



NSW Ombudsman

WORKING WITH LOCAL ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES

Audit of the implementation of the
NSW Police *Aboriginal Strategic
Direction* (2003 – 2006)

A special report to Parliament under s 31 of the
Ombudsman Act 1974

April 2005



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Any correspondence relating to this review should be sent to:

Working with local Aboriginal communities
Level 24, 580 George Street
Sydney NSW 2000

Phone (02) 9286 1000
Toll free (outside Sydney Metro Area): 1800 451 524
Facsimile: (02) 9283 2911
Telephone typewriter: (02) 9264 8050
Website: www.ombo.nsw.gov.au
Email nswombo@ombo.nsw.gov.au

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NSW Ombudsman

Level 24 580 George Street
Sydney NSW 2000

Phone 02 9286 1000

Fax 02 9283 2911

Tollfree 1800 451 524

TTY 02 9264 8050

Web www.ombo.nsw.gov.au

April 2005

The Hon Meredith Burgmann MLC
President
Legislative Council
Parliament House
SYDNEY NSW 2000

The Hon John Aqualina MP
Speaker
Legislative Assembly
Parliament House
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Madam President and Mr Speaker

I submit a report pursuant to s 31 of the Ombudsman Act 1974.

In accordance with the Act, I have provided the Minister for Police with a copy of this report.

I draw your attention to the provisions of s 31AA of the Ombudsman Act 1974 in relation to the tabling of this report and request that you make it public forthwith.

Yours faithfully

Bruce Barbour
Ombudsman

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Abbreviations

Aboriginal Strategic Direction	NSW Police <i>Aboriginal Strategic Direction 2003-2006</i>
ACLO	Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer
YLO	Youth Liaison Officer
CSO	Community Safety Officer
DVLO	Domestic Violence Liaison Officer
LAC	Local Area Command (command)
LACACC	Local Area Command Aboriginal Consultative Committee
PASAC	Police Aboriginal Strategic Advisory Committee – the statewide advisory committee to NSW Police on Aboriginal issues
PCYC	Police and Community Youth Club
CDEP	Community Development Employment Program – a work for social security entitlements scheme.
The Redfern Inquiry	NSW Legislative Council’s Inquiry into issues relating to Redfern and Waterloo
DOCS	Department of Community Services

Foreword

Several years ago NSW Police sought to improve its relationship with the Aboriginal community by developing a detailed plan called the *Aboriginal Strategic Direction*. The *Aboriginal Strategic Direction* is aimed at improving criminal justice outcomes for Aboriginal communities as well as changing the relationship between police and those communities for the better. It requires police to develop and implement initiatives at both the corporate and local community level.

Over the last two years, my office has conducted audits in 14 local area commands across the state to look at how well police are implementing this plan.

In recent times there has been considerable attention around Aboriginal-police relations in the public arena. The death of TJ Hickey and the subsequent riot in Redfern early last year led to a Parliamentary Inquiry, which examined the relationship between police and the Aboriginal community in Redfern. One of the Inquiry's many recommendations was that the Police Minister undertake an audit of the implementation of the *Aboriginal Strategic Direction* in Redfern command.

More recently, the Aboriginal community's response to tackling crime in West Dubbo has also been the focus of media attention. The crisis meeting held by the leaders of the West Dubbo Aboriginal community was an example of a community recognising that to make a difference, they need to act themselves and show that they are prepared to work with police and other government agencies.

Given the extent of the work my office has done in this area, I think it is important and timely, to make public some of our key findings and observations about Aboriginal-police relations in this state.

This report is intended to inform the public and to provide guidance to police about the key issues they need to address to ensure ongoing improvements in Aboriginal-police relations. We have also sought to acknowledge some of the better examples of police and Aboriginal leaders coming together in an attempt to improve their relationship and deal with some of the tough issues in their communities.

The report outlines some of the challenges facing both police and Aboriginal communities in implementing the *Aboriginal Strategic Direction*, and highlights some of the positive work we have observed during our audits. The report recommends that police consolidate and extend already successful initiatives, and highlights models of good practice that might be adopted elsewhere. Although our observations outlined in the report are based on audits of rural communities, we have further audits to conduct and will be focussing on metropolitan Aboriginal communities this year.

This report also provides an opportunity to acknowledge and thank all those who participated in our consultation process, including: more than 1500 community people, representatives from over 300 government agencies and local area commanders, senior officers and specialist liaison officers from the commands we audited.

It is clear from our audits that there is a direct link between police building a strong relationship with the local Aboriginal community and successfully making inroads into reducing crime and Aboriginal people's contact with the criminal justice system. It is also clear that police cannot bring about change on their own. What is needed is a commitment from community leaders and all relevant government agencies to work together to come up with practical solutions to tackle crime and underlying social problems.

The *Aboriginal Strategic Direction* provides the framework and opportunity for significant change in the relationship between police and Aboriginal communities. Continuing commitment, adequate resourcing and the consolidation and expansion of current initiatives are necessary, if tangible and long-term benefits are to be realised.



Bruce Barbour
Ombudsman

Introduction

The Aboriginal Strategic Direction

Following the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, NSW Police committed itself to developing and implementing a strategy to address the causes of tension in its relationship with Aboriginal communities across NSW. This approach has taken the form of a series of three-year strategic plans, the most recent of which – the *Aboriginal Strategic Direction (2003 – 2006)* – was released in June 2003.

The *Aboriginal Strategic Direction* is an important part of broader government policy initiatives aimed at requiring all service providers to foster more consultative, outcome-driven approaches to engaging local communities and involving all government agencies in Aboriginal justice initiatives.

The key objectives of the Aboriginal Strategic Direction

The *Aboriginal Strategic Direction* is built around six key objectives:

- Strengthen communication and understanding between Police and Aboriginal people
- Increase Aboriginal cultural awareness throughout NSW Police
- Improve community safety by reducing crime and violence within the Aboriginal community
- Reduce Aboriginal people's contact with the criminal justice system
- Divert Aboriginal youth from crime and anti-social behaviour
- Target Aboriginal family violence and sexual abuse

We see these six objectives as falling into two areas; building better relationships and reducing crime and Aboriginal people's contact with the criminal justice system. These capture the fundamental issues at the heart of improving outcomes for Aboriginal communities and police.

Our audits

In late 2002, we selected 14 commands based on the number of Aboriginal residents and the rate of police contact with Aboriginal people in these areas. The 14 commands selected were all in regional areas: Shoalhaven, Mid North Coast, Richmond, Oxley, Canobolas, Wagga Wagga, Castlereagh, Barrier, Lake Illawarra, Manning Great Lakes, Darling River, Barwon, New England and Orana.

For each audit, the audit team included several members of our Aboriginal Complaints Unit, an Assistant or Deputy Ombudsman, the Police Team Manager and a senior researcher.

Our audit process and ongoing work with these communities involves:

- reviewing existing projects or initiatives aimed at assisting police to work more effectively with local Aboriginal communities
- meeting with local service providers, key community people, local area commanders and other police officers to discuss practical issues affecting the relationship between police and Aboriginal people
- giving each command a report card and rating against the six key objectives contained in the *Aboriginal Strategic Direction*, with recommendations on how the command could perform better
- monitoring each command's compliance with our recommendations and the implementation of the *Aboriginal Strategic Direction* objectives.

Our approach was aimed at holding NSW Police to account against its own policy by auditing the implementation and effectiveness of the *Aboriginal Strategic Direction* in individual locations. At the end of each audit we gave the local area commander the opportunity to respond to our recommendations. Each command has taken steps to promptly address some of our more immediate concerns, which were incorporated into a report on our findings.

Reports on each command have been provided to the Police Minister and Police Commissioner.

It has been pleasing to see significant and ongoing improvements in a number of commands since the time of our audits, and we will continue to monitor developments in these areas.

During our audits there were recurring themes which require a better or more comprehensive response from NSW Police to assist police break down some of the barriers to effectively fighting crime in Aboriginal communities. These themes provide a framework for this report and are:

- building better relationships
- frontline police
- Aboriginal community liaison officers
- fighting crime – young people and family violence

Building better relationships

There are three important elements to building better relationships: consultation by police at every level within a command; formal and informal contact with individual Aboriginal community members – which includes creating opportunities for positive interactions between Aboriginal people and police; and interagency cooperation and consultation.

The following case study illustrates how a lack of consultation impacted on the relationship between police and the local community.

Case Study

Failing to show respect

In a small town in the north of the state, the local Aboriginal community complained that mourners driving to and from a funeral had been subjected to alcohol breath testing, including members of the deceased's family. Rather than seeing this sad event as an opportunity to show respect for a community elder, the police insensitivity angered the community. The incident received media coverage so police actions became well known in the area. Police promptly investigated the family's complaint and an officer from our Aboriginal Complaints Unit facilitated discussions between police and the family. As a result, the commander of the police station involved provided a personal apology to the family and the community for the poor handling of the incident and arranged for police to undertake cultural awareness training. The apology was publicised in local press and radio. There was widespread praise for the officer's sensitive handling of the matter. One community member said: "That's the only time we've heard police say they made a mistake."

The police response to the community's concerns went a long way toward restoring trust in local police.

Formal consultation

Engaging the right community people

In every command we found a core group of Aboriginal leaders and community people who were committed to improving the relationship with police and were particularly concerned about getting better outcomes for their young people. In many communities, elders and working parties, as well as men's and women's groups, are at the forefront of change. But Aboriginal communities are not homogenous entities and often there can be divisions within particular communities.

Because of this, NSW Police must ensure that commanders know who the key leaders are within the various sections of the community, and ideally build and maintain a strong relationship with all of them.

Occasionally it can be difficult for commanders to successfully engage with local leaders when contact with one group or another is interpreted as picking sides in local disputes. However, it is important for police to consult a broad spectrum of the community, even if this means attending several meetings or having one-on-one discussions with a number of people. Some commanders are successfully traversing these divides, and engage and work well with all sections of the community.

Some of the most respected people in a community may choose not to participate on committees or working groups but this does not mean that they are not interested in what happens within their community or that they have no influence or role to play. Police need to seek these people out and listen to their concerns.

Case Study

Talking to people on their turf

In one isolated community the widow of a former Aboriginal community liaison officer told us of the tensions that had arisen between her grandson and local police. On one occasion an officer came to her door and asked to speak to her grandson. The woman told the officer that if he wanted to talk to her grandson he should come inside, have a cup of tea with her and explain what was going on. The officer agreed and this seemingly small gesture not only caused her to change her view of this officer, but also changed the way the officer later dealt with other young people, by choosing to talk to parents about their children in their home when appropriate, rather than taking young people to the police station. Given the high regard the community has for this woman, her views carry considerable weight and can help change some of the more negative perceptions held by the community about police.

The need for consistent and senior police representation

Aboriginal leaders will always take note of whether the commander is prepared to engage with them in both a formal and informal setting. Communities frequently told us that they send their elders and leaders to negotiate with police but often police will send junior staff who may not be in a position to make decisions or provide explanations on behalf of the commander. A lack of consistent, senior representation sends a message that these meetings are not seen as a priority by police.

Taking a flexible approach

The *Aboriginal Strategic Direction* places significant emphasis on 'strengthening communication and understanding between police and Aboriginal people' through formal mechanisms, including the development of a Local Area Command Aboriginal Consultative Committee (LACACC). Police should aim to ensure that these meetings actually assist in building better relationships between police and Aboriginal communities rather than being dismissed as a "talkfest" where no substantial outcomes are achieved.

Formal mechanisms are important but it is also important that police are flexible in their approach when engaging communities and should avoid formal mechanisms where informal discussions could work better or where existing meeting structures in a community are already working well. To build relationships, police need to examine local community working party structures and their composition, and make strategic decisions about the best way to use the existing framework.

In a number of commands we saw the kind of strong working relationships between police and service providers which are necessary to get initiatives off the ground, but these strong links often do not lead to a change in broader community perceptions about police unless a greater cross-section of people in the community are involved. A useful way to do this is to hold community meetings in response to significant events or flare ups in the community to explain police actions and talk about other concerns.

Informal and positive interactions

While it is important that strong relationships are built between senior police and Aboriginal leaders, it is crucial that frontline police also have positive interactions with the broader community. In Brewarrina we heard of officers who put a great deal of effort into being a visible presence in those communities, and building a good relationship through informal contact and dealings. For instance, the sector commander in Brewarrina met many people through his son's local football competition and whilst walking his dog around the town in the evenings. This meant that the Brewarrina community were happy to bring issues directly to the sector commander. Elsewhere communities still talk positively of local area commanders who left the command two or more years ago, particularly when there is a perception that their successors are not putting the same effort into positive relationship building. These commanders were well liked because they took the time to stop and 'say g'day' on the street.

Some police are concerned that getting to know too many people in the community could somehow compromise their policing work, when in fact the opposite is the case. From the conversations we have had with numerous community members and police, it is clear that the officers who get out to meet people informally, play sport and socialise in the community are well liked and trusted. A number of police also told us that these sorts of interactions are one of the main benefits of working in a small community.

In one town we were repeatedly told by Aboriginal people that they would like police to get out of their cars, walk around the main street and talk to people. The value of this sort of gesture should not be underestimated and many people, including police, remember a time when this used to occur more often.

While increasing foot patrols is one method, it is important for police to create other opportunities for positive interactions with the community. In recent years there has been a strong police presence at commemorative events like NAIDOC Week

and attendance by senior police at the funerals for Aboriginal leaders. While these are important symbolic gestures, regard needs to be had to the more informal events and settings that police could be seen at that might enhance the relationship, particularly with young people. Some commands organise annual 'Black and Blue' golf days and social football competitions to encourage positive, informal contact between police and Indigenous community members. Police hosting or attending community barbecues was another welcome gesture.

Aboriginal people want to see police getting involved and living in their communities. This sort of community policing approach needs to be promoted and encouraged by local area commanders.

We observed a good example of informal contacts enhancing communication at Menindee.

Case study

Building relationships in Menindee (Barrier command)

At the time of our audit the head of the community working party and other influential people in the community had all read the Aboriginal Strategic Direction because one of the officers had provided them with copies and taken the time to discuss its contents.

In addition to police working closely with members of the community working party and other key figures, there was evidence of a range of frequent, cooperative police contact with broad sections of the community. For instance, many residents had already met an officer who had arrived at Menindee shortly before our visit because he had been the 'star attraction' at a large community barbecue within days of arriving.

Some communities have expressed disappointment that officers stationed in their town preferred to live some distance away. However, in Menindee, officers were seen to be part of the community and routinely participated in community activities. On the day of our visit, the two senior constables had signed up with the local Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) to undertake a course on chainsaw use. Neither needed the qualification, but "wanted to get involved". It also provided an opportunity for positive contact with the other CDEP participants.

Interagency cooperation

While the focus of our audits has been on the role of police, the need for shared responsibility and improved coordination between other government agencies and community service providers was obvious.

Many police and community members expressed concern to us about the lack of coordination of programs covering the same issues. This means police and other community members often have to attend far too many meetings, which takes them away from their core work or family responsibilities. Most of the frontline police we spoke with had a genuine commitment to being involved in proactive community programs but they are often left feeling frustrated when they are being stretched in too many directions. Local area commanders need to support their officers in identifying key priorities and consolidating police involvement in interagency forums.

There are significant demands placed on police, particularly in rural and isolated areas. Police officers are frequently called on to provide support in areas that are the core responsibility of other agencies. This is because police frequently the first to respond to incidents of domestic violence, child sexual assault, and families rendered dysfunctional by alcohol or drug abuse.

In some of the areas we audited we observed effective operational partnerships between police and local service providers. These initiatives included:

- police working with NSW Health and other services to tackle substance abuse
- police and local women's refuges working together to support and educate women about domestic violence and to improve the services available to them in their communities
- partnerships with the Department of Community Services (DOCS) to identify children at risk at an early stage
- police working with the Department of Housing to relocate certain families in an effort to avoid ongoing crime or violence
- police and the Department of Sport and Recreation developing sporting programs to involve young people
- links between police and local schools to identify young people for mentoring programs.

Strong interagency cooperation between police and other government and non-government agencies is essential, if genuine progress is to be made in improving relationships with Aboriginal communities.

Frontline police

The current relationship between police and the Aboriginal community needs to be viewed in the context of a long history of conflict. Elders told us of incidents that occurred up to 30 years before that still resonate to this day and influence their dealings with police. New recruits need to be aware of the impact of this history and understand the need to work on the relationship in order to gain the community's trust.

It is also important to understand that every community has its own distinct culture and customs, and way of doing business. While respecting Aboriginal culture is a cornerstone of the *Aboriginal Strategic Direction*, this 'respect' needs to run deeper into everyday dealings between police and members of the local community.

One of the most common things we were told during our audits was that the newly posted and younger police did the most damage to the relationship. A number of people told us about the disrespectful and sometimes racist behaviour displayed by police particularly towards their young people. It was felt that these officers often could prejudice good relations between police and the Aboriginal community despite the positive input from police who lived and interacted with the local community.

To build a sustainable relationship, NSW Police needs to ensure that suitable police work at the frontline. Ideally, only police with a genuine interest in working in an Aboriginal community should be considered for these postings. Commanders need to make sure that new arrivals are given a proper induction, as well as encourage and support police to get to know and become involved in their community.

Mentoring and assessing new recruits – local induction programs

The *Aboriginal Strategic Direction* states that NSW Police is committed to increasing Aboriginal cultural awareness. In part, this strategy requires the Police College to develop and implement a competency based course and induction program for police transferred to commands with significant Aboriginal populations. It also refers to a strategy that officers transferred to these commands should have a demonstrated understanding of 'Aboriginal awareness'.

Assistant Commissioner Mark Goodwin gave evidence to the recent NSW Legislative Council's Inquiry into issues relating to Redfern and Waterloo, that the training in Aboriginal awareness at the Police College was limited, and envisaged that this training would be supplemented by local, community-specific training.

Several other participants at the Inquiry gave evidence about the need for police to understand how their local Aboriginal community works, including things like local history, politics, identifying who the elders are and how problems are solved.

In its submission to the Redfern Inquiry the Police Association also recognised the benefits of an in-depth orientation for officers selected to work in areas like Redfern:

"Police new to the command should receive a reasonably in-depth orientation to the community and relevant issues. Selection of officers to police in an area with the specific problems of Redfern and Waterloo should ensure that those police are sensitive to the needs of the community and trained in the unique policing strategies that are required. These officers should have an understanding of the cultural differences in the local community. This strategy has been used successfully in other commands such as Cabramatta, where the local community cultural mix requires particular understanding from police."

While a general introduction for police at the College on Aboriginal issues is no doubt helpful, this approach is too generic and fails to take into account the different historical and cultural issues in individual areas and that every community is different. Although at a corporate level NSW Police appears to recognise the need for local induction courses, the approach taken by most commands is inconsistent and inadequate.

Often the extent of local induction courses involves little more than new staff meeting with the Aboriginal community liaison officers for a chat and sometimes a drive around town to point out the locations of Aboriginal service providers. Only some Aboriginal community liaison officers are asked to take the time to introduce new officers to the key community members. While it is positive to see that a number of police have a good rapport with their Aboriginal community liaison officer and consult them regularly for advice, it is common that developing a good relationship with an Aboriginal community liaison officer is the extent of most police officers' attempts to 'get to know' and understand the local Aboriginal community.

Our view is that all officers posted to a new command with a significant Aboriginal population should undergo an induction program where they are mentored and assessed by experienced local police and Aboriginal community liaison officers in relation to their dealings with the community. Seeking feedback about individual officers from community leaders and service providers would be useful in identifying early any problems before a relationship with the community becomes

seriously or irreparably harmed by the actions of one officer. Early assessment would also allow support to be provided to these officers who might be struggling with their new posting.

Local cultural awareness training

There is a significant gap between the approach envisaged in the *Aboriginal Strategic Direction* and the cultural awareness training delivered at the local level. The *Aboriginal Strategic Direction* specifies that cultural awareness packages be developed and implemented by the Police College as a general competency and as part of an induction program.

Training in this form is insufficient to enhance the cultural awareness of police officers at the local level. We advised most of the commands we audited that, in addition to any cultural awareness initiatives at the corporate level, there needed to be locally based cultural awareness courses with input from community leaders and involvement from local community representatives. Local area commanders need to ensure that locally based cultural awareness initiatives are developed for existing staff and new arrivals. Furthermore, it needs to involve officers at every level in the command: managers, sector sergeants, specialist liaison officers and general duties officers.

During our audits, there were only a few commands that had developed their own local cultural awareness courses. Many commanders had waited some time for the Police College approved course to be run in their command. Some commands had not had cultural awareness training for more than two years. Given that the College had only employed one person to provide this training and the distances that had to be covered, it was not surprising that there was a considerable delay. Although the course is informative about general cultural awareness issues, it alone does little to help officers understand their local community.

We were impressed to see commands like Barrier, Barwon, Darling River and Orana take the initiative to develop their own cultural awareness courses with local input.

Local area commanders who need to do more in this area would profit from considering successful cultural awareness initiatives in place in other commands, and adapt these to address their specific needs.

Case study

Mutawintji camps in Barrier command

Barrier command has well-established strategies to provide officers coming into the Broken Hill and Wilcannia sectors with effective cultural awareness training. The centrepiece of Barrier's approach is a series of overnight cultural awareness camps at Mutawintji, an Aboriginal-owned national park and historical site northeast of Broken Hill. The camps principally involve new probationary constables, officers posted to special remote locations and any others identified by the Aboriginal community liaison officers as potentially benefiting from additional training.

Officers camp with and receive instruction from Aboriginal people who are well versed in the traditions and culture of the Broken Hill and Wilcannia areas. The training includes sessions on the history of white contact, knowledge of key players, relationships between various groups, and other advice needed to help officers negotiate the complexities of the communities they work in.

Barrier command's camps are among the most sophisticated cultural awareness programs in the state and demonstrate the commitment of local police to working effectively with local communities. Many praised the role of Aboriginal community liaison officers and police in ensuring the success of these camps. Interestingly, another leading provider of this kind of training is the health service sector in Broken Hill, which provides all new staff with comprehensive and well-structured induction training.

A number of sources indicated that although the Mutawintji camps do not always succeed in turning around more recalcitrant attitudes, officers generally find them very valuable and there is broad community appreciation at being included in officer training. The camps demonstrate the benefits of building a local cultural awareness package into the broader cultural awareness training offered across NSW Police.

Even where a command has developed a good local based course, it is important that police continue to consult with the community, to ensure that the course remains relevant, and it provides an opportunity for police to meet a range of leaders in the community. It was suggested to us on a number of occasions that even if some leaders were not involved in presenting the course, it would be valuable to invite them to the training day so that they could introduce themselves and chat to officers on an informal basis.

Attracting the right police to remote locations

There are significant challenges for police working with Aboriginal communities in small, poorly resourced remote communities. Issues associated with family violence, alcohol and other drug use, unreported assaults and other problems can impact disproportionately on these communities. Limited access to services and difficulties for NSW Police in attracting suitably experienced and motivated officers to these locations can compound these issues and directly impact on the command's ability to provide an effective response to crime and meeting the *Aboriginal Strategic Direction* objectives. Staff turnover can be high as most staff transfer out of these commands at the end of their minimum tenure, which often leads to these commands being understaffed. Training is expensive and few courses are run locally. For these reasons, it is difficult to attract and retain skilled officers.

Getting involved in the community

Perhaps the most appealing aspect of taking up a post in the Western Region is that it offers police the incentive of their transfer requests being favourably viewed once their tenure is up. The majority of police request transfers to coastal locations. This practice leads to a perception in the community that police are simply doing their time out West and, for this reason, make less of an effort to involve themselves and their families in the community. We were frequently told that police officers did not really care about the people or what happened in their community. On the other hand, police that did stay in these communities after their tenure was up or at least involved themselves in the community while they were there, were very often well liked and respected by the community.

From our audits, it was clear that when a commander sets a strong example of being committed and involved with the Aboriginal community, then senior managers and other police usually follow. In fact, it is usually the more junior police that fail to see the benefits of being actively involved with the community. Having said this, some police are frustrated by the lack of support and services available to them in remote areas and feel that their involvement with the community is not appropriately acknowledged in terms of their overall performance. Commanders need to encourage their officers to get to know the community but also provide incentives like making community work a performance indicator when examining an officer's output.

It is also important that commanders spread the load across a range of police. Too often we saw positive, successful initiatives that depended almost entirely on the efforts of committed individual officers. Once these officers left their position or the command, these initiatives would fall away quickly. Successful strategies and initiatives need to be recognised by police managers, with efforts made to ensure that these become the command's responsibility, not just that of the officer concerned.

Aboriginal police

In every community we visited we were told that there needed to be more Aboriginal police.

Without a critical mass of Aboriginal police within commands that have high Aboriginal populations, NSW Police will continue to put a heavy burden on the Aboriginal police in these commands and it will limit what police can achieve in terms of developing a relationship with the community. While Aboriginal community liaison officers play an essential role in the relationship between police and Aboriginal communities, it is clear that recruiting more Aboriginal police officers would enhance the relationship. There are a number of barriers to this including educational and social disadvantage and perceptions and fear of racism and discrimination. But these should not be seen as insurmountable.

Barriers in recruiting Aboriginal police

The *NSW Police Aboriginal Employment Strategy 2002-2005* aims to increase the number of Aboriginal people recruited and retained by NSW Police. The strategy also aims to increase awareness of Aboriginal issues and the number of Aboriginal women employed by NSW Police.

The Police Commissioner has made it clear that he is committed to boosting the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander recruits and to this end, engaged the services of a research firm called *Cultural Perspectives*, to explore Indigenous attitudes towards policing as a career and the perceived barriers. Focus groups were conducted with Aboriginal people in La Perouse, Moree and Nowra in the 2003-2004 year.

The research revealed that the survey participants strongly felt that with the Police College being in Goulburn, they needed strong Aboriginal support units for people to discuss personal issues and get tutorial assistance. They spoke about the barriers of homesickness. Young people wanted other Aboriginal police to act as mentors so they could talk to them about 'Aboriginal stuff' and said 'a white police officer can't provide the same sort of understanding'. In all of the groups there was a perception that Aboriginal police would be strong role models for young Aboriginal people. The idea of special intake blocks was also raised so groups of Aboriginal people could go through the College at the same time to support

each other which would also create a built-in support network for later down the track. The participants said that if people knew that NSW Police was actively trying to recruit Aboriginal people, and that they would be part of an intake of Aboriginal students, this could also encourage enrolment. Others also spoke about the idea of block release – to break up the 14-week program because this was a long time to be away from home.

The current position

Figures supplied by NSW Police for the 2002-2003 year show that NSW Police employed 138 Aboriginal officers and 54 civilian Aboriginal staff across the state. This increased to 144 officers in the 2003-2004 year but fell to 46 for civilian Aboriginal staff.

The state government target for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment is 2%. Based on the figures for 2003-2004, the current number of Aboriginal police is less than 2% of all police in the state.

Given the over representation of Aboriginal people in the criminal justice system, there would be considerable merit in NSW Police aiming for an Indigenous employment rate well above the NSW government target of 2%.

Assistant Commissioner Goodwin told the Redfern Inquiry that the current target for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander recruits for 2003-2005 is 20 per year and that this target is being met. The previous strategy for 1995-2000 had a target of 10 recruits per year.

If NSW Police is meeting its target of recruiting 20 Indigenous police annually, then the net increase from 138 Indigenous officers to just 144 in 2003-2004 indicates a high attrition rate. This indicates a need to improve strategies to retain existing officers if the increased recruitment is to have an impact.

Recruitment strategies targeting Aboriginal people

Assistant Commissioner Goodwin told the Redfern Inquiry about a number of culturally specific strategies aimed at attracting Aboriginal recruits including:

- a bridging program to support Indigenous applicants in meeting academic requirements for the Diploma in Policing Practice
- the development of a distance education program
- 'policing as a career' days in connection with other community festivals in areas with high Indigenous populations
- the Recruitment Branch sending information about a career in policing to community groups for distribution
- in appropriate circumstances, the current 18 month waiting list to join NSW Police being waived for potential Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander recruits and their progression accelerated.

While we appreciate that NSW Police has implemented a number of initiatives at a corporate level, the only evidence we have seen of these initiatives being implemented in a sophisticated way at a local level was in Moree and Shoalhaven.

Case study

Employment strategies in Shoalhaven command

Shoalhaven command's commitment to improving outcomes for Aboriginal communities extends to police efforts to promote a three-tiered approach to improving employment opportunities for Aboriginal people in the Shoalhaven area.

Recruiting new officers: the first part of Shoalhaven's approach is to increase the number of Aboriginal officers in NSW Police. The Shoalhaven commander said there is a lot of competition for the limited number of Koori students graduating from local high schools each year. His approach is to identify Koori students interested in a policing career, have his staff mentor them through their final two years of high school to keep them focused and out of trouble, offer traineeships to any graduates who remain unsure whether policing is for them, and other practical incentives to join NSW Police.

Administrative employment: the second strategy is to use federal and other funding incentives to employ and train several Aboriginal general services staff for one to two years. While Shoalhaven command has used CDEP funding to employ Aboriginal people for front counter work in the past, the commander emphasised the need to include computer and other training to enhance their prospects for employment.

Private sector employment: having established its credentials as a responsible employer with a commitment to hiring and training local Aboriginal people, the commander felt that Shoalhaven command was better placed to confront the reluctance of local businesses to employ Aboriginal staff. This third tier aims to support efforts by local group training agencies to train and place Aboriginal clients in local businesses.

Case study

Moree recruitment strategy

At Moree, police identified 20 Aboriginal young people who were interested in becoming police officers. To overcome deficiencies in their previous education a bridging course was developed and put in place by the local TAFE, and with 15 passing the course, these students were given advanced standing in respect of admission to the NSW Police Academy. The local area commander provided a great deal of support and also took the group of students into the city and showed them around various sections of NSW Police including a ride on a Water Police boat.

In Moree, young people seemed to be more aware of policing as a career because they had heard about the police induction course through TAFE. The school careers adviser had promoted this. The annual youth festival (CROC) had also exposed a lot of young people to information about policing.

How successful are these strategies?

Although the steps taken at Moree and Shoalhaven to implement local employment strategies targeting Aboriginal people are impressive, what is not clear is whether the efforts of a few commands and other current police strategies will result in increased numbers of Aboriginal people completing the Diploma of Policing and going on to become police officers.

If NSW Police is serious about recruiting Aboriginal police, it needs to examine how well these recruitment drives and strategies are working, supplementing them with additional measures. There needs to be an analysis of the number of recruits 'in and out' at every key stage including enrolment, graduation, attestation and resignation. Intake rates each year need to be examined against retention rates generally in order to get a real picture of how well these strategies are working. An understanding of why recruits leave early needs to inform future recruitment strategies.

Additional measures

Even with these initiatives, NSW Police is unlikely to get large numbers of Aboriginal recruits unless a more creative approach is adopted. While things like scholarships, mentoring programs and TAFE bridging courses are being used in some areas, they could be used much more widely. Even so, additional measures are needed if NSW Police wants to increase the numbers of Aboriginal police significantly.

The idea of special intake blocks for Aboriginal students is one way to address the 'isolation' issue.

Another is to consider relocating some or all of the required training. Because the Police College is in Goulburn, this means that most of the likely applicants will have to move large distances away from their families, something many Aboriginal people are reluctant to do. Those who are prepared to make the move are often left feeling isolated and unsupported without the connection to family. Running at least some of its entry-level courses out of other regional centres such as Dubbo or the North Coast is worth exploring.

Queensland Police have recognised the need to reach out to its regional population by establishing campuses of equivalent standing in Brisbane and Townsville. In our view, adopting a similar approach in NSW would benefit police generally. Setting up regional centres to deliver mandatory training courses could also make training more accessible and less costly for commands.

Aboriginal community liaison officers

Aboriginal Community Liaison Officers (ACLOs) are civilian personnel employed by NSW Police to act as a link between the command and the local Aboriginal community. The ACLO is responsible for providing advice and support to police in managing Aboriginal issues across their command.

There are 80 local area commands in NSW – 27 have ACLOs. Commands with large Aboriginal populations may have more than one ACLO, there are a total of 56 ACLOs across the state. Women occupy only seven of these positions.

The role of the ACLO is critical to improving relationships between police and Aboriginal communities. An ACLO doing his or her job with the support of colleagues and the community is an invaluable resource.

But the ACLO role is a difficult one: too often their police colleagues and their own community treat them as if they are working solely in the interests of the other side in the police-community divide. One community member memorably described these tensions:

They are supposed to be a bridge but police have blown up the bridge and kept the ACLO on their side.

Our audits revealed that community expectations of an ACLO are often quite different from how police envisage the ACLO role. A common complaint from the community is that the ACLO is used solely or predominantly as a “taxi service” or “police informant”. In fact what stood out for us in almost every command was how little the broader community knew about the ACLO role. While a formal position description exists, it was also clear that there was limited understanding by police of how ACLOs might be better used in relationship building and operational policing.

ACLOs are responsible for providing a service that meets the needs of their community. This means that while ACLOs across the state will have the same core functions, the particular issues faced by individual communities and how these communities do business, will define the way each ACLO should perform his or her role.

What makes a good ACLO?

We met a number of ACLOS with good skills who were working effectively with police and the community. Many of the more effective ACLOs displayed compassion, initiative and enthusiasm.

The sorts of activities these ACLOs focussed on tended to be:

- establishing and maintaining effective communication between police and the Aboriginal community
- resolving disputes between Aboriginal people and police
- encouraging Aboriginal people to discuss their concerns with police about crime and violence and help bring these two groups together to work on solutions
- working closely with the Crime Management Unit (CMU) in each command to identify young people at risk and repeat domestic violence victims and offenders
- with the aim of providing support and assistance in accessing available services and programs
- educating police about their local Aboriginal community to enhance cultural awareness; and providing support to relatives of Aboriginal people in custody.

We received particularly positive feedback from one western NSW community about their ACLO.

One of the reasons he stands out is because he takes a simple, practical and compassionate approach to supporting his community. The following case study is a snapshot of some of the good work being done by this ACLO.

Case study

An ACLO supporting his community

This particular ACLO's success is due in part to his attempts to understand the causes of troubled behaviour from young people and find a solution. He regularly carries out truancy sweeps with the local school liaison officer and Aboriginal education assistants, and then visits parents to find out why their young people are not in school. The reasons are sometimes related to bullying, or not having enough money for the children to have lunch. In these cases, he reassures the parents that the schools have a breakfast and lunch program, so their children will not go hungry, or sensitively tries to bring about an end to any abusive relationships that young people may have with each other.

He also tries to help adults turn their lives around in an effective way. For example, if a person is brought into custody and is agitated due to drugs or alcohol, he gives them time to calm down, before talking to them about rehabilitation programs that are available in the community.

Early intervention is another effective tactic used by this ACLO. Through police intelligence, the ACLO was aware of a single parent family that had just moved to the area from the city. The mother was struggling to deal with the behaviour of her boys who were constantly in trouble with the police. The ACLO was aware of the boys' criminal history and introduced himself to the family soon after they moved in. He explained that if they carried on committing offences, they would continue to be regularly arrested by police. But he also explained that they had an opportunity to start again in a new area, and introduced them to the PCYC where they took up a variety of activities. Apparently, only one of the boys has reoffended since.

The ACLO's role in relationship building

One of the most critical aspects of the ACLO's role is to guide police in developing good working relationships with the key members in the Aboriginal community, including those who have a lower profile but are very active and important to the community. While senior police and specialist liaison officers normally use their ACLO well in this area, our audit identified a gap in terms of how ACLOs were used to educate police on the ground.

Involving ACLOs more in the training of new recruits and existing staff

The mentoring role that can be played by ACLOs is under-utilised by police.

While it is part of an ACLO's role to contribute to the training and induction of new staff, and they are often asked to provide cultural awareness training and be involved in cultural activities and camps for young people, we observed that there might be a better role for them in inducting new officers. ACLOs could provide on-the-job training that involves ACLOs introducing new officers to leaders and stakeholders in the community and being involved in the ongoing assessment of their performance.

Getting value from an ACLO operationally

There should be a more integrated approach in utilising ACLOs in crime prevention and community safety strategies, and better coordination and liaison with other specialist officers in important areas like working with young people and dealing with family violence.

There are a number of key areas where the ACLO role can and should be put to better use. Some ACLOs told us that they would like to be tasked with more operational activities rather than simply being a go-between for police and the community. They feel their skills are often wasted and are left to develop their own duties, which often leaves them feeling isolated and despondent about what they can achieve. While some ACLOs work effectively with little supervision and direction, others would benefit from and appreciate more guidance.

We have observed situations where there is a significant and valuable role for ACLOs to play in operational matters, particularly where their presence might reduce tension, or where involving them in planning means that they can provide input from the community's perspective to reduce the likelihood of conflict.

We also saw the effective role that ACLOs often play in persuading offenders to turn themselves in where police have to execute outstanding arrest warrants or follow up on bail breaches, particularly in relation to domestic violence matters.

The ACLO speaks to the offender and/or the family to reach a negotiated outcome that minimises the risk of adverse consequences for police, the victim and the offender.

While most liaison officers work during the day, there is an expectation that ACLOs will be available to work shifts on a 24-hour rotational basis. A common complaint from communities was that the ACLO usually worked 9 to 5, although this seemed to vary between commands. It is important to the community that the ACLO is available to ensure that support is given to their relatives, particularly young people, if they are taken into custody. For this reason, police need to ensure that they roster ACLOs in a way that best supports the community and police, by making them available during those times when crime is at its peak.

Giving ACLOs daily taskings embraces the immediate, mid and long-term needs of a community. Supervisors can task ACLOs to deal with matters that need an urgent response and follow up on what was achieved at the end of each day, as well as monitor the success of ongoing project work. This method of supervision allows ACLOs to work with other specialist liaison officers responsible for youth, domestic violence and community safety, so they can tackle issues faced by the community as a team in a coordinated and strategic way. It also provides ACLOs with direction and support and encourages accountability.

More sophisticated operational taskings for ACLOs that take all of these factors into account are already occurring at Manning Great Lakes, Richmond, Tamworth, Orange and Broken Hill with positive results.

Over the course of our audits, we noticed an improvement in the way that a number of commands were using their ACLOs and are confident that several good role models exist. However, we remain concerned that there is still a great deal of inconsistency in how ACLOs are being used. For these reasons, NSW Police needs to closely track how effectively ACLOs are being utilised in individual commands and take immediate steps to address any problems.

Employment issues

The need to promptly fill vacant ACLO positions

In a number of commands audited, it was common that the ACLO position(s) had been vacant for some time. We were often told that several attempts had been made to fill positions but police had trouble finding suitable applicants. A failure to fill these positions quickly puts strain on the relationship between police and the community.

While it can be difficult to fill positions, particularly in remote locations, NSW Police needs to be more proactive in approaching the community and agencies to identify possible candidates, and perhaps offer candidates a trial period to assess their suitability.

If ACLO positions remain unfilled for lengthy periods it creates a perception in the community that supporting Aboriginal people is not a priority for police.

The demand for female ACLOs

In almost every community there are calls for the employment of more female ACLOs. The current number of seven is inadequate and the impact is felt most strongly by victims of domestic violence. While there are several male ACLOs that have been acknowledged for the positive contribution they make to support women in this area, it is far from ideal that female victims are not given the choice to be supported by another woman.

The need for female ACLOs was one of the most common issues of concern for communities. The Police Commissioner has previously sought further funding for the creation of 12 additional female ACLO positions. We are unaware of the current position but clearly this is an issue we will continue to monitor.

Assessing an ACLO's performance

We came across a number of ACLOs with good skills, who were being well utilised. Some ACLOs showed an outstanding commitment to their job, while others did not perform as well, yet little was being done to manage their performance. If the community or police form the view that their ACLO is not performing well, it can be detrimental to police-Aboriginal relations.

If ACLOs are well supported members of the Crime Management Unit, then measuring their performance is easier. While police are responsible for the day-to-day supervision of ACLOs, it is critical that the community is consulted in relation to how the ACLO is performing and whether the needs of the community are being met. Often there will be a strong contrast in the views held by different sections of the community.

That said, the relatively small number of positions often means that ACLOs are not in a position to maintain high visibility across their command, particularly where the command covers a large geographical area and is divided into a number of

sectors. Some ACLOs are largely confined to working in the main town and are only able to visit smaller sectors every six months or so, and the length between these visits is noticed and remarked on by community representatives.

In addition, building and maintaining effective relationships with both the community and police is a complex task. Good ACLOs can still find that they are offside with members or sections of the local community but whatever the case may be, local area commanders and ACLOs need to work together to ensure that the whole community receives an appropriate level of service.

Training and career development

There is no obvious career path for ACLOs.

A number of ACLOs told us that they were not given adequate support and training to perform their role. While NSW Police needs to ensure that ACLOs have proper training in areas like custody management, domestic violence procedures and youth diversionary measures, it is also necessary that they receive practical training on the best way to handle some of the more difficult situations they face. Often the best people to provide this training are other experienced ACLOs.

If experienced ACLOs are given the opportunity to provide training or a mentoring role, this will not only support less experienced colleagues, but will also provide development opportunities.

One of the responsibilities of the NSW Police Aboriginal Coordination Team (ACT) is to provide coordination, support and professional development to ACLOs. However, given the ACT's limited staffing, it is unrealistic to expect this team to completely shoulder the burden of responsibility for supporting and developing ACLOs. Local area commanders are well placed to provide this support and development in consultation with the ACT. It is also crucial that the effectiveness of ACLOs across the state is reviewed regularly at a corporate level, with a view to providing guidance to commanders who are either failing to support and appropriately task ACLOs or who are wrestling with an ACLO's performance.

Our observations should be considered in line with the Redfern Inquiry's recommendation that the Minister for Police expedite the promised examination of the support and training structures available to ACLOs, in line with the Government's response to the NSW Alcohol Summit 2003, to determine whether additional support structures and training are required.

Fighting crime

Once imprisoned, the likelihood of Aboriginal people re-entering the criminal justice system increases significantly.

Figures from 2001 indicate that only a minority of Indigenous offenders sentenced to prison had not previously been imprisoned in the preceding five years and the rate of imprisonment for the Indigenous population was 16 times higher than for the population as a whole. The rate of imprisonment was even higher for young Indigenous males. In 2001 more than 1 in 10 Indigenous males received a prison sentence (for women it was 1 in 62 in the same age group)¹. These figures show that Indigenous people's contact with the criminal justice system is a significant problem for Aboriginal communities.

NSW Police has attempted to address this significant problem by focussing a large part of the *Aboriginal Strategic Direction* on reducing Aboriginal people's contact with the criminal justice system. Youth offending and domestic violence are the predominant forms of offending behaviour in Aboriginal communities, and are each the focus of additional key objectives.

While there are no clear answers, there are certain indicators that NSW Police needs to look for when examining the performance of commands with high Aboriginal populations that go beyond crime statistics.

The incidence and adverse consequences arising from youth offending and domestic violence merit particular attention from commands in developing strategies to enhance the relationship between police and the local community. Youth liaison officers, domestic violence liaison officers and ACLOs each have a critical role in coordinating and informing the approach taken by police in dealing with these areas. But given these issues are intrinsic to day to day policing, responsibility for a coordinated approach should not be left to a single specialist officer, but instead, should be a primary responsibility for management and operational police.

In all areas we visited it was obvious that Aboriginal people want to tackle crime in their communities. We found that many Aboriginal communities were not asking police for a "hands off" approach. Indeed many of them saw police intervention as a necessary response to serious offending. In fact, people in the community told us they noticed a distinct downward trend in crime when serious offenders were apprehended.

Working with the community to solve crime

Police cannot solve the problem of Aboriginal crime on their own. The level of disadvantage in many Aboriginal communities presents a significant challenge to reducing crime. Aboriginal leaders recognise this and know that communities need to take charge of their own circumstances. This is against a background in many areas of extremely high unemployment, a lack of basic education, physical and sexual abuse of adults and children at disturbing levels, substance abuse that is destroying families as well as a lack of willingness by some people to report the perpetrators of serious crimes for fear of retribution.

A whole of government approach is required to successfully address these challenges, and the contribution by police to implementing or supporting existing diversionary and rehabilitation initiatives is crucial.

In almost every command we saw evidence of police working in close partnership with service providers to address crime. These partnerships allow for a coordinated approach to addressing social disadvantage and early identification of young people and families at risk. However, there was usually a gap in relation to police successfully engaging elders and other community leaders to develop practical crime prevention strategies. One example we saw of a community coming together with police and other government agencies to address crime was in Dubbo.

¹ Weatherburn, D., Lind, B., and Hua, J., 2003: Contact with the New South Wales court and prison systems: The influence of age, Indigenous status and gender, *Contemporary Issues in Crime and Justice*, No 78. NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research

Case study

Tackling crime in the Gordon Estate

In late January this year, leaders from the West Dubbo community held a crisis meeting involving 200 residents, elders, police and government representatives to look at ways of dealing with the spiralling crime in the Gordon Estate.

Dubbo community leader, Mick Mundine chaired the meeting:

"Governments won't support you if you can't commit to change yourself. . . . And I'm sick of the talking. It has to come from the community. They have to set the agenda and the goals and the government can fall in behind it."²

A range of decisions were made as a result of this meeting but the most significant outcomes regarding immediate crime prevention strategies were:

- agencies agreed to conduct intensive case management of 'at risk' families identified collectively by police, DOCS, Department of Housing, NSW Health and Department of Juvenile Justice. Representatives agreed to meet every week for three months to develop individual case management plans
- the Department of Housing is working with residents of the Gordon Estate to establish a tenants' advisory group to resolve issues with problem tenants and explore relocations where appropriate
- police have increased their presence in the Gordon Estate both through covert drug operations and high visibility policing strategies
- a crime prevention van regularly visits the Gordon Estate and provides community members with advice and information on community safety strategies
- funding was sought and granted for security patrols for the next 12 months. These patrols are managed by the Aboriginal Employment Service (AES). The AES trains Aboriginal people as security guards and they patrol crime hotspots in conjunction with local police. We received advice from NSW Police that there was a significant decrease in crime in the Gordon Estate in the first month of the patrols
- the government agencies involved agreed to meet three months after the initial meeting to review progress and report back to the community

The impact of the police operational response on relationship building

One of the biggest obstacles for police in solving crime in Aboriginal communities is a lack of willingness on the part of many Aboriginal people to come forward to police with information because they are afraid of retribution and are distrustful of police. This often means that many serious crimes go unsolved, which leads to a perception by the community that police provide an inferior level of service to Aboriginal victims of crime. These perceptions could to some extent be overcome if police provide regular feedback to victims' families and the broader community where appropriate. We observed this problem at Boggabilla, Bowraville, Dareton and Wagga Wagga where police had been unable to identify the offenders in serious crimes committed against young Aboriginal people.

Case study

Supporting the families of victims of crime

In a small north coast community, the newly arrived sector commander was confused by ongoing community anger and an unwillingness to work with police until he learnt more about the police response to a brutal series of unsolved child murders that occurred in the town 14 years ago. The major cause of anger was a lack of feedback. One explanation for why the victims' families were told little about the police investigation was because the murders remained unsolved but officially the investigation was ongoing. An inquest was held, yet the victims' families knew little about the outcomes. The commander and the various local agencies confirmed the impact of these murders on the police-community relationship. It was difficult for police to make inroads in this small community when there were still so many unanswered questions from the community's point of view about these murders. Soon after our audit, the sector commander arranged for NSW Police Homicide and Serial Crimes Agency staff to meet with the families of the victims and take them through the details of the case. The sector commander also apologised to the families for the negative experiences early on in the investigation. The meeting was very well received and led to the families feeling more confident about the current investigation and keen to work with the sector commander on new initiatives. The sensitive handling of this difficult situation gave police an opportunity to turn a major obstacle to the police-community relationship into a chance to fast track improved relations.

² *The Australian* 18 January 2005, p10

While enhancing the relationship between police and key members of the Aboriginal community is an important objective it also has practical benefits. With improved communication, Aboriginal people are more likely to trust police and work with them to solve serious crimes and there is also less risk to police when they intervene in difficult and tense situations in the community.

Young people

Almost every elder and community leader we consulted was concerned about the crime they see and experience in their communities. While they acknowledge that family is the strongest influence, they see no prospect for improvements unless there is a meaningful change in the relationship between their young people and police. Elders almost plead for practical ways to improve outcomes for young people, so that not only can they feel safer, but also their young people might escape the vicious cycle they see created by frequent contact with police. Few pretend that the often strained relationships between police and young people is the fault solely of one side or the other, but they feel police are often better placed to make the first move in achieving better interactions with young people.

For these reasons, NSW Police needs to closely monitor the effectiveness of diversionary methods used by commands and Police and Community Youth Clubs (PCYC) to reduce the number of Aboriginal young people that come into contact with the criminal justice system.

Positive interactions between police and young people

Almost without fail, when we spoke to young Aboriginal people they were able to name 'good cops and bad cops'. Usually the good cops were liaison officers responsible for youth and community safety, officers from the PCYC or police that played sport with them. The common theme was that young people liked police that took the time to get to know them. We heard praise for a police officer who would repair young people's bikes in return for them agreeing to go to school. Several youth liaison officers have young people rush up and hug them in the street. One youth liaison officer took a group of young people from Bourke to Sydney to watch the State of Origin football and meet the players. The next day he took them to his parents' house for breakfast. These good relationships and bonds between police and young people can and do exist.

While there are many good stories, unfortunately there were more negative ones. A number of young people we spoke with felt that police targeted them because they were Aboriginal. Whether this is real or only perceived it needs to be addressed. We were told of young people being stopped and questioned about where they got their pushbike or strip-searched in public areas with little regard for their privacy. Others spoke about being offered fast food in exchange for information or having their bags searched by police while they swam in the river. Mostly young people felt that it did not make much difference if they were doing anything wrong or not, police still treated them the same way.

Formal diversionary options and alternatives to court

Some of the diversionary options available to police under the *Young Offenders Act* include warnings, formal cautions and Youth Justice Conferencing. While it is not the intention of this report to deal with the specifics of the *Young Offenders Act* scheme, it is important to appreciate that its provisions are an essential part of the strategy to divert Aboriginal young people from the criminal justice system. However, certain circumstances have served to somewhat limit the use of these alternatives for Aboriginal young people.

Before any of the *Young Offenders Act* options can be used, the young person has to admit that he or she committed the offence in question. Where there has been a poor relationship between police and the local Aboriginal Legal Service (ALS), the advice to young people from the ALS has often been not to admit to the offence, thereby placing the young person before the courts rather than being dealt with by way of alternatives. A number of legal services provide this advice because they say police are not prepared to take the time to go through the evidence with them to allow them to make an informed decision about whether to advise the young person to admit the offence.

Where the relationship between police and the ALS is better, we observed that a successful approach sees young people given a cooling off period of up to 14 days after the offence to seek appropriate legal advice. This option is only used for offenders who are not perceived by police to be a flight risk and often sees the young person return to make admissions and be dealt with under the *Young Offenders Act*.

We found significant discrepancy in the rates of referral to Youth Justice Conferences, cautions issued and use of the cooling off period between commands, and on occasion, between different sectors within the same command. These trends suggest that referral to these alternatives depends very heavily on the views of an individual officer rather than the application of more general criteria. In our view, this issue should be closely monitored by NSW Police to identify how referral rates might be improved.

Other youth diversionary strategies

While the *Young Offenders Act* offers some diversionary alternatives if an offence has been committed, there needs to be a much greater focus on developing positive relationships between Aboriginal young people and local police and adequate education and employment opportunities to deter young people from offending.

The *Aboriginal Strategic Direction* refers to a number of other approaches for diverting young Aboriginal people from offending and coming into contact with the criminal justice system, including:

- *Crime prevention and personal safety* initiatives, including safe houses, substance abuse awareness programs and Community Night Patrols
- *Cultural and recreational activities*, including partnerships with local elders, PCYC programs, camps, mentoring and organised sporting and cultural activities and events
- *Links with PCYC programs*, including the Priority 1 program which targets repeat offenders and the Priority 2 program which designs programs for crime hot spots
- *Education, employment and training*, including employment and training opportunities and parenting programs.

Crime prevention and personal safety

Another aspect of diverting young people from offending involves active efforts to divert young people from situations and circumstances where there is a risk to the young person or the community.

In a number of the commands we visited there was strong support for the provision of “safe houses” where young people could be accommodated temporarily if their home environment was posing a threat to their safety or welfare. In other areas, a night patrol served a similar function by removing young people at risk in public places and taking them home or to a safe house. These night patrols were usually staffed by community people but were linked by radio or mobile phone to police so they could respond to any concerns. In a number of the commands we audited there was a drop in street crime when night patrols were operating regularly.

We acknowledge that these are only short-term solutions and greater attention needs to be given to longer-term strategies in prevention and early intervention.

Cultural and recreational activities

Cultural and recreational activities are a significant feature of diversionary options exercised by police. These are often used as a way of providing positive role models to Aboriginal young people, reinforcing positive behaviour and helping enhance young people’s awareness of Aboriginal culture. Participation at camps or other activities is used as a means of encouragement or a reward for consistently good behaviour or attendance at school. Obviously these activities are resource intensive, but they are often conducted with the support and funding of local businesses or other service providers. These activities often result in police developing a better rapport with young people, and providing a reservoir of goodwill that might be relied on in other circumstances.

While almost all of the commands we audited had some sort of youth activity program including overnight cultural camps involving young people and police, for these relationships to have a lasting impact it is important that they are maintained through ongoing mentoring.

Case study

Targeting young people at risk in Castlereagh command

A significant commitment to identifying and working with young people at risk in Castlereagh command has been made through the Giyaali project. This initiative, involving a partnership with DOCS and the Department of Education and funded in part by the NSW Government, is intended to address at risk behaviour through positive interaction and association with role models and peers.

Young people who are referred to the group are encouraged to discuss the reasons for their referral, and how their actions affect them and their community.

Young people are given the opportunity to participate in attractive activities, such as camps and trips to the State of Origin rugby league matches and other high profile events. The young people involved have to sign a behavioural contract, commit to attending school and not come to the adverse attention of police. Their involvement is monitored over a 12-month period, with a strong focus on cultural awareness, developing life skills, disrupting at risk behaviour such as truancy, and reducing crime, violence and anti-social behaviour.

Links with the Police and Community Youth Club (PCYC)

A strong link between the command and local PCYC is critical.

PCYC is a registered charity run in conjunction with NSW Police. NSW Police allocates one or two police officers to each of the 57 statewide clubs. PCYCs are used in a number of commands to deliver cautions and conferences under the *Young Offenders Act* and work with local police to identify at risk young people as well as high-risk offenders for their program and case management work.

During our audits we came across some innovative programs being run from several PCYCs across the state. However, we noticed that the programs on offer varied between commands and their success often depended on the dedication and enthusiasm of particular officers. It is important that NSW Police ensures that the more successful programs are widely promoted around the state and are adapted to suit local needs. Some examples of specific PCYC programs are:

Priority 1 programs

Statistics from NSW Police indicate that approximately 20% of young offenders are likely to reoffend. The P1 program aims to target appropriate young people identified by the Crime Management Unit from this group. Upon referral, PCYC officers organise a meeting with the young person and their parents or guardian. A flexible program tailored to suit the young person is designed in consultation with the young person, legal representatives, police officers including the youth liaison officer and representatives from key youth agencies. The young person's criminal history is checked every three months to look at any reoffending.

On your bike

This program was run over eight weeks in Tamworth during 2003 and targeted geographically isolated youth, in response to an indication that many young people wished to own a pushbike to travel to work and school. Participants were involved in a day of outdoor sports such as abseiling, rafting and archery, which was conducted with the aim of building teamwork, trust and respect. They were each given a second-hand pushbike donated by Oxley command, and worked with Tamworth TAFE to learn how to conduct bike repairs. They also participated in workshops on road safety, basic first aid and bike maintenance. At the end of the eight weeks, they went on a two-day camp covering personal issues like self-esteem and teamwork.

Traffic education

Traffic education programs are run by several PCYCs, often in conjunction with the Roads and Traffic Authority. These programs target young people charged with driving offences referred by local courts. Over six weeks participants attend presentations relating to aspects of driver behaviour given by a range of people including probation and parole officers, the State Emergency Service, police, community health workers, solicitors and alcoholics anonymous. The course also features practical exercises, including exposure to a simulated vehicle roll-over.

Youth in sport

This Gunnedah initiative involves individual grants for P1 offenders to become involved in a team sport. Currently two P1 offenders are sponsored to play in local Australian Rules competitions. The youths are supplied boots and other sporting equipment, and their transport to matches and training is organised. PCYC officers have advised that this program has been particularly successful because the young people's confidence and morale has been significantly lifted, and their offending rate has reduced to zero. One of the participants, an Aboriginal youth, has developed into an excellent player, and has now joined the local open-age competition.

Tea, toast (and maybe a job)

PCYC Tamworth ran this program from the Coledale Community Centre due to the high proportion of young unemployed people at Coledale. Unemployed P1 offenders and other young people were targeted primarily from geographically isolated areas to participate in the program. Breakfast was provided and staff from local job placement agencies, TAFE and the Adult Education Service attended to discuss job opportunities, job search methods, resume preparation and relevant courses on offer locally. Resources such as newspapers, telephones, fax and photocopiers were made available. As part of the program, PCYC officers provided specific assistance to P1 offenders to help them get a job.

Mobile PCYCs

Mobile PCYCs are used by a number of commands to target young people engaged in criminal or anti-social behaviour in identified 'hotspots'. For example, Mt Druitt and Parkes commands use this program to establish a

police presence in local parks to target youth drinking at night. Strategies used by these commands include building a rapport with young people and engaging them in activities such as basketball and break-dancing, hosting a BBQ, informing young people they must go home at midnight, and warning people of the seriousness of the offence of supplying alcohol to young people.

Traffic offenders

This program is designed as an alternative to criminal sanctions after a young person has been found guilty of a drink driving traffic offence. The program aims to educate offenders and to reduce the incidence of reoffence. The program was run in 19 clubs in 2003, with PCYC Sutherland running one of the largest programs. The program lasts for eight weeks, and includes personal and video presentations from NSW highway patrol officers, local solicitors, brain and spinal injury sufferers, drug and alcohol counsellors, the RTA and ambulance officers. NSW Police analysis of a sample of 2002-2003 data indicated that of all participants, 78% had not reoffended in the year after completing the PCYC traffic offender program. Further follow-up analysis will continue.

Education, employment and training

The preceding strategies are often effective in creating a better environment of trust and respect between police and local Aboriginal young people, but of themselves they are generally insufficient to address long standing issues of disadvantage. It is almost universally acknowledged in those communities we visited that education, employment and referral to appropriate social welfare programs is essential to bring about long lasting improvements to the circumstances of young people.

Here again, as with social welfare issues, it is obvious that police do not have a direct role in improving Aboriginal education or employment, but their frequent interactions with young people means that they are often well placed to work with education providers and employers. Getting Aboriginal young people to commit to education or training is often difficult, but we saw the results of various programs aimed at reducing truancy and officers reinforcing the need for and value of education and training through mentoring programs.

The youth liaison officer at Bourke worked closely with teachers at the local school to identify at risk young people, with a particular focus on targeting high offenders. The youth liaison officer and other police from Bourke attended the school's mentoring program on a weekly basis. The benefit of this approach was that it was made clear to the targeted offenders that police had an interest in their welfare but it was done in a non-confrontational manner, where commitment to continuing with education and training was reinforced.

In other areas, youth liaison officers and ACLOs took part in truancy sweeps with Aboriginal education assistants and teachers. Youth liaison officers and ACLOs would talk to young people and their parents about why they have not been in school and look at ways to change their attitudes and behaviour by involving them in programs and activities.

What makes a good youth liaison officer?

We observed that the various liaison positions can be effectively deployed to implement strategies to identify young people at risk and intervene to divert them from offending. However, too often officers are appointed as the youth liaison officer when it seems there are no other suitable positions for them to occupy. The positions also suffer on occasion from not being effectively supervised, and all too often their role seems to be reduced to conducting talks at schools and administering the police functions under the *Young Offenders Act*. Clearly there is the potential for these positions to undertake a much broader and effective role.

There are officers who are committed to their role as youth liaison officer and are passionate about working with young people, but find there is insufficient scope in the current role to stretch and challenge them. As with ACLOs, there is potential for youth liaison officers to be more involved in operational policing through the Crime Management Unit. This allows youth liaison officers to work closely with other liaison officers to identify and target young people and families at risk for diversionary programs. This early intervention approach could free up resources in commands in the long term, which can be expended on other activities.

Youth liaison officers need to ensure that they have good and regular communication with the main youth service providers so that they are familiar with the issues affecting young people in their local area, as well as identifying suitable activities and initiatives for police participation and support.

A good youth liaison officer will closely track the command's performance against the rate of cautions issued, the number of young people referred by police to youth justice conferences, the use of the cooling off period, and educate police about the best ways to work with young people and encourage police participation in activities like camps, mentoring and sporting programs.

It is critical that youth liaison officers develop strong links with PCYCs and make use of their facilities and resources by involving young people in PCYC programs as part of youth justice conference outcomes. Youth liaison officers also need to work closely with PCYC officers to identify suitable participants for the Priority 1 offender program.

Oxley command was impressive in its multi-agency approach to diverting young people away from offending and the criminal justice system.

Case study

Multi-agency partnerships in Oxley command

In Oxley command, which takes in Tamworth and Gunnedah, the youth liaison officer worked closely with the PCYC and other service providers to develop an integrated approach to dealing with young people. Some of the features of this command's approach included:

- active and effective teamwork between Oxley's ACLO and youth liaison officer, and other senior and specialist staff tasked with improving police work with local Aboriginal communities
- the effective involvement of the PCYC clubs at Gunnedah and Tamworth, whose innovative and highly effective program work with young people at risk was amplified by strong links with general duties police, juvenile justice staff, Local Courts, schools, local councils and others with responsibilities for working with young people
- good communication between all of the agencies with an interest in young people, with police playing a key role in identifying further improvements
- the active inclusion of respected Aboriginal community figures in *Young Offenders Act* outcomes, including the issuing of criminal cautions to young Aboriginal offenders
- high rates of Aboriginal participation in PCYC programs and other initiatives for young people in the Oxley command
- the use of older non-Aboriginal volunteers in a driver education program to give young learner drivers, including many young Aboriginal people, access to mentors that enable them to complete the driving hours needed to qualify for a full licence
- Children's court hearings at Tamworth, which are conducted by way of round table discussions, whereby the magistrate invites all parties including young defendants and their parents to talk about the offences and work towards practical outcomes that will deter further offending
- an appropriately flexible approach by police to young offenders such as the police use of bail reporting conditions to steer young offenders to the PCYCs at Gunnedah and Tamworth, providing opportunities for PCYC officers and staff to involve high-priority young people in positive youth program work and further education

These and other successful initiatives indicated that Oxley command had a planned approach to promoting positive and effective criminal justice initiatives for young people in the command, including Aboriginal young people.

Measuring the success of local strategies

At a corporate level NSW Police has developed a *Youth Strategic Plan*, which includes a number of good strategies to both address youth crime and provide support to youth liaison officers, specialist youth officers and PCYCs. The *Young Offenders Act* also provides for a number of creative strategies to be used by police, Department of Juvenile Justice and courts in diverting young people from the criminal justice system.

Through our audits we have seen a number of positive programs and strategies being implemented across commands. We have also met some dedicated and enthusiastic youth liaison officers, community safety officers and PCYC officers. Because so many creative strategies already exist, the biggest challenge for NSW Police is to ensure that commands are measuring the success of local diversionary initiatives by closely tracking the offending patterns of both high-risk and at risk young people exposed to local programs. The frequency with which commands are using diversionary options needs to be monitored and where use of such options is minimal without good reason, commanders should be held to account and given guidance to improve their performance.

Longer term strategies to reduce offending and steer young people away from the criminal justice system depend on factors such as better education and job opportunities, improved health and a safe home environment. Police have a critical role to play in keeping other service providers and communities focused on strategies to achieve these broader social improvements and tackling underlying contributors to crime.

Family and domestic violence

The prevalence of domestic violence and the underlying factors that give rise to it, such as excessive alcohol consumption, present enormous challenges to police.

Successful prevention and intervention in family violence requires strategies to change attitudes and behaviour, initiatives that will encourage women to come forward, encourage men to take greater responsibility for their actions and result in agencies providing coordinated and integrated care and support services. In many areas, Aboriginal men's cultural groups are taking up the lead established by Aboriginal women's organisations to develop practical solutions that engage the community. A number of these groups regularly ask police to talk to men about the consequences of family violence for victims and offenders. Often these groups deal with being better partners and parents, and work with police to provide greater support to young people.

NSW Police needs to know what kind of innovative work is being done by commands in the area of domestic violence. Often statistics can be misleading because levels of reported domestic violence may vary depending on the level of support provided to victims. In some areas, low rates of domestic violence can simply mean under-reporting by victims and this could be due in part, to a lack of knowledge or trust in the system. There should be evidence of a strong relationship between the domestic violence liaison officer, ACLO and other service providers in the community to ensure that victims are being supported and informed of the available options by frontline police.

Both the community and frontline workers need to be confident that police take domestic violence seriously.

A source of frustration and anger in some Aboriginal communities was the perception that officers in particular commands were slow to respond to call-outs involving Aboriginal victims of domestic violence. Women at one community forum told us that getting police to respond to domestic violence incidents was simply *"the luck of the draw"*. Others in that locality told us that officers frequently ask callers whether the victim is black or white. If they indicate the victim is Aboriginal, the next question is whether the victim is drunk.

A significant obstacle to effectively addressing domestic violence in Aboriginal communities is that victims are often reluctant to pursue the matter, particularly if it means that the offender will be jailed. We found that the views of community people and service providers in this field differed greatly across commands. In some areas, victims wanted a 'zero tolerance' approach from police, whereas in other areas, women wanted safe places for men to cool down rather than having their partners arrested by police. In a number of areas we saw domestic violence liaison officers working closely with victims to tailor the conditions of apprehended violence orders to suit the victim's needs. What is clear is that police need to develop community specific strategies in consultation with service providers and community members.

For this reason, we have not detailed the scores of different initiatives in place across commands but instead have chosen to highlight some of the programs that are working well.

Positive initiatives

Case study

Operation Choice (Shoalhaven command)

In Shoalhaven command the Operation Choice project is designed to reduce repeat domestic and family violence. Established in March 2001, the program uses risk assessment to rank domestic violence offenders (and victims) as high, medium or low risk, with the aim of focusing police interventions on repeat incidents involving higher risk offenders.

The program aims to support victims by minimising their involvement in formal proceedings. Shoalhaven command told us that the videotaping of victim statements soon after the incident had led to some success in 'victimless' prosecutions. That is, the recorded evidence enabled police to successfully prosecute some high-risk offenders even if the victim was not willing to give evidence in court.

The focus of Operation Choice is not always on prosecuting the offender. Shoalhaven command also uses the intelligence gathered through Operation Choice to support the development of an emerging inter-agency Coordinated Family Case Management program. Police adapt their own analysis to assist family case management planners trying to identify families that might benefit from program interventions. Staff from other agencies told us that the police analysis coincided with their own understanding of families in need of support.

We also observed the benefits of partnerships between the ACLO and the domestic violence liaison officer, particularly in working with a range of Aboriginal and other community service providers. Such partnerships were also better placed to overcome under-reporting of domestic violence in Aboriginal communities, with the ACLO often having links with the community that facilitated their awareness of women and children at risk.

Case study

Domestic violence initiatives in Wagga Wagga command

In Wagga Wagga we observed the close co-operation between the domestic violence liaison officer and the ACLO. It is apparent that they play an important part in keeping police and other service providers focused on practical issues affecting Aboriginal communities. This, in turn, helps garner valuable community and agency support for local police initiatives.

One such initiative was the Family Violence Program, which featured a coordinated response to following up on incidents of domestic and family violence. Again, there is a strong emphasis on involving Aboriginal families, with ACLO involvement in all interventions involving Aboriginal clients.

As part of the coordinated approach promoted through the Family Violence Program, there seemed to be comprehensive court support for victims leading up to hearings. The process for following up with victims and making any further referrals to other services after court appearances also seemed to be managed with minimal fuss.

It was apparent that the ongoing involvement of the ACLO was an important factor in ensuring significant Aboriginal community involvement in these initiatives. Plans for a CDEP-funded Indigenous outreach worker were expected to help maintain and extend the program's momentum, and extend the range of support following the end of police involvement.

Regular ACLO and domestic violence liaison officer attendance at various forums including the Indigenous Consultative Council, Aboriginal Interagency and Aboriginal Legal Service meetings, also appear to have reinforced Aboriginal understanding of and support for police initiatives in respect of domestic violence. While senior police often attended these forums, it was apparent that the ACLO and domestic violence liaison officer tended to be the most consistent participants.

The command's most prominent initiative for dealing with the source of repeat domestic violence offending was its Operation Abacuses, a resource-intensive offender targeting strategy aimed at high risk offenders. The approach used includes regular domestic violence liaison officer and ACLO visits of select victims' homes to check for breaches of apprehended violence orders. The aim of this monitoring is to either deter the perpetrator from further offending or detect and report breaches – thereby enabling police to remove the offender. At the time of the audit, three of the four families in this program were Aboriginal.

We were advised that there had been a noticeable increase in the willingness of victims to report domestic and family violence to police. Factors cited as contributing to this apparent increase in community confidence included the close liaison between the domestic violence liaison officer and ACLO, and initiatives such as the Family Violence Program and Operation Abacuses. It was certainly evident that Aboriginal community and agency sources felt that local police took issues of domestic and family violence seriously. This in itself is a significant achievement and provides a sound basis for further initiatives.

We observed that a critical factor in developing an effective response to domestic violence in Aboriginal communities was engaging local men's groups in an effort to address offending. Here again, successful strategies are more likely to involve both the ACLO and the domestic violence liaison officer in overcoming community reluctance to deal with domestic violence.

We also were advised of emerging concerns about child sexual assaults and child prostitution in some communities. For instance, in one community we were told of young Aboriginal girls agreeing to sex in return for drugs, often from truck drivers passing through the town. Although police are aware of the problem, it is difficult to investigate and prosecute, especially where the sex is consensual.

Shortly after our visit, the commander and crime manager had a meeting with local children's welfare advocates and DOCS workers to discuss these issues. They planned to set up a support service through DOCS, to provide one on one support to the girls involved. Police also planned to run a camp, which will not address prostitution directly, but aims to provide support and appropriate role models for the girls. Police also indicated they have asked a nearby Joint Investigative Response Team (comprising specialist police and DOCS investigators) for its assistance.

Case study

Partnerships for dealing with domestic violence in Manning Great Lakes

This project was developed by one of the domestic violence liaison officers at the Manning Great Lakes command in partnership with the Manning District Emergency Accommodation Refuge.

The premise is that a well supported and informed victim of domestic violence is more likely to proceed with a matter until it gets to court, give evidence at court and ultimately say no to living with domestic violence. The project is built on a partnership between police and other community agencies to intervene as early as possible to provide support to the victim.

Aboriginal support workers have been employed specifically to address the high rate of domestic violence in the Aboriginal community. At the time of our audit in mid 2004, the project had funding to employ three domestic violence support workers – two of these workers are Aboriginal women, while the domestic violence liaison officer supervises the team. The project team responds to domestic violence victims upon direct referral from police at the time of the crisis. The team is supported by police personnel, equipment and communication systems.

The project worker will only make contact with a victim after police have made a request referral. The worker attends the scene to ensure the victim(s) are not isolated from services, support and information at the time of the crisis and identify any health or safety risks - facilitating care where appropriate. They also ensure that information provided by the police has been understood and appropriately acted on. However, the support from workers does not end with the provision of information, but extends to providing a crisis case work service to victim families which includes psycho-social assessment, counselling, consultation, information and referral for clients as determined by their health and social needs.

At the time of our audit, the project team had 542 clients. Of these, 93 were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, representing 17 per cent of the total number. For the period May 2003 to March 2004, 236 clients had been supported through the court process.

The project has realised other benefits, including:

- Reduction in the number of withdrawals by victims and an increase in the number of guilty pleas by offenders because victims are proceeding with matters at the first opportunity
- More accurate warnings on the system about persons of interest because the intelligence is coming directly from the victim
- Early detection of breaches
- Improved rapport between police and the Aboriginal community, with the community now more likely to approach police for support of Aboriginal victims of domestic violence.
- Employment and career development opportunities for Aboriginal women in the social welfare field.

In light of the positive community response to this initiative, the most pressing issue now is how ongoing support can be provided to the project team in future funding submissions. We understand that funding for the project runs out in mid-2005.

Police involvement in other diversionary programs

The relationship between domestic violence and drug and alcohol abuse is well documented. There are a range of government and non-government agencies addressing the issue of Aboriginal substance abuse. Police need to identify and work with agencies on the most suitable programs where police involvement will have the greatest impact.

One of the policing methods that can have the most impact on reducing alcohol-related crime in Aboriginal communities is police strictly enforcing licensing breaches and promoting the responsible service of alcohol from licensed premises, including the sale of takeaway alcohol. A number of community people spoke to us about the hardship suffered by their families when licensed premises ignored restrictions or allowed practices where people ran up a tab that was paid up before any money reached the family. Police need to closely monitor the practices of licensed premises and take a tough approach on breaches.

The Magistrate's Early Referral into Treatment Program (MERIT) is an example of an effective and innovative program, where police support and involvement is critical to its success.

Case study

Police involvement in programs for drug offenders in Richmond command

The MERIT program is a voluntary pre-sentencing scheme that emphasises early referral for people charged with offences and who are motivated to engage in treatment and rehabilitation for their drug use problems. The program was successfully trialled in Lismore before being rolled out in a number of areas across the state.

A May 2002 evaluation of the MERIT program at Lismore court showed that of the 96 participants who had completed the program, 41 percent had not come under any police notice for criminal activity or through other police intelligence since.³

An estimated 16 percent of Lismore's MERIT participants at the time of this evaluation were Aboriginal. Funding conditions required that the primary drug problem be illicit drugs, almost certainly resulting in a lower level of participation by Aboriginal offenders whose principal drug problem is often alcohol. Consideration was being given to expanding the program to include people whose offending behaviour involved alcohol.

Although the focus of MERIT is on diverting offenders before sentencing, there are obvious community safety benefits in removing and treating drug dependent repeat offenders from the communities they live in. As a May 2002 conference paper on MERIT co-authored by the Richmond command Crime Manager, Detective Inspector Bryan Boulton, explains:

*"The MERIT program has had a significant effect on the local crime rate in being able to temporarily remove from the community individual offenders who may constitute a 'one man crime wave'. Placement of a single client in residential rehabilitation has been known to reduce the crime rate in a local neighbourhood by an astonishing 50%. Even more remarkable is that these success stories have continued after the three months at MERIT have been completed, the case has been finalised at Court and the accused is back in the community."*⁴

MERIT's early success in Lismore, which included significant police and Aboriginal participation, has led to its expansion to other courts across NSW. MERIT's Lismore managers said police support for the program was critical to its success, and indicated that senior police managers have been very supportive.

Senior Richmond command managers acknowledged that frontline officer support for MERIT had been an issue, but also that it can be "bloody hard to get people in the street to accept it". The commander said his staff had been using positive examples of the program's successes to "chip away" at public resistance to the scheme.

³ J Scantleton, J Linden, B Boulton, P Didcott, *MERIT, A Cooperative Approach Addressing Drug Addiction and Recidivism*, conference paper presentation to the Second Australasian Conference of Drugs Strategy in Perth, 7-9 May 2002.

⁴ Ibid

Where to from here?

There is no doubt that the *Aboriginal Strategic Direction* has the potential for improving and enhancing relationships between police and Aboriginal communities. There is also no doubt that many strategies and plans, all with the same potential, have come and gone before. How, then, will the *Aboriginal Strategic Direction* be any different?

First, there appears to have been an historic shift in the willingness of many Aboriginal communities and leaders to work with police on achieving better outcomes, enabling police to work in areas that have previously been reluctant to involve authorities. While this places new demands on police, it also creates opportunities. Many Indigenous leaders are hopeful that this will lead to significant change. Overall we found that there was a reasonable level of awareness and acceptance of the *Aboriginal Strategic Direction* in the areas we audited.

Second, NSW Police has shown a commitment to delivering practical solutions to the seemingly intractable problems that have beset past contacts and relationships between police and Aboriginal people. The Police Commissioner has made clear that he expects senior managers to deliver outcomes through the *Aboriginal Strategic Direction* by including the management of Aboriginal issues in performance agreements for all region and local area commanders.

As a consequence of our audits, commanders are now much more conscious of their obligations under the *Aboriginal Strategic Direction* and have taken steps to implement a number of our recommendations. The progress made by commands in some areas has been significant. The Police Commissioner has also determined to use the Police Aboriginal Strategic Advisory Committee (PASAC) forum, which is the statewide advisory committee to NSW Police on Aboriginal issues, to monitor the performance of commanders in relation to their implementation of *Aboriginal Strategic Direction* objectives in their command.

Appropriate commitment is an essential ingredient but simple and practical strategies need to be developed to ensure that the *Aboriginal Strategic Direction* is implemented.

While there were some commands that were substantially better positioned than others in implementing the *Aboriginal Strategic Direction*, we found that no command was strong across all the *Aboriginal Strategic Direction* objectives and we did not sense that there was any accessible means of sharing successful strategies among commands like the employment program at Moree. In this regard, NSW Police must continue to improve the coordination and sharing of information about successful initiatives.

Individual leadership at the command level is vital in creating an operating environment where due regard is had by all managers and officers to the importance of the *Aboriginal Strategic Direction* and its objectives in delivering better outcomes for Aboriginal people. There needs to be a better coordinated approach within each command, involving executive management, crime managers, specialist liaison staff and general duties officers, and there needs to be appropriate support and resourcing given to these personnel.

Recommendations

The reports provided to commanders at the conclusion of each of our audits dealt with the specific issues faced by each command. Our reports recognised the positive initiatives in place and recommendations were aimed at improving outcomes where gaps in performance were identified. Our recommendations have largely been well received by commanders.

In preparing this report, we have brought together our observations and findings from all of our audits. Accordingly, we make the following recommendations to NSW Police:

1. That NSW Police considers the issues raised in this report within three months of tabling and provides a detailed response to this office as to how it proposes to address the issues raised, with particular reference to its plans in the following areas:

- Aboriginal recruitment
- improving the management and development of ACLOs
- sharing and coordinating successful initiatives across commands
- developing partnerships with the Aboriginal community to fight crime.

2. The Police Commissioner involves the Police Aboriginal Strategic Advisory Committee (PASAC) and other key Indigenous people in developing the NSW Police response, and considers the scope for using PASAC to monitor and help implement the necessary changes.

NSW Ombudsman
Level 24, 580 George Street
Sydney NSW 2000

General enquiries: (02) 9286 1000
Toll free (outside Sydney Metro Area): 1800 451 524
Facsimile: (02) 9283 2911
Telephone typewriter: (02) 9264 8050
Website: www.ombo.nsw.gov.au

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