



LOCAL COMMISSIONERS' YEAR IN REVIEW

Mossman Gorge Local Commissioners' report

Our community has seen many improvements over the past year. The Department of Housing and Public Works has recently renovated the community's houses, painting inside and out, installing new stoves, erecting new fences, pouring new concrete driveways and building new carports. We now have a new playground with an area for community gatherings. With each improvement, however, there can be drawbacks and the playground has presented a new challenge for us. Although the area has mostly been used positively, it has also become a convenient place for our teenagers to hang out late at night. Graffiti has already been a problem and we are unhappy that what is a benefit to the community is being defaced. Although graffiti occurs in all communities, ours is a small community and as Commissioners we are challenging this negative behaviour.

We feel that one of the most positive initiatives from Welfare Reform has been Mpower. Mpower educates community members to manage their money and build their financial capability. We continued throughout the year to refer our clients to Mpower, where we have identified the program would be of benefit in their particular circumstances. We had found, unfortunately, that many of our clients were not attending Mpower frequently, or utilising the Mpower services to their full benefit. We worked with Mpower staff to find a solution and now have a new process in place. We reschedule clients to conference for a review of their case plan and ask clients to complete a budget within a four week timeframe. There has been a positive response from all parties involved who now realise that this strategy can work to their benefit.

The above is an example of how collaborating effectively can achieve good outcomes. For collaboration to occur, good communication is necessary. We would like to see improved collaboration and communication between the stakeholders servicing Mossman Gorge as some outside services work in isolation. Working in isolation ultimately impacts on clients. For example when the PaCE (Parents and Community Engagement) team, employed by the Ngoonbi Co-operative Society first came into community around August/September 2014, there was some confusion as to their role. Although the PaCE team had good intentions and touched base with some providers, it seemed somewhat disjointed. We would like to see organisations come through BBNI first, from where they could then be directed to the right way to be introduced into community. Organisations should be introduced to the community through monthly stakeholder meetings. These meetings are chaired by Emma Burchill (Senior Advisor, Prime Minister and Cabinet) and participation has seen an improvement in collaboration between those attending.

School attendance has always been one of our primary concerns. We have seen improved school attendance for primary students when the school case manager's hours of work increased. Similarly, when the school case manager has not been in attendance at the school, greater student absences have occurred. Secondary school non-attendance has been quite high although this has been counterbalanced with a number of Mossman Gorge students applying for boarding schools. We feel there is a lot more work to be done around school attendance and educating parents on their responsibility to get their kids to school, and we will continue to bring clients to conference and convey the message that going to school regularly matters. We would like to see more programs conducted during the school holidays for children who have nothing to do, and nowhere to go. We are true believers that an active body makes for an active mind.

The BasicsCard has continued to challenge us this year. On a number of occasions clients who had been placed on the BasicsCard came into our office with an aggressive attitude. We expect this to occur from

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time to time, however, each client is different and we are learning that each client also requires a different approach. This 2015 Commissioner Development week included a particularly useful workshop called

'Handle with Care' which taught us some useful skills on how to cope with difficult clients. The workshop

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gave us strategies to manage a potentially violent situation. As part of the training we were reminded of the importance of self-care and ways we can revive ourselves for endurance.

We have been on a long journey to build up strength and become a voice for Mossman Gorge. The community still suffers the impact of people from other regions visiting us and abusing our boundaries by ignoring or pulling down dry house signs, drinking and partying with loud music, fighting and causing disruption. It is a difficult task for us to challenge these people as we have no power to conference outsiders.

We grow stronger each year whilst continuing to conference alone. We have found ways that work for us in conference. Prior to a conference starting and the client entering the room, we will yarn up about who will lead the discussion for each client on that day. This may be for various reasons. For example, one of us may have had some stern words with a client through the week leading up to conference about another matter, or one or more of us could be close to the families. These yarns usually set out some options on the direction the decision will go, depending on what the client shares. That way we know we are all in agreement and have up to date information before the client walks through the door.

Commissioners have welcomed the 90 percent income management and taken seriously the responsibility that comes with the decision to place clients on the highest percentage. We have found it is usually clients that are resisting 'Welfare Reform' as our new way in community who are the ones that end up on the higher percentage. We have witnessed over the past year that some of our mob who were placed on 90 percent income management along with a case plan tend to slowly come around and eventually attend conference.

Another significant change Commissioners have noticed when some of our mob are on 90 percent income management, is that their overall appearance improves; they are dressed better. The less money for grog and cigarettes, and the more money for essentials has a positive effect on wellbeing.

We Commissioners are consistently working to help our mob and avoid confrontation. We see most of our community members acknowledge welfare reform; some embrace it, but there is still a lack of respect from some toward us as Local Commissioners. We still have a long way to go and there is a lot of work to be done for our community.

Mossman Gorge Commissioners Loretta Spratt, Karen Gibson and Karen Shuan



Playground at Mossman Gorge