



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

# Proof Committee Hansard

## SENATE

### SELECT COMMITTEE ON REGIONAL AND REMOTE INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

**Reference: Effectiveness of state, territory and Commonwealth government policies  
on regional and remote Indigenous communities**

(Private Briefing)

TUESDAY, 13 APRIL 2010

BAMAGA

#### CONDITIONS OF DISTRIBUTION

This is an uncorrected proof of evidence taken before the committee. It is made available under the condition that it is recognised as such.

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

**[PROOF COPY]**

TO EXPEDITE DELIVERY, THIS TRANSCRIPT HAS NOT BEEN SUBEDITED

**SENATE SELECT COMMITTEE ON  
REGIONAL AND REMOTE INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES**

**Tuesday, 13 April 2010**

**Members:** Senator Scullion (*Chair*), Senator Crossin (*Deputy Chair*), Senators Adams, Johnston, Moore and Siewert

**Senators in attendance:** Senator Adams, Senator Boyce, Senator Furner, Senator Moore and Senator Scullion

**Participating members:** Senators Abetz, Back, Barnett, Bernardi, Bilyk, Birmingham, Mark Bishop, Boswell, Boyce, Brandis, Bob Brown, Carol Brown, Bushby, Cameron, Cash, Colbeck, Jacinta Collins, Coonan, Cormann, Eggleston, Farrell, Feeney, Fielding, Fierravanti-Wells, Fifield, Fisher, Forshaw, Furner, Hanson-Young, Heffernan, Humphries, Hurley, Hutchins, Joyce, Kroger, Ludlum, Lundy, Ian Macdonald, McEwen, McGauran, McLucas, Marshall, Mason, Milne, Minchin, Nash, O'Brien, Parry, Payne, Polley, Pratt, Ronaldson, Ryan, Stephens, Sterle, Troeth, Trood, Williams, Wortley and Xenophon

**Terms of reference for the inquiry:**

To inquire into and report on:

- a) the effectiveness of Australian Government policies following the Northern Territory Emergency Response, specifically on the state of health, welfare, education and law and order in regional and remote Indigenous communities;
- b) the impact of state and territory government policies on the wellbeing of regional and remote Indigenous communities;
- c) the health, welfare, education and security of children in regional and remote Indigenous communities; and
- d) the employment and enterprise opportunities in regional and remote Indigenous communities.

**WITNESSES**

<b>ANIBA, Councillor Jeffrey, Councillor, Division 5, Seisia, Northern Peninsula Area Regional Council .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>BIRD, Mrs Dulcie Ann, Executive Officer, Dr Edward Koch Foundation .....</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>CHRISTIAN, Mr Steven William, Private capacity .....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>COOK, Ms Samantha (Sam), Private capacity .....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>ELU, Councillor Joseph, Mayor, Northern Peninsula Area Regional Council.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>FOORD, Mr Christopher John, Chief Executive Officer, Bamaga Enterprises Ltd.....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>FORT-RUSHTON, Mrs Maree, Director of Nursing, Bamaga Hospital, Queensland Health .....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>LUI, Councillor Peter, Councillor, Division 2, Umagico, Northern Peninsula Area Council.....</b>	<b>2, 16</b>
<b>NONA, Councillor Gina, Councillor, Division 1, Injinoo, Northern Peninsula Area Regional Council .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>NONA, Ms Patricia, Private capacity .....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>SEBASIO, Mr Daniel, Deputy Chief Executive Officer, Northern Peninsula Area Regional Council .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>TOWNSON, Ms Sonia Kay, Area Manager, CAPE Police-Citizens Youth Welfare Association .....</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>WONG, Mrs Morva, Chronic Disease Care Coordinator, Bamaga Hospital, Queensland Health.....</b>	<b>24</b>



**Committee met at 9.53 am**

**CHAIR (Senator Scullion)**—Thank you for the welcome. For the benefit of anybody here who has not appeared before a Senate committee, this hearing gets recorded. Everything in parliament is recorded by Hansard and since this is a committee of parliament it is recorded.

The Senate Select Committee on Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities is holding this meeting as part of its inquiry into regional and remote Indigenous communities. On behalf of the committee, I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of this land on which we meet and pay our respect to elders past and present.

Before we begin the meeting, I want to make clear to all meeting participants that a transcript of the recorded meeting will be produced and the transcript may be made public. Participants' comments recorded at and transcribed from this meeting are protected by parliamentary privilege. That means that anything you say here is protected by privilege, in other words if somebody says to you, 'You shouldn't have said that' or humbugs you or gives you a hard time about that, that is a breach of parliamentary privilege. You are protected in what you say. Any act that disadvantages you as a result of the evidence given to the committee is treated as a breach of privilege. However, I also remind you that giving false or misleading evidence to the committee may constitute contempt of the Senate. If you prefer that the meeting not be recorded, you can advise the committee now. The committee prefers to record the session, as this allows us to remember your comments better and use them in our next report, which will be tabled on 13 May.

**ANIBA, Councillor Jeffrey, Councillor, Division 5, Seisia, Northern Peninsula Area Regional Council**

**ELU, Councillor Joseph, Mayor, Northern Peninsula Area Regional Council**

**LUI, Councillor Peter, Councillor, Division 2, Umagico, Northern Peninsula Area Council**

**NONA, Councillor Gina, Councillor, Division 1, Injinoo, Northern Peninsula Area Regional Council**

**SEBASIO, Mr Daniel, Deputy Chief Executive Officer, Northern Peninsula Area Regional Council**

**CHAIR**—Welcome. Information on parliamentary privilege and the protection of witnesses and evidence has previously been provided to you. Would you like to make a short statement and provide any advice you think the committee would like to hear?

**Councillor Elu**—Thank you, Mr Chairman. This is one of the two newly amalgamated councils of the Queensland Indigenous councils. The other one is the Torres Strait Islander Regional Council. We were amalgamated two years ago, so it is a fairly new council as councils go. We were five different councils before this and most of the councillors were on council to the five what we now call legacy councils. This amalgamation process has been a big upheaval. We only had eight months to put it together when the minister announced amalgamation to when the elections happened. Notwithstanding that, councillors and staff did a terrific job. We are now on track, we know where we are going, and we know how short of money we are. There has been a bit of a backslide, if you like, in some community outputs but, as I said, I think we are getting on top of it. Your inquiry into these matters is timely. Two or three months after amalgamation we had the House of Reps standing committee inquiring about food supply into Indigenous communities. We were very ad hoc then because we had just been amalgamated. Without further ado, I would like to welcome the committee here to our communities. I know Nigel has been up in the Torres Strait a long time. We go back a fair while even before he was a senator. And it is good to see a lot of Queensland senators during this round.

**CHAIR**—Thank you. One of the areas we were talking about a little area earlier is the housing. We spoke yesterday in Weipa and we had some evidence in Weipa that a number of houses had been committed and they gave us a bit of an upgrade about how that was going. Can you give us an update on what is happening in Bamaga at the moment with regard to housing?

**Councillor Elu**—In this area in most Indigenous communities everything is intertwined. We say that people's health depends on how they live, where they live. If children are in a good stable home, they have a room in the house for themselves, that is good for education, but if there is overcrowding it will affect their education. I think antisocial behaviour is derived from overcrowding, not enough space for people have time out. So we say that everything is intertwined. In saying that, in Indigenous communities, and especially in these remote Indigenous communities, it is very costly to build a house. We as the five legacy councils used to run our own housing program and it was very slow in turnaround. It was very hard to get labour

sometimes, and especially in own housing booms of the 1980s and 1990s it was very hard to get builders up here unless you paid top dollar, and then houses cost too much. And I think the Queensland state government's housing output was not crash-hot in the 1990s and early 2000s.

In saying that, I think our demand has been outstripping supply for a long time. The statistics show that Indigenous people have more kids than other Australians. Our communities grow, I think, twice as fast as other communities. The only slowdown is caused by people moving away. People move away for two reasons. The first is the lack of facilities in these places and the second is probably health. There are other reasons, of course, but those are the two main ones. Half of this area and the Torres Strait live in Cairns for health purposes.

In saying that, we need sufficient housing, the right type of housing and affordability. This community knows that the state government announced last year that it was going to charge 25 per cent of household incomes as rent. I argued with the then state minister, Robert Swarten, that I did not know that people would have 25 per cent of their income left after paying for other things that people need in these areas. A survey found that our the cost of living is 17 to 20 per cent higher than Cairns. Cairns is about five to seven per cent higher than Brisbane. But the Queensland government has made a decision that we will pay 25 per cent of our household income into rent all across the state. And that is not to mention fuel prices. I do not know if you are going to have time to run around and look at fuel bowser prices. We are always 15 to 20 per cent above Cairns prices, which are five to six per cent above Brisbane prices. So the cost of living increases the further you get away from Brisbane.

People do not realise that here we are parallel to Port Moresby and we are only 200-odd kilometres from Irian Jaya. So we are a long way from Brisbane, and the freight factor will always be there. That escalates to other things, as I said. The cost of living affects what people put on the table. It affects what people have in their bellies when they go to work or school. I do not know if you have seen the ad with the kid looking at the teacher and his beard grows. I think all of our kids do that every morning. Right now, we only have one boat per week coming up whereas before we had two boats. Currently the shipping company has one boat under repair. So if you are not down at the shop in the first two days after the boat arrives you will get the leftover vegetables—the squishy potatoes and the soft cucumbers. That is the reality of where we live.

As I say, those are the bad bits. But if you drive around this town I think you will see it is a community that is functional. It is a community that is together. We have good facilities here for sports. We have good roads. I do not know if you noticed that the road in from the airport got resealed just before the wet. If you have a chance to drive around you will find that this community is functional compared to other communities, especially the Territory ones. Sorry, Nigel!

**CHAIR**—It's all right.

**Councillor Elu**—That is the thing. We are getting there. I think if this council has its way we will have a progressive community. But we need the government to listen to us sometimes. Hence, this committee has come together. Sometimes I wonder if I am going to go in front of them and I wonder what the benefits are going to be and what my people are getting out of this. I

know government have a very slow turnaround in processes and policy creation coming from these hearings. Our people need those turnarounds earlier rather than later.

I saw the report of the food supply inquiry but I have not seen anything change since we talked to them last year. When I saw Jenny Macklin I asked her about it and she said, 'It's in the process.' I said, 'We're not growing any younger; the processes have to get a bit faster because the foodstuff is still the same and we're still paying \$5 or \$6 for an avocado when you can walk into Ken's and buy it for \$1.50 for something.' As I say, those things are a fact of life. If you live in heaven you have to pay for it, but you should not have to pay too much.

You asked about housing. We are still three years behind. We have a housing program that is three years in the delivery. When we were Legacy councils we had a \$10 million budget given to us. We started planning as five individual councils. Those houses are yet to be built. I know it is not part of your thing—it is Queensland state government—but it is one bucket of money that we are playing with here. I said to Jenny Macklin a couple of months ago when I saw her in Canberra that we have to fast-track the housing program. The new housing program is going to require 40-year leases. We have just found out that, for native title purposes, they have to have ILUAs before they build on the blocks, and that is all coming from Brisbane. Nobody is talking to us here; it is all coming through departmental officers. I said to them: 'Why doesn't the housing minister fly up here and have a talk to council? Maybe we could then counsel native title holders and government could get together and bypass this longwinded process and have a local solution created here in these five communities.' As I said, our communities are growing and our kids are growing up. We have got 12 to 15 kids coming out of high school every year. It is small area but those 15 will find a girlfriend in a couple of years and they will want a house and want to move out from mum and dad. Statistics show that our average family is five or six but housing is 11 to 12 per house. There are some houses with fewer, but overall there are 11 to 12 people per house.

On the other stuff, health comes into play. Some of our older people have health problems—diabetes, asthma—and they have kids living in the same house. Of course, there is other stuff that links in—other teenage kids living there and they want to play music at night and have a few beers—and nobody in the house gets time out.

**Senator FURNER**—I would like to ask a question on supply. You commented on the difficulties in supply and getting people up here to build construction. I was fortunate enough to be up here last August and I went out with Jeffrey to Injinoo and saw the school blocks out there. I understand that they have now recently been replaced, most likely through federal government funding. Can you explain how that went in terms of the construction of those new school blocks? I imagine they would have been companies from Cairns, most likely.

**Councillor Elu**—I think they were manufactured in Townsville. The Queensland education department let the contract out there. I think that was the process that, with the native title holders at Injinoo, did a very quick turnaround in granting the land to the schools. That is what I mean when I say that we can deal with local issues here. They were prefabricated buildings. A lot of the builders were down there and they prefabricated it there and brought it up and put it on site. It was a very quick process. That is good in one sense but it does not leave any money here. We keep on saying to the builders or suppliers that we need local labour hire. We were trying to talk about 25 per cent in the Northern Territory and I think that the Queensland government is



now talking about 50 per cent. But that did not happen at the school. I think they had a couple of fellas helping there. It was a very quick process. I think that in four or five weeks it was all done.

**Senator FURNER**—But the internal round, through consultation with the council, was a reasonably quick process?

**Councillor Elu**—That is right. It was a high school teacher because lawyers from the education department were dealing with the lawyers from the land council. We said: ‘No, stop that. Have an executive from the education department come and meet with the native title holders on the ground and see what we can do about it.’ That is when the instructions were done and then handed to the lawyers. And then it happened within four or five weeks. The deal was signed and the building was ready to go ahead.

**CHAIR**—It certainly sounds like that is a process we can all learn from right across Australia. If there can be a much swifter process rather than putting it in the hands of the lawyers and the land councils—which are, of course, very available—initially we should just do the normal thing and have a discussion first.

**Councillor Elu**—Yes. A local solution can be found and then the lawyers are given instructions to make it work.

**CHAIR**—Is there anyone else on the council who would like to make a contribution?

**Councillor Elu**—Jeffrey works for the education council. Peter is our youth ambassador. He does sport and rec with the youth.

**Councillor Aniba**—We need an education strategy locally, as the mayor indicated, and we need support. We were part of the Torres Strait Regional Education Council, or TSREC. But we have established our own education council in NAP. I think we have had it for 25 years. To us as a community the line management through that system was not good enough for us. I think we need to have an education council to lift our education standards and to support issues like attendance policies, behaviour management and all that stuff. Maybe we should have a document that says ‘these are the standards that have been identified through data’. But the reality sits at a different level. I think we as a community need to own the education strategy and build into the education system what is required by the education department. As chair of the education council we have established, I think we need support from the government. We need government to listen to the local issues because reality sits with us as a community.

**CHAIR**—What are the local issues you think you need support on?

**Councillor Aniba**—It goes back to the socioeconomic profile of the region—social inclusion, health, housing and, as the mayor mentioned, the high cost of living. These are all contributors towards education. At the end of the day, putting food on the table is very difficult. It contributes to issues like attendance and behaviour. If the COAG agenda is to get kids from early childhood to unemployment then where do we fit in as a community, what part of the gap do we close? To close the gap we need strategies, support and funding.

**CHAIR**—We have heard evidence everywhere about attendance—the relationship between the parents valuing education and taking their kids to school, rather than the punitive end. What is happening in this community?

**Councillor Aniba**—At the moment, this community sits at the bottom of 130 schools in terms of attendance. That indicates to us that there are issues around attendance. It indicates that housing and health contribute to it. We have an education attendance policy which we have just implemented through the school. We have employed about five family support officers, and that gave us support on attendance. We had 62 per cent attendance in 2008. We have just raised it by another six per cent, but we still sit at the bottom.

**Senator BOYCE**—What does a family support officer do?

**Councillor Aniba**—They are actually truancy officers. We did not want to use the word ‘truancy’ so we called them family support officers. In terms of attendance, at the end of the day, we need education around it. Through PACE, previously PSPI, we can make our families the first teachers. If we can get some support through that program to educate the parents, that would be a good starting point.

**CHAIR**—We took some evidence on that yesterday.

**Councillor Aniba**—Yes. Education starts in the household. That is where you prepare your kids for education.

**CHAIR**—I want to ask you some practical questions about that. Without going into the details of the demographic where kids do not go to school, obviously the school realises when a student is not at school. What happens? Do they send someone around to speak to the parents? Is there a fixed process for that?

**Councillor Aniba**—Yes. That is where the family support officers come in. The attendance policy document was implemented last year and it raised the bar by six per cent.

**CHAIR**—That is fantastic.

**Councillor Aniba**—In 2008, 62 per cent of our kids left school at year 7. We are signatories to the MOU for TSREC and we have established our own council.

**CHAIR**—Would it be possible to get that attendance strategy document?

**Councillor Aniba**—Are you meeting with the principals or the schools today?

**Senator BOYCE**—Yes, we are.

**Councillor Aniba**—That would be the right forum in which to ask about that.

**Senator MOORE**—We will follow this up with the schools but, in terms of your work with state education and also the focus at the national level about keeping kids at school, how does your committee work with the system? You have got together with the parents and worked out

that this is something that has to happen. But what is your model for working with the principals of the schools and also the various groups? Are you linked into the education area in Cairns?

**Councillor Aniba**—Yes, through the Indigenous Schooling Support Unit.

**Senator MOORE**—So you have made the decision that you have got to change and work—there has to be lots of things. How then do you work with the governmental structure? I have heard over many years about people not being able to get that communication right. How have you done it?

**Councillor Aniba**—At the moment, we have some funding through PACE to set up an education framework. We will get a consultant on board to do this whole education framework for us. Then the service providers and the education department will then sit around a table and look at who can contribute to whatever issue it is. If we run a COAG agenda here, that needs to be identified through the community. We sit around as a COAG body through schooling communities, health and all the other building blocks of COAG and then identify that. If we have identified through NAPLAN that there are four or five kids who have the potential to become doctors and lawyers and teachers then we have to sit around the table and agree that we will support these kids to become doctors and lawyers and teachers.

**Senator MOORE**—Through the education plan?

**Councillor Aniba**—Yes, through the education plan.

**Senator MOORE**—We were lucky enough to visit some of the schools here. Your area is geographically very large to get people together. Are there processes to get the kids to schools? Do they have to leave home and stay somewhere? We had just been in Weipa, where they are looking at building a big facility next to the school so that people can stay there rather than go home. I know that a lot of your kids have been boarding in Cairns, Townsville and Brisbane—a lot of kids from this area who have had the opportunity have gone away.

**Councillor Aniba**—I engaged with the principal earlier this year about establishing a hostel in Cairns.

**Senator MOORE**—For your kids who go to the bigger schools in Cairns?

**Councillor Aniba**—Yes.

**Senator MOORE**—For the kids you have identified as having the opportunity and potential is it something you are looking at?

**Councillor Elu**—I do not think so.

**Senator MOORE**—There are lots of different views about that as a strategy.

**Councillor Elu**—Right now, if you want to send your kid down, they do not look at their academic capacity; they look at whether they can study at home because of overcrowding and whether you have the capacity to pay their way down. That is the only time they look at it. I

attended one of Jeff's council meetings. I do not know if we talked with you, Nigel, way back when I was working with IBA, about looking at bright kids in the communities. There is a program in America called 'A Better Chance'. We tried to implement the same program here. We said to teachers: 'If you have a kid here, or in Weipa, or in Gove, or anywhere around Australia who is particularly bright or, mainly, who has leadership potential and is academically okay, we'll pay special attention to them. We'll either take them away, if their parents are willing, or give them special attention at their school if they are still young.' We want to look at the brighter kids. But right now Abstudy does not look at that. They look at the socioeconomics of the family. Whether the kid is bright, dull or indifferent does not matter; they get sent to Cairns. With some of the brighter kids, even if the parents want them to study in Cairns, if they do not fit the criteria then they do not go. So there is no emphasis on the kid; rather, the emphasis is on their living status back home.

**Senator MOORE**—We will talk with the principals when they come in as well.

**Councillor Elu**—Peter looks after kids when they finish school and do sport and rec.

**Councillor Lui**—We could sit here all day and discuss education and health, but the bottom line is that it always comes down to the cost of living. It is a myth that the parents in our communities here do not value education. Every parent strives to get their kids to school in the morning, but if you are in a community where 30 per cent of people have full-time employment and the other 70 per cent have government assistance through a CDEP program or an income support program, you cannot afford to put fresh fruit and veggies on the table every night; it is not economical. We stick to our basics: rice, flour and meat. I think the only way to experiment is for you guys to go down to the shops and try buying bread, milk, eggs and sandwich materials for five days a week and see how you go, see how it affects your wallet. Remember that some of these parents are on only 480 bucks a fortnight. So the bottom line is that some parents just cannot afford to send their school, especially when they have four or five children. Parents are scared of the embarrassment of having their child ask a teacher for food at school; they are scared of bringing shame upon their family.

**Senator MOORE**—So what should happen?

**Councillor Lui**—Economic development—stop using that as a myth in Indigenous communities. Have the government really look at putting those economic development programs into the communities. Stop coming here and telling us, I suppose, what we want to hear. Help us solve some problems. I have been a councillor since I was 26 and I have heard the term 'economic development' just being used over and over again. We have talked about housing and overcrowding. I come from an overcrowded family and I now have a family of my own that is in an overcrowded situation, so it is just going over and over again.

I am sure that some government representatives come up here with good hearts and they want to do something. I really question the ones that come here time and again and go away, and we never hear anything from them. That is all I can say about that. The myth of the people not valuing education is totally wrong. We value our education but we do have some issues in trying to get our kids to school and plus, when you have a generation that has probably graduated from school in grade 4 or grade 5, they are unable to assist the kids with their homework. All they have ever known for the last 30 years is a government program called CDEP.

**Senator FURNER**—On that point, Peter, evidence was given in Weipa yesterday from an organisation called PaL, Parents and Learning.

**Senator MOORE**—At Napranum.

**Senator FURNER**—It seems brilliant. They are identifying successes by tracking children from preschool and onwards into the college there. In your opinion, is that something that should be implemented here based on what you have just indicated?

**Councillor Aniba**—These are strategies that the education studies have identified themselves.

**Councillor Lui**—We have two major issues right now, and they are education and chronic illness. Where I come in as a sports and recreation kind of ambassador is to try to get our people to start exercising again. But the bottom line is the cost of living. We need another option with freight. We need access to road freight. People who are supplying us freight can have competition. We have a company that pretty much holds a monopoly.

**Senator BOYCE**—Who is that?

**Councillor Lui**—Sea Swift.

**Senator BOYCE**—You said that one of the two boats is in for repair. How long has it been going on for now?

**Councillor Lui**—They said it was supposed to be back on 1 April.

**Councillor Elu**—I think it went down for service in the middle of February.

**Senator BOYCE**—It will come back?

**Councillor Elu**—It will come back. But, as I said, the boat came in on Monday—

**Senator BOYCE**—Does that mean that there is less food coming into Bamaga?

**Councillor Elu**—No. There is enough, but if you do not get there on Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday you start to get the soggy vegetables.

**Senator BOYCE**—Yes. There is quality, too.

**Councillor Lui**—If you have missed the first three or four days at the shop—through Christmas, we ran out of fruit, vegetables and milk.

**Senator BOYCE**—What did you run out of?

**Councillor Lui**—Fruit, vegetables and milk; there was nothing.

**Senator BOYCE**—That is a really telling point in itself, isn't it?

**Senator FURNER**—Is this other boat getting repaired owned by the same company?

**Councillor Elu**—Yes.

**Senator FURNER**—Your argument is that there needs to be competition, whether that be by road or some other process?

**Councillor Lui**—If this community is to progress and have a chance, we have to look at other options for how we buy our food and get our materials up here.

**Senator MOORE**—Is it Cairns based?

**Councillor Lui**—Yes.

**CHAIR**—I want to go back to economic development. Part of the submission from Rio Tinto referred to the Northern Territory and Nhulunbuy. It was not spelled out here but they put forward the notion of fly in, fly out. It is not far. For example, if you transpose that notion to this side of the gulf, in Weipa, you would live here but you are fly in and fly out. So you would fly into Weipa for the week and live in accommodation in Weipa and then you would fly back to Bamaga. They could do other outlying areas.

**Councillor Elu**—We have four or five boys now who work in Weipa who come and go.

**CHAIR**—So they fly in and out?

**Councillor Elu**—They drive usually.

**CHAIR**—Whatever, so it is not far. Do you think that, rather than saying, 'Let's have something new here,' we can use better and value add the economic opportunities?

**Councillor Lui**—People from the NPA have been utilising the Rio Tinto system for years. Sometimes we had 20 or 30 boys down there. We have some of our people actually going down to Port Hedland and working right now. So people are going out for work. What we are losing in the NPA is our skills. There goes our mechanic, where the council has invested four years in his apprenticeship. There goes our electrician.

**Councillor Elu**—Mr Chairman, I have to go. I would just like to say that what Peter raised is very valid. In these types of places—you have heard me say this thousands of times—there are barriers that governments or government agencies put in front of us. One is the wild rivers legislation coming up here. One is World Heritage, which is going to be here. People say that it is going to bring more tourists in, and I think that is a false statement. Kakadu was declared a national park and the tourist figures did not change. I ran a hotel out there. The only thing that changed was that we had more greenies come up, but they would only come up one time; they were not return visitors. There are all of these other things. I know it is the Queensland government pushing the wild rivers and the World Heritage. That is why I am flying out. They have got a wild rivers Senate inquiry.

**Senator BOYCE**—So you are going to Cairns for that? Senator Macdonald was with us yesterday. He has gone there too.

**Councillor Elu**—He is going back there, yes. Peter is very right. The only answer is the amount of money people get in their pockets every fortnight. That is the only way it will change. I have said this countless times: we live in a 21st century First World capitalist country, and these places are not being treated as such. We are still controlled economies. We need to change that. This Steve Irwin thing down the road here needs to stop. We need that mine to go ahead. If we put five or six more boys from here in there, that would increase our income levels a bit more. I mean, I have no quarrels with Steve Irwin country—the government paid for it.

**Senator ADAMS**—I know you have got to go, but do you consider that the amalgamation of your council—it is new but it is moving forward—is the right way to go? Did you make the right decision?

**Councillor Elu**—The decision, I think, was inevitable, but I think the Queensland government declared itself bankrupt after it made the decision—well, not bankrupt but they said they were broke five months after they made that decision.

**Senator ADAMS**—It is up to you guys to be able to work together. Is it helping?

**Councillor Elu**—I think the economies of scale will work in the long run, but we did not get the right amount of funding for the amalgamation process, so I think we are short \$670,000-odd that did not materialise. Like I said, we are now seeing the end and it is looking good, but I think it will take at least another term before we can say that the evils of the amalgamation process have been overcome.

**Senator ADAMS**—You have a united voice. At least it is not just one voice going forward; it is the five regional—

**Councillor Elu**—I do not know that five mayors arguing with you is better than one! Anyway, thank you for this. I will have to go.

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much, Mr Mayor. We much appreciate that.

**Senator MOORE**—We are talking to the hospital later. My understanding is that Bamaga hospital is one of the better resourced hospitals in this area, in that you have doctors. You always need more, but you do have your hospital. The mayor said in his comments that a lot of your people have had to move to Cairns for health reasons. Can you tell us what kinds of health reasons make people leave, and is there any way those people could stay?

**Councillor Lui**—Most people go for dialysis.

**Senator MOORE**—So that would be one of the issues.

**Councillor Lui**—Yes.

**Senator MOORE**—And you would be talking with the government about getting dialysis here sometime in the future.

**Councillor Lui**—Yes. It is also such a strain on those families that move down, because as soon as they get down there they are homesick. Without that family support, in some cases the illness gets worse, not better. They need that family support. If we have a high rate of diabetes in this state, wouldn't it be sensible to at least put dialysis equipment in that hospital, instead of moving these people to, if I may say so, crappy little accommodation for dialysis, for years, in Cairns?

**Senator MOORE**—It is for life, once it is done.

**Senator ADAMS**—Have you got any chairs at the site at all?

**Councillor Lui**—We do, but we do not have anyone who is licensed to operate them.

**Councillor Aniba**—We just need the support of the staff for that technical stuff that comes with it.

**Senator BOYCE**—Where are the chairs—here?

**Councillor Nona**—We have four chairs at the hospital right now.

**Senator BOYCE**—In Bamaga?

**Councillor Nona**—Yes.

**Councillor Lui**—They have never been used, though.

**Councillor Nona**—No. I do not think they have been used.

**Senator MOORE**—My understanding is that the hospital was planned and equipped that it would be able at some time put the service in. There is a very large number from your area who are in Cairns. It all comes down to getting the right people here who can use them. That is the position we have found in many places, that it is one thing to get the equipment, and that is always expensive, but in Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory we have founded you can get the equipment but then you have to get the specially trained people, because it is quite specialised how you do it. That is the issue here, that you have not been able to get the technicians and special nurses you need?

**Councillor Aniba**—Yes.

**Senator MOORE**—What has the state government said when you have raised it with them, because I bet you have.

**Councillor Lui**—We have not spoken to the state government. We have not had a meeting with the state government on health issues in these communities.



**Senator BOYCE**—Not since the amalgamation?

**Councillor Lui**—I have not anyway. I am not sure if the mayor has. I have not had a meeting with any state government representatives to talk about health issues.

**Senator MOORE**—And no-one from state health has been to see you?

**Councillor Lui**—Not to my knowledge.

**Senator MOORE**—We will talk with the hospital later and see. So your job with youth and generally healthy lifestyles, what kind of programs are you putting in place when you have identified that diabetes and heart are big things? What are you putting in place?

**Councillor Lui**—Right now we are trying to work on developing an NPA sporting association and to have different codes attached to that sporting association. Rugby league has been pretty much going on for the last 30 years. AFL is coming into these communities.

**Senator MOORE**—The league has been up here and you have links in this part of the world. There have been some great players but you are actually trying to widen that to AFL, soccer—

**Councillor Lui**—I would not say soccer.

**Senator MOORE**—You draw the line somewhere!

**Councillor Lui**—I think these communities are pretty much renowned for league, basketball and volleyball.

**Senator MOORE**—Have you got netball for the women?

**Councillor Lui**—We are trying to work on all these codes but it is a matter of getting all the right people in to sit on these subcommittees. It is hard but we are getting there. We are going to work throughout this whole year to try and get some kind of structure ready for next year. We are going to go right down to junior sports development as well. One of the biggest things that our kids miss out on is that team bonding and that team spirit. They do not get that in these communities. It is a different family. We are really trying to create that. Most kids are lucky. They do go away to boarding school in, say, Rockhampton and Brisbane. My kids go to St Brendan's and St Ursula's in Yeppoon. They come back with different attitudes because of that team bonding and stuff like that. So we really need to get that in place.

**Senator MOORE**—St Brendan's is a great rugby school. When they get there they learn the team aspect. You will be working with the education committee to try and link in with your local bodies.

**Councillor Aniba**—Just to support what Councillor Lui is saying, through the amalgamation we were introduced to PCYC as well. That is a new thing that has come on board, because we were just running sports and recs through our councils. In terms of having a framework in place, we are just working on it now. Through PCYC we will have support from all the programs and more networking—

**Senator MOORE**—Where is PCYC located? In Bamaga?

**Councillor Aniba**—Yes.

**Senator MOORE**—And all the five communities actually use that PCYC?

**Councillor Lui**—Yes.

**Senator BOYCE**—They have got a contract with who? The state government?

**Councillor Lui**—Yes. The sports program I suppose will work closely with education program to look at trialling some of Prime Minister John Howard's ideas of no school, no pool. We will say, no school and you cannot participate at the weekend, and try using sports as an incentive. But we have got to realise that some kids do not like to play sports, so we might work in with our director of community services, who is actually working with me right now in trying to develop the sports program, to identify some kids who are maybe interested in arts. The bottom line is that, as the mayor was saying, our kids should not be chosen on what their financial capabilities are but they should be chosen on what their talents are. Some kids here are natural artists, natural musicians, natural sportspeople, but they do not get a chance after school in Bamaga to pursue that as a career as every other Australian child in this country does. That is what we are trying to change. There has to be exposure—not all of our kids are rugby league players.

**Councillor Aniba**—Through this education strategy we will not just target education, we will also brand ourselves as a training and employment entity through this framework. That will give us business in the end for our people.

**Councillor Lui**—I think where the sports fits in is that we need our kids to be our leaders in the future but they need to be healthy.

**Senator MOORE**—What about an arts centre: do you have one up here?

**Councillor Lui**—We have an arts centre, yes. It is small. At that time the arts centre belonged to the New Mappoon Council. Most facilities here have not been upgraded to suit the new amalgamated council. Some centres that do provide services are quite small. This is our first term and hopefully all of us will be back here and work towards that.

**Senator BOYCE**—Do you actually drive from each of the communities?

**Councillor Lui**—Yes.

**Senator BOYCE**—It is my first visit to the peninsula.

**CHAIR**—We are close to time and the next witnesses have arrived. As Peter has indicated, there is always a degree of frustration when you have people, boneheads like me, arrive and say, 'Sit down and pontificate,' and they disappear on a plane and you think, 'I wonder what happened about that?' A number of this committee's reports I think have had some influence on parliament and on government about being able to look and actually say, 'This is what people

said and this is what people felt.’ It might not be able to point to anything in particular but your evidence today is really valuable and I thank you very much for appearing and providing that evidence. There may be questions that other senators will remember later and we will provide those on notice to you through the secretariat. You may also have some questions of the committee or other pieces of information we may find valuable and again you can provide those through the secretariat. Thank you very much for providing the evidence today.

[10.50 am]

**FOORD, Mr Christopher John, Chief Executive Officer, Bamaga Enterprises Ltd**

**LUI, Mr Peter, Councillor, Division 2, Umagico, Northern Peninsula Area Council**

**CHAIR**—Welcome. Information on parliamentary privilege and the protection of witnesses and evidence has previously been provided to you. Would you like to make an opening statement with regard to your submission?

**Mr Foord**—I am not really sure of exactly what you want from me, representing Bamaga Enterprises. First of all, I would like to apologise for the chairman and deputy chairman not being here. They both have businesses in town and they do have contractual arrangements at the moment. It has been raining and when the sun comes out they have to get out there to make up the time. So you have me.

In regard to what I read of your brief, we can only deal with the employment aspect of it, I suppose, as we are a business and that is where we come in. We do not have a lot of interaction directly with health, mental illness or any of those aspects. But we certainly do have a lot to do with employment issues. This is the side that I would like to concentrate on now, if I may.

One of the biggest issues we are faced with at the moment is the changes to the CDEP. While I can see the reasons why government have moved to change CDEP to mainstream it et cetera—instead of CDEP we now have work experience—from our perspective I do not believe the direction that it is going on is helping communities such as the NPA. There are obviously communities where CDEP has never worked and government have made a decision that they wish to move people off CDEP into mainstream work-for-the-dole work experience. But on the ground in Bamaga the CDEP always worked. By the way, I was the CEO for seven years, so I have a lot of experience with the CDEP here. It was working perfectly here. It was certainly helping the community move forward. If you look around the town, all the fencing, paving and landscaping was done through the CDEP. It worked very well. All the CDEP employees with council, builders, carpenters and electricians were doing their work and learning a trade. They were not just sitting and doing nothing. Anybody who was any good always got a full-time job. This is the crucial thing in the NPA. Anybody that wants a job has a job. We are screaming out for people to work.

Culturally, a lot of people here do not want to work. They want CDEP hours. They have families or they have other interests. They do not have a mindset or a work ethic to want to do a five-day week job. So the CDEP suits them fine. It also suits the enterprise set-up here. If we, for instance, roster five people in the restaurant here or in housekeeping, we expect three to turn up. We do not mind if five turn up if we are only paying them a top-up of \$4 out of their hourly rate. But as soon as we have to pay the full rate we cannot roster five people on. We cannot give five people a job. As of 1 July, if there is an audit—which I have heard is going to happen—of Bamaga Enterprises to check the CDEP of not just us but everybody, after the year we are supposed to offer full-time jobs to those who have been on the 12 months experience. That is the correct interpretation, I believe. As of 1 July, if that is the case, we are likely to only employ

those people who have shown reliability and efficiency. If we do not have those we are going to be looking at backpackers from Cairns. We have already done that. We cannot afford to have a full house and no-one in the restaurant, in the kitchen or in housekeeping.

Although CDEP has a bad name, it works in communities. Also, although it is not supposed to be this, CDEP has in fact operated as wage subsidy for Bamaga Enterprises because the government is paying \$16 out of \$20, shall we say, of the hourly rate. That has helped Bamaga Enterprises establish itself and make substantial profits which go back into the community. Bamaga Enterprises Ltd is a community owned company that is non-profit, tax-exempt and all of our money is reinvested back into the community. There is a Centrelink building in town that we built for \$1.8 million. We gave \$160,000 to build a youth centre. We are now dealing with a \$40,000 donation to build a playground for the children here and we give \$2,000 every time there is a funeral, for the grieving process. They have to buy food, coffins, transport et cetera. We support all these things. Since the amalgamation of council, we are really the only people who deal directly with Bamaga and help Bamaga. It is very important that Bamaga Enterprises continues to be profitable. At the moment, we are going to lose \$265,000 off our bottom line if CDEP ceases to function in the same way after 1 July. That is \$265,000 that is not going to go back into the community and it is going to cause pretty serious consequences for Bamaga Enterprises because we will have to cut back very seriously on our employment levels.

I believe that we are not the only people in that boat. I know that some of the other organisations have had their grants increased to cover the shortfall that they will experience because of the lack of CDEP. That is okay. If Health, through the government, can do that then Family and Community Services can do that because they are all projects are orientated with government funding and it is just a question of increasing that funding. We cannot do that; we have to earn our own money. We are in a position now where we are seriously looking at our employment options. I believe that we will have to seriously cut back on our employment numbers and really be careful that we only employ people who turn up, want to work and are efficient at work. That could preclude a lot of our present employees because they are very hit and miss. As I said, we do not mind that with the CDEP. So, as long as there is CDEP, there is not a problem.

On the other side of the coin, trying to get across the message to our employees that it is a privilege to have a full-time job and that they should really look after it is a difficult exercise, but they are learning, because people who lose their job here have to register with Centrelink. It is a question of whether they have been sacked or they lost their job without reason. They do not get benefits for a period. Also, if their spouse is working, they do not get benefits anyway. It is not as easy as it was before. The difficulty of getting onto CDEP and having to, first of all, register with Centrelink, go to the job networks and be assessed and then coming back to us for a job takes a while. If we want to employ someone in the pub, we need to employ them now. We cannot afford for them to register, go through the process and then come back to us and try and get some training to come with them. The only way we will substitute this loss of CDEP is to get the six-month training subsidy through Itech, Job Search or whatever it is, and that is only for six months and it only makes a little impact on the money we are actually losing on the CDEP side. The ground with CDEP has shifted constantly. Everyone has been flying by the seat of their pants out of Canberra from what I can see over the last year or so. That is the latest position I am aware of: they are on work experience and, as of 1 July, we have to offer them full-time jobs.

Coming back to the social impacts of that, I have had a number of conversations with the police. I am chairman of the liquor court here also. We have the same thoughts about the way things are working at the moment. We think this area could be moving towards being a depressed area. There is the lack of CDEP and more people being on the dole—I do not know whether this is true but I have heard council are going to put off 150 people after 1 July—and the council has also opened an office in Cairns. There are 20 or 25 people operating out of Cairns now. All the senior executives of the NPA council are in Cairns now. It has taken about \$2 million out of this economy. If you just take an average of \$60,000 to \$70,000 per position and multiply that by 20 or 25, you come up with that figure. That is money that is not being spent in this community on groceries, petrol and alcohol at the pub, which is one of our operations.

There is the impact of CDEP being phased out or changing, shall we say, into a different animal and there not being available positions to be trained for. The concept is good. In mainstream Australia you want to get people into mainstream employment, get them jobs, get them trained and get them off CDEP or whatever the work for the dole is, but in a community such as this you cannot do that because there are not enough industries and businesses here to employ everybody. You can say, 'Let's create new jobs.' Where are you going to create them? If you open a coffee shop, how many cups of coffee do you have to sell a day with a population of 3,000 in the community? It is very difficult with a limited population to get the demand to drive a new business.

This idea that we are going to take these people off CDEP and create new businesses through new jobs is a fallacy. It is not going to happen because of lack of demand in the population. So we come back to the position whereby everybody who wants a job has a job. There are four or five major employers: ourselves, health, council and family and community services. We cherry pick everybody. We pinch each other's employees to try to maximise the efficiency of our own staff. We try to grab the wives or the husbands of people who are employed by one of these organisations to try to find someone who is good to actually work. You are not going to create new jobs; you are not going to create new industries. Therefore, people that lose CDEP are going to become unemployed and you are going to have more unemployment.

With the council having offices in Cairns, sacking people themselves and other people coming back, there is a scenario by which this becomes a depressed area. With a depressed area you get increased alcohol use, alcohol related violence and it spills over onto the women and children. There is less money for them because they are still going to buy the alcohol. The police tell me that this is a fact: with social problems alcohol use increases and alcohol related violence increases. I see this as the overriding problem that we are facing at the moment. I cannot see how to overcome it, given that the government wants to bring people back into the mainstream on work experience or work for the dole and streamline them into the mainstream. That is fine, it is a good policy, but there is this idea that comes out of both Canberra and Brisbane that one size fits all. It does not.

There might be problems in Aurukun and Mornington Island and therefore the policy changes and we all get hit. It is one policy fits all. You can look around town here. This is not some place where people are wandering around with machetes and causing problems and there are fights in the streets. There is none of that here. This is probably the safest place I have ever been. It is far safer than Cairns at midnight or central Brisbane. We do not have the violence on the streets here. There are a few incidents but not many. All I can say is that, from an employment

perspective, the CDEP is the most crucial issue for us and it is the one that I am having to deal with most at the moment.

**CHAIR**—Thank you. One of the things you have described to me is not unique, I can tell you. You can travel right across Australia with CDEP and there will be the processes that you have described to me. I think you have also described to me the reason that CDEP has failed to deliver what it was going to deliver and the reason that governments of both persuasions have changed their minds about support of the current process of CDEP. CDEP, as I understood it, was to ensure that people were job ready. In other words, the employers got the benefit by having a subsidised wage system and, in exchange for that, there was assistance for people that needed assistance in changing from intergenerational welfare to being job ready. So they got assistance in getting them out of bed, making sure they were ready et cetera. That takes a long time. That was the quid pro quo. Do you think that Bamaga Enterprises did enough to ensure that people understood that eight hours was eight hours and turning up was turning up? Do you think your organisation did enough on your side of it to receive the subsidies from taxpayers?

**Mr Foord**—For sure, because, as I said, anybody within Bamaga Enterprises that was on CDEP was also on a full-time job. Anyone that wants a full-time job on CDEP has a full-time job at Bamaga Enterprises. They work 76 hours a week. We have done that. It is only those that do not want to turn up that do not get the benefit of the full 76 hours. It is simple. If they only want to work 34 hours a fortnight, that is what they get paid for. We have done our bit. All our employees are trained up. Everyone has all the training they need to be a good employee.

**CHAIR**—With the people who have turned up to work, that is all great. That is them. They have chosen to have that ethic. But then there is the process of ensuring that the other people who are getting CDEP are trained to ensure they have that work ethic, whether it was their work ethic or not. That was part of the deal, that you would move them into that. Perhaps I can put it this way: what strategies have you got in place, given the circumstance that you are talking about at the moment? What is Bamaga Enterprises undertaking, with the people who have been part-time employees, to address some of those issues about their simply not wanting to work long enough? What sorts of efforts have you put into that?

**Mr Foord**—If you can tell me how you instil a work ethic in someone that has never had one, I will gladly listen, but I can tell you that Indigenous people that come up from Townsville, Rockhampton and Cairns have a work ethic. They come in here and they know what it is like to work in the mainstream. They know they have to work eight hours. They know they have to perform. They are some of our best employees. Culturally, though, here that has never happened. It is a process that, in my opinion, is not one of training someone to do the job. We can train them to do the job, but that is not going to make them turn up for work if there is a funeral down there or there is—

**CHAIR**—Peter turns up every day. I have seen plenty of people in this community that turn up and have got that sort of culture.

**Mr Foord**—Peter is fine. Peter is one of the leaders and knows what is going on, but Peter can tell you that down at Injinoo that might not be the case. If we had people down at Injinoo, if they had a funeral they would not come to work.

**CHAIR**—I can understand for some cultural reasons, but personally I find it difficult to understand. That is why I am seeking some understanding of it. After such a long period of time with the CDEP there, if someone suddenly does not turn up you can go and inquire and support them to understand what their responsibilities are or you can just let it go—

**Mr Foord**—I can assure you that we have sat down with all our staff. We have explained to them the consequences of the new system and how it is all going to work. We have told them that we are doing performance assessments, and on 1 July only those who have shown a good employment record and responsibility in their positions will have a full-time position.

**CHAIR**—Do you think you are going to have a sustainable business, given that you can get access to alternative labour from Cairns or whatever the suggestion is?

**Mr Foord**—That is a good point. I am still doing the numbers.

**CHAIR**—You are just not sure at this stage?

**Mr Foord**—I can say that we are looking at a profit of around \$400,000 with the CDEP. If you take \$265,000 out of that you are reducing that considerably. We are looking at all sorts of ways of becoming more efficient. I now have to put pressure on managers that I have not had to do before. That is going to have consequences too, because not everybody here wants to perform at the 100 per cent level which you can push people to in the mainstream. If you push people too hard here they do not come to work and it just makes the situation worse.

We have got to get more bang for our bucks now—that is basically it. We are looking at all our systems and all our employees across the whole board to see where we can tighten up and generate better results.

**Senator FURNER**—How many employees do you have employed by Bamaga Enterprises?

**Mr Foord**—I think there are about 76.

**Senator BOYCE**—What is that likely to drop to?

**Mr Foord**—There is a limit to what we can drop, because I have got to have so many people in the resort here for housekeeping and restaurant. We have already cut back on non-essential things like ground staff. We are now having to push the housekeepers to do a room in 35 minutes instead of 55. If you go into a hotel down south that is what they do. Here, it is not the way they do it—you have two girls. I went out there just now and there were eight girls out there doing the housekeeping. I saw the manager and said, ‘Why have we got eight girls here?’ He said, ‘They are all doing 2½ hours’. We are trying to spread the money around.

**Senator FURNER**—What sort of businesses are they employed in other than the resort here though?

**Mr Foord**—A lot of them are not in our type of business, some of them are on CDEP in other enterprises. They might work at health, or they might work at the school or they might work at



other places. They come here and we do not get the benefit of their CDEP sometimes because that is going to their other employer.

It is like our security in the pub. They have day jobs, and they come to the pub at five o'clock and work as security. All around, we come back to this situation where we just do not have the qualified people who want to work. I am sorry, I scream out for anybody who has not been recycled three or four times around all the businesses in town sometimes. It is very difficult to find a new person who has got the will. It is not necessarily the skills—we can train them—it is the will to want to turn up and to work.

**Senator FURNER**—Isn't that part of training though? We heard from employers like Rio Tinto yesterday. Surely they go through the same exercise of inducting employees and having them understand what the culture is of that particular employment, working for the aluminium mines in Weipa? Surely that is a part of the process that you would have to deal with as well?

**Mr Foord**—For sure. We have an induction manual that we go through with all new employees and it tells them all these things—not just the procedures for the jobs, but the whole aspect of what is required to be an employee. But, I am sorry, it just does not work. I come back to this: if there is a funeral, they are not going to turn up for a week. That is a fact of life. I would hate you to be the manager here, where you have a coach come in with 45 people and no-one turns up to clean the rooms, or there is no-one in the kitchen or in the restaurant. This has happened. The manager here has had to serve 65 tables himself because people have not turned up sometimes. I am not saying that that happens all the time, but it happens enough to be a problem. As an employer we can attend a market day and tell people what is available and what we expect, but we cannot go out into the community and change a work ethic. I am not putting anyone down here; it is just the way it is. I would love to have everybody with a work ethic where they come in and they want to work. That is why CDEP was so good. It was because it suited some people—a lot of people, in fact.

**Senator FURNER**—You mentioned the need to employ backpackers. How long have you been doing that for?

**Mr Foord**—We had to bring them in at Christmas because those on CDEP all go on holiday in early December. The whole place shuts down and no-one has enough interest because everyone is tired at the end of the year. So we had to bring four backpackers into the resort for December and early January. The thing with that is that they want the hours. They just to work for three or four months, they want the hours and they are quite happy to be here and do the work. That is what I need, and the more we get channelled into the need to be super efficient in performance and to earn every dollar that is possible in there, the more we have to put pressure on our employees to perform. That is how the world works. We have never had to do that here before. If we get a 70 per cent efficiency rate out of people, that is great; I am happy with that. I am not going to push them for 100 per cent; it does not work. You can only put people under pressure for so long. Otherwise, it just blows apart. Now we are getting to that point where we need that extra performance and to tighten up and have fewer people performing better. I do not know how that is going to turn out. Obviously our board wants to employ local people. It is one of the major conversations we have at nearly every board meeting, yet what can we do?

**Senator MOORE**—The local council is involved with the business, isn't it? And the council also won the contract for CDEP. Is that right?

**Councillor Lui**—Correct.

**Senator MOORE**—So obviously this is something that the council are turning their mind to. From your perspective—and I know you have had this conversation many times—what do you think? What do you want on record?

**Councillor Lui**—I agree with some and disagree other comments that Mr Foord made about CDEP. Yes, it has helped build these communities and, yes, we do have issues with work ethic. But in some cases CDEP is the problem that causes this lack of work ethic. If you are just out of school, you are signing up for work and the only work that they give you is a couple of days, what kind of a message is that giving to a young bloke? That young bloke or that young lady now begins to get used to the system. They are stranded there for a number of years and it becomes the norm. They can live off two days of work. All of a sudden, someone like Mr Foord gives a young kid a break but, because they have only been working two days for the last four or five years, that cycle is now too hard to break. My job is also as a training manager for CDEP for the council, and I work with the kids who are coming out of school: the 19-year-olds, 20-year-olds and 21-year-olds who simply cannot fill out a form because they have struggled at school. Now, in employment, they are struggling to do the basic paperwork that is required of them. I agree with some and disagree with some other CDEP changes, but I think the CDEP program has to change. It has to give our people a better pathway than it has done in the last 30 years.

We walked into this new amalgamated council and we had people who have been on the CDEP program from each of these individual councils as housing officers and environmental health officers. These people have been turning up for work for 10 to 15 years every day. So why were they still on CDEP? It was because they were used as a subsidy. The council so far has put through 140 people and converted those 140 people who are working in local government positions into full-time work without CDEP. We can only go as far as what we can do with what we have in the bank. We are not going to be able to employ anyone and everyone.

On your comment that we have 25 people in our Cairns office, that is incorrect. We do not have 25 people. I can get you the right number, but most of those people are senior financial officers who have helped this regional council get an unqualified audit. So we are moving in the right direction with that. Yes, it has been an investment. Yes, we do plan on sending some of our people down to Cairns to get that experience. Yes, like Bamaga Enterprises Ltd, the council does face issues with people with a bad work ethic, but we do get good ones as well. My employment with the council as a training officer is not only to train participants and think that they could only have jobs in the NPA. The mining industry needs to be an option for our people. That is why the mayor made the comment earlier that the mine near the Steve Irwin area needs to open. It would be an employment opportunity for nearly half of the NPA.

**Senator MOORE**—So in terms of the fact that the council is actually on the board of Bamaga Enterprises Ltd—

**Mr Foord**—No.

**Senator MOORE**—They are not? The council is not involved with this business at all?

**Councillor Lui**—My only knowledge of council association with BEL was by the Bamaga Island Council. I am not really up to speed with—

**Senator MOORE**—So there is no longer any link between the NPA council and this business?

**Mr Foord**—No.

**Senator MOORE**—I know that there used to be; that is why I wanted to get that on record.

**Mr Foord**—The Bamaga Island Council used to operate all the businesses that Bamaga Enterprises now operates. When I was CEO of council I transferred them out and set up a locally owned, community owned, company that was totally separate from council. At the amalgamation, all of the enterprises in the NPA, apart from those operated by Bamaga Enterprises, went to council because they were not separated. So we are the only ones that are different. We are an entity totally nonrelated to council, and it is what has saved us, really, because we were not caught up when all the councils lost their liquor licences in the NPA. We were the only ones that did not lose their liquor licence, because we were a separate entity and they could not touch us, basically.

**CHAIR**—Thank you, Mr Lui and Mr Ford. Unfortunately we are out of time. I think we should have taken Mr Lui's advice and spent all day talking about it; we certainly could have. If any of the committee senators wish to provide extra questions to you, they will be provided on notice to the secretariat. If you have further information that you wish to provide to the committee, that can also be provided to the secretariat. Thank you very much once again for providing your evidence today.

**Proceedings suspended from 11.24 am to 11.34 am**

**CHRISTIAN, Mr Steven William, Private capacity**

**COOK, Ms Samantha (Sam), Private capacity**

**FORT-RUSHTON, Mrs Maree, Director of Nursing, Bamaga Hospital, Queensland Health**

**NONA, Ms Patricia, Private capacity**

**WONG, Mrs Morva, Chronic Disease Care Coordinator, Bamaga Hospital, Queensland Health**

**CHAIR**—Welcome. Information on parliamentary privilege and protection of witnesses and evidence has previously been provided to you. As departmental officers you will not be asked to give answers on matters of policy, though this does not preclude questions asking for explanations of policy or factual questions about when and how policies were adopted. I now invite you to make a short opening statement, or statements, and at the conclusion of your remarks we will take questions from the committee.

**Ms Nona**—Looking at the terms of reference, point (a) says:

the effectiveness of Australian Government policies following the Northern Territory Emergency Response, specifically on the state of health, welfare, education and law and order in regional and remote Indigenous communities;

Looking at the communities in the NPA, I feel that the reforms would work to some extent—for example, not as a blanket approach but on specific issues. Here we have the services available to support that. I feel that in the Territory they did not have the appropriate services to support that particular reform. However, in our communities, we have thought about it and we would benefit from some of those reforms.

**CHAIR**—Could you perhaps let the committee know which of the reforms you think you would benefit from?

**Ms Nona**—Basically, the Centrelink payment and budgeting but not particularly for everyone but specifically for the parents who do not have the capacity to manage the payments—those with problems managing their budgets and those who maybe have different problems who need to have support around them.

**Ms Cook**—I had a bit to do with the child reforms through CRANA. We do have services here such as child health—not only here but also over in the district—and we are in the middle of doing some health screening with children and adults. We are doing the whole area. We are quite unique up here in that we do have a large population but we are in a small area. So we are very lucky. With the child reforms, it was great how people came in and assessed the children et cetera. But, again, we can do that here. It is just that we need more resources et cetera to do that. A lot of the stuff that has happened in the Northern Territory has been great and more of a blanket approach, as Patty mentioned, but we, as individuals and communities, have the

foundation; we just need a lot more resources or funding to build on those things and to individualise things for us to make things work.

**Senator ADAMS**—What sort of screening are you doing?

**Ms Cook**—The health checks, through the chronic disease guideline strategies. They are annual. We are currently doing them now to get a baseline as we are actually rolling out a new primary healthcare system here as well. We are movers and shakers in the NPA.

**Senator ADAMS**—So that is your benchmark for later?

**Ms Cook**—Yes.

**Senator BOYCE**—And that will be everyone—the whole population?

**Ms Cook**—Yes.

**Mr Christian**—Zero to 100.

**Ms Cook**—Not that we have anyone who is 100 years old.

**Senator MOORE**—But that is a benchmark that we might have some time in the future.

**Mr Christian**—Exactly.

**Ms Cook**—On our database, our eldest person is 87.

**Senator BOYCE**—One issue that was raised earlier was the fact that apparently you have four dialysis chairs but they are not operating because there is no-one to operate them. What is the story, please?

**Ms Nona**—It is correct that we have actually got the funding for four dialysis chairs. Given the difficulty in recruiting staff, we had an issue with recruiting an endocrinologist to be based at Cairns Base. We do have satellite programs around the region but, with one endocrinologist, it was difficult to manage that at that time. Therefore, right now, we have the capacity to do that now; it is just that we are working on some of the logistics. We do not have a problem setting it out; it is just getting the right skills mix into the community.

**Ms Nona**—We need a dialysis nurse to be based here. Coming with the nurse, we need accommodation; we do not have accommodation. That is the biggest obstacle for us in these communities. We have the patients in the Cairns Base Hospital; they are old people who are from here. The other difficulty for us is that, given the complexity of the situations of individual patients as well, they have to be based on criteria to be moved back to the communities.

**Senator BOYCE**—Would all of them have support in the community if they came back?

**Ms Nona**—It is not so much the support; we have the support. It is the complexity of the comorbidity.

**Ms Cook**—Currently how it works is that we have dialysis patients in the community. They are having peritoneal dialysis, not haemodialysis. How it works—and this is something that also needs to be considered—is that a carer is sent down—a person, not just one. That particular individual could be of any age. The carer could be a husband, partner, sister, brother or whatever it might be. I was on Murray Island, so I can speak from that experience as well. When that carer wanted to go on holiday, they had to either take the person with them, because there was no-one else that was trained, or simply not go. They were the two options. The third option, which we do not do here, was to have the nurse look after that client. With our policies, we cannot do that here and in the district. So what I am saying is not only that there is the unit but also that, although you mentioned community support, we do not have that either, because, as I said, people go down and have one carer. Indigenous culture has a family orientation, so therefore, if it is a young person—say, aged 30—she might have young children, but we cannot send them under the current PTS, or patient travel scheme. So the children either have to be left behind with other people to care for them—

**Senator BOYCE**—Does that happen?

**Ms Cook**—Yes, quite often. The thing is that they might be down there for six months or longer. The client and carer only return when Cairns Base Hospital believe that they are competent in self-caring. Therefore, it is a double-edged sword. As Patricia just said, the dialysis unit is wonderful and great—yes, we can get it up and running, we can have more money, we can get funding and we can do all that—but it is behind closed doors at home that we need more support as well. Otherwise, one renal nurse is going to be—

**Senator BOYCE**—So you need things like respite renal care.

**Ms Cook**—Yes.

**Ms Nona**—The other situation is that when all the clients left—they were in Cairns Base Hospital—their accommodation was given to another resident.

**Senator BOYCE**—Yes, that is why I was asking. Can they just come back?

**Ms Nona**—No, they cannot. They need a place and accommodation here. We have our biggest crisis accommodation for community locals and for the staff as well. We are trying to set a standard of one staffer per unit so that they can have quality of life, but it is very difficult. We have to make them share because we do not have the appropriate accommodation.

**Ms Cook**—And many staff will leave. I myself have been here 2½ years now. If I were asked to share accommodation, I would not say I would leave overnight, but I would consider leaving.

**Senator BOYCE**—It would be part of a decision-making—

**Ms Cook**—Yes. But on that matter I will say as well, briefly, that we have quite a few nursing and other positions that are vacant and have been vacant for years because we cannot

accommodate people. We currently have the ATODS, which are under AMR and which we are trying to get up and running. We were given roughly \$500,000, give or take, and that was to build an office area as well as a duplex. We costed it at nearly \$2 million, roughly.

**Ms Nona**—That has been addressed now.

**Ms Cook**—It has, but I am just saying that people also need to consider that up here it costs a lot more money as well.

**Senator BOYCE**—How much accommodation would you need to be fully staffed?

**Ms Nona**—We have a huge amount of staff, but we actually have to create internal policies just to stay to that. The Indigenous staff are also overcrowded. They are also senior staff members, but they cannot get accommodation because we have to prioritise it. If someone comes from outside they get the priority. So we definitely need lots of accommodation in the communities.

**Ms Cook**—We are talking about health workers as well. We are reviewing it right now and trying to advertise. Steven is community health services manager. We currently have 15 up to nearly 20 positions. I think seven positions are contract ones, and X amount of those positions have come out of the district, so they have to be lucky enough to have family or a friend here to stay with, even though they might have moved away and come back. This is anyone below 005. Steven is higher than that, of course. Patty and Steven from here and have their own houses. But, at the moment, for us to recruit health workers we need at least another 20. We do not have the capacity here. There is no one trained, because whoever we have trained we have employed, or they are old or they have moved on—whatever it may be. So if we try and get a good workforce up here of effective workers who know their stuff and the first thing we say is, ‘Sorry, we can’t give you accommodation,’ then of course they are not going to come. Therefore, we are surviving on just above half a workforce at the moment. We are limited, but we are still moving on. We just did four or five weeks of health checks—

**Mr Christian**—Seven weeks.

**Ms Cook**—and we have still got another two to go.

**Senator MOORE**—One thing that has been raised with me in a number of regions is that to attract students to come and do the placements in nursing, medicine, dentistry and all those things that we are saying we need people to come and do in community, so that they will then come back and stay in community, they need accommodation as well. I have been told by some regional centres in Queensland that they just do not have the capacity to offer that. Is that the situation here?

**Ms Nona**—That is exactly true.

**Senator MOORE**—So if people from James Cook or from Brisbane would like to come and do these placements, you are not able to offer that and accept them. Is that right?

**Ms Nona**—It comes to the point where I have to tell the doctor or the don that we just have to take them in our own accommodation.

**Senator MOORE**—To give them the chance?

**Ms Nona**—To give them the opportunity. We just do not have the accommodation.

**Senator BOYCE**—Do you billet students at home?

**Ms Nona**—We would not want to, but it has come to a point where they have to.

**Ms Cook**—And we have turned students away.

**CHAIR**—What is the department telling you? The department of health have plenty of accommodation around Queensland. Whilst it is not necessarily tied to the whole thing, what have they said about this? Clearly, this is just unsustainable. Your need is going to grow. Is there any communication between the Queensland department of health with regard to this accommodation crisis?

**Ms Nona**—They are fully aware of it.

**CHAIR**—What moves have they made? Have they got a plan or a strategy to deal with it?

**Ms Cook**—They are looking into it.

**CHAIR**—The mirror.

**Mr Christian**—We have raised a lot of important issues here. We have talked about workforce. I do not have to explain that. I think you have enough background information on that, accommodation, recruitment and retention. There are entitlements and incentives for each of the different professions, and there is an inequality there in itself. The Indigenous workforce make up the majority of the workforce. When you look at their entitlements compared to those of a doctor or nurse, it is just so unbalanced and uneven.

One of the things that you may or may not be aware of is that we are probably the only district in the state of Queensland that actually has a model of primary health care. I was interested to hear that the Commonwealth government was looking at a national primary healthcare model. We are also be only district that has an Indigenous management structure so we control everything within our district.

In relation to all these issues, over our 25 years each—so 50 years between the two of us—we have raised these issues at all government levels. About two or three years ago we raised the issue with the previous government, the federal minister for health. What was his name—who was the previous federal minister the health?

**Senator BOYCE**—Tony Abbott.



**Mr Christian**—He was the one. We provided all the statistics to him. Sure, we got a few little things—that was fine to get us through. We are also on the advisory committee to the director-general. We are going down to Brisbane on 14 or 15 May, again raising the issues. We continually raise these issues which are outstanding or overdue. I have been dealing in industrial matters for Queensland Health for some 16 years. Yes, there has been improvement, but not enough improvement.

**Senator MOORE**—That is a tough job. You look too healthy to have done that with industrial issues in Queensland!

**Mr Christian**—So everything we are talking about is overdue and has been spoken about over I do not know how many years. For some of you older ones who have been dealing with health, you can go back as far as the NAHS report. I am sure you are all familiar with that. We are still talking about the same issues and about what changes can occur to reduce the impact on Indigenous health.

Interestingly also is that, although I am not fully knowledgeable with respect to what happened in the Northern Territory, from what I can understand I do not agree with it. I think there was a lot of injustice there. Yes, there has been some good, but I always ask the question: how much consultation occurred as a lead-up to taking over, when we saw Defence Force personnel and things like that? I would hate to see any of that happen here in the NPA, or within our district. I am sorry, but I am a bit cautious. You can appreciate and understand that. I do not know what else can be asked or what responses can be given, given the historical events that have occurred and where we are.

**Senator MOORE**—Do you have a document—I am sure you have—which describes the way you operate your primary health model in this area?

**Ms Nona**—Yes.

**Mr Christian**—Yes.

**Senator MOORE**—We would like that; it would be very useful.

**Ms Cook**—We will make sure it is dropped over to you.

**Mr Christian**—Including the Indigenous management structure.

**Senator MOORE**—Yes. Knowing the particular way you have worked it out here would be very valuable.

**Ms Cook**—Following from what Stephen has also said, I do not know whether it is a district issue but it is true that in this area, if you speak at the grassroots level, the workers—we are all workers; even though we do sit in offices we also come out and do work, which is very good and which is why I like working here—you will get a particular view. I will ring up the health centres and say, ‘Walter is coming over from OH&S to do a security audit.’ The staff will ask why. The reason they ask why is that there have been four or five done in the last two and a half

years and nothing has been done. Seriously, if you were to go into the centres now and ask, 'What do you need?' they would look at you and say, 'What's the use?'

**Senator BOYCE**—Yes—'Go back to the one I did six years ago.'

**Ms Cook**—I have asked for equipment. X amount has come from down south, Brisbane, Cairns and wherever it may be, and nothing is done. The reports are there. Pat here gets given most of them. But that is what we find most frustrating: we will write out forms after forms, and put in submissions, and we will ask—sometimes beg, to be frankly honest—and they still come up, not with a 'no' but with, 'We'll get to that' or 'We'll have to talk about that' or 'The meeting's coming up soon'. It is like that with equipment. With the new CEO we are working on equipment and a lot of things are happening, which is positive. But it is also like that with maintenance—not only with the health facilities but with the accommodation. The thing is that, with the staff accommodation, QBuild cannot cut it. I am not going to make false allegations, but QBuild just does not have the capacity. I do not know whether the workmanship is good or bad, because I am not a tradesman.

An example is the maintenance of security spotlights. I am not making this personal, but I will use the example of where I live. People do walk around quite a lot at night. I keep a Rottweiler because I do not trust my security lights. My front lights are broken. As soon as they are fixed I can guarantee that the other two sets will be broken. And I have had someone break into my house. I do not live on the hospital grounds. There is no guarantee that they can be fixed within 24 hours, which is what the policy states. So I am speaking on behalf of all my colleagues. People will come up from down south. So a new person comes up for recruitment and retention and they are excited. They want to come up but they walk into the accommodation and it is covered in dust because someone has left the windows open, thinking they are doing a good thing. Then they turn the air cons on and basically they spew out dust because they are the old ones or they are rusted. Then they go into the bathroom—it got dropped. Then they go to work and something else happens. Then you put in a maintenance request for gas. I am not blaming the workers at all but it could take all day. They start worrying: 'Where's my gas?' Half the time it is not our fault; it is just the system. We have asked so many times to have things fixed. With the hospital, which Maree can speak of, the security is major and it is as simple as putting lights up. It has been nearly three years that we have talked about it.

**Senator BOYCE**—External security lights?

**Mrs Fort-Rushton**—Yes. Our security cameras and things have not been working. I have been in the hospital not quite two years and that is something I identified when I first came up. We have had reports, we have had people up, we have had quotes and everything. I am led to believe that by the end of June this year we should have our security cameras and lights and they are talking about putting duress alarms in the Queensland Health cars. That has taken me nearly two years.

**Senator BOYCE**—And when is that going to happen—end of June?

**Mrs Fort-Rushton**—Supposed to be then.

**Senator BOYCE**—How old are the houses?

**Mrs Fort-Rushton**—In the staff accommodation, you do not have duress alarms. So if you were in a major situation, you wanted to press an alarm and you were nowhere near your phone, you do not.

**Ms Cook**—Often if you live off grounds, we of course make sure that staff are always secure. When my other half is away, I let Maree know so that if she does not hear from me for a couple of days, she comes looking for me. It is just simple things. People would be so much happier and then productivity would go up 100 per cent. Also people would want to come here, but as soon as we start saying, ‘Sorry, we’re going to have to start sharing because we haven’t got enough accommodation’—in other words, we start blowing out—we are going to go backwards and people are going to start leaving in droves.

**Mrs Fort-Rushton**—I use a lot of agency staff up here. Our agency accommodation is not the flashiest. It is share accommodation. The agency staff do not want that because they have been to Pormpuraaw or other communities where they have flash accommodation, all the saucepans and everything, and we do not have that here. So to keep agency staff here who have come for short-term contracts is also an issue because they do not like the accommodation.

**Senator BOYCE**—The agency staff would come from Cairns?

**Mrs Fort-Rushton**—From anywhere—Adelaide, New Zealand, Victoria.

**Senator BOYCE**—Not Victorians!

**Mr Christian**—To give you an example, in the middle of the screening which we have been doing to get our base line, we have had to go as far as Melbourne to get a qualified medical officer to assist us. We go through a clinical process and you get to a level where the child or adult has to be seen by a medical officer. Without a medical officer it is useless and it is not only for screening but Medicare and to generate funds, all that sort of stuff. It is ridiculous and it is crazy when you have to go that far, to another state or territory, to get a colleague, whether it be a doctor or a nurse, to support us. Usually the contracts are for short periods and the cost involved blows everything apart, but what do you do?

**Ms Cook**—He was actually here for two weeks. He started flying up from Melbourne on the Monday and spent the night in Cairns. We have only one airline. Actually, we have two but they both fly at virtually the same time, which is ridiculous. Then he had to stay all day in Cairns and wait for the afternoon flight because there was only one flight that day coming here. Therefore, that took two days. On Wednesday he spent a bit of time in the morning asking, ‘What is going on? Where are my forms?’ and so on. That took X amount of hours, so by the time he really hit the tools it was about lunchtime. That is pretty normal. Thursday and Friday were very productive. On Monday, because it was Easter, he started wanting to know, ‘How am I going to get home?’ We spent a couple of hours talking about that. Then he basically had to leave Wednesday afternoon to catch a ferry to Thursday Island to catch a flight on Thursday morning. So he was effectively working for about four days even though he was here for two weeks. It being Easter was a bit of a bugger—sorry about the word. The thing is that there was a late flight on Friday and that would have worked out better, but he wanted to be home Saturday morning.

The other issue is medical staff. With accommodation for doctors—and, yes, I am a nurse, so forgive me—they expect a fair bit of gratuity. They expect a bit of a bonus, you might say. The thing is that the medical staff do expect a house. The number of houses is limited. We do have families up here. If anyone has kids then preferably they have a house. But the houses are limited. It is not because of us; it is because of what we are given. At the moment, there is a medical officer in one of the houses. It is a three-bedroom house. He has no kids, but okay. The other medical officer—which is actually the med super—is living in a duplex. She does not have kids, but okay. But if the next doctor that we get—because we have three positions—comes along with, say, four kids or whatever, we do not have a house for them. We are actually advertising the med super position, and a med super will expect a house. How are we going to get that person unless they are a person who is laid-back and flexible, which would be lovely, and are happy to live somewhere else? But, really, we do not have anywhere else to put them either.

**Mrs Fort-Rushton**—It is the same when I advertise my nursing positions. I hope they do not have a family because I do not know where will I put them. I do have duplexes available that a single couple can go into.

**Senator BOYCE**—Do duplexes have two bedrooms in them?

**Mrs Fort-Rushton**—Yes. Nothing can be built with fewer than two bedrooms, which is good.

**Senator ADAMS**—Is land available for more houses?

**Ms Cook**—Yes.

**Mr Christian**—I want to talk about the NPA impact. Some of the issues that are of grave concern to me which end up becoming health issues are justice, education and employment opportunities. For a lot of our children over the years—and it has had an impact on me and a few other family members within communities—we have had to force them to go to school or threaten them by saying, ‘Education is important to get a good job and, if you haven’t got one, you have to get out of here.’ A lot of parents in the NPA have been forced into a situation where they have had to get their children out of here. If there is one person working then you have certain entitlements, such as Abstudy, which will pay for flights and fees and all that. Then there are families where two parties work and when they are means tested they are found not eligible for anything other than probably airfares.

So it becomes a grave concern because it means that I need to get my children or my child out to get a better education so they have the same opportunity for employment as anybody else anywhere in Australia. Unfortunately, when you get means tested or tested financially you cannot meet certain things, so they stay here. So what happens? The old story. The child leaves school and goes to CDEP. CDEP is about to go out, so where do they go from there? Or they have training programs at high school from grade 10 to grade 12. They are guaranteed, in most situations: if you complete and you have a good mark then the chances of an apprenticeship are pretty high. Sorry, it does not happen that way. A lot of our children do not have that opportunity to be seeking good employment, as in apprenticeships and things like that.

Education, as far as I am concerned—pardon me if I use the word—sucks. Yet I see on the news quite frequently—just the other night I think on Seven Central—the billions of dollars that have been wasted on education facilities. Something cost \$600,000 to build and it looked like a car garage, compared to a local council office which was \$400,000 and a big multipurpose building. These facilities are for our children to get a good education. They deserve the same treatment or access to funding so they can get proper facilities. The curriculum does not help or enhance their learning so they can go out and get a career.

At the moment we have 35 kids, both Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, who have gone out to join the armed forces, be it Army, Navy or Air Force. Actually, they are on their way through to Darwin now and they finish their training in September. That is probably the only option they have unless Bamaga Enterprise, BEL, provides career opportunities. But with a growing population and the number of children finishing school or hoping to finish school there is nowhere to go. So education is an issue and employment is an issue. At the end of the day they end up drinking or fighting or what have you. They start a family and the merry-go-round these people are on just goes around and around. I do not know what can be done, but I can tell you something needs to be done.

**Senator BOYCE**—How many people in the community would currently be studying nursing, medicine or an allied health occupation?

**Ms Cook**—None.

**Ms Nona**—Maybe two or three.

**Mr Christian**—That is about it.

**Ms Nona**—Basically it is what Steven said. I can speak from experience. I send my kids to boarding school. I cannot afford to. I send them anyway and I still try to make ends meet. Basically, when my kids are at boarding school they are actually two years behind the rest of the kids in the boarding school, so they have to repeat and get their standard up. We were lucky that my kid could actually start at grade 8, but he struggled to write until grade 12. They did get an OP, but it took them a long time to actually get there. So they had lots of support from myself—lots and lots of support. If I did not give that they would not even make it there. Kids could not even get to do basic subjects when they first went to boarding school because of their school studies. Actually, the curriculums are the same.

**Senator BOYCE**—Where is the school? In Cairns?

**Ms Nona**—The school is in Brisbane. The Bamaga curriculum is the same, but I just do not know why the kids are not learning as much as the rest of the kids down south.

**Mr Christian**—I think the curriculum really needs to be looked at, and education as a whole. My daughter wishes to be a doctor. There is no way that they can provide any curriculum—subjects like physics—for her in Bamaga. I have had to organise for her to go to Brisbane. Only last week I had to get my other son through to Townsville. He wants to be a technician in the Army. I cannot provide that for him here. They are only a few amongst many of them. About a month ago 23 kids had already finished school. Not last year but the year before and last year—

and there were a lot of dropouts in between—I had to register them. I physically took them to ITEC or whatever you call it to get these kids registered because all they do day in and day out is walk and roam the streets at night. Use your imagination: all sorts of things happen. That becomes an issue now for alcohol and drugs, which has an impact.

Justice is another big thing. I think we need a bigger police force. I do not know what the future is for community police in remote areas, if there is any future. They need authority to do something other than just drive around, look around and say, ‘I don’t think I’ll go there.’ The policy is to not put themselves in harm’s way. There is a whole range of things. At the end of the day, it all comes back to health because it is about violence, as in fighting or brawling, or it becomes a matter of self-harm, suicidal tendencies, anxiety or mental disorders. All that we talk about comes back to health, which becomes a burden on the whole system which has an impact on all the systems that we have, both state and Commonwealth, which has an overall impact on the community.

The last thing I want to say—and this is a sensitive issue and my personal opinion, not as a Queensland health staff member—and I want to make this very clear: unless somebody at this table proves to me that prohibition in the history of mankind, understanding and consuming alcohol in any country of the world, has ever worked, I do not know that it has worked. The alcohol management plan needs to be thrown out or reviewed, because I feel that it is not only an injustice but a bit of a racist thing. It is a bit of a sham on behalf of the government not being able to handle the situation. The rights of individuals within a community have been taken away. How can you put rules and regulations on people within a community? Yes, we have problems with alcohol—there is domestic violence and this and that. I compare that to what I see on the news at the Gold Coast, Brisbane, Sydney or Melbourne, where there is rape, murder and bashings. This is in a facility for public use, the home environment or at a shopping mall. How can the government justify telling us, ‘This is what you can’t do,’ or ‘This is what you can or can’t drink,’ yet I see on the news the media portraying all this violence going on? When it first came in at Mareeba or Atherton—somewhere around there—their courts could not keep up due to the number of adults and young people who were involved in domestic violence, brawls or fights in public. It was all related to alcohol. Where is the justice in that? That is just from me. Like I said, it is a sensitive issue. There are those who think that it is good; there are others who say, ‘Well, that’s—

**CHAIR**—Would you have a solution?

**Mr Christian**—It is just like in health: you can put 1,000 doctors here and 200,000 nurses and it would never stop the problem. More police—no. I think it is something about which we need to sit down as a group and say, ‘Where are we; where do we want to go?’ but have some control, because when you start taking control away from people they retaliate. You can be as strict as anything. Ever since the introduction of the alcohol management plan there has been an increase in adults drinking metho and there has been an increase in New Guinea gold. Customs and all those silly buggers, Commonwealth government people, are flying all over the Torres Strait and yet there are the guys in their little dinghies who know how to patrol from Thursday Island or even from here to an island for safe haven. They go to the borders of Papua New Guinea and then come all the way back. They come right into the central group of the Torres Strait. Nobody could control it and nobody knew was going on. There are technologies, with planes flying around wasting government money, or taxpayers’ money, because they cannot find them. They

do an island hop. I am ex-Army and we used to do patrols right through the Torres Strait to the PNG border. We got in and got out. It was quite easy.

What is the solution? I will say what the solution is. There is a solution. It just means that we need to sit down and be a bit more realistic about our approach and how we are going to reduce the impact on health, education, justice, employment or what have you, and give more control back to people. I do not think governments necessarily get it right all the time—not from my perspective as an ordinary person within the community.

**Ms Nona**—Just to take the Northern Territory, the AMR was put across to all communities. If it was looking at individual communities—we put a lot of effort into harm minimisation in these communities and putting the AMR on top of us is actually defeating the purpose of what we were trying to achieve in the first place

**Mr Christian**—That is right. There are more young people drinking and, I can tell you, there are more females now drinking than males. What happened when it first came in is that they were looking for cheap alcohol, as in wines, because the alcohol content was much higher. So they bought the cheap plonk—wine or whatever—because they knew how to read the alcohol content. So what did they do? They scull drink, as in gobble. So we had an increase of females drinking more than the males. The violence increased. ‘Who is going to stop us going to TI and bringing grog back?’ ‘Who is going to stop us for Youth and Police?’ You cannot police the whole coast here. Police operate from this time to that time, and if there is a problem going on you can ring all you like—and they might come or they might not, I do not know.

**Ms Cook**—With regard to the introduction of the AMR, which I have mentioned and Patti has mentioned and which we as Queensland Health staff support—and I personally support; I do not drink so it is very easy for me to talk about this—what Stephen is saying is right, of course. The issue about health, though—trying to put it very simplistically in a short version—is that we are not dry here, but it does not work. The reason is that we are not dry. People do kill themselves in trying to get alcohol. They go to TI, load up their dinghy with lots and lots of bottles and then the dinghy sinks and they die.

**Senator BOYCE**—That has happened?

**Ms Cook**—Yes, lots and lots of times. If you see the ads—when I looked at that ad, I thought, ‘Finally, somebody’s grown a brain.’ Some of the Indigenous ads are quite good at the moment, very good. There is one particular one—with the kids—which touches me in my heart. But, moving on, therefore it was decided that we must have alcohol here, because we are all humans, regardless of our race—whichever—and there should be a certain amount of free choice. But, with that free choice—and this is where the AMR comes in—there must be education and responsible drinking et cetera. So, with the AMR, the ATODS—the program—will be brought into speed. But then we go down the difficult track—and I hate to be a broken record—of: ‘We were given X amount of money which wasn’t enough.’ Basically we were asked to provide information that we were not qualified to give. In other words, being a nurse and at a master’s level, I was asked to design a building with specifics. I sat down and basically drew a box and said, ‘Well, this is roughly what we want.’ And they said, ‘No, if we were to build that, it would cost at least \$3 million,’ and I said, ‘What do you mean?’ They said, ‘That is roughly about 15

metres long.’ I said, ‘No, no; that’ just a line.’ The other issue is the time it takes to do things up here. You multiply it by at least three or four.

**Senator BOYCE**—Do you know you can build a house in 10 weeks? That is what we were told yesterday at Napranum.

**Ms Nona**—That is because they carry it through the land—

**Senator BOYCE**—I wonder about this. They have not started building houses but they will have them finished by 30 June, they keep telling us.

**Mr Christian**—Good luck to them.

**Ms Cook**—What I am trying to say is that Patti had us in her office prior to us coming here talking about this particular fact—that we have actually got the money and we are trying to spend it by June but we have Buckley’s of being able to do so because of the time frames. One thing I want to mention, seeing as we are going a bit off track, but I think it is community related, is something I was going to talk to Jason O’Brien about when I see him again but I will talk about it here because it is a community thing—that is, food.

**Ms Nona**—The cost of it.

**Ms Cook**—The cost and the quality are some of the worst I have seen. I have worked in the Northern Territory, Tasmania—I have worked all up the East Coast.

**Senator BOYCE**—Did you say you have worked in the Torres Strait as well?

**Ms Wong**—Yes, the Torres Strait. The food quality is rubbish. The meat is so expensive that I cannot afford to eat steak, and I am on a pretty good wicket. We actually eat chicken quite a lot and I got an iron deficiency through it, so my health is actually deteriorating. The vegetables are virtually either off, mouldy or whatever within two or three days of them coming here.

**Senator ADAMS**—Can you grow vegetables here?

**Ms Wong**—The council has talked about it, and we have also talked about it as well. There was a market garden scheme ages ago—Patty and Steven could clarify that. But then there was the dirt quality—there are germs in the dirt, apparently.

**Ms Nona**—It is very difficult to grow vegies here because of all the pests as well. They have tried numerous times. We also trialled backyard gardens, just of small proportions—those projects have also been implemented in the communities. But it is actually difficult for the vegies to grow—we are not sure what it is.

**Mr Christian**—Soil quality.

**Ms Nona**—Morva is a gardener as well.



**Ms Cook**—I tried growing watermelons. They grow anywhere, but they were terrible. I am speaking also for health—if I cannot get decent vegetables and food et cetera, I worry about what everybody else eats. I know that the shop—and I will not name which one it is—has stopped doing it, but they actually sold off food. They actually had mouldy food, off milk and off cream still on the shelves. I would go to the shop, buy the cream, smell it and find it was off. The next day it would still be on that shelf—

**Mr Christian**—The issue of that is quality, quantity and freight cost.

**Ms Cook**—But the other thing that I want to mention is that it is the cost of bringing it up here.

**Senator ADAMS**—I have got two questions. Firstly, with your screening: are you doing anything about hearing services?

**Ms Cook**—Yes.

**Senator ADAMS**—What is the result there?

**Mr Christian**—We have got the Deadly Ear program running here at the moment.

**Senator ADAMS**—Yes, I realise that.

**Mr Christian**—That has been going on for four or five years. The Deadly Ear team here, due to me and a few others being in our final year at uni, are doing hearing impairment in Torres Strait and NPA children. We found that over 70 per cent of our children had from mild to severe hearing impairment.

One of the issues we found when we were dealing with hearing was that there is about a six-year gap in hearing impairment for our children in the NPA because it is difficult for parents to take their children to Cairns, Townsville and/or Brisbane. They had large families or, like I said, there was cost involved or there were relationship problems. So if there were 50, and out of that 30 had to go to Brisbane for various degrees of clinical procedure intervention, probably only two or three would present. At the time, Gil Haney was the executive director at the Royal Childrens Hospital, and negotiations went on past two years to get the Deadly Ear program up here. Ever since that time we have done quite well, although we are still way behind.

At the moment we have Australian Hearing, we have the ENT specialist from Cairns and we have Deadly Ear that comes up twice a year. We are addressing the hearing impairment issue of our children, but we still have a long way yet to go. TI do not have Deadly Ear, but they do have a hearing health program there. The outer islands of the Torres Strait have very little hearing health services at all, so they have a high degree of mild to very severe hearing impairment.

The other thing alongside hearing health is dental health. It is unbelievable. We are lucky here in the NPA that we do have a dentist who is permanent. But how long that person will stay here we do not know. When that person goes, recruitment of a dentist is very difficult and it is very far apart from that time that we get somebody in—even in hearing. Our way of tackling hearing was that we got Deadly Ear to train eight Indigenous health workers and one school teacher to be

competent. We do all the screenings, assessments and what have you, then we prepare them for the surgeons.

ENT specialists or surgeons are very hard to come by and it is only because of the good hearts of these surgeons who come from all over Queensland, who do it either on a voluntary basis or take leave of some sort, that we can provide surgery here, but not invasive surgery. They are usually here for a week. Tomorrow we have two-day surgery here. The last day, obviously, is for observations and things like that. They then fly out and we do not see them again until October.

**Senator ADAMS**—How are you coping with the patient assisted travel scheme?

**Ms Nona**—Not very well. We are struggling with that. The PTS is a big burden on our district and has been for a while. It is an ongoing issue for us. The amount of money set aside for the PTS is very little, especially when there is no consideration given to the geographic locations of these communities. Every year the budget deficit continues to increase for the PTS because we just cannot cater for the cost that the airlines charge us. Taking our people down to Brisbane and Cairns is just too much. We have an issue with PNG as well. PNG is on the doorstep of our district and we have to cater for them as well. We fly them from the islands to Thursday Island Hospital and it is very expensive. The PTS funding is very small.

**Senator ADAMS**—Is that administered from the hospital?

**Ms Nona**—Yes.

**Senator ADAMS**—So how are you coping with it in your budget?

**Mrs Fort-Rushton**—It has blown my budget.

**Ms Nona**—We are way over.

**Mr Christian**—The nursing agency blows the budget, along with the PTS.

**Senator ADAMS**—My last question is on the foetal alcohol deficit syndrome. Do you have any problems here?

**Mr Christian**—Many years ago it was a bit of an issue. It is something that, while not rare, there is now very little of.

**Senator BOYCE**—What is the incidence?

**Mr Christian**—It is so rare now that I could not even give you the figures.

**Senator ADAMS**—You have a paediatrician coming around?

**Mr Christian**—From TI, yes.

**Senator ADAMS**—There are other areas now that are realising that, when children have had ADHS or partial autism, that is not what it is at all. Now that people are able to diagnose better the foetal alcohol deficit disorder is rearing its head, and it has been found already that some have been misdiagnosed.

**Mr Christian**—We have one at high school. I can remember this child from way back, from preschool and through primary school. The school is well aware now of how to support these children. Health is more aware.

**Ms Nona**—We have done a lot of campaigning on foetal alcohol syndrome, educating the school and the parents. Lots of education has been done in the community in that area in particular, looking at how to identify the symptoms in the early stages as well. We have not had very many. As Stephen said, many years ago, we could not really clearly identify the signs and symptoms. Even now when we look at the kids who have grown up from that time you cannot see it, although you can pick it up from some of the learning difficulties. But we are definitely working on that and lots of our programming has been put into that area.

**CHAIR**—As there are no further questions, thank you very much for your evidence today. If there are further questions you would like to put to the committee you can get in touch with the secretariat, and we would be delighted to hear from you. I know that other senators may have other questions and we will provide those questions on notice to you through the secretariat.

**Proceedings suspended from 12.29 pm to 12.47 pm**

[12.47 pm]

**TOWNSON, Ms Sonia Kay, Area Manager, CAPE Police-Citizens Youth Welfare Association**

**BIRD, Mrs Dulcie Ann, Executive Officer, Dr Edward Koch Foundation**

**CHAIR**—The information on parliamentary privilege and the protection of witnesses and evidence has previously been provided to you. Sonia, as a departmental officer you will not be asked to give opinions on matters of policy but this does not preclude questions asking for explanations of policy or factual questions about how and when policies are adopted. I would now like to invite either or both of you to make a short opening statement. On the conclusion of your remarks I will invite members of the committee to put questions to you.

**Mrs Bird**—I am with the Dr Edward Koch Foundation which is a foundation that has been operating for 14 years in Far North Queensland. We do a lot things connected with public health but the main focus is suicide prevention. To that end we started the Far North Queensland suicide prevention task force 14 years ago which comprises about 120 agencies all connected with suicide prevention. We work together to identify gaps in the community with resources and education and things like that. More recently we have connected with the CAPE PCYC to do Life workshops which are suicide prevention workshops around the Cape. Last year we did 11 workshops in 11 different communities in the Cape at Weipa, Napranum, New Mapoon, Mapoon, Hope Vale, Wujal, Lockhart, Coen et cetera. They were very well received and every one has been evaluated, with really good results.

Because we worked so successfully last year, the CAPE PCYC Indigenous Business Unit has asked us to do a strategy to help with suicide prevention in the NPA area. The reason we were asked is that we have done a similar type of strategy on the tableland, down near Cairns, and we have been called into other communities and asked to map out some sort of strategy that would reduce suicide. I will use NPA as the example of what we do when we come into a community—what we are doing this year. We hold our LIFE workshops every time we come, which is once a month. We identified earlier on two members of each community that would like to work with suicide prevention, so they are on-the-ground workers. After the 12 months are up, we will get another 10, so that gives us 20 people all working in the NPA area on suicide prevention. We act as their backup and support, and we do counselling while we are there as well. While we are here, we are also doing our LIFE workshops. For example, we are doing a LIFE workshop this afternoon in New Mapoon and we are doing one tomorrow in Injinoo.

**Ms Townson**—CAPE PCYC are the new kids on the block here. We are a new organisation that has come aboard. My position was initiated by the Queensland government sport and rec. department. They spoke to council and they spoke to a lot of organisations in relation to how we would operate a CAPE police citizens youth club in their Indigenous communities. I too am under the Indigenous Business Unit.

There are seven sites throughout the Cape. Being the one providing services to five communities I have the biggest site. The difference between Sport and Recreation Queensland

and the CAPE PCYC is that Sport and Rec. focus on youth, whereas CAPE PCYC works with all targeted groups, from toddlers to elders. So a lot of the programs and projects that I have implemented on the ground are to service the targeted groups. In saying that, PCYC has, as Dulcie spoke about, the ‘Something better’ project. Sue Williams is the head of that unit, and they cover suicide prevention—also Drum Up Big; they are an African drum team that come into the community. We like to look at different sports and recreations to introduce to our communities.

When we talk about sports and recreation we cover a lot of areas. I think the downfall of our sport and rec. came with the Lockhart River plane crash, because on board that plane were a lot of our sports and recreation officers. Since then, our communities have suffered in sports and recreation. However, sports and recreation came under council at that time, before PCYC came in, and they too struggled long with the other organisations on the ground to lift sports and recreation in the area.

CAPE PCYC now has looked at networking with a lot of the local organisations, government and non-government, on the ground here. Our role is to not duplicate but enhance what is on the ground. So, if there is a particular sport or recreation event that is happening, we are enhancing that; we are supporting that. We support a lot of the local organisations that are running their local programs on the ground. Being a local, from the area, helps me in this position. It makes it easier for me to network with a lot of government departments. I held my previous position as an alcohol and drugs education officer here for six years. It has made my current position stronger, working along those lines of suicide prevention and alcohol and drugs, targeting our young people especially.

We have had successful programs so far. As I said, we target all groups, so we work closely with our elders as well. The very first project we did this year was a clean-up day. When the monsoon season is here our elders cannot actually get out to the yard and mow their lawns, clean their cupboards out and things like that. My team went in and did a big clean-up day throughout the five communities—it was more like a clean-up week—but we were very successful.

**Senator ADAMS**—Was that with volunteers?

**Ms Townson**—Yes. We actually went into the community and rounded up all the youth of that community and did something like 12 houses in each community. Bamaga was the biggest. We did about 24 houses.

**CHAIR**—How many kids would be involved in Bamaga?

**Ms Townson**—There were about 32 kids involved in Bamaga.

**CHAIR**—That’s great.

**Ms Townson**—We covered one end to the other.

**CHAIR**—Were they happy to be involved?

**Ms Townson**—Absolutely.

**CHAIR**—Because it is something they can see.

**Ms Townson**—Yes. Because it was for a good cause. That was a good interaction between the youths and the elders and it had never been done before. There are always educational programs and projects in the school where elders do take part, and that is where you do see that transition happen between the two groups, the youths and elders, but it has never been done in a community like that before. They were really uplifted and our program went very successfully. Now I am finding myself structuring in my calendar one week of every month going to servicing that aspect of our elders' lives.

We look at different programs. We recognise International Pancake Day, Valentine's Day and those sorts of things. I try and focus not just on sports but on recreational things as well. Just recently we assisted the family planning unit from the NPA Women's Shelter and Family Resource Centre. Their planning unit actually invited the Indigenous Hip-Hop Project up into the community. PCYC was seen as a strong tenderer in that we were part of that working party and we assisted in their project. Like I said, we look at enhancing and supporting other local organisations and programs and what they have around the communities to service the five communities.

We work very closely with the shire council. I am sure you got to speak this morning with Peter Lui, who holds the portfolio for sports and recreation. Councillor Lui and I have been working very closely to look at getting a Northern Peninsula Area sporting association up and running. We are the advisory group at the moment trying to build the sporting association. We are looking at resurrecting our Rugby League, volleyball and all those other sports that not only men but women and young people play at different levels. We identified over the years, especially with Rugby League, that our young people were coming along to Rugby League and seeing it as a recreational thing for a weekend. We are trying to turn the tables around and look at it from an education standpoint—that is, it is not all about Rugby League; you have to have your grades up too. We are working very closely with the school in relation to that. I think that is very important, because a lot of our young people coming through think sport is it. Then when they bow out because of injury there is nothing left for them.

We do invite sporting icons up to talk about what they have been through, where they are now and how, because they did not get the proper education, they have now gone back to school whereas they should have done it before. Peter Lui and I have a lot under our belts in relation to sports and recreation. We try and look at identifying cultural recreation as well. Just on the weekend, on Saturday, we had three big events. There was a wedding, there was an initiation and then there was a tombstone unveiling. We are really looking at identifying cultural recreation as well. And it has never been done before—inviting government departments and our state MPs to come along and have a look. At times they do hear of these things, but if they are in the moment with us they can understand what our culture is about. What better opportunity for them to be in the area at the time? That is not to say we are going to look at our calendar and say, 'There's a tombstone unveiling there, so we'll have that meeting on that week,' or something like that, but—

**CHAIR**—Everyone else sees it.

**Ms Townson**—Yes. So bottom-line we are enhancing and providing that service to each of the five communities in relation to sport and recreation. At the moment I am also working with Bernard Charlie starting up a youth council and planning a negotiation table to present to the full council. So we look at pulling that off and having something again in Reconciliation Week. We look at more or less everything from every angle of youth. I think it is really important that we do have a youth council. A youth council representative should centre on the shire council. They are the voice for our young people. Of course there are always going to be brick walls, we always hit brick walls. We hit them but we stand up again and we keep going. This is something that I think our young people now have noticed, the stamp-out of the alcohol and the reform. We have taken that very seriously, our social impact on our young people's lives.

I know that the youth council will be a strong voice for our young people. I know that there are going to be recommendations from the council to support that youth council and we are already in the process of doing that now. They are just a couple of things. But my main challenge right now is the memorandum of understanding. It has not been signed off between us and the council as yet, and that ties my hands because I cannot actually deliver those sporting programs properly, I can only do what I do on the ground at the moment in the schools. Schools are getting my full and undivided attention at the moment with our programs and projects. The reason is that the MOU is a legally binding document between two organisations. They have not come across with it, so I cannot really utilise their facilities at the moment. Even though they can say, 'Yes, you can go ahead and use it,' for legality reasons I am not going to use those unless it is signed off. We do have a deadline and it is actually tomorrow, so I hope that that MOU is signed off. In my calendar for this year, which I will present to you, Hamish, that will change once the MOU is signed. I will then run a lot of sporting activities like the volleyball nights for the women and the basketball and the soccer and so forth. At the moment we cannot use council facilities and that is really frustrating for me. I am a person for getting up and going and doing things; I am not a person for sitting down. I do not like that and I do not like being in an office. Right now with this position I have to be in office, so I am out there with my team all the time. With these sports, using these facilities is really a problem for me.

**CHAIR**—Do you anticipate any problems with it or is it just an administrative process?

**Ms Townson**—It is just the administrative process.

**CHAIR**—Let us hope it all gets going tomorrow. A couple of things. The youth council is a notion and in a previous iteration my portfolio was actually responsible for youth. One of the frustrations I found was that those people who wanted to put their hand up to be part of a youth roundtable or be part of all that were not the people I needed to engage. The people I needed to gauge were those who could not give a rat's bottom about all those sort of things. What strategies have you got that may be useful to try and engage with the youth that are, if you like, disconnected from school, friends, community or family, which would seem to be some of the big challenges? How are we going to engage with those?

**Ms Townson**—The strategy we are using at the moment is that currently all the communities have their own community forum and on that forum sit an elder, a youth, a community justice rep and the council rep for that community. Some have and some do not. How we have structured it is that there is an advisory committee on the side, or advocates, and that is local organisations or departments who deal with youths or have youth issues. That is identified from

each community. So that is myself from here, activity centre coordinators, youth centre coordinators, Councillor Lui and we also have Councillor Williams, who has got the youth portfolio as well. So we are the advisory group and we actually go to the five communities and look at selecting youths to form community youth groups and then a representatives from that will sit on the council with us. So we are actually their support.

**CHAIR**—That is the structure, and the activities that you have identified in the calendar are what engage with youth across the board—and that gives them access to them through the remainder of the program.

**Ms Townson**—Yes. That actually is aligned with my operational plan, my calendar. The youth council is part of my operational plan as well, to assist and network with parties who are involved in structuring the youth council. This youth council will then not only present to the council but represent our region in youth forums. Over the years, we have never had a youth council from here. Torres Strait has actually been talking on our behalf. We are a separate region to Torres Strait. They do not know any of our issues here, so that has become a really big problem for us.

**CHAIR**—Do you think the issues here are different for young people to what they are in Torres Strait?

**Ms Townson**—In general, no, but there are other issues, maybe cultural issues. Torres Strait is Torres Strait Islanders, and here in the NPA we have three Aboriginal communities living amongst two Islander communities. So it is a big cultural change for us here. One of the biggest issues that the youth have now is with the alcohol reform and the social impact that has hit our communities in relation to that. We have a community at high risk for youth suicide. We have been working very closely with our community building that youth structure in our community first. Last year we had three in a row within three or four days of each other here in the NPA, so you can imagine the impact that it had on the kids. They went to school with these young kids. Some of the community people saw it as a copycat action. Some saw it as a challenge, a dare, an attention-seeking strategy. Kids then questioned their parents.

All these things came apart. These things came from kids. That made us wake up and think, ‘We didn’t even think along the lines of that.’ So the youth council, I think, will be a strong body to sit in with our council and not only that but it will represent us with our issues here. We do have different issues to Torres Strait and to the rest of the cape, because we are a unique area. A lot of the government departments—like Anthony’s department, like education, like youth justice—come up here and see for themselves. We are very different to the Torres Strait. We are not the same at all. The five communities themselves are different. Nobody is the same. No Indigenous community is the same throughout Queensland, throughout Australia.

**CHAIR**—I wanted to look at the young people. The issues that face young people about disconnection would have been roughly the same. I am not questioning any of those issues about the youth council. I am just wondering if there were any particular things—apart from, obviously, the great tragedies you speak of—that were particularly different that we might need to know about.



**Mrs Bird**—I have found from experience with young people that we have worked with in other communities that, if you give them things that they enjoy and also connect them with their cultural heritage, that does work. A good example would be the *Pelican* at Hope Vale. They have a boat that they take the young people out on every year, and they have elders on the boat. They have tasks and creativity—things that they do. I do not know what they do, but it may be, say, basket weaving or something that is cultural and relevant to their history. There are also the modern things that young people like to do. They have also talked about having someone like me, a suicide prevention officer, on board in the future to work with kids. The other thing that they enjoy these days is the internet. There are also movie nights. DVD nights go down really well. I have just given Hope Vale a great big heap of my son's cast-off DVDs. They love having a movie night. We were talking about implementing that up in the NPA as well. It involves things that they enjoy so that they can come together and connect with each other but also be aware of the loss of cultural heritage and try and bring that in. I did a workshop last week for 35 young people that are hoping to get into the Navy, from Djarragun College. They all expressed this need. They all said that they would like to identify more with their cultural history. That said, it is not everything. It is the things that any young person, from any society, enjoys today.

**Ms Townson**—I ran a similar project called 'Rumble in the Jungle'. The site that that uses is just past Loyalty Beach. That was a Health-initiated program. When I looked at it, it did not suit us in the NPA; it was actually for communities down south, in Cairns and Townville. What the Health and ATODS officers do is to run it as a one-day thing. When I put the project together, I took out things and implemented my own things in there.

We did both cultural activities and modern activities. One of them was that we did a navigational course out in the bush. One group used a compass and another did not. They had to do pacing and identify bush objects as they went along. At the end of the navigation course, both teams sat down and we asked them what they found hardest, and they said, 'The calculation of the compass; we would rather walk to the pace.' The guys that paced it said, 'It took too bloody long, it was too hot, the grass was high and we lost count.' There were five in a team, aged from 13 to 17. The whole idea was that everybody played a leadership role. At every checkpoint they hit, they solved a drug and alcohol question, a community question or a cultural question. At the end of the day, we said to them: 'This was an exercise for you culturally. Our people, when they moved from site to site, did not have compasses. They had to identify bush objects, whose camp was where and what clan was this, and that's how we did things.' We are trying to put that cultural aspect back into our kids so they respect our land. So all of that came in place. We had a traditional hungi out there—a kup-mari—where the kids had to do it. The men and the young boys were around it. I asked the men not to involve themselves. They were to give the instructions; they boys had to do it. The women had the girls prepare the food. So it was their camp.

I think that when you implement something from a community, especially from a young person's perspective, they have to have it and own it. If they have ownership of something, they are proud. They will keep it and respect. We now try to look at programs that suit our community. It is okay for government to come in and say, 'This is a well-funded program; here you go.' It may not suit our community. Then again, we have to work beside the government and not against it. So, if I am given a government project to do, of course I am going to view it, but then I am going to say: 'Is there something that I can take out and something that I can put in

here? Can we work together and negotiate some things?' That is the only way that I have found that my programs and projects work, because I negotiated. The magical word is 'negotiation'.

Negotiating a lot of things helps not only us as an organisation or a business to understand but also our people as a community to understand. All they are seeing is a government program being thrown in their faces and that they are being told they have to do whether they like it or not. We have to have stats or data up where the government can say whether something did work or did not work. I am now asking, 'Can I restructure the programs to suit us?' Yes, it does work. I am about a win-win situation and not about a lose-lose situation or a win-lose situation. When I am doing something on the ground I like to do it as a win-win situation. I think that works well for everybody, especially our young people.

**Senator ADAMS**—I am just looking at some of the comments we have had about you. Congratulations on your child protection week award. That was very well deserved. I notice that you are a second lieutenant in the Army cadets.

**Ms Townson**—I am a full lieutenant now.

**Senator ADAMS**—Would you like to tell us about that, because earlier we heard evidence about 15 of your youth in this area going forward to a career in the armed forces. Can you just tell us how you start.

**Ms Townson**—Yes. I should be sworn in as a captain in October.

**Senator ADAMS**—Wow! You are really going well.

**Ms Townson**—I am pretty happy about that. With the Army cadets, that is a program we have tied in with the school and which will be tied in now with the police citizens youth club. The initiative that we use is that if you do not attend school that day then you do not come to cadets that afternoon. Our rule in the cadets is that you respect each other and respect everybody's opinion. It is all about courtesy and looking beyond the here and now. It is about planning. It is about planning their futures. It is about structure. It is about structuring their lives and taking that stepping stone out of the community and coming out of their comfort zones, looking at career paths.

My unit on the ground here go away on cultural exchanges to other states. We have been over to Darwin. We went into Larrakeyah Barracks over there and worked with Aboriginal kids from Aboriginal cadet units from all over the Northern Territory. We bring with us a difference experience and they give us something back. It is all about the kids looking at opening their minds to a better future and a pathway into the military services, whether it be Army, Navy or Air Force. But I think Army is always the best because we are on the ground. I always say that to my kids: 'We are the best because we are on the ground. You do not want to be in the Air Force because you go up there and you come down. You are surrounded by water when you are in the Navy.' Having said that, I have three Navy cadets from TI now in the Army cadets. TI is not liking me at the moment for that!

We have a support unit on the ground from Far North Queensland. They are our support unit, so they support us in a lot of the bivouacs when we go out in the bush here. My kids are also role

models for other kids when it comes to leadership camps. My kids take the role in presenting or doing a particular activity. That boosts their leadership confidence. That gives them a lot of self-esteem. I have at the moment 32 on my books. I have the highest cadet rank you can go in a CUO, which is 'cadet under officer'. They sit straight under a second lieutenant. I have had three CUOs who have successfully come through, graduated from high school and gone on. One is now studying medical academics. She wants to be in the Army as a nurse. So good luck to her. I also have young ones come in whose mums and dads have put them through to give them a little bit of self-confidence and experience to be out there on their own. My kids are exposed to bush life here. When we go away on a lot of Army challenges down south in Townsville, you wonder why because we are surrounded by bush. But it is not only that: my kids bring a cultural exchange to the other units around Queensland and Far North Queensland.

They are now looking at an international exchange. I have just been to a meeting in Canberra, looking at New Zealand and Tonga, about doing an Army cadet exchange for my kids. That is sharing the knowledge of the different lifestyles—in cooking and culture and that sort of thing—around the military. With the Army cadets, it was a good move that the HQ in Townsville allowed a unit to open up here. Because of the vast number of kids now who are in it and my staff who are supporting me on the ground, I think we can only increase in the years to come because it has just been a successful program.

**Senator ADAMS**—Thank you very much.

**Senator BOYCE**—Can I ask both of you: what special programs or measures are your organisations pursuing to assist with learning about tolerance or awareness of gay issues within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth?

**Ms Townson**—With the CAPE PCYC, we work closely with the sexual health team. We work closely with the family planning unit. The kids who are coming to our group now in PCYC accept it. They accept it, because there are gay and lesbian relationships in our communities and they see that. A lot of it is exposed, in front of their face—like suicide, like tragic deaths, like any other thing. It is not something that their mothers and fathers would hide from them. It is exposed in Indigenous communities, especially here. I do have young males in my group who come to our activities who have a lot of female—how do you say it?

**Senator BOYCE**—Attributes?

**Ms Townson**—Yes. And they are accepted. My programs are all about respect. So you don't call somebody 'gay'—'lesbian' is never used; it is always 'gay'. But to our kids it is exposed all the time, and when they are in my activities I can see that they have accepted it.

**Mrs Bird**—We do have a segment in our life workshops where we talk about gay, lesbian and bisexual being a high priority at-risk group and we discuss that. I have never found anyone who was averse to it. Young people are much more accepting than older people of homosexuality.

**Senator BOYCE**—In a different capacity, as you would appreciate, we have had evidence that people have moved away from community and basically cut themselves off from family because they were gay and, in their view, they were not able to come out at home.

**Mrs Bird**—Yes, and I would imagine that that is the same in any community, whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous, because I come across that a bit. But I do feel that the young people in the workshops tend to talk about it more. We are working again with CAPE PCYC and trying to develop a curriculum. We have been having talks with Education Queensland about including our life workshop in one of the wellbeing and lifestyle courses and trialling it up here in the NPA, and there would definitely be a segment on gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender and so forth. So we are going to be putting that in. And we will not focus on suicide on the first day of the course. It will build up—the lifestyle program and wellbeing and so forth. So we are looking at doing that in the near future. It definitely needs to be addressed. I know many, many people who have moved away from communities because of issues. But the people I know have mostly been of an older age group.

**Senator BOYCE**—Thank you.

**Ms Townson**—Just to back what Dulcie said, I think our religious beliefs play a very strong part in our communities as well in relation to that. For some families it is a problem, but they deal with it in their own way in their own homes. If it is gossip in the community, it is gossip and then you see them walking down the street and, okay, it is the norm, so everybody thinks, ‘That’s the norm.’ It is not really a big issue. However, the physical side of it—the sexual side of it—is an issue.

**Mrs Bird**—We do of course have a counselling service and people do come to us about those issues. When they do come to us, they are very suicidal about it. We would like to think that we are able to work through some of those issues but, again, a lot of Indigenous communities have that religious background—a Christian background—and are not as forgiving about a member of their family being that way, which is what brings them to us.

**CHAIR**—In a more general sense, I wonder if you could give us a quick overview of the rates of suicide and how some of your intervention deals with that.

**Mrs Bird**—I cannot give you the exact figures or anything, but I am very disturbed at the moment as I think that they are increasing in Far North Queensland—and quite rapidly; since Christmas. We get calls after a suicide from every suicide we know about in the region, from Cardwell up to Hopevale. Within the week after Christmas we had five in one week. We have them every week.

**Senator BOYCE**—Does that include the three that you were talking about?

**Mrs Bird**—No. At the moment I am talking about the area between—

**Senator BOYCE**—Sorry.

**Mrs Bird**—That is the area where I know the statistics more. It just seems to be increasing. An 18-year-old boy hung himself on Sunday in Cairns. That is happening every other day of the week, and it is just not good enough. We really need to work harder to try to stop this from happening.

**Senator FURNER**—Just on that subject, four of us on this committee are also involved in an inquiry on suicide in Australia. A lot of the evidence we are hearing across the board is that the causations of some of those suicides are things like alcohol, substance abuse and those sorts of things and also the lack of reporting of the actual suicide statistics. I just want some feedback on some of those issues.

**Mrs Bird**—Definitely alcohol and drug abuse play a very big part in the suicide rate in Far North Queensland, especially in the Indigenous communities. It is just horrific and we need to address that. As far as reporting goes, there is not enough reporting. Of course, if you are not reported accurately then you cannot feed the funding towards the areas that have the problems. There needs to be much better reporting. We actually signed an MOU with the Queensland Police Service in November with a fax-back referral system. From that, every suicide that they fax to us is collated and the coroner's office is taking all of that data and putting it together now. So it is much more immediate and a first for North Queensland?

**Senator MOORE**—How much of the work you are doing and have described is dependent on government funding?

**Ms Townson**—Do you want an honest answer or do you want us to lie?

**Senator MOORE**—It is your call.

**Ms Townson**—I am government funded. When we are rolling out our programs, we are also applying from other organisations as well. When we are doing programs or projects, it is best to network to see what is already on the ground. We actually use what is already on the ground—our facilities that are already on the ground—before we actually apply for funding elsewhere. Like I said, I am not about duplicating; I am about enhancing. So, if it is already on the ground and running, if I have it in my budget, I will support it or I will contribute to that program or project. But if it is something big that I need to apply for to enhance it, I will.

**Senator MOORE**—Is the current state funding to PCYW over three years?

**Ms Townson**—Yes.

**Senator MOORE**—Is the first year?

**Ms Townson**—Yes.

**Senator MOORE**—So a lot of the programs you are talking about, which sound fabulous, are based within that three-year circle of funding?

**Ms Townson**—Yes.

**Senator MOORE**—So, once again, if you do not get that again you could be—

**Ms Townson**—Yes, it will roll over. It depends.

**Mrs Bird**—It just depends. You shouldn't start me on it!

**Senator MOORE**—No, I particularly wanted to start you on this point, in terms of government funding and the work you are doing.

**Mrs Bird**—My government funding has been for 14 years of service to the community and three years of one project being funded by the Department of Health and Ageing. That was a trial. The trial ended in June last year. In February last year I went to Canberra and told the director there that the trial was not a good enough program for Far North Queensland. In June, when refunding became due, we were offered the same amount of money that we had the three years before, provided that we did that same program. I knocked it back, probably foolishly, because I now have no funding. I was told that I could put in a submission for funding for our program, which is much more flexible and much more suited to Far North Queensland and our Indigenous and our CALD populations, of which we have 72 just in Cairns.

I was told in February this year and then in March this year that we did not get that funding. It has been given to an organisation at the Sunshine Coast to run a suicide bereavement service in Cairns. We are absolutely disgusted with the government over this. I am through with it. I will just move on and keep our projects going the same way as I always have done: by fundraising in the community by asking corporations to fund us. I will move on from this, but I do not think the opposition is going to take it lightly. Already, troops are rallying all around Cairns about the lack of funding to an organisation that has proved itself credible over and over again for 14 years.

**Senator MOORE**—I wanted that on record.

**CHAIR**—Do you think that perhaps the reason they are not providing the funding to you is because you are so capable of raising funds for yourself? Do you think that has an impact?

**Mrs Bird**—No, I do not. I was told yesterday by our federal member, who has supported us wholeheartedly throughout this and wrote letters to Canberra, that he was told by the minister that the Department of Health and Ageing wants to fund the old program that we said was not good enough. They want to make it national and have it all over Australia, so that is why they have given it to this other place.

**CHAIR**—Thank you. Senator Adams, do you have any questions?

**Senator ADAMS**—No. I am just listening intently and thinking that we might have to ask some questions about it at estimates. One of the points I would make about this program is that it is excellent. I have never seen one as good. It is really very good and I think the rest of the committee should have a quick look at it because it is outstanding.

**CHAIR**—Thank you both for appearing before us today. I think the evidence provided has been very useful to the degree that I am sure that some of the senators may have questions that they have not had answered. They will be provided to you on notice through the secretariat. If you have some further information that comes to mind that you think may assist the committee, you can provide that to the committee through the secretariat.

**Senator MOORE**—As we have a bit of time left, could I ask a couple more questions, Chair?

**CHAIR**—That is fine.

**Senator MOORE**—We have had a couple of discussions today about CDEP and employment. I know it is big, but you guys are on the ground working with youth. You know all the issues, but we heard from both spheres. We had people who said that CDEP is the only way that young people in the community can get employment because you need subsidisation and people have difficulty in adapting to work. At the other end of the scale we had people saying that it is important that people get into the concept of coming into work and doing what you have to do to earn money.

I am interested to know how you feel about that, particularly with young people who have gone through the school system. You are working on getting them all kinds of things, like self-esteem, knowledge and confidence, but a lot of things are employment based. It is about getting the best out of education and employment. If you care to make a comment about those things, please do so—or, if you would like to go away and think about it and get back to the committee, you can. But it seems to me to be an absolutely critical issue for your area.

**Ms Townson**—No, I would like to comment on it right now. I do not really want to go away from this table without you hearing what I have to say about CDEP. We failed that program, and that program has failed us. When the CDEP initiative first came in it was a funded program that went to your council to have our young people to go onto that program to be trained in that field and come out with a ticket at the end of the day and then work and give something back. We failed. Our people who have gone onto CDEP have the money and live day-to-day on that money, and from fortnight to fortnight. It is an absolute joke. I would be happy for it to go tomorrow, because of what been going on.

If you have good councils, they use that program the right way. If a government puts a program into your community, you should use it for the right purpose, not the wrong purpose. I think a lot of our councils over the years have abused that program—including my dad, who was the chairman of Seisia and who is now the mayor. We have had a lot of discussions about that at the dinner table! But I am allowed to state my opinions. I think that particular program has failed our communities because the councils failed to do it the right way in the first place. We would not be in the trouble that we are in now in relation to having the program or not having it. Our people failed their own people, because that program was solely for training our own people in the field so they could get their tickets and come out and better themselves in a job, whether they came back or they went out to build their business and brought their business back into the community.

Look around at how these communities have developed in the economic or business area. We are one of the five NPA communities. We have got enterprises up here, people who now have their own businesses—but those people were not on CDEP. They were not. They went the smart way, doing business courses and things like that. They did not go on CDEP, some of the business operators here now. But then you have IBUs coming in. Dad worked with them for 30 years. So, personally, I think that particular program failed because our people failed in its delivery to our own people.

**Senator MOORE**—Thanks for telling us that. Mrs Bird, do you have any comment on CDEP?

**Mrs Bird**—Not a lot. I prefer not to have the CDEP.

**Senator MOORE**—You go into the communities, so I just wondered if anything had come out.

**Mrs Bird**—I have seen it wasted in some communities, and of course that is because of people, not the scheme exactly.

**Senator MOORE**—It is how it has been run, yes.

**Mrs Bird**—Yes. But I am a believer: from what I have seen around, people want to work, and they want to work properly and earn it for themselves.

**Senator MOORE**—Thank you very much to both of you. Thanks, Chair.

**CHAIR**—Thank you, Mrs Bird and Ms Townson, for your evidence today. As I said, if there is anything else that comes to mind that you think we might need to know about, please provide that through the committee secretariat. Thank you very much.

**Ms Townson**—Thank you for visiting. Have a safe trip home.

**Committee adjourned at 1.39 pm**