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Ombudsman urges rethink on flawed 'off the shelf' plans for Aboriginal communities

Years of spending on ineffective, fragmented programs and services have failed to make significant inroads into high levels of disadvantage in Aboriginal communities, a report tabled in the NSW Parliament today says.

In his report, *Addressing Aboriginal disadvantage: the need to do things differently*, the NSW Ombudsman Bruce Barbour highlights the frustration expressed by many Aboriginal leaders who **'are tired of seeing valuable resources wasted on poorly targeted "off the shelf" programs and a lack of coordinated planning around the funding, design and delivery of critical services by government agencies.'**

Mr Barbour stated that: **'It is our view that the uncoordinated funding of ever more services has become a poor substitute for failing to grapple with the more difficult and inter-related challenges associated with child abuse and neglect, youth offending, habitual non-attendance at school, high levels of substance misuse and unemployment in high-need Aboriginal communities in NSW.'**

For much of the past decade, successive state and federal governments have invested heavily in programs to improve the lives of Aboriginal people in NSW. In 2008-2009 – the year for which the most recent figures are available – the NSW Government spent \$2.65 billion on delivering services to Aboriginal people, including approximately \$240 million on Aboriginal specific services.

The report released by the Ombudsman today, is the latest in a series of reviews of Aboriginal programs to demonstrate the poor return on this level of investment.

Mr Barbour said: **'Simply directing additional funds to more Aboriginal programs and services is not the solution. Rather, it is time for major reform in this state to the overall approach to Aboriginal affairs.'**

Mr Barbour cautioned against simply imposing another plan on top of the many plans and initiatives that are already in place.

'There is an urgent need to rationalise the array of existing plans and strategies to determine what works and which current initiatives are likely to deliver real benefits,' he said. **'Aboriginal leaders – and the community generally – stress the need for much stronger accountability in relation to government spending on programs intended to benefit Aboriginal people.'**

The report emphasises the need for a genuinely inclusive, community-driven approach to reforming Aboriginal services and building the economic prosperity of Aboriginal communities in NSW.

As part of this new approach, the Ombudsman is calling for major reforms to the 'infrastructure' governing Aboriginal affairs in NSW, starting with partnerships that give Aboriginal leaders a real voice in decisions that impact on their communities.

Mr Barbour welcomed the recent creation of a high-level taskforce to look at what needs to change and guide the reform process.

'It is pleasing that the NSW Minister for Aboriginal Affairs has recently announced the establishment of a Ministerial Taskforce to advise him on the development of Aboriginal policy, particularly in the areas of Aboriginal education and economic opportunity,' he said.

'It is vital that any plan to address Aboriginal disadvantage is based on strengthening the capacity of individuals to take control of their own lives. Improving education and employment outcomes are crucial to this; so too will be strategies directed towards intervening early to break the patterns that entrench dependency.'

The report also calls for independent scrutiny and more transparent reporting to ensure that agencies deliver on their commitments to support more effective planning, funding and delivery of services to Aboriginal communities.

Mr Barbour said the reforms he proposes are in everyone's interests: **'Tackling systemic disadvantage is critical to improving the lives of Aboriginal children and future generations of Aboriginal people. It will also produce broader social and economic benefits for the whole community.'**