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NSW Ombudsman **Annual Report 2007-2008**

Working for communities across the State

The NSW Ombudsman today tabled his Annual Report for 2007-2008.

“I am not just a city Ombudsman” Mr Barbour said. **“Over the last year, our work took us to 68 regional and rural towns, giving us the opportunity to listen to community concerns and help fix problems faced by people from across NSW.”**

The report provides a number of examples of the Ombudsman’s work in regional areas:

- Only after we looked into a poorly handled neighbourhood dispute, Eurobodalla Shire Council apologised for its handling of the complaint, provided trees to replace those cut down, and issued a corrected community fact sheet. **“Councils need to provide the community with clear guidance around their rights, as well as the council’s responsibilities”** said Mr Barbour (**case study 63**).
- We investigated Bathurst Regional Council’s delayed handling of a compensation claim following a sewage leak. We found the council’s procedures and record keeping were grossly inadequate. They agreed to improve their procedures, and compensated the ratepayer for the damage caused (**case study 64**).

“We don’t just wait for complaints to come in before we act” said Mr Barbour. **“Our proactive project work also helps to achieve positive outcomes for the people of NSW.”**

- 18 regional and rural councils were among 30 local councils made the subject of mystery shopper audits by Ombudsman staff. They called, emailed and wrote to all the councils posing as ordinary citizens to test their standards of customer service. The Ombudsman sent a report card to each council. **“I was very pleased by the positive response from the 30 councils that were involved. Many indicated that they had already begun to make improvements as a result of our involvement”** Mr Barbour said.

- We completed a detailed investigation into the adequacy of services provided to foster carers looking after Aboriginal children. We interviewed over 100 carers and staff from relevant organisations across the State. The interviews showed that carers valued regular, quality contact with caseworkers, as well as community consultation about where Aboriginal children should be placed. **“It is very important that all foster carers have access to and awareness of the services and assistance to which they are entitled”** said Mr Barbour.
- We are investigating how the public housing system supports disadvantaged people. Ombudsman staff have visited 25 regional and rural areas and spoken with over 450 people with a direct interest. Our investigation will be completed in the coming months.
- We collected over 460 survey responses at 14 different courts to measure the first-hand experiences of people searched by police after being arrested.
- We went to Wollongong, Tamworth, Dubbo, Coffs Harbour and Wagga Wagga and gave regional community service workers a chance to share their experiences as part of our regional outreach program.

Issues of interest

Community engagement chapter		P41-56
Caring for Aboriginal children		P49
Survey of people facing charges		P114
Wellington Correctional Centre		P124
Junee Correctional Centre	Case study 52	P128
Cabonne Shire Council	Case study 62	P140
Eurobodalla Shire Council	Case study 63	P141
Bathurst Regional Council	Case study 64	P141
Wollongong City Council	Case study 66	P141
Shellharbour City Council	Case study 67	P141
Albury City Council	Case study 70	P142
North Coast Area Health Service	Case study 75	P151