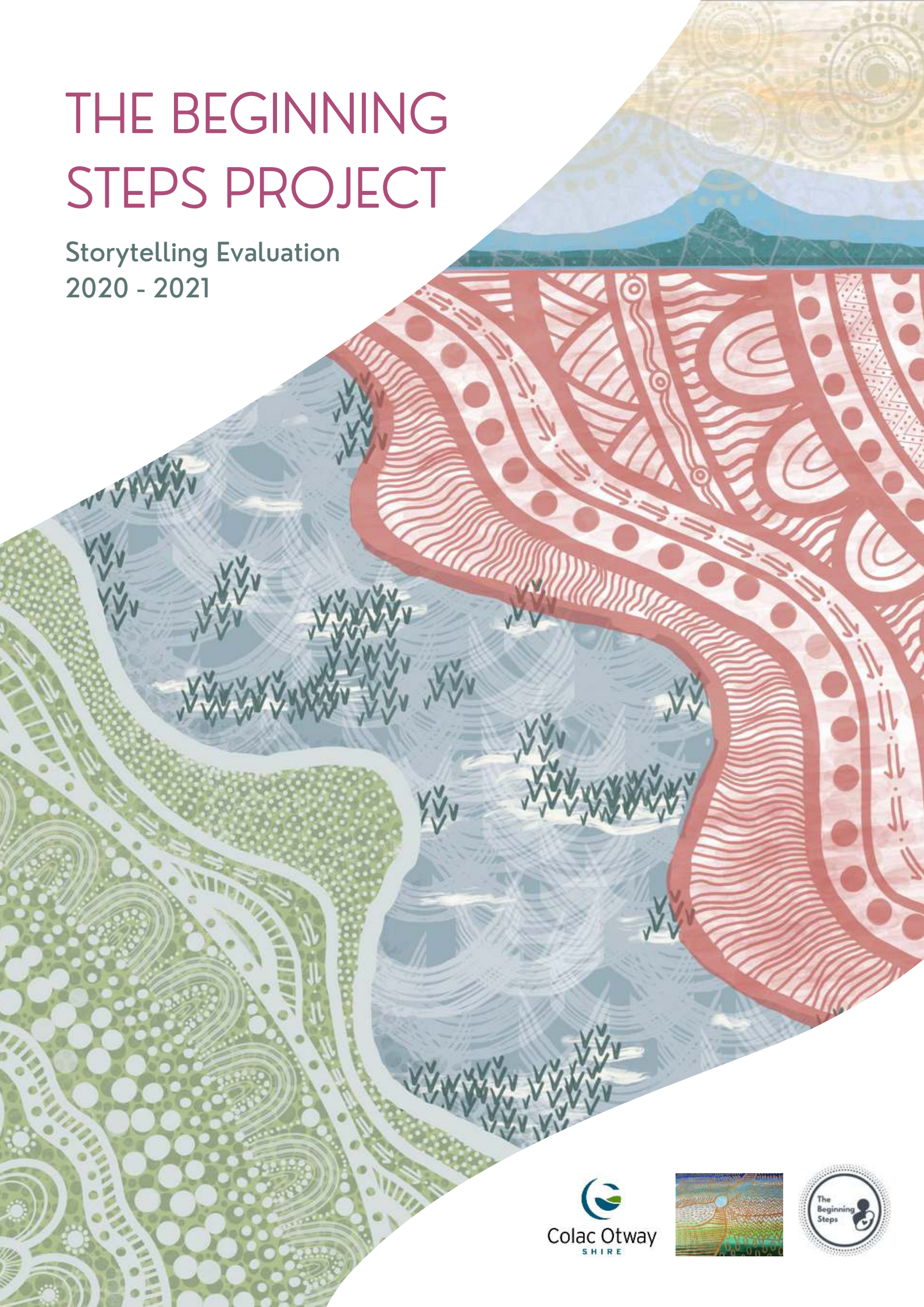


# THE BEGINNING STEPS PROJECT

Storytelling Evaluation  
2020 - 2021





## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

The Beginning Steps Project and the entirety of the Partnership Group Acknowledge Gulidjan and Gadubanud Country and her Peoples.

We pay out respects to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Members extending our gratitude for the opportunity to work on such a project with you and in this magic place.



## NOTE FROM AUNT

The design and implementation of The Beginning Steps Project has been a very special project to me, as a Senior Advisor and Barwon Area Lead for the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing but also just as importantly as a Maar Woman.

In both my personal and professional life it's both a privilege and a passion to be able to support initiatives that aim to design, deliver and implement culturally appropriate, respectful and welcoming spaces. Not only do these works demonstrate commitment to the local Colac Otway Aboriginal people and families, they work towards educating and facilitating spaces for truth telling.

Within the context of self-determination and reconciliation I am very proud to have been part of this project and encourage everyone reading to think about the role you play in removing the barriers indicated through this evaluation and to be leaders in nurturing connection and excellence for our youngest Community Members and their families.

Auntie Julie Jose  
Gunditjmara Woman  
DFFH



## EYES, EARS AND HEARTS PROJECT EVALUATION

This Evaluation has been developed to reflect and report on The Beginning Steps Project, based on Aboriginal Community Development principals and local protocol to the Gulidjan Peoples ensuring all Projects are maintaining links and pathways to use our Eyes, Ears and Hearts and the lessons they provide us within not only undertaking the project, but it's narrative and the collective data collated and final reports. It can easily be observed that the vast majority of work that's been undertaken to address issues faced by the Colac Otway Aboriginal Community has long been at the discretion of the western world and has placed our Aboriginal community in a position of 'otherness' and have had passive and limited success' if any at all. The Beginning Steps Project is unique in the way it's been able to walk alongside both community and stakeholders for the duration which has been able to grasp the complexity of the ontology, axiology and epistemologies of all sides. Using the Eyes, Ears and Heart as a guide is a decolonisation tool that facilitates deep knowledge and encourages deep reflection, active listening and healing, local knowledge tells us that if we have a problem the present way of doing things must change and the future is a space we can build together.

## BEGINNING STEPS OVERVIEW

The Beginning Steps Project brings together two DFFH initiatives, Healthy Babies, Strong Families funded by Health Initiatives, West Division, and The Beginning Steps funded from the Vulnerable Children's Initiative. The project aimed to build on the community engagement and strong partnerships at the Colac Aboriginal Gathering Place to engage and support Aboriginal families with babies and children to inform and co-design community and early year's supports, programs, and activities. As well as to improve the health and developmental outcomes of Aboriginal babies and Children in the Colac Otway Shire in partnership with the Colac Aboriginal Gathering Place and Aboriginal Community members. The key objectives of the project were to increase the participation and engagement of Aboriginal parents/carers in maternal, health, education, and social services and activities.

## FROM THE BEGINNING STEPS PROJECT COORDINATOR

For the last two years, I have worked as the Project Coordinator for the Beginning Steps Project, employed by Colac Otway Shire and based from the Colac Aboriginal Gathering Place between lockdowns.

During this time we have made some great progress and seen change within many local early years services - we have also faced some big challenges and barriers along our journey. Running the project through the pandemic meant that we were very restricted and limited with what we could do - the First 1000 Days training, the Bush Kinder program with BCYF, along with countless workshops, activities, and programs are just some of the things we weren't able to see through due to the pandemic. I feel disappointed for the community here because they haven't been able to fully enjoy all it could have offered. However, I think that our achievements through this challenging time are a testament to the community's eagerness to get involved and engage in the workshops, activities, and other things we have been able to do.

Through it all, we have seen the necessity for Aboriginal-led solutions and room for growth within some settings. We have witnessed the importance of engaging, supporting, and empowering Aboriginal community members to inform and co-design community and early years supports, programs and activities and have seen Mainstream Services step up to become more accountable to their responsibility to create inclusive and safe spaces.

Although my time is up as this role draws to a close, I'm eager to see more projects like this being funded and supported and really hope to see the Colac Aboriginal Gathering Place get a permanent home - it's through my experience that the community here needs to continue to have a hub and a place to connect and it has been invaluable to this project.

- Zephlyn Taylor



## ARTWORK OVERVIEW

This artwork shows a birds-eye view of the Colac Otway region, showing the rolling hills of the Otway's - through to the Salt Plains towards Red Rock and Lake Corangamite. Through the middle of the landscape is a flowing river - blocking the flow of the river are 8 rocks, representing challenges and obstacles that Aboriginal babies, children, and people face in our region. Each stone represents a unique challenge. Our hope for the Colac Otway Shire is that eventually we will overcome the challenges and create a culturally safe and inclusive environment where Aboriginal children can have equal opportunities for health and development.

## GERARD BLACKS ARTIST BIO

Gerard Black is a proud Worimi Man. After a 10 year career as a tattoo artist Gerard is now focusing on his painting, drawing, and digital art. His work reflects his Indigenous background, storytelling and his love of nature and draws on his strong design background from tattooing to produce a unique style of art. This together connects ancient Indigenous art with modern design and medium, bringing them together into the future, creating a new modern style promoting reconciliation and connection.





# OUR JOURNEY SO FAR

## January 2020

Project Coordinator employed and working in Gathering Place



## February 2021

School holiday activities organised with additional funding.

*\*Cancelled due to pandemic*

## March 2021

Yal Yarra local resource launched



## February 2020

First engagements with community members and early years services

## January 2021

'Its All About Me' mothers and daughters hand-dyeing workshop with local Aboriginal community.



## May 2021

Cultural resource kits created.

## December 2020

Project extending for an additional eleven months - new finish date is the 31st December 2021.

## July 2021

The Safe our Way Forum



## March 2020

Regional Victoria announces its first lockdown and work from home restrictions begin.

## October 2020

The First 1000 Days Training to be held in Colac for early years services and Aboriginal community members.

*\*Cancelled due to pandemic*

## August 2021

The 'Welcome Bub To Country' bundles are launched.



## April 2020

Working with BCYF to brainstorm a bush kinder with a focus on strengthening the role of fathers in families.

*\*Cancelled due to pandemic*

## July 2020

The first edition of the Community Yarn Newsletter is published.



## May 2020

Community sewing project: creating sustainable sanitary products with local Aboriginal community and community groups for Aboriginal women.

## December 2021

End of Project celebration and launch of evaluation and resources



# WELCOME BUB TO COUNTRY BUNDLE

The intention of the Welcome Bub To Country bundles is that they will be stored at the Colac Maternal Child Health centre and delivered to Aboriginal babies at their first home visit. The kits include:

- **Hand Dyed Muslin Wrap:** The wraps were hand-dyed by Aboriginal mothers and daughters in the It's All About Me! Workshop at Tarndie on Gulidjan Country. A collaboration between the Department of Justice and Community Safety, Department of Families, Fairness & Housing, Barwon Child Youth and Families and the Colac Aboriginal Gathering Place funded party by the Beginning Steps Project and the Victorian Women's Trust.
- **Baby Milestone Book:** A baby book that families can use to document important milestones throughout bub's first 3.5 years earth side. The book includes important information for Maternal Child Health key ages and stages visits, relevant local contact numbers, and advice on topics such as safe sleeping, feeding and looking after bub.
- **Milestone Cards:** A set of 10 milestone cards adapted from the Growing Up Strong and Healthy Boorai Visits brochure, in accordance with Maternal Child Health key ages and stages visits.
- **Baby Jumpsuits:** with an embroidered outline of the Aboriginal flag.
- **Yal Yarra Book:** A copy of Yal Yarra, a children's book that tells the creation story of Lake Elizabeth, a local place on Gadubanud land.
- **Plush Toys:** Reflective of both the Koala and Platypi found on Gulidjan and Gadubanud country.

## CULTURAL RESOURCE BOXES

The kits will be housed at the Maternal Child Health Centre in Colac, the public library, the Colac Aboriginal Gathering Place, and at various other locations throughout the Colac Otway Shire. Inside the kits are collections of culturally relevant dolls and toys, educational games, books, and other cultural resources. The items are sourced locally with information and materials being relevant to the Colac Otway region.

- **Educational games** - using Aboriginal symbols, words, and stories to help children learn through play.
- **Children's books** - that teach about Aboriginal people, history and culture.
- **Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander dolls** - so that children can play with a diverse range of dolls.
- **Information Resources** - the Marrung Educational Plan, Possum Skin Pedagogy series & Yarning Up On Trauma.
- **Culturally Relevant Toys:** felt mats, native animal finger puppets, and plush toys & puzzles.





# WEERING - THE EARS: WHAT WE HEARD

## COMMUNITY:



"I'm was worried that Child Protection would become involved if I spoke up about things I needed help with, through being linked with the Gathering Place I was able to get the help I needed without judgment."



"Often living out here can be super isolating and you learn to deal with what you've got even if its a little off but being able to get Aboriginal Health Checks has helped us keep on top of the things the kids need to be ready for to go to school"



"I was worried that Child Protection would become involved if I spoke up about things I needed help with, through being linked with the Gathering Place I was able to get the help I needed without judgment."



"Living off country knowing the Gathering Place is inclusive of all Mobs and backgrounds helps me feel like I belong, being invited to participate in community events and access services ran by mob here makes like easier."



"As a non-Aboriginal single parent of Aboriginal kids, I'm always worried I'm shortchanging my kids in regards to their learnings, challenging learning environments to be more inclusive is a little out of my comfort zone, having the Gathering Place as a safe place as a sounding board for my concerns is game-changing".



"I was hesitant at first to share my thoughts about cultural safety in kinder settings because I didn't want to complain or compromise my little ones education but through this process I was validated in my feelings and that cultural safety and inclusion were lacking in some areas, this has since been rectified"



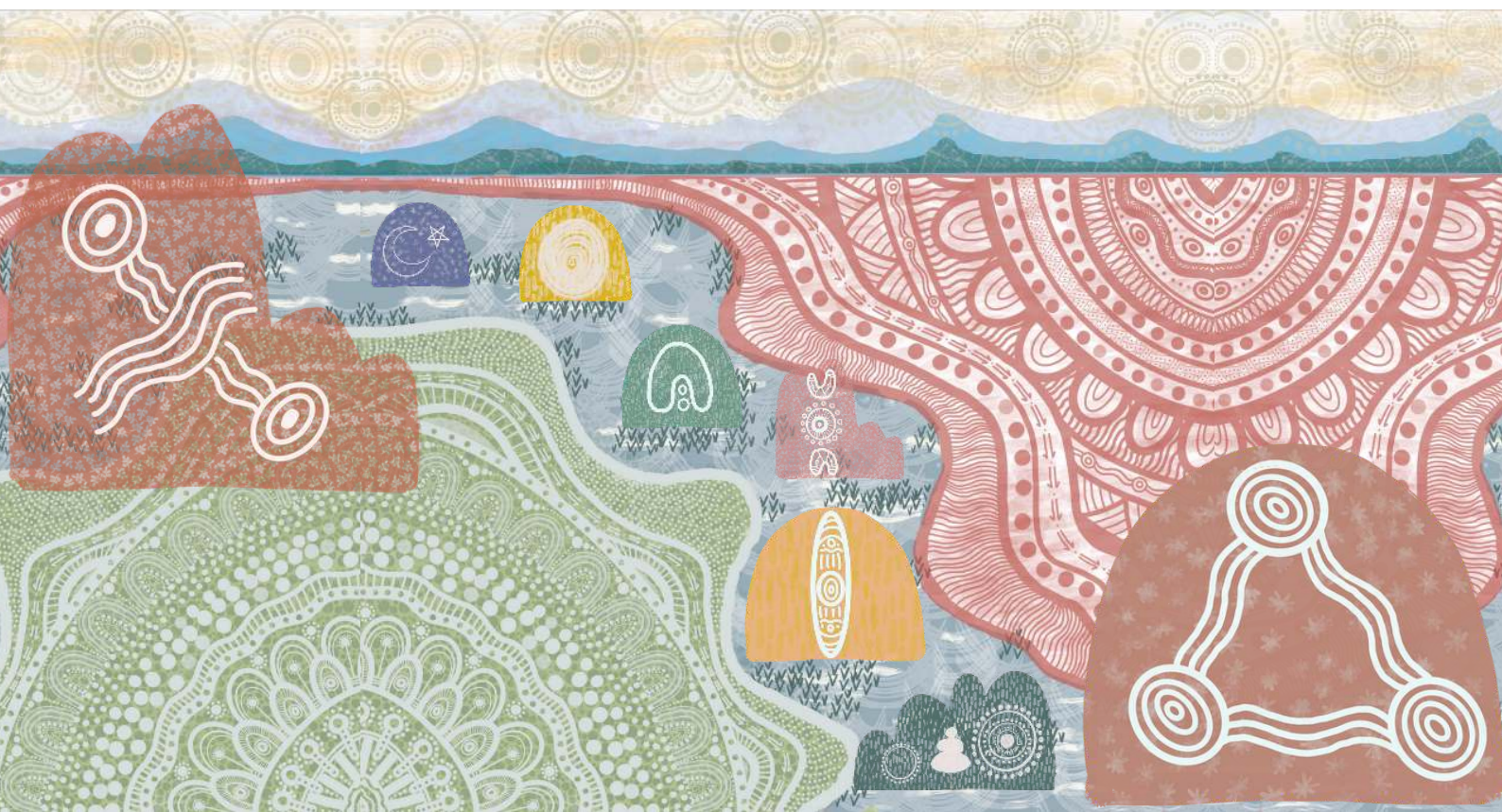
"I'd all but given up hope that services such as MCH would be understanding of my parenting style, knowing MCH Nurses have engaged in the Beginning Steps project will help me encourage other Community Mums to engage in the service they provide and that are open to our ways of parenting".



"For a little while Wathaurong had a little playgroup here in Colac, I was sad to see it go but that's what happens here things come and go"



"The Beginning Steps worker was able to link me in with services and supports I'd otherwise have gone without".





# WEERING - THE EARS: WHAT WE HEARD

## SERVICES:



"Often Aboriginal issues are hand balled to the Aboriginal Services that are already under-resourced, we should be looking at ways to address the needs of Aboriginal families within our own service".



"We are often so focused on what our agency delivers and blame the shortfalls on what other stakeholders are not and in reality we've all dropped the ball on cultural inclusion and holistic service provision".



"I never knew the different roles and functions of the Gathering Place, Wathaurong and Eastern Maar. Being able to attend specialist training this year helped open my eyes to just how much we are unaware of".



"The Marrung Aboriginal Education Plan is such a strong supporting document, this year its our aim to deep dive into it and implement as much as we can".



"We were able to share the Community Yarn newsletter with our centres families which generated lots of talk about reconciliation and led us to booking a Welcome to Country and Smoking Ceremony to celebrate NAIDOC week".



"Understanding that Aboriginal Services are few and far between in Colac Otway has helped me as an educator understand how precious the access we have to the Gathering Place is".



"I'm a non-Aboriginal early years educator, for years I've struggled to access local content for lesson planning, even though resources are scarce knowing I can reach out to the Koorie Education Support Officers will enhance and streamline planning for special events like NAIDOC and Reconciliation Week".



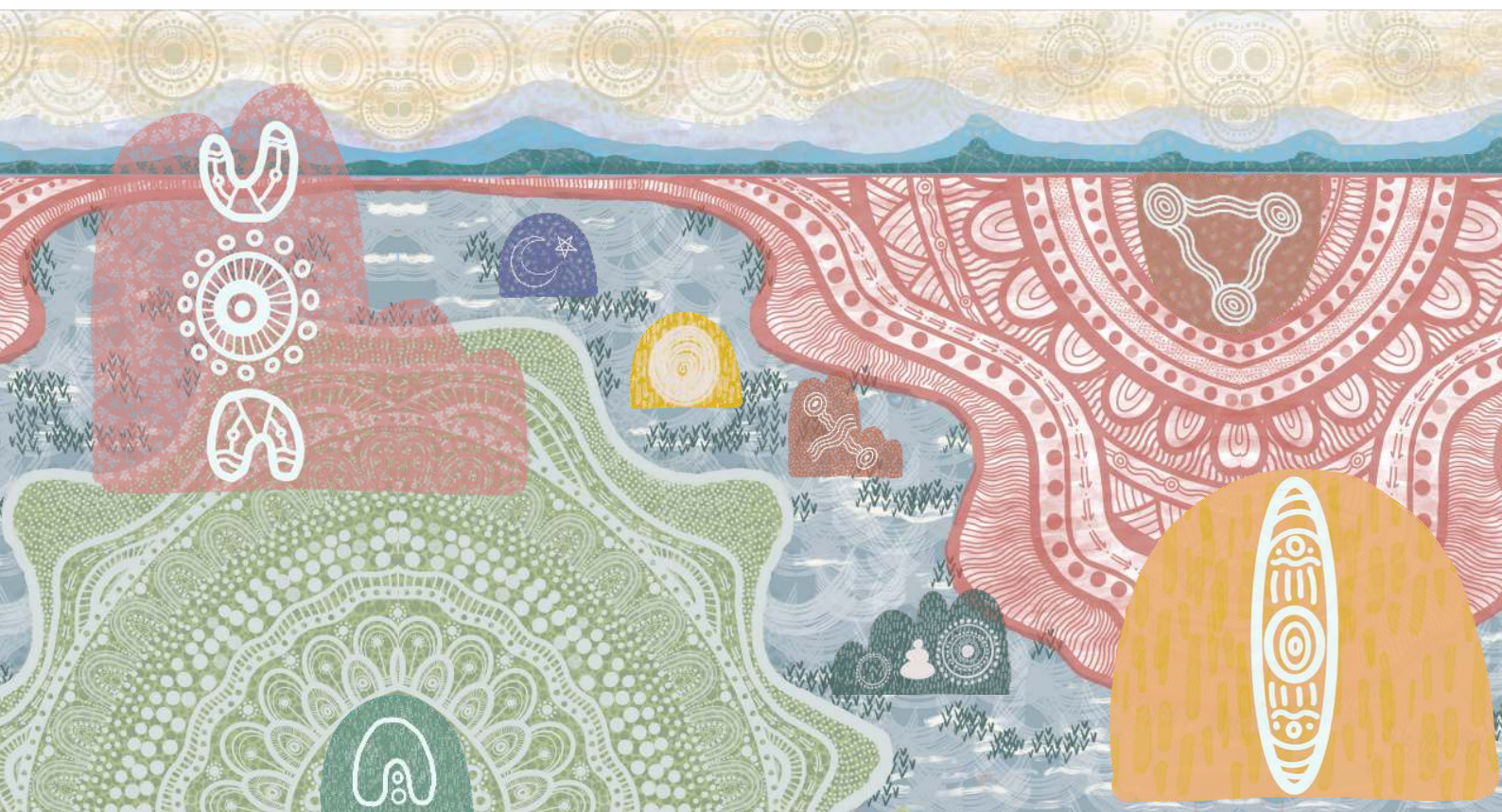
"Attending the safe our way forum was really great for our team, knowing what other services are around. And building relationships through the monthly Beginning Steps steer group meetings".



"Information and knowledge gained by the project has been taken back to our organisation and has been shared with caseworkers which in terms has resulted in practice improvements and support given to families and children".



"The resources and book development have been great, and it's really highlighted the need to be properly resourced. Hopefully from here on we can really continue to push for more support, connecting the services together with that one common goal".





# MEENG - THE EYES: WHAT WE SAW

## COMMUNITY:



Families in the Colac Otway region feel that there are limited culturally safe and inclusive early years services available, sometimes they need to travel to either Geelong or Warrnambool to get the support they need.

Overwhelmingly so, many people within the Colac Otway Shire have a deep thirst and interest in Aboriginal Knowledge, taking up much time on Reconciliation and Truth Telling work at the Gathering Place, further disadvantaging staffs time spent working with Aboriginal Families.

Gaining access to services as an Aboriginal person is a challenge. Being over 100km at minimum away from an ACCO or Aboriginal specific service means that the community has missed out on lots of the funding and support to build on local resources and community development.

When working with Aboriginal Families, instead of handballing a family, there needs to be culturally safe practices and handovers where necessary to ensure that the relationships continue.

Community in the Colac Otway area eager to get involved with services, supports, programs and activities in this region - they just aren't sure what is available and what is going to be culturally safe and inclusive.

It is important for Aboriginal families that their little ones are in spaces that care about Aboriginal culture and that their children can feel welcome and respected.

When early learning centres fly the Aboriginal flag and have an acknowledgement to country upon entry, it shows Aboriginal families that the centre recognises Aboriginal culture.

Some Aboriginal families living in the Colac Otway region feel that some support workers and early years service workers have made negative assumptions or unrealistic expectations about them and their knowledges because they are Aboriginal.

Families that have been engaged with the Beginning Steps Project have all been excited to participate in programs and activities run by the project or at the Colac Aboriginal Gathering Place. Many expressed it would be good to see this continue so that families can keep engaged and connected with each other and the Gathering Place.

Many Non-Aboriginal parents and carers with Aboriginal children want to learn more about Aboriginal culture so they can pass it on to their children and ensure they grow up culturally connected and confident. Especially when they are from far away and don't have a connection with their mob, they want to learn the stories and culture of Gulidjan and Gadubanud country so their children can know the place where they grow up.

When services use Aboriginal specific frameworks to underpin their work it shows Aboriginal people that it is a service actively working to embed culturally safe practices.





# MEENG - THE EYES: WHAT WE SAW

## SERVICES:



The Beginning Steps monthly meetings have created a time and space for stakeholder organisations in our region to come together and connect. Establishing these connections and strengthening the existing relationships has been a major success of the project. It gives the organisations the opportunity to touch base and discuss wants and needs.



Local early years services are hungry for cultural resources and knowledge; they see EYS in other areas like Wathaurong and Eastern Maar who are well funded and resourced and they want to keep up. This can lead to added strain for the already overworked and limited Aboriginal workers in the region. It can also mean that services use culturally inappropriate resources that aren't relevant to this area because they are eager to use whatever they can find.



There is a need for more Aboriginal-specific roles and training within early years services throughout the Colac Otway Shire.



There was some confusion around what the intentions of the project were; there were such big intentions for the project and project worker. But confusion over whether the project worker should be providing case management to families, providing in-service activities to the early years services, gathering information, creating resources - all too big for one worker and across an initial one year of funding.



The use of flexible funds allow service coordinators to wrap services around children and their families based on need seem to have better outcomes than forcing children into existing programs.



Despite the knowledge of known traumas of government and systemic interventions in the child protection, education and justice systems, training around therapeutic approaches in the Colac region is few and far between.



Services in the Colac region tend to lean on one or two people for support, questions or requests relating to Aboriginal culture. This leads to cultural overloading.



Early years services and centres that use the Marrung Aboriginal Education Plan to underpin their work and embed koorie perspectives and outcomes at the of their practice build better relationships with Aboriginal families. Aboriginal families are more comfortable accessing early years services and supports when they feel safe and included. This often leads to more opportunities for centres to grow and expand on their cultural knowledge and practices





# LEENANN - THE HEART:WHAT WE FELT PARTNERSHIP GROUP:

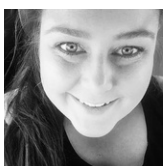


KIRSTEN  
GEORGE  
DFFH

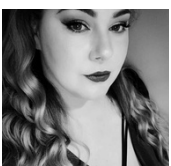


MELINDA  
FLOOD  
DFFH

Department of Families, Fairness and Housing were proud to fund The Beginning Steps Project. This project has not only generated conversations and actions within service delivery in Colac, but it has also provided a voice for Aboriginal families to share their stories and be involved in the design and delivery of early years programs and activities. The resources that have been developed will provide an ongoing legacy and give all children in Colac the opportunity to learn about local Aboriginal history and culture. The staff involved in the delivery of this project are thankful for the opportunity to continue their learning and understanding about how to provide culturally safe places, programs and activities. It has been an absolute pleasure being a part of the Project Partnership Group and we look forward to continuing the work and ensuring services continue to be delivered in a culturally safe way.



KRISTY FRASER-  
LANGE  
WATHAURONG



SHANTELL  
BAILLIE  
WATHAURONG

Working within an ACCO is a privilege that comes with an obligation to work alongside and in the best interests of the Aboriginal community. We feel projects like the Beginning Steps create opportunities for those generally in mainstream services to incorporate local knowledge into their practice which will lead to more holistic ways of doing and benefit everyone.



KIM COULTER  
BCYF

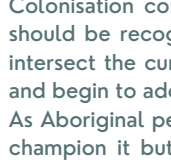


JANELLE LLOYD  
BCYF

The Beginning Steps has been really great in that it has highlighted what the needs are through the project. Honing in on what we need, and it might have been things we couldn't achieve, but will now be in the forefront of people's minds. And if programs and activities like the bush kinder could happen, what further can happen? These possibilities aren't sitting in the background anymore.



EBONY HICKEY  
GATHERING PLACE



Colonisation continues to leave a heavy footprint on our Communities spirit and healing; the impact of that trauma should be recognised as a current issue across all sectors. The Beginning Steps project has been able to confidently intersect the current Western ways of doing with Aboriginal ways of being and as such we have been able to unpack and begin to address the barriers we face to decolonise spaces which will lead to further healing opportunities for Mob. As Aboriginal peoples, we've been championing change for a long time, I feel this has been an opportunity to not only champion it but enact it, moving forward I hope that the work undertaken by all our Stakeholders and Early Years Service Providers on Gulidjan and Gadubanud Country can be that of an informed position and responsibility to provide spaces that are culturally responsive at a bare minimum.



PETER  
MACDONALD  
COLAC OTWAY  
SHIRE



TAMZIN  
MCLENNAN  
COLAC OTWAY  
SHIRE

Over the past 2 years Council have been the employer of the Beginning Steps Co-ordinator who was based from The Gathering Place, this has been an invaluable opportunity and fostered a growing relationship between The Gathering Place and Colac Otway Shire that will well outlast the project and benefit us both well into the future.



DIANE EARL  
COLAC OTWAY  
SHIRE



MCH TEAM  
COLAC OTWAY  
SHIRE

From a MCH service perspective, I think one of the greatest outcomes for the project will be the conversations that arise between families and early years providers when we look at the resources from the project together with our families. I hope these yarns will build on trust, help early years providers have a deeper understanding on the importance of cultural safety and improve our long-term engagement and participation with our families.

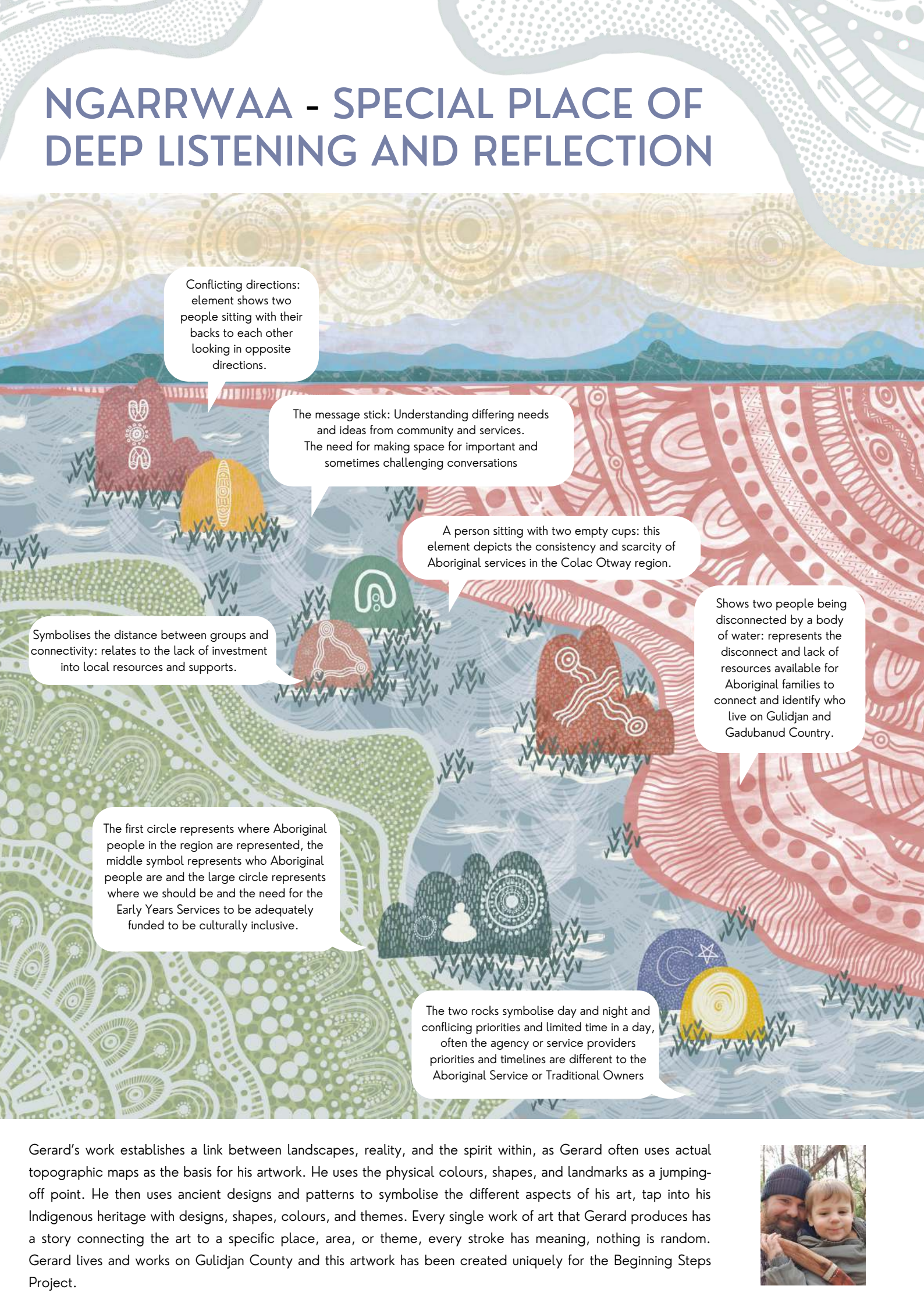


RUTH PAYNE  
COLAC AREA  
HEALTH

Being apart of The Beginning Steps Project gave Colac Area Health the opportunity to improve our connections with other services that work in the early years and how we can implement change based on lived experience of Aboriginal peoples using our services



# NGARRWAA - SPECIAL PLACE OF DEEP LISTENING AND REFLECTION



Conflicting directions:  
element shows two  
people sitting with their  
backs to each other  
looking in opposite  
directions.

The message stick: Understanding differing needs  
and ideas from community and services.  
The need for making space for important and  
sometimes challenging conversations

A person sitting with two empty cups: this  
element depicts the consistency and scarcity of  
Aboriginal services in the Colac Otway region.

Symbolises the distance between groups and  
connectivity: relates to the lack of investment  
into local resources and supports.

Shows two people being  
disconnected by a body  
of water: represents the  
disconnect and lack of  
resources available for  
Aboriginal families to  
connect and identify who  
live on Gulidjan and  
Gadubanud Country.

The first circle represents where Aboriginal  
people in the region are represented, the  
middle symbol represents who Aboriginal  
people are and the large circle represents  
where we should be and the need for the  
Early Years Services to be adequately  
funded to be culturally inclusive.

The two rocks symbolise day and night and  
conflicting priorities and limited time in a day,  
often the agency or service providers  
priorities and timelines are different to the  
Aboriginal Service or Traditional Owners

Gerard's work establishes a link between landscapes, reality, and the spirit within, as Gerard often uses actual topographic maps as the basis for his artwork. He uses the physical colours, shapes, and landmarks as a jumping-off point. He then uses ancient designs and patterns to symbolise the different aspects of his art, tap into his Indigenous heritage with designs, shapes, colours, and themes. Every single work of art that Gerard produces has a story connecting the art to a specific place, area, or theme, every stroke has meaning, nothing is random. Gerard lives and works on Gulidjan County and this artwork has been created uniquely for the Beginning Steps Project.



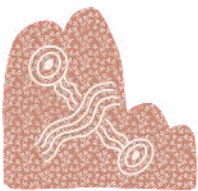


# THE NEXT STEPS

As you've now read, The Beginning Steps Project has been able to identify many barriers and limitations to Aboriginal Inclusion and Culturally safe Early Years Services within the region with the indicators scattered creating the risk of harm throughout the waterways in images on previous pages. The next steps need to be removing these.

What is evident, is that from when a child is born into a Community, the supports, education opportunities and access to services required to thrive are a significant life line, although we all experience this flow and journey differently, removing as many barriers that can cause harm or trauma to the child and family go towards building stronger and more resilient communities.

These actions are ways you and your service can take to make the Beginning Steps of Mob in our Community the safest and most rewarding.



## Acknowledge:

and honour the country you are on, use and invest in the creation of resources local to your place.



## Engage:

with your Aboriginal Community, Organisations and participants, be present and steadfast in your commitment to be present and listen.



## Promote:

and prioritise Aboriginal specific services in the Colac Otway Shire. Advocate for a permanent site for the Colac Aboriginal Gathering Place





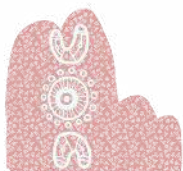


## Understand:



the closest Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services are located over 100km away, before making a referral to a service check which ACCO the community member may like to engage with and understand the limitations of outreach services available in Colac, Close the Gaps where and if you can.

## Decolonise:



your service, and champion culturally safe spaces. Upskill, invest and attend training where possible.

## Allow



for Aboriginal Groups and Individuals to be self determining and honour that they may have different priorities to your organisation or service.

## Reflect



on your actions and practices, make use of State Based Frameworks and local resources. Invest in building and supporting locally developed resources where practical.

## Be the change:



within your circle of influence, at home at work and in your community, it takes good people to do this work, be one of them.





# PARTNERSHIPS

The Project Partners have supported the project worker to engage with the Aboriginal Community in the Colac region and implement the project outcomes. Members of the Project Partnership Group (PPG) have been committed to focusing on self-determination as a guiding principle in working closely with the Aboriginal community to tackle some of the most important issues for Aboriginal families in the Colac Otway region.

- BCYF
- Colac Area Health
- Colac Aboriginal Gathering Place
- Colac Otway Shire
- Department of Education
- Department of Families, Fairness and Housing
- Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-Operative

We thank each and everyone for their commitment to this work and the support they provided the Beginning Steps Co-ordinator.



Families,  
Fairness  
and Housing



Education  
and Training

## SPECIAL TDO

A special Thanks to Project Partners who have moved on to different roles and phases of life or taken leave during this project, Deb Kearney and Amanda Miggins and Aunty Denise Charles your support for Aboriginal Excellence and Advocacy in the region is noted and appreciated.

And thanks to NIKERI Institute for earlier supports.