



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

**HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES**

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES
STRAIT ISLANDER AFFAIRS

Reference: Capacity building in Indigenous communities

TUESDAY, 8 JULY 2003

PALM ISLAND

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER AFFAIRS
Tuesday, 8 July 2003

Members: Mr Wakelin (*Chair*), Ms Hoare (*Deputy Chair*), Mr Cobb, Mrs Draper, Ms Gillard, Mr Haase, Dr Lawrence, Mr Lloyd, Mr Snowdon and Mr Tollner.

Members in attendance: Mr Wakelin, Mr Cobb and Ms Hoare.

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

Strategies to assist Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders better manage the delivery of services within their communities. In particular, the committee will consider building the capacities of:

- (a) community members to better support families, community organisations and representative councils so as to deliver the best outcomes for individuals, families and communities;
- (b) Indigenous organisations to better deliver and influence the delivery of services in the most effective, efficient and accountable way; and
- (c) government agencies so that policy direction and management structures will improve individual and community outcomes for Indigenous people.

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Committee met at 10.07 a.m.

FOSTER, Councillor Delena, Chairperson, Palm Island Aboriginal Council

GEIA, Councillor Deniece, Councillor, Palm Island Aboriginal Council

LACEY, Councillor Alf, Councillor, Palm Island Aboriginal Council

CHAIR—I declare open the public hearing for the Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs inquiry into capacity building in Indigenous communities. We began our work just over 12 months ago and we have received many submissions. We have visited a fair bit of Australia—with a fair bit of Australia to go. Today we are in Palm Island. We would like to take some evidence firstly from the Palm Island Aboriginal Council, a number of members of which we had the pleasure of meeting a little earlier. They were kind enough to give us a cup of coffee, and Deniece has given us a wonderful look around part of the island and some of the significant assets you have here in terms of a developing and significant community. Welcome. Would you like make a short opening statement?

Councillor Foster—This inquiry really encourages me—especially as it has come to the Palm Island Community. It is encouraging to see that people from the federal government—especially members of parliament—are willing to come and sit down and listen to our issues and our concerns. I see it as a stepping stone towards reconciliation. It is only a small start, but at least it is a start that you will hear first-hand about our concerns. Also it really encourages me that you have actually taken the time to come here. Your actions in doing that show me that you really do care what happens to us in a remote Aboriginal community. I would like to welcome you. I hope, too, that when you leave you have a positive view on Palm Island—although you may hear a lot of negative stuff—and some ideas on how we can work together in partnership to address some of those issues. Welcome.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Delena. Further to your comment about remote communities, islands have their particular issues in terms of the infrastructure that is needed and costs and all of those sorts of things. My electorate covers a bit over 90 per cent of the area of South Australia and includes a number of remote Aboriginal communities, including Pitjantjatjara land and Maralinga Tjarutja land, so I am familiar with remoteness. But you get a fair bit more rain here and you have got an island, whereas my electorate is just a big hunk of land with about 2,000 or 3,000 people. From what I have seen this morning in the brief look around, there is a huge investment here in very good infrastructure—the dam, the school, the hospital, the roads and the ACAP program, just to touch on a few. We might hear about how the store is going and things like that.

You mentioned the Commonwealth—that is the federal government—but can we just talk about other levels of government, particularly the relationship between you and the state government and the federal government. Councillor Lacey is clearly an ATSIC connection. I am interested to hear about how you work with your state government and with ATSIC people. We have talked about the NAHS project and other ATSIC projects. I think the dam was a fifty-fifty project, and we talked about that. So can we talk about relationships with the Commonwealth and with the state government and can we talk about relationships with ATSIC and the local or

state Aboriginal department? Can we talk a little about some of those things and about what structures you have and how it is going?

Councillor Lacey—First of all, as you would probably be aware, we are at a turbulent time in this community at this point, with regard to the state government serving a show cause notice on the Palm Island Aboriginal Council, which is the peak democratically elected body in this community, elected by its constituency base. Like ATSIC, we have turbulent times ahead in regard to major changes and to doing things properly, in the sense of ensuring that needs are met. With respect to this community's relationship with the state government, it has come from the protection era, keeping in mind that the state government department of Aboriginal affairs used to be the old 'superintendent' of the community, so there are certainly still a lot of branches within state government that continue to act like big daddies, particularly in Aboriginal communities in Queensland.

CHAIR—How long ago would that have changed?

Councillor Lacey—We are talking about self-management from 1985, particularly for most of the communities in Queensland, which are now known as deeds of grant in trust communities. Certainly, if we talk about capacity building, we heard about capacity building quite some time ago, particularly in the Fitzgerald inquiry that the state government, as you would be aware, headed up in regard to certain issues in remote communities. We were also involved in the Dillon inquiry—which was jointly headed up by the Commonwealth and the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs at that time, Kevin Lingard, who was the National Party minister—and in many other inquiries. The list goes on and on, including particularly the inquiry into Aboriginal deaths in custody and the inquiry into the removal of Aboriginal children, which was headed up by Mick Dodson and Sir Ronald Wilson. Certainly nothing has changed since then in regard to the amount of inquiries and the amount of recommendations that have been tabled to Aboriginal communities—and particularly in regard to government taking a different approach to it.

In regard to our relationship at this point in time, it is fair to say that the department of Aboriginal affairs in Queensland, because of the show cause notice issued by the minister, has distanced itself from the Palm Island Aboriginal Council with regard to answering the 10 points. We have asked for more evidence, and the minister has provided more evidence to show what she based her decision about the show cause notice on. With respect to the 10 issues that were raised, she could only show evidence of five issues out of the original 10. So certainly in terms of our dealings with the department of Aboriginal affairs they have not been as good as probably any other community. So we share our fair share of the problem, like any other Aboriginal community, in regard to dealing with government, whether it is on a daily, monthly or quarterly basis.

With respect to the retail store, as you will probably be well aware right now it is still run by the Queensland government. Six of those stores still remain in the hands of the Queensland government, with no investment given back to the community. Recently, there was an alcohol management plan produced and discussions happened in the community and the community asked that those discussions be left until a later date. Those approaches came out of the Fitzgerald finding in regards to the special inquiry that the Beattie government appointed him to do in Queensland. It looked particularly at family violence and violence generally across the board.

If we talk about the canteen, as it is known in the report, or the hotels or the pubs, as we call them, that local councils run in some of our communities, on the one hand the government says, 'We are setting up an alcohol management board,' but on the other hand it says, 'All the profits that are made from the pub will continue to be given to you to run your normal services within your council.' My view—and this is my personal view as a community member—is: if the pub is so much of an issue then why don't they take it and take the lot and give us funding from somewhere else to make up for what we have lost out on?

CHAIR—Can I suggest a couple of things? I asked the question about the relationship with the state and with ATSIC and with the federal government. I am happy to talk about the sorts of things you have talked about, but much of what you are talking about is related to state matters, which we do not have any jurisdiction over, as you would appreciate. We have to take account of them. You would be aware of the COAG trials and the Cape York Peninsula trial. In the Pitjantjatjara lands, which I mentioned, there is a trial as well in terms of the Commonwealth and the state and ATSIC and interested groups and the community working together to see what we can do better.

I am happy, as I said, to come back to the state issues, but I wondered whether we might use our time this morning to talk about the relationship with the Commonwealth and with ATSIC, because you are familiar with ATSIC. I have a list here of issues around education, substance abuse, employment, the young and family violence—which you have touched on. These are fundamental issues which are really coming to the fore more and more. Sexual violence is an issue as well. So I invite you to talk a little bit more about state issues if you want to, but I ask you to come to the federal issues as well, and I would certainly welcome any comments by Delena and Deniece as well on anything about those subjects. I will then open it up to my colleagues to ask a few questions.

So, to give you a bit of guidance of what we are here to seek, we are aware of the difficulties with the state government, and it is not for us to enter into that; that is a jurisdictional issue for them. We will not have any view on that; we will not be able to assist in any way. We are here to make general inquiry about your capacity and what things we need to do in the medium- and long-term to strengthen Palm Island. From what I have seen this morning, I feel pretty positive. You could not help but be positive when you drive around an island like this, I reckon, particularly with someone like Deniece, who is a very good advocate for the island. It is great to meet councillors such as yourself: you are welcoming us and giving us your hospitality. So those are just a few comments to give you guidance about where we are coming from. Does that help?

Councillor Lacey—Yes, thank you. Why I led in those areas is—

CHAIR—I understand that you are very aware of those issues. But that area is not our cup of tea. We need to be totally honest with you that it is not. We very much hope that can all be resolved, but that is as far as we can go. We need to talk about those broader issues that are our tasks within our nation—within the whole of Australia.

Councillor Lacey—The second issue in regard to that is investment. We have talked briefly about investments this morning, and particularly about what the Commonwealth has invested in the community—particularly through NAHS. There is also the dam project we talked about this morning, which is a fifty-fifty joint project between ATSIC and the state. The upgrade to the

airport was a fifty-fifty arrangement between the Queensland transport department and ATSIC. In terms of investment, regardless of the political bashings and knockings of ATSIC at the moment, in retrospect we need to give credit where credit is due. Some of their programs have been and are being delivered successfully on the ground. Regardless of what the news reports of the day are saying and what other members of parliament are saying, we—the people here at the grassroots—are seeing some positive outcomes from some of those investments.

The other important one is the investment that Centrelink has made in the community in regard to moving from a community agent to an almost fully-fledged community Centrelink office, to provide our people with choices in accessing proper Centrelink services in this community. No doubt people from Centrelink are here today. They have done a wonderful job. If we talk about choice and access to choices, we have an office in this community that is no longer an agent office; it is now almost a fully-fledged Centrelink office. It saves our people a return airfare to Townsville, which has the nearest Centrelink city office. That has certainly made a big impact in regard to those areas.

CHAIR—How long has that office been with you? How long ago did it change?

Councillor Lacey—About two years ago.

CHAIR—It is significant that the office is a permanent service.

Councillor Lacey—Yes. Housing is always an issue in Aboriginal communities—a big issue. Infrastructure, such as water and sewerage is another one. You had a look this morning at the AACAP program that has been delivered jointly between ATSIC and the Commonwealth health department.

CHAIR—We have seen a little bit. We can probably see a little bit more this afternoon. We have not seen too much.

Councillor Lacey—That is certainly making an impact in the community. By the time the program is finished it will provide 66 bedrooms to the people of Palm. As one of the players in that, as I said in the local newspaper—and I will continue to stand by it—I am proud of those achievements because at the end of the day it gives the little people in the community much needed choices in accommodation.

CHAIR—Do you know the housing stock on Palm Island—the number of houses? What is the shortfall?

Councillor Lacey—There is currently a stock of 310 and we have a waiting list of 500-plus.

Mr JOHN COBB—Houses or people?

Councillor Lacey—People—a waiting list of 500-plus of people continuing to wait for houses.

Ms HOARE—Where do they live?

Councillor Lacey—In overcrowded situations. You sometimes have two or three families in three-bedroom homes.

CHAIR—We have seen today some very impressive buildings and houses, but there is still a fair way to go. I have had more than a fair go. I invite people to be fairly informal and relaxed. Mr Cobb and Kelly Hoare, our deputy chair, will ask their questions. Come in where you would like to on any of these issues. We are just getting a feel. We have our own views about where we think Australia might go on Aboriginal issues. We have to thrash that out in the report at a later point.

Ms HOARE—In our earlier discussions you talked about the CDEP and in particular the fishing venture. It seems to be quite successful at the moment. I wonder if you can flesh the program out a bit more for us for the record and maybe talk about whether or not there has been any look at private partnerships as well as community-Commonwealth partnerships—for private investment?

Councillor Lacey—When we talk about private investment in the community, we have local businesses in the community. From council's point of view, we continue to maintain and encourage community groups and community organisations to build those relationships, whether they be with the private sector or the public sector.

The CDEP fishing venture is probably a fine example because they deal with the fishing market in Townsville. That venture is wholly and solely run by CDEP, which is governed by a board of directors of local people. In terms of the numbers there, Palm has a ceiling of 275 places, and within those 275 places there are different programs, I suppose, that are being run within the organisation.

Ms HOARE—How many places are used by the fishing venture?

Councillor Lacey—I would not know that off the top of my head at the moment, sorry. Someone from CDEP would be in a position to answer some of those in depth questions.

CHAIR—You could take that on notice.

Ms HOARE—The reason I ask is this: could the council foresee the fishing project eventually being an independently run, sustainable business, so whatever CDEP places are used at the moment could maybe then be transferred to another area to build up skills for young people?

Councillor Lacey—Probably in terms of a review of CDEP nationally, I am not too sure what the outcomes from the latest report are. But I think it suggests, particularly where business ventures are happening within CDEP, that they try to stand alone to free up the places for more people to join CDEP. But in terms of the current fishing venture the board of the CDEP in the community would be best placed to answer that question.

Mr JOHN COBB—My electorate is not so different from Barry's. It has a couple of bigger towns but it includes most of western New South Wales. I am very familiar with the remote side, but not this type of remoteness where you are not landlocked but water locked. Obviously, you do not encourage outsiders to come and live here, and I gather that not many people really

leave—not permanently. Following on a little bit from where Kelly was, do you see much opportunity for people to get into business, outside of what is currently happening? Is there any encouragement given to individuals to try to do something—within the community, I mean; forget about government and the departments. Do you as a community encourage or, in a funny way, discourage people from trying to take whatever opportunities might exist—and I guess I am asking if any do? I wonder if Delena or Deniece could tell us whether anything is happening to try to get individuals to get outside the square a bit?

Councillor Foster—At the moment, Palm Island Council receives \$33,000 from the state government in relation to the Meeting Challenges, Making Choices program, which arose out of the Fitzgerald report. Council has asked if we can use \$15,000 of that money to put together a blueprint for a business plan to look at some small, viable business options. We will consult with the community so that the plan will be owned by the community.

In the past, a group of businesswomen—the Soroptimists—were funded through the Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy to set women up in small business. That fell through. There was no ongoing follow-up and no mentoring. Only a couple of ladies ended up moving on with it. There was also some money put in through DATSIP in another area for state economic development—that may have been funded by ATSIC—to set people up in small businesses. That has failed.

We spoke about, through our vision plan meetings, how we can build small businesses and enterprises for the community and how we can plan it properly. We are at the stage of going back to the drawing board and providing a blueprint for the community which the community can work towards in developing those areas.

Ms HOARE—That is something that brings us to how the Commonwealth delivers services in your community. There are various Commonwealth programs available both through DEWR and the department of industry to assist people in setting up small business. The one that has been referred to in the last few days is the New Enterprise Incentive Scheme, NEIS, which is delivered by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations. It provides income support and all the other support that people need, whether they are living in Palm Island or my community at Newcastle—all the structured support that they need to set up a small business and to ensure that the small business, whatever it be, does not fall over and has a very high chance of success. How is the Commonwealth delivering these types of programs in your community? Are they delivering?

Councillor Foster—No, they are not. The problem that we have had in the past is that community people wanted to set up businesses that were successful but did not have the skills to plan it properly—looking at marketing, sales and all of those areas. Once we get the business plan for the community that will be a starting point for us. My own personal view is that before we can do any major development we must also develop our people. We need to also look at those training opportunities so that our people can get skills in financial management, marketing, sales and all that.

Through the Soroptimists, we had a group of 10 to 15 community members who went through the program. They ended up with a certificate. They did stuff like marketing. But we need to

have that ongoing. Maybe through those training programs we can achieve that but we have not heard about them.

Mr JOHN COBB—There are groups on the mainland who are looking at doing this. I wonder if it wouldn't be a good idea for some of your young people who are being trained to go and work with them for a while to see what is happening over there. I know it is not the same and there are more business opportunities on the mainland, obviously, than there are here. Do you send any of your people to work with other groups that are doing things?

Councillor Foster—The council is currently looking at sending over our own staff to work with Thuringowa City Council. We have already spoken to the mayor and the CEO there to see how we could do that exchange, I suppose to try and expose them to the mainstream, especially in the administration area and in the work department.

CHAIR—So you are actually putting out—

Councillor Foster—We are looking at it.

Mr JOHN COBB—Do any of the councillors go and see what is happening in other places?

Councillor Foster—Councillor Lacey—maybe only two councillors.

Councillor Geia—One councillor has gone to visit another Aboriginal community just to have a look at their set-up, their structure and how they run their businesses in their community. We have sent a few of the councillors to an Aboriginal community up in the north.

CHAIR—I have a few points to tick off, and it will not take a lot of time. I think everybody accepts that education is very important. I would like to try and gauge, in terms of the two schools that you have here, how you are feeling about the attendance rates. We know that the attendance rates are quite often low across Australia, and there would be a number of reasons for that. To home in on the questions in a general way: how is education going on Palm Island and how important do you see literacy and numeracy for the future? They are the opening questions. I know that some council members would be mothers and fathers and would have a view about this.

Councillor Geia—I could add to that. The education system in this community is failing us. It is not 100 per cent the way that we, as a community, want it to be delivered—culturally appropriately. That is why we have a lot of high school dropouts and kids that do not go to school at all. We get a lot of young people from down south who come up here and teach our children. They are not even parents themselves, so they do not have parenting skills in how to relate to our young children. Just sending our kids off to high school on the mainland is completely different to sending our kids to a high school here on Palm Island. It is not the same—the level is definitely not the same. They are struggling on the mainland. That is why a lot of families pull their children back from mainland school and keep them here at Palm Island.

We as parents, caregivers, guardians, grandmothers and grandfathers can voice our concerns with the school and with the department of education. It seems to be going nowhere. We have struggled with the education system here for a long time. The department of education has

definitely tried to bring in new ideas, new ways and new styles of teaching, but it is not our way, so it does not suit us. We may boast that we have our own Indigenous teachers teaching our children. That is a plus, a positive, for us. The deputy principal is a Torres Strait Islander who is married to an Aboriginal man from Palm Island. That is a plus to us. But the decisions do not lie with our own people on the ground; it is further up the food chain. But it is a struggle that we have to persevere with, I guess.

CHAIR—How valuable do you see literacy and numeracy—is it essential?

Councillor Geia—Education is the key to getting our black doctors and our black lawyers; education is the key to having our black politicians. Numeracy and literacy is a priority for us.

CHAIR—Can you give us one or two clues as to what is culturally appropriate? What will change that?

Mr JOHN COBB—And on the federal or state side, what can we do differently that will encourage attendance?

CHAIR—My question is quite specific: what is the culturally appropriate way? I understand that—and here I would be presuming this from a whitefella's point of view—but I think it is important to try to deal with this according to what is culturally appropriate.

Councillor Geia—It is about community ownership. Give us the school and we will run it. We will own it and we will put in our own programs and we will set up our own disciplinary measures. If a kid plays up now, he will get suspended for seven days. If he goes back to school and gets suspended again, it is for 21 days. This poor kid is living and growing up not even educated—he is standing outside the classroom. Give us ownership of the schools and we will run them our way.

CHAIR—And you are pretty confident that you would see literacy and numeracy and attendance rates pick up?

Councillor Geia—I am confident. I have seen a black community school in Brisbane do it, and it is successful. I have been there with the chairlady. It is a successful program.

Mr JOHN COBB—I guess that is a state decision. Federally, is there anything that we can do? What you are saying is, 'Let us determine how to run the school.' What will attract the children to want to be there? More particularly, what will ensure the parents make sure they go?

Councillor Foster—As a community—and we have started doing it through our vision plan meetings—we have started talking about programs that could be run and how support could be given to the schools. But the programs that we want to set up have not been getting to the government departments. They are coming to us with 'this is the way you do it' so it is coming from the top down whereas, as I think Councillor Geia is saying, we need to do it our way from the bottom up for it to be successful. There are a number of issues that we have. A lot of children in our schools suffer with ADD and a lot of children have alcohol syndrome. There is no real support there for them to learn. As Councillor Geia said, if they play up, if they misbehave, they are stood outside the classroom every morning and then they are suspended for seven days. If

they play up again when they get back, it is 14 days and I think that seven days is added all the time. Then the poor kid does not end up going to school.

CHAIR—What form of governance—in terms of a school council and input into it and discussion by it and interchange with it—is there?

Councillor Foster—They are in the process of setting up a school council. I do not know whether they have done it.

CHAIR—But you would still worry about the influence that you could have at the senior level?

Councillor Foster—Yes.

CHAIR—I need to start winding this up, but I wanted to get in that point about education. I think we have a very good view of the problem. We have a lot tougher job to define the solution—and you would understand that—because it is a state jurisdiction, but from a Commonwealth perspective I agree that that is the actual perspective. You would probably all be aware of the Collins report in the Northern Territory, a report by former Senator Bob Collins on literacy and numeracy. Bob was a pretty significant man from the Territory who had a lot of experience of Aboriginal issues. He was a Labor former minister put in, after he left politics, by a Liberal government to have a look at this, and you have reinforced what he was talking about. I want to tackle one more thing and I would encourage you to say anything on what we have not covered or anything that you would particularly like to mention before we wind this up. I want to talk about substance abuse, and you might want to bring into the discussion the centre that you have here. How big a problem is it for you? There is always some plan or mechanism, so how are you going in tackling it? How is your centre going?

Councillor Foster—I think it is a major problem. Anywhere in Australia alcohol and drugs are a problem. As I said earlier, when we put up our plans and programs to try to tackle the issues on the ground, they do not get funded. I know it is a state jurisdiction, but through Meeting Challenges, Making Choices the Palm Island community has not received any funding to deal with those issues. We actually put in for funding for child protection, alcohol and drug, and family violence programs and not one single submission was accepted and approved. If we are ever going to work towards solving those issues, we have to work in the community and start addressing them with our programs.

Mr JOHN COBB—Are there programs—not just the ones that your community or your council has ticked off on—set up which are different to your programs dealing with drug and alcohol problems et cetera? Are there programs currently set up under the state bureaucracy that you have tried to ask them to run a different way?

Councillor Foster—Yes. They are actually in isolation. As an example, I will use the healing centre funding that was done through community consultation. It was set up so each community organisation would be involved in providing a service to individuals, to families. That was not funded, whereas the state one is working in isolation.

Mr JOHN COBB—My question was getting to the fact that you are not necessarily asking for more money; it is just that the money is being spent in a different way to the way you want it spent. Is that what you want?

Councillor Foster—No. We are actually asking for more funds because there have been gaps that have been identified in different areas. To be effective, I believe we need to fill those gaps.

CHAIR—For example, would you know whether you would access the national Tough on Drugs strategy? Would you know whether you have accessed any Commonwealth money in the last couple of years?

Councillor Foster—No, I would not know.

CHAIR—How is your centre going? I think you have a substance abuse centre. How is that going?

Councillor Foster—They are pretty good at the moment. They have their own board of directors in place. It would probably be worth while to go more in depth with that area—to talk to them about it.

CHAIR—Do you have anything that you would like to conclude with—a concluding comment or two?

Councillor Foster—We would probably like to see more money for family violence come into the communities from the Commonwealth, because we seem to miss out at the state level. We notice that a lot of money went up into the cape areas.

CHAIR—The Prime Minister, you might know, is taking a great interest in this issue at the moment. I think it is in the papers today. We do not have authority to approve it but we certainly hear the request and it will be passed back.

Councillor Lacey—One comment I would like to make is with regard to whether it is state jurisdiction or not. At the end of the day, the Commonwealth also has a responsibility in terms of its joint funding arrangement with state government, particularly with regard to funding across the board and delivering programs. When we talk about black housing and infrastructure, for instance, the Commonwealth government gives X amount of dollars to the state Department of Housing for delivering housing programs in the state. They give a certain amount of dollars for other programs. The terms of reference are between the state and Commonwealth through a joint effort most of the time. Particularly in Aboriginal affairs, we do not see the terms of reference that the Commonwealth government agrees with the state government to deliver Aboriginal services.

CHAIR—You do not see that? You are not aware of it? You would like to be more aware of what is happening?

Councillor Lacey—I just want to come back to your comment where you raised the issue that it is really a state jurisdiction. I agree with you but, at the end of the day if we talk about a state

jurisdiction we have to keep in mind that the Commonwealth also jointly funds some of these programs. Then you have joint agreements.

Mr JOHN COBB—Do you mean you would like to talk to the Commonwealth before they have an agreement with the state?

Councillor Lacey—It is probably like what Wilson Tuckey is saying at the moment. He believes that ATSIC should be delivered directly to the community. There are a lot of comments about ATSIC at the moment. I am not here to defend or save ATSIC. All I am saying is that while ATSIC gets a good bashing, and the Aboriginal affairs department gets a good bashing, we also need to ask about the delivery of other Commonwealth services to our people, because I do not see them getting kicked in the guts for what they are delivering. Are they delivering good outcomes to our people?

CHAIR—That is a very fair point. There is a specific issue with Palm Island, and I wanted to make sure that we did not misunderstand that is a state jurisdiction concerning the immediate future. I want to separate that so that I did not mislead you that we could be involved in those particular issues you are dealing with locally at the moment. But I fully agree with what you are saying.

Councillor Lacey—In my understanding of the COAG agreement at the moment with regard to ensuring delivery of services, you have got the federal minister chairing these committees and all the state ministers. A lot of our ministers go to a lot of the COAG meetings. In delivering those programs, even with the state arrangement at the moment, by the time the dollars get to the people who are supposed to deliver the services a big heap of the cream is taken off the top by everybody else before it even gets to us and it leaves us with very little money to deliver the services on the ground.

CHAIR—There are two points of view—and that is a really important point, and we need more time to discuss this, but we really do not have it. We can debate the issue of the amount of money allocated; there will always be a need for more money. That is one issue. But there is also an issue about the amount of money that is there and how that is spent. There has been a concern for a long time that that money is not getting to the community in the most effective way—and the chairperson mentioned ‘bottom up’. As I understand the Tuckey view, he is trying to encourage the idea that the community receives value for moneys that are being spent. Let us argue about how more money should be allocated. That is where the debate is at. It is a debate worth having. It is not to decry ATSIC and the effort that has been made in the past, because it has done a lot of good work. But there are problems with ATSIC and no-one denies that currently.

Councillor Geia—In closing, during the last five years I have been involved with the council I am pretty positive and I feel pretty good about the infrastructure and the works are going on here. Councillor Lacey and I share the portfolio for health, housing and infrastructure and, since doing so, we have seen progress. We have seen progress in houses, roads, water upgrades, sewerage upgrades and waste management. I believe we are going in the right direction with infrastructure and development and I am pretty pleased about that. I feel good as a Palm Islander. Things are progressing. We just have to stay positive.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. We really appreciate you being with us. Thank you for the discussion we have been able to have.

[10.55 a.m.]

GEIA, Ms Josephine Grace, Chairperson, Palm Island Community Justice Group

ISARO, Mrs Dulcie, Executive Member, Palm Island Community Justice Group

ISARO, Mr Sevese, Executive Member, Palm Island Community Justice Group

WATSON, Mr Ralph, Executive Member, Palm Island Community Justice Group

WYLES, Mr Owen, Executive Member, Palm Island Community Justice Group

HURLEY, Senior Sergeant Christopher James, Officer In Charge, Palm Island, Queensland Police Service

CHAIR—I welcome to our public hearing this morning representatives of the Palm Island Community Justice Group and a representative of the Queensland Police Service. For those who were not here earlier, I should repeat that we have been on the track now for about 12 months looking at the issue of capacity building in communities—individuals, families, regional and community bodies—and also looking at how the government in return can work with the community. So the inquiry is about as broad as you want to make it. We are interested in how we can do things better and what some of the problems are, particularly from a federal perspective, but we know it all fits together—state, federally and locally. The deputy chair is Kelly Hoare from New South Wales, John Cobb is from New South Wales and I am from South Australia. Ninety per cent of my electorate is a remote area—we talked about remoteness before—so I know a little bit about remoteness.

I invite you to make a brief opening statement, and then we can have a fairly informal discussion about how we see the issues. Ms Geia, as chairperson of the Palm Island Community Justice Group, would you like to say a few words about what you are doing? I think I can predict some of the things you might want to talk about. Where would you like to put your priorities, and how are you going?

Ms Geia—I would like to state first and foremost that next month we will have been operating for 10 years. We started on 25 August 1993. We have been operating all that time. We did not have the proper requisites while operating until the middle of last year, when we were able to get the office requisites and equipment. With the struggles over the years, we have found that where help is needed most of all in the community is with domestic violence matters. Excessive consumption of alcohol is a problem now that sly grogging and drug dealing have been introduced. That is another thing that needs to be looked at. There is the question of empowerment of the group, in particular how we assist the police and how they assist us. Many people say that the police do not do their job at times because of lack of numbers in the police force. We know extra police are needed right throughout Queensland, but we need to have extra police to police issues here.

Many other things that we deal with include family feuds, when they happen. Considering what Palm Island used to be, it has now quietened down a whole lot. I guess there would be members in the community, and present here, who would know about those issues as well. A lot of things stem from the backbiting and gossiping that causes such arguments—teasing, name calling and such. What our people need to do here is wake up from what they are doing. There is a lot of jealousy within the community and when other people come in to try to help lift the place up, our people have to break from that kind of thing and accept that there are people with skills and knowledge—regardless of race, creed or colour—who can come in and help with their knowledge and expertise. If we want to move ahead then we have to get up: we cannot just wallow in self pity and lie there. That is how I see it from my perspective. I guess I could say that for the group, but each individual can speak for themselves.

We are more than happy to assist the police in the areas where help is needed, and we certainly do need the extra police. When people come in, we know that each one has to respect the rules of this community—there are guidelines and protocols in place. If we had to go to another country we would have to abide by that country's rules and guidelines too so in a likewise manner we expect them to do the same thing. Rather than be fighting, arguing and bickering with one another, from what I can see, we should be finding solutions to help.

What we need more in this community are more resources. We are under-resourced in many ways. We have worked over the years without the resources that were needed here. I can say that I am proud of the group because we have persevered this long, but it is by the grace of God that we got through and we stand fast and firm by our faith. That is the most important thing. We are more than happy. We sit with the JP mags on the bench with the magistrate, and we also write up pre-sentence reports and such things to the magistrate. If I can stop there, maybe you want to ask questions.

CHAIR—There were a number of things that occurred to me while you were speaking, but there were two things that would help me get a handle on the community justice group. Did something happen a decade or so ago? Did it get to a point where community action was needed to respond to the way you people saw it? What was it that motivated you to become involved?

Ms Geia—At that time those of us on the group had no knowledge. We were not self-appointed. Many people tend to think that we appointed ourselves. It was not that way at all; it all came about through research done by the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. The research was done by John Adams from the Yalga-binbi institute in Cairns, who is now working at Shalom Christian College in Townsville. That is how this all came about.

CHAIR—How many of you are there? Do you meet on a regular basis?

Ms Geia—There are 35 members. Five to seven members sit as the exec body and deal with issues, because everybody is caught up in their own work.

CHAIR—You mentioned reports to the magistrate.

Ms Geia—We do pre-sentence reports. This morning in particular, we dealt with a young gentleman who had to come in and report to the group—he was ordered by the magistrate prior to his sitting in court tomorrow.

Mr JOHN COBB—So the magistrate will order people to report to this group?

Ms Geia—Yes.

Mr JOHN COBB—Does Chris sit on the group?

Ms Geia—They are more than welcome to come in—it is open—because we work in conjunction with them. We like to see a member from each group come in—there should be a rep from council and a rep from health. That has happened on a couple of occasions but, because everybody is pretty tied up, we cannot sit back and wait for everyone—we have to get on or the work would pile up. I might add that none of us get paid; we do not enter into it to have any money—we do not want it that way. It is from the heart that we work because that is where the genuine part comes in.

CHAIR—I heard some positive outcomes coming through quite clearly, despite the problems. You have seen improvement and development here over the last decade, so you are quite positive about that?

Ms Geia—Yes, I am.

CHAIR—I understand from your representatives that you sit on the alcohol and drugs council.

Ms Geia—Yes.

CHAIR—You mentioned the problems of domestic violence, grog and drugs, the resources, and the difficulty the police and the committee have because of those issues. Can you give us an insight into how the alcohol and drugs are impacting on you at the moment? How do you see it at the moment? What are some of the things you would like to see happen that the government might be able to help with? It is a tough question I know.

Ms Geia—That is all right; I can answer it. I know what it is about. I would like to see a lot of things happen, that is me as an individual and from my perspective. I would like to see more resources put into place here; that there are more outlets and not just one, because people feel threatened in a way at times that when they come into the place they do not like certain things. A lot of them are not really bound to guidelines and restrictions. But part of their sobriety, of healing within, is that they have to abide by these rules and guidelines otherwise how are they going to discipline themselves and get it into line and into place? It is a bit hard when there are friends who mock them and tease them. A lot of them become embarrassed. That is a big thing with our people.

CHAIR—Peer pressure?

Ms Geia—Yes.

CHAIR—So you are saying diversity of service and options?

Ms Geia—Yes. I would also like to ask another question. We have wanted a diversion centre built. We have applied through the board down there at Ferdies. We were told that we cannot have it; there is no need to because we have got a hospital here. This has only 14 beds for a big community of 3½ thousand. Why couldn't there be a diversionary centre built? Why are they knocking us? We are the largest Aboriginal community. Many things that our people have asked for over the years we did not get straight off—we know that. We know it cannot come on a silver platter to us, that we have to work towards that goal. But why is it that it cannot be given?

CHAIR—I do not know the answer to your question.

Ms Geia—No, but that is the question that I ask you.

CHAIR—It is on the public record and we will certainly have a look at it. I asked the council earlier if they knew whether any money had come from the Commonwealth Tough on Drugs strategy. The Commonwealth—led very strongly by the Prime Minister and by previous prime ministers—has taken lead action in the Tough on Drugs strategy and there has been Commonwealth money allocated. Therefore, the question becomes: why hasn't Palm Island been able to access some of that money? We were checking today to see whether there has been any money. We do not think there has been. That is part of it and maybe that could help with a diversionary program.

The issue usually becomes—and this is where I go to my own electorate experience—that you can have assistance with capital and a short-term program, maybe up to three years, but it is the recurrent funding that usually ends up with the state and that is where the state worries about it. That is something we will have to address in our report. That is a problem for governance, where these issues are not dealt with as well as they might be because of the lack of Commonwealth-state coherence. I will take the question on notice if I may, but you have your finger on a key question. I have several questions for Senior Sergeant Hurley before I hand over to my colleagues. You have been here for a little while?

Snr Sgt Hurley—Eight months now.

CHAIR—What is your role as part of the community justice group? I know you are not able to comment about resources because they are allocated, but you will be able to answer in a way that talks about how you prioritise your resources and what resources can mean to help the situation. There are two parts to the question: your role within the community and the resources issue.

Snr Sgt Hurley—In relation to the role, as the officer in charge I am basically the liaison between the police and the community justice group. I was asked before by Mr Cobb whether I was involved in the group. They have a meeting every Tuesday. I have been to a small number of those meetings. Part of the group that I am involved in is the group that created a transport advisory committee. Within that committee there are members of the Queensland police service, the community justice group, health, education, the council and any other interested stakeholders basically.

It was asked before if it had been successful in the past 10 years. I can say that in the past eight months the group has had success to the transport advisory. Never before had we had

school zones; we now have 40 kilometre per hour school zones instead of 50 kilometres per hour. Palm Island has the first ever sign prohibiting riding in the back of utes. They are big, clear signs, and three are going to be put about the island, because there is new bitumen on the roads and, as you are well aware, the roads are going to be further improved over the next couple of months by the Army.

CHAIR—How tough is it to police the no riding in utes prohibition?

Snr Sgt Hurley—The response is one of the best I have had from a community. Unfortunately, there had been an untimely death of young men off the back of a ute in September. I arrived in November and, because the death of the young men, it was a little bit easier for the police. People realise it is a dangerous practice. It was through education—putting out simplified posters from our station here and through the community justice group in transport meetings—so it has not been too bad. We are having a bit of an uphill battle with seat belts, but that is ongoing.

CHAIR—Congratulations on the issue of riding in the back of utes, anyway.

Snr Sgt Hurley—Our next battle is to get the kids to wear helmets. That is a battle but, again, through the transport advisory committee, the store now stocks helmets, and we are going to conduct an education campaign through the school in the latter half of the year. As police and as a group, we have found that you cannot just go out and enforce straightaway; you must educate, because Palm Island has had a lifestyle that has been so laid-back for all these years. The majority of people on the island come and speak to the group and they say that they still want the laid-back lifestyle, but they want law and order to be the same as the mainland. On arriving here, it was difficult to enforce that—you had to become a bit of a bully.

But since 1 December, when we started our education and offered an amnesty period for people to come in, we have had 103 vehicles registered. You would not think that there were that many on the island, but there are quite a few vehicles on the island and that is how many new registrations and drivers licences came forward. That is the way we go. We want to educate first and then discuss it as a group—do we think that that education has worked? If it has not, we will look to go down another avenue of education. If we think it has, then we would move onto enforcement, exactly the same as on the mainland.

I have had the benefit of working in many communities, but a lot of the police have not. In the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, you must speak in Aboriginal English—very simplified English. Most of the brochures put out by Queensland Transport are directed at mainstream communities. They have recognised that and at our last meeting they were talking about doing brochures specifically for Aboriginal and islander communities.

CHAIR—Congratulations.

Snr Sgt Hurley—A lot of Aboriginal and islander people pick up a lot more from the pictures. That is why the signs are so large. There is no writing on them—it is just a straight picture. So we have had success in the transport advisory committee.

Our relationship with the community justice group is probably at an all-time high, basically because of the positive and honest communication between us: they will let us know if they feel we are doing the right thing by the community; we will take people from the front counter. As Pena said, a lot of the arguments here are very childish, but you must understand that it is an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and a lot of it comes down to jealousy—past boyfriends and girlfriends—and insults and swearing at each other. You and I might just shrug it off, but it is a big insult to swear at a person here. We have got to deal with that.

How we deal with those types of things that have not been legislated in state law is through the community justice group. We have mediation sessions, basically. The Queensland Police Service have recognised the importance of community justice groups, and in their forthcoming police station there is actually a mediation area. It is not within the police station, in our area; it is in an area out the front, a garden area. It is almost a neutral area, you might say. Had I been here earlier I would have been able to do a report to the Queensland Police Service about the importance of the community justice groups, because it would be great to have them in a building that is near the police station. The building they are in at the moment is an older building, and it is really beyond its life span.

CHAIR—It is past its use-by date, yes. I was smiling slightly to myself when you were talking about the abuse; anyone who has witnessed parliament in session might say that we go a bit over the top. Can you talk about the resources, the new police station and maybe integration—the sort of thing you just talked about with the police station—and the officers themselves. You have touched on a very good point. You have had the experience across a number of stations, by the sound of it, and that practical relationship with the communities and understanding how you do that well is quite critical.

Snr Sgt Hurley—I will give you a bit of background. The police station here is also outdated. The plans for a new police station have been approved by the Queensland government. There is a land issue that the QPS and the council are working out at the moment and, hopefully, that will be resolved in the near future. We have got the site there, right beside the old one. The station here houses nine police officers: seven uniforms and two detectives. The detectives were brought in because of the community justice group and their close association with detectives in Townsville. That happened before I was here, and Pena can talk about that. Per capita this community does have a lot of police officers: nine to 3,500 people. However, when you look at the statistics—I have to be careful about what I say here, obviously—it is my opinion that this community could do with more police.

CHAIR—Based on the work load.

Snr Sgt Hurley—The issue we have then is accommodation for the police. There is a lack of accommodation on the island. Not just the police are finding that; education is finding that as well.

CHAIR—What Aboriginal involvement is there with the Police Service?

Snr Sgt Hurley—We have a police liaison officer—one—who is an Aboriginal fellow, a local fellow. I do not know why we only have one. I am going to campaign to get more, because

Normanton, which is smaller—even though it is not considered a community, it has a large Aboriginal population—has two. Cloncurry has two. Mount Isa has several.

CHAIR—I believe that is another issue too—the recruitment of Aboriginal people into the mainstream police service. I presume there are efforts towards that as well?

Snr Sgt Hurley—There are, but that is more through Brisbane. The TAFE at Innisfail has what they call a bridging course. Some people on Palm Island have actually expressed an interest in going into the state police. That is where you give them that information and put them in touch with those people at Innisfail—and there are also officers in Townsville and Cairns who handle that. They had a trial in Yarrabah, in Woorabinda and on Badu Island of QATSIPs, which stands for Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Police. With regard to the structure, you might say you have community police officers and then you have police liaison officers, QATSIPs and state police. QATSIPs have basically the same powers as the state police, but they are not sworn officers. They have found that a lot of those officers, through the skills they have gained being a QATSIP, are going on to become state police officers.

Ms HOARE—If I may, I would like to go back to the question of domestic violence. I noticed when we were travelling around that there was a women's centre. Is there any type of refuge for women and their children, and how does that work? Also, you mentioned that the group is being used by the court system to help design programs for people who have come up through the court system. Chris, you also spoke about acts which are not actually legislated. Is the group accessed by people who want to look for preventative measures, where they can see that there could be the possibility of domestic violence occurring and where it has not yet occurred? For those mediation programs that you run, can a person or a family just come to you and say, 'We need some help in our situation before it gets too bad.'

Ms Geia—Yes, we have many of them. We try as best we can to assist in any way possible. Having Family Services coming into it is another thing in this community—particularly with two families here, where there has been some feuding going on. To me, having Family Services stepping in is a threat to our people here. I know that one case just recently was thrown out, and for them to step in after a case has been thrown out is going way beyond them and it is wrong. The stolen generation is happening right under our very noses in this day and age, which is not right. If anything, with all due respect, I see them as the people who are breaking up our families here, which is wrong.

Ms HOARE—Family Services, I presume, is a Queensland state department similar to DOCS in New South Wales. You said that none of you are paid. There is a whole range of Commonwealth programs, not only in the legal field—the chair spoke about domestic violence and Tough on Drugs, and there is also the FACS Stronger Families and Communities Strategy, funding for child care arrangements and respite services. Are those services being delivered to Palm Island? Is the community justice group able to access the programs which are available?

Ms Geia—We can access them, because our own people are working there—that is, if they have enough workers. That is where, again, there is a breakdown—there are not enough young people being trained in those areas, especially now that the government calls for suitability checks on people to take place. If they have a criminal history then they cannot be working with children. Whether it is here or in any other Aboriginal community, we know that everybody has

to have that. That is the understanding we have. Even on the group, we had to have a criminal history check. If any one of us here had anything wrong in any way—prison or whatever—we could not be on the group. There is an understanding that we have to be impartial, even when our families are coming before us, and that is in all fairness. Confidentiality is another thing. We cannot go outside the group with what we talk about and repeat it out there—that is not right. We should not be on the group if that is the way we feel.

Ms HOARE—But are you able to access the actual government programs and the Commonwealth funding that is available out there right across the country?

Ms Geia—Here in the community we can.

Ms HOARE—Yes, I am talking about here, in Palm Island. For example, have you been able to access Tough on Drugs, which is the one the chair asked about, or Stronger Families and Communities?

Mr JOHN COBB—Stronger Families and Communities is where you can set up a local program—have you been able to get into any of that?

Ms Geia—We would like to do that. We have people around and we have representatives in ATSIC who we could utilise. Then it is up to them as individuals to come forward and sit with us if they want to give anything to help out and we can share with them. This is what we are all about—being a preventative body and helping people to find these organisations. I come back to the weak point again, which is Family Services. As I said, they are breaking up a good family here. To take children away is to have the stolen generation happening right under our very noses in this modern day and age. How can we assist when you are breaking up a good family, taking their children away from them and wanting to put them into another family—someone that may not be a strong point? That is the point there.

Mr JOHN COBB—Do you mean taking them off the island, or do you mean giving them to another family on the island?

Ms Geia—Even if they took them off the island, which they did at one stage.

Mr JOHN COBB—I am talking about now.

Ms Geia—Now they are back here with the parents. A couple had a child given to them with no written agreement; there was a verbal agreement by the two parents to hand over the child for this couple to look after. The mother has a problem with alcohol. She herself saw that this couple could help her, and then all of a sudden their privacy is being invaded again. It is an invasion of their privacy to now try to take from them this young child, who was given to them by their parent, and send it to another community, to where the dad's sister is, up in Kowanyama, to another place. Mind you, the woman up there, the sister of this fellow from here, had no contact at all—you tell me.

Ms HOARE—So you can actually mediate solutions and then that can be overridden by government departments?

Ms Geia—If, as community people, we come to a decision, then I believe wholly and solely that it should be kept here, not taken outside. To me that is not being fair to our people, to any of us in this community. That is invading our privacy here.

Mr JOHN COBB—What is the availability of alcohol here?

Ms Geia—If you want to know the honest truth, there is black marketing going on.

Mr JOHN COBB—So it is not legal to bring it in?

Ms Geia—Of course it is not legal.

Snr Sgt Hurley—A section of the Palm Island Aboriginal by-laws says that you are only allowed to have beer on the island. You are allowed to transport beer to the island. You are allowed to have beer on the island. You are not allowed to have wine and spirits.

Mr JOHN COBB—But you are not allowed to bring it here and sell it; you are only allowed to bring it here for yourself.

Snr Sgt Hurley—Under state law, no-one can sell it. You must be licensed to do that.

Mr JOHN COBB—There is no licence?

Snr Sgt Hurley—There is a licence at the canteen—they call the hotel a canteen.

CHAIR—To consume on the premises?

Snr Sgt Hurley—To consume on the premises and to take away. What happened was that the canteen closed down around the time of the water crisis here, at the end of last year. Too much water was being used to clean the canteen the next day, and it was decided to allow just a takeaway licence. It closed some time ago. Even when the canteen was trading, there was sly grog going on. When the canteen closed, the sly grog market basically just opened up. The information you receive as police is third- and fourth-hand a lot of the time. In the last few months, several people have been prosecuted for sly grogging. When I say 'sly grogging', I am going into the field of also having that prohibited alcohol under the by-laws. It is difficult to police here. Even though everything comes to the island by vessel or aircraft, we just do not have the personnel to stand there meeting every aircraft. The by-laws also say that you must have a reasonable suspicion to search a vessel, aircraft, a person's bags or a person. In other words, we have not got the power for random searching.

Mr JOHN COBB—The council cannot do that?

Snr Sgt Hurley—We have approached the council, and they are discussing it. The council were initially not aware of that themselves when I spoke to them about it. I think they would like it to go ahead, but they were of the belief that we had the power to randomly stop people and search them.

CHAIR—Both Mr Cobb and I have considerable experience in our own communities with whether or not to have prohibition. We are well aware of the difficulties.

Snr Sgt Hurley—It is difficult.

Mrs Isaro—My concern is that we are at a standstill. We are now frozen as a justice group. We cannot do what we want to do. We are limited at the moment. We are waiting until after August. We are supposed to be magistrates, justices of the peace. We were supposed to have that in March, then it came down to June, and now it is in August. We are having meetings but we are going nowhere. We are at a standstill. We are frozen. The empowerment that they gave us they have taken away from us again. So we are sort of dangling in the air, and that is not good enough to run a justice—

Mr JOHN COBB—Could you explain how the powers were given to you and then taken away?

Mrs Isaro—Yes. When we were told that we had been made a justice group, we were given choices, which is something else that I might comment on: Meeting Challenges, Making Choices, which we did not have in the first place. It was not given to us to make those choices; they had the choices on the paper already made for us to pick one of the three. That is not free choice. As Councillor Foster was saying the first time, it has to start from the bottom to go up. We have to tell the government what we want. I am very clear about exactly what I want. Even as a justice group—even as members of this community—we know that this is the way that we should run our people, and the government should listen to us. Do not give us a whole pile of money and say: ‘Right, here’s your money. What we want you to do is use it this way.’ No.

CHAIR—Option (a), (b) or (c).

Mrs Isaro—Yes, and that is wrong. What they should do is let us decide—consult us; have consultation with the community members. If you cannot get the whole of the community members, which we do not always get here, get together with the bodies of the community—like ourselves, the rehab, the women’s centre and the council. We know exactly how we want the island to run and how we want to run the island. But most of the time—for years—we have just been passed a whole lot of money that does not mean anything to us, and then told: ‘Here. We would like you to use it for this and use and this.’ That is not our thinking; they are not our own thoughts. They are the thoughts of the government. If you write a book, your thoughts are in that book. If somebody else comes along, their thoughts are not your thoughts. What I am saying is that at the moment we in the justice group are frozen. We have meetings on Tuesdays. We have people come in to see us and we refer them to Ferdies Haven, but that is as far as we go. There are a lot of things that we would like to see for our people—especially the ones that are coming to us for help. I am very concerned about why we are frozen now. I have a fair idea. But why don’t we keep on operating the way we do as justice—

CHAIR—Would you care to share with us why you think you are frozen?

Mrs Isaro—This may only have been heard on the grapevine. I should not really repeat it, because it is only on the grapevine; it is not really—

CHAIR—That is your choice, but—

Mrs Isaro—What I would like to do now is continue the way that the justice group has been going, rather than be frozen in relation to what has happened. We are at a standstill.

Mr JOHN COBB—At the moment you can sit down with the sergeant and work out what should happen. Do you mean that his ability to accept that as the law is very limited? Is that what you mean?

CHAIR—I think it is to do with programs.

Snr Sgt Hurley—Mr Cobb, I think what she means is that the community justice group were given the authority with regard to the alcohol management plan for Palm Island. That was decided upon; that went to Brisbane—

Mr JOHN COBB—That was a couple of years ago.

Snr Sgt Hurley—No.

Mrs Isaro—That was only recent.

Snr Sgt Hurley—This was just recently. It came as a result of the Cape York justice study and alcohol management plan with regard to Aurukun. That went to Brisbane, and when it was announced in the media here there was some resistance to the alcohol management plan. So, basically, the alcohol management plan for Palm Island is now being reviewed. So the work and the time—

Mr JOHN COBB—Is that outside the local field?

Mrs Isaro—Yes; that is by the government.

Snr Sgt Hurley—It is being reviewed outside of Palm. So, because of the work and the time that the justice group and the council put into it—just correct me, Dulcie, if I am speaking wrongly—I think they now feel that it was basically wasted time. I was also stationed at Aurukun. The problem is that Aboriginal communities are being grouped, you might say: Palm Island compared to Aurukun. Yes, they are both Aboriginal people, but they are two completely different communities. Basically, the alcohol management plan that was accepted in Aurukun was the leader for the other communities, and they wanted that accepted here. This is where the problem is. If something works in a community on the mainland that might have a minority group of Italians, it might not work down the road at another town that has Italians. That is what happens with Aboriginal people. They seem to generalise. There is different culture, there is different Aboriginal law and there are different customs on this island. I believe that the people feel that they are not listened to enough about their point of view. They are all Aboriginal people, but do not generalise; do not group them with everyone else around Queensland.

Mr JOHN COBB—I am a bit like that myself.

Ms Geia—We are not actually ‘frozen’. What Sister Dulcie means is that we are hanging in limbo at the moment. We are going on doing our work; we are not frozen. It is a matter of waiting for what is going to happen and what decision the government will come down with about the alcohol management plan. That is all it is: a matter of waiting. But we cannot sit back and wait on that time and go ahead and let things pile up for us. We still move on with the work that we have to do.

Mrs Isaro—We know people are doing these things; they are doing it right next door to our houses. But you have to have proof. Proof is there every day, but we cannot get the police at that time to see it.

Mr Isaro—Unless we have the power to stop these people. The sly grog will come in because the pub is closed. The sly grog is coming in more, as are the drugs, and we need to have the power to stop that at the mainland. That is what we are talking about here.

CHAIR—I see.

Mr Isaro—They gave us the power and then they took it away from us, so we cannot do anything except watch them.

CHAIR—You had the power?

Mr Isaro—We had it.

Ms Geia—We had it, yes.

Mr Isaro—From February they promised it to us. Then it went back to March. That was no good so they passed it on to April. Now it is back to August. So we are just waiting. If they give us the power, we will stop whoever is coming in, because we will have the power to stop whoever is selling the sly grog.

Mrs Isaro—They import it from Townsville on the boat or the plane.

CHAIR—You grasp the essence of the community involvement. I cannot comment on the detail, because there are jurisdictional issues and we are a general committee looking at general principles. So we cannot promise that we can fix this at Palm Island tomorrow, or in 10 years time. That would be wrong; we would mislead you. But you grasp the essence of community ownership and the need to feel empowered. You have a view, and in a democracy we do not always get that view, and you are expressing that view and you have to feel that it will be responded to. Whether it is a matter of stopping it on the mainland or whether it is a matter of different policing powers or resources, you have to feel that you can put that effort in and that it will be respected and not shifted around. I think you have captured the essence. It is not easy, because there is a lot of history and a lot of issues. I am going to look back at the comments that you made just to remind me of what we are about. What you have captured is your clear view that you want to do it, you want to own it, you want to fix it. That is what you have to have to make a community work. Anything that governments can do to lift that would be good. All I can say is we will do all that we can to support it.

Mr JOHN COBB—This is putting it on you a bit, but do you believe you have the vast majority of the community behind you on dealing with the drug and alcohol bit?

Ms Geia—There are a lot of people, yes. It would be fair to say it would be fifty-fifty, or maybe 70-30.

Mr JOHN COBB—Who want to deal with it?

Ms Geia—Yes, people who want to deal with it—those of us who do not delve in that kind of thing and indulge in it. It affects us, too, even though we are not a part of it and we do not participate in it.

Mr JOHN COBB—Of course it does.

Ms Geia—It affects everyone. My concern is our little children. They are our future here in this community. It is not so much the adults; it is the future of our children—the future Palm Islanders coming up. What is their welfare going to be like? What is their future going to be like if we cannot stop it now? We cannot keep on forever saying, ‘We have to have living proof,’ when we know full well who these people are. It is affecting us in so many ways. I am so concerned for the little children. Child abuse comes into it.

Mr JOHN COBB—We have talked about alcohol a lot, but drugs—

Mrs Isaro—They are also here.

Mr JOHN COBB—They are also here—in quantities?

Ms Geia—Yes. That should come in in the by-laws. It has never been a part of our culture.

Mr JOHN COBB—Obviously it should not be, but I am really just asking how big a problem it is.

Ms Geia—I am concerned because of an incident that occurred while we were sitting in our meeting and a sport carnival was going on in the field opposite the police station. While the children were clearing up the field for their sports, a little child stepped on a syringe. The child’s foot became puffed and infected. That is our concern. We do not know what kinds of infections may have been in that syringe, and that child’s life could be damaged. It makes you stop and think, ‘Where are we going to go from here?’ That is the big question. What can be done and how can we assist to alleviate the problems?

CHAIR—There are huge challenges there. I need to start winding up, so I want to encourage anyone who has not said anything to add a comment. Firstly, I want to ask one more question to the sergeant about Aurukun. How long ago were you there?

Snr Sgt Hurley—I was in Aurukun twice. I was there for 18 months and then for a second stint of nine months.

CHAIR—How long ago was that?

Snr Sgt Hurley—That was 10 years ago.

CHAIR—Not in the last three, four or five years?

Snr Sgt Hurley—No.

CHAIR—It is just that there is a comment here in a newspaper article that says:

Police in the areas—

this is Aurukun—

also have said that the greatest shortfall of the new laws—

that would be the liquor laws—

was that they did not include 'diversionary activities' for the community.

I wonder whether a lot of what Ms Geia and Mrs Isaro are saying is related to community management. Right at the beginning you talked about somebody coming before the magistrate tomorrow, and you have talked about it as a community justice group. Going back to root causes, what sort of diversionary activities occur? I am going back to my comments and my concern that you may not be accessing the resources that are available, from the Commonwealth perspective, from Tough on Drugs. What activities are there? I am relying on the comment on Aurukun in the *Courier-Mail* which said that police in the areas said it did not include diversionary activities for the community. I am wondering whether it is the same for Palm Island.

Snr Sgt Hurley—Embarrassingly, it is the same for Palm Island. We do have Ferdies Haven, which is a diversionary centre, a dry-out centre, but which is totally voluntary. If we attend a job in relation to alcohol, where the person has not committed any other offences besides being drunk in public, the only option we have is to take them to the watch-house. There is no diversionary centre as there is in other places. We do have drug diversion; Mr Cobb mentioned drugs. In my opinion, the drugs issue is increasing here because Palm Island is so accessible to the mainland and because the people here go to the mainland so often. A lot of the things that come back to Palm Island are picked up in Townsville. We have five flights a day, and there are ferries and private vessels that go to the mainland.

CHAIR—There is a big selection of transport. There is basically free movement.

Snr Sgt Hurley—Yes.

CHAIR—I was in London a while ago. What does London have to do with Palm Island? It has to do with diversionary programs. Substance abuse is an issue in this country and all over the world, and I am pretty interested in this issue. Many Australians will not like the word I am about to use—coercion—but there is a degree of coercion in the best models in the UK for very young people. The connection between the magistrate, the community, the individual and the schools is very tight. They are developing it and putting a lot of money into it. It is where you might get the best result. This whole issue of diversion, accessing the resources and getting the

system right so that there is a degree of coercion—a degree of ‘must do’—is a very important part of it as well. I am a passionate supporter of those sorts of issues, and I want to offer that encouragement. Does anyone have any final statements?

Mr Watson—Yes. The way you handle yourself and the people counts in the justice group. We mix with a cross-section of people. We mix with the top people and we mix with the alcoholics. We sit down and talk with them and let them tell their stories. They gain confidence in you and look up to you as someone they can come to. We give our time freely. We do not get paid. I have been called from my place on many occasions where I have had to drop what I am doing and come in on interviews with kids and adults. In that way, they see that you are encouraging them to go on. We have had a few cases where young fellows went on to better things. Seeing them do something in life for themselves—seeing them come from the bottom and climb up—is what we look forward to. It gives us what all the money in the world will not. But we would like a bit of money. It would help us a lot more.

CHAIR—I would like to see you access that money and get your fair share of it.

Ms Geia—I would like to see more industries put into our community to help overcome all the stress and anxiety within our people. I think that is the only reason a lot of them fail—they feel they are not worthy of doing anything. They do not have jobs to assist them. You have CDEP, but what is that? That is only working for your dole two days a week. After that, what else is there? There is nothing else.

CHAIR—Mr Cobb started the morning on this question. He is a great advocate for it, and we hear you.

Ms Geia—That is our main concern—making sure that our people have jobs that they can go to.

CHAIR—We really appreciate the time and energy that is there. Whatever is in front of you, I am greatly encouraged by what I have heard. All the best.

Ms Geia—Thank you for taking the time to invite us.

[11.55 a.m.]

EGAN, Mr Craig Alick, Nurse Practice Coordinator, Acting Chairperson/Director of Nursing, Joyce Palmer Health Service

JOHNSON, Dr Andrew, Executive Director of Medical Services, Townsville Health Service District

MUIR, Ms Nanette, Director of Community Health, Townsville Health Service District, Joyce Palmer Health Service

PAGEY, Dr Georgina, Medical Superintendent, Joyce Palmer Health Service

RABUKA, Ms Lavinia, Health Worker, Joyce Palmer Health Service

ROWBOTTOM, Ms Alison, Acting Indigenous Health Worker, Joyce Palmer Health Service

PEACHEY, Ms Maria, Action Indigenous Health Coordinator, Townsville Health Service District and Northern Zone Management Unit, Queensland Health

CHAIR—I welcome representatives of the Joyce Palmer Health Service to the public hearing of the ATSIA committee this day into capacity building in Indigenous communities. You are a strong representative team. Dr Johnson, you obviously have a presentation that you would like to make. We have about 30 minutes. How do you see the format and what message do you want to portray? How long does this run for?

Dr Johnson—We have a presentation which is going to be done by Georgina and Lavinia. That will take about five or six minutes. We just want to focus on a few key areas. We have assembled this group so that we can provide you with a broad range of responses to any questions.

CHAIR—You have obviously addressed the issues in our inquiry, so we will go through that.

Dr Pagey—Firstly we would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of Palm Island, the Manbarra people, and the Bwgcolman community. We acknowledge the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Affairs; the chairperson, Mr Barry Wakelin; the deputy chair, Ms Kelly Hoare; member of parliament, Mr John Cobb; the inquiry secretary, Ms Jacqui Dewar; and members of the Palm Island community and other members of the public here today. As mentioned here before, our team here is Ms Lavinia Rabuka, Ms Maria Peachey, Ms Alison Rowbottom, Dr Andrew Johnson and me. To us, health does not mean just the physical wellbeing of the individual but refers to the social, emotional, spiritual and cultural wellbeing of the whole community. This is a whole-of-life view and includes the cyclical concept of life-death-life as originally written up in the Ottawa charter. Health services should strive to achieve the state where every individual can achieve their full potential as human beings and thus bring about the total wellbeing of their communities. We

would like to think that this is our mission statement for Joyce Palmer Health Service. As far as Queensland Health's strategies for Indigenous health are concerned, the 2002-07 Queensland Health strategy framework for Indigenous health combined with the northern zone management Indigenous health plan, which is actually in alignment with the 1994 Queensland Health Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health policy, provides our key priority areas for how we work at Joyce Palmer Health Service.

Good things are happening on Palm Island with regard to health and the service provision provided by Joyce Palmer Health Service. Joyce Palmer Health Service provides a structure for the development and implementation of culturally appropriate and effective health services for the Palm Island community. Our mother and child health program has an 86 per cent immunisation coverage rate on the island, which is a good deal higher than a lot of places in Australia. Failure to thrive rates have decreased from 35 per cent to eight per cent in the past nine years—eight per cent is the WHO acceptable limit for failure to thrive within a community. Concurrent with that, anaemia prevalence in the under five-year-olds has actually dropped from 55 per cent to 14 per cent.

Through our sexual health program, which is incorporated through the community, we promote safe sex and the prevalence of sexually transmitted infections is continuing to decrease on the island. We have a renal dialysis unit—one of the members of the audience is a user of this service—which was set up in July 2002 and we currently service up to four clients, three times a week, on the island which keeps people on the island so that they do not have to access services outside the island.

Earlier this year a health worker initiated community health screening program was undertaken. Over 400 community members took part and a significant number of cases of previously undiagnosed diabetic disease were detected. It is important, when we move forward, to have an understanding of where we have come from. I would like to introduce Lavinia to discuss that.

Ms Rabuka—In 1918 the Aboriginal mission near Tully survived the cyclone at Hull River and the residents were relocated to Palm Island. They made Palm Island into a penal colony and 40 different tribes—to be exact—were sent there from as far away as Brisbane, Mount Isa, Bedarra and up to Cape York. They were sent to Palm for misdemeanours and STIs—the main reason was their half-caste children. My mum was sent from out west to Fringe Island, which is one of the islands off Palm. She was sent there for three months and given bread and water out of a 44-gallon drum with the diesel or petrol that was still in it. They had hessian bags to clothe themselves with. My mum made clothes for other children that were there without their parents.

From there they were sent to Fantom, which was a leper colony—the people that had leprosy stayed there and the others were sent on to Great Palm to the dormitories. My mum stayed in the dormitory. She was six years old and she was looked after by the elders. She grew up in the dormitory and she met my dad—they were boyfriend and girlfriend but they were not allowed to really mix in those days. When girls were caught even waving at boys, they would get punished—their heads were shaved and they would have to whitewash the roads and the rocks around the streets. There were given rations—flour with weevils in it, maple syrup, tea and sugar—and they survived on that. They had a boys home as well. They had to be sent out at a

certain age. They went to the mainland and worked out on the stations until the government said it was okay for them to marry.

They had to get checked over by the doctors here—I think they were veterinarians, really. They were really ill treated. The women had to get physically examined, and apparently carbolic was used for examinations and peroxide and iodine were used in their ears. The women really had a hard life. Most of the girls got married at an early age. The ones that did go out on the station ended up back here on the island and developed their families. My mum is survived by her sister and brother.

Dr Pagey—In consideration of all that history that is so unique to Palm, particularly as opposed to other Indigenous communities, our objective as a health service provider and as a provider of health to the community is to work with the community to achieve shared health goals. Much work has already been done towards developing shared health goals and partnerships in service delivery between Queensland Health and the Palm Island community. A formal visioning and planning exercise was undertaken in 1998 and 1999. This was undertaken with a whole-of-government approach, including justice, health and housing services.

A number of models were considered for the delivery of health service on Palm Island. One thought was that Palm would have a community controlled Aboriginal medical service as the sole provider, but recognition of the role of Queensland Health had to be taken into account. Another model was that Queensland Health would work alongside the Aboriginal medical service. However, the current model that has been implemented is a Queensland Health controlled service with significant community involvement as to the direction and the vision of the health service and the community needs.

The challenges for us, as Joyce Palmer Health Service, in our current model, is to get increased ownership of health by the community; to empower the community to achieve their health goals; to realise that there are competing priorities for community attention, such as housing, justice and jobs, as previously mentioned; and to try and remove the occasional perception that we are paternalistic. We recognise that we need to move forward in partnership with the community to improve the health of the community.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Dr Pagey. As to where to next in the questioning, and how I will usefully use this time, I think Lavinia's story sets the context. I will start by asking who Joyce Palmer was.

Ms Rabuka—She was one of the old AIMs. She was a midwife: she delivered babies without even the midwifery certificate and just learned first-hand. She was here the longest. They actually named the hospital after her.

CHAIR—So she was a health worker before health workers were health workers.

Ms Rabuka—Just an old bush nurse—

CHAIR—Without the qualifications. That is going back a long time.

Ms Rabuka—We have still got a few ladies around here like that.

CHAIR—They look pretty fit. All of what we have heard is interlinked and interdependent, but what we have to try and work through is where we might better provide support from a Commonwealth perspective. So we are looking to you, as individual community members, to identify the areas of training and experience within your health service and how we could do that better. I am not sure whether you feel there are any restrictions on you because you are essentially, I presume, a state body, but the interface between the Commonwealth and the state has its moments. We are interested to know how we could offer stronger governance. You have a very large Indigenous staff—two-thirds, I think. That is pretty significant. Perhaps that is where I could lead off. How did you develop something as strong as that? What was the philosophy?

Ms Peachey—In 1994 the National Aboriginal Health Strategy and policies were put in place. Part of that was work force management development. Through that we worked towards having Indigenous people being employed as health workers and making a career pathway. Basically, we work with Indigenous people, who are our main clientele, especially in North Queensland. We have a culturally appropriate health service. In Joyce Palmer Health Service in particular, we are able to employ health workers to work alongside the clinical, medical, nursing and allied health staff in order to be mentors and ensure that the services are culturally appropriate.

Mr JOHN COBB—But they are Palm Island Indigenous people, aren't they?

Ms Peachey—Yes.

Mr JOHN COBB—They are not from the mainland.

Ms Peachey—Most of the employees are people who live on Palm Island.

Dr Johnson—If you look at where there have been major successes within our programs—and Georgina highlighted a number of those—some key factors keep coming back. You will see that local champions who take projects forward in sexual health, mental health, and mother and child health have been identified. Much of what you will see is that relationships and the building of trust is a consistent factor. Having people who are part of the community and who commit to the community is an extremely important part of that.

Mr JOHN COBB—How far have you been able to go? Have you got any actual training of registered nurses?

Ms Peachey—Yes, we have at the moment. We had two students who were in training, but they have deferred at the moment. We also have another young lass who has completed certificate IV in primary health care and is taking the career pathway into nursing. Basically, we are hoping that somebody will be able to offer a scholarship towards training.

Mr JOHN COBB—Are you making use of the Commonwealth? The Commonwealth has quite a few scholarships in nursing, especially for aged care, but I guess that is another issue. Are you able to access those for the residents of Palm Island?

Ms Rowbottom—I could answer that. In my role as a district health worker, my main aim is to look at training for health workers who want to further their training into nursing or whatever. At the present time we have four staff members looking to be trained as registered nurses. Of the

four, maybe one will be EN trained; maybe another will be EN trained. One of the problems that we have in getting registered nurse training is trying to get the training done either in the community—

Mr JOHN COBB—On-site, do you mean?

Ms Rowbottom—Yes, on-site. It is distance education. One of the problems that we have is that if they go away from their homes it is a problem. Even though it takes six years, by the end of six years you will be a registered nurse.

Mr JOHN COBB—Do you mean they can do it here but it takes six years to do it, as against three at university?

Ms Rowbottom—Yes. So they can be working and do their training at the same time.

Mr JOHN COBB—It is a better way. That is a better system.

Ms Rowbottom—Absolutely. I am working with James Cook University on that at the moment. They seem to be pretty excited. There are a couple of Queensland Nursing Council scholarships, namely the Puggy Hunter scholarships. We are looking at those and developing some support mechanisms within the Joyce Palmer Hospital to support those people training—access to computers, time off for study and those sorts of things. We also have one staff member who wants to be a radiographer or a plaster technician, so we are looking into that as well. There is some pretty exciting stuff happening at the moment.

CHAIR—I need to run through four or five issues. There seems to be strong support from mainstream to Joyce Palmer. There seems to be something happening here which is strong. It is an instinctive thing: I can see that there is a crossover with the Townsville health services district and Joyce Palmer, and I want to hear a comment about it. I will just give you warning of the things that I want to cover. I want to talk about that strength in your relationships. The Commonwealth perhaps does not quite register on the Richter scale of health service too strongly, which I am greatly encouraged by, because it means the state and the region is functioning relatively well. We would like to know if you have anything to add about whether the Commonwealth should participate more strongly. I hear James Cook mentioned as well. I want to talk about substance abuse, domestic violence, child abuse and sexual abuse. I want to touch on some of those difficult areas, because you are doing quite well in everything else. I have to find some tough areas where the Commonwealth is showing significant interest. I want to try and understand a little bit of that. Kelly will have some views as well. Can we talk, firstly, about the alliances that you have developed at Joyce Palmer with Townsville and how well that is going, and the Commonwealth link?

Dr Johnson—The Joyce Palmer Health Service is part of the Townsville health services district. Townsville health services district takes in the greater Townsville area, Palm Island and Ingham health services.

CHAIR—Sorry to interrupt. I appreciate that, but my point is the fact that it seems to be together and that there is not an isolated posting here. This is part of an overall holistic service.

Dr Johnson—We certainly do have people who are employed for Joyce Palmer Health Service, but what we have tried to do is build in Joyce Palmer and Palm Island people into that whole of district approach. That manifests in a lot of ways. For instance, if Georgina has a particular problem and needs specialist support, she has the networks within the Townsville district to access that. We have people coming out here to do outreach clinics from the district. That is something that we are trying to build up over time. Eye health, oral health, mental health—

Dr Pagey—Ear, nose and throat—

CHAIR—I am not meaning to dwell unduly on it, but I am just making the point that that regional relationship seems to be strong and you are able to offer the range of services to get the outcomes that are clearly there. That is pretty encouraging. The only question then becomes, ‘Where does the Commonwealth come into it and how do you access some Commonwealth programs?’ We talked about them earlier—those related to substance abuse issues, stronger families and Kelly mentioned another one as well. There are a number of Commonwealth programs which maybe would strengthen your services further. We are hearing the substance abuse issue loud and clear. We just wanted to try and get a picture of that, then I will lead into those other issues of sexual abuse, child abuse et cetera. Do you want to talk about substance abuse a little bit?

Dr Pagey—With substance abuse we can work with the clients in the prevention and intervention levels and in primary, secondary and tertiary health care. There are programs related to alcohol, tobacco and other substance abuse. We have a worker who was doing a mapping of the services. That was established two years ago.

CHAIR—How did they get on with the mapping?

Dr Pagey—Well, just getting all the stats—

CHAIR—I have a particular national interest in this. It is in another area. How did you get that? Were you able to come up with something there?

Dr Pagey—Looking at the breakdown of the mapping, the figures may not be accurate, but they are trying to encompass a number of clients. It is sort of hard with the clientele.

CHAIR—Sorry to interrupt, but my interest is in the awareness of and access to services—that is, individuals being aware of a service and then accessing a service. That is awareness of services from alcohol through to any other substance, whether it is marijuana, heroin or whatever.

Ms Peachey—There is a lot of health promotion, information sent out to the clients and then working on the ground with the clients themselves.

Dr Pagey—Can I just interrupt there. We do have a number of clients of the health service who come into get fix kits. Those are available. We do provide that. I think most people in the community know where to get health services here. We have a health worker who does drug and alcohol support. It is whether the community chooses to come in and utilise that service.

CHAIR—And therein lies the challenge.

Dr Pagey—Exactly.

CHAIR—I would like to quickly touch on—and then I will make way for my colleagues—domestic violence, child abuse and sexual abuse. Where do they fit in, how are they presenting and what are the issues? It is a tough area, I know.

Dr Pagey—Domestic violence is presenting; I cannot deny it. It does present, usually associated with alcohol abuse, and this is nothing new. It is presenting in multiple forms. And it is also not presenting: there are lots of women in the community who are too ashamed to come in when they have been assaulted. They will come in if they have been substantially assaulted or they wish to be examined so that they can make a charge, but I believe—and I think Lavinia would support me in this—that there are a lot of women—

CHAIR—So they are at the very extreme end?

Dr Pagey—It really does vary, who presents and why they present, but there are a lot of people who do not present or who present very late.

CHAIR—The question then becomes: what programs are running predominantly for the men of the society? Is there much happening there?

Dr Pagey—The preventative health ‘men’s business’ program here is run by mental health workers. Mental health workers are involved in counselling and running groups.

CHAIR—How long has that been running?

Ms Rabuka—For a couple of years.

Mr JOHN COBB—Is it having any effect?

Ms Rabuka—That is men’s business; we are women.

CHAIR—We will leave that as an open question. Child abuse is related to some of these same issues, and we have compulsory or mandatory reporting of that.

Mr JOHN COBB—Just before you go on, Chair, has the men’s program had any effect on the numbers of people? Can you see any change in the numbers—is it getting any better or worse or what?

Mr Egan—I have been told that there are more people attending the men’s group and they are willing to discuss issues more openly. I believe those issues—domestic violence and so forth—are discussed, and counselling can occur through that avenue.

CHAIR—We have a way to go yet.

Dr Pagey—It is about engaging the community. The individuals and the community have to want to be engaged. If they do not perceive it as a problem then they will not engage.

CHAIR—But it is out there, it is being discussed. It is still very much a part of the community.

Mr JOHN COBB—Does it seem mainly alcohol related?

Dr Pagey—From my experience here so far, I would have to say yes.

CHAIR—Mandatory reporting of child abuse is a state requirement. What are the statistics like? Are they confidential—do they need to be in camera? What is the story?

Dr Johnson—It is a very difficult area to talk about—

CHAIR—Absolutely—that is why I am asking.

Dr Johnson—and the reality is that it is also a hard one for us to speak on as definitively as we do on other areas.

CHAIR—I am not here to press you beyond what is legal or is protocol but I need to expose the issue. This is going to be part of our inquiry.

Dr Johnson—The issue is one that is recognised within the health services area here in Joyce Palmer, as it is in Townsville, Ingham and all of our communities. Some of the things that can lead to child abuse, sexual abuse and domestic violence are well known in society. Alcohol abuse and substance abuse are certainly high up on that list. Is there an issue? Yes, there is an issue in the community. Can we give you definitive statistics? I do not believe so.

CHAIR—I asked a Commonwealth department this same question about a fortnight ago, and we know that the states vary on this. The Commonwealth is taking a particular interest in this and it is going to take an increasing interest in this, so we want to at least be up with what is happening and we want to bring it out.

Dr Johnson—Mandatory reporting only works in any environment where things come to the attention of those who are required to and are empowered to make reports. The reality is that mandatory reporting systems across a wide variety of areas are perhaps not as effective as we would like to think they are. Just because you make something a mandatory reporting issue does not mean that you are going to hear about all of the issues and concerns.

CHAIR—Mandatory reporting is probably put there with that understanding but with the hope that it may expose it in a way which allows us to deal with it more effectively. I am sitting here as a federal politician asking you state people about this because you are at the pointy end. I do not do it in any way of differentiating the responsibilities. It is a matter of how we as a Commonwealth actually work with the states to give people, particularly young people, a better go. I understand their rights. It is basic stuff: if their capacity to act as full human beings in adulthood is impacted in any way by this—and it has to be and we all accept it is—then we have that responsibility. I accept that you people are very much at the pointy end of this.

Dr Johnson—It would be reasonable to say that, yes, we are at the pointy end in some respects. We see the downstream effects. We see the end effects of substance abuse, child abuse, sexual assault et cetera. That is not isolated to Joyce Palmer Health Service by any stretch of the imagination.

CHAIR—Absolutely.

Dr Johnson—We see this everywhere.

CHAIR—I am asking this question of every community that I visit.

Dr Johnson—Yes, we can say we do see the victims of child abuse, sexual abuse, domestic violence et cetera. We have a role that we recognise in secondary prevention of these issues and certainly in health promotion and wellness activities within the community. We are certainly not the only agency involved and not necessarily the most important agency involved in these issues.

CHAIR—Who would you see as the most important agency?

Dr Johnson—It is very difficult for us to pin down one government agency that does have the lead in this. You are talking about the spectrum from education and justice to housing. This is part of the reason why one of the points that we really wish to share today is that we have to understand what the context is when we look at health service provision and capacity building within the Joyce Palmer context.

CHAIR—Just to conclude my part, the linkage between substance abuse and the impact on a young life et cetera is of great interest to me. It is critical to the mental health area and therefore it becomes very much part of particularly that area as well as other areas you have touched on. It is not the real issue but a significant downstream impact for the Commonwealth is the impact on our justice system, on our welfare system and all the things that flow from a person who is not able to function as well as they should be able to function, as a normal human right. So that is why I have an acute interest, because I think that is part of capacity. That is not to single anyone out. It is just to make sure that you understand that we see our responsibility and we want to understand where you might see our responsibility as well.

Ms HOARE—We were talking earlier about accessing the health service here and the type of people who would present to a hospital to access maybe preventative health services. In particular, women will bring their children for treatment but may not necessarily come along for a mammogram or for some advice from the nutritionist or to see the sexual health specialist. Are there any outreach programs particularly for those health care workers involved in the more preventative measures to get out to these schools and other groups within this community?

Dr Pagey—Joyce Palmer Health Service is an acute care hospital but it is also a primary health care service and that is where we see we are. We have a maternal child health care service, we have a mental health care service and we have a sexual health care service, which are all combined under community health. All these services provide outreach in one way or another. Sexual health is currently undertaking sex education with the young women at the schools.

Ms HOARE—Would that also include reproductive rights?

Dr Pagey—It includes reproductive health. It is a very accessible service. If we are looking at—I am just taking an example—sexual health, young women will come down just for sexual health. They will not necessarily see me. They will see the sexual health nurse who has prescription rights and can assess people. They can get a pap smear and discuss their reproductive rights and needs in a completely confidential environment. Confidentiality is so important in a community.

Ms HOARE—I am particularly interested in this area. Do your statistics show that young women are accessing that service?

Dr Pagey—Lavinia is our female sexual health worker. She can tell you.

Ms HOARE—What would be the percentage of 15 to—

Ms Rabuka—Seventy-three per cent. Even at schools.

Ms HOARE—What about the boys and their rights and responsibilities?

Ms Rabuka—We have a male health worker. He does the boys' side of things.

Ms HOARE—Particularly when we are talking about domestic violence and sexual abuse, our young men should be educated to say, 'This is not right and these are the responsibilities,' and young women should also say, 'I am not going to cop that and I don't have to. We all have our own human rights and this abuse is not included.' Lavinia, I do not know whether you can talk a bit more about the kind of service that you provide to those young people who come to the service. Could you expand a little bit more on that?

Ms Rabuka—With regard to education on safe sex, our work does not finish at the hospital; it continues on at home. When Frank goes home and I go home, I have women come up and tell me what I should know or who to contact and other things—sexual departments and stuff like that—so my work is never done.

Dr Pagey—In a community it is also part of the network that you do not always see your clients in the hospital setting. You might see them down the street or, as Lavinia says, you will see them in the house. That makes all of us accessible all the time. A lady came to my gate on Sunday because she was in crisis. You are accessible the whole time. You are on the island and it is part of your role. It is not just confined to a building. You promote health wherever you are.

CHAIR—I want to commend you for presenting here today as a team and thank you for what you have given us. We humble backbenchers have a pretty big challenge in front of us, and we enjoy the interaction, tackling these tough issues and moving the thing forward. With that, thank you very much. Lavinia, thank you very much.

Dr Johnson—Thank you very much for the opportunity.

[12.37 p.m.]

BROWN, Ms Mary (Michelle), Director, Community Renewal, Queensland Department of Housing

WALKER, Mr Bruce, Manager, Renewal Delivery, Community Renewal, Queensland Department of Housing

WALSH, Mr Rhianon, Community Renewal Planner, Community Renewal, Queensland Department of Housing

CHAIR—Welcome. I now invite you to make an opening statement.

Ms Brown—The community renewal program was commenced in 1998 with the Queensland government committing \$83.5 million to the program for work in 15 specific communities across the state. It is an area based program which provides a specific focus on high-need localities and concentrates particularly on coordination and integration of programs and on community capacity building and participation. Our goal, which has been endorsed by the Queensland cabinet, is to develop communities where people feel valued, safe and proud—and we have a number of objectives under that.

Cabinet approved the Palm Island renewal program on 17 July 2000 and \$4 million has been committed to this program over four years until June 2004. To date, 18 individual projects valued at \$2.2 million have been approved by our minister, the Hon. Robert Swarten, for the Palm Island program. The Palm Island Aboriginal Council has provided significant support in shaping the program's approach on Palm Island. In particular, individual council members have invested considerable time and energy in working with the program, and we have valued and appreciated this commitment. I was going to run through some examples of projects we have funded but I will not do that.

CHAIR—What about going through just one?

Ms Brown—One project is the participation of 12 young people in a youth development camp. We provided \$18,000 to support their participation at the camp in Victoria. Participation and community building are really critical parts of the model. The community renewal program is really based on the United Kingdom's national strategy for neighbourhood renewal, so the notion of community participation is central to the program. We have been working in the program for a few years now and we really do look forward to strengthening our capacity to involve people in decision making about the program's expenditure. A key feature of our model is that our minister will not accept applications for approval unless he is sure that the community themselves have endorsed the projects that are funded. That is something that makes us a little different from most other government programs. We look forward to continuing to work and build collaborative and respectful relationships with the Palm Island community.

CHAIR—Where are you based, Ms Brown?

Ms Brown—In Brisbane.

CHAIR—What linkage do you have with the Commonwealth? Would you draw on any Commonwealth funding in terms of linking across?

Ms Brown—We work particularly with the state agencies but we have initiated a number of meetings with Commonwealth agencies to seek to coordinate our efforts, particularly around Palm Island. We recently held a meeting in Brisbane involving most of the regional directors for the Commonwealth agencies. We are particularly focused at the moment on a major project to develop a youth and community centre. We have invested \$1 million in that program and have leveraged about \$2.3 million from other agencies to support the project.

CHAIR—Have you got any Commonwealth or private—

Ms Brown—We have an application which is currently being considered for the Regional Partnerships Program with the Commonwealth. We are hoping to be a very early cab off the rank for the new program, and have submitted documentation to the ACC in Townsville to try to get some funding there. The Palm Island Aboriginal Council have been very much involved along with a number of community members in the design of the youth centre, which essentially came from concepts from some young people's workshops held on the island. We are hoping to run a number of recurrent programs and have recurrent funding to support the ongoing viability of that centre over the long term. To do that we are hoping that a number of Commonwealth agencies will become involved.

Ms HOARE—Is there any philanthropy or private support in that?

Ms Brown—We have approached a number. We have made calls to the Telstra Foundation, BHP Billiton and a number of organisations. To this point we have not been successful because we have currently been looking for capital funding. We are hoping to lay the slab with the cooperation and involvement of the Army in September, so we have been focusing on acquiring capital funds. It does not seem to fit within the nature of what is being funded through the philanthropic organisations at the moment. We have certainly been trying and we hope that we will be able to involve some groups once we get into the recurrent funding phase.

Ms HOARE—The reason I ask is that I am particularly interested in this because I have a New South Wales government community renewal happening in my own electorate and we are just trying to support now some funding from FaCS under the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy. The two that are being run in my region have been run alongside a local group formed with the Two Bishops Trust—as they call it—where you have the local Anglican and Catholic Churches and they raise money at football games and all kinds of things. It gets community support behind community projects so you have the government support, the community support and the community leaders' support of that. That was the reason I asked about that.

You talk about the youth centre. Do you see that as being a focal point for the community renewal or is there already a focal point? In my area the focal point is the school. Young people go to school and the mums come and do some craft lessons and there is some adult literacy and

numeracy training. It becomes the focus for the renewal of that particular community. How is that working here?

Ms Brown—We actually came to the point of having the youth centre as part of what we were hoping would be an integrated approach for children and young people. I did not mention that the foundation for our program here is the vision plan, which was mentioned in one of the earlier submissions. Clearly, the children, representing the future of Palm, are expressed as a priority for the community. We hope it will be a key part of renewal activity and that we will be able to work with other agencies to get that integrated approach from the youth centre. There will be a number of other focal points. For example, we have funded a master plan for the physical amenity of Palm Island and, with council, are hoping that we will be able to progress a number of projects around things such as the redevelopment of the mall. We have contributed to that foreshore development with the cookhouses and so forth. It certainly will be an important focal point but there will be a number of other projects as well.

CHAIR—I have three or four quick questions. With respect to private housing assistance, I presume that on Palm Island there is not a private market of any form?

Ms Brown—No. I am not an expert on housing issues.

CHAIR—I am looking at how private housing assistance might work, because there is interest in owning, and even in the recent ATSIC review, the review committee made some comments about private investment. Of course, we touched on philanthropy before. Are you aware of much support in terms of private housing assistance with respect to your vision plan?

Ms Brown—No. I understand that Alex Ackfun is giving evidence tomorrow. He is our general manager for housing.

CHAIR—In terms of Indigenous graduate recruitment, how are we going there?

Ms Brown—Again, Alex will be able to elaborate on that tomorrow.

CHAIR—I am left with asking questions about development, and maybe the regional manager can help me on that as well. In terms of the investment in time and in terms of bringing community, state and local council into the equation, what are some of the techniques and effort that have to go into reassuring yourself in this regard? You then take the matter to your regional managers meeting to go to the minister. Does the Commonwealth register anywhere in the discussion?

Mr Walker—Probably not. The main focus is around engaging with the community. A lot of that is falling onto Rhianon's position, which is based here on Palm Island, to engage with the community. There is a community meeting planned for tomorrow. So he has been out there actively promoting that and distributing fliers et cetera in the community to let people know that that is happening, and encouraging them to be part of that process and to consider the items on the agenda for that meeting. In terms of the state, that is handled through the regional managers forum, based in Townsville. There is a subcommittee of that forum which deals with community renewal as an issue. That meets on a monthly basis to consider the applications and the concepts that are being developed for the three community renewal areas within the Townsville region,

Palm Island being one of those. So that covers the state side of things. I understand that the Commonwealth participates in some of those regional managers forums but that does not happen in Townsville. The involvement of the Commonwealth is based around specific projects where there is an attempt to engage and to participate together on those things.

CHAIR—Rhianon, can I ask what a community renewal planner does, and what is your background? Can you give us a clue or two?

Mr R. Walsh—Basically I have only just joined the community renewal. I have only been here for about two months. The basic gist of my job is telling the community about it and getting the community involved in these projects so they can have their say and put their viewpoints across to the new projects that are coming across. My background is that I am a jack-of-all-trades and master of none. I have been around the bush and worked with council and worked with a retail store. I have done four years in the Army reserves. That is basically where I am at, and I am enjoying this position at the moment.

CHAIR—And you live on Palm Island?

Mr R. Walsh—Yes.

Ms HOARE—What has been the response for the meeting tomorrow? Have you tried to rustle up the numbers and get people thinking about it?

Mr R. Walsh—Yes.

Ms HOARE—How have you been able to do that?

Mr R. Walsh—I have done it with flyers, for starters, and through face-to-face contact with people that I know and getting them to pass on the message to come to this meeting tomorrow. We are trying to get artists involved as well. We are probably looking into elders as well, as there is a space for them in the new PCYC that is coming up. We are trying to get better communications between us and the people here in the community. That is about it.

Ms HOARE—Good luck with it.

Mr JOHN COBB—Is the department involved with selecting people who get the houses as they are put up? How does that happen?

Ms Brown—Alex is covering the housing issues tomorrow. I am not from the housing part of the department. I think he is in the best position to provide advice around that.

Mr JOHN COBB—While we are here today can you enlighten us on that one at all, Rhianon?

Mr R. Walsh—I think that is a council process.

Mr JOHN COBB—Council does that?

Mr R. Walsh—Yes.

Mr JOHN COBB—Council collects the rental money as well, does it?

Mr R. Walsh—Yes. They have a process in place where they have a list of applicants for housing and whatever is available. I am probably not supposed to say. You will probably have to ask council about their processes and the way they deal with that.

CHAIR—We clearly are not into housing specifically; we are into renewal. Do you link with accommodation at some point? Is there anything that relates to the accommodation issue? Can you give us an indication around that?

Ms Brown—Not really on Palm. In most of the communities that we operate in, there is a very high density of public housing and that is why the program has been situated in housing. But on Palm Island we do not have that situation, so it is quite unique and different here.

CHAIR—This question might be appropriate for Rhianon or Michelle or Bruce. You make a very good point about comparing the intensive and closely settled areas with a remote community like Palm Island. What are a couple of the key differences and how do you do it differently? I can think of some obvious differences, but some of the issues would be very similar. What is one that is very similar and what are some that are quite different?

Ms Brown—One that I would say is very similar is people wanting to be involved and knowing that, if services are not working at the moment, if people listen to them then they will be able to be done better. That is consistent in all our communities. What is very different, and what we are still working on in Palm Island—because it is very different to the urban centres in which we work—is finding the best ways to involve people. We are still working on that. It is a challenge to us and one that we are hoping to continue to improve with.

CHAIR—My last question goes back to that earlier question—which we will do a little bit more on tomorrow—about Indigenous graduate recruitment. Let us call it something else—let us call it Rhianon's role or whatever you like. What participation do we have in terms of community renewal programs by Indigenous people? Are you aware of the awareness and can you give us a couple of hints on that?

Ms Brown—In other communities it is not as strong as we would like it to be. We are working harder to do that.

CHAIR—How would you do that?

Ms Brown—It is about time. It is about not trying to do things at our pace but doing them in a different way and having someone there. We have an astounding Indigenous woman working in Vincent, for example. It is about being part of the tuckshop and connecting at places where people are—not with any specific agenda to start with, but just being there and talking and then inviting people to participate. Taking time is the key issue.

Ms HOARE—You said that you now funded the programs running until June 2004. Under normal circumstances I would not imagine the youth centre being built before then, so what

happens after June? Is there an ongoing commitment from the state government to review those projects which have not yet been completed? It would not be much good to plonk down a youth centre and then leave it.

Ms Brown—We have put a submission to government on continuation beyond June 2004. It is currently being considered. If that were not to happen, we would work from the end of this year around transition and ways in which we might be able to establish mechanisms to enable things to continue. I guess the key issue for us is coordination and integration. That is the key difference we hope to be able to make. For example, through the negotiation table process that is being considered through the Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy, we would hope to work very strongly with that agency. The strategy we take will be dependant on the government's current decision making processes.

Ms HOARE—Thank you for that. Good luck.

CHAIR—Do you connect with ATSIC very much? What linkage would you have with the regional council or the ATSIC commissioner? What would be the relationship? Would it be a phone call once a year, or would they turn up at a regional conference? What is the linkage?

Ms Brown—There is connection through our linkages with Palm Island council. At a Brisbane level, when we are looking at ways we can coordinate, we invite the officials from ATSIC to meetings. We recently had our director-general, while on a visit to Canberra, visit the ATSIC offices and have discussions at that senior level as well.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. It is much appreciated. A few members of the community will now make some five-minute statements.

[1.00 p.m.]

KYLE, Ms Erica Florence (Private capacity)

Ms Kyle—Thank you very much. I only found out about half an hour before you started that you were visiting our community, so thank you for the opportunity for me to say something. I was born on Palm Island in 1937. I came back 23 years ago and have been very involved in all the issues on Palm Island. First of all, I am one of the founding members of the Palm Island women's centre, where in the 1980s we looked at the serious problem of domestic violence. It was an exciting time for our women. We made a huge difference in our community, not only with our women but with our men. I am very concerned that most of what is happening in our community comes from a non-Aboriginal perspective. We seem to have very little say in what happens. I am concerned because it has a crippling effect on all of us.

I want to talk about two things briefly. One is the issue of health. We established our own health service back in the eighties. It was a beautiful concept. It was when HIV was in our community—there were seven people who had the virus. We called our organisation Turtle Dreaming Palm Island Health Service because the turtle is very important to us. If we do not eat the turtle at times we feel sick—it strengthens us. The turtle is very significant: it has a long life. Our service had a beautiful meaning to our people. We were successful—even though we lost the seven people—because we educated our men and our women about the AIDS virus in our community. Then the plan for a hospital emerged. It is a very deep pain that I carry that we have very little say in that service.

The second issue is our own school. I had five of my six children go through this school. I worked there as a community education counsellor, I was a P and C chairperson and I was also on the school board. So I was very involved and worked right around the community with the people. I saw and heard the stories of our people about education. Therefore we put together the idea of commencing our own school and having control of our school. I went around the community with a petition to get some Commonwealth funding for this. Over 500 people said yes in this community—no-one has listened to that call for change so that we can be part of the education of our children. People in our community know what self-determination is. Self-determination has been taken off the agenda. From our position, the programs are failing Aboriginal people because they all come from the non-Aboriginal perspective. Thank you.

[1.05 p.m.]

WALSH, Mr Stephen Hal (Private capacity)

Mr S. Walsh—I have just a couple of things I would like to express. The first thing is to do with the lack of people from the community who sat in the gallery for this meeting today—that is sad in itself. The other things we spoke about earlier were housing, the state government—along with your huge NAHS project—and the lack of home ownership in these communities. It is all governed by the Queensland act; it is still enacted by the state government. I guess at some stage someone has to get up and say that will not work. It has not worked for the last 50 years so it is not going to work as time goes on. Lavinia touched on a story earlier which probably touches most of us who come to or sit in these meetings who come from Palm Island. It expresses the point of how we feel about how our mothers and fathers have suffered. We will be stuck in this bubble in this community as long as the government holds that act, which keeps us from where we want to go and which keeps us from developing into Australian human beings in general right across the board.

One of those things we need is probably the great Australian dream. They talk about housing, land and rent. We are probably the greatest rent payers in this country, on our own land, which is ludicrous when you think about it. You wonder how we keep doing it. Every fortnight we go up and we pay our rent. We have our housing. Our children will only get that house if we die. They will inherit it—maybe, if the council at their discretion says that that is okay. But it is not a rule. The only way we will ever be able to be sure that the home ownership actually gets passed on to our children is when someone from the federal government, who put a lot of money into housing in these communities, says, ‘You have to change the way that you give housing money to Aboriginal people in this country’—to us, the people on the ground—’and how they access ownership of those housing stocks.’ Then we will be able to pass it on to our children. We do not want to be forever paying rent. I am sure I do not. I do not have much time left on this planet. They are already talking about it now: ‘When you die, Dad, we can give one of the kids your house to rent.’ That law is bad in itself but to hear your children say it to you is even worse. This home ownership issue is something that I have been championing for years in my own personal fight with departments and governments, state or federal.

When that lady spoke about her mother’s issue and so forth, it set the scene of how we sit here today and from where we have come—the dependency program that was going right through those days of the early era and that has now been passed on to us, some of our children, some of our grandchildren and people who are sometimes older than us. They became dependent in that time on the department of Aboriginal affairs and the government with regard to what houses belong to them, what do not belong to them, what they could have, when they get leave, when they could come. You might say it does not happen anymore but it is still there in a sense. There are older people who are around who use a blackfella saying, ‘If you don’t believe him, go and ask that whitefella.’ It is sad because that mentality still lives in this community.

Then there came social security and we got that and we went down and threw it all up against the wall and drank as much as we could. Now we have CDEP. Since the Miller report there have been no changes made to CDEP. We have the highest rate of CDEP participation in this

community than anywhere else in Australia. Most of them are still training and they have been training for the last 10 years. We are probably the most trained people in the world. You tell us to jump; we know how high to jump and when we are going to come back down. That keeps happening, instead of them incorporating education into our work programs. Tell those people in that administration that this has to happen: work two days and have two days schooling, whether you do first grade, second grade or high school or move on to TAFE. We have people going on to TAFE now but a lot of them have never had education past grade 6—they are the older fellas who are doing carpentry or whatever trade they want to go into. Without that proper education up-front they are not going to go far.

We talk about the alcohol program, but we still do not go back to the school and tell our children that this is where it starts. Up there is the end of the road. That is the way to the funeral, down to the burial grounds. That is where we go when we come from there. But before we get there, children here are seeing it and growing up with it. They are the ones who have to be educated about drugs and alcohol now, not later, so that they grow up understanding exactly where we are. That can only be done through us, I suppose, as parents—and we do not send our children to school. It is a major issue here. There is no policing of children not going to school. There is no policing of how many hours our children spend at school. Some of them go up there for half a day. It is not unusual to walk up to the store at midday or in the morning and see 150 kids standing in front of the shop, waiting for the post office to open to see who will get a cheque and give them some money. The schooling system has got to change too. It has not worked.

I do not want to be negative in everything I say, but these are things that are happening here. People are dying because of lack of services. As well as this hospital does, there are still more things that they could do. Probably more Aboriginal people could be involved in the programs that come out to us. I remember that when they had a hospital outgoing program it was working. They stopped it about a year or two years ago when they opened the centre, and now it has dawned on them that they should not have closed the health workers program at that time. I could go on all day and keep telling you about what is not good and what is good.

CHAIR—We borrowed a bit of time from Erica's shorter speech. I thought you put coherently a number of the issues. Like me—tjulpì, with the colour of my hair—you bring a few years of experience. I am very grateful for the fact that you did take the trouble.

Mr S. Walsh—Thank you for taking the time to listen to me.

CHAIR—Someone was hoping that someone from the school might give us a few minutes, but that has not happened.

[1.13 p.m.]

IZZARD, Mrs Florence (Private capacity)

CHAIR—Welcome. I invite you to make a short opening statement.

Mrs Izzard—We have only just started a disability service on the island. Its name is Woombura, meaning resting place. When we applied for a vehicle, we got a tiny car. We have not got any access to a bus or even public transport on the island for people with a disability. We have got a hell of a lot of disabled people on this island, and we have got nothing here in the way of access for them. I became the chairperson of Woombura after Sylvia Ruben passed on. We started up a flexi support for the island. At the moment we have not got facilities for our disabled people on the island. We cannot even get buses for wheelchairs. We have to lift people out, put them into a car and then try to fold up their chairs to put them into the cars, but nine times out of 10 you cannot do that with the chairs. Can we find out if you are going to give us some sort of bus? I am going to James Cook tomorrow to workshop this. I want to find out. I want to try and get some more information as to how I can go about this. I am learning all these things. I am not only in this organisation; I am in other organisations. With this disability organisation, my main concern is that we do not have proper housing for these people.

CHAIR—The design of the housing needs to be addressed?

Mrs Izzard—Yes, the design of the housing and all of that. We have one bloke who lives in the lounge room. You might say that this is the Third World while you in Australia are living in 2003. Come on, we should have moved out of that sort of style! We should be up and front with everybody else on the mainland, but we are not. We are still coming up the track. When we get up to the top with you in 2003, that will be fair enough; we will say we are equal. But we are not equal at the moment considering the people with disabilities on this island.

CHAIR—I think that is a very good point that has been well made. I thank you for doing that. We will close the meeting now. Thank you all for your attendance and for your hospitality.

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

That this committee authorises publication, including publication on the parliamentary database, of the proof transcript of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

Committee adjourned at 1.17 p.m.