

## **INQUIRY INTO OVERCOMING INDIGENOUS DISADVANTAGE**

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## NSW REGIONAL COMMUNITIES CONSULTATIVE COUNCIL

### Report to the NSW Standing Committee on Social Issues

### Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage

February 2008

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## RCCC Report to the NSW Standing Committee on Social Issues Background

The Regional Communities Consultative Council (RCCC) is an independent, community advisory body to the Premier and the Minister for Rural Affairs. The Council is comprised of an independent Chair and fourteen committee members drawn from regional New South Wales, representing a broad range of knowledge and sectors, including: Social Services, Farmers, Women, Young People, Ethnic Communities, Health, Aboriginal Communities, Religious, Trade Union, Local Government, Education, Environment, Business and Industry and Economic Development.

Members of the Council are:

Member	Town	Sector/Interest area	Constituent Group
Lynda Summers	Table Top	Chair	Independent
Julia Imrie	Mudgee	Environmental	Nature Conservation Council
Ruth Shanks	Dubbo	Women	NSW Country Women's Association
Iris White	Broulee	Aboriginal Communities	Minister for Aboriginal Affairs
Mick Madden	Orange	Unions	Unions NSW
Tim Sheed	Jerilderie	Business & Industry	NSW Regional Development Advisory Council
Sue West	Bathurst	Health	Area Health Advisory Councils
Peter Quarmby	San Isidore	Social Services	Council of Social Services of NSW
John Ainsworth	Macksville	Farmers	NSW Farmers
Bernadette Wenner	Wee Waa	Youth	Minister for Youth
Fr Tim Cahill	Wellington	Religious Communities	NSW Ecumenical Council
Janet Hayes	Deep Creek	Local Government	Local Government Association of NSW and LGSA
Lyall Wilkinson	West Wyalong	Education	Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of NSW
Kevin Abey	Armidale	Economic Development	Economic Development Australia (NSW)
Diane Erika	Bonnells Bay	Ethnic Communities	Ethnic Communities Council of NSW & CRC Community Relations Commission



## THE RCCC VALUE ADD

The value of the RCCC is in the broad representative perspective that the membership brings to the table within a collaborative and collegiate framework. In considering policy issues, government and agencies find the RCCC a useful reference group and an invaluable 'sounding board' for feedback from a body independent of government but representative of the main leadership sectors of regional New South Wales.

The RCCC has now developed in experience and skill to the extent that despite the diverse backgrounds and interest of the individual members and their constituents groups, all issues, controversial or otherwise, can be considered in the context of a whole of regional NSW approach, independent of government. It is unique in this regard. Hitherto operating quietly 'behind the scenes', its recently revitalised membership is keen to utilise its capacity and potential to assume the more proactive and public role decreed by the Minister for Rural Affairs and Regional Development.

*The RCCC anticipates a constructive role assisting the State Government with the recommendations of the NSW Standing Committee on social issues.*

### Recommendation #1:

*That the RCCC be tasked and adequately resourced to assist the State Government with the recommendations of the NSW Standing Committee on Social Issues.*

## Context of this Report

The Council appreciates the opportunity to provide comment on this very important issue. The RCCC, through its constituent members, community consultations and experience knows only too well that Indigenous disadvantage is still experienced and reflected in communities of rural and regional NSW.

## Consultation Methodology

The methodology used by the RCCC includes the utilisation of their constituent groups who have members in many towns and villages visited, to hold open community meetings and to form small working groups within geographic regions to interview community members in the towns and villages. The RCCC also encourages groups and individuals via print and electronic media coverage, to submit their own individual submissions to the Council.



## Report Content

This paper represents (and is limited to) a synopsis and analysis of the views of Council members and issues raised by members of communities visited or consulted by the RCCC during their activities.

### Current and Emerging Issues:

As Coral Dow & Dr John Gardiner-Garden, Social Policy Group, Australian Government Background Paper 15 1997-98; *Indigenous Affairs in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, United States of America, Norway, & Sweden*; have stated “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a lower life expectancy than **any other first world country indigenous population**. Life expectancy for indigenous people in South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory is 60 years for males and 61 years for females. Fifteen to twenty years less than that of other Australians. The adult mortality rate has not improved and is now 6-8 times that of the total population. Infant mortality has improved since the 1970s but is still over three times that of the total Australian population. In 1994 school participation rates were lower than for all Australians, especially in senior high school and the unemployment rate was 38 per cent compared with 9 per cent for all Australians. Family incomes are on average \$10,000 per year below the rest of the community”.

These findings are from 1998 but the RCCC is confident that not much has changed in the ten years since this report.

From review of the many reports on indigenous disadvantage throughout the world it is interesting that, of those countries with **increased and improving life expectancy** of indigenous people, **all have received formal apologies and have a signed treaty**.

It is acknowledged the current Rudd led Federal Labor Government has recently formally apologised to the stolen generation. This is overdue in comparison to other first world indigenous countries. As Dow and Gardiner-Garden have stated “the New Zealand Government has made specific apologies on two different occasions, the Canadian Government has apologised for its role in the administration of special residential schools, the United States Government has apologised for its overthrow of the Kingdom of Hawaii, and the Norwegian King apologised for his state's past policies with respect to the Sami”.

All of these countries have greater life expectancy rates than indigenous Australians with the gap between indigenous and non indigenous in these countries now down to between **5 and 7 years**.



Population Change

Population growth and decline factors place different demands on service provision and service provision planning. Declining population communities have well documented economic, social and welfare issues and plans, yet at the local level community members in *growing* smaller communities do not perceive that the same intense focus or planning has occurred. Two common features cited by all communities about service provision are the need for;

- 1. Tailored local solutions - not the one size fits all approach
- 2. A coordinated approach by service providers - reducing duplication and waste, sharing resources, eliminating artificial demarcation etc.

Recommendation #2:

*That Service Plans account for and anticipate population growth in small communities.*





## Committee Terms of Reference - Response

*a) Policies and programs being implemented both within Australia (States/Territories/Federal) and internationally aimed at closing the gap between the lifetime expectancy between Aboriginal people and non-aboriginal people.*

Research has shown that in other first world indigenous countries such as America, one of the reasons Native American life expectancy has increased to nearly the same as the non native is the “**provision of a specific, national, health service for Native Americans.**” “The existence of a bureaucracy with skilled functionaries devoted to the service of special populations, as well as to their own bureaucratic survival, has meant that Indian health continues to be a visible issue.” *Kate Ross and John Taylor, 2002, Improving life expectancy and health status: a comparison of indigenous Australians and New Zealand Maori.*

### Health Services

In NSW the Aboriginal Medical Health Services, which are locally based, are proving to have positive effects on Aboriginal health outcomes. For example, the Orange Aboriginal Medical Service, in two years since its commencement, has registered 60 births with only 3 babies with a low birth weight. (One of these babies was born premature). A baby born weighing less than 2500 grams is considered to be a low birth. Birth weight of a baby is accepted as a key indicator of infant health and can be affected by age, size, health and nutritional status of the mother along with smoking or prematurity.

This exceptional result in Orange can be considered a testament to their holistic program of ante-natal care, provision of transport, Medicare bulk billing, home visiting service and full individual case management. As the CEO of the service stated, “the Mid Wife and Clinical Nurse Manager will do home visits if they haven’t seen the patient for a few weeks”. They are committed to keeping in contact with their patients. The home visits mean they also come into contact with other family members and have the opportunity to talk to them about their health needs.



The experience of the RCCC members strongly indicates that localised health service delivery and working within the community is a critical factor in engaging people, building trust and breaking down barriers, which is a fundamental principle in individuals accessing continuous health care which should lead to improved health outcomes overall.

The Aboriginal Medical Health Services are also offering regular health checks to monitor the ongoing health needs of patients and to serve as a mechanism of early intervention and preventative care.

The linkages between the NSW Area Health Services are often managed under a series of Memorandums of Understanding (MOU's) as the Aboriginal Medical Services are funded by a variety of means, often Commonwealth based. These MOU's need to be more than just a paper agreement and should serve as the foundation for a supportive, complementary and professional relationship between the State Area Health Service providers and the Aboriginal Health Services. This is not only for the benefit of the clients of the service, but also for the staff members, for clinical supervision and collegiate support and professional development.

### Reduction of 'Localism'

The RCC has received comment that many service providers use demographic and population statistics to reflect their client base but they often lack the local knowledge that identifies how best to service an individual community. It has been an increasingly common trend for Government agencies to use the Not for Profit sector to address individualism within service delivery. Although this satisfies the agencies criteria, many Non Government Organisations, especially in declining and Aboriginal communities are finding it increasingly difficult to deliver services on the ground.

Where services do exist, the lack of local involvement and knowledge often results in poor awareness of the existence of the service, or reduced confidence in the service. This then creates an apparent diminishment of demand and a self perpetuating reduction of service availability and the development of a 'hidden' demand. This is particularly problematic in the health and counselling sectors where lack of access or engagement in early intervention is later exposed in the development of chronic and crisis situations for individuals.

### Recommendation #3:

*Agencies engage communities at the local level to identify local service delivery options.*



## Information and Awareness - Access

In many areas it became apparent that there existed limited information, knowledge and awareness about existing government, commercial and philanthropic programs. Common requests for information were about programs for infrastructure renewal, economic development and assistance for community projects. State Agencies and Local Government are reasonably well informed, but this knowledge tends to be retained by those 'in the know', particularly since the consolidation of media, the reduction of local news coverage and increasing reliance on government information being stored on the internet, exacerbating the emerging digital divide within communities.

## Infrastructure Planning and Economic Development

There are a number of common issues that all constituent groups and community members across all regions raise that directly relate to the need for additional funding. These included expansion of health services, employment of more nurses and allied health staff, more spending on road, rail, bridges, sewerage, weeds, water management and general infrastructure and dedicated and regular maintenance. Increased funding to Local Government to deliver services and community projects are areas that communities believed only additional funding and better local coordination and planning can resolve.

Many areas identified good infrastructure and service provision as key pillars for a community to grow and be economically sustainable. Local Government is often cited as a key informer and contributor to local programs, but the capacity of Local Government to address many economic and social development issues is constrained by the diverse size of local councils and the relative size and nature of their economic and skill base.

Whilst Local Government in larger regional cities may have some financial capacity to contribute to economic growth and sustainability programs, outcomes are compromised by a lack of a regional approach - parochialism can see neighbouring towns pitted against and competing with each other, ignoring the real competition of national and global markets. A lack of professional skills exists in the areas of economic and social development. Smaller councils are severely limited in their financial capacity to engage in anything other than the traditional roles of rates, roads and rubbish.

Economic development in regional areas is about addressing sustainability across all sectors, social, environmental and economic. Creating employment improves the quality of life and can only be achieved by collaborative approaches.



Regional Development Boards and the Department of State and Regional Development roles have been enhanced in the NSW State Plan process. Regional Development Boards in partnership with Local Government should take a leadership role in developing economic frameworks for regions to achieve holistic economic, social and whole of community planning and outcomes.

#### Recommendation #4:

*That the Department of State and Regional Development, Regional Development Boards and Local Governments receive enhanced support to develop holistic economic strategies on a regional basis.*

#### Transport

Access to public transport and limited services was raised across all regions and all service delivery areas. Smaller towns and villages that do not have the critical mass to have a full fee paying service were most disadvantaged.

Those areas where the Ministry for Transport, Regional Coordinators have facilitated coordination of existing transport or part funding additional services stated that it was one area that had made the most difference to the lives of their community members. Assistance with transport was considered not only vital but imperative especially with the spiralling cost of fuel.

The poor level of assistance available for private travel to health services under the Isolated Patients Travel and Accommodation Assistance Scheme, (IPTAAS) is an ongoing concern. Despite the recent increase of eligibility to the scheme, the level of assistance available make little impact on the real cost of high fuel prices. Accommodation assistance of \$30 per night bears no relevance to the real cost of accommodation in regional and metropolitan centres and increasingly patients are forgoing specialist treatment due to financial circumstances and hardship. For many Aboriginal community members the option to travel to health services is not an option at all and they forgo treatment altogether.

The recently announced NSW Health Inquiry may present an opportunity for the specific issue of health transport to be addressed particularly for Aboriginal communities. However this inquiry should not be used as an excuse for inaction whilst it takes place. The success of transport coordinators in contributing to small community wellbeing is proven, however the stop-start nature of the program and 'one-off' assistance has compromised outcomes.

The community of Yetman received one-off State Government funding for a community bus to initially provide transport for medical services and youth activities. The community was isolated but now having access to affordable transport, farmers use it to attend meetings and local women travel to Moree. The bus not only provides essential transport, it has invigorated community activity in an area of ongoing drought and little or no services provided in their town.



There are other towns that are in the same position as Yetman with a small number of people in a village with limited services and the need to travel to a larger centre for services and activities. Bus services can never be commercially viable even when agencies contribute part funding for individual client travel. There will always be a gap in the cost of running a service on a regular basis. Menindee and Boggabilla are two communities that are in this position. They were initially supported with project funding from the Ministry for Transport, but without ongoing support the service cannot continue.

There are many other small towns and villages that are in the same position. Transport in these areas should be recognised as essential infrastructure and where there is no other subsidised public transport in place, small, local, community bus services should have ongoing funding to provide the service. The Menindee and Boggabilla transport trials should be the models that the Ministry for Transport, Regional Coordinators could emulate. Development of a local town business case, combining all agencies transport funding and the Ministry for Transport project provide the gap funding for 12 months. When the transport service has been running for the 12 months, schedules, need and realistic running costs can be determined and an application then can be submitted for the ongoing additional funding that the service requires.

#### Recommendation #5:

*That the NSW State Government empower and resource Regional Transport Coordinators to an appropriate level so that local solution projects in small towns and villages can continue to be developed.*

#### Recommendation #6:

*That the Menindee and Boggabilla transport trials be considered as models for emulation by the Ministry for Transport Regional Coordinators and that recurrent funding be available after a 12 month trial period.*

*b) The impact of the following factors on the current lifetime expectancy gap; environmental health, health and wellbeing; education, employment, housing, incarceration and the criminal justice system and other infrastructure.*

As Dr William Glasson, a member of the 2007 Australian Government's Northern Territory Emergency Response Taskforce has stated in the media "We all know that social factors such as overcrowded housing, lack of education and limited employment opportunities, along with environmental health issues such as lack of clean water, washing facilities and functioning septic systems **all influence health outcomes of individuals and the community**". (9<sup>th</sup> December, [www.eniar.org/news/health37.html](http://www.eniar.org/news/health37.html))



We do all know this and unfortunately it has been known for quite some time around the world and in Australia. *It seems incredible that we are still seeking evidence on the impacts when it has been proven time and time again in all the research over many years.*

From a Local Government Association perspective there are two important areas that are of greatest concern to the sector. These are environmental health and health and well being.

## 1) Environmental Health

There are many Aboriginal communities in NSW which do not have access to clean drinking water or adequate sewerage disposal. Within NSW there are 66 discrete Aboriginal communities, each with varying configurations of water and sewerage services.

In many Aboriginal communities often the only response available to E-coli contamination is boil *water alert*. This alert often remains in place for extended periods of time due to the lack of or absence of water and sewerage infrastructure services. This is a great inconvenience for communities and as well as a risk of disease. Also increases the risk of burns and scalds. In addition to this unacceptable state of affairs, communities are also exposed to other unacceptable circumstances such as frequent interruption to poorly maintained existing water services, exposure to water with chemical characteristics, including lead, that fail to meet the Australian Drinking Water Guidelines (ADWG) safety standards. The taste, odour and appearance of this water in some communities are such that it is simply not acceptable for drinking.

Instances of untreated sewerage can be found discharging from some communities into the river systems due to blockages that have been left untreated for periods of up to three years.

The *Aboriginal Community Water and Sewerage Working Group* was convened by NSW Health in 2004 to develop a coordinated strategy to address water quality monitoring and water and sewerage infrastructure needs in discrete Aboriginal communities.

It is unclear what outcomes the group has achieved and at what stage the strategy is in its development, implementation or evaluation.



Councils are the primary water and sewerage providers in rural and regional NSW. While the work of the group was initially focused on monitoring the quality of drinking water it is recognised that this monitoring must also be matched by a whole of government commitment to address the need for critical water and sewerage infrastructure in Aboriginal communities in NSW.

Encompassing this whole of government approach, the working group consists of representatives from the Local Government and Shires Association (LGSA), NSW Government Departments, the Australian Government, NSW Aboriginal Land Council, NSW Aboriginal Housing Office, NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs and other peak stakeholder organisations.

The focus of the Working Group is to develop recommendations for the provision of a sustainable, consistent and coordinated water supply and sewerage system for all Aboriginal communities. This is a complex and difficult issue. Accordingly it is important that the ongoing roles and responsibilities of various stakeholders are clarified, that accountability is transparent and that an appropriate sustainable service provision and funding model is developed and identified. Urgent and practical outcomes are required.

The benefits to be gained for Aboriginal communities from such developments are significant. Some of which are:

- The resultant increase in health and well being of communities;
- The capacity of water and sewerage services to meet acceptable standards;
- Outcomes expected from capital funding programs will be achieved; and
- Infrastructure assets will be properly managed extending their life, thus decreasing the need for capital expenditure to replace failing systems.

### *Amendments to the NSW State Plan*

Importantly, the NSW State Plan now includes within its Environment for Living activities, goals and priorities for ensuring that all Aboriginal communities in NSW have equitable access to a secure and sustainable system of water supply and sewage treatment system.

Under the plan, the NSW Government will reduce health impacts of poor living environments by:

- Reviewing water and sewerage systems in an estimated 75 Aboriginal communities in NSW to identify need for improved maintenance and infrastructure;
- Developing a sustainable waste management strategy to protect the environmental health of Aboriginal communities and conserve the natural environment, and



- Implementing clean up programs in Aboriginal communities and working with Aboriginal Land Councils, Local Government Authorities and the communities involved to implement sustainable waste management strategies and develop resources to address illegal dumping on their lands.

### Local Government & Shires Association Comment

The current state of water and sewerage services in discrete Aboriginal communities in NSW is simply unacceptable. The Associations are strongly committed to working with NSW Health and the working group towards developing a sustainable solution to this critical issue.

This issue was highlighted in the Associations 2007 State Election Water Policy Platform, which sought a commitment for the provision of recurrent financial assistance for the sustainable supply and maintenance of water and sewerage schemes.

The Association has raised (and continues to raise) this issue many times with the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and Minister for Local Government throughout 2006/2007.

Ongoing NSW Government Aboriginal Affairs CEO's work has progressed to the point where a business case to Treasury to resolve this problem is close to completion. The Association is encouraged by that business case.

*The RCCC strongly supports urgent attention to delivering practical outcomes.* There has been a plethora of research and plans, but tangible outcomes in the form of sustainable and robust infrastructure are overdue.

### 2) Health & Wellbeing.

The 17 year life expectancy gap between aboriginal from the non-Aboriginal population is a stark indicator of the status of health and wellbeing of the Aboriginal population. Around 134,800 Aboriginal people live in NSW which is 29% of the total Australian Aboriginal population.

NSW Local Government has an historic role in the protection of public health by planning for safe and healthy urban development and providing a range of services to communities. More recently, state and national health authorities have identified Local Government as a key stakeholder to help prevent chronic non-communicable diseases that causes morbidity and mortality in the contemporary Australian context. The incidence of chronic diseases such as cardio-vascular disease, cancer, mental health issues, diabetes and asthma along with injury can be prevented and reduced through a range of strategies in which Local Government can play a part.





Among Councils there is considerable awareness of types of health issues affecting Aboriginal people and a wide range of strategies being implemented to address these.

As part of the mandatory requirements of Social Plans, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are one of the seven identified targeted groups. Health issues are suggested in the *Social and Community Planning and Reporting Guidelines 2002* but are not a mandated requirement.

#### Recommendation #7:

*A focus on health and the fundamentals of sewerage and water infrastructure should be considered as mandatory goals.*

### Results of Local Government Public Health Survey 2004

In late 2004 the Local Government Public Health Survey was distributed to all Councils in NSW. A good response rate was received with 70% of Councils participating, representing a broad cross section of council regions.

The key health issues nominated by Councils as impacting on Aboriginal people were drug & alcohol misuse and tobacco use, mental health, diabetes, health service provision and access issues. Additionally Councils recognised the issues relating to healthy lifestyle and chronic non-communicable diseases.

Respondents primarily identified a range of strategies used to address the health issues experienced by Aboriginal people. The key strategy cited was effective partnerships, networking and liaison with Aboriginal organisations and effective networks with and within the Area Health Services. The second most commonly identified strategy was for Councils to employ specialised staff such as Aboriginal Liaison Officers, Aboriginal Environmental Health Officers, and Aboriginal Community Development Officers.

Councils have a good level of awareness of public health issues and incorporate these into their major planning processes but provision of infrastructure is subject to State and national policy and investment. Additionally Local Government provides a range of community services that impact on health and/or target vulnerable groups.



The RCCC recommends better linkage and reference to Local Government as a provider of key health infrastructure and prevention strategies, with support from the State and Australian governments to achieve practical outcomes such as improved sewerage, water and housing facilities as well as access to culturally specific services.

## Education

Education is a key factor to consider in addressing life expectancy issues for Aboriginal people. The RCCC recommends that the government consider innovative educational programmes which are sensitive to cultural issues and which focus on life and work skills, as well as traditional cultural and academic pursuits.

One program identified by the RCCC, which may offer potential for disadvantaged communities, is the Gwydir Learning Model, which takes the whole of community approach over a longer term, to educate people, harness their interests and match them with careers and employers to suit.

This has the added benefit of tackling what is emerging as an intransigent skills shortage in regional New South Wales. It is a damning indictment indeed, that those locations where it is most difficult to recruit staff are also the locations that have a high incidence of unemployment, particularly amongst the Aboriginal community. This is not a new phenomenon, such reality having been in existence for in some cases decades. An innovative approach which targets young people at school for roles within the community over a longer term could be one way of “growing your own”, growing capacity within communities and sustaining populations.

### Vocational Education - The Gwydir Learning Region

Investing in education and skill development through vocational education can be the catalyst for confidence building and revitalisation of the community. Addressing the learning needs of a community can be a reality through partnerships, utilising the large number of potential instructors and under-utilised educational facilities and resources. Using learning as a catalyst of promoting social cohesion, revitalisation and economic development is the basis of the Gwydir Learning Region model.



The Gwydir model facilitates access to education and training in the local area, re-skilling the community and instils an appreciation of the importance of lifelong learning. The Council, businesses, educators and the community invest time and training in the young people, unemployed and mature age workers who are increasingly seeking opportunities for learning and re-skilling. Local access and support along with flexible delivery encourages community members to continue with their education throughout their lives. The Gwydir Learning Region enables individuals and community to regain control of their future, build confidence and maintain a sense of pride and achievement.

## Background

The model is one of partnership between Warialda High School, Bingara Central School, New England TAFE, Barraba ACE, the business communities of Warialda and Bingara, along with Yalleroi, Bingara and the recently formed Gwydir Shire Council. The Gwydir Learning Region established a committee to identify the learning needs of all Gwydir Shire residents and to facilitate the delivery of the appropriate knowledge and skills development.

Within the large area that makes up Gwydir Shire, there existed a large number of potential students and instructors as well as under-utilised educational facilities and resources. In order to improve access, it is crucial that the delivery of education be local, affordable and flexible.

The Gwydir Learning Region through co-operative effort facilitates the re-skilling of the community, the completion of community projects and the development of new business opportunities and services. Warialda High School has acted as a kind of brokerage, identifying what students and community members want to be taught, who could best deliver it, where and how. Each year over 30 students are involved in diverse traineeships which include retail, business services, information technology, horticulture, beef cattle production and childcare.

Through the Gwydir Learning Region mature age residents have been able to access HSC courses, theatre skills, and heritage building restoration skills, film and video production skills and aged care nursing. As a result of this training, the North West Theatre Company was formed, the Roxy Theatre in Bingara was restored, a state short film festival was conducted in Bingara and a respite care service established in Warialda. The keys to success are to instil the value of learning, engage participants in the process, developing an emphasis on youth being valued, creating an awareness for opportunities and possibilities, flexibility, strong partnerships and effective communication.

### Recommendation #8:

*That the NSW Government expand the Gwydir Learning Region model across Regional NSW.*



## Housing

### Local Management Models

An Aboriginal organisation management model has been developed within Aboriginal housing in the south coast. *The South East Aboriginal Management Services* model provides professional housing management on behalf of a number of local Aboriginal Land Councils. The model allows for the local Land Councils to have local autonomy without the burden of the day to day financial and housing stock management. A key to this model is that the organisation provides traineeships and apprentices for management positions. This model allows the local community to be actively involved in developing local management capacity as well as providing the opportunity to train people to gain the skills within a professional environment and in time take over local management.

A similar successful example is the merging of the Women's Refuge, No Interest Loans project, Neighbourhood House and Youth Centre groups in Albury, under a common governance structure where all back office and administrative functions are carried out centrally enabling volunteers and operational staff to focus on service delivery. It is important that such initiatives are not resisted or ignored by agencies and funding bodies given the capacity building potential of such methods.

#### Recommendation #9:

*That an Aboriginal not-for-profit company be created to offer Aboriginal not-for-profit organisations management services on a fee for service basis.*

The model could be based on the South East Aboriginal Management Services based in Narooma. The difference of this model is the long-term outcome of the organisation. The objectives are to up-skill people in the local committees and for the community to eventually take over management of their individual organisation.

### Incarceration and the criminal justice system

As with many indigenous communities around the world incarceration rates are higher for Aboriginal people. Many are young people, repeat offenders, substance abusers and often have a low standard of education. Mental health and dual diagnosis issues (mental illness and substance abuse) often result in incarceration of individuals in a society that is still grappling with how to address these complex issues in the mainstream population, let alone the aboriginal population.



One response has been to build gaols closer to the communities but a better option would be intensive intervention to prevent interaction with the justice system in the first place. Potential opportunities are offered by growing local skills and capacity, training locally, and technological innovation which are discussed under the terms of reference (d).

*c) Previous Social Issues committee reports containing reference to aboriginal people - and assess the progress of government in implementing adopted report recommendations.*

The RCCC is certainly aware of several current policy documents. We cannot confirm if they originated from recommendations in reports of the Social Issues Committee but the RCCC takes this opportunity to make comment on them.

*The "Two Ways Together", partnerships: A new Way of Doing Business with Aboriginal People.*

The "Two Ways Together" policy is a ten year plan for how Government can work in partnership with Aboriginal people. The ten year plan is for the period 2003-2012. From speaking to workers on the ground from participating agencies, reportedly this policy document is not understood by the workers and its awareness is most probably only known to those managers who attend regional meetings. From all reports agency workers have not been made aware of the document nor have their internal procedures and directives changed to a new way of doing business with aboriginal clients. **This is very disheartening considering this is the fifth year of the plan.**

It is interesting that one partner we spoke to who is crucial to achieving one of the goals in a July 2007-June 2009; Regional Action Plan didn't even know about the goal and didn't know their service had a role to play in achieving said goals. This is very disappointing for the aboriginal community and for the integrity of the Policy and the Action Plans.

*Aboriginal Education and Training Strategy 2006 - 2008, a direct response to the Aboriginal Education Review*

This document as its title suggests is a direct response to the Aboriginal Education Review. In this strategy the goal is by **2012; Aboriginal student outcomes will match or better outcomes of the broader student population.**



From discussions with teachers and the parents of Aboriginal students, there does not appear to be much action on the Actions set out in the Plan. Of particular importance to improving aboriginal outcomes is *Action 3:1; Develop personalised learning plans for all Aboriginal school students in partnership with teachers, parents, caregivers and students*. The RCCC believes this is critical to achieving the overall goal and for it not to be happening in January 2008 when the strategy only goes from 2006 to 2008 is incredible.

From the consultations the RCCC had with grass roots community members, practitioners and those requiring access to services there appears to be disconnect between the lofty ideals of policy and management plans and the reality for those who deliver or require services at the community level, which of course is where the practical outcomes are required. There is a strong sense that a lot of resources in government agencies is expended on internal reporting and resource sharing between each other in generating reports and plans, but at the 'coal face' the key people responsible for delivery of services and who require access to services perceive little benefit, change or outcome.

*d) The Federal Government intervention in the Northern Territory and advise on potential programs/initiatives that may or may not have relevance in terms of their application in New South Wales*

The Federal Government intervention in the Northern Territory may have occurred because of a genuine concern for the health and wellbeing of the remote indigenous communities. However, the most reported criticism of the intervention appears to have been the hasty way it was brought about, the lack of community consultation and the duplication of services that were already happening.

One local GP, Dr Louise Elliot who works with a team of doctors based in Alice Springs and who regularly visits the Northern Territory Government Health Centres in remote indigenous communities has reflected on the Intervention in the following ways;

The intervention came as a surprise to us and everyone else.

The local team of GP's were to have minimal input into the interventions Child Health Checks.

After the intervention Doctors came and left, many had not made contact with the local GP's who visit the communities on a regular basis.

There had been no formal way of reporting back to the local GP's.



The Health Checks of the intervention duplicated the Health School Aged Kids (HSAK) screen and the Growth Assessment Action (GAA) programs that are already in place and functioning well.

The initiative teams have not found anything the local GP's didn't already know.

The regular community Paediatricians have been receiving referrals for children they already knew about and had already commenced and completed checks for, e.g. heart murmurs.

Even the local Paediatricians have not been informed about the Initiative Health Check findings.

In indigenous communities a sense of engagement with people is more important than filling up the dosette box with pills.

That the local GP's need resources and more importantly other GP's who are willing to commit for the long haul, not just two weeks.

"With respect to the local communities I have had to do a lot of damage control, reassuring everyone that the army wasn't coming, the children weren't to be taken away and that I will still be their regular doctor."

Dr Elliot reported the loss of rapport with her communities was heart breaking, given that she had spent much time and energy in building a strong and trusting relationship with the communities. ([www.racgp.org.au/rural/intervention](http://www.racgp.org.au/rural/intervention))

The RCCC believes this inquiry needs to take on board the reflections of Dr Elliot who is working with the local community, who knows the people, who are trusted by the people and who is now crying out for **more resources and help that will last longer than 2 weeks**. Dr Elliot and the other GP's on the ground in the Northern Territory are trying to do what the overseas research shows works and local Aboriginal Medical Centres have proven works. That is **indigenous health has to be delivered locally by local providers who know the patients and their medical history and it has to be adequately resourced**.



*e) Opportunities for strengthening cultural resilience within Aboriginal communities in New South Wales with a focus on language, cultural identity, economic development and self determination.*

### **Innovative Applications to Improve Service Delivery**

New technologies can significantly improve information about services to rural and regional areas. The expansion of the Government Access Centre program (GAC's) so centres have access to a comprehensive knowledgebase as well as an electronic response management system is essential. Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems are proven applications used by large corporate and private sector organisations to manage customer databases, electronic response management and track service requests.

CRM systems allow GAC officers to deliver accurate and consistent information from an extensive range of Government Agencies to rural customers in a coordinated, accurate and timely manner. It provides a single point to coordinate all interactions for information between agencies and customers to fulfil information requests, regardless of the channel used e.g. over-the-counter, phone, online or email.

CRM systems have layered access capabilities that could also provide the opportunity to outsource Government information services to other Government funded programs like the Community Technology Centres (CTC's). This could expand face-to-face Government service delivery to another 60 plus smaller towns and villages that do not have a GAC office. Increasingly Government information is internet based and being able to expand access, manage responses promptly and easily record and analyse service demand and satisfaction supports the NSW State Government Plan Priority 8 - Increase customer satisfaction with Government services.

The Department of State & Regional Development through the Murray Regional Development Board's MurrayNow has recently purchased access to a Customer Relation Management system that can be accessed over the internet. Ensuring that this type of system is used to manage information will allow all information requests, regardless of the source to be handled professionally, consistently and have the ability to analyse need regardless of where community members live.

#### **Recommendation #10:**

*(a) Expand the remit of the Government Access Centres program (GAC) so centres have access to a comprehensive knowledge base and an electronic response management system that allows staff to easily locate the right information or service, promptly and consistently respond and record and analyse service needs.*

*(b) Outsource Government information services to Community Technology Centres (CTCs) to expand face to face access into the smaller towns and villages.*





## Growing Local Skills and Capacity

Many Aboriginal communities identified the trend of large Sydney or Metropolitan based NGO's increasingly winning service provision contracts and not employing local people to deliver. Communities clearly recognised that in many areas using local Aboriginal NGO's in the past, has not delivered the quality of service that has been required, but they all felt that alternate governance and management options had never been adequately explored. Funding a local group should be seen as employment, skill development and capacity building and a contribution to local economic development.

## Volunteerism

Most Not for Profit groups offer to provide services because of community need but they fail to appropriately structure their organisation or ensure that funding adequately reflects the real cost of delivering the service. The high reliance on volunteers to undertake more and more complex management roles is not sustainable. Declining communities are suffering from a lack of volunteers and growth communities suffer from a lack of people with time availability to volunteer.

### Recommendation #11:

*That local service groups be supported to identify the gaps within their management and service delivery structure and be adequately funded to pay local skilled people to fill the skill gap.*

This support can increase the capacity to merge or outsource management or back office roles that the local service delivery group may not have within its local volunteer group.

## Hard to Fill Agency Positions

Attracting and retaining skilled workers is not only an issue for Not for Profit organisations. In many communities government service providers are also struggling to attract skilled or professional workers. Often positions have remained unfilled for over 12 months or there has been a delay of 6 months between replacements. A cynical view emerges that this suits the Government agencies who have an excuse not to spend their funds (and thus assist the 'bottom line') on the basis of not being able to attract applicants.



Redesigning jobs to suit the skills already existing within the community is another approach that could be contemplated. The State continues to have skills imported to communities on an ad hoc and often short-term basis to fill Government positions, whereas a longer term strategic approach could see local young people trained to assume these roles. Discontinued programs such as Public Service Cadetship's, Nursing Assistants and Teaching Aides, which traditionally recruited from the local community, could be re-examined as potential community capacity building strategies for small, regional and Aboriginal communities.

#### Recommendation #12:

*That a progressive and innovative approach be developed by NSW Government Departments and Agencies to address vacant positions.*

This approach should invest in the identification of local people particularly in rural and remote 'hard to fill' locations who have the potential to up skill, combined with designing roles to encourage skill development and match available skill sets.

### Training Locally

There is often a real local capacity and willingness to deliver services, but local volunteers are overwhelmed by the associated 'red tape' that accompanies these endeavours. By providing support for outsourcing back office and management roles, local communities benefit from the local groups ability to continue to harness this capacity.

Management committees have found it problematic to undertake face-to-face governance and management training when most training is offered only at regional centres. Other issues are the continual and ad-hoc timeframe that training is scheduled. Committees change over their management positions and the skill level of training that individual people want and need is often hard to meet in a one day workshop.

There is a wealth of information and training that can be identified and accessed through the NSW Government Communitybuilders website, the New South Wales Council of Social Services (NCOSS) website or through the online training courses being developed through the Community Technology Centres Association.

#### Recommendation #13:

*Provide the ability for groups to access governance and management training by incorporating a training component (dollars) in all small Not for Profit grants that deliver State Government services to facilitate these groups to receive the training they require.*



There has been a model developed within the New England North West area with the CommunityLink/CTC Centres at Gwabegar and Pilliga. Both the centres identified the need to outsource their financial management role as it allowed community members to concentrate on delivering the services and activities.

The Community Technology Centres Association is providing on a fee for service basis, financial management, funding opportunities and grant reporting. The model is simple but without a grant administrative fee, these communities would not be able to continue to access grants or funding to deliver services or undertake projects that are enhancing community life.

## Technology and Communications

Delivering services, education and training in rural areas requires affordable high quality, high speed communications. High speed broadband removes the tyranny of distance and brings equity into service provision. The ability to deliver specialist and professional services on line and in real time has emerged as a viable complement to traditional services delivery, and in some cases an alternative, particularly when access to traditional services is difficult or not feasible.

Rural and regional communities continue to be impacted on a number of fronts, which challenge their long term viability, but poor connectivity also acts in consort to reduce opportunity, stifle entrepreneurial initiatives, innovation and severely degrade the quality of life for individuals and families.

Many city-based professionals are looking for a “tree and/or sea change” for professional, personal and family life style reasons. In making relocation choices these professionals take into account the quality and availability of telecommunications and broadband infrastructure and services that will not only support their lifestyle choices, but also offer opportunities to generate real incomes within these communities.

Today’s digital telecommunications environment requires infrastructure to be of a standard that is capable of supporting digital voice and video applications. Tele-Health, Tele-Medicine and Tele-Psychiatry have demonstrated the potential to deliver enormous service improvements as well as addressing the acute skills shortages that exist in the sector.

The standards for telecommunications and broadband services should be consistent with industry best practice, and capable of supporting a scalable data speed, with capacity to support committed bit rate services (QoS requirement) such as Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP), videoconferencing and video streaming on ratios at a minimum, e.g. below 8:1 and end-to-end network latency, any to any connections of less than 150 milliseconds.



Good telecommunications may never fully replace face-to-face service delivery but it is an essential tool. To achieve equity the State Government needs to take the lead developing state wide strategies that identifies and leverages off the significant investment of the NSW Government and opens access for competition in rural and regional areas.

### Broadband Planning in Regional NSW

Planning at the regional and local level for a community's future telecommunications also needs to be undertaken. Rural and regional communities, business and industries identified high speed telecommunications as fundamental to a modern regional economy as electricity, clean water and transportation infrastructure. Invigorating rural and regional communities through technology that allows access to clever applications will help build long-term sustainability and redress the capacity and skills drain.

Advanced local telecommunications infrastructure planning will encourage the development and deployment of new and competitive telecommunications infrastructure. If Government grants or subsidies are used to assist the deployment of infrastructure, then such infrastructure should be made available under an open access regime, open to all access seekers and at competitive (cost plus) pricing.

There have already been a range of NSW Government initiatives and investments that demonstrate outcomes that can be achieved with local input, these include:

- NSW Government Fibre Towns Project - broadband fibre loops have been installed in 16 country NSW towns - for Government services (health and education sites) - there is an opportunity to now leverage that infrastructure for the benefit of the local business and the community.
- CCIF Mitchell link -optic fibre from Lithgow to Parkes addressing the gap in broadband backbone infrastructure;
- Murray Region Development Board Albury Wireless Broadband Technical Trial and CountryTELL community engagement model - a project which created an internationally acclaimed innovative business model and community engagement process to plan for rural and regional telecommunications infrastructure owned on behalf of the community by a not for profit organisation.

This project has attracted Victorian and Commonwealth Government support and has been awarded a DEST International linkage Research grant to partner with the University of Technology Sydney, California Tech, the University of Illinois and Microsoft in investigating the benefits of meshed networks and to produce an adoption handbook for communities. Significant research and innovation has already occurred to create a potential template for rural and regional communities to plan their digital futures.



- New England Smart Communities Action Project (NESCAP) - Uralla Local Loop Technical Trial - the tree change case study;

Many communities and industries across the state do not have access to the skills and knowledge to implement clever solutions in their local area. While some areas have forged ahead (as the cases studies indicate) this has been done in isolation. A lack of coordination, integration and a platform to share experiences and knowledge does not exist.

A strategic approach to planning local telecommunications infrastructure would also ensure coordination with Australian Government telecommunications initiative, e.g. the current Government's OPEL initiative or Federal Labor's broadband Fibre to the Node proposal. It is now opportune to leverage these successful local projects and coordinate a range of new initiatives, supporting communities and industry to identify need, plan and broker their telecommunications and broadband infrastructure services tailored to meet their individual and projected industry, business, education, health and social needs.

The Regional Communities Consultative Council identified the critical need for high speed reliable Broadband and new business and delivery as a key pillar of economic development and community sustainability several years ago, and the issue is a key focus of the RCCC strategic plan.

A strategic framework needs to be established for rural areas, and the RCCC has conducted substantial research into the area. *The RCCC will be making a more comprehensive submission into the current NSW Parliamentary Inquiry into regional broadband in NSW which will focus on enabling communities to plan for a digital future, from the ground up.*

#### Recommendation #14:

*The NSW State Government develop a Regional Broadband Strategy that incorporates industry, economic development, service delivery, local government and community input and requirements to ensure State based IT infrastructure and investment can be leveraged for public benefit.*

#### Recommendation #15:

*That the RCCC be tasked, resourced and supported to assist the State Government to develop a Strategic Framework for the development of new models of Broadband and IT deployment for regional communities.*

#### Recommendation #16:

*That the RCCC be resourced and supported to engage with the Australian Government to ensure National Plans reflect the needs of NSW regional communities for Broadband and IT deployment.*



*f) The experiences of the outcomes of the COAG Murdi Paaki trial but also take into account the other COAG trials occurring across Australia and their outcomes/lessons learned.*

The RCCC is aware the COAG Murdi Paaki trial has been independently evaluated by Urbis Keys Young in 2006 on behalf of the Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination and the Murdi Paaki Steering Committee. We are also aware that the trial ceased in December 2007 and the initiatives are to be transitioned into the Two Ways Together Policy. There will be a Regional Engagement Group to monitor and deliver on the regional plans.

From the evaluation it appears the lead agencies were very committed to the trial however there was comment to the effect that other Government Departments need to learn to work together if service delivery and government/community relations were to improve. The inability of Agencies and Departments to work together is one of the biggest criticisms the RCCC receives from its consultations around the state and this has to change if Aboriginal disadvantage is to be overcome. This is not only the case for Aboriginal issues but for a whole range of government activity. Community members are continually perplexed by the inability of various arms of Government to communicate with each other, to work together or to collaborate in resolving issues. The silo approach, and territorial culture of Government agencies is a significant impediment to many facets of regional development.

### Concluding Comment

The RCCC appreciates this opportunity to contribute to the inquiry into overcoming Aboriginal disadvantage. Australia has a long way to go to bridge the gap between its indigenous and non indigenous residents. Other countries have shown that Aboriginal disadvantage can be reduced especially in the area of health outcomes and life expectancy. It is hoped that now the Australian Government has issued an apology to the stolen generation, indigenous and non indigenous Australians will work together in a true partnership to begin to close the gap and overcome indigenous disadvantage.

Yours Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lynda Summers'.

Lynda Summers  
Chair



## Summary of Recommendations

### Recommendation #1:

*That the RCCC be tasked and adequately resourced to assist the State Government with the recommendations of the NSW Standing Committee on Social Issues.*

### Recommendation #2:

*That Service Plans account for and anticipate population growth in small communities.*

### Recommendation #3:

*Agencies engage communities at the local level to identify local service delivery options.*

### Recommendation #4:

*That the Department of State and Regional Development, Regional Development Boards and Local Governments receive enhanced support to develop holistic economic strategies on a regional basis.*

### Recommendation #5:

*That the NSW State Government empower and resource Regional Transport Coordinators to an appropriate level so that local solution projects in small towns and villages can continue to be developed.*

### Recommendation #6:

*That The Menindee and Boggabilla transport trials be considered as models for emulation by the Ministry for Transport Regional Coordinators and that recurrent funding be available after a 12 month trial period.*

### Recommendation #7:

*That a focus on health and the fundamentals of sewerage and water infrastructure be considered as mandatory goals.*

### Recommendation #8:

*That the NSW Government expand the Gwydir Learning Region model across Regional NSW.*

### Recommendation #9:

*That an Aboriginal Not for Profit company be created to offer Aboriginal Not for Profit organisations management services on a fee for service basis.*



#### Recommendation #10:

- (a) *Expand the remit of the Government Access Centres Program (GAC) so centres have access to a comprehensive knowledge base and an electronic response management system that allows staff to easily locate the right information or service, promptly and consistently respond, and record and analyse service needs.*
- (b) *Outsource Government information services to Community Technology Centres to expand face to face access into the smaller towns and villages.*

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