



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES
STRAIT ISLANDER AFFAIRS

**Reference: Community stores in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
communities**

THURSDAY, 2 APRIL 2009

AURKUN

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING
COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER AFFAIRS**

Thursday, 2 April 2009

Members: Mr Marles (*Chair*), Mr Laming (*Deputy Chair*), Mr Abbott, Ms Campbell, Mr Katter, Ms Rea, Mr Kelvin Thomson, Mr Trevor, Mr Turnour and Mrs Vale

Members in attendance: Mr Katter, Mr Marles, Mr Turnour and Mrs Vale

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

The operation of local community stores in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, with a particular focus on:

- food supply, quality, cost and competition issues;
- the effectiveness of the Outback Stores model, and other private, public and community store models; and
- the impact of these factors on the health and economic outcomes of communities.

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Committee met at 10.12 am

BENSCH, Mr John, Chief Executive Officer, Aurukun Shire Council

KERINDUN, Councillor Angus, Aurukun Shire Council

KOONGOTEMA, Councillor Patrick, Aurukun Shire Council

KORKAKTAIN, Councillor Jonathon, Aurukun Shire Council

POOCHEMUNKA, Councillor Neville, Mayor, Aurukun Shire Council

YUNKAPORTA, Councillor Phyllis, Aurukun Shire Council

CHAIR (Mr Marles)—Neville, we are in your hands.

Councillor Poochemunka—Thanks once again. We know that this is a pretty emotional week for the Wik and Wik Way people of this community. I would like to thank the parliamentary delegation visiting the community, although this is a very emotional time for the people of this community. I would like to thank the locals here for their support and for their views and their input to this meeting. I would like to thank the government and independent organisations in the community as well. Before we go ahead with the introduction, I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of this community and throughout the region of the Wik and Wik Way country. I acknowledge in particular the families and the situation they are facing. I would like to acknowledge the funeral that is going to be held this week. On behalf of the community, the family and the extended family, could we have a minute's silence. Thanks.

Thank you, ladies and gentlemen.

My CEO and I will not be able to spend most of our time here. We have an appointment today. It almost looks like it is the middle of the year now; it is not but things are moving forward. I want to thank the delegation for visiting the community and hope that you will visit in future as well. Thank you once again.

CHAIR—We are also on a bit of a tight time frame so we will try to keep the morning going along as quickly as we can. Can I welcome everyone here to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs and our inquiry into community stores in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of this land, the Wik people, and pay our respects to the elders both past, present and future. The committee would also like to acknowledge the present Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who reside in this area today. The committee is particularly thankful to the Aurukun community for hosting us today and for allowing us to hold this hearing in your community this morning.

This committee is a formal proceeding of the Commonwealth parliament. Those of you who are providing evidence today need to be aware that it is important to be factual and honest and that it can be considered a serious matter to attempt to mislead the committee. I invite all of you who are providing evidence today to make comments that will assist us in our inquiry to try to

improve the government administration in relation to remote community stores. This is a public hearing and the transcript of what is said will be placed on the committee's website. At the conclusion of the formal part of the hearing this morning, where we speak with those witnesses that we have planned to speak to, there will be an open forum, where anybody who has an issues that they would like to raise in relation to community stores is welcome to do so.

Before I ask the committee members to introduce themselves, I would just like to say something about your local member, Jim Turnour. A large part of why we are here is because of the advocacy that he has provided in relation to the issue of community stores and the price and quality of products within them. He has certainly done a good thing by you in terms of encouraging us to be here, and that is part of why we are here.

Before we start, I will get an introduction from each member of the committee. I will start with Bob.

Mr KATTER—I was the minister for the best part of a decade for Aboriginal affairs. My act did not cover Aurukun. Whilst I visited here a couple of times, I never had any power under the local government act, a separate act, but we came in here to see how successfully the local government act operated. In my opinion it did not act very well at all. But it is lovely to be here again.

Mrs VALE—I am the federal member for Hughes, which is in New South Wales just south of Sydney. My electorate covers the areas of Sutherland Shire and Liverpool. My northern river is the Georges River which flows into Botany Bay. Hopefully that gives you a picture of where I come from. I pay my respects to the traditional and tribal elders of this area. Thank you all for coming. I am very interested in what you have to tell us.

Mr TURNOUR—I am your federal member, the member for Leichhardt. Can I also thank you for the welcome, Neville, and pay my respects to the traditional owners and to the community in this week of the funeral. Our apologies for being here at this time, but it is one of the roles of parliament to get around the countryside. These are formal hearings, so I appreciate people coming along in these difficult times. Thank you very much.

CHAIR—To put this hearing in context, the committee is doing three trips around Australia over the next few months. This is the first trip to the Torres Strait Islands and Cape York, where we are visiting communities and having sessions like this and visiting community stores. In about five weeks time we will be heading off to Central Australia, where we will be going to the top of South Australia and around Alice Springs and that part of the Northern Territory. Then in July we will be visiting the top end of WA and the top end of the Northern Territory. All of that information will be condensed and we will be reporting to the House of Representatives around September of this year and then also providing those recommendations to the Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Jenny Macklin, who is the person who originally asked us to look at this particular topic. That is how this all fits into the process of government.

With that, I would like to call the Aurukun Shire Council. Do you wish to add anything about the capacity in which you appear?

Councillor Poochemunka—The importance of us gathering today is to hear the views about the community stores in Aurukun and what the future is of the community store.

Councillor Yunkaporta—I am the deputy mayor of Aurukun Shire council.

CHAIR—Do you wish to make an opening statement about how the store is run and what your views on it are, and then we might ask some questions?

Councillor Poochemunka—There is an old history that lies within the community store of Aurukun. It has a very long history, since the community was established. It was established back in the mists of time, and it was operated by the council from then onwards. Eventually, correct me or not councillors, just before the 80s a company was established in the community, which was called the Aurukun community incorporated. It actually managed the community store on behalf of the community for some time. Eventually the Aurukun Shire Council took over the management of the business. We have had some problems in the past about the management and the service that would be provided by this business and where benefits can be achieved by the community, such as just getting involved in the ministerial round table that has been held in the past two years or so.

The ex-minister for local government, Mr Warren Pitt, addressed the Indigenous councils throughout the state of Queensland on functioning as a local government organisation that is running businesses—that is, post offices and other businesses—that are not local government core functions. Apparently the council decided to take into consideration how a business can be managed by another organisation or identity. We put the process out to tender. About five companies put in expressions of interest. Council has made a decision on the best tenderer, out of the expressions of interest. We finally found one. We had an interest with the Department of Communities as well. We had the results of the management within the other communities, such as Palm Island and Pormpuraaw. I think the Department of Communities is managing some of the shops in the Indigenous communities. The feedback was given at the ministerial round table that the revenue—from the shops being managed by the Department of Communities—is not benefiting the communities. The revenue is more or less being put into the government's bucket and not being handed out. It is not benefiting the community. These are the things that will be mapped out at the next ministerial round table.

I congratulate the Aurukun Shire Council on coming to a decision. But I think we went through the appropriate process. Now we have the shop being managed by a company. We are also setting up a steering committee that will more or less focus on the management of the business and on how it is delivering and providing the service. It will make sure the communities are happy about the service and accept it. That is where the process is up to now.

CHAIR—Can I ask you some questions about that, just so that I am clear in my mind. The shop, as we understand it, is managed by Island and Cape. Is that right?

Councillor Poochemunka—Yes, that is right.

CHAIR—Do you retain ownership?

Councillor Poochemunka—The council own the assets.

CHAIR—And the business?

Councillor Poochemunka—Island and Cape manage the business.

CHAIR—But, if the shop makes a profit, does that go back into the community or is that profit owned by Island and Cape?

Councillor Poochemunka—It will go back to the community at some stage. We collect the rent and put it back into the community.

Councillor Koongotema—Six per cent of the turnover of the business comes back to council.

CHAIR—Through rent?

Councillor Koongotema—Through rent.

CHAIR—The business is owned by Island and Cape. If they make a profit, it goes to Island and Cape. But they are paying a lease which is roughly six per cent of the turnover of the business, so that is a guaranteed stream of income for the council? Do I have that right?

Mr Bensch—Yes.

CHAIR—So it is all being operated out of council owned property?

Mr Bensch—Yes.

CHAIR—You then mentioned a steering committee. Has the steering committee been established?

Councillor Poochemunka—Not yet.

Mr Bensch—The council is inviting the community to submit names. At the end of April the council will make a decision on which of the community members will form part of the committee.

CHAIR—What will the role of the committee be?

Mr Bensch—They will be influential on the shop management to guide them on what the community wants in the store—like fruit and vegies—what the variety of stock must be, prices and hours.

CHAIR—Is that something you are establishing in conjunction with Island and Cape?

Mr Bensch—Yes. That was part of the tendering process.

CHAIR—They are keen that a steering committee be established?

Mr Bensch—That is correct.

CHAIR—How long has this arrangement, where Island and Cape have been running it, been in place?

Mr Bensch—They started their business on 1 March, a month or two ago.

CHAIR—Are you happy with how it has been going so far? It is early days, but—

Mr Bensch—Yes. It is going very well.

CHAIR—Are you satisfied with the prices of the products and the amount of products that are available in the store?

Councillor Poochemunka—As John mentioned, Island and Cape took over the business just a month ago. Hopefully, the steering committee will at some stage meet with the community, who will express to the steering committee that there are concerns such as local employment opportunities that are to be created through the business, as well as pricing and stuff. It will more or less be the steering committee's responsibility to engage on behalf of whatever concerns are raised to the steering committee by the community. Then they will be taken forward to the management of the store.

CHAIR—I think you said this in your opening statement, but so I am clear: prior to this arrangement coming into place, the council itself was running the store?

Mr Bensch—It was not really the council. It was being managed by the Department of Communities on behalf of the council through the management rights concept. Before the Department of Communities had the management rights, it was run by the council. The Department of Communities ran the store for about two years and, before that, the council operated and managed the store by itself.

CHAIR—Over the years, have there been particular issues with how the store was run? I wonder whether there are particular problems that you think need to be overcome in this process—the supply and quality of fresh food, for example.

Councillor Poochemunka—I think these concerns have more or less been addressed on several occasions by ministers, not only by me but by other Indigenous ministers throughout the state of Queensland and as far as the Torres Strait. Some of the products that are being purchased and sent up are from Brisbane. It sometimes takes nearly a month just to get them delivered to some of these remote communities, and sometimes these products are not good enough when they arrive in their stores. The cost of the products is enormous, so that is a very big issue. I think this has to be considered by the new government that was elected. I hope that they will consider what these prices cost us. Fuel services are also being managed through the shop. Some of these fuel prices—it is about a dollar something down in Cairns and when it gets to Aurukun it is nearly \$2 a litre.

Mr KATTER—It is \$2.30 now?

Councillor Poochemunka—Yes.

CHAIR—What is the supply chain? How does product get to Aurukun? Is it a barge, overland or—

Councillor Poochemunka—It is delivered by the trucks during the dry season, and the prices drop down. When it is delivered by barge, they triple the price. It is enormous.

CHAIR—They triple the price when?

Councillor Poochemunka—During the wet season.

CHAIR—So during the dry season product comes in by road?

Councillor Poochemunka—Yes.

CHAIR—Is that relatively continuous? Is there a truck coming in every day or does it tend to be a weekly delivery?

Councillor Poochemunka—It is a weekly delivery. The barge comes probably once a fortnight.

CHAIR—So there is also a fortnightly barge. Is that right?

Councillor Poochemunka—Yes.

CHAIR—Who operates that?

Councillor Poochemunka—It is Bowyer Transport.

CHAIR—Where is that?

Councillor Poochemunka—It is based down in Cairns, in Mareeba.

CHAIR—So that comes around the cape and up to you?

Councillor Poochemunka—Yes. Sometimes it goes right past us to the Torres Strait. It goes right up to the cape. Sometimes we get it through Karumba.

CHAIR—It is not Sea Swift?

Councillor Poochemunka—I think Sea Swift does the other communities around the Torres Strait.

CHAIR—Yes, it does.

Mr TURNOUR—Do other councillors want to make a statement before I start asking some questions?

Councillor Korkaktain—We have problems with higher prices because of the cost of freight up and down. We have to use the barge during the wet season. We have groceries coming in now every week. My biggest concern is with the groceries that come into our local shop. Sometimes they are out of date. Sometimes I go to the shop and I can spend \$200 or \$300, but you can spend that much money and come out with nothing. I do not know why the prices are high. The main thing is that we need to have fresh vegies at all times.

Mr TURNOUR—Jonathon, have you seen any improvement since the new management started with Island and Cape, or is it too early?

Councillor Korkaktain—Well, they just started last month. We will see how we go. We will be appointing a committee to see how the management runs.

Mr TURNOUR—Neville, have you seen any improvements since Island and Cape have come?

Councillor Poochemunka—Since they took over a month ago I think there has been a little bit of improvement. But we will just see what happens.

Mr TURNOUR—I gather that there are generally better fruit and vegies during the dry season when you can truck stuff in rather than using the barge fortnightly—is that right?

Councillor Poochemunka—I think the supplies of some fruits and vegies are being flown to Aurukun on a weekly basis, most of the time.

Councillor Koongotema—With freight, when it is dry and they are driving from Cairns or Mareeba, sometimes the foods get buggered while they are on the road train. That is why when the meat comes in it is bad. They have to really look at bringing the food in, because the meat is bad. The freezer in the truck is buggered or no good.

Mr TURNOUR—Does that still get put out on the shelf in the shop?

Councillor Koongotema—Yes.

Mr TURNOUR—Just to change track a little bit: are there many CDEP workers at the shop? Do you know what percentage of the workforce is CDEP?

Councillor Poochemunka—It is about 30 per cent.

Mr TURNOUR—And has the CDEP workforce been picked up in terms of the transition that is going on, or is the expectation that they will basically become full-time jobs within the store over time?

Mr Bensch—They have been picked up. I think their main aim is to get them full-time, but for the moment there has just been overflow.

Mr KATTER—I have a few questions. At the present moment, Neville, is everything is coming in by road?

Mr Bensch—By barge; it is the wet season.

Mr KATTER—I will ask the question again. I do not want to be impolite, but I am asking a question of Neville. Neville, is it coming in by boat?

Councillor Poochemunka—Yes, it comes in by boat once a fortnight.

Mr KATTER—And the barge comes out of where—Weipa or Cairns?

Councillor Poochemunka—We have the barge services delivering the items and groceries both ways, whether it is right around the cape or through Karumba which is the quickest way.

Mr KATTER—We have backloading with Georgie Raptis, who was taking prawns south and his trucks were coming back empty from Adelaide. He was also processing in Brisbane and Townsville to a lesser extent, so we got backloading from those areas. We cut the price of delivering goods into Weipa by 60 per cent. But the council then would not come into the scheme, so they were not part of it. Whether they came in later on after I was minister, I do not know. There is not a huge amount of prawns being processed anymore. They are all being done, as you realise, on the mother ships. But there is still a fair amount of processing in Karumba, so I would point out to you that there is still a ball game there with backloading. I am not clear, Jonathon and Patrick—everyone has made these complaints, but do they relate to before Island and Cape took over or after Island and Cape took over? Has there been any change since Island and Cape took over?

Councillor Korkaktain—I meant before. I can spend a certain amount, do the shopping. I am just concerned about the prices.

Mr KATTER—But there has been no change in the price structure since Island and Cape took over?

Councillor Korkaktain—No, not yet.

Mr KATTER—Patrick, you would say the same thing?

Councillor Koongotema—Yes.

Mr KATTER—Can I ask a question of you again, Neville. There was not the sort of level of rage over the prices, going back five, 10, 15 years. The level of rage just was not there that I am seeing now. Petrol prices have gone through the roof since then, so that is one element of it. The other element of it is GST. When you fill up at the grocery store, 60 per cent of your purchases are not in fact food. That is the actual figure. The non-food items are carrying 10 per cent not only on the item but also on the freight up here and on the retail margin on the freight. The GST effect should have the effect of almost doubling the price of a tube of toothpaste.

Mr TURNOUR—Bob, you should not have voted for the GST back in 1998. You keep bringing it up, but you did vote for it. We didn't, but you did. It is on the record.

Mr KATTER—I do not think we should turn this into a political arena. Not only did I not vote for it, I stridently opposed it publicly, privately and in the House.

Mr TURNOUR—You are on the record as voting for the GST. I had it checked, because you keep bringing this up every day. The Labor Party ran two election campaigns against it and the Liberal and National parties voted for it. You continue to bring it up.

Mr KATTER—Neville, within one hour I will have proof whether I voted for the GST. I abstained from voting it, because I had an agreement that we would get a zone allowance review. I voted against it initially, I think, but I most certainly did not vote for it. I opposed it at all times—in the election campaign as well, by the way. That is not important. The fact of the matter is that it is having an effect. You have a twin effect of a massive increase. You have asked the government to remove the GST in remote areas, but can you give us some suggestions on how you can cut down the price of transportation into Aurukun?

Councillor Poochemunka—I think that it is not only Aurukun that is facing some of the problems following the introduction of the GST. I hope that would not stop someone buying an artefact from Aurukun who voted for the GST. Weipa is facing a lot of problems. Weipa is a mining community. I go to Weipa a lot and purchase some stuff there, but sometimes the prices are too high because the products are shipped by the barge. Some of the prices in Aurukun are a lot cheaper than they are in Weipa. These are some of the problems that we are facing and we have to resolve them. Some of these issues have been raised at the ministerial roundtable over the past three years. We are still going through the process and hopefully somebody might listen at the end of the day and recognise us guys living in the cape remote communities. We are so isolated sometimes during the wet season and the prices are so high then. It is so difficult for us in a remote community like Aurukun in Far North Queensland. The government needs to realise that North Queensland does not end at Townsville but rather up in Cape York.

Mr KATTER—This is to anyone on the council. Do you have any other ideas on how we could cut the price of freight to carry goods in?

Councillor Korkaktain—We need to look at the freight charges but we also need good products in our shop. When you go into the shop, you see the same old things there sitting on the shelves. I want to see new products and fresh vegies in our shop. Whether the prices are high, the thing is we need good quality products for people to buy. If the freight rates are high, the shop cannot put a low price on the products. We need to work out how to pay the high rates in the shop. The freight rates are really high in the wet season.

Councillor Koongotema—Could the council raise the funds to get a private truck owned by the council so we can deliver straight to the community? That way we would not pay freight to other companies.

Mr KATTER—I think that would be very practical, Patrick. I do not know what your cattle numbers are here now, but you had 12,000 before the TB eradication campaign. I make the point that the white fellas who were in charge shot all your cattle. The black fellas in charge at

Pormpuraaw bought 6,000 head through. They started off with 300 head and you had 12,000. By the time the white fellas finished, you had none and they had 6,000, with black fellas running it down there. That is not your fault. You did not make those decisions. Having said that, if you have cattle here there is no reason why a body truck could not pull a semi to cart the cattle, with the body truck to actually cart fruit and vegetables. The cost of carting in and out would be borne by the cattle operation and you could get the fruit and vegetables sent very cheaply. I think that is a very practical suggestion and one the committee should take on board.

Mrs VALE—I have a question for the deputy mayor. Who does the grocery shopping in this community? Is it the women or the men?

Councillor Yunkaporta—The women.

Mrs VALE—It is pretty important that I hear from the women. Women do the grocery shopping, generally speaking, where I come from, too.

Councillor Yunkaporta—I guess that the woman has that role to play because she is the cook in the house.

Mrs VALE—Absolutely.

Councillor Yunkaporta—Consideration really needs to be given to the wellbeing of the community as to the prices. Consideration also needs to be given to the people who are ill, especially those who have diabetes. They need a daily intake of fresh vegetables and fruit to lessen their illnesses. And if the prices were reduced to very low, I am sure that those illnesses would go away.

Mrs VALE—Do you find, with the new arrangements at the store, that there is plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables for the family? Have you noticed a difference? When we have the open forum, if there are any women who would like to come and give us their impressions on this, I would like to know about any improvement in the quality, quantity and range of fresh fruit and vegetables for your families.

Councillor Yunkaporta—The quality of the range of fresh fruit and vegies has greatly improved. But then again, it does not have to be left on the stacks—for instance, bananas get rotten, and I have noticed that they can stay there for nearly two or three weeks after they have rotted.

Mr KATTER—Is that in the store, Phyllis?

Councillor Yunkaporta—That is in the store. Even though we have to see the good side of things happening now, we have to reflect on the past.

Mrs VALE—We need to know, because we need to address these issues. If the food goes off too quickly, is there enough cool storage in the store to keep fruit and vegetables fresh as long as possible?

Councillor Yunkaporta—At the moment there is.

Mrs VALE—Okay. When does the delivery happen? What day of the week does the truck come?

Councillor Yunkaporta—On a Tuesday.

Mrs VALE—And the barge comes every fortnight?

Councillor Yunkaporta—And then whatever fresh fruit and vegies are there, they need to last until the next delivery but in the past they have not.

Mrs VALE—So mothers and grandmothers have been without fruit and vegetables to buy for their families?

Councillor Yunkaporta—Yes. A mother needs to cook; she needs to prepare food for the nourishment of the body, for everybody.

Mrs VALE—Absolutely. Phyllis, has there been any tradition in this community of growing, say, backyard gardens or community gardens or market gardens? Has there been any tradition of that at all?

Councillor Yunkaporta—That mentality has gone away since the mission days. In the past people would farm vegetables and so on. But I guess other influences coming into town pretty much washed that away from the brains of those who had that taught to them in those early days.

Mrs VALE—Do you keep chickens here anymore?

Councillor Yunkaporta—They did keep chickens in the mission days. I was not born in the mission days; I was born after those days.

Mrs VALE—How is your supply of fresh eggs? Do the eggs stay fresh?

Councillor Yunkaporta—Yes, they do.

Mrs VALE—Phyllis, I just want to ask you one more question, about baby care. How expensive is it? Do you get any feedback from the mothers about how expensive it is to look after babies? Do all the mothers here nurse their own babies, or do some give them baby formula?

Councillor Yunkaporta—Some nurse; some put them on baby formula.

Mrs VALE—Have you had any of the mothers say anything to you about how expensive it is for baby formula or nappies or anything?

Councillor Yunkaporta—Most mothers say so, because the price has to really come down if they are to raise their child.

Mrs VALE—And have any of the mothers experienced difficulty in, say, starting little babies off on vegetables? What is the first solid food that traditionally the babies in your community start eating? Is it rice or is it another cereal?

Councillor Yunkaporta—Rice would pretty much be a favourite.

Mrs VALE—Maybe there will be somebody in the open forum who could expand on that. Thank you very much, Phyllis. Thank you, everyone.

CHAIR—I have just one other question, and it is really picking up on what Danna was asking. To what extent do people get food from sources other than the store? Is there any fishing?

Councillor Koongotema—Yes.

CHAIR—Do people eat fish every day? Is a large amount of food consumed which is not bought from the store?

Councillor Koongotema—If they run out, they get a fresh fish.

Mr TURNOUR—There was a community garden here, too, wasn't there? Or did individuals have gardens and grow their own food?

Councillor Poochemunka—There was a community store that was functioning, and now the quarantine zone just ends at Aurukun so you have some stuff that is illegal to be sold through the shop. The government has put in legislation about that. So there has to be some survey done before these products can be grown and sold through the shop. That is a big concern. But there was some gardening; for instance, my deputy mayor raised some. There were fruits and vegetables being produced in the community but some government legislation has more or less stopped us from going ahead.

Mr KATTER—From going ahead in what, Neville?

Councillor Poochemunka—From producing some products in the community.

Mr KATTER—What sort of legislation? Is it quarantine legislation?

Councillor Poochemunka—It is quarantine legislation.

Mr KATTER—It is my opinion that those laws are unconstitutional. It is like Mabo—the law was, and then Mabo came and the law was changed. It is my opinion on this that the laws here are unconstitutional.

Mrs VALE—Might I say to the mayor: on the suggestion of perhaps growing community market gardens or going back to private backyard gardens, I do not want you to think that we think that Aurukun could be totally self-sufficient in fruit and vegetables, because it would not. You would always need to have some fresh fruit and vegetables being trucked in so that you

could get a better range. I just wanted to know about the tradition of having the market gardens like in the old days, and whether it is possible to do it again—just as a support, that is all.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Neville, John, Phyllis, Patrick, Angus and Jonathon for giving us your evidence today, and we would like to thank the Aurukun Shire Council. I think some of you have to go off to the opening of a Centrelink office, so we will let you go and call our next witness.

[10.59 am]

OXLADE, Mr Michael Craig, Store Manager, Aurukun Supermarket, Island & Cape

CHAIR—Welcome. Would you like to add anything about the capacity in which you appear today?

Mr Oxlade—I am appearing on behalf of Island and Cape. I am the store manager at Aurukun and I have been for the last 10 months. I was previously employed by the Department of Communities retail stores branch. I made the decision to leave them and stay in Aurukun, and so joined Island and Cape on 1 March.

CHAIR—So you were managing the store prior to Island and Cape taking over—is that right?

Mr Oxlade—Yes; it was for a period of about eight months with, as I said, the retail stores branch of the Department of Communities.

CHAIR—We might ask your opinion. Can we see a difference yet? It has only been a month, but is there a difference since Island and Cape have taken over?

Mr Oxlade—Yes, I think there is a dramatic difference. My partner, Debra, and I took the decision to part company with the retail stores branch based on a number of issues that we had. The control of ordering was being centralised back to Brisbane. We found that the store stock levels were running down dramatically. We experienced a number of weeks of being out of stocks. I felt that there were a number of very poor decisions made with regard to transport. You heard a couple of the councillors refer to fortnightly barges, and that was the situation at one stage; we were restricted to fortnightly. Since we have been taken over by Island and Cape, we are back to weekly barges. That has made keeping decent fruit and veg on the shelves much easier, and we have been able to build our stock levels back up. At any point in time, the store sits on about three-quarters of a million dollars worth of stock across the range. We were dramatically running down once the ordering processes were centralised back to Brisbane.

CHAIR—The barges are now coming in weekly?

Mr Oxlade—Correct.

CHAIR—What day do they come in?

Mr Oxlade—They come in on Monday.

CHAIR—What is the company? Bowyers Transport?

Mr Oxlade—Bowyers are the company which road freight our product for us on a normal basis through the dry. They have been road freighting product through to Karumba since the roads have been opened, and we are running it up the coast on a subcontracted barge from Karumba up to Aurukun.

CHAIR—During the dries are there also trucks coming in directly?

Mr Oxlade—During the dry we roll a truck in every week. That consists of a 22-pallet chiller freezer and two trailers of dry behind that.

CHAIR—You said that was weekly. Is it the same company?

Mr Oxlade—Same company.

CHAIR—And during the wet that truck goes to Karumba and then the barge comes up from there?

Mr Oxlade—Correct. That was an interim arrangement that was put in place. We had a lot of problems with transport in general this year. The Department of Communities decided at the eleventh hour to switch companies. The store had had a longstanding arrangement with Bowyers previously—apparently they had been servicing the area for about 16 years—so there were contracts in place at pretty good rates to barge freight in through the wet. At the eleventh hour the retail stores branch took the decision that they were going to sub out the contract for all their stores, and we changed over to Tucksworth Transport. They rolled trucks in here weekly for the tail end of the dry. Then we ran into some monumental problems, because there were no arrangements in place for barges. Everyone was scrambling, looking for a barge to get gear out here. It was a bit of a debacle at the beginning of the wet season. It improved as we went along. Since Island and Cape have taken over, they have switched us back to Bowyers, which were the previous company.

Naturally, all those contracts that were in place for barge freight have since all fallen over. Bowyers have done a fairly good job, I think, to get us a weekly barge for the tail end of the wet and, by the time we roll into the next wet season, hopefully the road will be the situation—I understand there are many upgrades to the road—so we may not have to roll barges in here. That would be the preferred option.

CHAIR—The arrangements that are operating today or this week are basically wet season arrangements?

Mr Oxlade—Yes.

CHAIR—Can you estimate what the cost of freight adds on to the price of your average product?

Mr Oxlade—It adds about 15 per cent to our costs. To give an example, we landed a barge in here two weeks ago. This is the only one I have seen an account for. I had 44 pallets of stock on it. It cost us \$29,000.

CHAIR—That was for freight?

Mr Oxlade—That was for the barge component of the freight. You then add the road transport component from Cairns to Karumba and then we pay the council a further \$60 a pallet to move

the stock from the barge landing to the store. So we are talking in excess of \$800 per pallet to land that stock here in Aurukun.

Mr KATTER—It costs \$800 per pallet?

Mr Oxlade—In excess of \$800. If you take the \$29,000 and amortise that over 44 pallets I think it works out at about \$619 a pallet. I do not know what the road freight component was on top of that—I have not yet seen an account for that—but if you then add on the \$60 a pallet that it costs us to move it from the barge landing to the store you are up for \$700. By the time you add the road freight component back in there you are going to be around the \$800 a pallet mark.

CHAIR—Your estimate is that it will be about 15 per cent of the cost price?

Mr Oxlade—That is a percentage averaged across the last three months of freight.

CHAIR—As you have outlined, in the dry season that cost would then come down dramatically, I imagine?

Mr Oxlade—It would come down to between 10 and 12 per cent. I personally think I have underestimated the cost of the barge freight. It has been a little difficult to arrive at a figure because previously we were not seeing a lot of the accounts here in the store. All the admin was being done in Brisbane.

CHAIR—So you are saying it might be more than 15 per cent?

Mr Oxlade—It could be considerably more, especially in the light of the figures I have just given you which are actual figures.

CHAIR—You do the purchasing from here—by that, I mean you determine here what you want purchased?

Mr Oxlade—Yes.

CHAIR—You let Cairns know rather than the decisions being made in Cairns?

Mr Oxlade—We now have total autonomy as far as the range goes. We conveyed this to the community at a town meeting. So for things that people are looking for, things that people want ranged in their store they come and see us, we source it and we bring it in. Since we have changed to Island and Cape they have opened us up to a number of different suppliers. Currently, we are bringing stock from Darwin, Melbourne and from all over the place. It has given us the ability to provide some exceptionally good gear. I will give you an example—we landed in excess of \$6,000 worth of clothing out of Melbourne. We had comments from the community: ‘This is fantastic, this is much cheaper than we have been able to buy in Weipa or Cairns.’ The gear that we landed went off in two days. The place looked like David Jones one day and Best and Less the following day, because it was trashed. It was such a good response, so Deb has placed more orders with that company. The prices we were able to buy that clothing at were at prices that Aurukun has not seen on clothing for years.

CHAIR—I suppose it is too early to tell, but do you have a sense of whether the store is making a profit or whether it is covering its costs?

Mr Oxlade—I think the business is profitable—we run a reasonably sophisticated point-of-sale program—provided our cost and sell information in that is accurate. We are still in the throes of changing over from Metcash costings. We were previously drawing our stock out of Metcash in Brisbane; we are now drawing our stock out of the Island and Cape warehouse in Cairns. I am talking basic grocery stock here. The costings are pretty similar on a number of lines. I am finding that they are cheaper. You have seen that reflected in the shelf pricing. I was surprised by a couple of comments that the councillors made about pricing. I would have thought they would have duly noted that the price of cigarettes went down \$1.25 a packet the day that Island and Cape took over because of the reduced cost.

CHAIR—That is good.

Mr Oxlade—It is a benchmark product.

CHAIR—On that, following in a different direction, do you try to cross-subsidise the healthy stuff with the less healthy stuff? In other words, are you trying to keep fresh food and meat cheaper?

Mr Oxlade—There are lower mark-ups on fruit, veg and meat than there are on other areas in the store.

CHAIR—Is all the meat you are selling frozen?

Mr Oxlade—It is frozen. I would like to clarify a couple of comments that the councillors made. Both Phyllis and Jonathan made comments about the quality of the fruit and veg. I must admit that I took exception to that. The fruit and veg sales in this store represent between nine and 10 per cent of turnover. Deb and I have run community stores in the Tiwi Islands, in Arnhem Land and this is by far the highest percentage of store turnover in fruit and veg that we have experienced in an Aboriginal community. In fact, it is marginally short of mainstream. To me, that says that people understand fruit and veg, obviously they have a good supply of fruit and veg and they are using it. Generally, as a benchmark, fruit and veg will run as high as six per cent in a community. To run at eight to 10 per cent tells me that the job is being done—

CHAIR—Has it been running at that level ever since you have been operating the store or just in the last month?

Mr Oxlade—When we first came in here it was down around the six per cent mark. We introduced a number of new lines. It was a pretty basic fruit and veg range when we came in here. The lines you will find now on those shelves over there, apart from exotic fruits, would be as good a range as what you would find in a Cairns supermarket.

CHAIR—How many people do you employ?

Mr Oxlade—We employ 27 local staff. We have a management team over there that consists of four white people, two of whom arrived on Tuesday, so they are still finding their feet.

CHAIR—Any CDEP participants in that?

Mr Oxlade—Of our local staff, 21 of those are CDEP participants. Prior to Island and Cape's takeover there was a requirement that any staff who we employed in the store had to be part of the CDEP program. Prior to 1 March, 100 per cent of the local staff were CDEP participants. Since then, we have employed another five people who were not in the CDEP program but were keen to work, so they now have a job.

Mr TURNOUR—Just following on from the CDEP, with the transition with the CDEP over the next year or two, what sort of impact would it have on your bottom line in terms of losing your CDEP workforce?

Mr Oxlade—I guess at some stage we are going to have to look at that critically. Obviously, we have a percentage of total turnover that we allocate to spend on wages. At the moment, we run marginally below that percentage. Realistically, the impact is going to be that, if we are going to create full-time jobs, some positions will disappear from the supermarket. At the end of the day, it is a commercial operation; it has to be viable. It is no good me telling you that I can spend 15 per cent on wages if my budget is 12 per cent. When we start creating those full-time positions, I guess we will have to look more critically at work performance and staffing levels.

Mr TURNOUR—Thank you for that. I just want to switch back to where we started, to the difference between a store with central buying and a store with a manager and staff and a community that can have input into it. You have worked in a range of different stores with the central buying model as well?

Mr Oxlade—Yes. My first experience with the central buying model was while working for Retail Stores Branch.

Mr KATTER—Working for who?

Mr Oxlade—The Queensland Department of Communities Retail Stores Branch. We spent eight months working for them when we first came across from the Northern Territory. The Department of Communities were running the store. We were approached to come over here and help the couple who were originally the store managers to get this place on track. It was—and I am trying to think of a nice way to put it—an unmitigated disaster. That would be a good way of putting it.

Mr KATTER—That is very nice!

Mr Oxlade—That is about as good as it gets! It was dirty, it was run down and it was overstocked with out-of-date product. To look at, it was probably one of the worst stores I have walked into. Part of Deb's and my role in a number of the locations we have been sent into was to fix businesses that were out of control and losing money, as this one was. This one was pretty shabby.

Mr TURNOUR—With those problems, with a centralised buying model, was it difficult to make changes given that a lot of that decision making was being made in Brisbane or Cairns?

Mr Oxlade—I have to be honest. We found ways around it. Whilst we were being told to do one thing, as a manager who had been in the food game for about 30 years, we basically did what we needed to do in the store. Fortunately, at that stage we still had access to purchase order books in the store. Whilst we had automatic orders being generated out of Brisbane, what we would do every week was leave the heading in the computer and delete pretty much every line in there. Then we would rekey what we actually required.

Mr TURNOUR—So you were effectively overriding the system by making changes. I want to get clear on this, because I think it will be an important issue for recommendations from the committee. There are these different models. You have 30 years experience. You are currently running a store in Aurukun. What are your views about the importance of having local ownership control compared with a central buying model?

Mr Oxlade—There needs to be some kind of central control, but there also needs to be the autonomy to be able to react to your community. When we were in the Territory, we worked with ALPA. I was extremely impressed with their systems.

Mr TURNOUR—ALPA is?

Mr Oxlade—The Arnhem Land Progress Aboriginal Association. They do an extremely good job. They are a very professional organisation. Island and Cape seem to be taking what ALPA are doing and adding another dimension, in that they are allowing you to step outside and look at other suppliers. I think probably the flaw in the ALPA model when we were working with them was that they were very busy building supplier relationships but I felt as though that was detrimental to the price competitiveness of the product we were buying. So, if you were looking at a variety supplier, you had one variety supplier to look at.

Probably the biggest difference between the two—and they are very similar in the way that they function—would be the fact that with Island and Cape we have access to a large range of suppliers. That means you can play one off against the other in order to get the best price for your store and you are able to access a larger range of product for your store.

Mr KATTER—Where did ALPA operate?

Mr TURNOUR—We might ask the secretariat to get them to present when we go over there. I have one last question. It is in relation to the operation of the community reference group. How do you see that working? What involvement have you had with the council in getting that up and running?

Mr Oxlade—That was a model that was suggested by John Smith, who is the owner of Island and Cape. He felt it would be good to have a formal representation from the community rather than just people popping in and out on a daily basis. As John Bensch mentioned, that has not been set up at this stage. They are still collating names. I gather it will consist of two council members, the mayor, the CEO and three other representatives from the community, who will meet off site twice a year to discuss issues relating to the store. There will be a broad range of issues: pricing, ranging et cetera. I think it is a good idea. It will give the community a formal way of presenting ideas to the store, although we have an open-door policy anyway. It could be that there are people who are embarrassed or shy or whatever about coming and speaking to us

directly about things that they would like to range, and they may feel that they can do that best through this committee. That will give them a formal arrangement.

Mrs VALE—The old-fashioned suggestion box always works well. Thank you for that information about the consumption rates of fresh fruits and vegies here. That is really good to know. Do you also have rates for the consumption of junk food and how that compares with the national average?

Mr Oxlade—I do not. I cannot pull any numbers out of my hat. I can tell you that this community, like every community I have run a store in, has an excessively high Coca-Cola intake. I have been surprised in every community at the high rate of consumption of high-sugar products. We sell a disproportionately large—and when I say ‘disproportionately’ I mean in relation to mainstream—amount of sugar in most areas. I would not say confectionary sales are incredibly out of whack.

Mrs VALE—What about potato chips and other high-salt junk food?

Mr Oxlade—No.

Mrs VALE—It is the Coca-Cola that concerns you?

Mr Oxlade—It is soft drink and especially Coke. I had a meeting recently in Cairns with representatives from Coke, who were mindful of the fact that their sales were disproportionately high. They will be coming to Aurukun some time in May. We are installing some new refrigeration and we will be laying things out differently in the fridges so that we promote a healthier range of product. Whilst Coca-Cola is a predominant product in the fridges at the moment, that will reduce and there will be a lot more juice, water and other lower sugar lines.

Mrs VALE—Craig, I understand there is a water product with a spritz fruit type of thing in it and that that is not as high in sugar content as Coke.

Mr Oxlade—Yes, there is. I have to be honest with you: we do not range it currently.

Mrs VALE—Do you have fruit juices available in your range?

Mr Oxlade—Yes.

Mrs VALE—They are high in sugar, too, but not as high as they are in Coke?

Mr Oxlade—Not as high. We sell a massive amount of fruit juice in this store. People seem to like fruit juice.

Mrs VALE—Is there any fruit juice available with no sugar added?

Mr Oxlade—We have no ‘added sugar’ fruit juices there.

Mrs VALE—Can you also tell me anything about the consumption of baby formula?

Mr Oxlade—We have relatively high sales of a couple of brands of formula. We have a number of new babies in the community; I do not know whether those sales will spike again. We turn over probably eight cartons of formula a week.

Mrs VALE—You are probably not the right person to ask. I tried to ask a councillor about the number of women who actually still nurse their own babies. Is that not happening as much in recent years? Are the mothers choosing to go on to baby formula?

Mr Oxlade—I really would be hard pressed to comment on that.

Mrs VALE—If there were local market gardens, would you be prepared to access and sell local market produce?

Mr Oxlade—Absolutely. If there is an opportunity to deal with a local business then I am sure Island and Cape will jump on board. I would be encouraging them to jump on board. Part of the problem, especially as CDEP phases out, is how do we create real jobs for these people? How do we create sustainable industry and a sustainable economy that is not completely government funded? It is okay as long as those kinds of projects are set up properly and run properly. Obviously, we have a duty of care to provide a quality product and we certainly put pressure on our existing suppliers to provide a quality product. I would hate to think that we were going to supply an inferior product just because it was locally grown. Subject to the same sort of criteria that we currently buy under, yes, we would be very keen to support the growth of vegetables.

Mrs VALE—Those vegetables are grown locally somewhere, even the good-quality ones you get.

Mr Oxlade—Exactly.

Mrs VALE—Even in my area where I live, underneath the flight path of Mascot Airport, would you believe, there are still Chinese gardens where the Chinese have been gardening market fruit and vegetables for over 100 years.

Mr Oxlade—Is that right?

Mrs VALE—Yes. And they are still there. Under the support of the council, I point out, because they are heritage gardens. They are actually classified as heritage gardens. They still produce and sell to local consumers. Thank you, Craig.

CHAIR—Bob.

Mr KATTER—I think Craig has answered all my questions.

CHAIR—Thank you, Craig, for the information you have given us today. That is fantastic.

[11.27 am]

AHLERS, Mr Douglas, Private capacity

GRAHAM, Ms Wendy, Dietitian, Royal Flying Doctors Service, Cairns

Hilda (not identified by family name due to bereavement practices)

HUNT, Mrs Johanna, Coordinator, Building Parental Skills Program

NATHAN, Mrs Angie, Consultant, FIM

SARAGO, Mrs Patricia, Private capacity

WALPO, Mr Derek, Private capacity

YUNKAPORTA, Mr Herbert, Private capacity

CHAIR—Derek, do you have any comments to make on the capacity in which you appear?

Mr Walpo—I am the coordinator for the Wellbeing Centre in Aurukun. I am employed by the RFDS.

CHAIR—What would you like to say?

Mr Walpo—I wanted to raise a question when Mr Katter asked the councils: how can we cut the cost of our freight rates? It is just a thought that governments may want to think about. I am a community person. I am talking about taking not only the Aurukun community into consideration but also the other communities on the west and east coast of Cape York and in between us like Coen and cattle stations and road houses. It is just a thought that governments may want to think about it. If we are going to think about cutting the cost on freight rates, why don't governments start thinking about sealing an all-weather road from Lakeland to the NPA communities. That way, Kowanyama, Pormpuraaw, Lockhart and in between us will not be missing out on freight and food. Stuff will be delivered on time. That is the question I want to raise with government and for them to go back and think about. We are talking about freight et cetera but it will not happen overnight. Government should take into consideration how they are going to cater for community people who are isolated in these communities?

Mr TURNOUR—Through the chair, I can assure you that the peninsula development roads are a very high priority for me. Hopefully, we should have the bitumen through to Laura this year. From us putting additional moneys in over the last few years you would have seen improvement to the roads into Lockhart River, Pormpuraaw, Aurukun and those sorts of communities. We will continue to work on those roads. We also have to look at how we can improve things in the interim. It will take us a number of years to get here.

Mr Walpo—That is why I raised it before. During the wet we have to get charter flights and barges to bring in our vegies. We are sort of doubling up, so to speak, on freights. If we had just one system in place for the whole of Cape York I reckon it would be grand.

CHAIR—Thank you. Wendy, what would you like to say to the committee?

Ms Graham—I think the store here is very well run and managed by Craig and Debbie. From a nutrition perspective there is pretty much always a good range of fruit, vegetables—frozen, fresh and canned—and other products available at the store. They have been really fantastic to work with. Anything that I ask them to help me with, whether it be running nutrition programs or anything like that, they always agree and will get new products if I ask them. I think the reason they are so good is they came from ALPA in the Northern Territory where they were trained in nutrition and the effect it can have on health. ALPA also had store nutrition policies, and I think those should be put in place in all stores across Cape York.

Mr KATTER—What is a store nutrition policy? What would that do?

Ms Graham—It says things such as: all people who work in the stores will be trained in nutrition, that nutritious foods will be given prominence. In some stores, not in this one, unhealthy products are right at the front of the store and at eye reach, so they are the ones people buy more of.

Mrs VALE—Wendy, through the chair, of course it is a real science, too. People in big department stores actually design where different products are going to be presented. You are quite right.

Ms Graham—Basically, it is a policy to try to make it easier to choose a healthy choice. Once you have walked into the store, it makes it easier for people to pick something healthy rather than pick something unhealthy. As far as the store here in Aurukun goes, I think it is really just luck that they are such great managers. I also work in other communities across the cape and, generally speaking, the store manager has the potential to have a massive impact on the nutrition of the people in the community and therefore on the health of the community. That is ad hoc. Currently, it just depends on whether the manager is a nice person or is interested in nutrition. There is nothing to ensure that the manager does not abuse their power over the health of the community. Having said that, I think the role of the store in nutrition and health of the community is fairly small in comparison to some other factors. Someone asked before how many people use the takeaway here. A lot of people eat takeaways almost exclusively and a number of factors contribute to that.

Mr KATTER—Here?

Ms Graham—Yes, here in Aurukun and every other community that I go to: Kowanyama, Pormpuraaw, Lockhart and Coen.

CHAIR—What is the takeaway here? What do you get?

Ms Graham—Here in Aurukun it is greasy, deep-fried stuff but they also have healthy options available for people—healthy sandwiches that are made daily, stews and vegetable stews. Craig has said that he is happy to work with me to have more of those options available.

CHAIR—Is the takeaway part of the store?

Ms Graham—The takeaway is part of the store.

CHAIR—Is that typical in the other communities that you work in?

Ms Graham—No, in other communities it is different. I believe you are going to Kowanyama this afternoon where the take-away is run by the Anglican Church and it serves nothing but rubbish and all the profits go out of the community, and most people eat there.

CHAIR—Is it typical of these takeaways that they are eating deep fried and pies?

Ms Graham—Yes. The reason for that is largely, say, in Kowanyama the level of certification that you have to have to serve food that you touch with your hands is much higher than if you get something in a packet and put it in the bain-marie or oven or whatever. You do not have to have much training to do that. But to actually cook something and put it in a bain-marie you have to have special sinks and benches and training et cetera.

The other thing that happens a lot here, and like all communities on the Cape, is that basically people just do not have the money to buy the food in the store. A lot of people run out of money before payday and have no food to eat whatsoever for a variable number of days each week or fortnight. So the problem with the store is that the food is too expensive, in my opinion.

Mr TURNOUR—How do people survive for those numbers of days, in your experience?

Ms Graham—They get hungry. If you have ever gone without food for a day or two it does not make you feel very good or very happy. When I am hungry I am pretty grumpy.

Mr TURNOUR—Sure. Does that happen regularly at the moment, every week?

Ms Graham—It varies from person to person but a lot of people in communities do not eat food for some days of the week. The other thing that happens is that I see a lot of little kids under the age of two who get hungry and to fill them up they get a sugary drink like Coke and it stops the crying, but of course there is no nutritional value in that kind of a drink.

CHAIR—How are they paying for the Coke?

Ms Graham—It is a cheap meal. The other thing that I want to get on to is that the lack of infrastructure here really impacts on what food is purchased at the store, so a lot of people are living with many people in one house and with minimal cooking infrastructure. If they would go and buy a weekly shop the way we do—I get my pay and I go down to the supermarket and buy food for two weeks, put it in my cupboard and it stays there, so I know that in two weeks time what I have not eaten is still there. But that is not the case when people share. That means a lot

of people buy for one meal only and often the takeaway is the easiest option because you go to the take-away with your money, buy the food, eat it and then you are not hungry anymore.

Mrs VALE—That is a very expensive way of eating and trying to survive, to eat takeaway. Can I say, Wendy, congratulations on the basis that Craig actually said that the consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables here is very high for a remote community store, so you must be having a great deal of impact.

Ms Graham—I think that is more because of Craig, because since they have been here they have really got in a lot of new lines and turned things over a lot faster.

Mrs VALE—That is really good news.

Ms Graham—He has done a lot with presentation and whatnot as well in terms of his infrastructure.

Mrs VALE—As a nutritionist, do you have a program where you give mothers lessons about eating? Is there anything formal in place? This culture is very traditional and had traditional food a hundred years ago but now they are eating, if you like, Western food. And even teaching young girls today about what you can do with half a kilo of mince. Are there any lessons like that at some of the young mothers can take? I would like to know what access they have.

Ms Graham—There are programs. I come here for two days every two weeks and I do one-on-one consultations with people who are already sick, which takes up at least a day. Basically I am flat out the whole time.

Mrs VALE—Are any parents able to talk? This is an open forum and we need to hear from you.

Hilda—Due to a recent death in the community I cannot mention my name, so I am referred to as Hilda, my middle name. I am the coordinator for the building parental skills program here. I arrived in October 2006 in Aurukun and I have been here for 2½ years. The program supports a lot of the young mothers between the ages of 12 and 18. Forty-eight babies were born in 2006-07. Last year the numbers have come down to 32 babies born. Already this year we have had eight babies and it is end-March. In January we had five babies born.

The program supports these young mothers with parenting and birthing. Also we look at areas like the health and wellbeing of the child. A lot of mothers will breast-feed and then when they get to around seven months they will switch over to formula but they will do both, breast-feed and formula. The hardest thing is trying to introduce them to feeding their babies solid food for that nutrition. Wendy mentioned the overcrowded houses here, and as young parents they have not even got that time to bond as a couple with their child because everybody wants to nurse the baby. In these overcrowded houses they have not got time to prepare their own meals and with the takeaway shop it is more convenient for a lot of the young mothers to just go to that shop and buy something there. The women's shelter used to be open, so when I first started we used to have cooking sessions at the women's shelter. It was taking these mothers into the store and picking out food like a pack of frozen vegetables, mince, just to show them how to budget and how they can manage to feed other families in the household. I used to run lot of programs from

the women's shelter. We also had in partnership with Royal Flying Doctors a very successful sandwich program. That had five or six young mothers providing the store with fresh sandwiches, 100 to 120 sandwiches four days a week, and they were sold out within an hour. That was the only sort of food that was being sold and it was made locally. When I arrived in 2006 there was a market garden and due to funds they have closed it down. They used to provide the store with local vegies, more so variety of lettuce and tomatoes. Probably about 12 men used to work there. That was going well and is another good project that was closed.

Mrs VALE—Why did it close? Because it did not get any funding?

Hilda—I am not too sure. All I know is that it closed down.

Mrs VALE—Did the market garden sell the produce to the stores so it can keep going? It would be interesting to track that through.

Hilda—In 2006 the store was the old store where the petrol browser is now. That little space was the store.

Mrs VALE—I know this is probably not the right climate for soup, but soups are very easy to make and very cheap. They go around a lot of people and they are great nutritional value. Is there any way people would have soup in this particular part of the world? It is learning how to do it, of course.

Hilda—Learning how to do it, and I have not got the resources. The program has been lacking resources. We are going to get a parenting centre built where those things will be operating with cooking sessions, getting young fathers involved in doing a garden and they maintain the yard. The parenting centre will be money from the Premier and Cabinet office. We are going to have a parenting centre where we would be able to start all these programs again.

Mrs VALE—You did say that you were teaching cooking or basic meals at the women's shelter. That does not happen anymore?

Hilda—We cannot access the women's shelter because the women's shelter is closed. I cannot comment on the closure of the women's shelter but it is closed and has been closed for 12 months now.

Mrs VALE—You cannot comment. Do you know why it closed or you just cannot comment?

Hilda—I cannot say why it closed.

Mrs VALE—But you are hopeful that you will get another centre.

Hilda—I drafted a letter this morning to reopen the women's shelter, and I am getting signatures from women in the community. Hopefully there will be a good response. Again, when that women's shelter was open, that is where everything was run. We had playgroups and cooking sessions. We also had workshops based around family and domestic violence and how it affects children.

Mrs VALE—How long has it been closed?

CHAIR—Sorry. We are really running out of time here.

Mrs VALE—Can I just ask how long it has been closed?

CHAIR—We have to be out of here in six minutes.

Mrs VALE—Can you just tell me how long it has been closed?

Hilda—The women's shelter?

Mrs VALE—Yes.

Hilda—Twelve months. It was closed on 29 May last year.

Mrs VALE—Thank you. Sorry, Chair.

CHAIR—Wendy, do you have other comments you would like to make? It is important.

Ms Graham—My final comment is this. If you really want to address the health of communities, you cannot look at one narrow little thing like nutrition at the store. You have to look at the takeaway and you have to look at the underlying social issues—especially housing infrastructure, which has a major impact—and look holistically. The most important thing is consulting the community about what they want. When you do consult the community, you should take into consideration that people are not used to being listened to and have a long history of not being listened to. You get sick of it, I suppose. On that, thanks for coming up.

CHAIR—That is a pleasure. Thank you for giving us your evidence today.

Mr KATTER—Could I ask a quick question?

CHAIR—You have to be really quick, because we have to be out of here.

Mr KATTER—Do you have any idea, Hilda, of average house occupancy? It is 15 at Doomadgee.

Hilda—It is 15 to 18.

Mr KATTER—It is a bit higher here.

CHAIR—Is that it?

Mr KATTER—Yes.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, guys. We have a couple of other people who have indicated that they would like to say something to the committee. Douglas Ahlers?

Mr Ahlers—I work at the store here.

CHAIR—What would you like to say to us today?

Mr Ahlers—I have a question to raise with Mr Katter. I think that question was raised with you earlier on. What are the chances of bringing cattle back in here? Sometimes we talk about how our meat goes off. A lot of times the issue has been raised of local people wanting to start up their own businesses, like a butcher shop. I would like to see if we can get any help from Mr Katter or maybe from you.

CHAIR—Let me get the local member to answer that. Jim?

Mr TURNOUR—The Queensland department of primary industries, as I understand it, is working with the community to re-establish cattle up here. I have been involved in live exports out of Weipa and a range of different things. It is something that we could look at in our recommendations from the committee. I can follow it up with Tim McGrath, who works for the DPI. I understand he has been up here looking at those issues as well.

Mr Ahlers—It is just that a lot of times people have been sitting down thinking about how they can go about it and who they should talk to. I thought this would be a good time to raise it—

CHAIR—Yes.

Mr Ahlers—while Mr Katter was here as well.

Mr KATTER—Mr Chairman, as a practising cattleman all of my life, I made the observation earlier on that there were 12½ thousand head of cattle here before the TB eradication campaign. There were all whitefellas running it. The easy way was to just shoot all the cattle and get the money for it, which is what they did. Jackson Shortjoe and Eddie Holroyd took up two blocks there. Two-fifths of the service area of Pormpuraaw were taken up under private blocks. They put together 6,000 head. As a government, we could only ever muster 360 head. Mr Chairman, it is an important point I am making here. As a government, when we ran them, all we were ever able to muster—with really capable people, I might add—was 360 head. When the local blokes, Jackson and Eddie, took up those runs for themselves and had a profit motive and an ownership incentive—that is, they owned the blocks privately—they put together 6,000 head. They had 6,000 head, not 360 head. We had no cattle at all and we had 6,000 down there, where the local black blokes were running the whole show themselves with private ownership. I emphasise that they were not going to go out there and flog their backsides off unless there was some profit in there for their families. What I am talking about was on *60 Minutes*, by the way.

All I would say, Jim, is this. I would urge you to look at a private ownership approach. If there is anywhere in the world a successful cattle station run by corporations or communities, I would like to know about it. If you give a bloke a right to take a block—

CHAIR—Bob, we are going to have to wind up.

Mr KATTER—and run his own cattle then there is a big future there.

CHAIR—Angie Nathan?

Mrs Nathan—I do FIM, which is family income management, with Cape York partnership. I would like to mention what was said about people not having enough money for food. People do have money to buy food but the thing is that there are a lot of underlying issues to do with that money. You have a lot of things that happen in the community here, especially with gambling and drugs and alcohol. The way to utilise their food spending money for the week or fortnight—whatever it may be—is through the food card, the ALPA card, that the store has. They can put on it as much money as they want to, but that food card can only be used for food and not for cigarettes. It can be used for any product that is sold in the store. I am having a little bit of a problem with Centrelink in getting the people's money from Centrelink going onto the food card. That issue is being resolved. The problem I have is with those who are on CDEP plus top-up. I cannot get the money to go from their wages onto the food card. That is the main issue.

Unfortunately, in communities you get families that live off one another. The reason why people do want to put their money on the food card is that they know their money will be protected to buy food with it. When they have the cash in their hand, other family members want to get money from them because they want to get food or maybe use it for gambling or whatnot.

Mr TURNOUR—Angie, we will follow up that issue of Centrelink and the movement of money. I wanted to quickly ask you this. There must be a number of people that are on CDEP who do not have top-up. Have you done any budgeting? Is it possible to survive for a fortnight and eat properly under current CDEP?

Mrs Nathan—Yes, it is, if the whole household is willing to pool their money together to cover living costs.

Mr TURNOUR—Could I ask if the secretariat could follow up with you about providing us with some of that budgeting information if possible?

Mrs Nathan—Yes, definitely. I just want to say one more thing. The prices in the shop have improved a lot since it got taken over by the other people. That is especially the baby products and especially with nappies. There is a better range. You can buy in bulk and there is a better product. Before they were just selling black and white. The range of food is a lot better now, so there is an improvement. I know that it will improve more once the trucks are able to come through.

CHAIR—That is really good to hear. Thank you very much for that, Angie. The final person is Herbert Yunkaporta.

Mr Yunkaporta—I work with the RFDS through the Aurukun Well Being Centre as a community support worker. I just came here to share a few things. There are four areas I would like to look at. First of all, before I do, I would like to personally welcome you here. Thank you for having us here. I think it is a pleasure to put our points forward, to hear from each other as we go along and to learn from each other. First and foremost, I would look at it from a humanity point of view. This is people servicing people. It seems to me that isolation in the remote communities means that services are not being met as has been promised. It is something that we always look forward to. We as a wellbeing centre got off the ground slowly and surely, but the

people around us have not met our needs so that we can provide services for our community. We do not get the support from the stakeholders within the community. We are all in this together. They need to recognise that we live in the same community and we need to work together as people serving people.

The next area I have got is health promotion. People talk about health and closing the gap. I agree with that, but areas I do not agree on are poor health promotion being put out in the Cape area. I cannot speak for the whole Cape but I can speak on behalf of the community of Aurukun. We talk about health promotion and health is our priority, and therefore we need to put forward health promotion so we could meet our needs by working together hand in hand in order to meet the standards of the closing the gap campaign.

Another area is community awareness. Services coming into town need to recognise not so much community protocols but it is about respect. We have a death in this community at the present time and we often give thanks for the families for allowing these people here so we could point out our views. The other awareness is services. What I am saying is that these services that are coming into the community or being promoted by government or non-government organisations then stay in the community, are part of the community. I as a community support worker work in the middle of supporting my local people and helping these services to meet with the local people, so I am based in the middle where I could support my local people in order to meet the services and the services to my people. But if we cannot communicate within the community as a whole and as the stakeholders, bringing services from the outside if you cannot work with me how are we supposed to go about closing the gap?

Last but not least is the financial side of things. About 20 years ago I worked for \$53 a week; that is all I had in my wallet. If I wanted to go to the shop with \$53, I do not have a chance of having enough food on my table. I am a single parent to a daughter and now thankfully I have a little bit of money that I could move on, but there are still people behind that try to meet their own needs trying to put the food on the table but they do not have the financial stability to feed their children and their families. What I am saying is that if a single parent working for \$230 a week goes to the shop, you can spend almost the whole of your salary. You have to survive and you get to live another day and work your way back until your next pay, and you have to go to that life over and over again. I think it is very important for us to look at which way we can work together to break the cycle and start bringing services to the community and the community to the services, meet our needs, work together as one people in closing the gap.

Mrs Sarago—I have been in the community just over 2½ weeks now and have been out and about talking to a lot of the individual traditional owners and the government services et cetera in the community itself. What I am hearing from the people is their desire to take ownership of services here. This is coming from them, that everything is controlled by council. They are interested in putting into place things that used to happen previously. For example, there was a corporation that had existed here in the past and they were able to have fresh bread and fresh meats and all those types of things that were fresh. They are looking at doing that sort of thing rather than being dependent on council and are looking to being able to have less restrictions.

The other thing that they were very interested in because of the problem that has been expressed here with regard to hunger is that they actually thought a mess area would be good. We are looking back to the mission days, yes, and they are well aware of that. If there was a big

mess area here, money could be put into a swipe card so that that money is there. Apparently there are quite a few of the people that have slipped in between the CDEP and Centrelink because of not turning up to CDEP so they have been put off it and have not been able to cope with the guidelines et cetera that Centrelink are requiring. So they do not get to receive any money, and that poses a problem in that they are asking family for food and family cannot refuse. That is a vicious circle. More than one person goes hungry then.

CHAIR—We are going to have to finish this off soon.

Mrs Sarago—There are lots of charter flights coming in at the moment. A lot of them are not full. Just to give Marney Wettenhall a little bit more work, she is the government coordinating officer here, and maybe there is a possibility of bringing in other freight type things on those services. Just to use Napranum market garden as an example, they are doing wonderful stuff there. Maybe that could be something that people could have a look at and see how that has been achieved.

Regardless of what was said before about the disposable income here, I find that to be really high when you consider that there is no rent being taken out. When you are on the dole you are not expected to have a lot of money for pleasure and things like that. Usually the dole mainly covers your basics of food and a roof over your head type things. It is a high disposable income but what we need to be doing is actually helping people in budgeting. One of the ladies said there are 15 to 18 in a home and surely we can assist in some other way. I do not know how, but I thought that the mess idea was a really good idea. It is a way that the locals see that they will be able to afford their meals, that is, money being put into an account with a swipe card attached.

CHAIR—Thank you. That brings us to an end of the day's hearing. I am really sorry that I have had to speed this up. We should be in Kowanyama by now; we were meant to have landed there about 10 minutes ago.

Resolved (on motion by **Mr Katter**):

That the committee authorise publication, including on the parliamentary electronic database, of the evidence given before it at public hearing today.

CHAIR—I would like to thank Hansard and I would like to thank the secretariat staff for what they have done. I finish off by handing over to your local member to close it off today.

Mr TURNOUR—I want to thank everyone for coming along. We pay our respects to the traditional owners. Our apologies. Thank you to the community for allowing us to come during this difficult time.

Committee adjourned at 12.03 pm