

ARTD Consultants

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Introduction

Their Futures Matter (TFM) is a landmark reform of the NSW Government to improve outcomes for vulnerable children, young people and their families and to develop a clearer picture of what is being achieved in the sector and what works.

In 2018, TFM piloted the **Aboriginal Evidence Building Partnership (AEBP)** to begin to build an evidence base of promising programs that anecdotally, are seen to be improving outcomes for Aboriginal children, young people, families and communities. The AEBP partners Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) with evaluation and evidence-building experts to strengthen the capacity of the sector to collect meaningful and measurable data to demonstrate program impacts.

Partners

Abcare selected ARTD Consultants as their partners in the AEBP pilot (2018-2019) and the partnership continues through other projects.

ARTD is a leading public policy consulting firm, with specialist expertise in working with government and non-government organisations to co-design service models; monitor and evaluate outcomes; and continuously improve performance. Working with Aboriginal people and communities has been a mainstay of ARTD's work since its founding by staff from an Aboriginal Training College in 1989.

Abcare is a non-government organisation that operates from Coffs Harbour, offering a range of family and community services to local Aboriginal people and families, focusing on empowerment and enhancing cultural values and wellbeing.

Objectives

The AEBP engaged ARTD to work in partnership with Abcare to build Abcare's organisational capacity to collect meaningful and measurable data to demonstrate the impact of their programs. In the first instance, this supported Abcare to sustain and improve its service delivery to improve outcomes for Aboriginal children and families. Secondly, the project contributed to building the evidence base around effective Aboriginal services, which is invaluable given the lack of evidence of 'what works' in Aboriginal policy contexts, and the importance of addressing the over-representation of Aboriginal people in the child protection and justice systems.

Rather than conducting an independent assessment or evaluation of Abcare's programs and outcomes, the AEBP's explicit intention was to build the evaluation capacity of ACCOs and their staff so that evaluation could be integrated as part of their day-to-day management and programming. This follows "empowerment evaluation" theory and the idea developed by Tony Dreise on his work on undertaking evaluation in Aboriginal contexts, that evaluation needs to be "built-in, not bolted on". Our work with Abcare ultimately aimed to foster a culture within the organisation of collecting, tracking and evaluating outcomes data to inform and improve their service delivery.

Methods

Over a period of 12 months, we worked closely with Abcare to:

- develop a program logic for their out-of-home care program, including a theory of change informed by relevant evidence and literature
- develop an outcomes matrix mapping how their program outcomes could be measured
- embed a validated tool for measuring wellbeing outcomes into standard program practice
- train staff in data collection systems and processes
- support staff to regularly report outcomes

- develop a new family preservation service in line with the literature around good practice, culturally safe and effective interventions for Aboriginal families
- develop funding applications for this new service.

Our work with Abcare on the AEBP was completed with a final report on the project delivered to TFM, outlining the significant progress made during our 12-month partnership.

Abcare was also offered ten family preservation packages to bring their new service model to life from 1 July 2019 on the back of the AEBP.

Lessons Learned

Value of genuine partnership and self-determination

A collaborative working partnership, built on regular communication, mutual understanding and respect, was critical to the success of the project. Self-determination is the gold standard for working with Aboriginal organisations. However, real self-determination is rarely applied in practice and particularly where research and evaluation are concerned. This project demonstrated a new and impactful way of working and contributed to Aboriginal community-owned solutions of what works. It fostered a self-determined and genuine partnership between us and our partner, Abcare.

We consider this project innovative because it embedded a partnership approach from the project inception. Our partner, Abcare, had the opportunity to select their evidence building partner with whom they wanted to work and this laid the foundations for a strong, collaborative working relationship that began in good faith.

Key to taking a collaborative approach was:

- placing culture at the forefront of all project activities and putting the needs of Abcare and their participants first
- maintaining regular communication throughout the project
- playing the role of an expert supporter or coach, rather than a supervisor.

Cultural competence matters

Our work with Abcare through the AEBP confirmed ARTD's belief in the importance of cultural competence when undertaking capacity building projects with ACCOs. The ARTD team, including Aboriginal leadership, brought extensive experience working with Aboriginal communities and organisations to this project. This experience framed an approach recognising the importance of relationship-building in the first instance and an emphasis on the core values of trust, reciprocity and mutual-respect in all our work together.

As consultants, we sought to work *with*, and not *for* Abcare and its community. From the inception of the project, we encouraged Abcare to take the lead in defining the direction and objectives of the project, recognising their knowledge and expertise in their area of work and of the community they service. We positioned ourselves as a "critical friend" providing guidance, seeking to work in the spirit of self-determination and genuine partnership.

"ARTD's work with us at all times demonstrated a sound understanding of effective ways of working with Aboriginal people and communities and using methods in a way that honoured Aboriginal self-determination and codesign."

Abcare



ARTD Consultants joined by Abcare at the Australasian Evaluation Society (AES) 2019 Awards night. Our work through the AEBP was awarded the Indigenous Evaluation Award.

Appetite for evidence

Our work with Abcare and other partners through the AEBP has shown us that there is significant appetite among Aboriginal organisations to collect, analyse and present their outcomes data. We know that many ACCOs across NSW are doing great things with community and achieving positive outcomes. However, reviews by the NSW and Commonwealth Government have consistently shown that these organisations often struggle to provide strong evidence of their good work. As the NSW Government shifts to an outcomes driven approach to funding services, it is vital that support is provided to organisations like Abcare to build their internal capacity to demonstrate their service outcomes.

From the inception of the project, Abcare staff were eager to adopt and embed new processes that they saw as invaluable to sustaining and improving their service for their local community. By the end of the AEBP, Abcare staff were independently developing new tools and processes for capturing outcomes for their new service streams. Witnessing this growth was incredibly rewarding.

Impact/What's Next?

Abcare proudly report having increased knowledge and understanding of outcomes data collection and have begun to build an evidence base through which they can demonstrate program outcomes. Their staff understand the value of program logics and are successfully administering validated tools and interpreting collected data. They have also made program refinements based on evidence. The Personal Wellbeing Index data they began to collect during the AEBP led them to better understand the level of uncertainty that young people leaving care were experiencing and they have strengthened their post-program support as a result.

On the back of successful completion of the AEBP pilot, TFM engaged ARTD to work with their Aboriginal Co-Design and Evidence (ACE) team to develop an overarching program logic, partnership guides, toolkits and policy documents for the AEBP's second round. This work will support new ACCOs participating in the AEBP, four of whom selected ARTD as their evidence partners for 2019-2020.

Acknowledgements

Coffs Harbour Aboriginal Community Care Centre Inc. (Abcare),

Their Futures Matter – Aboriginal Co-Design and Evidence (ACE) Team