

CAPE YORK WELFARE REFORM EVALUATION



Cape York Welfare Reform Evaluation

From the commencement of the CYWR trial in 2008, the policy design of the implementation included an evaluation of the trial to be conducted in order to determine whether the four streams of social responsibility, education, economic opportunity and housing were producing the behavioural changes sought. The evaluation was split into two components, the first being an evaluation of the implementation of the Commission, and the second being a final evaluation assessing the effectiveness of the trial. The 'Implementation Review of the Family Responsibilities Commission FINAL REPORT' was released in 2010. The 'Cape York Welfare Reform Evaluation 2012' (the Evaluation) was subsequently released in early 2013.

Evaluation framework

The Evaluation sought to address several key questions in order to determine the effectiveness of the trial:

- had the trial been implemented as agreed
- had social norms and behaviours changed as intended
- had service delivery supported the intended change, and
- had governance arrangements supported the intended change.

The Evaluation was conducted by a number of independent evaluators, each focusing on one or more of the four key questions stated above. Two fundamental difficulties were identified in conducting the evaluation. Firstly, the difficulty of reliably measuring social change was noted which necessitated the acquisition of community 'perception' data, and secondly, it was noted that the restricted timeframe of the Commission did not allow for definitive long-term behavioural change:

"Hence, the conclusions in this chapter about the outcomes of the trial are tempered by the need to be realistic about the extent of change to underlying social norms and behaviours that can be expected within a three to four year timeframe."

The evaluators therefore proposed a more limited goal of assessing "whether the trial has set the foundations for and made progress towards changing social norms and rebuilding the four participating communities".

The Evaluation stated that the Commission formed the centerpiece of the package of policy reforms which comprise the CYWR trial. As such a chapter evaluating the Commission was prepared by the Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) at the University of NSW, and it is this component of the Evaluation with which this article is concerned. The uniqueness of a social policy trial which relies upon a statutory body as a key component was noted.

Extensive analysis of Commission administrative data was conducted in order to examine a pattern of community interactions with the Commission and outcomes achieved. The data provided a picture of the:

- extent of exposure of the community population to the Commission
- concentration of the types of behaviours leading to interaction with the Commission
- extent of repeated breaches
- acceptance of the Commission's authority and
- the client's participation and response to notices to attend conferences.



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In addition, outcomes of referrals to services, particularly engagement, impact of income management (by examination of subsequent notices) and impact on school attendance were assessed.

The SPRC analysed Commission operational data in conjunction with information from surveys and interviews to measure outcomes and gain an overview of perceptions of the Commission in the four trial communities. The analysis found that over the first three years of the trial, half of the adult population of the communities had contact with the Commission in relation to notices received for school attendance, housing, child safety and offending dealt with at the Magistrates Court level. Of these, 82 percent were asked to attend a conference with two-thirds of those attending as requested, indicating a high level of acceptance of the authority of the Commission.

The Evaluation revealed that the majority of notices received by the Commission were for Magistrates Court convictions followed closely by school attendance notices. By 2011 the majority of community members dealing with the Commission were existing clients, and new clients accounted for only 10 percent of the total client base. This was reported as an indication that the Commission had reached the majority of the people in the communities who were breaching social obligations.

Evaluation findings

The Evaluation reported that despite the administratively complex environment within which the Commission works, its operations were effective. The Local Commissioners were identified as serving a number of roles within the communities in addition to the stated aims of restoring social norms and local authority, and assisting people to resume primary responsibility for the individuals and families within the communities. The Local Commissioners, who are respected members of their communities, fulfilled additional roles including coordinating services, ensuring that clients received appropriate services which addressed the needs of the client, and on occasion mediating in community disputes.

A social change survey conducted by Colmar Brunton Social Research as part of the Evaluation investigated community perception of what had changed during the years of the trial. Overall 58 percent of those surveyed felt that the community was on the way up. The provision of more services and support in the communities such as MPower, Wellbeing Centres, Pride of Place and Student Education Trusts were common reasons for this perception as were changed attitudes, for example:

- more people trying to be better parents
- more people working and
- more people using services to get help.

Survey respondents in all four welfare reform communities identified an increase in the number of children going to school as among the most significant changes in the three years of the trial. Community members were asked whether life had changed for children in relation to food, physical activity, overall happiness and respect. Almost two-thirds (63 percent) of respondents felt that children were eating healthier food, more than half (54 percent) felt that children were happier than they were three years ago, and 50 percent felt that children were more active.

The survey also noted a high level of support and community acceptance of the Commission's authority. Overall, in excess of half of the community members felt that the Commission was good for the community, and around the same number wanted the Commission to continue to help people. Of the surveyed people who had attended a Commission conference, 66 percent

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said that the Commission made things better for them and that the community would be a better place within which to live if everyone followed up on their talks with the Commission.

Income management is imposed by the Commissioner as both a sanction and a support. It is sometimes imposed as a last resort when other approaches have failed to result in the changing of a client's behavior, and at other times as an aid to assist those in financial difficulty to manage their finances. The Evaluation reported that income management is used sparingly by the Commission with only 20 percent of clients being income managed at any one time.

One-fifth (20 percent) of community members surveyed had been issued with a BasicsCard at some time. Of those, 78 percent reported that it made their life better. Overall 69 percent of all community members agreed that if people spent their money on things other than rent or food and then cannot pay for rent and food, they should be put on the BasicsCard.

Summary

Whilst detailed assessment of the impacts of the trial are available within the evaluation report, a synopsis of the results indicates clear evidence of improvement in the wellbeing of residents in the four communities, decreasing crime rates, improvement in infrastructure and services, and school attendance rates that have either risen or been maintained. The Evaluation also reported that people seemed happier.

Overall key findings included an increase in school attendance in Aurukun and Mossman Gorge with the change in Aurukun being greater than the change in any other Indigenous community in Queensland. Other key findings were: a decrease in crime rates, in particular a fall in the number of serious assaults in Aurukun; an increase in employment in all four CYWR trial communities; and progress in the normalisation of tenancy with 422 new rental agreements in place.

The Evaluation report states that whilst it is beyond the scope of the report to make recommendations on the future of the Commission, a number of suggestions provided by participants in the consultations were recorded. These included the implementation of a clear exit strategy for the conclusion of the trial or alternatively for transition planning for the next phase. Other suggestions provided by stakeholders included succession planning to hand the Commission over to Local Commissioners on the retirement of the current Commissioner, the extension of the Commission into other communities, increasing its authority in regard to the withholding of benefits and the extension of jurisdiction to include those community members in paid employment.

The Evaluation notes that whilst there can be no quick fixes to rectify issues that have been decades in the making, promising progress over the longer term could be built upon to yield significant results.

“An aspect of the trial's implementation that is worth highlighting is the Family Responsibilities Commission. As the pivotal new institution in the welfare reform framework, the FRC'S effective implementation was crucial to the trial's overall success.

Evaluation activities have confirmed that the FRC continues to function effectively and is a successful element of the trial particularly in relation to the conferencing undertaken by Local Commissioners.”