other advances in outcomes measurement impeded by pandemic

The SHS Sector Client Satisfaction Survey has been run by the IP and the NSW Community Housing Industry Association (CHIA) since 2018. The survey measures satisfaction with services and client outcomes from accessing SHS. The Workforce Survey showed that 61 per cent of practitioners thought the client satisfaction survey provided them with useful information that met their needs, with a further 31 per cent indicating that is partially met their needs. About two thirds of managers (11 out of 18) felt it helped meet their program needs.

The survey asked practitioners whether the client satisfaction survey provides them with useful information that meets their needs. Nearly all practitioners thought that the Client Satisfaction Survey either met their needs (61%) or partially met their needs (34%) (Table 13).

These findings indicate that while most practitioners and managers think the client satisfaction survey provides them with useful information, there is an opportunity to review the survey to ensure its ongoing currency and relevance.

3.2.4 Workforce development

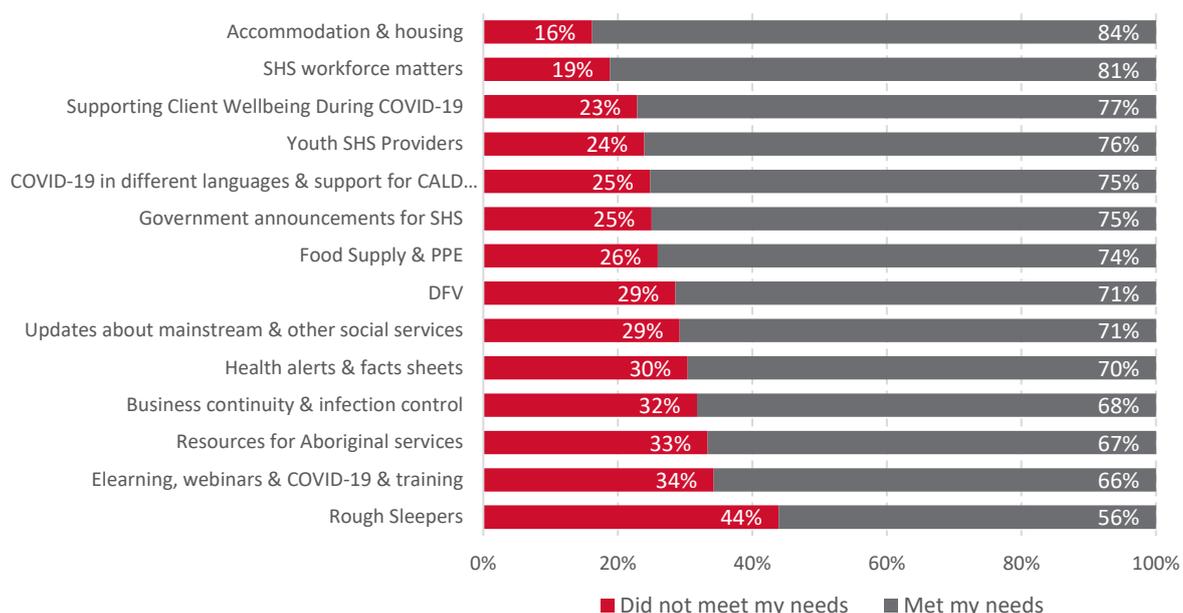
The IP implemented key workforce development initiatives such as the L&D Framework and Workforce Capability Framework. The outcomes of those frameworks are discussed in section 4.

3.2.5 COVID-19 initiatives

The impact of COVID-19 on the sector was widely acknowledged. Focus groups highlighted that the IP played a crucial role in acting as a communication channel for the sector.

Managers thought that overall, the COVID-19 initiatives met their program's needs (Workforce Survey), especially webinars (86%) and accommodation guidelines (76%). Practitioners also considered that most COVID-19 initiatives met their needs (Figure 1).

Figure 2: How well did COVID-19 initiatives meet practitioner needs?



Source: Workforce Survey.

3.3 How effective were communications?

Overall, IP initiatives and messages were well communicated to the sector. However, not all messages from the IP reach all parts of the sector workforce equally. As a result, not all sections of the workforce are aware of all IP initiatives and opportunities that are relevant to them. For example, around a third of respondents (34% of 146 respondents) were unaware of Network Meetings. The evidence indicates that messaging about the ACCORD and cultural competence needs improving.

4. Formative evaluation and training needs assessment of the NSW homelessness services workforce

This chapter addresses evaluation activity 2: formative evaluation of current workforce capabilities and assessment of the training needs of the NSW homelessness services workforce. The chapter details the characteristics of the homelessness workforce, identifies priority needs to develop the workforce further, and evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of the current L&D and Capability frameworks.

4.1 What are the demographic, skill and job characteristics of the NSW Homelessness workforce?

4.1.1 Workers are mainly young female, middle-aged, Australian born and non-Indigenous, but sector client groups are more demographically diverse

The Workforce Survey found that the NSW homelessness sector workforce is largely female (78%) (Table 3). This largely reflects the feminised nature of the NSW SHS client base (59% of all SHS clients are female). Only 8 per cent of staff identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander whereas Indigenous clients represent a large proportion of clients (31%). The low representation of Aboriginal persons in the workforce is lower than estimated in a previous study (13%) by Cortis and Blaxland.⁹

Table 5: Demographic composition of staff compared to clients, NSW

Characteristics	Workforce characteristics*	NSW SHS client characteristics**
Male	21%	41%
Female	78%	59%
Indigenous	8%	31%

Sources: * AHURI Workforce Survey 2021; ** AIHW (2021).

The Workforce Survey identified that more than two thirds of workers (69%) are adults 25–54 years of age. Most workers are born in Australia (82%) and speak only English at home (83%). According to AIHW data, NSW SHS clients are predominantly born in Australia.¹⁰ This is despite the Census showing that a significant proportion of homeless or at-risk persons are migrants (58% of all persons who were homeless in NSW in 2016 were migrants). This disparity suggests that many persons who are homeless or at risk (such as those experiencing overcrowding) are not accessing the SHS system.

⁹ Cortis N. and Blaxland M. (2019) *Training and workforce development in Specialist homelessness Services*, report prepared by Social Policy Research Centre University of New South Wales, for Homelessness NSW, Domestic Violence NSW and Yfoundations.

¹⁰ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2021) *Specialist homelessness services annual report 2020–21*, AIHW, Australian Government, accessed 12 May 2022.

Even so, sector staff usually work with a breadth of different client groups (seven on average), most commonly with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people with mental health problems, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) people, and people sleeping rough.

There may be benefit in fostering recruitment of more staff with diverse backgrounds to match the diversity of the client group as a means of improving service engagement and building capabilities around supporting such staff.

4.1.2 Most workers are well educated, and this education generally equips workers well

According to the Workforce Survey, most workers are highly educated (51% hold a bachelor's degree or higher). Most have qualifications in either community/youth work (46%) or social policy/social work (25%). Most regard their qualifications as preparing them extremely or very well (58%) or moderately well (35%) for work in the homelessness sector. Likewise, most managers felt that their staff skill levels met the needs of the program to a great extent (65%) or mostly (35%).

4.1.3 Most work full-time permanent jobs and job turnover is low, despite low pay and the sector attracts few new entrants

Data from the Workforce Survey show that most staff are employed on a permanent ongoing basis (73%) and work full-time (77%). The sector workforce is stable and attracts few new entrants. Lack of prospects for job progression and low pay may impact in the sector's future ability to attract and retain staff (45% nominated these factors for wanting to leave the sector). Many have been working in the SHS sector for over 5 years (60%), and most expect to remain in this role (72%).

4.2 What are the priority training areas needed by the workforce?

4.2.1 Management needs training in strategic planning, governance, supervision, cultural and emotional intelligence

In their responses to the Workforce Survey, senior managers identified strategic planning and governance management for the community sector as the key priority for skills development for their leadership team.

Practitioners' priorities for management and leadership training were: professional and clinical supervision for managers, building workplace culture, and emotionally intelligent leadership.

4.2.2 Practitioners need training in cultural competence, working with particular groups, and training that will advance careers

The Workforce Survey indicated that staff skills and capabilities largely meet the needs of the sector, though there is room for improvement, particularly in relation to cultural competence.

Managers' training priorities for staff are to equip them for working with: people with mental health needs, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, LGBTQI+ people, victim survivors of DFV, and people vulnerable to alcohol and other drug (AoD) misuse. Training priorities for specialist skills are advanced mental health and cultural competence.

Practitioners' training priorities were cultural competence training, access to training in regional areas, more availability of training for specialised skills such as those offered by established courses and modules in other training organisations, and training that will help career development (such as leadership and accredited training). Other specific ideas for training raised in focus groups included: training around the broader welfare system (including NDIS and interactions with housing system); CHIMES; trauma informed care training (for housing providers); and the outcomes framework.

4.3 How well does the L&D Framework meet the needs of the NSW homelessness sector?

The L&D Framework is designed to improve industry and workforce skill development through provision of training opportunities. Training is provided through the Managed Training System (MTS). The L&D framework and MTS are described below. Feedback from managers and practitioners from the Workforce Survey is used to evaluate the effectiveness of these initiatives.

The L&D Framework aims to support systemic improvements in industry and workforce capability. The framework provides:

- a staged approach that builds towards qualifications
- flexible and accessible programs
- masterclass webinars and recordings
- just-in-time, online self-help tools
- access to other funding (such as Smart and Skilled) where possible
- training specific for meeting the needs of client groups at different levels, for example induction, intermediate and advanced.

Training is delivered through a combination of face-to-face training and online training. During the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the training was delivered online. DCJ funds workers and managers to enrol in subsidised courses. The training is delivered through the SHS Managed Training System (MTS) Training Calendar and online portal. Coursework and training are targeted to different skill levels:

- induction training for those new to SHS
- core skills for SHS
- specialist and advanced skills for client groups
- training for managers and emerging leaders
- qualifications and recognised prior learning.

4.3.1 Mechanism to review the L&D framework

Consultations heard that the IP currently has no formal mechanism in place to review the L&D framework. This is a gap which constrains the IP's ability to keep the framework current and refresh it as needed.

4.3.2 Uptake of training opportunities is high, especially for new staff

The Workforce Survey demonstrated that there is a relatively high level of uptake of training and most managers and practitioners felt it was relevant to the workforce. Managers indicated that 67 per cent of program staff had attended training in the 12 months prior to the survey, with a median of four days training attended. Almost all managers (94%) indicated that new staff received training for Client Information Management System (CIMS) client records and case management, and training for working with SHS clients (76%).

Most practitioners (86%) thought that adequate skill development opportunities were available to them, and that MTS training better prepared them for their job (74%).

4.3.3 Key training offerings include trauma informed practice, CIMS, case management and working with people with mental health issues

The most common training accessed for core and specialist skills was for trauma informed practice (130 respondents), CIMS (120 respondents) and case management (118 respondents). Working with people with mental health issues was the MTS training most accessed by practitioners (accessed by 128 respondents). This was followed by working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (114 respondents) and victims of DFV (113 respondents). Most of this training was accessed within the past five years.

4.3.4 Barriers to participation include time management, lack of regional opportunities, lack of suitable courses and staff backfilling

During the past 12 months, 29 per cent of respondents did not access MTS training at all. Barriers to accessing training included time management issues (22%), lack of training opportunities in regional centres (18%), and lack of suitable courses (18%). Around half of managers thought staff absences due to training affected services.

4.3.5 Face to face opportunities and virtual training are needed

Managers and practitioners consulted in the Workforce Survey were appreciative of the increased availability of training on Zoom. Online learning increased accessibility, especially for those in regional and rural areas. However, there remains a distinct divide between those who prefer the immediacy of face-to-face training and the social and networking opportunities it provides and those who prefer online training because it offers more flexible access to training.

4.3.6 Cultural competence could be more tailored to local needs

The issue of cultural competence training attracted many comments. While many respondents felt this training was beneficial to them, many also noted the need for more locally specific training, increased use of Aboriginal trainers and alternative modes of delivery. Several programs/organisations conducted their own cultural competence training or used trainers outside the MTS Training Calendar. Crucially, findings from the Workforce Survey highlighted that organisations face unique challenges in recruiting and attracting Aboriginal staff and achieving cultural competence. Despite efforts to recruit, more needed to be done to attract staff. Initiatives that might help include organisational policies, reconciliation action plans and increased Aboriginal representation at governance and leadership level. As a result of these findings, the evaluation was expanded to include specific consultations with Aboriginal workers and organisations using a series of tailored qualitative consultations. The findings from the survey and Aboriginal consultations are discussed in section 6 of this report.

4.4 How well does the Capability Framework meet the needs of the sector?

The SHS Workforce Capability Framework is designed to help managers and workers understand skill requirements for staff at various levels. The evaluation used feedback from managers and practitioners from the Workforce Survey to evaluate the relevance and implementation of the framework.

The NSW SHS Workforce Capability Framework¹¹ (Capability Framework) describes the broad capabilities required for different levels of the NSW SHS workforce (frontline staff and practitioners, senior officers and practitioners, managers and lead practitioners, CEO, leadership and board members). The purpose of the Capability Framework is to assist the SHS workforce to:

- support client outcomes through targeted skill development
- understand the capabilities required to work at their current level / a different level
- identify opportunities for training and development or any gaps in skills, knowledge and behaviours that need addressing

¹¹ Homelessness NSW (2018) *NSW Specialist Homelessness Services Workforce Capability Framework*, Sydney, Australia.

- provide evidence of Recognition of Prior Learning when applying for entry into courses
- allow for cross sectoral career pathways
- allow for movement between types of service delivery and types of clients
- increase collaboration across different organisations

The Capability Framework also contains a range of tools that can be used by organisations, managers and practitioners.

4.4.1 There is high managerial awareness of and satisfaction with the Capability Framework but opportunities to draw from other professional frameworks

Most managers (17 out of 20 or 85%) are aware of the Capability Framework and most (12 out of 16 or 75%) think it meets their program's needs. Focus group participants found that it was beneficial for organisational planning.

Focus groups suggested that there was an opportunity to look at other professions like social work (e.g., resources of the Australian Association of Social Workers and associated university curriculums) to develop in key skill areas like case management and other skills, rather than having a narrow field of vision around the homelessness sector. Having a way for training to be accredited as professional learning (for example using a point system) for continued registration as social worker might make a connexion to relevant professional associations and make such training meaningful and portable.

4.4.2 Staff are motivated to reduce homelessness, but feel unsupported, underutilised, and underprepared

Although there is managerial satisfaction with the Capability Framework, it is unclear whether it is sufficiently utilised by or on behalf of staff. The Workforce Survey shows that 58 per cent of sector staff do not feel supported by their manager and workplace, and 57 per cent do not think their job makes good use of their skills and abilities. Over half of workers (51%) do not feel prepared for changes and challenges associated with their work.

On the positive side, qualitative feedback given by workers as part of the survey about what they valued about working in the sector were a desire to create positive change and their enjoyment in working as part of a team. Almost two thirds of sector staff indicated they feel they are contributing to reducing homelessness (65%) and can spend enough time with each client (61%), though this implied that over a third felt they were not able to be effective or spend sufficient time with clients.

5. Organisational sustainability across the NSW Homelessness Industry

This chapter addresses evaluation activity 3: assessing the sustainability of SHS organisations in NSW (Are organisations sustainable?). Sustainability is determined by how well organisations marshal their available financial, strategic and human resources to meet organisational goals, using efficient governance and management structures. Sustainability is also constrained by system wide factors like government regulation and organisational mandates to serve clients.

The chapter details the characteristics of homelessness providers in terms of their structure, size, location and client specialisation. It then looks at whether organisations are well resourced and structured to meet demands made on providers by client groups. Finally, it considers how well organisations are mitigating risks to sustainability through funding, meeting regulatory requirements of policy makers (such as staff quality accreditation) and use of strategic alliances.

5.1 Characteristics of NSW homelessness organisations

5.1.1 Structure of organisations is diverse in terms of client numbers and budget

Data from the AIHW¹² show there were 335 agencies involved in provision of SHS services in NSW in 2020-21. There has been a decline in the number of organisations over time since 2011-12 when there were around 359, however the numbers have not changed much since 2016-17 when they were 330. Table 6 below shows that since 2018-19, there has been an increase in the number of small organisations (which we define to be organisations with 200 clients or less), from 190 to 199 in 2020-21. By contrast, the number of organisations with larger caseloads has declined. This poses challenges for the sector to build capacity in this growing part of the sector.

Table 6: NSW SHS agencies by client number

Number of clients	2018-19	2020-21	Percent of all agencies (2020-21)
0 to 99	86	99	30%
100 to 199	104	100	30%
200 to 299	44	41	12%
300 to 599	65	63	19%
600 to 1,499	38	30	9%
1,500 or more	2	2	1%
Total	339	335	100%

Source: AIHW (2019¹³ and 2021).

¹² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2021) *Specialist homelessness services annual report 2020-21*, AIHW, Australian Government, accessed 12 May 2022.

¹³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2019) *Specialist homelessness services annual report 2018-19*, AIHW, Australian Government, accessed 12 May 2022.

As at December 2021, there were 176 lead agencies in the NSW homelessness sector that received funding from DCJ. This increases to 241 agencies if the 65 subcontracted providers are added. Funding for each agency ranges between \$304,094 - \$126,658,386 per contract, reflecting the diversity in the client responsibilities across the sector.¹⁴

The Workforce survey showed that in the last financial year, 90% of responding organisations indicated that their main source of income was from government funding (76% NSW Government funding, 14% Australian Government funding). Only 10% of organisations surveyed were mainly funded from philanthropic sources. This singular reliance on government funding places NSW SHS organisations' sustainability at risk in the event that they should organisations or programs cease to receive government funding. Furthermore, reliance on government funding constrains the ways in which organisations can operate and deliver services, as they are bound by government funding contracts, which generally prescribe how funds can be used (e.g., duration of service, types of support provided). The sustainability risk is most pronounced for smaller organisations that lack the capacity to cross-subsidise programs from their other activities.

5.1.2 Organisations are well spread across different locations, though concentrated in cities

Table 7 sets out the location of providers as at December 2020. This shows that the largest numbers of services are concentrated in the greater Sydney and New England and Northern NSW areas, but that SHS are available across all parts of NSW. This fulfils an important aspect of ensuring a sustained response to client demands across a range of locations.

Table 7: NSW providers contracted by DCJ – lead and partner organisations, by location, December 2020

Organisations	Lead	Partner	Total	Percent of total
Sydney	47	33	80	49%
Central Coast	4	1	5	3%
Hunter	12	0	12	7%
Illawarra/Shoalhaven	8	0	8	5%
Mid-North Coast	6	2	8	5%
Nepean	4	4	8	5%
New England and Northern NSW	10	15	25	15%
Murrumbidgee	2	6	8	5%
Far West and West	8	1	9	6%
Total	101	62	163	100%

Source: DCJ Provider data 2020.

5.1.3 Organisations are both generalist and specialised

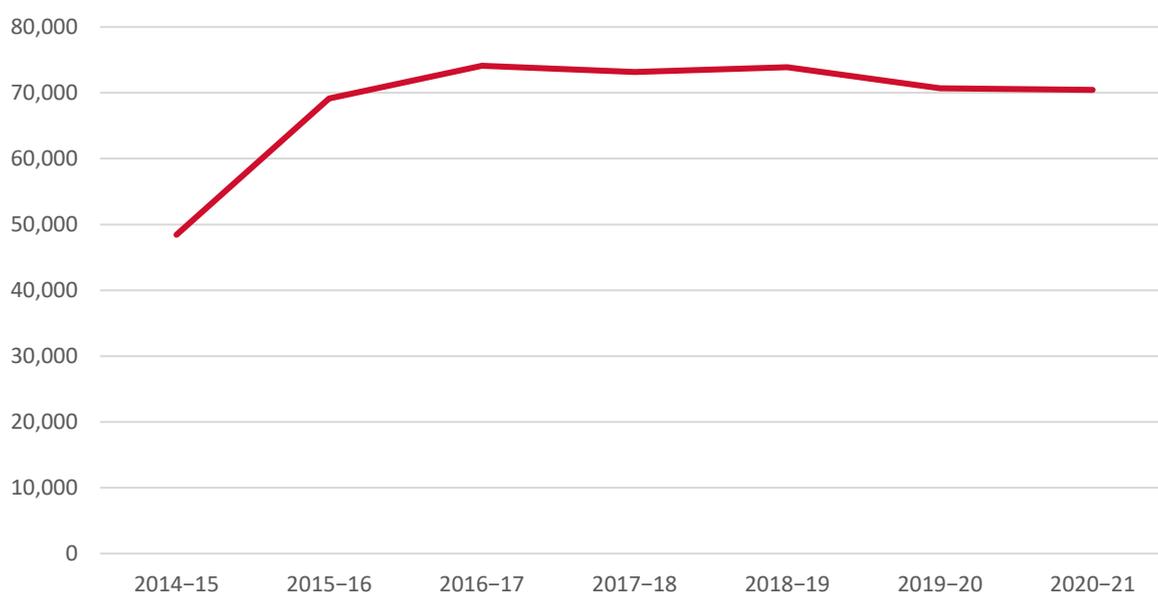
According to the Workforce Survey, around a third of organisations (67 of 227 or 30%) provide generalist homelessness services. Many organisations provide services that are targeted to particular client groups. The most prominent target groups are people sleeping rough (49%), women and children experiencing DFV (44%), and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (43%).

¹⁴ Data supplied by Homelessness NSW.

5.2 Client demand for SHS in NSW has stabilised

A study conducted at the start of the Strategy for 2017-2020, revealed that notwithstanding improvements in the capacity of the sector as a result of the Going Home Staying Home reforms, demands had increased, and the sector 'cannot provide effective support across all four intended service responses' (prevention and early intervention, rapid rehousing, crisis and transition responses and intensive responses for complex needs) even though there had been promising and positive improvements in prevention and early intervention.¹⁵ Over the course of 2020-21, around 70,600 clients were served by the SHS in NSW¹⁶. This demand has not changed significantly over the last few years after it increased significantly in 2015-16, though it did moderate, especially in the years when COVID-19 was present (Figure 3). The Workforce Survey showed that staffing remained relatively stable (38% of organisations) or increased a little (38% of organisations).

Figure 3: Clients served in the SHS system, NSW 2014-15 to 2020-21



Source: AIHW (2021) Historical Client data.

Unmet need has also moderated slightly. Daily unassisted requests averaged around 30.7 in New South Wales in 2020-21 compared to around 34.4 in 2016-17.¹⁷ Demand remains the highest in major cities and inner regional locations. The composition of demand has also remained relatively stable, though demand moderated especially in outer regional and major cities over the last two years, while increasing slightly in inner regional and remote areas. Most of the demand (58%) is in major cities (Sydney), while one third is in inner regional areas, and only 8 per cent is in outer regional or remote areas (Table 8).

¹⁵ valentine k., Zmudzki F., Fotheringham M. and Smyth, C. (2017) *Early Review of the Specialist Homelessness Services Program: final report*, Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales, Sydney; p.6.

¹⁶ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2021) *Specialist homelessness services annual report 2020-21*, AIHW, Australian Government, accessed 12 May 2022.

¹⁷ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2021) *Specialist homelessness services annual report 2020-21*, AIHW, Australian Government, accessed 12 May 2022.

Table 8: Client numbers by remoteness NSW 2016-17 to 2020-21

	2016-17	2020-21	Change	% of all clients (2020-21)
Major cities	44,409	40,996	-3,413	58%
Inner regional	22,928	23,594	666	33%
Outer regional	6,181	5,225	-956	7%
Remote / very remote	699	773	74	1%
Total clients	74,217	70,588	-3,629	100%

Source: AIHW (2017 and 2021).

5.3 Organisational sustainability

Organisations in NSW face a number of risks and constraints around sustainability, including: obtaining sufficient funding from government, staff caseloads, accessing suitable housing for clients, ensuring they meet quality standards to fulfil government contractual requirements and achieving effective strategic alliances.

5.3.1 Risks around short-term funding models and smaller organisations around accreditation

Most specialist homelessness organisations rely heavily on government funding, with these funds constituting around 85% of all finances.¹⁸ In focus groups, some participants cited the inadequacy of funding to assist intensive assistance clients and the vulnerability around short term funding cycles as issues for sustainability.

Organisations in the NSW homelessness sector are diverse in terms of the amount funding received, the number of staff employed, and geographic areas serviced. Most organisations have an annual income of \$1 to \$5 million and most of that is NSW Government funding. Table 9 shows that of the 170 organisations funded by the DCJ, 121 (71%) were rated as 'large' (they had revenues greater than \$1 million), but the remainder were medium, small or micro in size. The heavy reliance on government funding means there are potential risks if funding is withdrawn or is not renewed. The high reliance on government funding means that organisational sustainability is closely linked to government funding priorities and arrangements.

Table 9: NSW providers contracted by DCJ – lead and partner organisations, by median and average revenue

Organisations	Lead	Partner	Total	% high or very high risk
Large	85	36	121	34%
Medium	22	15	37	78%
Small	1	0	1	100%
Micro	1	0	1	100%
Unknown		10	10	-
Total	109	61	170	42%
Median revenue	\$3,077,118	\$3,328,950	\$3,189,842	
Average revenue	\$36,421,173	\$16,765,681	\$30,155,985	

Source: DCJ Provider data 2020. NB – Large revenue is over \$1 million, medium is under \$1 million and over \$500k, small is \$100k to \$500k, and micro is under \$100k.

¹⁸ Flatau, P., Zaretsky, K., Wood, L., and Miscenko, D. (2016) *The financing, delivery and effectiveness of programs to reduce homelessness*, AHURI Final Report No. 270, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/270>, doi:10.18408/ahuri-8209101.

Reliance on government funding has implications for the way in which services are delivered and outcomes are accounted for, as service models tend to be prescribed by funding contracts. A key risk around sustainability for organisations is whether they can achieve accreditation around ASES standards and are able to sustain themselves financially. Smaller organisations are at greater risk, especially those which have not yet achieved accreditation in a range of areas. Of all organisations, more than 40 per cent have high or very high-risk ratings around achieving ASES and most are smaller organisations, but the most at risk were smaller or medium organisations (Table 9).

As at December 2020, 14 ACCOs were contracted by DCJ to provide SHS; of these, 10 were lead organisations, and four were partner organisations (however one of these organisations left the program). Of the ten lead organisations, five were medium sized (below \$1 million but higher than \$500,000), and five were large (above \$1 million). Of partner organisations, there was one medium and three large organisations. Despite their larger size, most (around three quarters) were rated as high or very high in terms of risk around achieving accreditation.

5.3.2 Staffing caseloads and access to staff

Focus groups revealed that while some organisations kept staff caseloads to a manageable level, some partner agencies struggled to keep workers because of excessive caseloads (15 and above) or ageing of the workforce. Many organisations had low rates of staff turnover, but this partly reflected good team-based work cultures and few alternative opportunities in regional areas.

5.3.3 Lack of access to affordable housing is a risk to sustainability of the sector

When asked about key risks to sustainability in the sector, many focus group participants nominated the structural barriers around access to social and affordable housing. There was criticism that programs such as the Together Home Program, which use head leasing, are increasing pressure on low cost rental housing, without increasing the supply of social housing.

5.3.4 Networking and collaboration

Formal and informal collaboration between agencies is occurring but barriers remain. Collaboration between agencies and services is an important way to improve sustainability of the NSW homelessness sector. Collaboration enables pooling of resources, facilitates better services and better client outcomes and allows services to support each other. Most organisations provide a range of SHS services, most often a combination of case management, support to access housing and sustain tenancies, client advocacy, information, advice, and referral. Additionally, 43 per cent of responding organisations to the Workforce Survey provided community housing.

The Workforce Survey showed that all programs collaborate with other organisations, either via Memorandum of Understanding (MOUs) (outside a JWA) (85%), informal agreements (70%) and JWAs (35%). At the program level, collaboration is usually formalised. At the practitioner level, informal arrangements are the main form of collaboration. Barriers to collaboration included tendering practices and competition, different ways of working, referral practices, breakdown of communication, lack of capacity within the sector, and staff turnover.

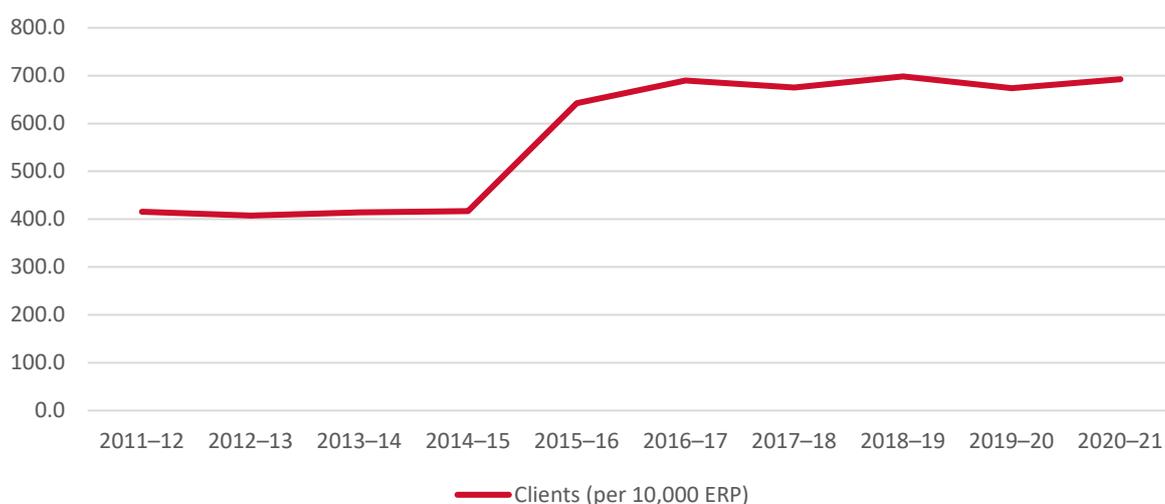
6. Cultural competence

This chapter addresses evaluation activity 5: assessing competence of organisations in providing culturally safe and competent services for Aboriginal clients and communities (How competent are services in serving Aboriginal clients and communities?). The chapter draws on information from consultations with Aboriginal organisations and workers. It considers the needs of Aboriginal clients, and actions organisations can take to better support Aboriginal clients and workers. It then examines issues around organisations providing culturally appropriate services, such as recruitment of Aboriginal staff and training and considers the opportunities and constraints faced by ACCOs. Finally, it makes recommendations for improvements.

6.1 Aboriginal demand for homelessness services is high and increasing

The NSW homelessness sector supports a high proportion of Aboriginal clients. The *Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report* shows that 29 per cent of NSW SHS clients identified as Aboriginal in 2019-20.¹⁹ According to the AIHW, 31 per cent of clients accessing NSW SHS identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. It stands to reason that the NSW SHS system should be calibrated to meet the needs of this major client group. How the NSW homelessness sector supports its Aboriginal workforce and staff is of particular importance as the number and proportion of clients who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander accessing NSW SHS has grown over the last decade (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Number of Aboriginal SHS clients per 10,000 population, NSW



Source: AIHW (2021) data Supplementary tables - Historical tables SHSC 2011-12 to 2020-21.

¹⁹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2021) *Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report*, Data tables: Historical tables SHSC 2011-12 to 2019-20, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-annual-report/data>.

6.2 Key issues facing Aboriginal clients

6.2.1 Lack of housing options

Aboriginal clients face a range of problems in accessing housing. Lack of affordable and appropriate housing is a key issue. Consultation participants noted that needed housing often did not exist and that discrimination in the private rental market makes it difficult for Aboriginal people to find housing. This is consistent with evidence that discrimination is a factor in the private rental market more generally.²⁰ Consultation participants highlighted the importance of staying on country but that the lack of housing often meant this was not possible, for example as there are no refuges locally. This lack of appropriate housing for Aboriginal families and women in particular is also found in other Australian research.²¹

6.2.2 Complexity of needs

Many consultation participants highlighted the complexity of issues facing Aboriginal clients and that this is at odds with the structure of funding arrangements, length of service contracts and KPIs.

[There is] need for a better understanding of Aboriginal clients requiring long-term support and intensive engagement. (consultation participant)

6.2.3 Need for choice and cultural competence

Participants noted that Aboriginal clients should have the choice of whether to use mainstream or Aboriginal services.

Consumers should have choice on what service they go to, as some Aboriginal people don't want to go to an Aboriginal service, for example due to safety issues, or family connection to workers. (consultation participant)

While mainstream organisations have an important role in supporting Aboriginal clients, consultation participants noted that cultural support and understanding could be lacking in mainstream organisations, which could contribute to negative outcomes.

Yet, mainstream organisations do not have an idea on how to treat the client and they come back to Aboriginal organisations after dropping out of services, which may accentuate issues and makes it harder to solve these. (consultation participant)

While organisations are often committed to providing culturally specific support for Aboriginal clients and Aboriginal staff and developing the cultural competency of its workers and organisations, the evaluation finds that there remains room for improvement. This should be a priority area for Homelessness NSW but would also need to be considered in DCJ funding models. One organisation in focus groups said that their organisation had their own cultural competency framework which broke down what was involved:

An example is providing accommodation for First Nation clients, which usually is for 12 weeks, but if they need to go to Country, those days don't count. Concrete, practical things (Focus group participant)

²⁰ See Maalsen, S., Wolfson, P., Rogers, D., Nelson, J. and Buckle, C (2021) *Understanding discrimination effects in private rental housing*, AHURI Final Report No. 363, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/363>, doi:10.18408/ahuri7324501.

²¹ Cripps, K., and Habibis, D. (2019) *Improving housing and service responses to domestic and family violence for Indigenous individuals and families*, AHURI Final Report No. 320, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/320>, doi:10.18408/ahuri-7116201.

Issues of cultural competency were also relevant when dealing with government departments and the housing sector in relation to their knowledge of the work involved in supporting Aboriginal clients. For example, there may be limited understanding of the additional work done within community and the need to meet community expectations to be in the community instead of just working from the office.

... that person (from the department) was saying that 'we are not doing the work'. That was 'funny', because the night before had to pick a fella up at 9 o'clock from the railway station, who had just got out of jail, and took him to the temporary accommodation. The next day [we were] told of not doing the work, despite having worked 15 hours the day before. (consultation participant)

6.3 Lack of sufficient awareness and success of the ACCORD

The ACCORD is intended to be an active guiding document to assist organisations to close the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples by taking a holistic and human rights approach to redressing Aboriginal homelessness.

The survey found that managers had a much higher awareness of the ACCORD than frontline staff and that many staff were unclear whether their organisation had signed up to the ACCORD. While 62 per cent of CEOs and senior thought their program had signed up to the ACCORD, only 15 per cent of practitioners thought this was the case and over half (55%) were unsure. High proportions of both managers (29%) and practitioners (81%) were either unaware or didn't know about the ACCORD.

Participants in the Aboriginal consultations had a high awareness of the existence of the ACCORD, few however, knew the details. Some felt the ACCORD was not well known across the sector. This is perhaps a reflection of the fact that the ACCORD constitutes a set of guiding principles for collaboration and achieving positive outcomes towards closing the gap in Aboriginal homelessness, rather than a concrete set of actions. Consultation participants expressed that the ACCORD had not had the impact that had been hoped for and while it has the potential to guide services, it is not generally embedded within organisations. Participants noted that to be impactful, the ACCORD needs to be up to date and linked with funding and supporting material and operate from board to practitioner levels. The ACCORD should 'have teeth' in terms of negotiating with other organisations (e.g., like similar previous accords on mental health). Another focus group participant argued that there needs to be practical outcomes:

Utilise what is working and what services are asking for, which is practical application. It is all about outcomes. (focus group participant)

These sentiments were echoed in consultations with mainstream organisations, many of which had Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs) in place or were in the process of developing RAPs. RAPs were seen as advantageous as they link to meaningful actions to work towards reconciliation. Several organisations in mainstream consultations noted that the support they received from Reconciliation Australia in developing their RAP had been helpful in initiating reconciliation initiatives and embedding reconciliation in the organisation. Participants in the Aboriginal consultations observed that while RAPs were now being adopted across the sector, their development and implementation often remain the responsibility of Aboriginal workers, rather than that of managers or decision-makers. This reflects the systemic issues that are prevalent in 'closing the gap'.

6.4 Current issues in providing culturally appropriate services

6.4.1 Insufficient numbers of Aboriginal staff especially at senior level

The survey highlighted the low numbers of Aboriginal workers and Aboriginal organisations in the NSW homelessness sector. Only 8 per cent of SHS workers who responded to the survey identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, though 63 per cent of responding organisations employed Aboriginal staff. Notably, there was a very low number of Aboriginal persons in management, board and lead practitioner positions (apart from one Aboriginal Controlled Community Organisation that had 15 Aboriginal people in senior levels, all other organisations only had 22 people in such positions). Areas of concern are low numbers of Aboriginal workers especially in senior and executive positions and manager/lead practitioner levels. Consultation participants noted that recruitment of Aboriginal staff occurs mainly for entry level roles, but that more Aboriginal people are needed in executive roles and on boards.

[There is] usually [a] generic response in the employment of Aboriginal staff members. Roles are mostly trainee roles, starter-jobs, rather than encouraging executive roles or on the board. (consultation participant)

Participants observed that support to enable Aboriginal staff to advance to leadership positions is missing in some organisations.

With more senior roles the excuse is that there is already one Aboriginal person on that level, but why not more? (consultation participant)

Some organisations (involved in the focus groups) indicated that they had had success in recruiting Aboriginal staff into the organisation through traineeships. Partnerships with Aboriginal organisations may also open up pathways for staff to move between organisations.

6.4.2 Pressures on Aboriginal staff

Because of strong community ties and cultural obligations and the small number of Aboriginal workers and large number of Aboriginal clients, Aboriginal workers carry a disproportionate load. In addition, frequently the complexity of support needs is not sufficiently acknowledged:

Aboriginal workers are on the job 24/7. Examples include people showing up at their house for support or when meeting them in shops. (consultation participant)

[My] role is quite stressful. I try to be involved and be part of the organisation. I'm a member of the RAP committee as well as part of the Community of Practice addressing Aboriginal homelessness. In general, just being active in bringing in an Aboriginal voice for Aboriginal issues and homelessness. (consultation participant)

These stresses can contribute to a high rate of Aboriginal staff turnover, which creates issues with consistency and building lasting and trusting relationships.

Survey data demonstrated that a gap in understanding between managers and practitioners about whether and what kinds of mechanisms were in place to support Aboriginal clients and staff to resolve issues in a culturally appropriate way (57% of managers thought such mechanisms were in place, 58% of practitioners thought such arrangements were not in place or didn't know). Comments demonstrated that while a range of different mechanisms were used, there was considerable scope for improvement.

6.4.3 Mainstream services don't provide services appropriate to Aboriginal clients

The survey asked all respondents whether their organisation provided services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Of the 203 responses, 43 per cent answered their organisation did not provide Aboriginal specific services; 27 per cent provided Aboriginal specific services but were not contracted to do so; and a further 27 per cent were contracted to provide Aboriginal specific services.

The survey and consultations found that the main way programs sought to ensure Aboriginal clients were supported in culturally appropriate ways were by referring to Aboriginal specific services, by employing Aboriginal staff, and having policies in place and cultural competence training available. At the same time there is an acknowledgement that these mechanisms may not be enough. Balancing this, several programs have put in place specific mechanisms to facilitate genuine engagement with local Aboriginal communities.

The evaluation finds that while there are some notable exceptions, overall, the NSW homelessness sector has a limited view of what constitutes culturally appropriate services and that there is considerable room for improvement. There is uneven awareness across the sector of the ACCORD and a lack of practical strategies for its operationalisation. It is necessary to grow the cultural competence of the sector for meaningful engagement with Aboriginal communities and to provide culturally appropriate services.

6.4.4 Cultural competence training needs to be more relevant to local Aboriginal communities

Most NSW homelessness sector organisations require their staff to undertake cultural competence training. The survey showed that while MTS cultural competence training was widely accessed, it did not fully meet organisations' needs and two thirds of practitioners had accessed cultural competence training in other ways (this was of 173 practitioners surveyed who answered this question). Some staff refused to do the MTS training because of wording that they regarded as inappropriate. Aboriginal consultations highlighted a need for more locally specific and meaningful cultural competence training. They noted that more in-depth involvement with local culture and communities was needed and that cultural competency training should be delivered by someone with lived experience of local culture.

The delivery of training should be by someone who actually knows what Aboriginal culture is like, especially when you are living off-country in a refuge or homelessness environment. (consultation participant)

6.5 Issues facing ACCOs

6.5.1 ACCOs play a peripheral role in provision of services

Only two percent of SHS organisations are ACCOs. Despite the sectors' heavy reliance on Aboriginal led organisations to provide culturally appropriate support to SHS clients, Aboriginal organisations felt themselves to be disadvantaged in their ability to directly access funding for providing an SHS service. Some organisations felt they were on the periphery of the service structure. The way this was described by participants in the Aboriginal consultations was that Aboriginal organisations are frequently called upon to provide support to the SHS sector, but they are not part of the sector. As one participant described it:

Organisations feel they are a resource to the sector rather than being part of the sector. (consultation participant).

The Going Home Staying Home reforms of the NSW SHS policy and funding have had detrimental impacts on NSW Aboriginal organisations. Due to the reforms, many Aboriginal organisations lost their funding or experienced a substantial decrease in funding, and now face substantial barriers to accessing direct funding for the provision of SHS services. The reforms also impacted Aboriginal organisations' ability to access housing for their clients. Nonetheless, Aboriginal organisations are frequently called upon to provide culturally appropriate support for

SHS clients. This places high demands on these organisations, as the clients referred to them almost always experience high and complex needs, there is only a small number of Aboriginal organisations and a high level of demand for their services, and the funding received by Aboriginal organisations is not concomitant with their responsibilities.

6.5.2 Subcontracting arrangements do not build capacity of ACCOs

Organisations can make alliances using a range of agreements. Agreements are formally regulated through a document that covers the roles and responsibilities of each party. Agreements may be non-financial and/or financial depending on their purpose, may also be formed for the purpose of contracting with government agencies. The three types of working agreements most commonly seen with homelessness service providers are alliance, consortium and joint venture.²²

The evaluation finds that very few Aboriginal organisations were funded directly by DCJ to deliver homelessness services; most provided homelessness services in partnership with mainstream organisations through arrangements such as JWAs, MOUs or other informal arrangements. Since the Going Home Staying Home reforms, these arrangements have been a key mechanism to connect Aboriginal organisations with the NSW homelessness sector. Previous research has suggested that 'JWAs were extremely difficult for both the lead and non-lead organisations, and required significant support from the Industry Partnership and FACS', and 'procurement and early implementation of the reform reportedly caused substantial damage to relationships between services, in multiple areas and across the sector' (valentine et al. 2019: 6)

Participants in Aboriginal consultations were critical of JWAs as a vehicle to integrate Aboriginal organisations into the SHS sector and grow the capacity of Aboriginal organisations. Participants noted that there has been little increase in the funding associated with JWAs since they were introduced and that to date, there has been no systematic review of whether JWAs are working well.

Participants felt that support to assist Aboriginal organisations to become stand-alone providers of SHS was lacking and that JWAs were not effective in building the capacity of Aboriginal organisations. Most JWAs did not include funding to support organisational capacity building and JWAs were often under-resourced in terms of providing and funding training, assisting organisations to achieve accreditations (such as ASES), and funding to pro-actively manage the relationship between JWA partners. One participant noted that since the introduction of JWAs, no Aboriginal organisation had achieved a status as an independent provider due to their involvement in a JWA.

Some participants in the Aboriginal consultation indicated that at an operational level their program or organisation had good working and collaborative arrangements with the partnering mainstream organisation, including regular meetings and shared resources. However, other organisations felt their inclusion in the JWA was a 'tick box' exercise rather than a fully-fledged partnership. Some mainstream organisations had multiple JWA's with Aboriginal organisations and felt that these worked well.

Heavy caseloads and high client complexity impacted most JWA partners. Participants observed that although Aboriginal clients were sometimes assessed as having low-to-medium needs, in their experience most Aboriginal clients had high and complex needs. This mismatch between the support contracted and the work required, impacted JWA partners' ability to manage their caseloads and meet KPIs.

Several participating organisations collaborated via MOUs. Some organisations used MOUs in addition to JWAs, others used MOUs and were not in a JWA. In one example, an Aboriginal organisation had an MOU with a mainstream organisation to provide cultural support to Aboriginal clients, but no brokerage money was associated with this support.

²² NSW Department of Family and Community Services (2016) *Joint Working Agreement Guide for Homelessness Services*, Sydney, https://www.housing.nsw.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/387131/Final-Joint-Working-Agreement-Guidelines-for-Homelessness-Services.pdf.

6.5.3 Smaller ACCOs struggle with ASES compliance

Participants in the Aboriginal consultations had diverging views on ASES. Larger organisations embraced ASES as a way to build capability within the organisation and across the sector and increase Aboriginal organisations' ability to access funding. Smaller Aboriginal organisations viewed ASES as an administrative burden and felt ill-equipped, even with support from Homelessness NSW, to undertake the accreditation. Organisations that struggled to achieve ASES feared this would further disadvantage them in their capacity to access SHS funding from DCJ.

6.6 Increasing mainstream organisational engagement with ACCORD

The survey asked respondents about what steps their organisation had taken to operationalise the ACCORD and increase its impact. Responses highlighted that many were unaware of the ACCORD or wanted further information and training about it. Some felt the ACCORD was too abstract and needed to be backed up with concrete actions to embed it in the organisational culture. Poor resourcing of partner Aboriginal organisations constrains usefulness of information sharing and collaboration. While some programs had taken steps to ensure the ACCORD was integrated with their RAP and their organisation's overall strategy, other organisations were only beginning to operationalise the ACCORD in meaningful ways. Managers identified the following mechanisms to support clients to resolve issues in a culturally appropriate way:

- RAP planning and worksite policies and procedures
- Sanctuary model
- access to an external mentor
- staff have access to culturally appropriate clinical supervision and appropriate meetings
- Aboriginal retention strategy
- cultural supervision for Aboriginal staff
- cultural competency handbook that specifies the supports and systems for Aboriginal employees.

6.7 Growing the capacity of Aboriginal organisations to become part of the homelessness sector

Consultation participants identified a range of barriers and opportunities to growing the capacity of Aboriginal housing and SHS organisations.

Several respondents felt that Aboriginal organisations were not well integrated into the SHS sector. A key issue was that there were only four ACCOs in NSW. Very few Aboriginal led organisations received direct NSW State Government funding to provide SHS services. Most Aboriginal organisations linked with the NSW SHS sector either through JWAs (see above), MOUs or through informal arrangements.

Several respondents expressed that there was a need for more Aboriginal homelessness providers in the sector. Discussions of what was needed to grow the capacity of Aboriginal organisations to provide SHS services included developments in the following areas:

6.7.1 New Business models

There may be opportunities to develop business models that will increase capacity. Ideas included:

- **Connecting SHS with community housing:** Building up the Aboriginal housing sector to enable them to diversify business and start looking into becoming SHS providers. Moving Aboriginal housing providers towards a prevention model around sustaining housing may be part of this so that they are rewarded for reduced exits (they currently operate mainly as rent collectors and should shift their practices to assist tenants to sustain their tenancies by using social landlord case management approaches).

- **Creating consortia:** Several smaller Aboriginal SHS providers could form a consortium to become a larger SHS provider.
- **Mainstream-Aboriginal collaboration:** There might be stronger and more genuine collaboration between Aboriginal and mainstream organisations, including through MOUs to create partnerships such as resource sharing or workforce sharing agreements.

6.7.2 New governance arrangements

Increased capacity and accountability mechanisms are needed at a governance level to get better outcomes:

- **Governance improvements:** Growing organisational capacity includes improved governance structures at both board and operations levels of an organisation.
- **Outcomes orientation:** KPIs for service delivery to Aboriginal clients, most of whom experience high and complex needs, should be outcomes oriented rather than time limited. There is need for a better understanding of Aboriginal clients requiring long-term support and intensive engagement.

6.7.3 Building know-how and compliance

- **Cross-sector information:** Homelessness NSW could help Aboriginal organisations to gain a better understanding of the homelessness sector. Setting up forums or information sessions for organisations interested in moving into the homelessness sector could create a better understanding of sector and required preparations, such as accreditation and operational changes. This could create more interest, involve more communities, including creating employment in remote areas, and help expand services.
- **Obtaining more compliance:** ASES and compliances are tools that allow Aboriginal organisations to apply for grants and SHS funding.

6.8 Attracting and retaining Aboriginal staff

6.8.1 Recruiting and training Aboriginal staff – focus on lived experience

Consultation participants identified that systemic issues are prevalent in 'closing the gap' in Aboriginal employment, including better recognition of lived experience and the role of local communities. Thus, generic approaches to recruitment often exclude Aboriginal applicants on the grounds that they do not fit the formal selection criteria. However, participants noted that several Aboriginal and mainstream organisations have successfully developed innovative approaches to recruiting Aboriginal workers at all levels. These approaches include connecting with local Aboriginal communities to find suitable people to fill the position, providing cadetships for people with lived experience and providing support and training to build formal skills and capabilities as part of employment. (See example1 for alternative approaches to training and recruiting Aboriginal workers.) One participating mainstream organisation works closely with the local TAFE to bring in Aboriginal students to create pathways to employment. Consultation participants identified the need for other forms of training, such as applied training, peer training and mentoring.

In relation to Aboriginal board members, the consultations identified the importance of acknowledging community connections and lived experience equally to formal qualification. Participants noted that a genuine commitment to having more than token representation on the board was needed. Some organisations, including mainstream organisations, had made commitments to having high levels of Aboriginal representation on their board and were close to achieving this. This included having a deliberate recruitment strategy for Aboriginal staff, including developing a strategy to become an employer of choice.

If you want genuine Aboriginal people on a board there should be more acknowledgment, valuing of lived experience and standing in local community, rather than qualifications and background checks as main criteria. (consultation participant)

6.8.2 Support to sustain Aboriginal staff

Consultation participants highlighted the need to provide cultural support to keep workers strong so they do not burn out, and keeping staff safe from expectations to be too personally involved. In some instances, there is an expectation that Aboriginal staff have 'all the answers' or are the 'expert' with all the solutions, which can lead to them being exploited and not valued.

For clients there is a lot of support, but not so much for staff. (consultation participant)

Participants noted that there are limited opportunities for cultural supervision for staff and there is a lack of an Aboriginal specific support program for workers to call to talk through issues, such as the Employee Assistance Program (EAP).

An Aboriginal worker can be in the same position as the clients, which is different from non-Aboriginal workers. (consultation participant)

Aboriginal workers can have positive experiences working in mainstream organisations if the right supports and processes are put into place.

I haven't worked for an employee that felt more comfortable with than [name of mainstream organisation]. (consultation participant)

7. Priorities for the Future Strategy 2020-2024

This evaluation sought to evaluate outcomes from the Strategy 2017-2020 and identify priority areas to inform the development of the Future Strategy 2020-2024. This section provides recommendations for improving the Future Strategy 2020-2024, drawing on the findings of this evaluation.

The goals of the Strategy 2017-2020 were:

- **Goal 1 – Service quality, sustainability, and good practice:** To provide quality services to service users that are trauma informed, sustainable and demonstrate good practice
- **Goal 2 – Service integration:** To provide service users with integrated services coordinated at local, district and state levels, that are accessible from multiple points of entry (i.e., embodies a ‘no wrong door’ approach)
- **Goal 3 – Outcomes indicators and measurement tools:** To work towards standardised, measurable outcomes for service users to assess the effectiveness of the sector
- **Goal 4 – Workforce Development:** To ensure a highly skilled, motivated and stable homelessness workforce.

The goals of the draft Future Strategy 2020-2024 are:

- NSW SHS are equipped to deliver quality supports and services, within a trauma informed framework
- NSW SHS are equipped to measure and demonstrate the outcomes and impact of their service
- NSW SHS workforce is skilled and capable at all levels, including leadership
- SHS within NSW are supported to network and collaborate
- SHS across NSW are sustainable
- across NSW, SHS provide culturally safe and competent services for Aboriginal clients and communities.

Overall, the evaluation finds that the 2017-2020 Strategy has been effective in supporting the homelessness industry and workforce development in NSW. For example, 85 per cent of managers in the Workforce Survey thought that the IP had been effective or very effective in responding to sector needs in the past 12 months. ASES support (ASES webinars, ASES policy and procedure manual, ASES how-to guides) stood out, as it met the needs of most programs. The Portal and Network meetings also rated highly.

The key area for improvement is in assisting the sector to increase its cultural competence and safety to better meet the needs of Aboriginal clients, who make up around a third of clients, and CALD clients. For Aboriginal cultural safety this will involve:

- improving cultural competence training delivered through the MTS
- developing mechanisms to embed processes for cultural appropriateness and safety in the daily practice and management of sector organisations in meaningful ways, for example through an updated ACCORD

- providing more and better opportunities and tailored supports to recruit and retain Aboriginal staff in the sector, especially at senior, management and executive levels
- increasing the capacity and number of Aboriginal led organisations in the sector

Better meeting the needs of CALD clients may require engaging with CALD organisations and ethnic community peaks.

7.1 How well was the strategy delivered and communicated to the sector?

Workforce Survey findings and focus groups show that overall, the 2017–20 Strategy was well implemented and delivered. The impact of COVID-19 on the sector was widely acknowledged. Overall, 85 per cent of managers thought that the IP had been effective or very effective in responding to sector needs in the past 12 months.

Overall, IP initiatives and messages were well communicated to the sector. However, not all messages from the IP reached all parts of the sector workforce equally. As a result, not all sections of the workforce are aware of all IP initiatives and opportunities that were relevant to them. For example, around a third of Workforce Survey respondents were unaware of Network Meetings. The evidence indicates that messaging about the ACCORD and cultural competence needs improving. While most managers were aware of the ACCORD, many practitioners were not.

7.2 Goal 1 – Service quality, sustainability, and good practice

The IP provides supports that aim to improve service quality, sustainability, and good practice. These include ASES, CoPs, sustainability health check tools, and Good Practice Guidelines and training. The Workforce Survey showed that managers thought many of these initiatives met sector needs, with especially ASES and the BNG Portal receiving high approval ratings (Figure 3).

7.2.1 Maintain a focus on ASES and provide more support to smaller organisations

ASES are a key tool to help organisations continuously improve their services and achieve service standards. The Workforce Survey showed the ASES supports provided by the IP were well utilised and received by the sector. However, the qualitative data from focus groups and Aboriginal consultations paints a more nuanced picture and showed that some organisations struggled with ASES. Smaller organisations especially were challenged by the resource commitment required to achieve ASES accreditation. Conversely, some larger organisations that were also housing providers or delivered a range of services other than SHS struggled with the need to achieve multiple accreditations.

Recommendation 1: Maintain a focus on enabling SHS organisations to deliver quality supports and services by becoming ASES accredited and provide continued support for smaller organisations to achieve this accreditation to ensure they do not get left behind.

7.2.2 Review and reinvigorate communities of practice

CoPs are an important mechanism for collaboration, learning and sharing of good practice. The evaluation found that while most managers and practitioners view CoPs as meeting their needs, about 1 in 5 workers do not have access to a CoP and around a third found that CoPs did not meet their needs. Focus group participants identified that some CoPs could be city-centric and that some could be improved in terms of facilitation.

Recommendation 2: Continue to support existing CoPs but review all existing CoPs with a view to improve relevance to regional and remote areas and strengthening facilitation of the groups.

7.2.3 Sustainability coaching

The Workforce Survey found that 73 per cent of practitioners felt sustainability coaching met their needs, this was the case for only 29 per cent of managers. This indicates a need to investigate why sustainability coaching is not meeting managers' needs and adjust the initiative to meet this gap.

Recommendation 3: Review sustainability initiatives to ensure they meet the needs of both, managers and practitioners.

7.3 Goal 2: Service integration, networking and collaboration

7.3.1 Continue and strengthen support for collaboration between agencies, programs, and practitioners

Effective collaboration is key to the sustainability of the sector as it enables pooling of resources, facilitates better services and better client outcomes and allows services to support each other. The Workforce Survey showed that all programs collaborate with other organisations, either via MOUs (85%), informal agreements (70%) and JWAs (35%). At the program level, collaboration is usually formalised. At the practitioner level, informal arrangements are the main form of collaboration. Barriers to collaboration included tendering practices and competition, different ways of working, referral practices, breakdown of communication, lack of capacity within the sector, and staff turnover.

The IP already provides a range of initiatives to facilitate and support collaboration, including CoPs and biannual Network Meetings. The evaluation found that CoPs Network Meetings are effective in communicating up-to-date sector information but around one third of respondents were not aware of the Network Meetings.

It is recommended that the Future Strategy 2020-2024 continue and improve initiatives that support collaboration.

Recommendation 4: Improve and continue support for collaboration via CoPs and Network Meetings and address ways to increase awareness of the latter and address barriers to attendance.

7.4 Goal 3: Outcomes indicators and measurement tools

7.4.1 Review or supplement client satisfaction survey questions

The annual client satisfaction survey is a key mechanism to measure the outcomes and impact of SHS. The Workforce Survey found that most managers (61%) and practitioners (92%) thought the client satisfaction survey provided them with information that met or partially met their needs. Nevertheless, there is an opportunity to review the survey to ensure its ongoing currency and relevance, especially to managers.

Recommendation 5: Consult with the sector to review and revise the client satisfaction survey to identify areas for improvement and ensure its ongoing currency and relevance.

7.5 Goal 4: Workforce development - skills and capability, including leadership

The IP provides a range of activities that support workforce development, including the L&D Framework, the MTS Training Calendar and the Workforce Capability Framework. These frameworks and services are cornerstones of the IP and remain relevant to the ongoing strategy. The SHS L&D framework and MTS portal provide a range of training resources relevant to new and more experienced workers, comprising core and specialist training.

Most managers (85%) were aware of the Capability Framework and most (75%) thought it met their program's needs. Focus group participants found that it was beneficial for organisational planning.

The Workforce Survey showed that uptake of MTS training across the sector was high, practitioners and managers felt adequate skill development opportunities were available to them and that MTS training better prepared them for their job.

Several areas (mainly in the training offerings) are identified for strengthening and improvement which are outlined below.

7.5.1 Develop and implement a formal mechanism to review the L&D framework

The IP currently has no formal mechanism in place to review the L&D framework. This is a gap which constrains the IP's ability to keep the current and refresh the framework as needed.

Recommendation 6: The IP should develop and implement a formal mechanism to review the L&D framework.

7.5.2 More relevant induction training and progression after this

The Workforce Survey showed that induction training is frequently accessed by new staff and is generally well received. However, more than a quarter of managers thought it does not meet their program's needs and 11% did not know. There was also a need for a clearer progression around training after induction.

Recommendation 7: Review the induction training component of the L&D Framework and MTS training for currency and relevance.

7.5.3 Virtual and face-to-face training offerings

There is a high uptake of MTS training across the sector and online delivery of training in response to the COVID-19 pandemic has broadened access for those in rural and regional areas. However, focus groups and comments made in the Workforce Survey many affirmed the continued importance of face to face training as it facilitated networking and collaboration and people have different learning styles.

Recommendation 8: Review the L&D Framework and MTS training with a view to providing a mix of face-to-face and online delivery modalities to increase accessibility of MTS training.

7.5.4 Flexibility in times and frequency of training

Barriers to accessing MTS training include courses often being booked out, courses being not available when and where needed, and practitioners and managers lacking time to access training. These barriers could be addressed by having greater flexibility in how, how often and when training courses are provided. This means increasing the availability and frequency of courses that are in high demand. Focus groups also suggested an appetite within the sector for courses that are delivered in a way that allows students to pace their own learning and assessment tasks.

Recommendation 9: Increase the flexibility of how, how often and when MTS training courses are provided.

7.5.5 Diversified training for experienced practitioners

Many NSW SHS workers have been in the sector for a long time and have already completed most MTS training. There is an appetite for more diversified training, especially around advanced and specialist skills (e.g., around advanced mental health).

Recommendation 10: Increase access to advanced and specialist training, either through MTS or partnerships with other training organisations (e.g., professional associations, universities, TAFEs).

7.5.6 Consider ways to better utilise highly educated staff

The NSW SHS workforce is highly educated, yet many workers feel their skills are not being fully utilised, which impacts the wellbeing, capacity and utilisation of the workforce.

Recommendation 11: Address how existing workforce skills can be better used to create more effective and supportive work environments.

7.5.7 Improve cultural competence training and CALD specific training

Staff skills and capabilities largely meet the needs of the sector. However, there is a need to review and improve cultural competence training in relation service provision to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In addition, the L&D Framework needs to remain current and relevant to the cultural competences required to provide support to those with CALD backgrounds.

Recommendation 12: Revise MTS training content and availability in relation to the skills required to deliver support for those with CALD backgrounds.

7.6 Culturally safe services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Issues around culturally safe and competent services emerged as a key theme in the evaluation.

Recommendation 13: Include the provision of culturally safe and appropriate services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as one of the goals of the Future Strategy 2020-2024.

Specific initiatives are detailed below.

7.6.1 Improve capacity to provide culturally appropriate services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

The NSW homelessness sector is nominally committed to providing culturally appropriate support to Aboriginal people. This means organisations (generalist and specialist) need to provide culturally competent services and choice. However, the evaluation finds that while there are some examples of good culturally appropriate support being provided and some organisations are at the forefront of collaboration, many programs and organisations could improve how they collaborate with Aboriginal communities and provide support.

Recommendation 14: The IP should provide leadership, education and training to assist NSW homelessness sector organisations to further develop and strengthen their capacity to provide culturally appropriate services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

7.6.2 Providing culturally appropriate services

A key issue relates to how mainstream organisations and programs understand culturally appropriate support to look like. While the evaluation identified several programs that have put in place specific mechanisms to facilitate genuine engagement with local Aboriginal communities, more often culturally appropriate services and support were lacking.

Most often programs considered themselves to provide culturally appropriate and safe services and support if they referred clients to Aboriginal services or organisations, employed Aboriginal staff, had policies in place, and/or required staff to undertake cultural competence training. The danger is that these mechanisms can be ‘tick box’ exercises that do not result in culturally appropriate support. For example, having a policy is not the same as embedding the policy to shape the way the organisation operates. Mandatory cultural competence training is only as good as the training that is provided and does not necessarily lead to greater collaboration between local Aboriginal communities and SHS services. Employing only a few Aboriginal staff members to address culturally specific support places undue expectations and pressure on those persons – it is important for responsibility to be shared and preferably involve more Aboriginal staff. Referring to Aboriginal services places additional strain on these services since they are often under-resourced and not funded to provide SHS services.

Recommendation 15: Supporting and train leaders in NSW homelessness sector organisations to develop and strengthen their capacity for meaningful engagement with Aboriginal communities, and to strengthen the provision of culturally appropriate services for Aboriginal clients by building upon and extending models that already successfully do this within the NSW homelessness sector.

7.6.3 Localised cultural competence training

The evaluation found that MTS cultural competence training was widely accessed, but often did not fully meet organisations’ needs, and two thirds of practitioners had accessed cultural competence training in other ways. Aboriginal consultations highlighted a need for locally specific and meaningful cultural competence training, and greater involvement with local culture and communities. Aboriginal consultations suggested that cultural competence training should be delivered by someone with lived experience of local culture, for example by identifying local providers and partnering with Aboriginal organisations and communities.

Cultural competence training is also relevant to government departments and the housing sector. This includes growing an understanding of the additional work Aboriginal staff and organisations. For example, the expectation by Aboriginal communities that Aboriginal staff and services be in the community and be available when needed, instead of just working from the office.

Recommendation 16: Review the content and mode of delivery of cultural competence training, including relevance of content and delivery partners.

7.6.4 Refresh, promote and operationalise ACCORD

The ACCORD is an important document and set of guiding principles intended to close the gap in Aboriginal homelessness. Many organisations have signed up to the ACCORD. However, COVID-19 has negatively impacted adoption and dissemination of the ACCORD, as responses to the pandemic took priority. Furthermore, awareness of the ACCORD is uneven across the sector and that it has not always been implemented in meaningful ways. This has limited the impact of the ACCORD.

To ensure that it remains current and meaningful, the IP should treat the ACCORD as a process that requires continual renewal, refinement and promotion. Many consultation participants expressed a desire that the ACCORD be complemented with practical strategies that can be used to embed the ACCORD within their organisation.

Recommendation 17: The IP should refresh the current ACCORD to ensure ongoing currency.

Recommendation 18: Promote and provide education and training about the ACCORD to increase knowledge across all levels of the sector, and especially among practitioners, and to assist organisations to implement the ACCORD in meaningful ways.

Recommendation 19: Link the ACCORD to practical strategies that will enable organisations to implement and embed the ACCORD in ways that impact organisational ways of doing things.

7.6.5 Supporting Aboriginal workers

The evaluation found that Aboriginal workers face unique challenges. A low proportion of Aboriginal workers within the sector, a large number of Aboriginal clients, and strong community ties and cultural obligations mean that Aboriginal workers carry a disproportionate load. These stresses can contribute to burn out and a high rate of Aboriginal staff turnover. In some instances, there is an expectation that Aboriginal staff have 'all the answers' or are the 'expert' with all the solutions, which can lead to them being exploited and not valued.

While there are a range of mechanisms to support Aboriginal workers, and some organisations demonstrate high levels of support for their Aboriginal workers there is considerable room for improvement.

Recommendation 20: Develop advocacy, education and training material for the sector to enable Aboriginal workers to be better supported. This could include, but is not limited to, cultural support and supervision, culturally specific employee assistance programs, and keeping staff safe from expectations to be too personally involved.

7.6.6 Attracting and retaining Aboriginal staff

The evaluation found that most NSW homelessness sector organisations have a very low proportion of Aboriginal staff. Recruitment of Aboriginal staff occurs mainly for entry level roles, and more Aboriginal people are needed in senior and executive roles and on boards. Creation of new roles (e.g. at Cert 4) and training opportunities (leadership training, traineeships) are all methods organisations have tried to attract Aboriginal staff.

Many mainstream organisations that participated in the evaluation indicated that they struggled to attract and retain Aboriginal workers. Generic approaches to recruitment often exclude Aboriginal applicants on the grounds that they do not fit the formal selection criteria and discount lived experience and community connection. Aboriginal consultations showed that several Aboriginal and mainstream organisations (e.g., Bungaree) have developed effective ways of finding, training, and keeping Aboriginal workers at all levels, but that this will require a shift in thinking.

Successful approaches include connecting with local Aboriginal communities to find suitable people to fill the position and providing support and training to build formal skills and capabilities as part of employment. There is a need for other forms of training, such as applied training, peer training and mentoring. Acknowledging community connections and lived experience is equally important to formal qualifications. Successful approaches provide support to enable Aboriginal staff to advance to leadership positions.

Recommendation 21: Consult with organisations that are leaders in Aboriginal employment to develop and support approaches to increase the proportion of Aboriginal workers in the NSW homelessness sector.

7.6.7 Growing the capacity of Aboriginal organisations

The evaluation found that Aboriginal organisations are not well integrated into the NSW homelessness sector. While Aboriginal organisations are viewed as an important resource to the sector, they are not part of the sector and don't play lead roles. Most do not receive direct funding from DCJ to provide homelessness services. This creates equity issues and constrains organisations' capacity to deliver the needed quantum and intensity of services required by Aboriginal clients, most of whom experience complex issues. It is important to ensure that subcontracting and collaborative arrangements do not lead to adverse outcomes for Aboriginal organisations.

Recommendation 22: The Future Strategy 2020-2024 should have a view as to how contracts and funding can effectively build capacity in Aboriginal organisations so they might aspire to take on greater responsibilities around service provision in future.

Some Aboriginal organisations, especially smaller ones, struggle to achieve ASES accreditation, which constrains their ability to bid for funding contracts, build capability and remain sustainable.

Recommendation 23: The Future Strategy 2020-2024 should commit to providing additional support to Aboriginal organisations to achieve ASES accreditation.

At the time of writing, subcontracting JWAs were a key mechanism by which to integrate Aboriginal organisations into the NSW homelessness sector. The evaluation finds that while this arrangement has had positive outcomes in some cases, it represents a missed opportunity to grow the capacity of Aboriginal organisations in the NSW homelessness sector. Since the Going Home Staying Home reforms no systematic review has been undertaken to ascertain the effectiveness of JWAs, including their role in growing the capacity of Aboriginal organisations to become stand-alone providers of SHS. This evaluation found that while JWAs worked well for some organisations at the operational level, in many instances JWAs did not benefit Aboriginal organisations. Limited resourcing for capacity building and training contributes to the failure of JWAs to provide a mechanism by which to grow the capacity of Aboriginal organisations.

Recommendation 24: Undertake a systematic review of subcontracting arrangements (especially JWAs) to assess whether their continued use benefits Aboriginal organisations and what alternatives are available. This could form part of the impending review by DCJ of the NSW Homelessness Strategy and/or Evaluation of the SHS program.

7.7 Ensure SHS across NSW are sustainable

The draft Future Strategy 2020-2024 includes a goal to ensure SHS across NSW are sustainable. This goal is supported by evaluation findings, which identify several issues that should be a priority for the sustainability of the NSW homelessness sector.

7.7.1 Defining sustainability

The evaluation finds that the IP at present has no clear definition of what sustainability means (e.g., financial, workforce, cultural, organisational). This constrains the IP's ability to target and develop initiatives to assess and strengthen sustainability of the sector.

Recommendation 25: Clearly define what sustainability means, how it can be measured and what activities will support increasing sustainability of the sector for both, large scale and smaller organisations.

7.7.2 Assess financial sustainability of the sector and diversify income base

The evaluation finds that the NSW SHS sector is heavily reliant on government funding; the Workforce Survey showed that for 90 per cent of organisations government income is the primary funding source. Risks arise where organisations or programs cease to receive government funding, which can imperil their ability to continue to deliver services and remain sustainable. This risk is more acute for smaller organisations, which lack the capacity to cross-subsidise programs from their other activities. The danger is that smaller organisations with specialist skills that support particular cohorts are disadvantaged in their access to funding and resources compared to large organisations that deliver many different programs across a number of locations, but that may be less specialised. The heavy reliance on government funding has implications for the way in which services are delivered and outcomes accounted for, as service models tend to be prescribed by funding contracts.

Recommendation 26: Develop a clear understanding of the sustainability of the NSW homelessness sector's funding base and investigate avenues to diversify revenue income sources, especially for smaller organisations.

7.7.3 Consider enhanced role for ACCOs within the sector

Aboriginal organisations struggle to access direct government funding to provide SHS services. Despite the high proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients, few Aboriginal controlled organisations receive funding from the NSW Government to provide homelessness services, with other Aboriginal organisations working together with mainstream organisations via JWAs. Meanwhile many non-Aboriginal organisations are contracted to provide Aboriginal specific services and have varying capacity to do so. It is questionable whether an SHS sector, which relies heavily on Aboriginal organisations to provide culturally specific support yet places Aboriginal organisations at the periphery of the sector in terms of funding and support given to them to operate and grow their capacity, is sustainable. The IP is well positioned to participate in a review process and to facilitate a dialogue between Aboriginal services providers and DCJ to identify models of service delivery and funding that would suit Aboriginal providers.

Recommendation 27: Consider new ways of contracting Aboriginal organisations in the provision of SHS services with a view to enabling greater access to direct and adequate funding for these organisations and ensuring recognition, sustainability and safety for Aboriginal staff.

7.7.4 Increase Aboriginal staff including in leadership

The evaluation finds that there is a need to increase the numbers of Aboriginal staff, especially in leadership positions and on boards. This might include tailoring recruitment procedures, developing non-exclusionary job selection criteria (e.g., focus on community connections and lived experience), tailored training and career pathways, having more Aboriginal specialist roles and roles designated for Aboriginal workers, and working with local communities and elders. The evaluation showed that there are mainstream and Aboriginal organisations in the sector that are leading the way in recruiting Aboriginal staff and providing culturally safe workplaces. There is scope for these organisations to mentor other organisations in the sector to grow their capacity.

Recommendation 28: Develop the capacity NSW SHS organisations to recruit and retain Aboriginal staff.

7.7.5 Promote entry of newer employees to replace those ageing out of sector

The Workforce Survey and focus groups revealed that at present there are low numbers of new workers entering the NSW SHS workforce and some organisations are struggling to find qualified staff to fill positions. The possible impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of worker burnout, a low proportion of younger workers and limited opportunities for career advancement are negatively impacting on the sustainability of the workforce. The sector has an ageing workforce and rejuvenating the workforce is important for sustainability.

Recommendation 29: Address workforce renewal, including strategies to improve the attractiveness of the sector for new and younger workers and to develop pathways for job progression.

Appendix 1: Focus Group Questions

Introduction

1. Short presentation on Homelessness NSW Industry Partnership initiatives
2. How effective has the current Homelessness Industry and Workforce Development Strategy 2017-2020 been?
 - What worked well, what did not work well?
3. Training, staff skills and capability
 - Which MTS training was most useful?
 - Do you access training from sources other than the MTS Training Calendar? What is the reason for this? What type of training is this?
 - How are you currently approaching the recruitment of board members with lived experience?
 - What services would you like to see from the Communities of Practice?
 - What do you think are the training needs into the future (e.g., trauma informed approaches)?
4. Culturally appropriate services
 - What are the barriers to effectively implementing the Redressing Aboriginal Homelessness Accord?
 - What are the barriers to increasing awareness of the ACCORD across all levels of NSW homelessness sector organisations, especially front-line practitioners?
 - What support do services need to assist with the recruitment and retention of Aboriginal staff? Including professional/career development
 - Do you consider the cultural competency training provided through the MTS calendar to be helpful? In what ways? How could this be improved?
5. Collaboration
 - If you are in a JWA, how do you approach collaborative working and providing supporting to the partner organisation?
 - If you are not in a JWA, how can mainstream organisations support Aboriginal clients? What alternative agreements do you have in place?
6. What are the main risks to sustainability of NSW homelessness sector organisations, and what would help overcome these risks?
 - financially (reliance on specific funding sources)
 - organisationally (staffing; systems; policies and procedures; contractual arrangements; governance, leadership, skills)
 - strategically (how well can the sector understand, prepare, and respond to changes in the broader external environment)
 - for Aboriginal led organisations
 - for organisations that are subcontracted to provide homelessness services
7. Overall, what should be the priorities for the future strategy?



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