Justice Minister Peter Toyne today welcomed the Federal Government’s concessions - but called for further changes - to its approach on Aboriginal legal aid funding, to ensure culturally appropriate services for Indigenous Australians.

Dr Toyne, who is attending the Standing Committee of Attorneys-General (SCAG) in Adelaide today, had previously criticised the Federal Government’s initial plans for Indigenous legal services.

“I am pleased to see Federal Attorney-General Phillip Ruddock back down from some of his original plans for purchasing arrangements for legal aid services for Indigenous Australians,” Dr Toyne said.

“I have openly criticised, and written to both Ministers Ruddock and Vanstone, about their original plans to tender out Indigenous legal aid funding without consideration to sensitive Indigenous issues affecting the Northern Territory.”

Dr Toyne said the previous proposal, particularly the intention to exclude people with prior convictions, would have impacted on Indigenous people’s access to appropriate and accessible legal aid services.

“However, tendering out of Aboriginal legal services represents a radical departure from the long standing arrangements that have existed for the provision of specialist legal aid services for Indigenous people,” he said.

“It also works against the critical issue of Aboriginal control over these services.”

Dr Toyne said that while the changes to the tender process announced yesterday is an improvement by requiring prospective tenderers to demonstrate an ability to provide Indigenous leadership and culturally sensitive legal services – the whole tender process is a bad idea.

“There has been an increase in demand by Indigenous people for legal services in the Territory, and this demand is intrinsically linked with broader issues such as economic and social disadvantage,” he said.

“The Commonwealth should continue to directly fund specialist Aboriginal Legal Aid Services in the NT and they should fund them to an adequate level.”