



# Community operations

***FRC operations in Aurukun were undertaken by Local Commissioners Edgar Kerindun, Doris Poonkamelya, Ada Woolla, Dorothy Pootchemunka, Vera Koomeeta and Keri Tamwoy, supported by Local Registry Coordinator Bryce Coxall. A report of their operations during the reporting period follows.***

## **Aurukun Commissioners' report**

This year has been very eventful for us. The commencement of Tammy Williams as our new Commissioner on 2 September 2019, replacing David Glasgow who retired after 11 years with the Commission, brought us hope for the future of the FRC. To further strengthen our hopes, on 24 October 2019 the Governor in Council under the FRC Act approved the appointment of five new Local Commissioners and the reappointment of all currently serving Local Commissioners to 30 June 2020. Further, we were extremely excited to hear that on 12 December 2019 the Commission received an executed Memorandum of Understanding between the Australian and Queensland Governments, thereby promising a future for the FRC to 30 June 2021. The appointments and agreement have delivered some certainty for us going forward. Working with the wider FRC team we look forward to using this time to show that we are still an effective and essential service for our community.

Commissioner Williams has brought a new range of ideas and a new perspective to our operations and she has fitted into the team like she has been here from the beginning. Her support and mentoring have already had a big influence on all of us and we are excited to learn and grow with Commissioner Williams into the future.

This year we set several goals to strive for. We hope achieving our goals will result in improved support for our clients. Our main focus has been on improving the relationships with our service providers and increasing the number of referrals to these support services. The relationship and communication with the Wellbeing Centre, Cape York Partnership and the school has never been stronger. We are thrilled to see these services actively reaching out to us around our clients and providing all the support they can.

In 2018-19 many factors, including some uncertainty of the FRC's future, meant very few referrals for our clients to support services. The low number of referrals is not a reflection that our clients do not need support. We know that many of our clients need extensive support from our referral pathways. That is why we have reviewed our approach and focus. We made 182 referrals in 2019-20 and we intend to continue using local support services going forward and working collaboratively with them for the benefit of our community members.

Another focus and target we have set is to increase our client attendance at conference. We have been conferencing many of the same clients for years so we knew that this would be a struggle, however, our client attendance is improving and we strongly believe this reflects that our clients are benefiting from our work. We will continue to support them to the best of our ability.

The Aurukun community, as a whole, finished off the 2019 calendar year quite strongly and was heading in the right direction, but the new year was met with some of our biggest challenges. Extreme community unrest in early January, which resulted in the murder of a young man, led to a mass exodus of community members out of Aurukun. Hundreds of people left Aurukun in fear of their safety and possible retaliation from opposing families. Aurukun families travelled to Weipa, Napranum, Coen, Pormpuraaw, Kowanyama, Cairns and as far south as Townsville.

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During this time, we were extremely thankful for DATSIP's work developing a team of staff to help support the families that had left Aurukun. We continued to stay in contact with all our clients even though they were not in community. We held FRC conferencing for Aurukun clients in Cairns and Coen and conducted teleconferencing with other displaced community members. This was very challenging at times, but we committed to not letting our clients go unsupported just because they were not residing in Aurukun. We are pleased to see that a lot of the displaced families are slowly returning to Aurukun as this is their home and where they should be. We hope to assist the community to overcome this setback. It brought hardship to many families who were caught up in the unrest, and it has made all of Aurukun look for a solution going forward. We would not like to see this situation occur again.

And just when we thought things were returning to normal, our resilience was tested with the COVID-19 pandemic. Again, although the community was put into lockdown because of the extreme vulnerability of many of our community members to this virus, we continued our operations while complying with all the social distancing and cleansing guidelines. It is a huge relief to us that Cape York is still COVID-19 free. Due to all the travel restrictions we have been conferencing with Commissioner Williams joining us by phone when needed. We take our responsibility to maintain a professional and efficient workplace very seriously, and owe much to our Local Registry Coordinator, Bryce Coxall, who with his family remained with us in Aurukun throughout the COVID-19 crisis to assist us in continuing our services to the community of Aurukun. We have seen the difficulties faced by our other communities having to serve notices and conference without the assistance of their Local Registry Coordinator, and we feel very lucky indeed to have such a committed colleague and friend.

In March we had our Local Government elections for the Aurukun Shire Council and a number of us who have served as Councillors in the past decided not to run for Council again. We felt it was time to get some new voices and fresh ideas in council seats. Luckily for us there was one exception – we were very pleased to see our youngest Aurukun Commissioner, Keri Tamwoy, elected as Mayor. We know Commissioner Keri Tamwoy will do great things leading our community into the future. One of her first decisions, in keeping with her commitment as a Local Commissioner, was to keep the school at Aurukun open during the pandemic for the sake of our children, most of whom are unable to continue schooling at home.

Unfortunately, with many displaced community members and COVID-19, our school attendance figures will be lower than ever in 2020, but with the Aurukun State School remaining open and those committed parents and children able to attend, we at least have seen some semblance of normal, everyday life. We would like to thank the Department of Education for their uninterrupted service during the pandemic and their continued support for the children and families of Aurukun.

We have faith that things will get easier going forward, and with the new Council appointed and new Mayor leading our community, we are expecting some great things to come for Aurukun. We are excited that with the leadership and direction of Commissioner Williams we will continue to grow and improve our service and support for the families of Aurukun.