

**Senate Select Committee on Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities
Third Report 2009**

Whole of Government Response

Recommendation 1

2.42 The committee recommends that COAG consider at its first meeting in 2010 how communication and consultation with all relevant stakeholders in the delivery of the COAG targets can be improved. Furthermore, progress in improving communication and consultation should be publicly reported.

Government response:

The Australian Government notes this recommendation and advises that both the COAG Reform Council and the Coordinator General have responsibility for publicly reporting on COAG Indigenous reform activities.

Communication and consultation with stakeholders in the delivery of the COAG targets is taking place under the auspices of the National Indigenous Reform Agreement, the National Integrated Strategy for Closing the Gap in Indigenous Disadvantage and the Remote Service Delivery National Partnership Agreement.

The National Integrated Strategy for Closing the Gap in Indigenous Disadvantage provides for an engagement and partnership approach in delivering the Closing the Gap reforms.

For example, the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Service Delivery is changing the way governments deliver vital services and infrastructure to Indigenous communities in remote Australia. Local Implementation Plans, tailored to the specific needs of each community, are being developed through consultations and planning workshops which are taking place in each priority location, supported by Regional Operations Centres. These plans will continue to be monitored to make sure they are on track and delivering agreed priorities throughout the life of the agreement.

Recommendation 2

2.68 The committee recommends that the Commonwealth government take a more active role in driving reform of the criminal justice system with the aim of reducing the alarmingly high level of contact of Indigenous Australians, particularly Indigenous young people.

Government response:

The Australian Government accepts the recommendation in principle. While criminal justice matters are primarily the responsibility of State and Territory governments, the Australian Government Attorney-General's Department is leading cross government work to reduce the high level of contact that Indigenous people have with the criminal justice system.

The Government is providing funding for additional community engagement police officers in remote Northern Territory Indigenous communities. These eight additional police officers will focus on community engagement to build trust and confidence in the justice system in order to strengthen local safety and security.

The Government has committed \$2 million for a series of outcomes evaluations of Indigenous justice programs. The first tranche of evaluations will focus on youth and perpetrators initiatives. These results of these evaluations will provide a strong contribution to the body of evidence about what measures are most effective in the Indigenous community safety sector.

The Australian Government worked closely with State and Territory governments, through the Standing Committee of Attorneys-General to develop the National Indigenous Law and Justice Framework. The Framework, which was endorsed by all jurisdictions in November 2009, provides a comprehensive national approach to addressing the serious and complex issues that mark the interaction between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the justice system in Australia. The Framework's goals are to:

- improve all Australian justice systems so that they comprehensively deliver on the justice needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in a fair and equitable manner;
- to reduce over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander offenders, defendants and victims in the criminal justice system;
- to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples feel safe and are safe within their communities;
- to increase safety and reduce offending within Indigenous communities by addressing alcohol and substance abuse; and
- to strengthen Indigenous communities through working in partnership with government and other stakeholders to achieve sustained improvements in justice and community safety.

The Government recognises that the rate at which young people from an out-of-home care background come into contact with the criminal justice system is unacceptably high. The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children recognises Indigenous children are overrepresented in all parts of the child protection system, and that closing the gap on the areas of disadvantage is critical to addressing the factors that place Indigenous children and young people at risk of abuse and neglect.

Recommendation 3

3.142 While recognising that some measures contain specific strategies to address workforce shortages, the committee recommends that the Commonwealth and Northern Territory governments develop a comprehensive strategy to address workforce shortages in all areas associated with the NTER measures.

Government response:

The Australian Government supports the recommendation in principle. The Australian Government recognises that workforce shortages continue to be a key issue in the Northern Territory.

Specific whole of government policies for dealing with workforce shortages in the Northern Territory are already being considered through a number of bilateral partnerships between the Australian and Northern Territory Governments.

The Australian Government has a firm commitment to workforce development and workforce productivity including through the Productivity Places Program, which will deliver 711,000 qualification commencements nationally over 5 years.

The Australian Government has additional teachers and a Quality Teaching Package as specific measures under the agreement. The Australian Government is working with education providers in the Northern Territory to place up to 200 additional teachers in hard to staff remote Northern Territory schools. The Government is providing around \$100 million over five years from 2008 to recruit, deploy and retain teachers in Indigenous communities to help improve learning outcomes for Indigenous students.

The Australian Government has committed an additional \$44.3 million over three years from 2009-10 to support the Northern Territory in managing the Quality Teaching Package and Enhancing Literacy measures in remote communities in conjunction with activities under the three Smarter Schools National Partnerships.

The Quality Teaching Package is a professional development framework designed to build the capacity of the existing education workforce in remote Northern Territory communities to accelerate student learning outcomes. The Quality Teaching Package is targeted primarily at up-skilling local Indigenous staff who are more likely to stay long term in communities. Opportunities include teacher qualifications upgrades, Masters and Graduate Certificate courses, completion incentives, and leadership development programs.

The National Partnership Agreement on Remote Service Delivery focuses on the coordination of government services in 29 communities, 15 of which are prescribed under the NTER.

This agreement aims to implement a new remote service delivery model to ensure that Indigenous Australians living in remote communities receive and actively participate in services to close the gap in Indigenous disadvantage. A Board of Management comprised of Australian Government and State/Territory officials has been established in each jurisdiction to take a whole of government approach and solve implementation issues such as workforce shortages.

The Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program, monitored under the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing, is another major initiative in the Northern Territory. One of the program's key outcomes is a skilled Indigenous workforce enabling local people to maintain and develop new infrastructure and housing in remote communities.

The Australian Government also works in partnership with the NT Department of Business and Employment, who administer the jointly funded NT Indigenous Training for Employment Program (ITEP). Australian Government funding is provided through the Government's Training Initiatives for Indigenous Adults in Regional and Remote Communities Program.

A priority for the ITEP program is projects to develop industry-specific workforce development strategies to support Indigenous employment and career development.

In December 2009, Senator the Hon Mark Arbib and the Hon Paul Henderson MLA endorsed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to support collaboration across the employment and training agenda.

The MOU will drive the engagement of industry in skills and workforce development as well as assist employment-disadvantaged individuals, particularly in the remote areas of the Northern Territory, to overcome barriers to their participation in the labour market. Progress against the outcomes identified in the MOU will be reported to Ministers annually.

The Australian Government, through the Department of Health and Ageing, has several measures in place to address workforce shortages including the very successful Remote Area Health Corps which has deployed more than 600 health professionals on short-term assignments in the Northern Territory since commencement in late 2008.

Recommendation 4

3.143 The committee also recommends that progress made in addressing workforce shortages should be included in the Monitoring Report.

Government response:

The Australian Government accepts this recommendation in principle. Progress made in addressing workforce shortages is already reported through a range of processes. Considerable work has been undertaken and additional resources allocated to address issues raised in the Recommendation.

For example, reporting on State and Territory delivery for the Productivity Places Program will occur through the COAG process for monitoring the implementation of all national partnerships. The Australian Government is intending to make information on progress across all elements publicly available in an Annual Report on the Productivity Places Program. The first report is expected to be available in late 2010 and will also cover 2008 and 2009 delivery.

In addition, implementation of the Quality Teaching Package and Enhancing Literacy measures is bound by the conditions set out in the Northern Territory *Smarter Schools* Bilateral and Implementation Plan. Progress against the Implementation Plan is provided to the Department as a mid-year progress report and Annual Report. The Northern Territory has committed to releasing the Annual Report and the 2009 Smarter Schools and Closing the Gap in the NT Annual Report is available at:

Recommendation 5

- 4.22 The committee recommends that the Commonwealth support the Western Australian Police in continuing to ensure that the message to use greater discretion in policing in remote communities is communicated to and well understood by officers in the field and that they have the appropriate guidelines, training and support to do so.

Government response:

The Government notes this recommendation. The resourcing and management of policing services is a State government responsibility and it would not be appropriate for the Australian Government to become involved in operational policing matters in Western Australia. The Australian Government has provided capital funding to Western Australia in recent years to support the Multi-Function Policing initiatives in Blackstone, Burringurrah, and Looma. This initiative was implemented to provide a more holistic approach to community safety for regional and remote communities by co-locating police with other justice and support services.

The Australian Government supports greater transparency in the allocation of police in remote communities. At its meeting on 2 July 2010, the Ministerial Council for Police and Emergency Management – Police (MCPEMP) discussed the issue of transparency in allocating policing resources in remote and very remote communities and resolved to commission research to get a better understanding of the key drivers and agreed that jurisdictions will provide regular reports.

Recommendation 6

- 4.46 The committee recommends that all Commonwealth, state and territory government departments provide appropriate remuneration packages to staff in remote communities in order to attract and retain a skilled workforce.

Government response:

The Australian Government accepts this recommendation in principle. The Commonwealth has a presence in a significant number of remote areas across Australia. Departments offer conditions packages to assist in attracting and retaining suitable employees to remote localities. Such conditions can include:

- additional leave entitlements;
- remote locality leave fares;
- compassionate/emergency leave fares;
- assistance with relocation expenses;
- remote locality allowance; and
- staff housing in some locations.

Recommendation 7

- 4.55 The committee recommends that the Western Australian government consider conducting a comprehensive analysis of non-custodial sentencing options to reduce the unacceptably high incarceration rates in regional and remote Indigenous communities, with particular attention to the social and economic costs and benefits of alternatives and the factors driving significantly high rates of reoffending.

Government response:

This recommendation is for the Western Australian government.

Recommendation 8

- 4.66 The committee recommends that the Western Australian government consider undertaking an audit of the substance and scale of rehabilitation programs and post-custodial release programs to address the unacceptably high rate of Indigenous recidivism in the state.

Government response:

This recommendation is for the Western Australian government.

Recommendation 9

- 4.67 The committee recommends that the Western Australian government consider developing a comprehensive, culturally appropriate strategy to address Indigenous incarceration rates and recidivism that is based on sound international and domestic evidence.

Government response:

This recommendation is for the Western Australian government.

Recommendation 10

- 4.78 The committee recommends that COAG increase the level of consultation and engagement with local governments in formulating its strategy to deliver cost-effective and appropriate municipal services to remote communities and develop an explicit communication strategy to ensure that local government in Western Australia is aware of its responsibilities.

Government response:

The Australian Government accepts the recommendation in principle, noting that it is primarily a matter for the Western Australian government to engage with local government in its state.

The Australian Government is working in partnership with Western Australia through the Remote Service Delivery National Partnership and the East Kimberley National Partnership.

In the COAG meeting of 19-20 April 2010, the Council agreed to amend the National Partnership on Remote Service Delivery “to recognise the important role local government or other municipal service providers have in ensuring the effective delivery of the Partnership in each priority community, with the detail of these service provider commitments to be captured in a Local Implementation Plan for each priority community”.

Recommendation 11

4.102 As a matter of urgency, the committee recommends that all levels of government clarify who is to provide municipal services to remote Indigenous communities and arrange for the adequate resourcing of these services.

Government response:

The Australian Government accepts this recommendation. Under the National Partnership on Remote Indigenous Housing, the Australian, States and the Northern Territory Governments have agreed to work towards clearer roles and responsibilities and funding for municipal services and the ongoing maintenance of infrastructure and essential services in remote Indigenous communities, with new arrangements to be in place from 1 July 2012.

Under this National Partnership it was agreed that a national audit of municipal and essential services would be undertaken to assess the level of outstanding need for these services in remote Indigenous communities. The audit will assist in informing roles and responsibilities for the delivery of municipal and essential services into the future.

Recommendation 12

4.157 The committee recommends that the Commonwealth work with the Western Australian government to support the development of an explicit plan to ensure that alcohol restrictions in regional and remote communities, including Fitzroy Crossing and Halls Creek, be supported by adequate rehabilitation and community support services to address alcohol addiction and problem drinking.

4.158 The committee further recommends that the plan include a consistent approach to alcohol management that includes effective community consultation and decision making.

Government response:

The Australian Government accepts the recommendation in principle. The Government believes that measures to reduce the harm caused by alcohol should be designed and implemented in close consultation and partnership with Indigenous people. The joint Commonwealth/State Regional Operations Centre in the Kimberley works with the residents of Fitzroy Crossing, Halls Creek and other Kimberley towns to provide the most appropriate services in a timely manner. The Office of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health, Department of Health and Ageing, is funding 120 organisations in 2009-10 to provide, or support, Indigenous substance use services across Australia. Funded services include residential rehabilitation and day centres; Aboriginal Medical Services; sobering up shelters; multidisciplinary teams specialising in substance use and related issues; outreach services and transitional aftercare services.

Recommendation 13

- 4.163 The committee recommends that the Commonwealth and Western Australian governments work together to ensure that adequate and long term funding and support for the youth service in Balgo is provided.

Government response:

The Australian Government supports this recommendation in principle. The Australian Government is investing in the Balgo Youth Development Program under the Australian Government's Petrol Sniffing Strategy. The program consists of funding for one male and one female youth worker and associated equipment to support the provision of youth services to the community. The Attorney-Generals Department has agreed to fund these positions to 30 June 2012.

The Balgo Youth Development Program is one component of a broader initiative to improve the quantity and quality of youth services throughout the East Kimberley region. The initiative is being lead by the East Kimberley Substance Use (Petrol Sniffing) Implementation Working Group which is comprised of representatives from Australian, State and Local government agencies; Indigenous organisations; providers of alcohol, other drug and youth services.

Recommendation 14

- 4.184 The committee recommends that the Commonwealth considers the development of a communication strategy to provide simple, practical advice to parents and guardians caring for a child with Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, and that the status of FASD as a recognised disability is clarified to ensure that parents, caregivers, schools and communities are able to provide adequate support to children with FASD.

Government response:

The Australian Government notes the recommendation. The Government recognises the unacceptable impact of foetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) on children, families and communities and is committed to working with State and Territory Governments to develop further options for reducing the incidence of FASD and options, including communication tools, for supporting parents and other caregivers of children affected and their communities.

The Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy has commissioned the development of a monograph on FASD, Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder in Australia: an update.

It is expected that the monograph will identify action that is required in prevention, screening, diagnosis, models of care and workforce capabilities, and illustrate the complex, multi-faceted nature of FASD.

The Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing (DOHA) is currently considering the possibility of providing additional support for remote communities to adapt existing materials on FASD prevention to make them culturally appropriate and appropriate to local circumstances.

As FASD involves agencies and intergovernmental bodies beyond DOHA, which have responsibility for managing the impact of FASD, the Monograph has been forwarded to the Disability Services Ministers Conference and the Early Childhood Development Ministers for consideration.