



# Community operations

***FRC operations in Coen were undertaken by Local Commissioners May Kepple, Garry Port, Elaine Liddy, Alison Liddy and Maureen Liddy, supported by Local Registry Coordinator Sandra Rye (assisted by Acting Local Registry Coordinator Josephine Pinder). A report of their operations during the reporting period follows.***

## **Coen Commissioners' report**

We have been FRC Local Commissioners since 2008. We would like to say that during our time as Local Commissioners for Coen, our vision has not altered. Children are our future leaders and we are driven to make certain the children of Coen are given the best possible opportunity to choose their path. Last year we talked about building on the progress achieved from previous years. We firmly believe this is happening. The work of a Local Commissioner is challenging. It takes dedication to continue year after year. Not all clients are happy with the decisions made during conference, but we must not lose sight of our vision for the future.

We continue to maintain our focus on a sustainable future for our people. With support from our Local Registry Coordinator, we have continued to work in collaboration with the school principal and staff of the Coen Campus of the Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy (CYAAA) to assist with any difficult attendance matters. Open communication is critical in ensuring there is no misunderstanding between school staff, community members, parents, students and our partners. Our leadership has in the past supported these important steps and we commit to continuing to do so in the future.

An issue that has been raised year after year remains – when parents/carers take their children out of school to attend medical appointments or work training commitments outside of the community. This creates several pressures for those concerned: for parents who are often concerned about being served a notice to appear before the Commission due to an unreasonable student absence; pressure on the student to complete missed work; and pressure for teachers to ensure the student remains at level and catches up on any missed school work. In addition, this type of absence can have a significant effect on the overall school attendance percentage, particularly if the family leaving community has several children. We have raised this matter with the school and have been advised the school team are currently workshopping some potential solutions to be considered with the aim of incorporating a new process by 2021.

The school attendance in Coen dropped from 88.6 percent recorded in Term 2 2019 to 81.7 percent in Term 3 2019. Although this percentage was a little lower than usual, there is a decline trend between Term 2 and Term 3 across the board. We put this down to families leaving community to shop, attend the local show, stock up for Christmas and prepare for the onset of the wet season. Coen school attendance, however, generally remains in the 80 to 90 percent range.

In early January there was an influx into community of approximately 200 displaced Aurukun people who fled their community following the murder of a 37-year-old male. These Aurukun people fled the town in fear of their own lives after several houses were burnt to the ground and further acts of revenge were threatened. Many Aurukun people dispersed to Lockhart River, Kowanyama, Weipa, Laura and Cairns after spending a few weeks in Coen, but some families remained.

The police found there was a rise in public nuisance cases due to high levels of intoxication and worked with the Exchange Hotel where a ban on take-away alcohol was initiated to reduce alcohol consumption. We worked in a very successful collaboration with Aurukun Commissioners to conference Aurukun clients in Coen who had existing notices or were the subject of new notices received by the Commission. Commissioner May Kepple and our FRC Local Registry Coordinator gratefully utilised the services of the Coen Police to serve notices to attend conference to identified

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Aurukun people still residing in Coen. It was the presence and respect of family member and Local Commissioner May Kepple that produced such a positive result in the serving of Aurukun community members, and the excellent conference attendance achieved.

The Commission's heightened response during these weeks enabled support for Coen residents and stakeholders by ensuring that the people of Aurukun were connected to Aurukun Local Commissioners and were reminded of their responsibilities. The collaboration with Aurukun Local Commissioners during the conference process encouraged Aurukun people to engage in socially responsible behaviour, highlighting the expected behaviours in Coen and the detrimental effect unsocial behaviour can have on community children.

The challenges continued in mid-March when the COVID-19 pandemic caused a change in how we go about our daily activities. The initial announcement of community lockdown caused a wave of fear and anxiety across the community and we suggested the upcoming conference be postponed until the community prepared and processed what was occurring. Once the COVID-19 safe practices were introduced, we continued business as usual with no fly-in/fly-out support staff. All support was managed remotely through the Cairns registry office, and although we were forced to incorporate some new administrative duties, our focus was on the task. This is where we feel our leadership roles assisted us to ensure our people, especially our children, continued to be supported.

The pandemic has highlighted the lack of resources for specialised support that we stated in last year's report. We mentioned some relief through the Justice Group programs for members affected by domestic violence, however, such support is limited. There continues to be a need for specialised local drug and alcohol services that can follow the journey of healing and stop the band-aid approach. The influx of Aurukun people during the unrest also highlighted again the desperate need for housing in Coen. As research suggests, lack of housing comes with many complexities such as overcrowding and homelessness, emotional stress for families, and domestic and family violence. Domestic and family violence then has a domino effect on children's emotional state and children start missing school. Getting to the core of what is really happening and providing the resources for genuine healing for families is necessary.

Coen interagency meetings have been, and continue to be, a hub of cooperation and partnership where stakeholders are given a platform to coordinate and share information such as urgent matters of health and wellbeing, services being delivered, gaps in service delivery, and resources available or required. These meetings have been crucial during the uncertainty 2020 has brought and gave all government and non-government organisations a space to share critical information about emergency directives.

The beginning of 2020 also brought positive outcomes. We started a new incentive program for FRC individuals and families where we present gift hampers in recognition of the client's improved efforts toward a positive outcome. The gift hampers are presented to two individuals or families each quarter and has been a great success.

During the year we have conducted many conferences. We feel we have given our all to each matter that comes before us, prioritising the protection of children foremost, and advising parents of the importance of education for the future of Coen. Although we have faced many challenges, we believe our work is impacting the community for the better and hope it will continue to benefit future generations.