



Community operations Coen

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

Coen Commissioners' report

Our focus this year remained consistent with last year – to improve outcomes for clients who are wanting access to support for complex needs.

Significant achievements

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

- family responsibilities agreements entered into with our clients increased from 12 in 2020-21 to 23 in 2021-22, an increase of 92 percent from the 2020-21 financial year
- clients who entered into voluntary case plan agreements increased from 1 to 6, an increase of 500 percent from the 2020-21 financial year
- clients who entered into voluntary income management agreements increased from 7 to 14, an increase of 100 percent from the 2020-21 financial year
- orders for conditional income management decreased from 8 in 2020-21 to 1 in 2021-22 a decrease of 88 percent.

Building and sustaining relationships with service providers and stakeholders is an ongoing strategy for us to ensure clients will benefit from more successful outcomes. Working collaboratively allows for connection, innovation and efficiency. With our advice the Local Registry Coordinator attends local meetings with service partners. These meetings provide current statistical information, communicate challenges, break down service delivery silos and allow for a coordinated approach to improve client referral pathways. The Coen Interagency bi-monthly meetings are of significant value, providing a networking opportunity with stakeholders, together with sharing and gaining insight into the wider community social and operational activities. We invite service providers to attend conference for complex matters to offer support to clients in a multi-disciplined approach. We have found this strategy successful in connecting clients with support services to expedite their case plan interaction.

Challenges

Local Commissioners – the importance of gender and cultural diversity

Our greatest wish for this year, was to increase the number of Local Commissioners to represent all Clan groups in the region. Unfortunately, our wish has not materialised. Last financial year saw the retirement of one of our Local Commissioners who was a founding member of the FRC in Coen. We are now only a small group of four female Local Commissioners 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

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only two of those clan groups – Lama Lama and Wik-Mungkan. We believe that bearing in mind the importance of our role in community, a greater clan diversity is required as well as gender diversity.

Legislative constraints

We raised concerns with the Queensland and Australian Governments in regard to the legislative constraints which affect the recruitment of new Local Commissioners, and we hope that when our long-term future is determined, we will see these difficulties addressed. The primary problem with our legislation is that should an applicant for a Local Commissioner role have been the subject of an FRC decision in the past, they are ineligible to apply. This particular legislative section has prevented quite a few of our community members (who we consider well placed to serve as a Local Commissioner) from being appointed. We would like to see this legislation altered. Often, the very best people to serve their community, are the ones who have experienced hard times, who have a thorough understanding of what it is like to be vulnerable and need assistance, and who have overcome their difficulties. They understand what it takes, and the sometimes-hard decisions that are required. In a community as small as Coen, there is not a large pool of applicants to choose from.

Impact of COVID-19 and the introduction of ICM

Further challenges were experienced at the start of 2022 due to the spread of the Omicron variant into the community, and the decision was made to suspend conferencing until late March 2022. To overcome temporary travel restrictions and continue to support vulnerable community members, an Intensive Case Management (ICM) framework was established. The ICM framework was offered to clients on a voluntary basis who may be experiencing some difficulties and was an alternative to engage clients while conferencing was suspended. ICM is a safe, holistic approach where we link clients to various support services.

Community unrest

January and February 2022 saw escalating tensions in Coen between Clan groups, resulting in community fighting involving over 40 people including youth. We were advised that at least 40 residents were charged by Coen Police with offences in regard to the unrest.

Housing shortage

Coen continues to navigate the impact of housing shortages due to growing families and visitors to the area, resulting in overcrowding. This is not a new challenge for Coen. For many years we have continued to receive Magistrate Court notices for family and domestic violence. We believe this is a symptom of overcrowded housing and other issues in our community.

Other community matters

Changed serving practice

We are proud to report that our clients are demonstrating a more collaborative and progressive attitude. This can be shown with a 500 percent increase in the number of voluntary case plan agreements and the 250 percent increase in voluntary referrals to support services during this financial year. Serving of notices to attend conference has historically been completed by the local Coen Police. At the conclusion of 2021 it was decided we would trial serving the notices ourselves in order to enhance and increase our engagement with clients prior to the conference



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setting. We thank Cape York Partnership for assisting with the use of a vehicle and believe that this opportunity and changed practice has directly contributed to the 12.8 percent increase in client attendance at conference from 2020-21.

Domestic and family violence

Domestic and Family Violence prevention month was held in May with the FRC supporting two events in Coen. Coen Regional Aboriginal Corporation (CRAC) facilitated a street march through Coen that included school students to raise community awareness and send a clear message that violence will not be tolerated in our community. Supporting these events strengthens our commitment to address these serious matters with clients. We note that this year referrals for FRC clients to support services to address domestic family violence increased by 57 percent compared to 2020-21.

FRC Future Directions Review

We appreciate Abt Associates visiting our community. We hope Abt Associates left Coen having a good understanding of our roles as FRC Commissioners, how the FRC benefits Coen, and how we would like to see the FRC evolve to increase the benefit we bring to our people.

It is important to remember that the FRC was not forced on Coen. In 2007 and 2008 consultations were held with the Coen community, and the Coen community chose to be a part of Cape York Welfare Reform. A small but very significant part of that Cape York Welfare Reform was the FRC.

We live and breathe our position as Local Commissioners of the FRC here in Coen. We are the leaders of the FRC in our community. Most importantly, we listen and hear the problems our community brothers and sisters face. We provide guidance to our people by sharing our knowledge – built up from a lifetime of lived experiences and from what we ourselves were taught by our old people. We make the hard decisions. We live with those decisions, and they affect our lives and the lives of our families. We are perhaps the only Aboriginal organisation that is truly community-based with real powers to make decisions, and not merely an advisor to a decision-maker. Our powers are granted to us by the *Family Responsibilities Commission Act 2008*.

The next 12 months

Adding to our already established referral pathways, we would like to see additional support services to fill gaps in mental health, domestic and family violence, and children and youth support services. Working alongside our service partners in complex conference settings will provide for a client centred focus and create better outcomes by connecting clients with service providers at the time of conference.

We are committed to working with clients in the conference setting and with the ICM framework. We are using the ICM framework where appropriate and believe it is building a better rapport with clients. We will continue our focus on ICM for the coming year and we look forward to being able to identify and monitor the results with a view to continuously improving our engagement with FRC clients.