



VACCA
Connected by culture

VICTORIAN ABORIGINAL CHILD CARE AGENCY

Return to Country FRAMEWORK

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the children, young people, their families and their communities for generously sharing their experiences of Return to Country so that others may benefit from this opportunity.

Thank you to the Return to Country Framework Reference Group who contributed their time, expertise and insight to clarify the vital role Return to Country has in meeting the cultural connection needs of Victorian Aboriginal children and young people.

Thank you to GEGAC and VACCA staff, the DHHS, our partner Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and Community Service Organisation's for their contribution to the final framework.

Finally we would like to acknowledge the significant contribution of Link Up Victoria to this initiative. Their experience in supporting members of the Stolen Generation to Return to Country has provided valuable information and insights. Many of the tools provided in this framework were developed by Link Up Victoria and modified to support Return to Country for Children and Young People.

The tools in this publication were developed by VACCA in partnership with the Australian Catholic University. They are part of a set of tools for Aboriginal children and young people. More tools and guidance are available on VACCA's website. These are based on the Kids Central Toolkit, available at http://www.acu.edu.au/about_acu/faculties_institutes_and_centres/centres/institute_of_child_protection_studies/kids_central_toolkit

The graphics in this publication were designed by Reanna Bono and Emma Bamblett and should not be reproduced in part or whole without the prior authorisation of VACCA.





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The Return to Country Framework

The Return to Country Framework will guide Return to Country programs undertaken by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations across Victoria. In the interim it will guide the Return to Country Program Pilot to be implemented by the Gippsland and East Gippsland Aboriginal Cooperative (GEGAC) and the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) in 2017, while encouraging flexible responses to the needs and circumstances of Aboriginal children, young people, their families and their communities.

It is envisaged that the Framework will be complemented by a program practice guide to be developed by each Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation delivering Return to Country in respect to:

- Organisation policy and procedure
- Local cultural protocols contacts, and
- Resources.

The Return to Country program is a celebration of Aboriginal cultural practice. It recognises the impact of disconnection on identity, health and wellbeing and is about knowing who you are, where you come from and what this means. It incorporates people, land, water, language, kinship systems, law, knowledge, values, beliefs and spirituality. It is about a shared history and shared memories, healing and resilience, survival and pride.

'Culture defines who we are, how we think, how we communicate, what we value and what is important to us. For Aboriginal people, land, the kinship system, spirituality are the foundations on which culture is built. For an Aboriginal child to grow into a strong Aboriginal person they must be supported to learn about, maintain and grow in their knowledge and connections to land, family, community and culture. If these elements are not present in their life, it will significantly impact on their social, emotional, health, educational and psychological development and wellbeing throughout their childhood, adolescence and adulthood' (VACCA, 2015).

Importantly, Return to Country is a representation of how the 'Best Interests of the Child Framework' and the 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Placement Principle' can intersect successfully to enhance practice and meet requirements to:

- protect the Child and Young Person from harm
- protect his or her rights and
- promote his or her development (Best Interests of the Child Framework: Children, Youth and Families Act, 2005) and
- recognise the importance of each child or young person staying connected to their family, community, culture and country (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Placement Principle: Children, Youth and Families Act, 2005).

Much of what is recommended in the Framework is already in practice and illustrates the commitment of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and the Victorian Aboriginal Community to celebrating and restoring culture and keeping our children and young people safe. Therefore, rather than an end point, the framework reflects ongoing organisational and community processes with the ultimate aim of providing opportunities for all Aboriginal children and young people to learn about and practice their culture inclusive of an understanding that this practice is empowering, supports connectedness, instils hope and optimism about the future, identifies meaning in life, and makes self-determination possible. Our vision is that our children and young people will be proud to be Aboriginal and will thrive.

The CEO of VACCA, Muriel Bamblett recently stated that *'Aboriginal children's rights are based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and with rights comes responsibility. As Aboriginal people we have a responsibility to ensure the survival of Aboriginal culture and there is no better way than through our children. Aboriginal children also have a right to know where they are from and a right to native title. Therefore it is critical that they not only have a paper connection to land but also experience it'*.



The Return to Country Project

As part of the Roadmap for Reform service system improvement, the Victorian government has committed to providing Aboriginal Return to Country cultural and family connection programs for 20 Aboriginal children or young people residing in out of home care in the Gippsland Region over an 18 month period. The Return to Country Project has two phases: **Phase One** is the development of a Return to Country Framework and **Phase Two** is the implementation of a Return to Country pilot in Gippsland commencing in January 2017. This is a report of **Phase One** of the project.

The Return to Country Partners

This is a joint initiative of GEGAC and VACCA with funding from the Department of Health and Human Services: Child Protection.

GEGAC

Located in Bairnsdale in East Gippsland, GEGAC is the primary provider of health and allied services to the Aboriginal community of East Gippsland and also provides Out of Home Care (Foster & Kinship Care), alcohol and drug and HACC services across Gippsland.

GEGAC currently provides: Primary Care Services; Aboriginal Medical Service, Dental Services, Early Years services, out of home care programs, Family Support services, Allied Health, Chronic care, Koori Maternity Service, HACC and Elders services, Drug and Alcohol, Youth Emergency Accommodation, men's and women's family violence services, mentoring for young Koori men, cultural camps and emergency support. GEGAC also provides a gathering place, community BBQ's, meetings and healthy lunches specifically for Elders on a regular basis. GEGAC provides services to all Aboriginal people residing in their catchment area.

The Traditional Owners of Gippsland

The Return to Country Program Pilot will take place on the land of the Gunaikurnai people who are the traditional owners of Gippsland.

*'There are approximately 3,000 Gunaikurnai people and our territory includes the coastal and inland areas to the southern slopes of the Victorian Alps. Gunaikurnai people are made up of five major clans: **Brabralung**: Brabralung people in Central Gippsland, Mitchell, Nicholson and Tambo Rivers; south to about Bairnsdale and Bruthen; **Brataualung**: Brataualung people in South Gippsland; from Cape Liptrap and Tarwin Meadows east to the mouth of Merriman Creek; inland to near Mirboo; at Port Albert and Wilsons Promontory; **Brayakaulung**: Brayakaulung people around the current site of Sale; Providence Ponds, Avon and Latrobe rivers; west of Lake Wellington to Mounts Saw Saw and Howitt; **Krauatungalung**: Krauatungalung people near the Snowy River. Cape Everard (Point Hicks) to Lakes Entrance; on Cann, Brodribb, Buchan and Snowy rivers; inland to about Black Mountain; and, **Tatungalung**: Tatungalung people near Lakes Entrance on the coast; along Ninety Mile Beach and about Lakes Victoria and Wellington from Lakes Entrance southwest to the mouth of Merriman Creek, also on Raymond Island in Lake King' (Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation, 2016).*

VACCA

VACCA is the lead Victorian Aboriginal child and family welfare agency and works in service delivery, advocacy and training. VACCA is the largest Aboriginal provider of Out of Home Care with over 30 years experience in child and family welfare. VACCA delivers approximately 50 programs across the state, offering a broad range of services that seek to:

- Ensure child safety and community well being
- Provide targeted support for Aboriginal children, young people and their families
- Maintain strong connections to Aboriginal culture
- Promote culturally specific ways of growing up Aboriginal children

VACCA services are underpinned by principles of prevention, early intervention and therapeutic healing. They are premised on human rights, self determination, cultural respect and safety. They include all types of out of home care, supported play groups, cultural support planning, education, cultural activities, emergency relief, homelessness, drug and alcohol support, family mental health, justice services and family violence services including an Aboriginal Women and Children's Crisis Service. VACCA also delivers cultural training and developed resources for the Aboriginal Community and funded agencies.

The Return to Country Framework Development

To inform **Phase One** and the development of the framework:

- A literature review was undertaken
- A Reference Group comprising Aboriginal staff was convened and
- In-depth interviews and focus groups were undertaken with Aboriginal Community Elders, families, the Department of Health and Human Services, Community Service Organisations, and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.

Throughout the Framework composite client details are provided except in regard to Ruby and Sharlene, whose Return to Country journeys have been presented in previous forums and publications.

A series of discussions were undertaken with senior managers of GEGAC and VACCA to inform **Phase Two** the Return to Country Pilot Program Implementation Plan.

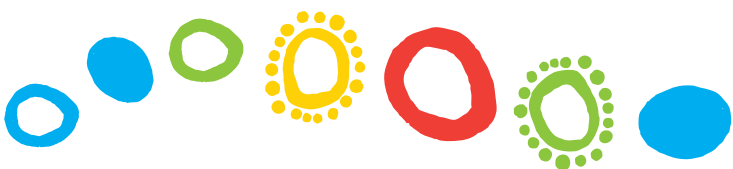
The Return to Country Framework Structure

The Framework provides a definition of what we mean by Return to Country. This is based on the experience of Aboriginal children, young people and their families and staff who have returned to Country. The framework is then divided into three sections. Section titles and content were derived from key themes identified as part of the consultation process and literature review and include:

- **Section One:** The Best Interests of the Child: Setting the Scene
- **Section Two:** The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Placement Principles: Relationships and Cultural and Emotional Safety; and, The Reunion
- **Section Three:** Return to Country Outcomes and the Reunion Report

Each section provides practice considerations and tools including checklists to support each phase of the Return to Country journey.

- **Section Four** comprises the GEGAC/VACCA Return to Country Program Pilot Implementation Plan



Return to Country: A Definition

Introduction: What we mean by Return to Country

'When we talk about Return to Country we mean more than putting your feet on the ground.'

This section discusses what we mean by Return to Country based on the Return to Country journeys of six families:

- Sharlene and her family
- Ruby and her family
- John and his family
- Annie and her family
- Joylene and her family and
- The Baxter family which includes twenty-seven children or young people and their families who meet annually On Country*.

*The broadest possible definition of families has been applied and includes for example parents, siblings, extended family and carers.

*Details have been changed to protect privacy.

The definition highlights each phase of Return to Country and includes:

- Setting the Scene
- Relationships and Cultural and Emotional Safety
- the Reunion and
- Reunion Outcomes and Evaluation

Setting the Scene

The majority of children and young people were placed with non Aboriginal carers and were in out of home care due to a range of reasons including family violence, family breakdown, and alcohol and other substance misuse. As expected time in out of home care varied according to age, significantly though for all the children and young people the out of home care arrangements were understood to be longer term. The children and young people were aged between 6 months and 17 years. Four Return to Country reunions took place in Regional Victoria, while two took place interstate, one in Queensland and one in New South Wales. Two reunions took place on the child or young person's father's country, while the others took place on the child or young person's mother's country.

Decisions about who would be involved in the Return to Country were made early on in response to a range of factors including the developmental age of the child, goals identified in Care Plans and in Cultural Support Plans and outcomes of Aboriginal Family Led Decision Making.

There were a range of Return to Country experiences:

- For Annie aged six months and Joylene aged four years, their journey included at least one biological parent as well as carers and staff. In Joylene's instance two staff members were required to support her Return to Country in light of an order requiring supervised access with her Mum at all times. A range of benefits were identified by staff where biological parents were involved in the Return to Country journey, including the opportunity to build or rebuild their own connections to family and culture and to establish or re-establish their relationship with their child in a culturally safe and supportive environment. This is exemplified by a comment Joylene's Mum made to her brother during a family reunion: *'we have family and they want us'*, giving hope to staff that through this Return to Country healing would come and with healing the possibility of a future reunification with her daughter
- Ruby aged fourteen years was supported by staff and a Victorian Community Elder Aunt Violet Harrison
- John thirteen years was supported by staff and his carer

- Sharlene seventeen years was supported by her Aunt Lynette, Aunt Sandra and Aunt Bonnie, who she said gave her an extra sense of connection as they have the same connections to community
- The Baxter family, a range of ages, were supported by Elders, family and carers. Notably the Baxter family involve and invite all their children's carers along to their annual reunions because they want *'to meet, get to know and thank the people who are looking after our babies.'*

Time Frames and Contact with Communities

The time frames for development and implementation of Return to Country varied. For Sharlene's family a Return to Country reunion happened within a few days to enable Sharlene to attend her father's funeral, while planning Ruby's reunion took over twelve months.

All children and young people were known to their families and communities, though for all families contact had been significantly disrupted. Critically staff supporting Return to Country were able to identify at least one family member and/or Elder who agreed to be the primary point of contact and were over time shown to be great organisers, who helped us navigate local cultural protocols and were instrumental in ensuring that the Return to Country was developed and owned by the family. Often our staff supporting Return to Country in Victorian Aboriginal Communities used their own knowledge, contacts and understanding of Community to find the right person.

On hearing about the proposed Return to Country, families and Communities on Country welcomed the opportunity to embrace their children and young people and have them home. At their end they made sure that all who needed to know about the Return to Country knew, gathered information about their ancestors and Elders and family history, who was married to who, how they were related, why family moved, stories of resistance and survival and photos, dream time and other significant Community stories and shared this information with the children and young people and their families at various stages of the journey to facilitate learning and support connection.

'Everyone in the family and the Community needs to be on the same page to make it work.'

Key Findings: Setting the Scene

- Return to Country is acknowledged as a remarkable opportunity for healing and is celebrated by children and young people, their families, their carers, their communities, and our staff
- Return to Country should focus on the needs of the child or young person and be responsive to their strengths, cultural hopes, aspirations and any worries they may have
- All Aboriginal children and young people in out of home care, regardless of age and circumstance can be supported to Return to Country - in fact, the sooner the better
- Every child or young person, family and community is different and every Return to Country will be different
- Return to Country should consider both the mother's and father's country
- Return to Country is not a linear process. Those staff supporting Return to Country were responsive to the needs and circumstances of each child, young person, their families, and their Communities On Country. They were flexible, patient and sensitive when dealing with the complexity associated with past and contemporary child removals, community loss and trauma and they planned accordingly
- Return to Country time frames will vary
- Establishing a relationship with an Elder or family member at the outset was essential to ensuring Community on Country readiness and ownership of the Return to Country
- Carers have a significant role in supporting their child's exposure to culture and contact with Community and family and are integral in sustaining the relationships required in the medium and longer term
- Aboriginal staff have the skills, knowledge and attitude required to successfully undertake Return to Country.

Preparation for Return to Country

Relationships and Cultural and Emotional Safety

Cultural Support Planning was considered fundamental in supporting the child or young person to safely connect to Country, Community and Culture. The Cultural Support Planning process establishes opportunities for children, young people and their families to determine: what is important for you to know about your culture, to share learning, decision making and agree to outcomes. This approach sets the standard for the ongoing relationship between the child or young person, their family, their carers, community and our staff and supports further safety considerations including that: *‘everyone, the child, their carer, their family and their community should have a role in Return to Country and a commitment to making it work.’*

Advice from Link Up Victoria with their many years experience in arranging family reunions, is that contact with family is a crucial part of ensuring Return to Country is successful. The most important aspect in preparing for Return to Country, therefore, is building relationships between children and young people, their carers, their families and their communities that will be sustained over time.

‘Ruby had not had much contact with her family in Queensland and her family had not seen her since she was an infant. Contact commenced and was maintained through phone calls, emails, text messages and face book and was an important step in getting the ball rolling on initial plans for the trip. In addition a number of other factors needed to be accounted for as part of planning for Ruby’s Return to Country. For example we needed to ask for permission from the local Land Council of Elders to step onto the lands of the Lama Lama and Wunta Wunta people and undertook consultation with Regional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Care, Link up Victoria and Link Up Queensland, Wuchopperen Child Services Cairns, Recognised Entity in Lockhart River, and Coen, Local Traditional Owners Council and Elders Council and family members’ (VACCA, 2015).

A key factor identified in the preparation stage of Return to Country was the need to keep everyone involved safe. All agreed that Return to Country is *‘inherently safe’* because it prevents the consequences of disconnection as experienced, for example by the Stolen Generations. Nevertheless, as an Elder said: *‘we do not want to re-traumatise our kids or our communities.’*

The assessment of risk and the development of a Wellbeing and Safety Plan is a key component in preparing for Return to Country. Staff working with children and young people spent as much time as was needed identifying any concerns or worries that a child or young person might have, and then building on that child or young person’s strengths and cultural aspirations to work through these concerns. The opportunity to discuss concerns and how people were generally feeling was also extended to carers, family and community members, and continued throughout the Return to Country journey.

Managing Potential Trauma

The Return to Country journeys described in this Framework went well. However, Return to Country Reunions do not always go as planned. Link Up Victoria, who work with members of the Stolen Generation, provided examples where family did not, for a range of reasons, want contact; or people found out that the mother they were looking for had recently passed or families could not be traced. To address the trauma, Link Up staff emphasised the need to provide the support necessary to assist people to work through any setbacks and disappointments. Importantly, Link Up explores a range of other ways that people can be connected to their culture so that healing can occur. For example, opportunities to participate in community events and cultural programs are offered, or they seek other members of extended family who are willing to connect. Careful assessment and planning on behalf of children and young people is required to minimise the potential for further trauma.

Key Findings: Relationships and Cultural and Emotional Safety

- The children and young people we work with are all at different stages of their cultural journeys. It is essential that each journey is underpinned by research and development work through the Cultural Support Planning process
- Engagement of traditional land owners and other Aboriginal services On Country is essential
- Cultural and Emotional Safety is maintained through building positive long term relationships, adherence to local cultural protocols, being clear about expectations, modelling respect, and planning
- It is critical that staff regularly check out how everyone involved in the Return to Country is travelling emotionally and provide support as necessary.

Return to Country: the Reunion

A Reunion proposal was co-designed in conjunction with the child or young person, their families, their communities and Care Teams for each Return to Country reunion. Each proposal included:

- The dates and location of the reunion
- Participants and their details
- The purpose of the reunion
- Travel details including flights, accommodation and hire cars
- A **Draft Itinerary** specifying:
 - Times and activities
 - Budget
 - Contact and emergency contact details
 - Any relevant information about the child and their family, which could include any medical issues or a genogram
 - Permissions, for example from the Care Team, to take the child or young person interstate
 - Approval from the delegated manager to undertake the reunion as planned.





Staff were clear that itineraries need to be purposeful but also allow ample down time so that our children, young people and families can experience the rhythm of day to day life On Country, and experience unplanned and naturally occurring interactions and events. As a staff member supporting Ruby said:

'We were taken around the town to meet the family. Everyone was so welcoming but their joy in seeing the kids was priceless. Everyone was taking photos with the kids. Josie had not seen the kids since they were small, and was so proud, showing the kids to family. We were all tired but getting on well...I stand back and watch the kids interact with their family. I am so proud of the way they are handling themselves with family, they are beautifully adjusted young people.'

Each child or young person's reunion itinerary was individualised. Reunions usually occurred over 2 to 3 days and included a mix, as appropriate of the following activities:

- Welcome Baby to Country for 0 to 6 year olds
- Ceremonies and rituals including graveside reunions. A staff member said:

'It's really important that we pay our respects to our dead and to our ancestors.'

- Cultural activities for example painting and dancing
- Hunting and fishing on their traditional lands, learning language and hearing stories from Elders
- Visiting sites of cultural and familial significance. A carer said:

'I hadn't understood the significance of culture until I saw the looks on their faces after we had visited the special places and spent time with their Elder.'

- Men's and Women's business
- Developing a Family Tree and learning about the stories of resistance, leaders and the specific circumstances of their own families, who and how people passed, why they moved and importantly, why children and young people are in care:

'I was able to explain to the young person, who was distressed that he wasn't in kinship care like his siblings that he couldn't blame his parents that his Mum had substance use issues at the time – she had spiralled out of control when her mother had passed and his Dad was a victim of lots of abuse and had been in the system – they were just unable to look after him. I explained to him that his carers loved him, like we his family loved him.'

- Time with family to yarn:

'We let the family have time with the kids without Richard, Auntie Violet and myself being here....Me and Auntie Violet were in the kitchen preparing for the BBQ, and through the louvres you could see the family and Ruby all sitting together and yarning and playing without being shame or needing us around. Me and Auntie Violet were yarning, saying that this is what it is all about and that is exactly what this trip needed to happen for Ruby. As soon as Josie, their maternal grandmother, sees the kids she bursts into tears. They are tears of sadness from so much separation and tears of joy in finally being together.'

- Taking photos, writing in a journal, presenting certificates:

'We made a certificate for each of the children, there was a background photo of the Murray River, welcome in language and pictures of family members, each certificate was personalised. We used them to explain how we were all connected. At our next reunion the Elders would like to give the carers a certificate as well, in recognition of what they do for our family.'

- Sharing food: Everybody spoke about the importance of sharing food and our staff spoke about the importance of our contribution (on behalf of the children, young people and their families) to the table. Staff said that when visiting they always took food and more food than was needed as a mark of respect
- Mutual gift giving: Children and young people gave family gifts they had made and framed photographs and were given framed photographs, personalised certificates and photograph blankets. Many children and young people were also able to take home art work that they had made On Country with their families

- There were also occasions where we paid for services provided On Country, including to Elders for undertaking Welcome to Country ceremonies or supporting visits to sites of significance and for any other reasonable expenses incurred
- Everyone spoke of the need to find out about, observe and respect cultural protocols. To foster respect we asked children and young people when buying keepsakes of their trip to buy artefacts produced by their Community. When John returned to Country he could not find a keepsake that met this requirement so chose not to buy anything and to return the money
- Importantly, the reunion must include time for fun. The Baxter family hire out the entire Caravan Park in their town for their annual reunions:

'We take it over and there is nothing like seeing all the kids running around and playing, laughing and enjoying each others' company. Seeing them all run around reminds me of when we were kids, when we used to camp on the river.'

- Finally, it is essential that to do what we say we are going to do:

'Sorry Business interrupted our first visit but we decided to proceed with the Return to Country because the kids were so excited.'

Key Findings: The Reunion

- Reunion proposals reflect the comprehensive planning and commitment required to support a successful Return to Country
- Each child or young person's reunion itinerary will be different and individualised
- Reunions should include time for fun because that's how children and young people learn
- Reunions should occur over at least 2 to 3 days
- The reunion is an opportunity for our staff to model respectful behaviour and set up relationships and connections for the future.

Outcomes from Return to Country

In essence, Return to Country is about strengthening an Aboriginal child or young person's Cultural Connections and the relatedness between cultural values, beliefs and practices, Country, personal identity, family, clan and community, history, symbolism, cultural expression and events as illustrated below.

Figure One: An Aboriginal Child's Cultural Connections



Return to Country enabled children and young people in a culturally safe and supportive environment to explore their cultural connections including questions about:

- Who you are (personal identity) – knowing you are an Aboriginal person, knowing your family name
- Who you belong to (family, community) – knowing your family and family connections, your clan and language group
- Where you belong (Country) – knowing your traditional land and the stories and totems of that land
- Where you come from (family history, Aboriginal history) – knowing your personal history, the history of your family and the history of Aboriginal peoples
- What you do (cultural expression and events) – participating in cultural events – creative, sporting and community events, learning Koori English and traditional Aboriginal words
- What you believe (cultural values, beliefs and practices) – values like prioritising family relationships and responsibilities, respecting Elders, sharing
- What symbolises your Aboriginal culture – things like the Aboriginal flag, Aboriginal art or music, Aboriginal role models.

Cultural Connections

Throughout the journeys represented here, there is evidence that these questions were explored:

- **Who you are** (personal identity) – knowing you are an Aboriginal person, knowing your family name

'He no longer talks about Aboriginal people like he isn't one, he talks about our Country, our stories, our people. He asked me the other day if he could join in (with the Aboriginal community in his placement Community) - that's the first time he has wanted to do that.'

- **Who you belong to** (family, community) – knowing your family and family connections, your clan and language group

'I watch Ruby sitting with her grandmother, great aunty and see three generations of Kulla Kulla women sitting around the fire yarning. Priceless moment! A special moment has been when family sang to the kids 'welcome home' song in language. I was doing ok until the great aunty starts telling me the words, and that makes me cry. Older community members remember

Ruby when she was small and you can see Ruby's mother when looking at her.'

'Since I've been back, I have had 50 family [members] friend me on facebook and I have been in contact with my brother who I haven't seen since he was a baby.'

'The kids have developed a strong connection with one another...they build networks with each other...face time between reunions. This is one of the things that they are really excited about.'

- **Where you belong** (country) – knowing your traditional land and the stories and totems of that land

'I have my brothers and sisters. I am proud to be Aboriginal and that I have two totems, a pelican and an emu wren. I am learning all about them and look here are pictures (of my totems) that I have been drawing'

- **Where you come from** (family history, Aboriginal history) – knowing your personal history, the history of your family and the history of Aboriginal peoples

'She has been in care for a long time and separated from her sister for 12 months, she is very traumatised and has been seeing a psychologist and her mother had just passed away. We sat down and were going through photos. This is my Dad, he is your uncle, this is your Mum, she is my aunty, we are first cousins... you could see that she now had a sense of place in the family. The psychologist said that she had come a long way since her Return to Country.'

- **What you do** (cultural expression and events) – participating in cultural events – creative, sporting and community events, learning Koori English and traditional Aboriginal words

'As part of the reunion we have cultural dance classes, for boys and girls, we then got them to do a performance, over the river at the Land Council, they were so excited and proud and we were proud. The carers were really engaged because they saw how excited the kids were.'

- **What you believe** (cultural values, beliefs and practices) – values like prioritising family relationships and responsibilities, respecting Elders, sharing

'Sharlene has returned to Country several times – always supported by her Aunties. Sharlene said that she was so thankful for the opportunity to reconnect with lost family members, forge new relationships with extended family and connect to her father's town.'

'Returning home gave me a sense of belonging that I have not had, it was so rewarding and so beneficial that I would recommend ALL Aboriginal children in care who have the opportunity to Return to Country- should be supported to do this.'

- **What symbolises your Aboriginal culture** things like the Aboriginal flag, Aboriginal art or music, Aboriginal role models

'He has a Koori flag on his bedroom wall. He is able to talk about what the colours on the flag mean and the history of the flag.'

Key Findings: Outcomes from Return to Country

- In essence Return to Country is about strengthening a child or young person's cultural connections
- It is about finding out:
 - Who you are
 - Who you belong to
 - Where you belong
 - Where you come from
 - What you do
 - What you believe
 - What symbolises your Aboriginal culture
- The hope is that children and young people will then be able to initiate their own and/or maintain connections: that they know who to ask and how to ask.



Framework Sections: Return to Country Program

Introduction

Each of the Framework sections provides:

- Practice considerations and
- Tools to support Return to Country program development.

The Framework Sections include:

- **Section One:** The Best Interests of the Child: Setting the Scene
- **Section Two:** The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Placement Principles: Relationships and Cultural and Emotional Safety; and, the Reunion
- **Section Three:** Return to Country Outcomes and the Reunion Report.

Section One:

The Best Interests of the Child: Setting the Scene

Aboriginal culture is a birthright and the journey begins as soon as you are born.

Things to consider: Setting the Scene

- Return to Country is acknowledged as a remarkable opportunity for healing and is celebrated by children and young people, their families, their communities, and our staff
- Return to Country should focus on the needs of the child or young person and be responsive to their strengths, cultural hopes, aspirations and any concerns or worries they may have
- All Aboriginal children and young people in out of home care, regardless of age and circumstance can be supported to Return to Country in fact the sooner the better
- Every child or young person, family and community is different and every Return to Country will be different
- Return to Country should consider both the mother's and father's country
- Return to Country is not a linear process. Those staff supporting Return to Country were responsive to the needs and circumstances of each child, young person, their families, and their Communities on Country, they were flexible, patient and sensitive when dealing

with the complexity associated with past and contemporary child removals, community loss and trauma and they planned accordingly

- Return to Country time frames will vary
- Establishing a relationship with an Elder or family member at the outset was essential to ensuring Community on Country readiness and ownership of the Return to Country
- Carers have a significant role in supporting their child's exposure to culture and contact with community and family and are integral in sustaining the relationships required in the medium and longer term
- Aboriginal staff have the skills, knowledge and attitude required to successfully undertake Return to Country

The following tools can be utilised to support the identification of a child or young person's strengths, cultural hopes and aspirations and any worries they may have about Return to Country. This information can be utilised to inform planning and ensure that we maintain a focus on the best interests of the child.

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All about me

The thing that's most special to me is...

The thing I like doing most is...

What I most want right now...

Draw a picture of yourself

I worry when...

I feel sad when...

To feel safe I need...

When I'm feeling sad I...

My favourite song is...

I want adults to know that I don't like...

When I am worried I like to talk to...



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Section Two:

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Placement Principle: Relationships and Cultural and Emotional Safety

Communities want to take back their children we all want to heal.

Things to Consider: Relationships and Cultural and Emotional Safety

- The children and young people we work with are all at different stages of their cultural journeys. It is essential that each journey is underpinned by research and development work through the Cultural Support Planning process
- Engagement of traditional land owners and other Aboriginal services On Country is essential
- Cultural and Emotional Safety is maintained through building positive long term relationships, adherence to local cultural protocols, being clear about expectations, modelling respect and planning
- It is critical that staff regularly check out how everyone involved in the Return to Country is travelling emotionally and provide support as necessary.

The Well Being and Safety Plan can be utilised to identify any potential relationship, emotional or cultural safety issues and strategies to address these issues. This information is critical to managing relationships and cultural and emotional safety and will help us maintain a focus on implementing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Placement Principle.

Return to Country

Child or Young Person's **WELLBEING** and **SAFETY PLAN**

Child or Young Person's Story: Briefly summarise the story

Child or young person's current family group: Provide names and contact details

Child or young person's health: Provide details about the child or young person's health and list the names of all medication

Child or young person's Doctor/health support: List doctor, psychologist, support workers and include contact details

Child or young person's wellbeing issues: What are the child or young person's wellbeing needs? How are these being addressed?

Child or young person's current supports: List all the clients' supports, i.e. other services, family, friends, etc (not health professionals)

Emergency Contact: List 3 emergency contacts name, address and phone number

Any other relevant information? Allergies?

Section Two:

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Placement: The Reunion

The more work undertaken prior to Return to Country the better the outcome.

Things to Consider: The Reunion

- Reunion proposals reflect the comprehensive planning and commitment required to support a successful Return to Country
- Each child or young person's reunion itinerary will be different and individualised
- Reunions should be fun because that's how children and young people learn
- Reunions should occur over at least 2 to 3 days
- The reunion is an opportunity for our staff to model respectful behaviour and set up relationships and connections for the future

The Return to Country Reunion Proposal and Checklist are provided to support planning for the Return to Country reunion.



Reunion Checklist

- ☐ Payment Requests followed up with a phone call to finance **AT LEAST 3 DAYS BEFORE DEPARTURE**
- ☐ Emergency Contact list including:
 - Child, family and staff contact details
 - Local medical services (GP, hospital, pharmacies)
 - Client and family emergency contacts
 - Catering
 - Support staff
- ☐ Travel Information to be checked and confirmed with workers and client
 - Travel dates, times meeting points
 - Taxi vouchers
 - Flight details especially connecting flight information
 - Car hire details
 - Car parking at airport
- ☐ Accommodation Details to be checked and confirmed with workers and child or young person
 - Name, location and telephone number of motel
 - Disability access if required
 - Meeting room availability
 - Credit card requirement addressed
- ☐ Details for family members and support workers:
 - Relationship to child or young person
 - Where are they from?
 - Who is their support?
- ☐ Copy of Reunion Agreement
 - Including Child or young person's Emergency Contact Details
- ☐ Copy of Client Rights and Responsibilities
- ☐ Reunion activity budget
- ☐ Reunion Itinerary/Activities/Resources/Gifts as appropriate
- ☐ Camera & charger (make sure camera is charged!)
- ☐ Relevant family history / tree / information
- ☐ Mobile phone and charger
- ☐ Laptop if required (check for power cord)
- ☐ Promotional items

Return to Country

Reunion Proposal

1. Child or Young Person's Personal Details

Name		Age	
Address			
Suburb			
Postcode			
Home Phone			
Work Phone			
Mobile			
Email			

2. Proposed Reunion Details

Date From		Date To	
Location		State	

3. Participants

Participants	Travelling from	Age	Relationship to Client

4. Child or Young Person's journey to reunion

Case background (child or young person's story)
Support provided by VACCA or GEGAC or CSO– records accessed, research, etc.
Family contact and involvement
Purpose of reunion – why chosen location, connection to traditional Country, who is involved and why/relationships, etc.
Other services/community involvement/roles, etc.

5. Travel Details

To Reunion						
Name	Departing location & mode of transport	Date	Time	Arriving at	Date	Time

From Reunion						
Name	Departing location & mode of transport	Date	Time	Arriving at	Date	Time

6. Draft Itinerary

Day and Date	Time & Activities

7. Budget

Items/Details		\$
Travel Allowances	Worker (insert name)	
	Child (1): (insert name)	
	Child (2): (insert name)	
	Add more children names as required	
	Sub-Total	

Items/Details		\$
Accommodation	Worker (insert name)	
	Child (1): (insert name)	
	Child (2): (insert name)	
	Add more children names as required	
	Sub-Total	

Items/Details		\$
Flights	Worker (insert name)	
	Child (1): (insert name)	
	Child (2): (insert name)	
	Add more children names as required	
	Sub-Total	

Activities	Day 1:	
	Day 2:	
Car Hire/Petrol		
Cab Charges		
Disposable Camera/s		
Miscellaneous	In case of emergency	
Photos		
Sub-Total		
TOTAL REUNION BUDGET		

8. Checklist

Pre-reunion: Strengths, aspirations and any concerns completed	
Cultural Support Plans and AFLDM	
Relevant written authority Department of Human Services, etc	
Wellbeing and Safety Plan attached	

9. Authorisation

Staff Member Signature: _____ Date: _____

Team Leader Signature: _____ Date: _____

Program Manager Signature: _____ Date: _____

Regional Director Signature: _____ Date: _____

Section Three:

Reunion Outcomes

Return to Country is the starting not the end point.

Things to Consider: Reunion Outcomes

- In essence Return to Country is about strengthening a child or young person's cultural connections
- It is about finding out:
 - Who you are
 - Who you belong to
 - Where you belong
 - Where you come from
 - What you do
 - What you believe
 - What symbolises your Aboriginal culture
- The hope is that children and young people will then be able to initiate their own and/or maintain connections. That they know who to ask and how to ask.

The Reunion Report

'We need to make Return to Country a rich, spiritual and healing experience.'

On return staff will complete a Reunion report. The reports included an evaluation of:

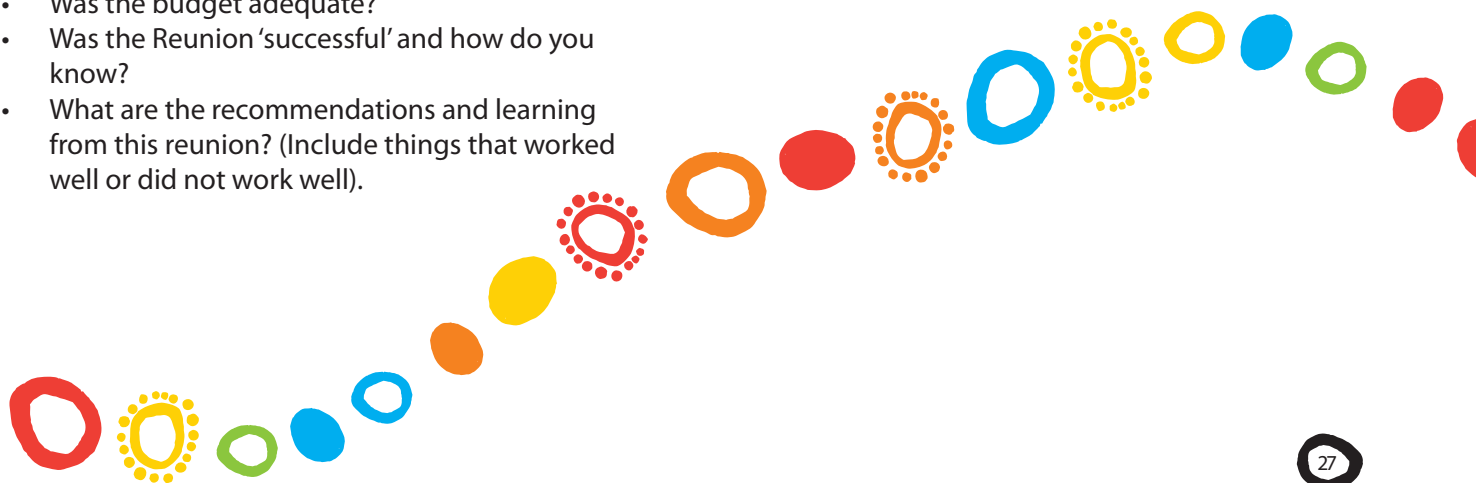
- How the child or young person was prepared for the Reunion and was this preparation effective?
- How was cultural and emotional safety managed during the Reunion?
- What feedback or comments did the child, young person and their families make during the Reunion?
- How effective or meaningful were the activities during the Reunion?
- Were the travel and accommodation arrangements suitable?
- Was the budget adequate?
- Was the Reunion 'successful' and how do you know?
- What are the recommendations and learning from this reunion? (Include things that worked well or did not work well).

Cultural Connection and Sustainability

The Reunion Report and the Child Journey Tool are designed to help us evaluate how the reunion went but more importantly to examine the efficacy of Return to Country in supporting the cultural and familial connectedness of children and young people overtime. For the Return to Country Pilot Program it is proposed that we complete the Child Journey Tool post reunion and at three monthly intervals, and ask the following additional questions at these intervals for the project duration:

- Is there ongoing contact with family through facebook, email, skype or other mediums?
- How regularly does this contact occur?
- Are future visits with family members planned or taking place and how are these visits being organised?
- Is there evidence that the Child or young person has an emerging understanding of:
 - Who you are
 - Who you belong to
 - Where you belong
 - Where you come from
 - What you do
 - What you believe
 - What symbolises your Aboriginal culture

Additionally, the Return to Country Program Pilot will undertake process and impact evaluation based on the experience of carers and staff through focus groups and in-depth interviews conducted as appropriate.



Return to Country

Reunion Report

Child or Young Person	
Worker	

Reunion Details

Location	
Dates and Duration	
Participants	
Other Services Involved	
Other Workers	

Reunion Details

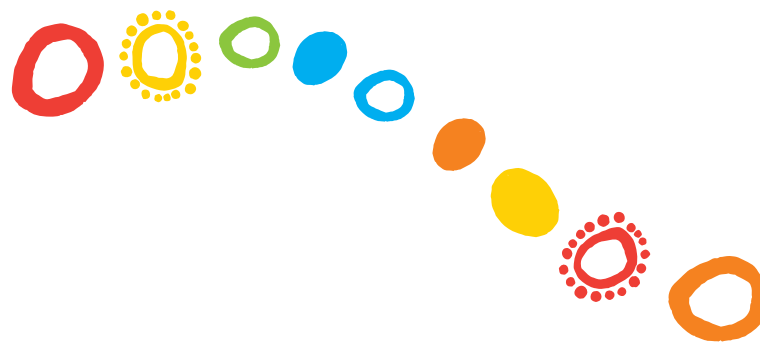
**Include a brief description of what this reunion was about, e.g. graveside reunion, return to country, client circumstances, etc.

Itinerary

Day 1	
Day 2	
Day 3	
Day 4	

Worker Evaluation

Pre-Reunion Preparation	<i>How the child or young person and their family was prepared for the reunion and was this preparation effective?</i>
Safety	<i>How were risks managed during the reunion?</i>
Child or young person's comments	<i>What comments did the client and family make during the reunion?</i>



Activities	<i>How effective/meaningful were the activities during the reunion?</i>
Travel Arrangements & Accommodation	<i>Were the travel arrangements suitable?</i>
Budget	<i>Was the budget adequate?</i>
Support from Other Services	<i>Was the support from other services appropriate?</i>
Quality of Reunion	<i>Was the reunion "successful" and how do you know?</i>
Recommendations	<i>What are the recommendations and learning from this reunion? (including things that worked well or did not work well).</i>

Child or Young Person's Evaluation

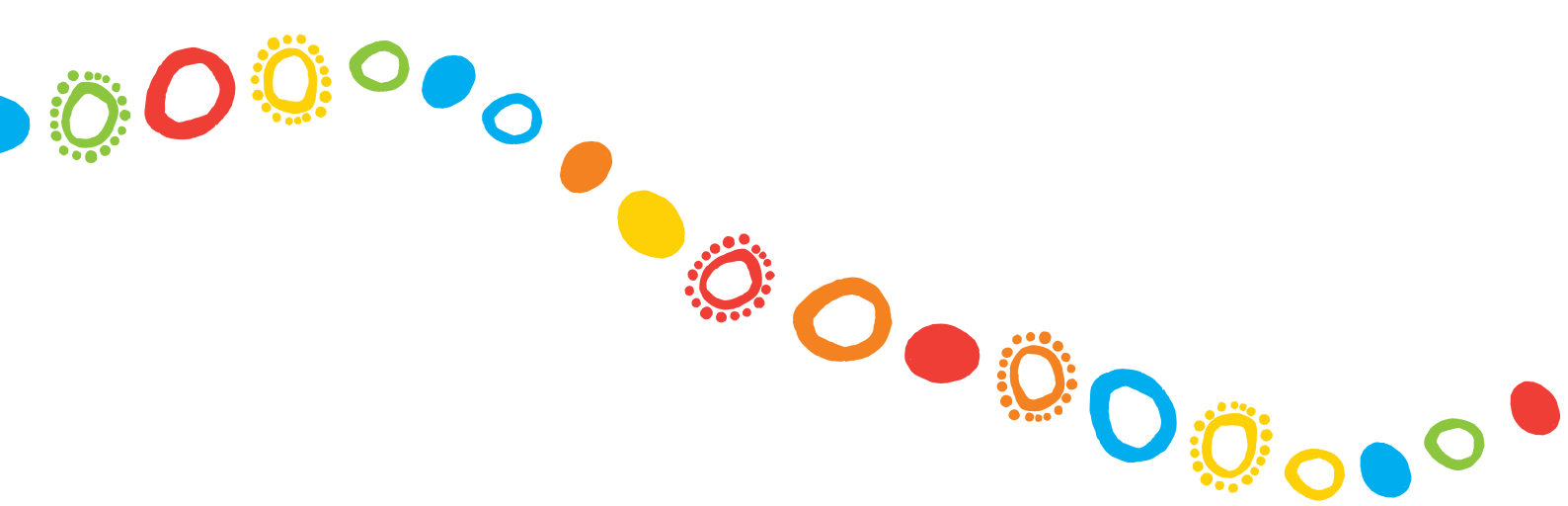
Has the child or young person completed an evaluation form?

YES/NO

Is the evaluation form attached?

YES/NO

If not, when do you expect the child or young person to complete and return an evaluation?



Post-Reunion Follow-Up

Post-reunion Support Required			
Service Provider			
Referred		Contact	
Last Contact with Client		Next Contact with Child or young person	

Final Comments

--

Signed: _____ Date: _____
(Staff Member)

Team Leader's Comments

--

Signed: _____ Date: _____
(Team Leader)

Program Manager's Comments

--

Signed: _____ Date: _____
(Program Manager)

My journey

Return to Country is a journey.

What are the important things that have happened to you on your journey?

Are there things that you want to know about your culture, your family, your community?



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Section Four:

Return to Country Program Pilot Implementation Plan

Framework Priorities

To enhance Return to Country work in a sustainable way within GEGAC and VACCA four key priority areas need to be addressed as part of the program pilot implementation:

1. Develop the Return to Country Pilot Program parameters and grow the organisational evidence-base for Return to Country
2. Build the capacity of Care Teams, VACCA and GEGAC workforces to undertake Return to Country work
3. Implement a quality improvement framework
4. Dedicated resource allocation

Key Priority Area 1 – Develop the Return to Country Pilot Program parameters and grow the organisational evidence-base for Return to Country

Strategy	Actions
Develop Return to Country Program Pilot parameters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish a Return to Country Program Pilot Implementation Steering Group to meet in mid January 2017 Develop Terms of Reference and a work plan to include: eligibility criteria, prioritisation and strategies to meet the 10 targets required, reporting and evaluation processes, a communication strategy and ongoing consultation processes including with for example Traditional Owners to develop locally informed cultural protocols to support the Return to Country Program Pilot to commence in February 2017 Develop a Return to Country Client database to support data collection to inform an evidence base

Key Priority Area 2 – Build capacity with the GEGAC and VACCA workforce

Strategy	Actions
Build capacity of Care Team, GEGAC and VACCA Workforces to undertake Return to Country	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote the Return to Country program to Care Teams, GEGAC and VACCA staff in the Gippsland area through dissemination of the Return to Country Framework, presentations at team meetings etc Provide orientation, training and ongoing mentoring support where identified to staff undertaking Return to Country Communicate program successes through VACCA and GEGAC Staff Newsletters and other mediums Develop a Return to Country Program Pilot Implementation Practice Guide

Key Priority Area 3 – Implement a Quality Improvement Framework

Strategy	Actions
Benchmark Return to Country activities at GEGAC and VACCA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop and implement an evaluation strategy inclusive of the completion of a Reunion Report, The Child's Journey Tool and in-depth interviews with staff and carers Provide quarterly evaluation reports to the Return to Country Implementation Steering Group Submit a final evaluation of the Return to Country program pilot to the Aboriginal Children's Forum at the end of 2019

Key Priority Area 4 – Dedicated resources	
Strategy	Actions
Increased financial resources	Funds have been committed to provide Aboriginal Return to Country cultural and family connection programs for approximately 20 Aboriginal children or young people residing in out of home care in the Gippsland Region. The Funds provided will be utilised exclusively to support Return to Country program reunions.

Implementing Framework Priorities

The Return to Country Program Pilot Implementation Steering Group will be formed and co-chaired by GEGAC and VACCA to oversee the implementation of the four priorities. Membership will be drawn from the existing Return to Country Reference Group and augmented as appropriate by staff of GEGAC and VACCA, the Department of Health and Human Services, and local Aboriginal Elders. Regular updates will be provided to the broader stakeholder group, for example through the Aboriginal Childrens Forum and the Out of Home Care Southern Initiative governance structures. The Committee will be supported by the Department of Health and Human Services Southern Division and the VACCA Projects and Reform Team, and will be tasked to develop a work plan with performance indicators and lines of responsibility for each action.

Bibliography

Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation (2016), 'Who are the Gunaikurnai', <http://www.gunaikurnai.org/who-are-the-gunaikurnai/#>.

VACCA (2015), 'Culture is Healing: Documenting Journeys to Identity and Belonging: VACCA Cultural Programs and Evaluation Report', *The Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency*, Melbourne, Victoria.

Victorian State Government (2005), 'Children, Youth and Families Act 2005', Melbourne, Victoria.





