



LOCAL COMMISSIONERS' YEAR IN REVIEW

Coen Local Commissioners' Report

“We are always walking in two worlds. Sometimes they run together into one and sometimes they become wide apart as our feet go in different directions. Our role as Local Commissioners is to help our community find the best walk, not a swagger and not a limp, but one of an Elder, an educated person and a caring parent all in one. The future can be strong when we walk together, shoulder to shoulder with no-one coming between us or left behind.”

Our community of Coen is unique. We are isolated for half of the year except for the airplanes. We have work for most of our people when the rains allow it, and we care deeply for our children and the education they must receive. Our culture is strong, a mixture of Indigenous ways with that of the stockman and an overriding love of our country. As Local Commissioners we are a mix of traditional and modern living. Commissioner Peter brings the wisdom of the Elders and the hard work of a ringer, whereas Commissioner Liddy is leading the young to secure employment as rangers caring for our country. We work together to guide our community members to make good decisions for themselves and their families. Commissioner Port works for the Australian Red Cross in Cairns, and looks after the social and emotional wellbeing of Indigenous people from the Cape communities when they come to Cairns for medical treatment.

The years of 2012 and 2013 have been good for Coen. There have been big changes with all homes now having tenancy agreements. This has been hard for some of our people and adjustments have had to be made. As Coen is not a discrete community, under the rent rules there is no upper limit, so depending on who is living in the home and who is working, the rent price gets set. This caused lots of community members to get behind in rent, not just because it was a new expense in the budget, but also because there was confusion as to where people were living, and then income from work depended on the season. As Local Commissioners we try to ensure that communication lines are open between the tenants and the housing workers, keeping everyone up to date on each other's circumstances. There have been some bumps, but paying rent is becoming normal. Nobody wants to see evictions and we all need a home to live in, so the answers to the problems need to keep being worked on. The community also received five new houses during the year which are now fully tenanted. The whole community is proud of the new, flash houses and we are supporting the tenants to keep them maintained.

Our children continue to enjoy school and attendance has been good apart from cultural requirements of funerals and sorry business. There have been a few changes in teachers and a new Principal was appointed in 2012, so we are keen to make them welcome in the community and to work together to remind parents and carers of the benefits of regular schooling and the school attendance guidelines. We think sometimes that Coen has been lucky. We have a Wellbeing Centre that has high attendance because community members want to attend, but we realise it is not luck. We know that it is because the people who work there really care about us and most have been there for many years. The Wellbeing Centre and the service providers in Coen are accepted as part of the normal community now. Our clients often go to the service provider before they attend conference and tell us they are going to address their problems. We don't use case plans much anymore because the clients are already engaging.

As Local Commissioners we would like to see more cultural awareness training for new staff in both government agencies and non-government agencies. Most of the people that come to work in our community are well meaning, but few have a good understanding of what it means to work in Coen. They need to understand our Indigenous past, and also our future and what we stand for. We are very disappointed that the Murri Court is no longer operating and think this has had a negative impact on

LOCAL COMMISSIONERS' YEAR IN REVIEW



offenders' views being heard and culture taken into consideration. We know the Coen Justice Group tries to assist the offenders but the Murri Court was much better for them, and we were very impressed with the Murri Court after our visit in Cairns last year.

This year for the Local Commissioner Development Week we spent time with our fellow Commissioners from the other Cape York Welfare Reform trial communities discussing our roles in our communities and the future of the Commission. We don't know what the Commission will look like in the coming years as we are already very different to what we were in the beginning. We all agreed that the biggest issues currently facing our communities are disengaged secondary students, bullying and cyber-bullying. The creation of real jobs and practical training that leads to real work, maintaining housing (especially the new houses), tidy streets and no graffiti, support for those facing court and their families, support for those returning from prison or rehabilitation and their families, and the development of young leaders in community are all ongoing issues within the community.

A summary of the Cape York Welfare Reform Evaluation Report 2012 was presented to the Local Commissioners. We are very impressed that the evaluation found that our presence in community was a positive to the rebuilding of authority and improving of behaviour. As Local Commissioners we were also impressed to see that the statistics backed up what we have seen in Coen. Our community members have persisted to achieve good school attendance and better functioning households. We were disappointed that the Evaluation did not review the quality of the service delivery in some of the other communities, as this has prevented us doing the job as well as we could have.

Another highlight of the Local Commissioner Development Week was the launch of the FRC History by Mr Gordon Dean. The book is called 'Taking Responsibility: Queensland's Family Responsibilities Commission'. The Honourable Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Multicultural Affairs, Glen Elmes, spoke of the importance of recording how the Commission came about and how it operates. We thank Mr Dean and Commissioner Glasgow for documenting our journey and ensuring it is available for our future generations. We were very proud to have our family and friends present to see our work in print. We would also like to thank our Local Coordinators and the office staff without whom things just would not happen.

As we keep walking on our journey, we continue to face challenges and bridges. Sometimes we need to hold the handrails or take it a bit slower, but we will continue to walk together and ensure the path is there for the future generations.

Coen Commissioners Peter Peter, May Kepple, Garry Port and Elaine Liddy

