Aboriginal court trial flops

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A groundbreaking trial of WA's only formal Aboriginal court has failed to reduce re-offending, according to an independent review which reveals that offenders sentenced in the specialist court are more likely to commit further crimes than those dealt with in the mainstream system.

Despite the disappointing results, the $430,000-a-year Kalgoorlie Community Court will be given another two-year lifeline in a bid to improve the pilot program.

But Attorney-General Christian Porter has warned the court will have to start delivering positive results over the next two years, saying strong local support for the project was one of the major reasons for the extension. There will be no expansion of the program to other regions pending the outcome of the ongoing trial.

The long-awaited review of the Aboriginal court, which was set up under the former Labor government in November 2006, found that 88 per cent of juveniles dealt with by the specialist court in its first two-year trial of operation went on to re-offend, compared with a 67 per cent rate of recidivism by those sentenced in the Children's Court.

Over the same two-year time frame, 79 per cent of adults dealt with in the Community Court re-offended, compared with 71 per cent in the Kalgoorlie Magistrate's Court.

But the evaluation also found that, people sentenced in the Community Court committed more serious offences and had more prior convictions which was a possible explanation for the failure to reduce re-offending.

The report also highlighted problems with the funding allocated to the Community Court, which it said had been diverted to meet a general lack of resources in the mainstream court.

The Community Court involves a panel of Aboriginal leaders and elders who sit with a resident magistrate to deal with pleas of guilty and sentencing, using a round-table forum rather than a traditional judicial bench.

The court gives victims, prosecutors, family members, mediators and support services an increased role.

Mr Porter said the Community Court had been set up to provide a more culturally appropriate process for dealing with Aboriginal offenders in the criminal justice system but had not been accompanied by adequate measures to address behaviour after the court process.

He said an extra full-time staff member had been appointed to the juvenile justice team to link young offenders with programs.