

28 January 2025

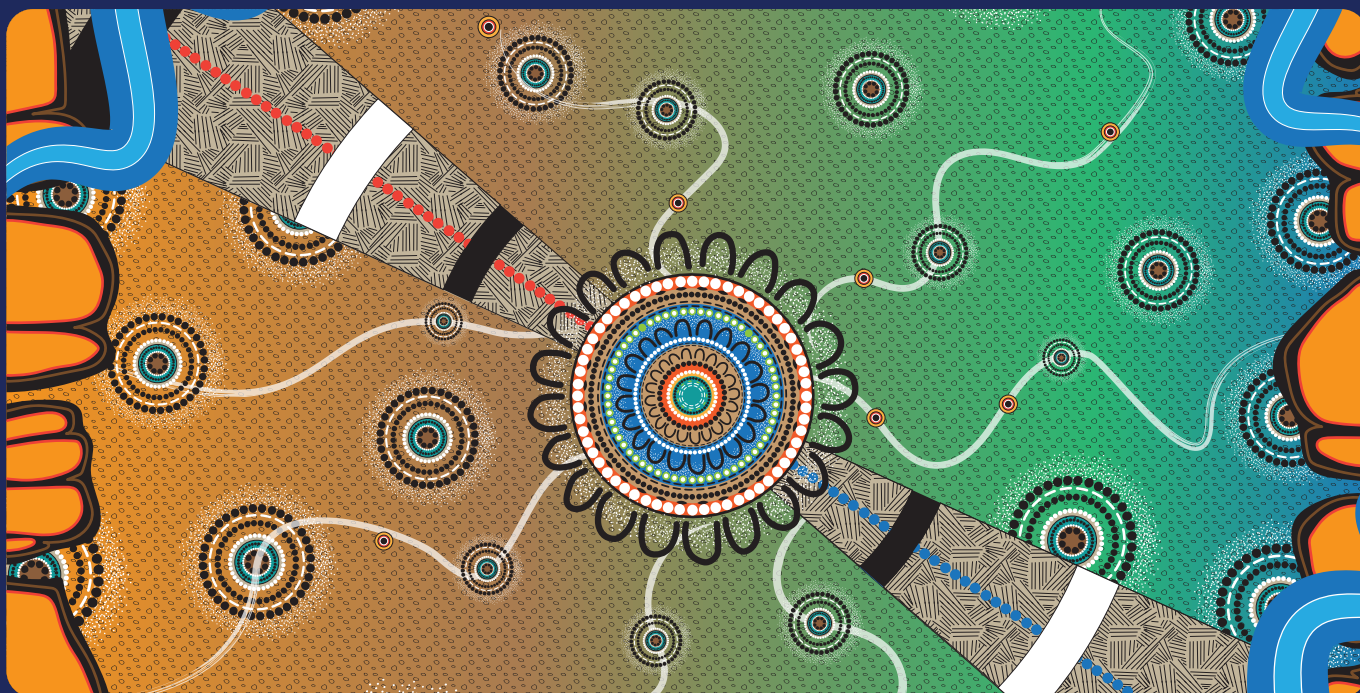
 **Ombudsman**
New South Wales

OCHRE 2024

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Current status
and future direction
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Community Guide

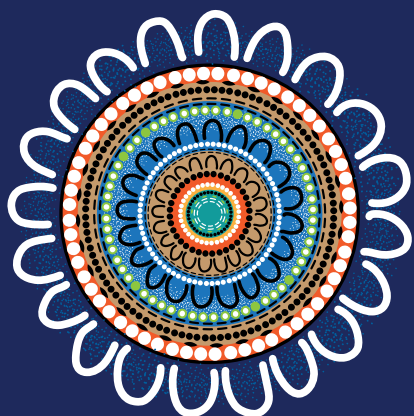
Journey Together by Jasmine Sarin



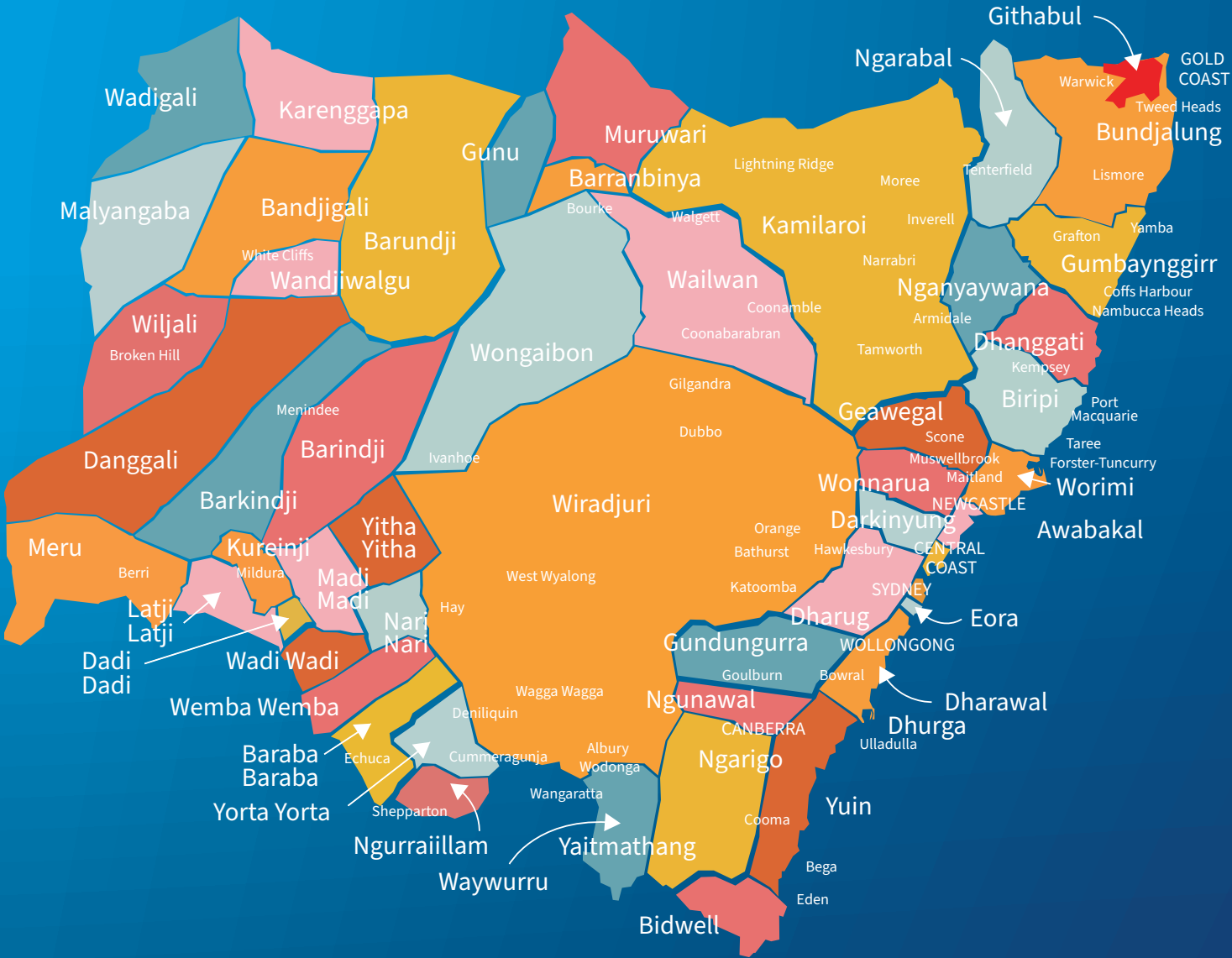
This artwork depicts the way families, communities and organisations connect. We connect when we want to share knowledge, information, and strengthen relationships.

The centre of the artwork is reflective of a gathering that involves many family groups. This gathering is where elders and knowledge holders will pass on stories and songlines, discuss lore and trade.

These gatherings are essential to ensure clans and family groups are supporting each other and maintaining strong cultural ties and respecting each other and our mother earth.

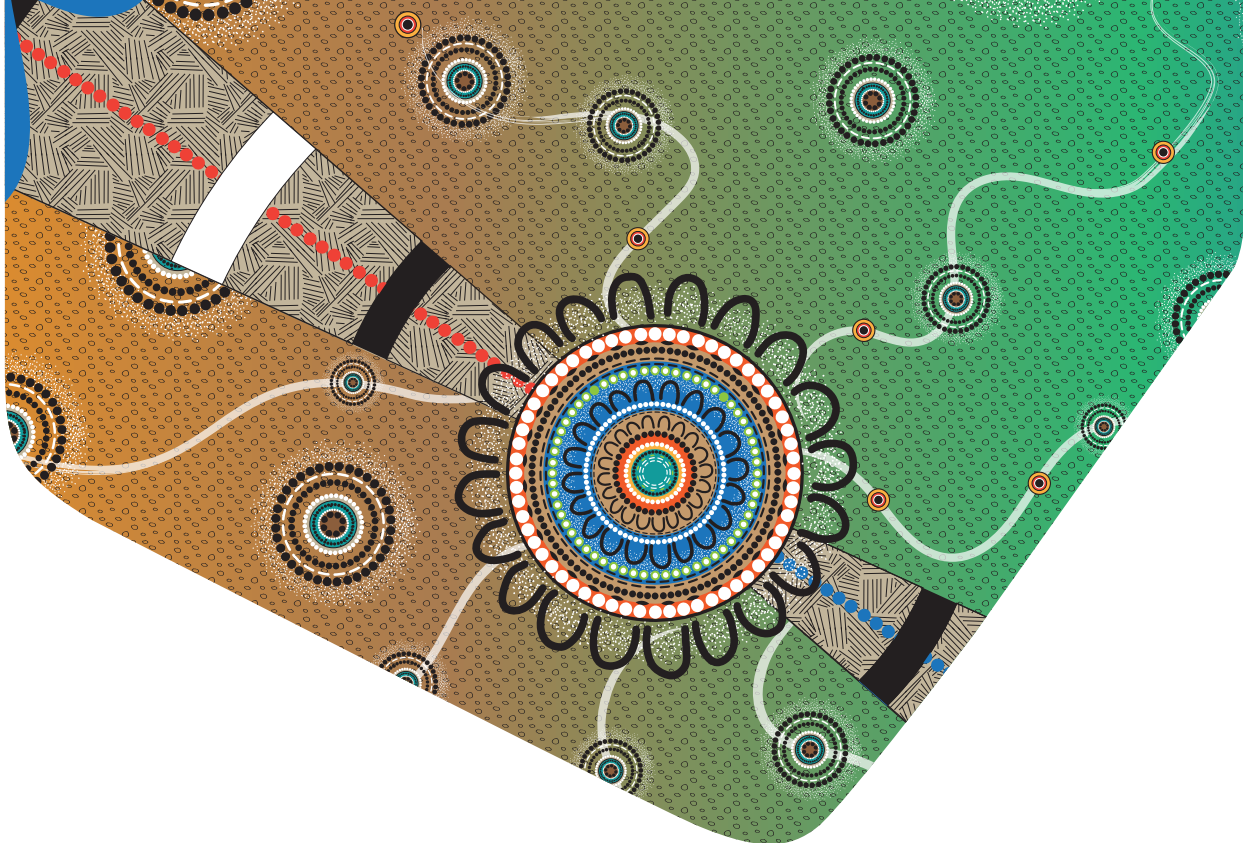


Aboriginal Nations/Languages in NSW & ACT



Acknowledgement

The NSW Ombudsman's Office pays tribute to Aboriginal Elders past, present, and emerging, acknowledging their ongoing connection to Country, their wisdom, and rich cultural heritage. We express gratitude to all stakeholders, partners, and individuals who dedicated their time, energy, and expertise to this Review. We acknowledge the diversity of views within Aboriginal communities and recognise that our engagement with Aboriginal people, while meaningful, may not be representative of the views of all Aboriginal communities in NSW.



How to use this Community Guide

The NSW Ombudsman wrote this report. When you see the word ‘we’ it means the NSW Ombudsman. This report is a summary of our *OCHRE 2024: Current status and future directions report*.

In this report, when we say ‘Aboriginal people’ told us something, we are referring to the Aboriginal people we spoke to during this review. We also use the term ‘Aboriginal’ to describe all First Nations peoples as this is conventional in the NSW communities we engaged with.

1. Who we are: The NSW Ombudsman

The NSW Ombudsman makes sure government departments and services are fair and do the right thing. We listen to complaints from the community, look into them, and work to solve the issues. Our job is to check that rules are followed and that NSW Government services work well for everyone.

Since 2014, the NSW Ombudsman has been checking how well OCHRE initiatives are working. Part of our job is to make sure Aboriginal programs are done properly and work well.

The Aboriginal Deputy Ombudsman, Leanne Townsend, drives our work in monitoring NSW Aboriginal programs and is the lead author of this report.

2. Why we wrote this report

We wrote this report to provide public transparency on how OCHRE is going, and to identify what should change in the future. It has been 5 years since we wrote our last report on OCHRE.

Here’s what we did:

Listened to Aboriginal communities: People shared their stories about what’s working and what’s not. Their voices helped us understand their experiences of OCHRE across NSW.

Read other reports: We went through lots of other reports written about OCHRE. We also checked what the NSW Government says it is doing.

We made clear recommendations: Based on what we heard, we gave the NSW Government clear steps and timeframes to make OCHRE more effective and to ensure they are accountable.

This report is not just about pointing out problems. It is about creating a path forward so OCHRE can do what it is supposed to do - truly supporting good outcomes for Aboriginal communities in NSW.

3. What is OCHRE?

OUCHRE is the NSW Government's plan for Aboriginal affairs. It launched in 2013.

The OCHRE Plan aims to improve outcomes for Aboriginal people by strengthening the relationship between the government and Aboriginal communities in NSW.

OUCHRE stands for:



4. OCHRE Initiatives

OUCHRE has seven initiatives designed to support Aboriginal communities.

Here is what they are and what they aim to do:

Local Decision Making

- Aboriginal people get a say in how government services are run in their communities.
- Focuses on building stronger relationships between Aboriginal people and the NSW Government.
- Encourages local-led solutions to local issues.
- Created by agreements ('Accords') negotiated between the Government and Aboriginal Regional Alliances.

Local Decision Making is led by Aboriginal Affairs NSW. The Government allocated \$2 million in resources to support LDM last financial year.

Connected Communities

- Schools become community hubs to help Aboriginal students succeed.
- Work with families and communities to provide better education and cultural support.
- Breaks down barriers to learning.
- There are 33 Connected Communities schools in NSW.

Connected Communities is led by the NSW Department of Education. The Government allocated \$39.6 million in resources to support Connected Communities schools last financial year.

Aboriginal Language and Culture Nests

- Teaches Aboriginal languages to students.
- Connects students with Elders and community members to share language and culture.
- Helps keep Aboriginal culture alive.

There are 7 Aboriginal Language and Culture Nests:

North West Wiradjuri Language and Culture Nest: Dubbo, Narromine, Peak Hill, Trangie, Gilgandra, Wellington, and Mudgee.
Gumbaynggirr Language and Culture Nest: Coffs Harbour, South Grafton, Bellingen, Urunga, Dorrigo, Northern Beaches, Sawtell, Toormina, Nambucca Valley, and Orara.
Bundjalung Language and Culture Nest: Lismore, Kyogle, Tweed Heads, Ballina, Evans Head, Woodenbong, Grafton, Tabulam, Coraki, Casino, and Bonalbo.
Paakantji/Baakantji Language and Culture Nest: Broken Hill, Wilcannia, Menindee, Bourke, Mildura, and Coomealla.
Gamilaraay/Yuwaalaraay/Yuwaalayaay Language and Culture Nest: Collarenebri, Walgett, Lightning Ridge, and Goodooga.
Dunghutti Language and Culture Nest: Bellbrook, Crescent Head, Kempsey, South West Rocks, Walcha, and their surrounding areas.
Gomeri Language and Culture Nest: Gunnedah, Walgett, Boggabilla, Moree, Lightning Ridge, Tamworth, Narrabri, Quirindi, Collarenebri, Mungindi.

Aboriginal Language and Culture Nests are led by the NSW Department of Education. The Government allocated \$3.1 M in resources to support Nests last financial year.

Opportunity Hubs

- Helps Aboriginal students plan their future.
- Provides mentoring, training, and job opportunities.
- Supports students from school to further education or jobs.

As of December 2024, there are 5 Opportunity Hubs in:

- Campbelltown
- Dubbo
- Tamworth
- Liverpool
- Greater Western Sydney

Opportunity Hubs are led by the NSW Department of Education. The government allocated \$3.4 million in resources to support Opportunity Hubs last financial year.

Healing programs

- Helps Aboriginal communities recover from shared pain across generations.
- Offers culturally appropriate support and community-led programs.

Aboriginal Economic Prosperity Framework

- Creates more jobs for Aboriginal people.
- Supports Aboriginal businesses and improves economic opportunities.

Solutions Brokerage

- Fixes problems that fall through the gaps.
- Brings together governments and local community groups to solve issues.

5. Which OCHRE initiatives are running?

Right now, these OCHRE Initiatives are still running:

- Local Decision Making
- Connected Communities
- Aboriginal Language and Culture Nests
- Opportunity Hubs.

The Healing, Aboriginal Economic Prosperity Framework, and Solutions Brokerage initiatives under OCHRE have stopped, but communities are asking for them to restart.

Different parts of the Government have started doing some other things that seem to have similar aims to the Healing and Aboriginal Economic Prosperity Framework initiatives under OCHRE. This is confusing.

6. What's Not Working?

- **Community Control:** Aboriginal communities don't always have enough say in decisions that affect them, and are asking for more power to decide priorities for their communities and to lead changes.
- **Funding Problems:** Short-term government funding makes it hard for Aboriginal communities to plan ahead, especially for initiatives like Aboriginal Language and Culture Nests and Opportunity Hubs.
- **Cultural Understanding:** Some NSW Government staff don't fully understand or appreciate Aboriginal culture, which makes working together harder, and there are frequent staff changes among government agencies.
- **Mixed Messages:** OCHRE overlaps with other government plans like Closing the Gap. This creates confusion and competition for resources, and some Aboriginal people feel that the NSW Government has forgotten about OCHRE.

7. Our Recommendations

Communities have told us that we think that OCHRE should continue, and that what is needed is a re-commitment to its core principles and aims.

We make one core recommendation in our report – that there be a firm and strong re-commitment to OCHRE.

Core Recommendation:

That the NSW Government both articulate and demonstrate a renewed commitment to OCHRE, and to its continued status and future as the Aboriginal affairs plan for New South Wales.

To achieve this, we propose that Government do the following:

Recommendation 1: Public statement of commitment

Clarify, by public statement (or via the NSW Government's response to the OCHRE 2024: Current status and future directions report), the current status of, progress on, and intentions for all OCHRE initiatives, including:

- Healing
- Solutions Brokerage
- Aboriginal Economic Prosperity Framework.

Timing: as soon as possible.

Recommendation 2: Get Local Decision Making Accords in place

Prioritise and expedite the finalisation of Accords with each Aboriginal Regional Alliance.

Timing: Signed Accords with all eligible ARAs by no later than 1 February 2026.

Following consultation, including with The NSW Coalition of Peak Aboriginal Organisations (NSW CAPO); The NSW Coalition of Aboriginal Regional Alliances (NCARA); Aboriginal regional alliances (ARAs), introduce a Bill to give OCHRE a legislative foundation.

Timing: Legislation introduced by 1 July 2026, noting community consultation required.

Recommendation 4: Make sure OCHRE outcomes are reported to Aboriginal communities and the public every year, including funding

Mandate transparent OCHRE Reporting Frameworks. This should include publishing annual performance and expenditure reports.

Timing: Reporting should begin with the 2025–2026 financial year, with the first reports due by 1 October 2026.

Recommendation 5: Adopt multi-year funding commitments

Implement multi-year funding commitments by introducing minimum five-year funding agreements for OCHRE initiatives.

Timing: Five-year funding agreements should begin by 1 July 2026.

Recommendation 6: Make the Head of Aboriginal Affairs more powerful OR Appoint an Aboriginal Coordinator General

This role would oversee OCHRE and align it with other programs like Closing the Gap.

Timing: Appointment by 1 July 2025.

Recommendation 7: Act on outstanding recommendations from other reports

Respond to other reports that have evaluated or reviewed OCHRE initiatives and made recommendations for improvement

Timing: Implementation Plan finalised by 1 July 2025.

Recommendation 8: Formally adopt and implement the OCHRE Practice Principles

Mandate all NSW Government Agencies adopt the 2023 OCHRE Practice Principles to improve cultural competency and collaboration.

Timing: All NSW Government agencies are to have and publish OCHRE Practice Principles plans by 1 December 2026.

Recommendation 9: Clarify the relationship between OCHRE and other strategies and programs including Closing the Gap

Clarify where OCHRE 'fits' in NSW by defining the relationship between Closing the Gap and OCHRE. This includes Aboriginal Affairs NSW developing and publishing a clear framework outlining how the two plans will complement each other.

Timing: Publish the framework by 30 June 2025.

Recommendation 10. Respond to our recommendations

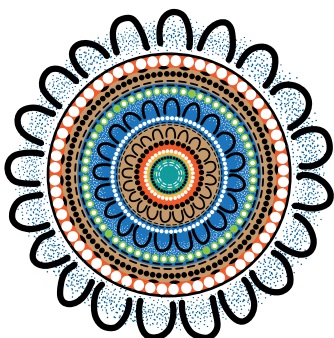
The NSW Government should respond with a plan on how they will deal with our recommendations.

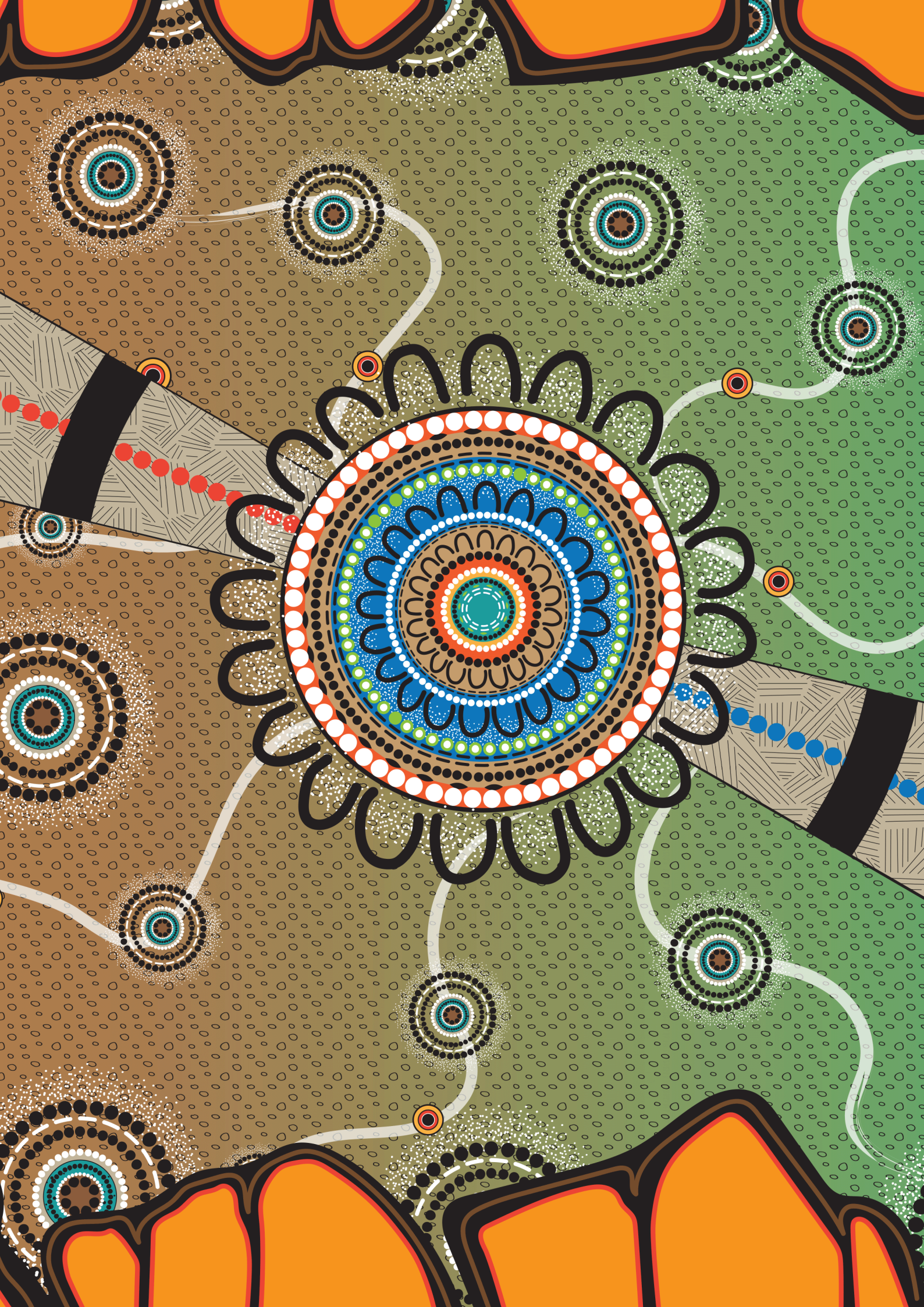
Timing: We asked that the plan be due by 28 April 2025 and that the NSW Government publish a report on its website showing what has been done no later than 1 December 2025.

10. The Bottom Line

OCHRE has achieved a lot, but it can and should do more.

By focusing on empowering Aboriginal communities and fixing the issues holding OCHRE back, the NSW Government can make OCHRE a lasting success that truly benefits Aboriginal people.







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