

# Final Review of WA Police Action into Recommendations on the Deployment of Police Dogs

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*Image credit: This artwork was painted by Corruption and Crime Commission staff under the guidance of Justin Martin from Djurandi Dreaming.*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1 In May 2022, the Commission tabled a report in Parliament which outlined the thematic review conducted by the Commission into the serious misconduct risks associated with the deployment of police dogs.<sup>1</sup> The review responded to concerns raised by the Aboriginal Legal Service of WA<sup>2</sup> and a recommendation made by the Joint Standing Committee on the Corruption and Crime Commission.<sup>3</sup>
- 2 WA Police officers are empowered to use such force as may be reasonably necessary to reduce a threat and gain control of a person. Police dogs are a force option available for officers in WA Police Canine Unit.<sup>4</sup>
- 3 A general-purpose police dog is trained to locate a person and to physically engage by biting and holding when given an 'apprehend' command. WA Police recognise that the deployment of a police dog may result in serious injury and therefore consider this option to sit between the use of a taser and firearm according to operational and force policy.<sup>5</sup>
- 4 The Commission's review considered WA Police's policies, training practices, compliance with the Use of Force policy, and the likelihood of serious injury resulting from police dog use.
- 5 The Commission identified an absence of policies and procedures specific to the use of police dogs as a force option. That limited the ability for independent oversight of police dog use and created a risk of issues not being addressed.
- 6 While the review revealed a higher statistical representation of police dog deployments on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons, at the time the Commission did not identify any systemic factors which gave rise to the higher representation.
- 7 Two recommendations were made to WA Police to address identified gaps:<sup>6</sup>
  - (1) WA Police develop and implement Canine Unit policy, procedure and/or guidelines.

<sup>1</sup> Corruption and Crime Commission, 'A report on the deployment of police dogs', 11 May 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Aboriginal Legal Service of Western Australia, *The Use of Police Dogs on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People in Western Australia*, August 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Joint Standing Committee on the Corruption and Crime Commission, 'IF NOT THE CCC ... THEN WHERE? An examination of the Corruption and Crime Commission's oversight of excessive use of force allegations against members of the WA Police Force', Report 2, 9 September 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Western Australia Police, *Police Force Manual - FR-01.01 Use of Force - Generally*, review date 2 October 2024.

<sup>5</sup> WA Police Situational Tactical Options Model (STOM) - a decision-making process which guides officers responding to operational policing tasks and an appropriate level of force.

<sup>6</sup> *Corruption Crime and Misconduct Act 2003* s 43.

- (2) WA Police undertake further analysis of police dog use to explore and address reasons for the higher representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons in police deployments.
- 8 Twelve months later the Commission commenced its first review of WA Police's response to the recommendations.
- 9 WA Police advised it was conducting a holistic review and assessment of all aspects of the Canine Unit. It had commenced implementing several key initiatives and engaged with Edith Cowan University (ECU) to explore possible reasons for the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons in police dog deployments.
- 10 With most of the initiatives still in their infancy and therefore incapable of review, the Commission determined that both recommendations would remain open for further review towards the end of 2024. An update was tabled in Parliament in October 2023.<sup>7</sup>
- 11 In September 2024, WA Police advised the Commission that its holistic review of the Canine Unit was finalised and provided a list of completed actions in addressing the Commission's two recommendations.

## **RECOMMENDATION ONE - DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT WA POLICE CANINE UNIT POLICY, PROCEDURE AND/OR GUIDELINES**

### **WA Police response to the recommendation**

- 12 Prior to the Commission's oversight, the Canine Unit relied on lesson plans from its training syllabus as guidelines for dog handlers in the safe deployment of their police dogs. Subject matter experts from the Canine Unit were relied on to determine the appropriateness of police dog deployments and whether the actions of the canine handler were in accordance with training procedures.
- 13 To address recommendation one, WA Police amended its wider police manual guidelines to include a revised Canine Unit policy. The policy states that handlers are responsible for the safe and lawful use of their dogs at all times and must adhere to legislation, use of force options, associated policies, standard operating procedures and training materials.
- 14 WA Police created and implemented Canine Unit standard operating procedures, covering all areas of canine operations.
- 15 WA Police's actions significantly increased oversight of all police dog incidents. Under the new procedures, a senior officer is required to attend when there is a police dog apprehension regardless of whether the apprehension results in an injury.

<sup>7</sup> Corruption and Crime Commission, *Deployment of Police Dogs Recommendation Review*, 12 October 2023.

- 16 The senior officer is responsible for conducting a preliminary investigation to determine if the deployment of the dog and use of force was lawful and in accordance with policy, training practices and guidelines. A Senior Officer Scene Attendance form must be completed containing suspect details, a summary of the incident and a description of any injuries. This record will assist with monitoring the force option and future data analysis.

### **The Commission's review**

- 17 WA Police have made considerable improvements to the Canine Unit, ranging from structural changes in the operation of the unit to implementing new policies and procedures.
- 18 The Commission considers that the amended Canine Unit policy and newly developed standard operating procedures reduces the level of ambiguity and risk surrounding the use of police dogs as a force option.
- 19 The written standards provide a framework for officer accountability and enable internal and external parties to oversee and/or investigate police dog deployment incidents.
- 20 WA Police's actions have improved oversight with the implementation of appropriate governance documentation and procedures. These measures have led to significant positive outcomes including a reduction in incidents involving the deployment of police dogs.

### **The Commission's conclusion**

- 21 The Commission considers that WA Police appropriately responded to recommendation one, and it is deemed closed.

### **Recommendation Two - Undertake further analysis of police dog use to explore and address reasons for the higher representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons in police dog deployment.**

- 22 WA Police engaged the ECU Sellenger Centre to further analyse its police dog operations. The research focused on factors associated with police dog use and identifying any implications for policy development. WA Police provided the Commission with a copy of the final report in January 2025.<sup>8</sup>
- 23 ECU analysed data extracted from WA Police systems for the period 1 October 2022 to 31 January 2023. However, it was noted that missing data (60%) impacted the ability to make statistically relevant conclusions.
- 24 The data quality issues were attributed to a variety of factors, including suspect demographics not being known at the time of dispatch, data not being reported by

<sup>8</sup> Edith Cowan University, *Factors associated with the frequency and severity of police dog bites*, 20 December 2024.

officers and certain categories of data not being relevant to a particular incident. Due to the tenuous nature of the data, qualitative data from interviews with seven Canine Unit handlers was used to add integrity to the findings.

- 25 The ECU report outlined the following findings:
  - Handlers made deployment decisions based on the offence before considering contextual factors such as offender characteristics.
  - Suspect non-compliance could be influenced by comprehension of the verbal warning. The complexity of language used had implications for young offenders and for individuals whose first language was not English (including certain Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander persons). The report noted that suspect compliance rates could be improved if the verbal warning was simplified and more colloquial.
  - The risk of grievous bodily harm was possible due to factors outside of the handler's control such as visibility and the behaviour of the offender (the more the offender resists, the harder the police dog will fight to maintain control).
- 26 The report noted that while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are overrepresented in WA Police dog deployments, identifying causes were beyond the scope of the report.
- 27 Observations made in the report suggested that overrepresentation in police dog apprehension outcomes was due to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people being overrepresented in serious crime incidents attended by the Canine Unit. However, the report stated this implied relationship was simplistic and failed to acknowledge that overrepresentation forms part of a much broader social issue.
- 28 The report concluded with 11 recommendations for WA Police, acknowledging several recommendations had been or were in the process of being implemented. These included consulting with Aboriginal organisations to help inform policy governing the use of police dogs, reframing the current police verbal warning, ongoing development and training for canine handlers, policy amendments to further mitigate the risk of serious bodily injury and development of a master data base on police dog use.

### Further information requested from WA Police

- 29 The Commission requested WA Police outline the impact of the ECU report's findings and how they informed initiatives intended to address overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons in police dog incidents.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Letter to the Commissioner of Police dated 24 February 2025.

- 30 WA Police advised no further work would be undertaken due to insufficient historical data to identify causal factors.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, WA Police reiterated the following key outcomes:
- Recent policy changes and improvements had led to a reduction in sub-optimal incidents involving police dogs.
  - The verbal command had been simplified to 'Police dog. Stop/come out or the dog can bite.' That command was implemented on 18 December 2024.
  - The Canine Unit will work with the Aboriginal Affairs Division to evaluate the need for culturally appropriate actions.
  - Canine Unit supervisors will be responsible for conducting desktop reviews of police dog deployments that do not involve the use of force. That will allow for early identification of skill and knowledge gaps and a focus on ongoing improvement of canine deployment methodology.
  - Collaboration continues with the Technology Portfolio to establish an IT solution for recording and reporting Canine Unit tasking and deployments. The IT solution will allow for accurate analysis of real-time evidence.

### **The Commission's review**

- 31 The Commission considers that the engagement of ECU demonstrated a commitment by WA Police to further understand police dog use, specifically in relation to deployments on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons.
- 32 While data constraints limited further review, the Commission acknowledges the actions taken by WA Police to integrate culturally sensitive practices into policy and procedures.
- 33 WA Police recognises that police dog deployments have a high likelihood of resulting in serious injury due to their level of force. The simplification of the verbal warning was important to provide an option for a person to succumb willingly to an arrest, avoiding the potential for serious injury.
- 34 The implementation of practices to record, review and monitor police dog deployments assists in capturing and managing ongoing risks associated with using police dogs as a force option.

### **The Commission's conclusion**

- 35 The Commission considers that WA Police responded appropriately to recommendation two, and it is deemed closed.

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<sup>10</sup> Letter from the Commissioner of Police dated 19 March 2025.