

Improving the services of the
Commonwealth Ombudsman to
Australia's Indigenous peoples

Report prepared for

COMMONWEALTH OMBUDSMAN



winangali INDIGENOUS
COMMUNICATIONS
& RESEARCH

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Summary

Research for the Commonwealth Ombudsman was undertaken in six locations across Australia, during late August and early September 2010, to investigate ways to improve that organisation's services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The locations covered people living in urban areas (Sydney and Brisbane), regional and remote, (Alice Springs, Mount Isa, Port Augusta and Yirrkala). The research also included transient people. Interviews were also held with community workers or elders in each location.

Using Government services

- Most participants were aware of, and use, the services of one or more government departments, but there is confusion about what is provided by the different levels of government.
- Many have experienced problems in their dealings to varying degrees of seriousness

Likelihood of complaining

It is unlikely for most people to complain. It varies enormously across the different groups, depending on:

- Self confidence / feelings of self worth
- Education level
- Knowledge / awareness of personal rights
- Degree of urbanisation
- Cultural attitudes

While there were some strong self-confident people in many of these groups, the majority are unlikely to complain.

Barriers to making a complaint

There are many barriers to making a complaint

- Not knowing that it is possible or acceptable to complain
- Belief that this is their lot in life
- Fear of reprisals
- Dislike of confrontation, feelings of shame
- Not knowing who to complain to
- No access to a complaint mechanism or support
- English language proficiency
- Belief that complaining is not going to change anything
- Favouritism and inter-family rivalries

Making the complaint process easier

To make the process of making a complaint easier participants want:

- Someone they know and trust to go to or call, preferably an Indigenous person who understands their issues



- Prefer face to face, not via email or the Internet
- Written correspondence as a record
- A location they feel safe and confident, where they can talk to this intermediary
- Confidence in the impartiality
- Confidence that it will make a difference

Awareness of complaint channels

There is very little awareness of official complaint channels

- People may go to elders or workers in the community, or Members of Parliament
- Very little awareness of Commonwealth Ombudsman
- Much confusion with different 'Ombudsman's' offices
- Very low awareness of advertising for Ombudsman

Use and impression of the Commonwealth Ombudsman

- Impressions are vague, but generally positive
- One participant had used the Commonwealth Ombudsman
- From the description participants believe the Ombudsman to be impartial
- Concerned that it cannot force change or any particular outcome
- Mixed reaction to its use in the future
- Pleased to hear of its existence - participants eager to spread the word

The ideal service

All would prefer a shop-front or non-threatening office with easy access, where they can talk face to face

- It needs Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island people staffing it
- Language is important in regional and remote areas
- Cross-cultural training for other staff
- Free telephone or fax line
- Well promoted
- Outreach to remote areas

Promoting the services of the Ombudsman

- Clear messages explaining the role of the Ombudsman and how it can help
- Use simple English, simple phrases
- Illustrations that tell a story
- Use Aboriginal and Torres Strait languages

Getting the message out

- Face to face - sitting and talking with people - community forums
- Printed materials with simple messages and illustrations that tell a story



- Indigenous radio and television
- Local newspapers and community newsletters
- Electronic promotion for young people

Media consumption

- Free-to-air television - Imparja, ABC, SBS, commercial stations, Austar
- Radio - local radio, ABC, SBS, Koori / Murri Radio, Mob FM
- Local newspapers, Koori Mail

Conclusions

- Awareness of Ombudsman is low
- Knowledge of their role is lower
- Need to build relationship with the communities, build trust to encourage people to use the service
- Without this trust, the service is unlikely to be used
- Ideally have a presence in the communities, either through a shop front, or through an intermediary from within the community
- Continue and expand the outreach program, but make sure feedback reaches the clients who use the services





1 Introduction

The Ombudsman's Office is keen to improve its communication and engagement with Indigenous communities across Australia, and in late 2009, started a project to develop a strategy to achieve this aim.

To help in developing this strategy, the Ombudsman's Office commissioned Winangali Pty Ltd to undertake research amongst selected Indigenous communities to gain a better understanding of attitudes, cultural influences, levels of awareness and the best way of engaging with the diversity of Indigenous communities.

This report provides the findings from this research.

1.1 Aims of the research

The aims of the research were to gain a better understanding of:

- The attitudes towards, and cultural influences on, making complaints against 'the Government'
- The levels of awareness and knowledge of the Ombudsman's Office and its services
- The most effective way of engaging and connecting with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in different parts of Australia, including messages that could be used in communications

2 Methodology

It was decided to use a combination of focus groups among different types of community (urban, regional, remote and transient) as well as face-to-face interviews with Indigenous service providers or community leaders in each location.

A total of eight groups and six interviews were conducted.

All groups were conducted by Indigenous moderators. The Torres Strait Island group was undertaken by a Torres Strait Island woman.

2.1 Location and composition of the groups

2.1.1 Location

The locations in which the focus groups and interviews were held were:

- Sydney (Redfern) - urban
- Alice Springs - transient and remote
- Davenport (five kilometres out of Port Augusta) - regional/remote
- Port Augusta - transient
- Yirrkala - remote
- Mount Isa - regional
- Brisbane - Torres Strait Islander



2.1.2 Composition

Both men and women were in each group. The groups of transient people were mixed ages, but the other groups were either mostly young (under 34) or mostly older (35 and over).

There were six in each group. From our experience, this is the most effective size to encourage participation.

The depth interviews were conducted with:

- A social worker and counsellor
- A social worker with the Catholic Church
- A shire council liaison worker who is also the chairperson of an Aboriginal corporation
- A career recruitment officer with an Aboriginal employment agency
- The executive officer of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Legal and Advocacy Service
- A community elder and cultural teacher

2.1.3 Timing

The groups were held between 22 and 30 September 2010.

2.2 *Research instrument*

A topic guide was used for the groups, with the questions adapted to the language style of the participants by the moderators.

A modified topic guide was used for the interviews with individuals.

For the groups in Alice Springs, where participants were from remote areas, a community worker acting as an interpreter was also present to assist when participants had difficulty in understanding the questions and to aid in communicating their answers.

(Copies of the research instruments are attached at Appendix A)



3 Findings

3.1 Using Government services

- Most participants were aware of, and use, the services of one or more government departments, but there is confusion about what is provided by the different levels of government.
- Some have experienced problems in their dealings with government services

3.1.1 Awareness of Government service

Most participants could name at least one 'government' service, usually Centrelink, although there was a great deal of confusion about which arm of government provides which services.

Consideration of the different levels of government is not an issue that has much interest for them - it is all 'government'.

Yeah, it's just the government. Because the majority of people don't really know what is State and what's Federal. You know, everyday, normal person - they're not going to care what is State, and what is Federal. They are only 'the Government'. It's not worth wasting time saying 'the state this or the federal this...' Redfern, under 34 year olds

The extent of knowledge and awareness varied according to their degree of urbanisation.

- The transient and remote groups knew of very few government-provided services
- The more urban participants (Redfern and Torres Strait Islander Brisbane groups) both nominated several services and, although they were not sure who provided each service, they were aware that some services are provided by the State and some by the Federal Government.

3.1.2 Use of Government services

Centrelink, Housing services, health clinics / medical services, CDEPs and Land Councils were some services that participants had experience of and had used.

We don't talk about Federal or Territory and this stuff here ... people don't talk like that in the community. They don't even know. They only know that it's a service ... we are only talking on the level of what has been done for us. Yirrkala, under 35-year-olds

3.1.3 Satisfaction with dealings and problems encountered

Many participants had experienced some problems in their dealings with agencies; many of these were the sorts of experiences that convey the message that they are second class citizens.

Sometimes they come across like they are talking down to me.
Redfern, under 35-year-olds

An issue of particular relevance to the Ombudsman's Office for its dealings with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people, is a common complaint that staff at agencies they were dealing with did not listen and did not understand their culture or language, or the agency did not have an appropriate Indigenous liaison person.



White fellas - they have got no understanding of the hardship that our mob face today, and the struggles. Port Augusta, over 35-year-olds

They didn't understand my predicament, you know, I didn't feel comfortable talking to them about my personal affairs. They need more Torres Strait workers because most of them are more Aboriginal, and if you have an elder that doesn't talk the tongue ... They don't understand because they don't have workers there that are actually Torres Strait Islander. Brisbane, TSI group

They have translators for every other group of people, but if you want to speak to an Indigenous person in a Centrelink, it's like either they are not there today because they only have one, or you need to book a few weeks before. Redfern, under 35-year-olds

Another common problem for those in remoter areas is lack of computers/Internet access or knowledge of how to use it.

When you walk into Centrelink, they expect you to sit on the computer and do on-line services. That is really frustrating - I know a bit about the computer, but I see a lot of our mob - they have got no idea where to go or how to work it... A lot of our mob sit there and there's a phone there, you know, a lot of our mob don't know how to use that. Port Augusta, over 35-year-olds

This is compounded by the attitude of staff answering agency telephone hotlines:

There's an Indigenous hotline and I rang it and she's really rude and she said 'You know you can just check this yourself on-line'. But a lot of us haven't got it, see? Yirrkala, under 35-year-olds

In Alice Springs the service provider reported significant issues with the Intervention.

Yes, a huge number of my clients have had problems with the Intervention, Centrelink, and some of the health services and employment programs ... they were often disadvantaged because of the way decisions were made. Felt they weren't particularly heard. Alice Springs community worker

3.2 Likelihood of complaining

The likelihood of complaining varies enormously across the different groups, it appears to depend on:

- Self confidence / feelings of self worth
- Education level
- Knowledge / awareness of personal rights
- Degree of urbanisation
- Cultural attitudes

While several of these participants are strong, self confident people who have no problem with standing up for their rights, many, particularly those in remote areas or young,



inexperienced people, would just walk away if they encountered a problem in dealing with a government department or agency. They may complain to friends or relatives, but not to anyone who could help solve the problem.

Just walk out... Alice Springs, under 35-year-olds

*I just walk out - swear or something - just get cranky at home...
Davenport, under 35-year-olds*

*No, a lot of our mob just walk off and swear.
Port Augusta, over 35-year-olds*

As the Mount Isa community worker explained:

No, they wouldn't complain. They'd just complain to the first person they come to. Sometimes that's us ... we will ask them if they want to take it further, and then most of them they say they don't want to take it further, but they're always complaining about it. Mount Isa community worker

In contrast, the urban groups were more ready to speak up if they felt they had been unfairly treated. About half these participants said they would make a complaint, although often reluctantly, and half said they would not.

Well, you do, otherwise the problem won't get rectified, sometimes I do...

I don't like complaining.

It depends on what your background is.

For myself, I have no problem. I am the type of person that doesn't tolerate bad service. So ... the first thing I did once I had the problem - went straight to the office manager.

Redfern, under 35-year-olds

The Torres Strait Islander group reported that confrontation and 'making a scene' were not acceptable behaviour for them.

You don't want to make a big scene, that's why most people won't - we weren't brought up that way.

No, I probably wouldn't tell anybody ... I, yeah, don't know why. I just don't - confrontation isn't my favourite thing.

Brisbane, TSI group

It takes self-confidence and courage to stand up to those who are in positions of power, some have that confidence:

Yep, I stand on my rights, me. I look over my ancestors. Long time they got pushed around and then they had nowhere to stand, nowhere to act.

Today you can. You have channels to go - as long as you know your channels, I know my channel. Davenport, under 35-year-olds



3.3 Barriers to making a complaint

- Not knowing that it is possible or acceptable to complain
- Belief that this is their lot in life
- Fear of reprisals
- Dislike of confrontation, feelings of shame
- Not knowing who to complain to
- No access to a complaint mechanism or support
- English language proficiency
- Belief that complaining is not going to change anything
- Favouritism, inter-family rivalries and community politics

There are many factors that impact on people's willingness or ability to make a complaint.

A major one, particularly for those living outside major urban centres, is the lack of knowledge about their right to complain ...

Ignorance ... Brisbane, TSI group

We have got problems. We have to deal with that problem to the best of our knowledge. We deal with it differently, Aboriginal people do. We deal with it silently or we go and talk to somebody else.

Davenport, community elder

... and the feeling that this is their lot in life - that they will be treated as second class citizens by white fellas who have power over their lives.

We just sit down and wait for something to come up.

Alice Springs, transient group

There is a perception that they often get victimised, so a very small percentage of the time do they ever make it to a complaint.

Alice Springs, social worker

Because government agencies are very strong agencies and that's what we believe. Because when it's just called government, some people are too scared to actually complain because our governments are very strong people. Governments owns a lot of departments that's run by government and sometimes I don't understand that too. Yirrkala, community worker

They have power over you ... Redfern, under 35-year-olds

Fear of reprisals or victimisation was a major barrier across all sectors.

Backlash - yes it's a huge thing. Mount Isa, under 35-year-olds

Because you have to deal with them - they just keep picking on you, keep picking on you. Redfern, under 35-year-olds

Some of us get frightened you know. See - 'that doctor's not going to see us again' or 'we are not going to get no more money from Centrelink', so we say nothing, you know? Davenport, under 35-year-olds



If it's Centrelink they would be frightened they would get their money cut off. If it's CASH they'll be kicked out of there.

Mount Isa, community worker

They might use it against you, hey? Port Augusta, over 35-year-olds

Fear of victimisation stops people making complaints.

Alice Springs, community worker

Shame and feelings of inferiority prevent some participants from questioning or complaining.

People get shamed, embarrassed. It's because I feel I am being made out to be stupid - or I am not as knowledgeable as the person who is serving me. So I, female like, think OK, he/she knows what she's talking about, maybe I have got it wrong ... it must be me. So I tend not to complain ... when in retrospect I'm not the one. It's that person who couldn't be bothered dealing with the issue and wanting to make me feel like I didn't know what I was talking about. Brisbane, TSI group

It's like a put-down, when you get there, they are talking down to you. When you got shot down the first time, won't bother going back again.

Davenport, under 35-year-olds

Feel shame. Yirrkala, under 35-year-olds

Not knowing who to complain to, or how to go about it, is another major impediment. This can be compounded by lack of literacy, or English language skills, or physical barriers such as no access to, or the cost of telephone calls.

Because they don't know how to do it, or have to write a written complaint - they might not have the literacy, or they might not know who to write the letter to, and who you post it to and everything.

Yirrkala, under 35-year-olds

Most people wouldn't know how to make a complaint.

Alice Springs, community worker

You have to put it in writing, and that scares people off. Like if you have to write something down - there should be another way of making a complaint, rather than putting pen to paper.

Port Augusta, over 35-year-olds

They wouldn't know what to do. Davenport, community elder

People - their second language is English and they talk their own mother tongue language and those sorts of services don't cater for those sorts of things... and they go to English speaking background person, it doesn't get across to them sort of... some of our people... are too scared to talk about what's inside them, because it's language. Davenport, community elder

There's a lot of detail in actually making a complaint, you've got to write, actually put it all in writing, and a lot of people don't know how to write, or if they do, they don't know how you go about doing it.

Redfern, community worker



There were many comments about the difficulties of making telephone calls to government departments from regions outside urban areas. There are few private landlines in these communities, and although many have mobiles, the only other telephones available are the occasional public ones, and both these and the mobiles are costly to use, particularly if you are put on hold or transferred from person to person.

The feeling that complaining is pointless because nothing is going to change was often expressed by these participants. As these community workers commented:

...they feel they can't get anywhere - they may come in and discuss about making complaints and how to go about doing it. But I find a lot of them in the end just don't do it, don't follow up because they feel like it's just too much and too hard and it won't get looked at - and that goes across all age groups and male and female as well. Redfern, community worker

In a lot of cases they don't complain because they don't think they're going to get a response anyway. Brisbane community worker

The feeling that it's a useless process making a complaint - it won't get them anywhere. Alice Springs, community worker

And these group participants confirmed:

Yeah, well, if you did complain, they still won't help us. You will still get nowhere - sometimes you think it's who you are ...
Port Augusta, over 35-year-olds.

The fact that people make a complaint and nothing gets done about it - you really achieve nothing by complaining - they don't take you seriously.
Mount Isa, under 35-year-olds

Overlying all of these issues of poor education, lack of self-confidence, fear of reprisals and low expectations of any result, is the problem of community politics, inter-family rivalries and favouritism.

Like with families, it seems like in situations, one family group can have the control - be more dominant - become really dominant, and other family's members miss out. It's straight out nepotism.
Port Augusta, over 35-year-olds

Often the people you are complaining about are quite powerful in the community and have the ability to not just actually punish you for complaining about that service, but have the ability to affect your access to a whole range of service. At the moment, the government business manager overviews all those sorts of things and complaints, so they can disadvantage you and your entire family, limit access to employment programs and access to a range of services. This is not people being paranoid this is quite real. Alice Springs, community worker

In the smaller communities, agencies have Aboriginal staff from the community. This can lead to a reluctance to confide or discuss a problem, for fear that it will be shared around the community, or the complaint may rebound on a family member, or conversely, the complaint will be ignored if the client is not a member of the right clan.

Well, you face a lot of favouritism in this community and blood pressure.
Mount Isa, under 35-year-olds



... you go and complain there, by the time you do, it's already in the backyard - already it's flying all over town! Davenport, under 35-year-olds

As a consequence of all these barriers, many participants will put up with a lot of bad treatment before they will take any steps to complain.

3.4 Making the complaint process easier

To make the process of making a complaint easier participants want:

- Someone they know and trust to go to or call, preferably an Indigenous person who understands their issues
- Preferably face to face, not via email or the Internet
- Written correspondence as a record
- A location they feel safe and confident, where they can talk to this intermediary
- Confidence in the impartiality
- Confidence that it will make a difference

3.4.1 Having a person to go to

Several suggestions were put forward to make it easier to complain, many of these centred on having a person to go to. This person would be someone:

- They know and trust, preferably an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island person

I think it would be a really good process if we had a complaints area of our own, especially within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sector - somebody that was known by community that could take up that advocacy role to where a complaint needs to go. But we would need to know that a service provider like that could actually go to the source or the problem and deal with it through the process instead of it going through the red tape system - try and knock out the red tape. Brisbane, community worker

You know, I can use the phone, the Internet, and write, all those sorts of things, but having that personal - seeing someone actually sitting there and being able to talk to them, I would feel that I am being heard.

Port Augusta, over 35-year-olds

It's the comfort sake, having somebody that you know and trust to speak to, makes it easier and more comfortable, if you actually open up and tell them. Brisbane, TSI group

- Who understands their issues and the issues of the community

I only complain if there is an Indigenous officer, because then I feel like it's going to be treated fairly. Redfern, under 35-year-olds

That would make a huge difference - if there was another Indigenous person you could talk to that relates to your situation, because sometimes you just feel like they don't really understand or you're just making a big deal out of nothing. Mount Isa, under 35-year-olds



- Who can support them through the process and assist with language and literacy difficulties

Like, for those mob who can't read, don't have the literacy and that, they can sit down and get help.

You need someone who knows how to write a letter properly.
Yirrkala, under 35-year-olds

Talk to someone, help filling in forms. Alice Springs, transient group

Some people are illiterate, they can't read or write, so they don't feel comfortable writing it. They may not feel comfortable speaking English, so having someone like a liaison officer, who speaks Torres Strait Islander language, would make it easier for them - somebody who can understand what they are saying. Brisbane, TSI group

That would make a huge difference, you'd feel more comfortable talking about it, especially language too - talking to people from your community - English is our second language. Mount Isa, under 35-year-olds

- Who would treat their matter confidentially

Confidentiality, for me, is such a big issue - most Kooris that I talk to are always thinking 'If I tell you this, I might get in trouble - where's that information going?' It's a bit scary sometimes. Redfern, community worker

3.4.2 Telephones and the Internet are less appealing

The majority of participants would prefer to deal personally with someone, than using the telephone, although the telephone is preferred to electronic contact. Few outside the urban areas have either the expertise or the equipment to use the Internet, and telephones are problematic because of access and cost. Also, as one participant said:

On the phone you don't know who you are talking to, do you?
Redfern, under 35-year-olds

Some may use the telephone if it was a toll-free number, but commented that to be put on hold, and transferred from person to person merely adds to the frustrations of the complaint. This is compounded by the lack of access to landlines, and the need to use public telephones, or the expense of using a mobile.

Letters are considered useful, as a record of the complaint. Even those without the language or literacy skills appreciate the documentation of a letter, although it tends to be more accepted by the more urban participants.

Letter would be good - you have got a copy for yourself, so then they know that they can't say 'We never received it'.
Port Augusta, over 35-year-olds

3.4.3 Having a location to go to

Many would like a physical location; somewhere they could access easily, a place where they feel safe and confident.

*Like a complaints centre ...*Redfern, under 35-year-olds



I guess having a body that you can come to, to complain easily, that's easily accessed. Just somewhere that they can come that's easy for them to walk to or something. Mount Isa, community worker

Don't have it like a government office kind of thing. You need to have it, like, in a room that's community-based, that everyone will access. Port Augusta, over 35-year-olds

3.4.4 Importance of impartiality

Impartiality is crucial. In many of their dealings, it is common for these participants to feel that they are not being treated impartially, both by external service providers, and, in some cases, by members of their own communities. As participants commented:

If we don't have a person like that here, we are afraid to come across. Yirrkala, under 35-year-olds

It is absolutely essential; it needs to be seen as impartial. Alice Springs, community worker

It's very important because you need to know that they are not being biased in any way, that they are in fact mediating the situation - not just helping you, but helping the situation; that this will never happen again. Brisbane, TSI group

You want to go and talk to somebody who doesn't know them people. Port Augusta, over 35-year-olds

There were concerns that any government agency could not be impartial because of links between departments:

Well, the problem for the departments, especially the government, they've got no independent. They linked all together ... people are linked, each one of them are linked to one or all of government agencies. Like a corporate, that's what they are, they talk to each other. That's why it's problems complaining ... like that to five seconds, that information has gone through another departments for whoever is facing the problems. Yirrkala, community elder

3.4.5 Confidence that it will make a difference

There is a great deal of cynicism that making complaints is pointless as it does not achieve anything, so confidence that it will achieve an outcome is essential.

More people would make complaints if they thought it would make a difference. Alice Springs, community worker

The result that most of these participants are looking for is, initially, that they are listened to, that their complaint is understood and taken seriously. This was the same across the board, for participants in urban, regional and remote areas, young and old.

I believe people are looking for the complaint is taken serious, and you know, this is the result of that. If they are actually told: 'This is the result' and sat down and spoken through. Because sometimes with the system and stuff, sometimes all you can do is go 'OK, this person now who you had to deal with is doing some cross-cultural thing, that's the best we can do because of the situation'. Then that's still justice, I think, in the



end it's that justice of going 'Is there an outcome and what is the outcome?' somebody explaining to you in simple terms.

Redfern, community worker

It's good to have that good feeling after a good talk.

Mount Isa, under 35-year-olds

While they do want their problem resolved, it goes deeper than that, to a desire that things will improve generally, not only that their problem will not reoccur, nor others have the same experience, but that services for Indigenous people generally will improve.

Initially, complaints and anger is about themselves, but there is a sort of systemic anger about the lack of services available and the decisions that are coming out from people that don't understand the community and don't care much really - people who are working on broad national policies that don't reflect the issues in the local community.

Alice Springs, community worker

Sort it out ... Alice Springs, transient group

Better services

That they listen more - they don't understand you

Just to be resolved I think

I guess putting things in place so that it doesn't happen to anyone else.

Mount Isa, under 35-year-olds

Make sure others aren't getting treated the same way

Get them accountable for what they are doing to our mob in the community

Getting justice

All of those things

Port Augusta, over 35-year-olds

And they would like a speedy result ...

They should act on it straight away, like a week or two weeks, get straight on to it. Redfern, under 35-year-olds

3.5 Awareness of complaint channels

- Very little awareness of official complaint channels
 - o Elders / workers in the community
 - o Members of Parliament
- Very little awareness of Commonwealth Ombudsman
- Much confusion with different 'Ombudsmen's' offices
- Very low awareness of advertising for Ombudsman

3.5.1 Possible avenues for complaints

Who or what participants considered suitable as complaint channels depended very much on their life experience, degree of urbanisation, education and background. As discussed above, many had no idea who they could complain to.



Usually a complaint doesn't get out of the peer group, and sometimes within the family. Alice Springs, community worker

However, participants from all areas suggested that they would prefer to go to someone they felt comfortable with:

I'd say the person you are comfortable with - an elder in the community.
Mount Isa, under 35-year-olds

I suppose, if it was a young person and the young person mightn't - you know - got any expertise or got no knowledge, go to elder who you feel comfortable with. Go and tell that person ... about your problem. And they might go and tell someone else about that problem and they, together, might talk about it, how they can deal with that problem and then go and tell you, to help you. Davenport, community elder

Participants in the more urban groups, including Port Augusta, suggested complaining to their local member of parliament, or the Aboriginal Legal Aid office.

3.5.2 Awareness of the Commonwealth Ombudsman

Three participants, one in a Port Augusta group, one in Brisbane and one in the Redfern group spontaneously mentioned 'the Ombudsman'.

There's ICAC, Fair Trading, Ombudsman, of course, but he deals with the police. Redfern, under 35-year-olds

Most of the community workers and some participants in other groups knew of it but it was not top of mind for many of them.

Oooh yes! I have [heard of them] sorry! Yes, I have.
Mount Isa, community worker

Yeah, I think it's an office on its own. It's not a government sort of run thing, I don't know, it's just the own organisation on itself.
Davenport, community elder

The Redfern community worker only knew of the NSW Ombudsman, having seen a display and met a representative at a NAIDOC event.

She said if you've ever got any complaints give her a call. And I never specifically knew what for - what actual complaints...
Redfern community worker

The community workers / elders and group participants who said they had heard of an Ombudsman were in the following locations:



Location	Group participants heard of Ombudsman		Community workers / elders heard of Ombudsman	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Redfern	✓		✓	
Port Augusta	✓ (both groups)		✓	
Mount Isa	✓		✓	
Yirrkala	✓			✓
Alice Springs		✓ (both groups)	✓	
Brisbane	✓		✓	

They don't do a lot of advertising here, the Commonwealth Ombudsman. I don't think there is a great deal of awareness how they might be used.
Alice Springs, community worker

While most of the community workers were aware of the Commonwealth Ombudsman, it was not clear which 'Ombudsman' the group participants were referring to and virtually none of them had a clear idea of its role, as these comments demonstrate:

If you have a complaint and you don't feel like it's being solved, you can go to them to solve it. That's my understanding of it. But I have never made a complaint.

To look at complaints - like for example the TV ads, you make a complaint to them if you don't like them.

I thought it was complaints about the Police. A government official that takes complaints and has to investigate what's going on. He's the representative of civilians. That's as far as I know.

I don't know what the ... because I have never done any complaining - I just keep along and that's it. Take it on the chin and keep walking.

Redfern, under 35-year-olds

What do they actually do? Alice Springs, transient group

They are higher than the Police, I think. That would be the next thing, if you can't get anything from the police or any organisation, then you go to that one. You have got another one on top of that. Is there anyone higher than the Ombudsman? Port Augusta, over 35-year-olds

3.5.3 Awareness of advertising

Altogether the awareness of advertising was very low. Very few of these participants had noticed any advertising for the Ombudsman and there was confusion about which Ombudsman or similar service they had seen or heard advertised.

I did see one ad about Ombudsman in the police force - that's about one ad in about 20 years of watching TV! Redfern under 35-year-olds



Some in the Davenport group had noticed posters in their community facilities, at Centrelink and in the police station. Participants in other groups vaguely remembered hearing a something on an Indigenous radio program, or a current affairs news program on television.

One Redfern participant remembered noticing something on the back of a brochure or envelope for another service, but had no idea what an Ombudsman is or does.

3.6 Use and impression of the Commonwealth Ombudsman

- Impressions are vague, but generally positive
- One had used Commonwealth Ombudsman
- From the description, believe it to be impartial
- Concerned that it cannot force change or any particular outcome
- Mixed reaction to its use in the future
- Pleased to hear of its existence

3.6.1 Ombudsman's reputation

Among those who had heard of the Ombudsman, but had no experience of it, the general impressions were positive.

I heard of it, but I didn't go there myself, no. They say that office, Ombudsman's office is a good place to go and complain about what's bothering you, or whatever; but, yeah, like I said, I don't know much about the Ombudsman. Davenport, community elder

My impression, I guess, is that they're there to help people, but in saying that, they're not easily accessible because you've got to go through all these different channels to get to somebody. Mount Isa, community worker

They investigate government agencies - you know, if you have got a complaint, you won't be heard anywhere else, you go to them. If they think you have got a case, they will help you, yeah.
Port Augusta, over 35-year-olds

Some had heard negative things about the 'Ombudsman', but were not clear about which one.

I wouldn't use them. They have to act on it straight away. I heard some stories that they don't act on it straight away. It's more talk and no action. Redfern, under 35-year-olds

3.6.2 Use of the Ombudsman

One participant in the Yirrkala group of under 35-year-olds had put in a complaint to the Commonwealth Ombudsman.

Yes, I did, because they were there at the time. I don't know what it would be like if you had to ring up and do it over the phone. I knew about them, but I never, ever did anything, and I think most people would be like



that. Unless they are there, live, in front of you and help you, then you won't really do it. Yirrkala, under 35-year-old

Unfortunately, this young woman's experience was not a positive one. Although she felt that she had been listened to, she appears to have heard nothing more of her complaint:

She just had a form and you just write it. That was it. I never heard back from them after that. They were helpful doing the complaint, but then - there's no - you don't know - like, they could have gone and chucked it in the bin for all I know. I don't know what happened.

Yirrkala, under 35-year-olds

A participant in the Redfern group had made a recent complaint to the NSW Ombudsman, with the help of an Aboriginal employee. She was happy with the process to date, but it is still ongoing.

A Port Augusta participant had also had contact with an Ombudsman, but the experience was frustrating and complicated.

I did try to ring them to find out certain things that I wanted to know, they didn't give me much help. I still had to go back and get the permission from the source of the complaint that I was making to try and find out things. Yeah, the Ombudsman, I think it's all a load of crap anyway. I don't think you get anywhere. Port Augusta, over 35-year-olds

Lack of knowledge of how to go about contacting the Ombudsman had prevented a Brisbane participant from making use of the service.

I knew that they were there, but I don't know how to go about getting their help, or contacting them, or what their role is within the communities.

Brisbane, TSI group

3.6.3 Impressions of the Commonwealth Ombudsman

Participants were read a description of the role and function of the Ombudsman, and then asked for their impressions.

Generally, they agreed that it would be impartial but were not as convinced about its independence.

I don't think so; I think it's still tied in with the government itself.

Port Augusta, over 35-year-olds

The fact that the Ombudsman has no power to force departments or agencies to change was problematic for some participants. They questioned the point of making a complaint if it may not make any difference.

No, I'm not going to do that, because I'm not going to get any change anyway. Because, you know, it's a long way down that road to complain...

Redfern, under 35-year-olds

I think that's the biggest issue. Brisbane, community worker

It's no use going somewhere that's not going to make change.

Redfern, community worker

Cynicism about the way in which governments behave also coloured their expectation of a positive outcome.



I wouldn't [use it] Like, it's still a government service, complaining about government services, even though it says it's an independent; and there's little policies/reservations that you can just say 'Well, we do have to do this, but because of this in this section, sorry ...' That's how I feel.

Redfern, under 35-year-olds

3.6.4 Likelihood of using the Commonwealth Ombudsman

Reactions to whether these participants would use the Ombudsman, in the future, were mixed. For different reasons, some participants in each group are unlikely to.

The reasons included:

- Not likely to complain at all

I don't think so ... Alice Springs, transient group

- Not convinced that it would achieve anything

I wouldn't, no. I haven't been given satisfactory evidence that there's any point in doing that. Redfern, under 35-year-olds

- Dislike of confrontation

Most unlikely, again, because of confrontation. Brisbane, TSI group

- Fear of repercussions

Me, personally, making complaints go against the government department scares the shit out of me, because if the Federal Police then go on a raid ... you know? You scared of making a complaint because the bureaux are all connected in most Aboriginal people's minds. All departments are collecting that information against you. Redfern, community worker

- Lack of knowledge, both themselves and other people

I don't think the community knows enough about the role of an Ombudsman to actually utilise it as much as we could. Brisbane, community worker

But to actually know what it does, it's not clear enough to the general public what it actually is there for. Redfern, under 35-year-olds

If there were people going out there into the community, talking about it and letting people know they are in a position to take complaints it would be much more likely complaints would be made.

Alice Springs, community worker

Where Indigenous people are made aware that that's what they are there to do, chances are they may actually use the service. Brisbane, TSI group

But many participants welcomed their introduction to its availability:

Now that I know about it, I would, because I did have an issue a while ago, and if I'd known about it I would have. Mount Isa, under 35-year-olds

If they knew what it was for, I reckon they would go there more often. You know if they have got any complaint or whatever, if they were told 'This is what these people do', then they might be more comfortable going there.

Davenport, community elder



3.7 The ideal service

- Would prefer a shop-front or non-threatening office with easy access, where they can talk face to face
- Need Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander staffing it
- Language is important in regional and remote areas
- Cross-cultural training for other staff
- Free telephone or fax line
- Well promoted
- Outreach to remote areas

Members of all of these groups are familiar with being treated poorly by government officials, so of primary importance is the understanding and cultural awareness of the Ombudsman's staff.

It would need somebody that was a community person that they could actually talk to. Brisbane, community worker

Cultural awareness for all staff members, so that they understood anyone from any culture that comes in. Understanding their background, their needs, their language, simple things like that. Brisbane, TSI group

They must have a person employed here who knows about Yolngu more - who can understand. Yirrkala, under 35-year-olds

Treat them like human beings. Mount Isa, under 35-year-olds

These participants feel much more comfortable talking face to face with someone who can help them and with whom they can build a relationship of trust. For this reason they would prefer a location where they can go, ideally an easy access shop-front arrangement, rather than a more daunting office in an office building. This is of particular importance in the more remote areas, where telephone access is more problematic.

Need someone real there, to support you, you know. Davenport, under 35-year-olds

It would have a welcoming atmosphere, with a little kitchen where you could make tea or coffee, to make people feel comfortable and have their cup of tea.

It would have to be somewhere that people would drive passed every day, so they would know it's there. Mount Isa, under 35-year-olds

I would like it to look inviting, a good place for them to come and relax, so that they can sit down and talk about things that are bothering them. Davenport, community elder

Would go and see them. Yirrkala, under 35-year-olds



It was also suggested that this shop-front could be an information hub, where people went for information, advice on who they should complain to and support to make a complaint directly to the offending agency.

Yeah, an information hub you'd call it. Somewhere where you can go to find out who you need to speak to, whatever the problem is, and where you need to go, and be able to get help. Brisbane, TSI group

There, there would be access to free telephones and faxes to submit complaints, and to the Internet for video-conferencing.

Yes, videoconferencing, you know, so they can see that person that they're talking to and then they'll feel at ease, and things like that.
Mount Isa, community worker

The Yirrkala group also recommended expansion of the outreach program.

3.7.1 Corresponding with the Ombudsman's Office

While face to face contact is the preferred option, or with the help of an intermediary, depending on the level of sophistication and self confidence, the telephone may also be used.

However, this would need to be answered by a person, not by an automated voice requiring callers to press numbers to be put through to the right department. With the cost of mobile calls, and public telephones, this can be extremely frustrating and a barrier to contact.

A free call service, with somebody that was a community person that they could actually get through to in the first place - not an answering machine that puts you through to the right person - 'Press this button if you wish to talk to this one' because most people hang up at the first press of the button. I think that is one of the things that really frustrates people...
Brisbane, community worker

A letter is preferred for the Ombudsman to contact a client, and some would also like to have the record of a letter in submitting a complaint. It is a permanent record, which can be referred to.

A letter, so you know that you have got it with you. That's the only way. And make it readable for, like I said, for people who have got language barriers. Straight-out English, not government jargon and all that!
Davenport, community elder

If they can't understand what's on the writing, you know, the letter, they can take it to the service providers like Centrecare or us even, or anyone, 'can you read and help me understand this?' Mount Isa, under 35-year-olds

If the Ombudsman's Office uses the telephone to contact clients, it is common for people to concur with questions they do not fully understand, while a letter can be studied.

They could just say 'yes, yes', but really they can't understand.
Mount Isa, under 35-year-olds

For young urban participants, or those with a level of education, the telephone or text messages are appropriate. The Redfern group suggested using Facebook and Twitter,



however, even this group would prefer a written communication because of its permanence and availability at any time.

3.8 Promoting the services of the Ombudsman

- Clear messages explaining the role of the Ombudsman and how it can help
- Simple phrases
- Illustrations that tell a story
- Use Aboriginal and Torres Strait languages

3.8.1 Messages

It is essential that the messages are clear and simple. Even the name: 'Ombudsman' came in for criticism.

First of all from a community perspective - Ombudsman - who's going to remember that? You've got to use simple words for people to understand. Some of them from the lands like pictures. Port Augusta, over 35-year-olds

It's a very formal name: Ombudsman... it's a bit scary!
Redfern, under 35-year-olds

Because of the extremely low level of knowledge about the Ombudsman in these communities, there needs to be basic information about what services are available, its role, and how to contact them. It also needs to tell people that it is free, unbiased and independent.

I guess I'd just say that we're here to help you, we're unbiased and it's a free service, yes, just saying that they're there to help everybody - we don't take sides. And our people will understand that, you know. And saying that they're free, this is what people want to know about.
Mount Isa, community worker

That it's an independent organisation. That it's not obligated to the government departments that it's investigating. That their advice is free. But I guess that one of the down sides is the fact that the departments don't have to take their advice for the changes.
Brisbane, community worker

Participants also commented that it is important to tell people that there is a person who will listen, and that they will be treated with respect.

Why don't they put it out there in a comfortable fashion, there's someone there to complain to and to know that it's not going to fall on deaf ears. There's a normal person there, wanting to help you.
Redfern, under over 35-year-olds

3.8.2 Words and phrases

Words and phrases used in promoting the services should be very simple.



When you use government words and all that, those sorts of words don't come into Aboriginal language. You have to use the right words to explain the meaning. There is no word for 'complain' in my own language, because we never used to complain about anything, because we had things there. But now we are complaining about anything and everything, and nothing's getting done. Davenport, community elder

Something straight up - get out loud and proud - just tell them straight. 'This is what we do. Give us a call. Here's an email address and here's the phone number. Redfern, community worker

Some of the recommended messages are:

- We don't take sides
- It's a free service
- We're unbiased
- Confidential and trusted
- Talk through the issues
- Speak up, it's your right
- Speak up for yourself
- We care or Ombudsman cares
- We're willing to talk
- You can count on us
- We can do this together
- Have a fair go
- We are here to listen to your complaints
- We are here to rectify your complaints
- Right the wrongs
- When no-one else will listen, the Ombudsman will

Well, the words, you would have to use language that people could understand. So you would have to explain what an Ombudsman was ... 'An Ombudsman will do this for you', 'You can contact the Ombudsman's Office by doing this ...', 'The Ombudsman can deal with complaints like this...' So, very clear messages. Brisbane, community worker

Participants were asked about the use of the word '**complaint**'.

There was no consensus, with some considering it to be a very good word, but others suggesting it is too confrontational or that a more positive approach would be better. However, the transient groups did not know the meaning of the word.



... complain, you just think, straight away, a whole lot of trouble. You know, something bad's going to happen - so 'Speak up for yourself' is better. Mount Isa, under 35-year-olds

Problems - not complaint. Yirrkala, under 35-year-olds

'Do you have a problem with this organisation?' that's better than complaint. Brisbane, TSI group

'Complaint' is like whinging all the time. I think it would be better to say 'Are you not satisfied with the service' or whatever. Davenport, under 35-year-olds

I think that's pretty much OK. People know about complaints and things - even the Grass-Roots people know the word 'complaint'. Mount Isa, community worker

Complaint is a really good word. Yirrkala, community worker

'Complaint' does come with a lot of baggage. People feel like they are whinging about things... To me it's more about defining what the problem is, so instead of saying 'Do you have a complaint?', use more positive words 'Come to me to solve your problem.' Brisbane, community worker

Similarly there was no consensus about what name to use to refer to the Government of Australia.

- Some participants felt it was immaterial as government is government, and they do not relate to any particular level

We don't talk about it. We just talk about services - we don't talk about that. Yirrkala, under 35-year-olds

By and large, people just perceive it as a white fella system and that white fellas are probably just going to make decisions whether they complain or not. Alice Springs, community worker

- Some thought Australian was the best term to use because that signifies the whole of Australia
- Others preferred Federal Government to distinguish it from the other Australian state governments
- Some did not understand what we were asking

On balance, the term '**Australian Government**' received slightly more acceptance than Federal or Commonwealth.

3.8.3 Using languages

People in the more remote areas were very keen to have messages and information materials in language, or at least promoting the fact that language services would be available in consultations with the Ombudsman's Office, either directly through a community employee, or using the Telephone Interpreter Service.

3.8.4 Using imagery

There was consensus, however, on the need to use images to tell the story, not only to attract attention, but for those in the communities who have low literacy.



Pictures, because people look at pictures, and simple words that they can understand. Mount Isa, community worker

Some of them from the lands like pictures. They can't read, they like pictures. Port Augusta, over 35-year-olds

The young group in Davenport suggested using a photograph telling a story of someone who had used the service, so that people seeing the poster or brochure would gain confidence that they could also use the service:

*Put her up there - 'She went there and she reckons she got a good response - I will go there' - 'If she can go to that office - I can go there too'.
Davenport, under 35-year-olds*

3.9 Getting the message out

- Face to face - sitting and talking with people - community forums
- Printed materials with simple messages and illustrations that tell a story
- Indigenous radio and television
- Local newspapers and community newsletters
- Electronic promotion for young people

3.9.1 Face to face

There was uniform agreement across all sectors and groups that there needs to be a lot more promotion of the Ombudsman's services, and the best way to inform people about it, is to go and talk to them. This generates discussion in the community and spread of information by word of mouth. Talking personally to communities allows interaction between the Ombudsman and members of the community, enabling the sharing of knowledge and influence on the way the service could be provided in that community.

*Should go into more Aboriginal communities and speak about it, so they know all about it. Not just sitting in a flash office in bloody Sydney, wherever the hell they are in a black suit and all that stuff.
It's so simple to sit down and have a chat. That's all it takes - been doing it for 50,000 years... Redfern, under 35-year-olds*

Get people together and talk to them. Alice Springs, transient

Get more information out there about it, and tell them what they do and stuff like that. And like I said, down to the Grass-Roots people. These are the people that really need it. So they need to make it understandable for them and what they're all about. Mount Isa, community worker

I think there needs to be information sessions, where the community decides and make it a community promotion thing - what's going to work for our mob, not what's going to work for Canberra and white fellas telling us. It needs to come up from the ground level up.

So if they have an information session here, they get information off us, we help them with the promotional thing on a local level, then I reckon they



will have so many calls from our mob!
Port Augusta, over 35-year-olds

That's a good thing, word of mouth. It goes from one place to another, like wildfire, yeah. Blackfella likes to tell everybody - that's the blackfella grapevine. Davenport, community elder

Both the Mount Isa group and the transient group in Alice Springs stressed the need for talking first to the elders, the leaders in the communities. By developing a relationship with them, trust in Ombudsman and its services will be more readily accepted through the community.

I guess we have to start off with the elders first, with having a go with the Ombudsman. Then the elders will have a clear understanding of what Ombudsmen are all about. Mount Isa, under 35-year-olds

See the leader first... Alice Springs, transient group

3.9.2 Other communication channels

A variety of other ways of promoting the services of the Ombudsman were suggested, mostly aural or visual channels, rather than written ones;

- Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander radio stations or programs, in-language promotions
- Multi-media displays at health clinics or resource centres
- 'Posters that talk in language'
- Television stories or commercials (*Not at midnight, when no-one is watching...* Redfern, under 35-year-olds)
- Posters, displayed at community / health centres, Centrelink, in public phone boxes, at railway stations, at Medicare offices
- Pictorial brochures with limited text
- Wallet cards
- Hats, t-shirts, pens
- U-tube video clips
- Facebook
- Indigenous newspapers, local newsletters and local newspapers

3.9.3 Communicating with older people

There was an emphasis on talking to older people, using intermediaries, particularly someone who can speak their language, or holding community forums to get the message across.

Other useful channels for this group are:

- Television and radio
- Local newsletters and Indigenous newspapers were also suggested



3.9.4 Communicating with younger people

Urban young people have greater access to computers and the Internet. However, young people in regional and more remote areas, also access the Internet on their mobiles.

It was suggested that Facebook and other social networking systems could be used to reach young people, as well as U-tube videos, although those in Yirrkala suggested that language would be a barrier for many of the local young people.

Do Facebook advertisement - that would get everyone. Or TV ads, something that looks fun. Redfern, under 35-year-olds

Make a hip hop song out of it, and video clip, then U-tube it.
Redfern, community worker

However, if community forums were held, even if the young people did not attend, they would still hear of it through the family network.

The thing that happens here, if you have a meeting and it doesn't matter if the young ones aren't there, the other people in the families they go home and they still talk about it. So that message gets spread out in an Aboriginal way, you know? Yirrkala, under 35-year-olds

Advertising with posters in places where young people congregate, such as PCYC and the cinema was also suggested.

3.9.5 Telephone and Internet connection

Very few participants have land line connections, although many, particularly the younger ones have mobile phones.

There was very limited access to computers and the Internet amongst these groups, other than those who access it at work. Cost of connection is the big inhibiting factor.

A few of the younger participants had email connections, accessed via their mobiles, although mobile connection can be problematic outside urban areas.

3.10 Media consumption

- Television - Imparja, ABC, SBS, commercial stations, Austar
- Radio - local radio, ABC, SBS, Koori, Murri Radio, Mob FM
- Local newspapers, Koori Mail

Television is a popular medium, and participants watch all the available free-to-air channels, including Imparja, ABC, SBS, NNTV, commercial stations and Austar.

*I watch Austar all day ...
I like programs about Aboriginal people...
I usually watch SBS because you have got Aboriginal issues on there.*
Davenport, under 35-year-olds

Koori and Murri radio stations or programs are popular, depending on the location. Local Yolngu Radio is popular in Yirrkala, Warlpiri radio in Alice Springs and Remote Indigenous Broadcasting Service, (formerly BRACCS) have radio programs in-language, using local



people, which are popular. Even those in urban areas like to listen to Indigenous radio stations.

Koori radio, yeah, Koori radio. Redfern, under 35-year-olds

Community members engage with the local media - but if there's a whole lot of government messages, they will probably switch to the soap operas.

Alice Springs, community worker

Few people read magazines, except in hospital or doctors' waiting rooms, but the Koori Mail and local newspapers do get read, or at least looked at, and some of the tabloids in the more urban areas, but not the mainstream broadsheet newspapers.

4 Conclusions and Recommendations

It is clear that the Ombudsman has a very low profile amongst these participants, many of whom would be reluctant or unable to complain about poor service they may have received, even if they knew more about the organisation.

There is a great deal of fear of the consequences, preventing people from making complaints about government agencies that have power over some element of their, or their families', lives.

Measures need to be taken to build trust in the independence and impartiality of the Ombudsman's Office, and to overcome the generations of discriminatory treatment that have left these communities cynical about 'government' and unwilling to trust.

The best way for the Ombudsman to build that trust is to provide a human face to the organisation, preferably one from the community, an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander face as appropriate.

Ideally, each community would like easy access to an office, preferably a shop-front where they can go and have a yarn about their difficulties. Since this is unlikely to be financially feasible, an alternative would be to engage a community worker, elder or similar person to act as an intermediary and be the face of the Ombudsman in the community.

This intermediary would develop trust between the community and the Ombudsman's office. They could provide information to assist the client to either make a complaint to the organisation that is causing the problem, or to the Ombudsman.

Support in this way is crucial to people who lack self-esteem, have poor English language skills or low levels of literacy. Even those who are educated and confident would benefit from having an intermediary who can guide them through the process.

The intermediary could also assist in facilitating communication between the Ombudsman and the client, particularly where other methods of communication are more problematic: i.e. no permanent dwelling, so no address for letters, no land line for telephone calls and no Internet connection for electronic communication. The intermediary would be the point of contact.

The outreach program is an excellent way of developing a relationship with these communities. They prefer to be able to talk to someone, and hear first hand what the person has to say, to see their face while they are saying it and be able to question and contribute. Although only a proportion of the community would be at such meetings, the word would spread, particularly if the community elders are involved and are convinced.



To truly show these communities that the Ombudsman cares and has their interests at heart, sitting down and having a yarn with them is the best way. As one participant said, this is the way they have been sharing information for 50,000 years!

Support the outreach program with simple, graphic promotional materials, video, radio stories and mini plays that engage people's interest; and have posters, brochures, cards and newspaper or community newsletter articles and advertising as a reminder.

Young urban people can be reached via social networking sites that they access on their mobiles, but for the broader population, the Internet should not be relied upon entirely.



APPENDIX A - Topic Guides for Focus Group Discussions and Individual Interviews

Improving services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People - LOI

Introduction

- Thank everyone for their time; Introduce self and Winangali - an independent Indigenous communications and research organisation operating since 2000.
- Explain role of research (eg “to get people’s ideas about an important service”)
- Explain rules:
 - It’s important that everyone has an opinion
 - Be honest and say what you really think
 - Speak one at a time.
- Explain confidentiality - your input will be combined into a report where no names will be used
- Get each person in group to introduce themselves - name, age, employed / not employed

Section 1 - Using government services

1. Let’s start by talking briefly about what Government services or agencies are there in this area? [eg Centrelink, CDEPs, Land Councils, Job Services, Medical Services, Housing and Rent, Ranger Services etc...]
 - Which of the services are provided by the Federal Government and which by the State / Territory government?
 - Are there any agencies or services specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people? [**Probe on:** whether provided by local, state or federal governments]
2. Which of any of the services provided by the Federal Government have you used, either locally or elsewhere, in the last year or so?
3. How happy were you with the service you got from them? [**Probe on:** did they get what they wanted / expected? did they get the information they needed? Did they get a result in good time?]
4. Have you ever had any problems in your dealings with a government agency or service provider? For example have you ever felt you were treated unfairly? Did you ever believe you did not get what you should have done? Were not told everything you should have been; or you weren’t listened to?



Section 2 - Making a complaint

5. If you felt you hadn't been treated fairly or if you had a problem with a government service provider or agency, how likely are you to make a complaint to the service provider, agency or someone else with the power to do something about it?
6. Thinking about, or imagining a time when you might have been treated badly by a government agency or service provider, what might stop you from making a complaint to the service provider, agency or person who can investigate it?
 - How bad would it have to be before you *would* make a complaint?
7. What would make it easier for you to make a complaint to the service provider, agency or person who can investigate it?
8. What difference would it make if you ...
 - had easy access to a complaints system ...
 - could talk to someone you know and trust ...
 - could talk to someone who speaks your language...
 - could talk confidentially...
 - believed that it would make a difference / get a result?
9. What would be the best way to access a complaints handling service? [**Probe on:** directly, through a mediator, on line, via telephone, in person, via letter or fax, what else?]
10. If you were to make a complaint, what result do you think you would be looking for? [**Probe on:** solving your original problem, making sure others weren't treated the same way, getting justice, what else ...?]
11. Who do you think you might complain to? [**Probe on:** the department or agency you were having difficulty with / an elder in the community / another trusted service provider / police / who else?]
12. How important is it that the person or organisation investigating your complaint is impartial and independent?

Section 3 - Awareness of Ombudsman

13. Do you think there should be an organisation that investigates complaints about government departments / agencies?
14. Do you know of any organisation that investigates complaints?
15. [**If unaware ...**] Have you ever heard of the Ombudsman's Office? [**If 'No' go to Explanation**]
16. [**If aware**] Can you tell me what you think the Ombudsman's Office does?
17. Have you ever had any dealings with the Ombudsman's Office or anyone representing it?

ASK ONLY if a participant has had dealings with Ombudsman's Office ...

18. Did you understand what you needed to do - fill in a form etc, and why it was needed?
 - Did the agency person listen to you?
 - Did they explain what you needed to do?
19. What is your impression of the Ombudsman's Office - do you think it was / would be impartial in helping sort out problems you might have had with another government department?



- Do you think it is independent?

Explain the role and function of the Ombudsman ...

The Commonwealth Ombudsman provides independent and impartial services to members of the Australian community which enable them to seek help in resolving problems they may have experienced with Federal Government departments, agencies or organisations providing service on behalf of the Government; and to help the departments, agencies and organisations to improve the standard of their services, to be accountable and fair in their actions.

It does not represent either the complainant or agencies. It is free. It can recommend that agencies make certain decisions or take certain action but it cannot make them do that.

20. [If not asked before ...] What is your impression of the Ombudsman's Office - do you think it was / would be impartial in helping sort out problems you might have had with another government department?

- Do you think it is independent?

21. How likely are you to use the Ombudsman's services?

- Why do you think that is?
- What would have to happen for you to have confidence in the service?

22. If you were setting up an ideal service to do these investigations, what would it be like?

- What would be the most useful products / services it could provide?
- What would be the best way for people to access the service?

23. Have you seen or heard any advertising for the Ombudsman's Office?

- Where did you see / hear it?
- What did you see / hear it?

Section 4 - Communication

Now, I want you to put on your creative hats and tell me what you think would be the best way to tell people about the service ...

24. What sort of things would you say to people to help them trust the Ombudsman's Office?

- What are the messages or words / phrases that would be most effective in attracting attention, giving people confidence and encouraging them to use it?
- Is the word 'complaint' a good one to use? What are your feelings about the word? Is there a better way to encourage people to seek help if they have had a problem with a Federal Government department or agency?
- Thinking about words to use, is it better to talk about the Australian Government, or the Federal Government? Which is the better / clearer way to refer to the government in Canberra?



25. What would be the best way to get the information to people? [As appropriate probe on: through intermediaries (what type?), media (which?), Facebook, mobile phones, community information sessions, posters/displays at Aboriginal service providers ...etc]
- What do you think would be the best way to help older people learn about the service?
 - What about getting the information to young people in the community?
26. If you had made a complaint about an Australian Government department or agency to the Ombudsman, what would be the best way for the Ombudsman's Office to contact you for more information or to report to you what progress they had made? For example would you like a letter, a telephone call, a text message to your mobile, or an email?
27. What TV stations do you watch regularly?
28. Which radio stations do you listen to regularly?
29. What newspapers / magazines do you read / look at regularly?
30. Do you have access to / use of the Internet?
- land line telephones?
 - mobiles?

That's all the questions I have; do you have anything you would like to add to what we have been talking about?

Thank and close.



Improving services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People - Questions for individual interviews

Introduction

- Thank participant for their time; Introduce self and Winangali - an independent Indigenous communications and research organisation operating since 2000.
- Explain role of research (eg “to get people’s ideas about an important service”)
- Explain confidentiality - your input will be combined into a report where no names will be used
- Get person to introduce his/her self - name, age, organisation he / she works for and role in it

Section 1 - Using government services

31. Let’s start by talking briefly about what Government services are provided in this area... which ones are there around here?
 - Are there any specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people? [**Probe on:** whether provided by local, state or federal governments]
32. Have any of your clients ever told you about problems in their dealings with a Federal Government agency or service provider? For example have they ever felt they were treated unfairly? Did not believe they got what they should have done? Or were not listened to?

Section 2 - Making a complaint

33. If one of your clients hadn’t been treated fairly or if they had a problem with a government service provider or agency, how likely are they to make a complaint to the service provider, agency or someone else with the power to do something about it?
34. What might stop them from making a complaint to the service provider, agency or person who can investigate them?
 - How bad would it have to be before they *would* complain to the service provider, agency or person who can investigate a problem?
35. What would make it easier to make a complaint?
36. What difference would it make if there was ...
 - easy access to a complaints system ...
 - someone known and trusted to talk to ...
 - someone who speaks their language to talk to ...
 - confidence in the confidentiality...
 - belief that it would make a difference / get a result?
37. What would be the best way to access a complaints handling service [**Probe on:** directly, through a mediator, on line, via telephone, in person, what else?]
38. What result do you think your clients would be looking for? [**Probe on:** solving the original problem, making sure others weren’t treated the same way, getting justice, what else ...?]



39. Who do you think they might complain to? [**Probe on:** the department or agency they were having difficulty with / an elder in the community / another trusted service provider / police / who else?]
40. How important is it that the person or organisation investigating the complaint is impartial and independent?

Section 3 - Awareness of Ombudsman

41. Do you think there should be an organisation that investigates complaints about government departments / agencies?
42. Do you know of any organisation that investigates complaints?
43. [**If unaware ...**] Have you ever heard of the Ombudsman's Office? [**If 'No' go to Explanation**]
44. [**If aware**] Can you tell me what you think the Ombudsman's Office does?
45. Have you ever had any dealings with the Ombudsman's Office or anyone representing it?
46. What is your impression of the Ombudsman's Office - do you think it was / would be impartial in helping sort out problems you or your clients might have had with another government department?
 - Do you think it is independent?

Explain the role and function of the Ombudsman ...

The Commonwealth Ombudsman provides independent and impartial services to members of the Australian community which enable them to seek help in resolving problems they may have experienced with Federal Government departments, agencies or organisations providing service on behalf of the Government; and to help the departments, agencies and organisations to improve the standard of their services, to be accountable and fair in their actions.

It does not represent either the complainant or agencies. It is free. It can recommend that agencies make certain decisions or take certain action but it cannot make them do that.

47. [**If not asked before ...**] What is your impression of the Ombudsman's Office - do you think it was / would be impartial in helping sort out problems you might have had with another government department?
 - Do you think it is independent?
48. How likely are your clients to use the Ombudsman's services?
 - Why do you think that is?
 - What would have to happen for you or your clients to have confidence in the service?
49. If you were setting up an ideal service to do these investigations, what would it be like?
 - What would be the most useful products / services it could provide?
 - What would be the best way for people to access the service?
50. Have you seen or heard any advertising or promotion for the Ombudsman's Office?
 - Where did you see / hear it?



- What did you see / hear?
51. If you were the Ombudsman's Office, promoting your services to this community, what sort of things would you say to people to help them trust it?
- What are the messages or words / phrases that would be most effective in attracting attention, giving people confidence and encouraging them to use it?
 - Is the word 'complaint' a good one to use? What are your feelings about the word? Is there a better way to encourage people to seek help if they have had a problem with a Federal Government department or agency?
 - Thinking about words to use, is it better to talk about the Australian Government, or the Federal Government? Which is the better / clearer way to refer to the government in Canberra?
52. What would be the best way to get the information to people? [**As appropriate probe on:** through intermediaries (what type?), media (which?), Facebook, mobile phones, community information sessions, posters/displays at Aboriginal service providers ...etc]
- What do you think would be the best way to help older people learn about the service?
 - What about getting the information to young people in the community?
53. If someone had made a complaint about an Australian Government department or agency to the Ombudsman, what would be the best way for the Ombudsman's Office to contact them for more information or to report what progress they had made? For example would they like a letter, a telephone call, a text message to their mobile, or an email?
54. What TV stations do people in this community watch regularly?
55. Which radio stations do they listen to regularly?
56. Newspapers / magazines ...?
57. Do many people have access to / use of the Internet?
- land line telephones?
 - mobiles?

That's all the formal questions; do you have anything you would like to add to what we have been talking about?

Thank and close.