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Ombudsman report: police working with Aboriginal communities

The NSW Ombudsman today reported to Parliament following a two year audit of police and Aboriginal community relationships in 14 rural and regional local area commands. The report examines how police have implemented the *Aboriginal Strategic Direction*, a detailed NSW Police plan aimed at changing for the better the relationship between police and Aboriginal communities, and improving criminal justice outcomes for Aboriginal people.

NSW Ombudsman Bruce Barbour said **'I have been impressed with the efforts of some senior police and frontline officers to implement practical initiatives with positive outcomes for Aboriginal communities. It is pleasing to see, in many communities, real leadership and very genuine efforts to work constructively with local police'**.

The report demonstrates that where police officers have regular and constructive contact with Aboriginal people, there is increased trust in police and crime-related issues are more likely to be raised and addressed. The report emphasises that to do this effectively, police must understand the local Aboriginal community, and respect local customs and culture.

'Aboriginal people and police officers live in the same community. It therefore comes as no surprise that officers who make a genuine effort to participate in and find out about the community become trusted by Aboriginal people' said Mr Barbour.

The report examines how police are responding to Aboriginal crime, especially juvenile crime and domestic violence. Aboriginal communities must lead in this area, and all government agencies must work together to effectively manage high risk families and individuals. But the police response is especially important.

'Aboriginal communities, like every other community, want to tackle serious crime head-on. Aboriginal families do not want their children locked up. Aboriginal women do not want to be victims of domestic violence. While policing is only part of the response to criminal conduct, most Aboriginal people do not want police to be hands-off. Good police-Aboriginal relations, appropriate use of diversionary options for young Aboriginal people, and targeting families where there is significant domestic violence are essential if there is any chance of improving community safety and reducing crime.'

The Ombudsman's report highlights the low level of Aboriginal police officers – only 144 in 2003-2004, which is well below the 2% government target.

‘Until there is a significant number of Aboriginal police officers, there is a limit to what can be achieved by police in Aboriginal communities. While some good recruitment practices are in place, they are having a limited impact. More can be done, including offering police training in regional areas.’

The Ombudsman report highlights the importance of the Aboriginal community liaison officer – or ACLO – in building bridges between police and Aboriginal people. Where ACLOs are operating effectively, police are better placed to deal with crime and public safety is increased. A particular difficulty, especially for victims of domestic violence, is the lack of female ACLOs – only seven of the present 56 ACLOs are women.

‘Excellent work is being undertaken by some police commanders to deal with domestic violence. Female ACLOs can enhance that work and assist Aboriginal women to deal with violence in their homes. Communities want more women ACLOs. I will closely monitor how police address this issue in the coming months’ Mr Barbour said.

The Ombudsman has requested that NSW Police consider and respond to the issues raised in the special report within three months.

The 14 local area commands audited by the Ombudsman are: Shoalhaven, Mid North Coast, Richmond, Oxley, Canobolas, Wagga Wagga, Castlereagh, Barrier, Lake Illawarra, Barwon, Manning Great Lakes, Darling River, New England and Orana.