



Community operations Coen

FRC operations in Coen were undertaken by Local Commissioners May Kepple, Garry Port, Elaine Liddy, Alison Liddy and Maureen Liddy, supported by Acting Local Registry Coordinator Simeon Miglioranza. An account of their operations during the reporting period follows.

Coen Commissioners' report

Our focus this year was to improve outcomes for clients presenting with complex needs.

Significant achievements

Together with our Local Registry Coordinator, Simeon Miglioranza, and registry staff we made significant progress in achieving outcomes in partnership with our clients and key stakeholders including:

- agreements for case plans entered into increased from 2 in 2019-20 to 12 in 2020-21, an increase of 500 percent
- voluntary income management agreements entered into increased from 3 in 2019-20 to 7 in 2020-21, an increase of 133 percent
- Coen Campus of Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy (CYAAA) school attendance for Term 1 2021 of 85.6 percent increasing to 86.5 percent in Term 2, the third and second highest attendance respectively for selected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community schools in Queensland (published by the Department of Education).

Increased focus on quality conferencing has resulted in collaborative decisions.

We are proud to report that our clients are demonstrating a more collaborative and progressive attitude to being called to conference with a 500 percent increase in the number of agreements for case plan support services. As a result of the substantial increase in agreements, we experienced a 57 percent decrease in the number of orders imposed in circumstances where it is justified to mandate a client to attend a support service/s. This is a noteworthy sign to us that there is a greater understanding by some clients of the social standards expected within the community, and their desire to meet that expectation. Another indication of the shifting attitude of community members we invite to conference is their willingness to enter into voluntary income management agreements.

Building relationships with service providers and stakeholders continues to be a priority for us to support referral pathways for clients. This year a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between the FRC and Apunipima, encompassing their wellbeing services located in Coen and the other welfare reform communities in Cape York. Apunipima receives many referrals from the FRC and we very much trust that the MoU will strengthen the understanding and cooperation between our two organisations. Together with a school eager to engage with parents and other wellbeing stakeholders, this has maintained Coen's good school attendance.

Challenges

Considering that fewer conferences were held this year due to a combination of factors including the complexity of our sitting schedule, the impact of seasonal work, sorry business, and fewer clients being scheduled for conference to allow for longer conferences on complex matters, the percentage increases are of some significance. We strategised to provide better value for our clients by increasing our quality time in conference, supported with the engagement of multiple service providers contributing toward case plan outcomes.

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Local Commissioners – the importance of gender and cultural diversity

This year saw the retirement of Local Commissioner Garry Port, who was a founding Local Commissioner of the Commission. In recognition of his services to the community of Coen in 2015 he was awarded a Medal of the Order of Australia. We are now only a small group of four female Local Commissioners and without Commissioner Port or a male replacement, we are without a gender balance. All of us have work commitments which have added complexity to our sitting schedule, and most of us also work away from community. The five main clan groups in Coen comprise the Ayapathu, Kaanju, Lama Lama, Umpila and Wik-Mungkan peoples. The four of us represent only two of those clan groups – Lama Lama and Wik-Mungkan. This presents a problem for us in terms of clan diversity (appropriately representing our community in regard to specific clan groups) and managing conflicts of interests. The FRC has raised concerns with the Queensland and Australian Governments in regard to the legislative constraints presented when seeking to recruit new Local Commissioners, and we hope that when our long-term future is determined, we will see these difficulties addressed.

Other community matters

Coen attracts many people from surrounding areas for various reasons including those escaping community conflicts or alcohol restrictions. This has created a transient community which can affect permanent Coen residents. Lack of housing has long been an issue for our community for various reasons which leads to overcrowding and all the pressures that brings.

A significant concern in the first six months of 2021 was the reported rise in driving offences, particularly people driving under the influence and without a licence. Those clients appearing before us in relation to traffic offences were referred to the Apunipima Wellbeing Centre for support programs which included an online Traffic Offender Program. Some clients who attended conference on court notices for driving offences reported they had driven without a licence due to pressure from family members. Cultural kinships, relationships and customary law contribute to an environment where community members feel unable to refuse family, even though doing so might be breaking the law and thus committing an offence.

Coen police reported high levels of alcohol in the community, intoxication, partying and public nuisance complaints, especially with extended family members attending the 'Over 55's' residence to party and play music until the early hours of the morning. Police were called to break-up fights or shut down parties, and report that it was difficult to press charges as only some premises display a 'Dry House' sign, and party goers would congregate to drink on driveways. We intend to investigate the possibility of having the entire complex declared a 'Dry House' in the near future to protect our older community members from antisocial behaviour and allow them to live in peace.

The next 12 months

We have added a new referral pathway option for clients to a community-based partner, the Coen Regional Aboriginal Council (CRAC). Programs available through the service include the Men's and Women's Groups which deliver cultural re-connection programs and domestic and family violence awareness programs. More community-based partners are needed to support economic participation, employment and training for job readiness. Despite the difficulty of finding eligible community members to apply for Local Commissioner roles, our greatest wish heading into the next financial year is that approval will be granted to seek applications for new Local Commissioners to assist us in performing the work of the FRC. New members (especially males) are very much needed to bolster our ranks, provide new energy and walk with us into the future.