



Commissioner Williams' Message

The contents of this annual report paint a picture of evolution over the past 16 years since the establishment of the Family Responsibilities Commission. The pace of this change has been determined by our clients: resulting in the FRC 'moving at the speed of trust'.

Although the FRC's legislative parameters have remained relatively fixed, the Commission's decisions have evolved, and the way in which the FRC engages with its clients has also matured. The evolution of the Commission's operations has occurred because the needs and aspirations of our clients have changed. Any reader of our annual reports will see a profound contrast between the FRC's operational and performance outcomes over successive years.

As recent as 2017-18 the Commission's decisions and client outcomes reveal a clear concentration of decision-making in a conference setting, with limited capacity to support client behaviour change, or acceptance of personal responsibility through family responsibilities agreements or voluntary engagements. In that reporting year a high proportion of clients were dealt with at conference resulting in 233 conditional income managements orders for 179 clients, and 122 referrals made for 107 clients to community support services. It was also reported at the time, that interest by clients, or the opportunity for them to engage with the FRC in a voluntary capacity outside of a formal conference setting was minimal – with only 14 voluntary income management agreements and no voluntary case plans entered into.

The Commission's operating environment during that period, was further compounded by the uncertainty throughout the broader service delivery ecosystem, with the discontinuation of key programs, and/or under-resourcing of community support services in each of the welfare reform communities. This resulted in the FRC having limited options for client referrals.

It must be recognised that for much of its 16 years of operations the FRC has experienced high levels of uncertainty brought about by short term funding agreements and being the subject of government reviews and parliamentary inquiries. The perverse and negative impact of this uncertainty on the Commission, and its staff, Local Commissioners and most importantly, its clients cannot be understated.

Against this backdrop the Commission continued to remain steadfast to its legislative and policy objectives. The 2019-20 and 2020-21 annual reports document the FRC's intensive focus on reinvigorating its frontline operations and operational structure to better align with the needs of our clients, and their families, while continuing to ensure the FRC's relevance as a public sector entity in a changing policy landscape.

Slowly, but surely, the FRC's performance results and client outcomes indicate a positive response to many of these strategic operational changes. Last year's annual report acknowledged an increased willingness of clients to take steps towards personal accountability, especially through the uptake of voluntary agreements. The data for 2022-23 showed 170 voluntary agreements, inclusive of income management and case plans, were made with clients outside of conference. This financial year I am delighted to report, the total number of voluntary agreements has skyrocketed to a record high of 291. This is a dramatic increase from a total of 20 agreements voluntarily made by clients only a few years ago in 2019-20.

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In August 2023, the FRC finally achieved a milestone which has eluded the Commission for much of its existence: funding 'certainty' albeit for another 3 years. The Australian and Queensland Governments have agreed to continue the Commission's funding so it can operate at full capacity until 30 June 2026. Incredibly this has provided the Commission with the longest period of tenure and funding security since 2011. This decision means the FRC can now upgrade its core infrastructure and continue to strengthen the capabilities of Local Commissioners and grow the capacity of registry staff.

There can be no doubt that the decision of both governments to continue to fund the FRC for a further three years, and the operational stability multi-year funding provides, has had a significant and consequential impact on client outcomes (which are documented throughout this report). For example, client demand for support services continues to grow, and is likely to do so, for the foreseeable future. In fact, the uptake of referrals by our clients this year is at a record high - with 662 referrals made for 454 clients to community support services. For these reasons the co-design and delivery of services must also evolve, like the Commission has had to do, at the pace of community members. This will require continued investment by both the Australian and Queensland governments in evidence-based services to support the continuum of behavioural change of community members, including economic empowerment, as originally intended in the Cape York Welfare Reform's program logic.

In closing it would be remiss of me not to recognise and pay tribute to the efforts of our registry staff, and Local Commissioners. Throughout the periods of change and uncertainty since its inception in 2008 – caused by external factors such as COVID-19 and alterations to government policies and priorities, has been the Commission's stable and enduring leadership of its community-based Local Commissioners. Appointed because of their cultural authority, relevant knowledge, and expertise, it is not surprising, that respected relationships have developed, over time, between Local Commissioners and staff, and many of our clients as they progress on their journey beyond personal responsibilities towards self-determination and agency. I speak on behalf of all my Commission colleagues when I say, it is a privilege to witness first-hand, the life changing and personal evolution of so many of our clients and their families.

Tammy Williams
Family Responsibilities Commissioner