



# Community operations Hope Vale

***FRC operations in Hope Vale were undertaken by Local Commissioners Victor Gibson, Priscilla Gibson, Doreen Hart, Erica Deeral, Cheryl Cannon, Selina Kerr-Bowen and Robert Gibson, supported by Local Registry Coordinator Josephine Pinder. An account of their operations during the reporting period follows.***

## **Hope Vale Commissioners' report**

As Local Commissioners and Elders we understand the importance of strong relationships with government and non-government organisations. The strengthening of these partnerships creates a pathway to trust for our people. It is our community members and families that will benefit from the partnerships we forge now and into the future. The past year has been spent on improving relationships and strengthening community understanding of what the FRC is, and what our responsibilities are as Local Commissioners.

## **Significant achievements**

With the support of our Local Registry Coordinator, Josephine Pinder, and registry staff we list some of our achievements this financial year.

- We have increased our conference attendance percentage each year since 2018-19. This year our conference attendance has increased by 11.2 percent when compared to the 2020-21 year, recording an attendance of 76.0 percent, the highest attendance rate since the commencement of the Commission. Hope Vale clients have gained trust in coming to conference with us, are reaching out for guidance and support when needed, and are embracing the conference process.
- The Cashless Debit Card was introduced in March 2021 and its improved look and functionality have removed the stigma and increased the flexibility of accessing welfare funds. Our data is testament to the acceptance of the new card with more clients in Hope Vale on voluntary income management (an increase of 150 percent from 2020-21) than conditional income management (a decrease of 25 percent since 2020-21).

We are proud of the way we have collaborated with the Hope Vale community and local and visiting support services to work on strategies to combat youth issues associated with disengagement from education. We see this as evidence of Indigenous leadership and responsibility. In the past 18 months we have invited school staff, support services and notifying agencies to attend conference with clients. Their attendance has led to a better understanding of our clients' needs, tailored support for them in a collaborative way, and kept everyone accountable while working for the clients' benefit.

## **Challenges**

### ***Impact of COVID-19***

Until December 2021 Hope Vale had been shielded from the COVID-19 pandemic, but it was inevitable that when the Queensland borders were opened Omicron would make its way to Hope Vale, and it did. Families affected by Omicron obeyed the stay-at-home directive.

Service provider delivery of programs and counselling was interrupted and compromised due to not being able to offer face-to-face engagement and home visits. Counselling was instead

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conducted via telephone sessions; this is challenging in Indigenous communities as mobile phone numbers frequently change and often credit is not available to return messages left by counsellors.

Both the COVID-19 pandemic and sorry business had a significant impact upon our operations with only 125 conferences held this financial year – a reduction of 49 percent from 2020-21. This reduction resulted in fewer clients conferenced (a drop of 33 percent), hampering our ability to engage with as many clients as we would have liked.

## ***School attendance***

School attendance was reduced as a result of the Omicron wave as parents were reluctant to send their children to school fearing that Omicron would be contracted and brought into the household. As a result many families have experienced difficulties in breaking the COVID habits and re-establishing a school-ready routine. During conference we are highlighting to parents the negative impact of low school attendance and behavioural issues upon boarding school applications. The new Playschool and long-running Kindy programs are also laying foundations for establishing strong school-ready routines to ensure children have the skills they need when they start school.

## ***Youth crime***

Hope Vale is not immune to youth crime which is a problem being experienced in Far North Queensland and across the State. We have significant problems with young people who have disengaged from school and are offending or showing anti-social behaviours. As research and studies have shown, there is a direct correlation between youth crime and disengaged school students. If students are engaged in school or an education pathway, they are significantly less likely to offend and/or reoffend.

The FRC has been an integral part of the whole of community approach to attempting to mitigate youth crime, but we need the Childrens Court trigger to be reinstated so that we can encourage parents to be accountable and to connect them with services and supports. We have the support of the Alliance of Guugu Yimithirr People which passed a resolution supporting amendments to the FRC Act to enable the Childrens Court trigger to be reactivated.

We agree with others who have called for urgent action to create significant employment growth in remote Indigenous communities to inspire and motivate our youth to pursue career goals, education, and training. Without these opportunities youth will transition to passive welfare and the cycle of disadvantage will continue.

## **Other community matters**

### ***Domestic violence support services***

Survivors fleeing domestic violence in our community report that they identify a lack of local support infrastructure. We are aware of service gaps around perpetrator (male and female) programs, and support programs to assist with early intervention and community education. When domestic violence incidents occur, police are called to transfer victims to Cooktown facilities. The absence of adequate emergency accommodation and frontline Indigenous family violence workers in Hope Vale leads to victims and their children being placed in Cooktown, which then impacts the child's ability to attend school.



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## **FRC Future Directions Review**

Last year we received information there was to be an FRC Future Directions Review. We were informed that the purpose was to look at options for the transformation of the FRC and advised that it was not about terminating the FRC. As this was in line with our aspirations to improve the FRC model, we welcomed the review and looked forward to putting forward our ideas to take our community into the future. We became concerned when the documents which were provided to us and our stakeholders prior to the consultation used terminology which suggested the review was geared towards determining whether the FRC should continue, and whether the FRC was compatible with other State Government policies including Local Thriving Communities. We thank Abt Associates, the review consultants commissioned by DSDSATSIP, for consulting with us and providing us with an opportunity to relay our strong belief in the FRC. As Local Commissioners we presented our views and advised that the challenges we have always faced remain, but so does our commitment to working for our community, and our pride in what we have achieved in the last 14 years.

## **The next 12 months**

We are a group of Local Commissioners with one voice, with one vision; we are a group of people not afraid of change. To live and have a great community we first must help those people in our community who need a hand up. We believe every child deserves the best start in life and our focus going forward is to work in collaboration with families, local services and education providers in the community. Our intention is to encourage and promote the importance and benefits of early engagement in playschool and kindergarten in preparation for 2023 enrolments.

Our Council and our community are concerned as to how to address the issue around disengaged youth. We look forward to future meetings with the Hope Vale Aboriginal Shire Council and other services in the community to continue the discussion relating to an action plan for long-term disengaged students. We believe more teaching staff are required to supervise a learning program where students are supported to transition back to an earning or learning pathway.

Although we must not dwell on it, we first must look at our past to fix the future. Our job will be made easier with the appointment on 5 May 2022 of a new Local Commissioner, Dora Gibson. We welcome her and look forward to the value she will add to our team. As Local Commissioners we have the courage to face the truth and take responsibility. We will stand alongside our community and work toward a better future for all, one with wellbeing, educational and economic opportunities.