TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS:

Corporate Services for Indigenous Primary Health Care Services

SUMMARY REPORT

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The Support Systems for Indigenous Primary Health Care Services Project was developed to gain knowledge about how to support the corporate functions of Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services (ACCHSs) and contribute to improving the sustainability of ACCHSs across Australia. This project was identified as a priority project by the Board of the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health following consultation with ACCHSs and key people working in Indigenous health.

Key aims

The key aims of the project centred around the questions:

- what are the corporate support needs of ACCHSs?
- how do ACCHSs get the corporate support they need?
- what organised support structures are required for ACCHSs to get the corporate support they need?

This work was NOT about identifying a 'one size fits all' approach. It was about describing and learning from a range of approaches used in different contexts and by different types of services.

What we did

The project began in 2008 and was done in two parts. Part 1 focused on corporate support needs and issues associated with obtaining support. Part 2 focused on existing models for corporate support and the lessons learned through developing and implementing these structures.

In Part 1 of the project we:

- looked at the literature for existing information about building capacity in Indigenous services, issues of doing this for a range of corporate functions, and types of corporate support currently provided and how they are provided
- did a limited national consultation with Chief Executive Officers of ACCHSs, staff of some affiliates, government officers and a researcher; the consultation focused on support needs, factors influencing support needs and the kinds of support ACCHSs currently get
- held a national roundtable to present the findings
- established the advisory group.

Services required support for various corporate functions. The most common support was for finance, governance, human resources and information technology.

In Part 2 of the project we:

- conducted a brief literature review
- identified four sites for case studies that demonstrated different corporate support models that ACCHSs have developed
- held a second national roundtable, which focused on suggestions about action for the future
- developed a decision-making tool for ACCHSs.

Factors influencing support

Many factors influence the type of corporate support that ACCHSs may need and how this support is provided. These are also determining factors for services to identify opportunities for partnerships around support or to implement a different way of receiving or providing support. These factors can be grouped into three main areas.

1. The broader environment

Factors include reform processes, jurisdictional issues, the way the sector is funded and associated administrative complexity, sector and organisational growth, and the other services that exist within a region.

Workforce availability and the capacity of organisations to attract and retain staff is clearly a factor that will determine the support an organisation might need. Corporate memory is often lost in organisations with high staff turnover, potentially creating a need for ongoing support.

2. Organisational factors

Factors include organisational type, size and complexity; location and multiple sites; capacity and capacity building strategy; reporting, compliance and accountabilities (including legal, corporate, community and cultural); relationship with government and funders; the uniqueness of systems in some organisations; and whether the organisation is also a support provider to others.

3. Community

Community capacity to participate and community expectations about local services are critical aspects of community-controlled services. Communities might need support to enable them to participate actively in decision-making.

Case study models

The intent of the case studies was to identify existing good practice in the provision of corporate support, to identify the issues experienced when establishing and implementing such support, and to seek information about what else could be done to enhance provision of such support. Key areas focused on include: history and development of the model, governance, organisation of the support structure, relationships between organisations getting support and those providing support, funding required and the types of support provided. Diagrams representing the types of models of the four case studies are on the opposite page.
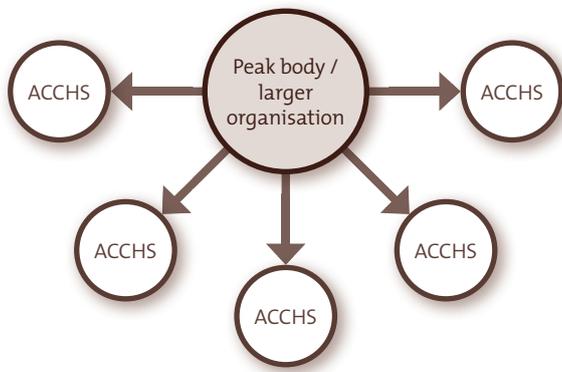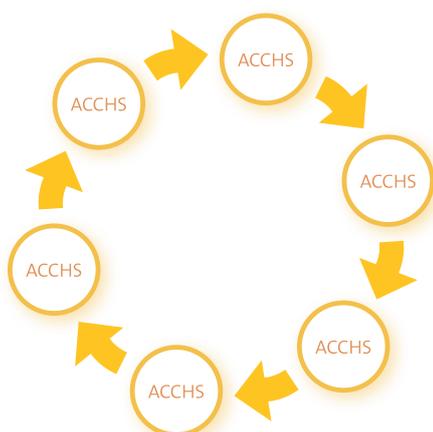
Large or peak organisation model – Queensland Aboriginal and Islander Health Council
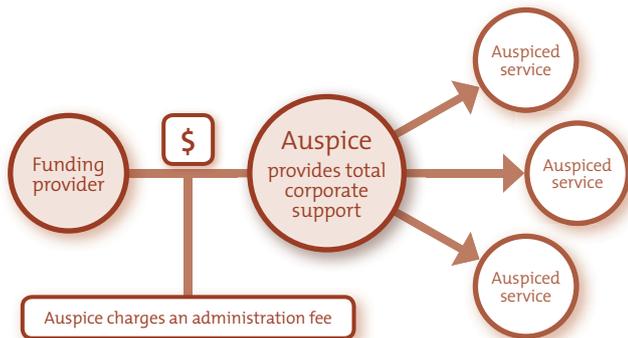
Auspice model – Central Australian Aboriginal Congress
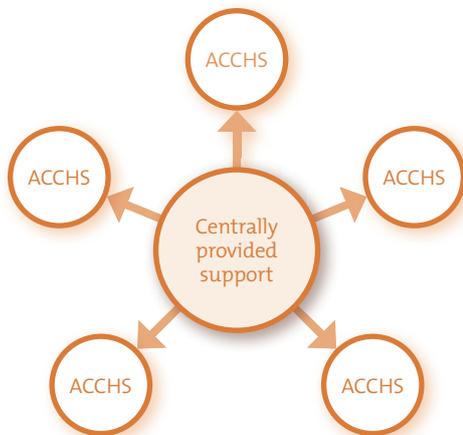
Regionalised or central support model – Katherine West Health Board

Peer support model – Bila Muuji Health Services Incorporated

Potential advantages of shared services

Advantages of developing shared corporate services or models have been identified. These include:

- achieving economies of scale and reducing doubling-up of effort
- building capacity to increase revenue
- providing support for small and/or emerging organisations
- enhanced business practices and improved effectiveness
- identifying issues common to a number of services
- coordination of workforce (and workforce strategies)
- enabling ACCHSs to focus on core business
- enabling access to high-quality specialist advice.

Potential risks of shared services

Risk factors include:

- the potential for loss of local community ownership and participation in decision-making
- making decisions about who holds the funds, how boundaries are determined and how equity is maintained
- making savings may provide funders with opportunities to reduce funding
- marginalisation of organisations that are not members of the shared support model
- members may opt out.

Key themes

The case studies show some of the significant work and effort invested in developing models for supporting the corporate functions of ACCHSs in Australia over many years. From this a number of important key themes emerged:

- **development from the ground up** – each model was developed by people working in the sector to address needs they had identified
- **voluntary participation** – participation in models was generally voluntary
- **visionary leadership** was required to lead development of new ways of thinking and working

- **good process** – having a good process for establishing a corporate support structure was critical. This means there is not a 'one size fits all' solution. Involving all potential participants in working through ownership issues, developing the 'rules' and identifying how different needs would be met were all essential parts of this process. Careful planning, including setting realistic goals and undertaking formal and informal review, are aspects of 'good' processes

- **internal versus external** – participating organisations need to make decisions about which corporate functions can be provided externally and which should be provided internally: these are influenced by the extent to which an organisation wants to maintain direct control over certain aspects of its service, by the local availability of skills, and by organisational capacity to train and/or employ relevant staff

- **governance** – where possible, organisations participating in a joint model should be represented in its governance structure, and a set of clearly articulated principles to guide joint activity is important

- **defined structures** – well-functioning support models had defined structures underpinning their work: this included formal agreements between participant organisations, mechanisms to ensure effective communication, and formal and informal review processes

- **highly skilled staff** – staff providing support need to be highly skilled, and flexible, be highly committed, be prepared to visit services, be approachable, be able to listen and be non-judgmental, and be able to maintain confidentiality

- **capacity building** – a capacity building approach was part of each case study and included direct skills and knowledge transfer; it also assisted organisations to create robust internal systems and processes

- **develop different levels of support** – all the support providers in the case studies generally used a number of mechanisms to achieve their goals, including providing support at combinations of local, community, regional, state/territory and/or national levels. The main mechanism was through direct support. Other mechanisms included facilitating training; having a help desk; meeting as a peer support network; developing templates, policies and procedures that could be adapted by organisations; facilitating development of local

networks; facilitating upgrades of infrastructure; and facilitating development of regional hubs to take on the role of corporate support

- **funding** – models were funded in a variety of ways and all required contributions from those accessing support – either through an administration fee, a fee-for-service arrangement or a membership fee

- **accountability** – support providers were accountable to support accessors either through governance arrangements, written agreements and/or through feedback mechanisms

- **clear benefits** – being able to demonstrate benefits that accrue from operation of a corporate support structure was important to maintaining engagement of organisations.

Healthy business tool

As a result of the knowledge gained from this project a decision-making tool has been developed to help ACCHSs decide their best strategy or model for getting support for their corporate functions. This tool can be found on the Lowitja Institute website (www.lowitja.org.au).

Further information

The project findings are reported in *Taking Care of Business: Corporate Services for Indigenous Primary Health Care Services*, which comprises three documents:

- *Overview Report*, with full details of the project

- *Case Studies*, with full details of the four case studies conducted for the project

- *Summary Report* (this document).

Copies of all three reports, including downloadable pdf versions, can be obtained from:

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