

Preamble Noel Pearson



It is now 14 years since the Family Responsibilities Commission (FRC) was first established as the centrepiece of the Cape York Welfare Reform trial in 2008. During this time, the case for new effective and empowering approaches to address complex and entrenched disadvantage across Australia has only grown. It has never been clearer—a decisive shift from the welfare paradigm to a development paradigm is imperative.

Remote and discrete Indigenous communities across Australia remain places where people remain ‘stuck’ in disadvantage. Our communities continue to experience unacceptably low levels of school attendance, educational outcomes, employment opportunities, home ownership and other asset development opportunities, and extraordinarily high levels of welfare dependence, addiction, mental illness, crime, violence, and criminal justice and child safety interventions. Closing the Gap on entrenched disadvantage in remote Indigenous communities is the country’s most profound challenge.

The FRC is a precedent setting reform. It shares power and responsibility with Elders and family leaders so they can tackle the problems afflicting their own communities, and bring our own cultures, knowledge, and expertise to bear in doing so. The FRC continues to be one of few examples in Australia of a structural reform embedded in legislation, genuinely empowering Indigenous people. It is the benchmark of shared decision-making.

It is also a rare proven example of success in tackling disadvantage. There have already been four evaluations that publicly report data relevant to assessing the FRC’s success. The evidence shows the FRC is a necessary and central element for transformational change. More must also be done, however, in concert with the FRC to tackle entrenched disadvantage more effectively, including the opportunity to work.

The FRC continues to evolve and improve with experience. From March 2021, the Cashless Debit Card (CDC) replaced the BasicsCard as the operational mechanism for FRC income management. The unique FRC model otherwise remained unchanged. Income management remains only one tool that FRC Local Commissioners use in their restorative justice style conferencing and decision-making.

Since the introduction of the superior CDC technology, we’ve seen a sharp increased uptake of Voluntary Income Management (VIM). As at 30 June 2022, 69 percent of FRC clients on income management were on VIM and only 31 percent were on Conditional Income Management (CIM) after an FRC decision. Many of those taking up VIM, have previously been on CIM, showing that personal responsibility is building.

The take up of VIM shows families see income management as an effective tool to manage one of the most essential elements of a functioning family household—the budget. VIM is being used to resist ‘humbugging’ and manage finances so life’s most basic needs can be met—i.e., to buy food and to pay bills. Women are using VIM to protect their income in relationships involving domestic violence and coercive control. Many parents who use VIM, do so to ensure they can support their children.

The Local Commissioners and the whole FRC team have our gratitude for their tireless work supporting positive change. Some of those appointed from the outset in 2008 are now very senior, and I know they are looking forward to younger and emerging leaders being supported into Local Commissioner roles and taking up their life’s work.

We continue to work in a unique partnership with the FRC, the communities involved, and the Queensland and Australian Governments to secure a clear and guaranteed long-term future for the FRC.

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