



LOCAL COMMISSIONERS' YEAR IN REVIEW

Coen Commissioners' report

Our focus this year has been to build on the progress achieved over the last 11 years, with the hope that we have done enough for our community to continue as Local Commissioners through the next 10 years. Children are our future and that inspires us to: engage with our people; encourage families to practice consistency when sending their children to school to give them the best opportunity to be prepared for the future; and to support our people on their journey of change toward taking responsibility for themselves and their families. While we continue to be a voice for our people and fight for opportunities our people deserve, we feel this year our voices have fallen upon deaf ears and brought some uncertainty about our vision for the future. We are talking about the transition of the Family Responsibilities Commission and welfare reform communities of Aurukun, Coen, Doomadgee, Hope Vale and Mossman Gorge to a new and as yet ill-defined model called Local Thriving Communities. This uncertainty has interfered with our focus, but not stopped us from following upon the path we envisage.

The Coen campus of the Cape York Aboriginal Academy and Cape York Partnership played lead roles in preparing students for boarding school with 12 year six students graduating in 2018. Coen school houses have been completed and teachers have settled into their new homes. A new Principal, Naomi Gibb, joined the school in Term 1 2019. Naomi comes to Coen with 10 years of experience working in remote Indigenous communities. Naomi has started the new term working with teachers to set new standards to address ongoing behavioural issues. We have engaged with the school principal and families to ensure a high attendance target is met to coincide with high expectations of the community. To achieve this standard, we think it is necessary to have a strong plan in place for students and school staff in collaboration with the community. Overall school attendance percentage for Term 4, 2018 was 86.7 percent. That is an increase of 4.4 percent on the same period in 2017.

Term 1, 2019 started off strong with an overall attendance percentage of 90.4 percent. Although this represents a small decrease from last year it is most likely due to the difficult weather conditions we had experienced. A tropical low and an active monsoon trough caused flooding in Townsville in late January and early February and affected some families trying to make their way home at end of the Christmas holiday period. Unfortunately, this led to some students missing the first weeks of school term. Toward the end of Term 1 severe Tropical Cyclone Trevor caused major disruption to the residents of Coen. Most services, including the school, were closed during this period.

The domino effect of the cyclone continued throughout the remainder of Term 1. The ongoing weather events left the community struggling to keep up with food supplies and other amenities. Shop shelves were left bare and the power cut for over 24 hours. The lack of food in community affected parents who were left struggling to provide packed lunches for their children. Coen had some relief provided by the first food drops in eight years consisting only of basic provisions.

Following on from these weather events, residents began to receive disaster assistance funding. The apparent ease with which residents claimed this funding opened the door to some residents claiming dishonestly and spending the money on alcohol and parties, which continued when the next person's funds were received.

Unusual weather conditions have continued this year outside of the standard wet season with Cyclone Ann threatening the community on a scheduled May conference date. This affected conference attendance due to safety concerns and the resultant clean-up across the community. We now hope the wet season is over and expect our families to be back on track and focusing on education.

The Women's Support Centre (Kiincha Ukulngumka) is going from strength to strength. The 24-hour support centre is not only used in emergency situations for women and children escaping violent situations, but is also a place to heal, and build confidence and resilience with regular women's yarning circles. The centre

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has been so successful, our local men are lobbying for funding to have their own special place for healing and men's business.

Another new initiative that Coen residents are lobbying for is a palliative care centre that will be a place of resting on country for not only Coen residents but for all people of Cape York; a place where families can come together, relieving the need for expensive travel and relocation costs once family members have passed. We are very supportive of this centre going forward. Cook Shire Council have donated the old James Love Building to the cause which is currently being renovated in readiness for an approval.

The official opening of the Coen Sports Oval was held on 23 October 2018 with the Honourable Cameron Dick MP, Minister for State Development, Manufacturing, Infrastructure and Planning, Coen Government Champion Commissioner Katarina Carroll, and football legends Steve Renouf and Scott Prince attending. To date, the football field, toilet block and shaded children's playground have all been completed, with further components yet to be included.

This year, as with previous years, working in collaboration with local stakeholders and visitors from varying government and non-government agencies has proven of great value to us. The Coen Interagency bi-monthly meetings are of particular value, providing a networking opportunity with stakeholders. These partnerships continue to be high on our agenda and a significant part of addressing matters that arise during a conference sitting, or within our daily roles as Local Commissioners and members of our community.

The Queensland Police Service consistently support our Commission by delivering conference notices to FRC clients who have been scheduled to attend. We would like to thank them for assisting us in this manner and for backing our work in community.

Our report last year spoke about the lack of resources for specialised areas of need such as local drug and alcohol services. This continues to be an area of concern although there has been funding provided through the Justice Group for community members affected by domestic violence. Again, this is a short-term approach for those people who need more intensive rehabilitation and are reluctant to move away from community to receive assistance. We continue to receive reports concerning the lack of housing and resultant overcrowding and have seen the problems that arise from this such as domestic violence, alcohol abuse and children arriving at school tired and unable to concentrate from lack of sleep. We encourage the government to do more in this area.

We are very honoured to share some wonderful news of one of our own Local Commissioners, Maureen Liddy. On Saturday, 26 January, Cook Shire Council awarded Maureen Liddy Citizen of the Year during the annual Australia Day celebrations held at the Cooktown Botanical Gardens. Her nomination described her as a "tireless worker, change facilitator and advocate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Coen and across Cape York". In October 2018 she was also awarded the people's choice Spirit of the Walk award for her determination to walk the entire 42 kilometres of the event.

This year has not only been one of change, but also one of goodbyes. We would like to thank Local Commissioner Peter Peter for his dedication and commitment to his role from the beginning of the FRC in 2008. In December 2018 Local Commissioner Peter decided to hang up his hat and retire, enjoying the remainder of his days fishing and improving his health. We have missed his thoughtful and passionate contribution and wish him all the best during his retirement.

As Local Commissioners we envision a sustainable future for all Indigenous people; to be free of poverty and racism; to be given the same opportunities of all people living in this country. We can see there have been some major improvements in this regard, but more needs to be done in relation to economic advancement and building new homes to tackle overcrowding. We will continue to advocate for our people into the future, to make their lives, and the lives of their families happy and meaningful.

Coen Commissioners May Kepple, Garry Port, Elaine Liddy, Alison Liddy and Maureen Liddy.