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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)

FRIDAY, 16 APRIL 2010

CHERBOURG

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

Friday, 16 April 2010

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

Senators in attendance: Senators Adams, Boyce, Furner, Moore, 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.

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Committee met at 10.38 am

CHAIR (Senator Scullion)—Good morning. Thank you very much for your warm welcome of the committee this morning. Cherbourg is looking fantastic and it is delightful to be here. The 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 this committee, I would like to acknowledge traditional owners of the land on which we meet, and we pay our respects to the elders past and present. Before the committee begins its meeting I want to make it clear to all meeting participants that the meeting is being recorded, a transcript of the recording will be produced and the transcript may be made public. This committee is a part of the Senate and therefore a formal part of parliament, so this meeting is considered exactly the same as if we were sitting in parliament in a meeting of the Senate. Everything we say in the Senate gets recorded by Hansard so everybody knows exactly what everybody said.

Participant comments recorded at and transcribed from this meeting are protected by parliamentary privilege. That means that any act that disadvantages you as a result of giving evidence to the committee is treated as a breach of privilege. In other words, if somebody, for example, reads or listens to what you had to say and does not like that and tries to give you a hard time about something, it is actually a breach of parliamentary privilege and a very serious matter. So you are protected by parliamentary privilege. However, I also remind those giving evidence that giving false or misleading evidence to the committee may constitute contempt of the Senate. If you would prefer that the meeting not be recorded, please advise the committee now. The committee prefer to record in session as this allows us to remember your comments better and use them in our next report, which will be tabled on 13 May.

[10.40 am]

BURROWS, Mr Ray, Chief Executive Officer, Gundoo Day Care Centre

MALONE, Miss Edna, Secretary, Board of Directors, Gundoo Day Care Centre

MALONE, Mr Matthew, Member, Board of Directors, Gundoo Day Care Centre

SALTNER, Miss Maylene, Member, Board of Management, Gundoo Day Care Centre

SANDOW, Ms Elvie, President, Gundoo Day Care Centre

SANDOW, Ms Rhonda, Treasurer, Cherbourg Gundoo Day Care Centre

CHAIR—Information on parliamentary privilege and the protection of witnesses has been provided to you. I invite one of you to make some opening remarks and then we will ask some questions.

Mr Burrows—What sorts of remarks would you like us to make?

CHAIR—Rather than us just asking questions, you may want to give us an explanation about how the Gundoo Day Care Centre works and some of the issues you face in a general sense. Anybody giving evidence can provide us with some information so we can learn more about the operation of the centre, some of the challenges it faces and some of the positives it enjoys.

Mr Burrows—Gundoo Day Care Centre is a 60-place MACS centre. We also have a 150-place outside school hours care facility and a 21-place CCB centre is being constructed at the moment and is due for completion—

CHAIR—A CCB centre?

Mr Burrows—A childcare benefit centre, so it is a mainstream centre, not funded by Aboriginal funding. Just like we do for our outside school hours care, our parents will have to be registered for childcare benefit and we will have to claim that way, whereas the original long day care centre is a multifunctional Aboriginal children's services centre which is funded by the federal government in block funding.

We cater for children from Cherbourg, Murgon and Wondai—those areas. Our centre is filled to capacity. The 21-place centre that is under construction will be full once it is finished. At the end of last year we had a waiting list of over 70 children. It has been proven that there are many positive outcomes for our children by being involved in early childhood education and care from the very young age of six weeks. Our children then go on to prep and primary school over the road from our centre.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. Clearly, day care is absolutely essentially involved with employment. Obviously it is very difficult if you do not have anyone to look after your kids and you have to go to work. When people get their first job or move into employment and need the day care centre, are places generally available for them? Can you foresee a growing need within Cherbourg and the area that you recruit from?

Mr Burrows—There is a growing need. We are very proud that at the moment all of our people who work in our centre are Aboriginal. Every one of our staff is studying for a higher qualification. There is a greater need for more places at our centre, as I said—we could fill our centre again. It all comes back to quality care. Our people are very confident in the care that they get at our centre. That is the reason that we are fully utilised.

CHAIR—You were speaking about the mainstream centre. Do you know how that is staffed?

Mr Burrows—Yes. We are already training our staff to fit in there. Over the last six months we have taken on extra trainees so that when the new centre opens we will have our group leaders and we will have our childcare assistants. They are all local people.

CHAIR—How are they being paid?

Mr Burrows—They will be paid out of our budget.

Senator BOYCE—Are these all separate buildings?

Mr Burrows—Yes.

Senator BOYCE—So you will have three buildings.

Mr Burrows—Yes, three buildings. We have three licences.

CHAIR—So there is no-one being paid on CDEP?

Mr Burrows—No. We get an allowance through DEEWR now. We used to have CDEP workers within our centre, but DEEWR changed it whereby they add so many dollars to our budget so that we can employ other people in our centre who we normally employed under the CDEP scheme, and we train them. At the moment we have four carers in each of our care areas where regulations stipulate two. We used to work with three carers but when we started constructing our new centre there last year we took on an extra four trainees under this scheme whereby the department has given us more money to be able to employ those people.

CHAIR—So you can now employ the same amount of people, or more people than you had before, and the Commonwealth is fully funding that—because that was their obligation.

Mr Burrows—Yes.

CHAIR—That is good to hear.

Mr Burrows—They are fully funding it in Queensland now.

CHAIR—You know that is Commonwealth funded?

Mr Burrows—Yes. When I spoke to you last year in August they were not doing it in Queensland, yet they were doing it in other states.

CHAIR—I am glad the representations have done something.

Mr Burrows—Yes. Thanks for that.

Senator FURNER—Could you give me a brief rundown on the makeup of the children in child care who come from Cherbourg, Wondai and Murgon, and also a similar breakdown of the 150 after-school care children?

Mr Burrows—I would say that 90 per cent of our children in long day care would come from Cherbourg and there are probably about the same amount in our outside school hours care. We are looking in the future at being able to get funding for a bus so that we can children from Murgon out to our centre. We give priority to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children but we do take in non-Aboriginal children. We seem to get a few children in the outside school hours care, but our long day care centre is just so overcrowded with trying to fit people in that it is a pity but we cannot have non-Indigenous children there.

Senator FURNER—Could you explain at some length your programs in early education process for the preschool children in terms of what is provided to them?

Mr Burrows—We call our preschool ‘prep’ in Queensland. Our children come to the centre in the morning and do a program there based on all areas of development. At about 12.30 pm each day they go over to the school for two hours and then they come back to our centre and stay there until between five and five-thirty of an afternoon.

Senator BOYCE—These are the five-year-olds?

Mr Burrows—These are the five-year-olds.

Senator FURNER—What about the younger ones?

Mr Burrows—The younger ones do all their programs within the centre itself. We cater for individuals. We do individual programs. We do a lot of cultural work. We bring in our elders. Having some males within our centre makes a big difference as well. We have managed to increase to about four males in the outside school hours care program. We have one male permanently in our long day care program. He has just completed his certificate III, so he is eligible to be a group leader. The kids love him. We have a couple of the outside school hours care males come over a couple of mornings a week and they paint didgeridoos with the children, they do painting and they play games, and the children love having that male aspect to the childcare area. I am sure that my committee have backed that up. It has been very good.

Ms E Sandow—Yes.

Senator FURNER—We have picked up some examples of issues associated with later school education, where people have not had the opportunities that you have been explaining. Are you able to identify development in those children who have gone on to, whether it be the state school system or the high school system, perform competently as a result of going through Gundoo childcare centre?

Mr Burrows—Yes. It stands out like anything, especially in the juvenile justice system. You find that there are very few of the children who have started off at Gundoo Day Care at six weeks old who have gone through it. They usually go their schooling, they go through their high schooling and they stay out of the juvenile

justice system. It is only a very small minority of our children that end up in it. That is mainly because of that school readiness and all that it is built into children: the social skills and everything. We also provide them with a good nutritional program. They come to our centre and they get four meals a day. We have a full-time cook, and they get roast dinners, salads and everything. That is all at the centre. We provide the children with their own hats and we provide sunscreen. All the child has to do at Gundoo is come along with a change of clothing, with Kimbies if they are still in them and with formula for while they are there if they are babies. You can see just how beneficial it is for our children to have quality early education and care, and every child in Cherbourg should be able to have that. But they are not, and they are the ones who end up not wanting to work and not having built up that self-esteem. Our children are proud of themselves, and we try to instil in them pride in their Aboriginality as well. A lot of the parents of the children, such as Maylene here, have sent them on to private schools. They then go on to university and things like that. That all starts back with early childhood education and care.

Senator ADAMS—You were talking about the ones that cannot get to you. How many more places would you need to be able to cater for everyone who wants to come and to be able to cover the whole community?

Mr Burrows—I reckon we could fill another 40 to 60 places. We would have no problem. We would be able to pull them in from Murgon as well. Our waiting list is just for Cherbourg, so a lot of people do not even bother coming because they know they have no chance of getting into Gundoo.

Senator ADAMS—Where would the nearest childcare centre be from you?

Mr Burrows—They are in Murgon, but they are private centres and they well out of the reach of our people. They do not have Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island staff, in the main, so our people cannot relate to them, whereas MAC centres, especially, provide all of these other programs for our children. The community health are up once a week to help out, and the medical centre comes. There are all of these other things that help our families. The families feel part of our centre. If a mother or a father comes in and wants to know something, I drop everything. You know that if you send them away and say, 'Come in for an appointment at 10 o'clock' you will not see them at 10 o'clock. They have got bingo to go to, or they cannot get away from work or something like that. So you have to have Aboriginal management of the centres that these children attend so that they have that understanding.

Senator ADAMS—With respect to transport, you were saying that you want to get a bus so that you can bring more people in. How are you going to cater for those ones? I can see what is going to happen; if you have a bus you are going to have all these extra bodies on it. Will you be able to deal with that?

Mr Burrows—Yes. That would not be any problem. I have a groundsman—he has his blue card and everything—who would be the driver. Then we would have to send some carers to meet the numbers licensed for that bus. But Cherbourg lacks a public transport system, even between Cherbourg and Murgon, and that makes it very difficult because a lot of our people do not have private transport. You will notice a lot of them walk to the day care and things like that. It is about getting the Aboriginal people from Murgon out to our centre. They would love to come out here. It is even the same with our staff, with us having to provide transport for our staff to get from Murgon out to here because they do not have any transport. So a big problem with Cherbourg is the lack of public transport between Cherbourg and Murgon.

Senator ADAMS—Have you applied to anyone for funding for this bus yet?

Mr Burrows—No, not yet—

Senator ADAMS—You are about to?

Mr Burrows—I intend to, yes.

Senator ADAMS—Okay.

CHAIR—Senator Moore.

Senator MOORE—I would like to talk to the board members and hear why you have chosen to be on the board and what difference you think it makes. We have had a lot of evidence in our hearings about the absolutely essential need to get parents involved with their kids, their education and their programs. So it would be really nice to hear from some of you who have got the job, some of you probably for quite a long time, exactly what your motivation was and what you think about the engagement of parents and kids.

Ms E Sandow—I am a mother of three, and they went to the day care. My main aim is to see the day care put our kids' needs first. I know that some of the children who go up there do not have a hot meal at home, but they do at the day care centre.

Senator MOORE—How old are your children now?

Ms E Sandow—My daughter is 20, my son is 18 and my baby is 10 in June.

Senator MOORE—And they were all able to go to the centre?

Ms E Sandow—Yes. The day care centre is a big need in Cherbourg. I reckon the kids who go there get a good start in life. Like I say to Ray, teach them respect, and not only towards people but also towards property in Cherbourg, because I know vandalism is a big thing in Cherbourg.

Senator MOORE—Has the centre had any trouble with vandalism?

Ms E Sandow—Yes. In the new section at the moment we have got mud and everything everywhere, but that is kids.

Senator MOORE—Yes. Okay. Anyone else—Matthew?

Mr Malone—I grew up in Cherbourg. I am a kid of the sixties and seventies, and we never had these sorts of facilities ourselves. I think it is vitally important, as Ray was talking about, that we mould our children from a very early stage. Our children have benefited a lot from the Gundoo Day Care Centre. More of our children are going away to other schools. More of our children go away from the day care centre or grow up with a sense of responsibility. It is the change that is happening. Back in my day, it was different. We had nothing else to do so we would just sit around the community doing nothing. But kids these days have a lot to do. The day care centre also organises holiday programs.

Senator MOORE—Wonderful.

Mr Malone—It takes them away on day trips and stuff like that, and that keeps them occupied.

I suppose the reason why I am on the board is that I see a lot of positives coming out of this day care. I am also part of the community, so I am on the board because I want to be there. My heart is with this community and I see a lot of benefits from Gundoo. I actually class Gundoo as one of the most advanced organisations in this community. It is moving forward. So that is part of the reason why I wanted to be on the board. And we are all family here in Cherbourg, so a lot of my grandchildren and my nieces and nephews have been through there.

Senator MOORE—Yes.

Senator ADAMS—How do you get elected to the board?

Mr Malone—We are incorporated under ORIC, so there is a formalised structure. We have AGMs every 12 months; we normally have ours around September. We just call the AGM and people come and it is the normal democratic process, I suppose, where people get nominated and decide whether or not they want to take up the position.

Senator ADAMS—How many are on the board?

Mr Malone—It is all of us here, so there are the five of us plus three more.

Miss Saltner—I am here because I am a parent as well. All of mine went to Gundoo as well, while I was working. Like Elvie, my eldest is 21. He has gone right through that. Now I have a son in boarding school, at Churchie in Brisbane. He got a scholarship through Yalari. This is his second year down there and he is going really well. I have a boy in high school in Murgon. All of my other children went to Murgon State High School. That was a choice I made as a mother. It has been good being on the board, to support other children and put them on the right track.

CHAIR—Do you have a lot of kids in the community who perhaps do not go to school or are not really engaged with the system? As you would know, this system is only the start. Edna, what do you think about why that is? Do you think the parents really know?

Miss Malone—Rhonda would be the best one to talk to because she is the coordinator of our youth and community action group.

Ms R Sandow—I am on the board because I work for an organisation that is funded by the Department of Communities. I am the coordinator of Cherbourg Murgon YACCA, which works with kids before they get into the juvenile justice system. It is youth crime prevention. I went on the board because of all the kids I have worked with through the last 12 years and the struggles that the young people face in our community. I have always struggled with the parents. I also started an alternative education program in YACCA, back in 2000, with the Christian Brothers. I am situated in Murgon. I used to work for Jumbunna. It is a youth justice

organisation, working with kids who are in the juvenile justice system. I had 25 clients there. They had been disengaged from the mainstream since grade 3 or 4. I left Jumbunna and went to Murgon. I got the coordinator's position there. There were 25 young people on juvenile justice orders. Because it is not a big place for young people to comply with community service orders, I decided to start an alternative education program with the Christian Brothers. Back in 2004 the Christian Brothers stepped aside and let Education Queensland take over. I am still working in partnership with Murgon high school.

CHAIR—How did that go, trying to reconnect those disconnected students with the education system? Did many of them come back into the school system?

Ms R Sandow—Yes.

CHAIR—What sorts of ages were they?

Ms R Sandow—They were seven- and eight-year-olds. That was back in the late 1990s.

CHAIR—What sorts of offences were they engaged in?

Ms R Sandow—These were kids who had never been in mainstream schools.

CHAIR—So that was the reason they were disconnected, not because they were already in the criminal justice system.

Ms R Sandow—Yes.

Senator BOYCE—They had been getting into a bit of trouble or something, had they?

Ms R Sandow—Yes, they have been getting into it. The only thing is, because of their age they could only put them on lower probation orders and stuff like that. The main kids were from Cherbourg State School. They sent them to YACCA because they struggled and they could not fit in mainstream schooling. They could not teach these young kids, plus these kids were sniffers at the time. Because they had a drug and sniffing problem, it was hard for them—

Senator BOYCE—They would lose concentration?

Ms R Sandow—Yes—for those kids who have never been in the Gundoo Day Care Centre.

CHAIR—Is there any petrol sniffing nowadays?

Ms R Sandow—Yes, there is—more. I am doing our launch on 28 April. The launch is SOS—Snuff Out Sniffing. There are about 40—maybe 50—of our young people that are sniffing here in our community.

Senator MOORE—It was right down for a while.

CHAIR—There is an organisation called CAYLUS in Alice Springs who I think have been very successful in dealing with this. It might be very useful if I can get them to get in touch through the committee. They have got some excellent programs. Luckily for them, we have had the rollout of Opal fuel in Central Australia. You can sniff it all you like, you just will not get high. Everybody uses it and it has been a huge investment by both governments over time. It is the only silver bullet to really change things on the ground that I have ever seen for anything. Nobody sniffs petrol because it does not do anything for them. I suspect that would not happen here simply because of the proximity of Brisbane—it would be with a great deal of difficulty. We will just make a note that officially on behalf of the committee I will write to CAYLUS and ask them to get in touch. We might just leave some contact numbers for you, Rhonda.

I know they have got a number of programs that they get funding for. Clearly, something there might work with a number here. I know them quite well and they may well come over and just have a talk.

Ms R Sandow—I have noticed that none of the kids who have been through the Annexe program have been through the day care centre. I thought that maybe if I go on this board I can try to break the cycle. I do a lot of parent support meetings as well and I try to support parents in encouraging their kids to go to the Gundoo Day Care Centre because it is really important for early childhood.

Senator ADAMS—What age group range are the sniffers? How old do the younger—

Ms R Sandow—Six-year-olds.

Senator ADAMS—Six-year-olds going to what?

Ms R Sandow—We get some that older ones—

Senator ADAMS—Still the older ones—are they leading the little kids on?

Ms R Sandow—Yes. There was an incident only last week where a young 14-year-old boy got airlifted from Cherbourg hospital here. He was sniffing and caught alight—

Mr Malone—Set on fire.

CHAIR—Yes, we used to have a lot of those injuries before the intervention.

Senator FURNER—That was sniffing, was it?

Ms R Sandow—Yes.

Ms E Sandow—And he was at school.

Ms R Sandow—In the school grounds.

Senator BOYCE—He accidentally did it to himself, did he?

Mr Malone—It is still being investigated.

CHAIR—One particular friend of mine—he is probably three or four years older than me—was sniffing and smoking at the same time about 10 years ago. Sometimes when you are sniffing you have a diminished thought process about why you should not have a lighter, a cigarette and a can of petrol in your hand and, tragically, that is what happens.

Ms R Sandow—Because of the problems we have, especially with the young people in our community, YACCA set up a community advisory group. We have that once a month, and out of that community advisory group there were two focus groups. I convene the truancy focus group and there is also VSM, the volatile substance misuse group. Bruce Simpson, who is the convenor of that, is the coordinator of the diversionary program that you received.

Mr Malone—Can I say something in support of what Ray said about the need for a transport service. We find that more people from Cherbourg are moving out of here. They are moving to Murgon, Wondai and Goomeri, and there are a number of reasons behind that. One of them is the alcohol management plan—that has been an issue that has been forcing people to rethink where they want to live. Currently we are going through issues with the lack of housing in the community. More people are moving into Murgon because they cannot find accommodation out here. And we are going to find that more people are going to be moving into Murgon, with the plans that are being put in place by state government. We have had two community meetings here and they have talked about the new system of housing. One of the carrots that they are dangling in front of people is the possibility of having a 99-year lease on homes, which they are selling as ‘homeownership’. A lot of people are confused about what is going to happen out here as far as homes and homeownership are concerned.

CHAIR—That is not an unusual thing with a very complex issue. I am not sure exactly whether that is the state government’s responsibility or the Commonwealth’s, but we will find out. The committee will write—though I will have to get their agreement—to those departments and say, ‘Listen, we think it would be useful if somebody from whoever is responsible for that would actually come here, again, to talk more about that.’ I do not think it is useful for a committee of parliament to try explaining some of those things which have been heavily politicised. I do not think it is useful for us to try to attempt an explanation here, but we will certainly get a letter off to whoever is responsible to make sure that they come here to speak to you about it again. Obviously it is not clear at the moment.

Mr Malone—Why I mentioned that is that we are probably going to find there is a bigger need to get transport services happening, because more people are going to be moving into Murgon, Wondai and Goomeri for our day-care facility.

Senator BOYCE—I just want to follow up on something that Ms Sandow said before. You talked about trying to get that link between the day care centre and supporting parents who have got kids who are in trouble. Have you had success in terms of younger brothers and sisters coming to the day-care centre and therefore perhaps not getting into the trouble their big brothers or sisters did?

Ms R Sandow—Looking back over the years at the kids who have been in the juvenile justice system, I have seen a lot of their siblings. Their younger siblings are now in the day-care centre. As I said before, I try to put that out to a lot of the parents in the community because early childhood is really important for the young people in our community.

Senator BOYCE—Thanks.

Ms E Sandow—About employment: the government is going to take CDEP away from council. We are down to 30 participants now. There are about 450 unemployed between the job networks. I think the thing is going to be more employment out in Cherbourg because a lot of our money goes into Murgon. If you go into Murgon and walk into a shop, you will not see an Aboriginal face in there working.

Senator MOORE—You never have.

Ms E Sandow—You never have—and you never will, because you have got a bit of racism there and other things. You have got barriers there. That will never happen. The council has put in a submission to get our town upgraded—to get more office space and everything. We have a clothing shop there, a second-hand one. We have fruit and veges. We are starting.

Senator MOORE—Good.

CHAIR—Thank you. We are out of time—

Senator MOORE—Can I put one more question on record. It is about foetal alcohol syndrome. We know we are speaking later today, and I would have thought that, with all your experience—yes; see what happened when I said ‘foetal alcohol’?

Senator BOYCE—Senator Moore, could we also put hearing into that question?

Senator MOORE—Okay: foetal alcohol and hearing. I know that, with your work with the young kids, that is something that you have been thinking about. So do you want to put anything on record about what you think about the issues around foetal alcohol syndrome, and also around hearing? We are all interested in the hearing stuff. Now you have the hearing tests at birth, and then we are supposed to go back and test later—has that been an issue for the kids and families in your community?

Ms R Sandow—The annex program caters for 26 young people, and the majority of the 26 young people who come to the annex program have got hearing problems and also—

Senator BOYCE—Intellectual disability?

Ms R Sandow—Yes.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for your appearance and your evidence here today. Because there has been such an amount of evidence, and it has been quite interesting, the committee may individually have questions for you and they will be put on notice through the secretariat. They will probably go through Ray and he will be able to question you more. If you have some information that you have remembered or you have some corrections to what you have told us—you might remember that a name or something was not right—you can correct that through the secretariat. If you have other ideas that you would like to share with us, by all means make further submissions or make information available through the secretariat. Thank you very much for your evidence today.

[11.17 am]

COLLINS, Mr Warren, Chief Executive Officer, Cherbourg Aboriginal Shire Council

HIGGINS, Mr Ross, Deputy Chief Executive Officer, Cherbourg Aboriginal Shire Council

MURRAY, Mr Samuel Joseph, Mayor, Cherbourg Aboriginal Shire Council

CHAIR—Welcome. The 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 traditional owners of the land on which we meet, and we pay our respects to the elders past and present. Before the committee begins this part of the meeting I want to make it clear to meeting participants that the meeting is being recorded, a transcript of the recording will be produced and the transcript may be made public. Participants' comments recorded at and transcribed from this meeting are protected by parliamentary privilege. Any act that disadvantages you as a result of giving evidence to the committee is treated as a breach of privilege. However, I also remind participants that giving false or misleading evidence to the committee may constitute contempt of the Senate. Information on parliamentary privilege and the protection of witnesses and evidence has previously been provided to you. Perhaps you would like to make an opening statement or tell us what is happening in your community, and then the committee will ask questions.

Mr Murray—Basically, with the transition of regional councils into amalgamated councils, most of the communities have been left to operate as independent local authorities. One of the main issues that we find frustrating as a council is: where do we fit with regard to the definition of our role? Are we a local government authority, are we a community shire council or do we fit into another category? Regarding one of the levels that we are dealing with, particularly the state government, there is a different determination every time we meet a new minister. We are just asking for a bit of continuity and which hat fits. In saying that, we have fought above our weight for probably the duration of this community. We have a lot of positives happening here. There are a few things that could be fixed. All in all, there is a genuine progression towards a better place for this community to be.

CHAIR—What sorts of things, what sorts of areas, still need to be fixed up?

Mr Murray—Realistically, you have to look at employment opportunities. Employment was probably the No. 1 issue at a public meeting on Tuesday night, and council have been adamant, probably even before I became the mayor, that we need to look at employment options. Understanding that council cannot be the be all and end all, I think we have to look at creating job opportunities, for our community residents primarily. They do not necessarily have to be directly for the community but have to have an impact on the community in regard to getting away from the tragedy that is CDEP.

CHAIR—We certainly admired the gardens on the way in. Apart from the council, what do you think are the prospective areas of employment, areas of enterprise, that may present opportunities in and around Cherbourg?

Mr Murray—I think there needs to be skilling in health areas. We have three major health providers on the community. One of those is funded by the federal government, I believe, and the other two come under the state umbrella. We would love to see young people especially involved in some of those areas where there is a commitment to government funding, as well as in education, school, TAFE and areas like that. I think there needs to be an influx of fresh funding in private industry. I think if we plan ahead and allow private industry to flourish on the community—through setting up private businesses or encouraging businesses to set up on the community—it would provide options in other areas that could provide a legacy for future generations.

CHAIR—Are there any impediments? Land tenure often an issue. What are the impediments in Cherbourg that you think government need to be alerted to in terms of some of those enterprises or developments?

Mr Collins—One of our major impediments is government.

CHAIR—Obviously not local.

Mr Collins—It is not local government; it is state and Commonwealth. Basically, the Wide Bay area, of which Cherbourg is a part, has been identified as one of the 17 areas in Australia with the worst economic situation. We do major applications under the nation building and jobs fund to try and create jobs and to expand what we are doing with our market gardens, and we do not get past the first post—yet, under the same programs, we see other places being funded which we think are nowhere near as worthy as ours. We

continually get slapped in the face. Every time we try to do something positive and expand what we are doing, there is a brick wall there. Whether it is intended or unintended, I am not too sure, but it becomes very frustrating when you live on a community like this. They talk about unemployment in our area being around 16 per cent. On this community, it is more like 60 per cent. So who is in greater need?

I think governments, both state and Commonwealth, need to look at need. We do not want to go to them cap in hand for the rest of our lives; we want to do something. We want to build enterprise on this community. We know that not everybody on this community is going to be employed on this community, so there has to be opportunities elsewhere. At the moment, the opportunities are not even in our district. The opportunities are a long way from us, which requires people from here to either do a lot of travelling or move away to other centres—in which case they are behind the eight ball because all the mining boom has done is put ridiculous prices on houses and renting. I do not know who can afford to pay before \$400 or \$500 a week in rent when they move to a new place.

Senator FURNER—Does the council have an enterprise development plan at all?

Mr Murray—We have an enterprise development unit within council.

Senator FURNER—What are the objectives of that?

Mr Murray—To create sustainable employment and to look at options of training in employment areas. The state government has a policy regarding negotiation tables, where you supposedly negotiate with the government. Sometimes, it is more of an ultimatum table than a negotiation table. I think realistically we have to, as I said before, look at creating those options on the ground or, if we cannot, look at the next best possibility. If people leave the community and there is no genuine investment—I say this all due respect—in infrastructure in the smaller communities, the line is basically drawn in the sand. Those communities will turn into ghost towns. You will find that across the nation—not only with Aboriginal communities but also with other small communities where the council is the No. 1 employer. If you close down the council or amalgamate councils, you are signing the death warrant for those communities.

We are trying to branch out in certain areas as a council. We are taking it as far as we can but there need to be support mechanisms in place or funding bodies willing to encourage industry or opportunities for education, training or whatever. We went down the track of limiting the number of RTOs, registered training organisations, that can come onto the community. At one stage we had 43, from as far away as Townsville, coming here to give people a piece of paper that they are probably never going to use. They build people's hopes up and give them a piece of paper. Those people's hopes are up and then dashed within a couple of days, and that is not right. So as a council we have said: let's have training organisations on the committee that have relevance to what is going on around and in the community and that give people a clear opportunity to gain employment.

Senator FURNER—What is your population now in Cherbourg?

Mr Murray—I think, at last count, it was about 1,600 or 1,800. We did a survey recently as a community. The council partook in a survey in November. We asked questions on key topics like housing, health, education and employment. It was very well supported by the community and that response has given us something to go on. When we are dealing with government, it is supposedly all about numbers. Coming from a small community, we see the faces to those numbers. If we are not pushing change in certain areas, we are letting those people down, and we are not in the business of letting people down—as I am sure you guys are not.

Senator MOORE—Yesterday we had, from the state department that looks after innovation and all that kind of stuff, Mr Fletcher. He talked about a recent gathering they had with the mayors from all the Aboriginal and Islander councils and a number of other people. You will be able to read the *Hansard* and see exactly what he said yesterday, but he talked about the fact that they were trying to pull together an economic and development process for councils like yours to share the knowledge. Were you part of that, Mayor?

Mr Murray—It is news to me.

Senator MOORE—That was just what he put on record yesterday, and I am sorry I do not know the detail. It was an acknowledgement that the councils need specific help around economic development. It was not just Cherbourg; it was Bamaga and all the others that you know so well. It was to get all those mayors together, with the kind of backing they have from their councils in their planning.

Mr Murray—With all due respect, and without patting ourselves on the back, as Warren explained before, we did take initiative on economic development. We had workshops set up before we actually put the bid in. All the big players were at the workshops. Officers from DEEWR and some of the other employment and training organisations and departments were at the table early on in the piece. We did not apply to the first round of funding because we felt that we were not quite there yet. We got a qualified architect in to draw up a plan that really would have changed the landscape of the community, the CBD, and would basically have breathed life into the community. With all due respect—and I do not know whether this is the forum in which to bring this up—it was scrutinised by some powers that be, there was correspondence back to the council in regard to possibly cutting costs, and then we were basically told no. A church in the Lockyer Valley was given some money out of that. Basically they were asking for the same amount.

Senator MOORE—That was the recent Arbib exercise that came out two weeks ago? Okay. There is still a lot of work to be done on that one.

CHAIR—It might be useful to the committee, Mr Murray, if it is possible to have a copy of that submission. You might want to provide that to the committee on notice if that is possible.

Mr Murray—I will send that. Parliamentary Secretary Jason Clare came down to the Keep Australia Working workshop, for which I am a member of the committee. We have a meeting next Monday at the community.

CHAIR—It would be useful to see the scope and nature of that submission.

Mr Murray—I think we had a basic breakdown of short-term employment and long-term employment. All in all, I think we were looking at about 120 to 160 jobs. That is from construction right through to production. I do not know if this is the forum to bring this up, but it is not sour grapes; I am just calling it as it is.

Senator MOORE—It is exactly the forum to bring it up.

CHAIR—That would be useful. I commend you very much for your direct engagement. You are obviously thinking ahead. It is pretty visionary stuff, and you know who you are going to engage with. You talk to me about the players—DEEWR and the Commonwealth government. They have never made anything in their lives. I think the connection between here and Brisbane is close. I have just driven from a major metropolitan centre that uses stuff all the time, and I would have thought the distance out gives you a fantastic opportunity perspective. Have you thought about how you might seek support from the government, if you like, in engaging with industry—having workshops here with Readymix or people who are in manufacturing—and talking to them about the opportunities with proximity and what Cherbourg has to offer in terms of employment, land space and those sorts of things? Clearly you have gone the first step down the road, but do you have any plans to directly engage with industry participants that might see this as a site for some development?

Mr Collins—One of the main things that council want over the next couple of years is to get a town plan and a land use plan done. The state government have funds set aside to do that. We were told recently that we cannot access those services unless we sign 40-year leases over our houses, which also brings in any new housing now. They are not going to give us any funds to build new houses on the community unless we sign 40-year leases. We are stuck between a rock and a hard place at the moment in relation to the plans.

CHAIR—I understand from previous submissions from Cherbourg and from evidence taken this morning that people were still confused about the consequences of that. I have indicated that we will write to the departments responsible and ask that they return to the community to have another round explaining exactly what this means, because clearly if people are still confused then we need another visit.

Mr Collins—There are a number of issues. They are talking about a 40-year lease between council and the state government. They are also talking about home ownership, which is a 99-year lease between the purchaser and the council. There is also a state government policy in relation to the amount of rent being paid—25 per cent of household income or market rates. They are the three main issues that the people are trying to grapple with at the present time.

CHAIR—In relation to my submission about perhaps engaging industry, I take it from what you are saying that, until some of those issues are resolved, it is very difficult to engage industry if you do not have any confidence about land tenure. Is that basically what you are saying?

Mr Collins—It is not so much land tenure. It is more about this: if a company like Readymix say, ‘Yes, we’d like to put up a base in Cherbourg,’ where are we going to put them? There are issues in our

experience—not in Cherbourg but in some other communities where the Katter leases, as they are known in Queensland, were drawn up back in the late eighties and early nineties. The leases were given out, and now there are problems with those leases, because they are leases over main roads and so on. It has thrown the town planning out the window, basically. So we are conscious of that, and we do not want to say, ‘Yes, Readymix: you build here,’ and then find in five or 10 years time that that is not the best place for it.

CHAIR—In your original submission, you talked about architects and somebody involved in town planning—actually having a town plan and a future plan, which would hopefully address many of the issues that Mr Collins is raising. Have you had some official town planning done? Is there an official town plan?

Mr Collins—There was some town planning done back in the eighties that needs to be revised.

Mr Higgins—We currently have a town plan but we do not have a land use plan for the whole of our deed of grant in trust area, and that is the concern that council have. We need to identify a recreation area. We need to identify light industrial. We need to identify townships.

CHAIR—Obviously that would be a task that is council’s responsibility, but I also understand the Queensland government would normally have something to do with that. Is there some process to advance the notion of a new and refreshed town plan—in your words, Mr Murray—for Cherbourg? Is there a process at the moment?

Mr Murray—We have got the inside running here, with all due respect, because our local government champion is the head of DERM, and DERM handle the town planning situation, I believe.

CHAIR—Okay.

Mr Murray—We have talked about major infrastructure changes in the community since, like I said, probably before I was appointed mayor. But these changes need to take place. We are talking about 40-year leases and brand new houses going up. Is it a case of putting the cart before the horse? If there is not an investment in infrastructure then are we going to supply our people with shovels instead of toilet paper? That is where it is going to be, at the end of the day.

There needs to be a commitment from the government, with all due respect. When the government went down the track of infrastructure and selling the point of infrastructure development in the nation, a lot of the smaller communities and a lot of the smaller councils missed out. A lot of that was chewed up by the bigger townships and bigger councils, which could have created that revenue by raising rates or through private industry and other investments. None of the Aboriginal communities got up, but a lot of smaller, non-Aboriginal communities did not get a look in either. At the end of the day, like I said before, you sound a death knell if there is not a commitment from government to invest in infrastructure, whether it be water, sewerage or electricity. These are opportunities or options that small communities miss out on.

Mr Higgins—We have had discussions with the Department of Infrastructure and Planning about land use planning, so we have actually started that conversation. But they are working more on looking at a regional strategy, the Wide Bay regional plan, which we are part of. The state government has given that responsibility to this new program office they have developed in Cairns to look at land use planning. We seem to be on the bottom of their list of people to get to. So, while we are the most closely related community to other towns, we seem to be last on the list in relation to that.

I think another thing that needs to be raised is the Commonwealth government’s release of the housing moneys into Queensland. They released \$1.16 billion for remote area housing in Queensland over 10 years, and two Indigenous communities missed out, Cherbourg and Yarrabah, because we were not regarded as remote. So they have picked on 16 communities in Queensland and left two out—crazy.

Mr Collins—And in some government departments we are considered remote, so we do not know where we sit.

Mr Higgins—That word is a really big issue for us. What is regarded as ‘remote’ by the state and the Commonwealth? We run a CDEP Program here, which is really only available to remote communities. It is a Commonwealth program. But we do not get money from Housing because we are not remote.

CHAIR—Yes, it is a pretty big word. Some of the communities this size in my electorate have 500 kilometres of dirt track, and they are remote. So it is a definitional quandary.

Mr Collins—The other thing I want to raise is that housing is probably one of the main issues. I have covered the fact that we are not going to get any new housing until we sign 40-year leases. But if we start building new houses and we increase the size of the community, I am not too sure that our sewerage system,

which was built in 1958, would handle any more people. There has been no work done to it since 1958, just minor repairs to keep it operational. It does not meet Queensland government requirements under the EPA because it is too close to the residential area and also the overflow runs straight into Barambah Creek, which then supplements both the Murgon and Wondai townships' water supplies, so they have been drinking recycled water since 1958. The state government has known about it now for probably six or seven years, but they keep putting us on the backburner.

CHAIR—Do you think that may be a bit of an impediment for people making investment in houses here?

Mr Murray—It is definitely an eyesore for visitors because it is on our doorstep. And if you attend the local church, it just wafts through the windows when you are sitting in the church. Residents around that area have to put up with that stench when it is the time for the families to sit down. It may have served a need in times past, but if we are talking about progressing this community then those things need to be addressed.

CHAIR—Could I just go back to ensure I have a clear understanding about where you are up in terms of the different processes. The infrastructure itself is completely separate from the town planning process, although you cannot have a review of the infrastructure until the town planning process takes place. Clearly the town planning process would acknowledge that pinched and decaying infrastructure is an issue for the future. When that takes place there is no doubt that will happen, given the evidence you have provided to us. When was the last time you made some sort of official submission about the infrastructure, about the issues of the water?

Mr Murray—At the last funding round for national infrastructure progress. We put in a bid for a new sewerage plant.

CHAIR—That identified the issues in terms of the sewerage, the run-off and those issues? Okay. The response from that was simply, 'No, you're not eligible for this round of funding,' but there was no other response in terms of the urgency?

Mr Collins—We applied to the Commonwealth. The state are aware of it because they are the ones that commissioned the report into the operation of the sewerage treatment plant—and we remind the state very couple of months.

CHAIR—All right.

Mr Higgins—The state government actually did a review of the infrastructure in all Indigenous communities about three or four years ago to create an unmet needs list. I understand that perhaps that unmet needs list was a lot more money than they expected and it is probably just sitting on someone's desk because they do not know what to do with it. But that certainly identified the infrastructure needs of our council anyway, and the sewerage was the top priority on that list.

Senator ADAMS—How much interaction have you had with the member for Wide Bay?

Mr Murray—I have personally been down to see him a few times. One of the issues was about the matter of the AMP, when the AMP first came out. It has just been a shemozzle.

Senator ADAMS—Has he been up here to visit the community?

Mr Murray—He has been around. He has been here in times past, recently, but not since I have been the mayor.

Senator ADAMS—Is he aware of the submissions you have made and everything else? Are you keeping him in the loop as to what you are doing?

Mr Collins—We certainly kept him in the loop when we applied for the sewerage treatment plant.

Senator ADAMS—What about the building and the leases and all the rest?

Mr Murray—We have not been in contact.

Senator ADAMS—I think that might be a starting point, if you can get him on board with you, at least for the Commonwealth issues.

Mr Murray—You will have to forgive me if I am sounding a bit proud here because that is not my intention but, with all due respect, when we went to the Jobs Fund we wanted to make sure that we dotted the i's and crossed the t's so that this council and community could stand on its own two feet and say, 'This application meets all the criteria, and if it does not get up then tell us what we are doing wrong.' We did not participate in the first round of funding in the jobs Fund, as I said before, because we were just off the pace. So

we were patient, to the point that we made sure that all the i's were dotted and all the t's were crossed. When that submission left us, I had it on good authority from people who passed that submission on that it was a very strong submission. I have no doubt that it was. On all the points that were raised by Jason Clare, the minister, down in Gympie with regard to the Jobs Fund, we met those criteria and then some. Then it did not get up, being beaten at the post by possibly a new church in Gatton or a rugby football oval administration block in Noosa, I think, or Maroochydore.

I am not saying that it will not have an impact on those communities, but here was something that we were building on. We had the workshops for a reason. We had the market garden for a reason. We are encouraging our community to get away from CDEP being defined as employment. We are probably the only community in the state which has a commitment from the federal government for CDEP for the next three years. That gives us three years to really wean our people off that scam—I cannot say it any other way. I was on CDEP. There is no way you can feed your children or pay your bills on CDEP.

Senator FURNER—Can I turn the focus to social issues starting with substance abuse. What forms of substance abuse do you have in this community?

Mr Murray—Everything ranging from hard drugs to petrol sniffing and alcohol abuse. Recently needles are starting to come onto the community, most probably brought from Brisbane. Petrol sniffing: Council got one of the best legal minds in the state, a barrister by the name of Michael Limerick, who does a lot of work for the state government. We sat down and changed our bylaws. We wanted to make petrol sniffing an illegal activity and we wanted to charge people by having a clear boundary and saying, 'This is what happens if you participate in this action.' The kids know that it is not illegal. That is the first thing they say to the cops. We had a meeting here where a senior sergeant got up and said, 'People could get into trouble if they took the bottles off the kids. They could have them up for stealing,' which is a farce when you are talking about preservation of life and providing for our future generations. No-one has been game enough to charge anyone under that law but as long as it sits there, there is a dog in the yard.

CHAIR—It appears that there is nothing new under the sun in those matters. I undertook with the previous group giving evidence this morning that we would write, as the parliamentary committee, to an organisation in Alice Springs who have been doing this for a very long time. Perhaps in addition to that the committee will provide the suite of initiatives which have been put in place by the Northern Territory and Commonwealth governments in Alice Springs, which have included the bylaw changes you are talking about to allow police officers to step in. It is part of the Volatile Substance Abuse Prevention Act. If that would be of some use to you, I would be happy to provide it to you, through the committee.

Mr Higgins—The problem we have, though, is that, to introduce a new local law we have to get the minister's approval. Because we introduced a draft law which we sent to the minister, it took 12 months to get a response. The minister then had to have that checked by every government department and we got a response back saying that the minister was not prepared to approve our local law.

Senator BOYCE—Which minister?

Mr Higgins—Minister Boyle. Too many government departments felt that our local law conflicted with state law.

CHAIR—That might be the case, but as I have said, nothing which has happened to you did not happen in the Territory in the fight to have some commonsense on these things, across political persuasions, without any politics being involved. Everybody could see that there was a great need. They were exactly the same issues as you are talking about now and eventually, fundamentally, it was one of those power of the people situations where everybody united. And the media were very cranky about it. That is why things happen. Perhaps that is what needs to happen here. We have one roadhouse left, but I understand they are selling out, hopefully after pressure from us.

Senator FURNER—Other than those substances, how are the alcohol restrictions going?

Mr Collins—What alcohol restrictions?

Senator FURNER—The signs on the way indicate that there are some.

Mr Collins—They have made no difference.

Senator FURNER—So what is happening? Are people going into Murgon to get their supplies there?

Mr Collins—They always brought supplies in from Murgon because there are no supplies on the community. It has not made any difference. They are still bringing in illegal alcohol under the AMP.

Senator FURNER—How many police do you have you?

Mr Collins—There are suppose to be seven state police officers here.

Senator FURNER—And you have no police liaison officer stationed here?

Mr Collins—Not stationed at Cherbourg.

Senator FURNER—Where are they?

Mr Collins—There are two stationed at Murgon.

Senator FURNER—How often do they come out here?

Mr Collins—I think they run the youth club on Thursday and Friday nights.

Senator FURNER—Is the youth club here?

Mr Collins—Yes.

Senator BOYCE—Is it a PCYC?

Mr Collins—No, it is not a full PCYC. It was something that was set up by the local police.

Senator FURNER—So that is the only time they visit Cherbourg?

Mr Collins—They do come out on other occasions, but that is mainly it.

Senator MOORE—Mayor, you are just bursting there!

Mr Murray—I am just trying to keep a lid on it, actually!

Senator MOORE—I didn't think it was going to last long!

Mr Collins—Policing is a touchy subject.

Senator MOORE—Always.

Mr Collins—A lot of people in the community believe that the police are here to protect Murgon.

Senator BOYCE—To protect Murgon?

Mr Collins—Yes.

Mr Murray—When the nuisance gets into Murgon, they bring them back out here. Under the AMP act were four funded programs from the state government: one for a community patrol, one for a volatile substance misuse officer, one for a hub and one for a sobering up shelter. Council, strictly on an employment basis, said, 'If we're going to do that, we'll apply for four so that we can monitor the alcohol situation from a community perspective.' One of the main issues when applying for the sobering up shelter was that we would not base the sobering up shelter on the community. If there is no alcohol allowed on the community, why have a sobering up shelter on the community—why deal with the aftermath? It defeated the purpose. We threw our hat into the ring. There were some other NGOs that sat at the same table that basically gave us confirmation on the day that they would not apply. We found out later that they did. The two that we probably wanted the most we did not get, so we said to the government: 'You guys can take the lot.' Eighteen months down the track, when we were told by the state government that we needed to get those applications in by mid-March, there is still no sobering up shelter. Until recently the community patrol did not patrol Cherbourg; it patrolled Murgon. It has only recently been patrolling Cherbourg.

I was a bit alarmed at one of the meetings leading up to the diversionary program, as the AMP was being wheeled out. We said that we had an existing service, the community police, that has long been in need of some support from the state government in terms of strengthening the relationship between the state police and the community—and what better option was there than to use the community police as that avenue to interact with the community? In times past the community police did their job, and above and beyond what they were called to do, while the state police basically took a back seat. We were told at that meeting that it was not negotiable, it was not on the table. Twelve months down the track we had to get rid of the community police because, with all due respect, it was not viable. The community patrol came on board, and now you have the situation where people are just taking numbers and not intervening, not getting involved in the situation, because they have no powers; it is all about reporting. I believe the government calls it 'vetting'.

Mr Collins—Also, the community patrol is bringing the drunks out of Murgon and putting them back into their own homes. This whole thing was about domestic and family violence, so nothing has changed—the people are now getting a free ride home and are being put in the same situation.

CHAIR—So you are telling me, Mr Collins, that in an alcohol managed area, where the motive for the alcohol management was to decrease domestic violence, the police or somebody are bringing people through the sign who are obviously intoxicated and returning them to their homes?

Mr Collins—Yes.

CHAIR—Thank you for that.

Mr Murray—With the program that is run with the community patrol, there is really no difference between what they do and what a courtesy bus would do for your local RSL. They are basically bringing the people out. The situation in Murgon is that people have their number. If there is a party at Murgon they will call the community patrol to pick them up at that place after they have had a gutful.

Senator BOYCE—Call a taxi!

Mr Murray—But they do not have to pay. So it is a glorified courtesy bus, paid for by the state government.

Senator BOYCE—Are the community police based in Cherbourg?

Mr Murray—There are no community police.

Mr Higgins—Cherbourg council employed community police up until two years ago, so there has always been an Aboriginal police base at Cherbourg, under the control of Cherbourg council. We just did not have the funds to continue that. We have been trying to negotiate with the state government an arrangement where we could still have the community police, under the guise of working with the state police officers, but the state police department thought that the state police could handle that better themselves.

Senator MOORE—Did you get a greater allocation of state police through that process? Did the allocation to Cherbourg stay the same? Has it been seven for the whole time?

Mr Collins—I think it may have been six and it went up to seven.

Senator MOORE—In the evidence we received yesterday, Cherbourg was not mentioned but in some of the other communities, when the community police were being wound back because of money—it is all about money—the state police increased the numbers of police on the communities.

Mr Higgins—I think there might have been an increase of police in Murgon.

Senator MOORE—But not on community? They specifically said community.

Mr Higgins—We might have had one.

Senator MOORE—We will check it out.

Mr Collins—Murgon certainly has had an increase. I think there are about 30 officers there.

Senator BOYCE—So what are the police in Cherbourg doing about illegal alcohol?

Mr Murray—Have you got 10 years for me to answer that question?

Senator BOYCE—In one word.

Senator MOORE—Or maybe two.

Mr Murray—There are few who really do their job, but I think it is difficult for them to do their job consistently. Some of the guys I have spoken to, people who are gainfully employed in the Queensland Police Service, have said from day one that there was no way that the AMP was going to be policed, because of our location. Because of our proximity to Murgon, our closeness to Wondai, there is no way that they can stop alcohol coming into this community. There is an elder sitting at the back of the proceedings today. I am sure she had the same situation in the community back in her day. Because of the closeness to Murgon there is always going to be an opportunity to have alcohol delivered to the community in one way, shape or form.

Senator MOORE—Unless you have a kind of quarantine gate and every car searched and every person searched, it is not going to work.

Mr Collins—There is more than one way into Cherbourg.

Senator MOORE—I know that.

Mr Collins—There are about 10.

Senator BOYCE—Does the council support the AMP or not?

Mr Murray—Realistically, I say no, with all due respect. Unless the ‘why’ factor is addressed—why do people drink?—you are never going to stop alcohol. Where was the AMP for the First Fleet? As long as you have alcohol you are going to have alcoholics.

CHAIR—We have probably 10 roads into Yuendumu and much the same problems, but there has clearly been the determination and resources put aside. There is an alcohol and substance abuse desk that coordinates the Federal Police and the Northern Territory and Western Australia police forces. There is a very significant coordinated effort to ensure that if you have alcohol in your car then you will not have a car and the alcohol will not get in there. So, many roads or not into Cherbourg, I would have thought if there was a will to ensure that it does not come here, it would not. I would have thought the circumstances in Cherbourg would be somewhat easier operationally than some other places where it is working.

Mayor Murray, we have a convention in the committee where, if there is adverse commentary about something, we pass that on. I would not have considered your comments here today adverse. They are comments that I think the Queensland Commissioner of Police would like to hear. I will seek the support of the remainder of the committee on this. But since he has given evidence—he gave evidence in Brisbane yesterday—we will write to him and highlight the evidence that you have given us so that we can ensure that it is brought directly to his attention.

Mr Murray—Just adding to that statement, it is nothing that he has not known about. I have spoken to him face to face about the issue. We are not saying that we want alcohol in the community. Councillor Desmond Tayley, the Mayor of Wujal Wujal, hit the nail on the head when he said that the AMP is turning good people into criminals. If Joe Blow works during the week, bends his back and breaks a sweat, and he wants to have a beer at home while he is watching the footy, after a meal with his family, that man is entitled to that, I believe, because he earned it. He is not causing anyone else any problems, if his missus can handle him. More power to him.

It is the ratbag element that tars the whole community and makes it easy for the media and other avenues to predetermine what happens in Aboriginal communities—what our people cannot even find out for themselves. We are not a ghetto, we are not people who basically walk around cap in hand and we are not beggars. We do not need people to come here and make up our minds for us. We know what is going on. We strive for an opportunity to have our say. With all due respect, if we were going to be moving forward as a nation after Kevin Rudd made the apology, then we earned the right to determine what happens in the community. None of the councillors, with the exception of one, drinks. I have not had a beer in eight years. There is no need for it anymore. In saying that, the choice of the individual needs to be questioned. If an individual does not adhere to social standards then that individual has to be dealt with. If his neighbour is having a beer and not bothering anyone, why is that being brought into question? It would be very interesting—and I say this with all due respect to the committee here today—to see how much revenue the state has made through AMP fines since this program started.

CHAIR—I thank all of you very much for the evidence you have provided today. As I have said during the process, we will be highlighting again to the commissioner the evidence you have given, because it is associated with his police force. There may be corrections or additions to the evidence. Please provide that on notice through the secretariat. Some of the senators may have other questions and we will provide those on notice to you through the secretariat. Thank you very much for spending the time providing your valuable evidence today.

[12.07 pm]

DRENNAN, Dr Marion, Psychiatrist, Darling Downs West Moreton Health Service District, Queensland Health

HOLDAWAY, Ms Val, Director, Community Health Services, South Burnett Health

STEWART, Ms Christine, Manager, Cherbourg Community Health Service

WIGAN, Ms Shirley, Executive Director, Mental Health Service, Darling Downs West Moreton Health Service District, Queensland Health

CHAIR—I am going to read into *Hansard* what I normally do only before a meeting. Since none of you were here in the earlier part of the hearing, I shall read into *Hansard* an explanation about parliamentary privilege and the protection of witnesses.

The Select Committee on Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities is holding this meeting as part of a particular 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 respects to the elders past and present. Before the committee begins the meeting I want to make it clear to all meeting participants that the meeting is being recorded. A transcript of the recorded meeting will be produced and the transcript may be made public. Participant's comments recorded at, and transcribed from, this meeting is protected by parliamentary privilege. Any act that disadvantages you as a result of evidence given to this committee is treated as a breach of privilege. I also remind participants that giving false or misleading evidence to the committee may constitute contempt of the Senate. In other words, if anyone gives you any strife or humbug about providing evidence, this is actually the Senate in this room. This hearing provides exactly the same level of protection as providing evidence to parliament and the responsibilities of that. The *Hansard* reporters at the end and these microphones are exactly the same as in parliament. A *Hansard* transcript is a parliamentary transcript.

Dr Drennan—I am the visiting psychiatrist for Cherbourg on a fortnightly basis.

CHAIR—Information on parliamentary privilege and the protection of witnesses and evidence has just been provided to you. I now invite any or all of you to make an opening statement or remarks and then I will go to the committee to provide questions to you. Making an opening statement is not compulsory or necessary, but it is an opportunity for you to tell us what you think are the important and principal issues around your organisation.

Ms Wigan—I am happy to make a statement, if that is okay. Thank you for the opportunity to be here. Clearly we are here because we have had some concerns. It is an opportunity for us to express those concerns and perhaps identify some of the ways forward that we are moving with. Regarding the concerns that we have had—and I think I can speak for all of us—it is a high-risk community. That is evidenced by a lot of the clinical issues that come before us. At the moment the mental health service is only operating at a direct clinical level. We do not have, and have not had, the capacity to take a community development and a wellness approach to the community, which clearly the community needs. We are really only responding to clinical referrals. It is a needy community. There are a lot of issues around unemployment, school attendance, issues in families, and dislocation and discontinuity in families, which in our view require—and certainly Marion and I have talked about this—a very robust, multiagency, community response. Because of the need for clinical services, we have not really gone that far.

One of the approaches that we are taking at this stage is that we have a working party looking at developing a model for mental health services for this community. Once we have that model we will look at developing that and implementing it within the community, in terms of promoting wellness within the community and not just responding to direct clinical need. That is where Marion and I are coming from. Certainly we are working with the other health services in this community to try and provide a multiagency approach to what we have. That is where we are coming from.

Dr Drennan—I do not have anything to add to that.

Senator ADAMS—Would you like to expand on the work that you do so that we can get a much better idea? You have said who you are, but perhaps you could give us five minutes on what you do?

Ms Stewart—My services are more or less about a primary health care intervention program. I have various services that I look after, like mental health, ATODS, chronic disease and child health. I have approximately 28 staff members.

Senator MOORE—What sorts of workers are in your staff?

Ms Stewart—I have social workers, clinical nurses in ATODS, a psychologist, a child health nurse, an early intervention specialist in child health, Indigenous health workers and a general social worker.

Senator BOYCE—Is anyone looking at special needs?

Ms Stewart—No.

Senator MOORE—Medical visits?

Ms Stewart—Yes, a clinic specialist.

Senator MOORE—Doctor, you clearly have a standard visiting cycle that you do.

Dr Drennan—Yes, fortnightly.

Senator MOORE—And there are other doctors and other professionals coming as required?

Ms Stewart—Yes, a cardiologist and an allied health worker.

Senator MOORE—So people know that next month the cardiologist will come.

Ms Stewart—Yes.

Senator MOORE—That is what I thought. Senator Adams, that might help you with the way it works.

Senator ADAMS—That is what I was after. What about hearing services?

Ms Stewart—Yes, there are hearing services. We have a project at the moment. We do hearing health screenings here in Cherbourg. We are working with an ENT specialist who comes to Cherbourg twice a year. We perform 20 surgeries at the Cherbourg hospital twice yearly, for up to 20 children. We have 100 per cent attendance rate with that. It is working out really well. If we send children away to Brisbane for operations, there is a 35 per cent attendance rate, so we prefer to do them at the surgery here.

Ms Holdaway—We try to do work with Royal Brisbane and Women's Hospital. We have a project running here where we have a van with which the health worker goes to all the schools within the area and checks all of the Indigenous children's hearing. He also has cameras with which he looks into their ears. The images are sent to Brisbane and we can get specialist advice almost straightaway. That means that treatment for the kids is a lot quicker and more efficient. He sees about 1,000 children a year. That is what he turns over. He goes through all the schools here. He has been picking up some European children through that process as well. For hearing, it has been very successful.

Senator ADAMS—What about adults and teenagers? Do you do tests on them?

Ms Holdaway—We would do if they were required, but not through that process; it would be through another process. The people here in Cherbourg use the hospital and they use the emergency doctors as their GP, although they have another doctor at the Aboriginal medical centre. But the two doctors who work in the emergency department have become their GP in a lot of cases. They see a lot of those people for chronic disease management or for normal management that you would go to your own GP for. So they would do some of those and we have an audiologist who comes up here to do screening as well.

CHAIR—Unemployment, disconnection and substance abuse has been well documented, and all of those things come together with mental health. Could you give us a broad overview of the types of presentations that you see? I understand that it is always a delicate matter in small communities, but I am sure you can acknowledge that without going into any detail. Could you scope the presentations and needs, and do you think the frequency is sufficient in terms of the nature of the presentations and the resources that come to this community in mental health? You might want to reflect on the wider region you are dealing with.

Dr Drennan—We see a lot of people here who reflect the complexities you have already referred to. Many of the people that I see have been very seriously affected by both direct trauma and intergenerational trauma that is passed on. So there is often a lot of work to do just on the trauma basis. There is also the response so many people take to the distress, which is to use illicit substances. In addition, one of the major problems here is the inhalation of paint fumes. Thee incredibly damaging effects of those substances, whether they be legal or illegal, are quite profound. I see a lot of people in this community who suffer from psychotic illness. At this point in time, I cannot say, 'This person would've had schizophrenia if they had not been exposed to these

substances,' but they do meet the criteria for that diagnosis. One of the things I have focused on, particularly when I started here, is to try and bring the advantages of 21st-century treatments into this community—the actual medication treatments and in addition the supportive psychotherapies and sometimes other types of psychotherapy I can do with people in the community—because a lot of people were on quite old treatments. The response from people is really very encouraging. We barely even touch the need. In terms of needing more resources, I could hold clinics every week, and possibly every day, and we would never be short of people with a need.

CHAIR—Without wanting to verbal you, we are significantly under-resourced in that area?

Dr Drennan—Absolutely, yes.

Senator BOYCE—Can you quantify that in any way?

Dr Drennan—It is really hard. I just know that, whenever I am here, there are so many people to see me. I have contact with the doctors in the hospital, and staff who are working with the service, during the week, when I am away from here working in Ipswich. I try to make myself as available as possible when I am in Ipswich to take any calls and discuss the management. When I am in Ipswich and I am hearing about somebody, I really want to be there and actually see them individually. As Shirley said, the risks here are enormous. People have so much to deal with, so their thoughts about ending their lives are not exactly surprising.

Senator ADAMS—Have there been many suicides?

Ms Holdaway—We have a large number of people who commit suicide who have a connection to Cherbourg. They may have grown up in Cherbourg and gone away. They might not be in Cherbourg, but their family roots are here. We have a significant number of suicides. We have a lot of copycat attempts among young adults in the schools and so on for a variety of reasons. It is a large problem and we do not have the services for the young people.

Dr Drennan—For young people we need a team. One person cannot possibly deal with all this on their own. We need a full CYMHS team here to even start to address the problems. That might reduce some of the problems later on.

Senator BOYCE—There are no CYMHS teams, I take it?

Dr Drennan—No.

Senator BOYCE—Are there any health workers in Cherbourg?

Ms Wigan—There are two positions, and Dr Drennan visits. Just to give you some perspective on the child and youth aspect of it, within my district, which is 92,000 square kilometres, which goes down to Goondiwindi and the border and the Indigenous issues there, there are currently two child and youth psychiatrists to cover the whole area. We will be getting a third one when we open an adolescent unit, but currently there are only two that function within the district. The only way we can service this community is on a needs basis rather than in a proactive way. I think that is decidedly disadvantageous because it does not provide an opportunity to do an early intervention and a family and wellness approach and actually address that significantly. At the moment, most of our case load is adult. We currently have 32 active clients that we review and manage and assist on a regular basis.

Senator BOYCE—That is in your area?

Ms Wigan—That is just here in this community. None of those are child and youth, but that is not to say that there issues are not ever present—and clearly they are. But our response has really been at the clinical level—when people walk through the door. But we do have provision for assessment of child and adolescents if they present. They are linked back to a specialist child and youth psychiatrist, if that need is there, and clearly they would review the clinical input. Hospitalisations and in-patient admissions for this community are at either Ipswich or Toowoomba. If it is for adolescents, it is at Brisbane, which is even further than that, until the Toowoomba adolescent unit opens later this year. At the moment, they trek to Brisbane, which clearly from the management of an Indigenous community is not a good way to do business because of the disconnections and the non-involvement of families and the lack of ability to engage that. We have tried to address that with the development of a new adolescent unit by creating a special needs in-patient environment which does allow for families to come in and stay, if we need them to, to enhance the family dynamics and family involvement. As I said, we cover 92,000 square kilometres with fairly significant Indigenous communities, not least of

which are the ones at Toomula and Boggabilla, near Goondiwindi, which are even more difficult for us to service given the remoteness and the cross-border issues of registration and the clinical issues around that.

But, again, we service that area, from a psychiatrist's point of view, on an outreach basis. We have no psychiatrist resident in that area. We certainly have mental health clinicians in the principal disciplines, but I have a commitment to the belief that there is a lot more that we could do in a significant way if we could address that and take a community development and community capacity approach rather than just a reactive response approach. That approach is also essential but, in my view, the evidence would suggest that there are different ways of doing business in those communities to support them more effectively.

Senator ADAMS—We have just heard evidence from the day care centre. Do you think the fact that the children have been going to the day care centre and then going up through the education system has had an influence on them?

Ms Wigan—As opposed to not having that facility and that resource to attend?

Senator ADAMS—That is right—not attending anything and not going to school.

Ms Wigan—I am not personally familiar with that and it is not something that we have researched, but certainly the evidence base for that would suggest that that is about capacity building and supporting families in a more—

Senator ADAMS—Early education.

Ms Wigan—Early education, early linking. The evidence would support the fact that that is a very effective model in early childhood and early childhood and youth mental health and wellbeing.

Senator ADAMS—Would it take much to just have a look at those statistics for your clients as to whether they have had an opportunity to attend or have just not gone to school?

Ms Wigan—It would not take a lot. It is about targeting that and actually having a good look at it. Having said that, I need to say that I have only had responsibility for this for about the last six months. Prior to that it was under someone else. It is an area that we are particularly interested in and clearly that is why we have looked at a model for servicing communities in a very different way to reallocate and realign resources to do that. If we just remain reactive we will clearly not be able to take early intervention. Some of that really starts with prenatal and postnatal—infant mortality and infant mental health. At a statewide level there is an initiative to look at the perinatal approach. We are linked in with that and we are keen to pursue that. It is not something that we have particularly targeted but clearly it is a need, and I think Marion would agree that that is not an area that we have been able to address. Our principal approach at this stage, as limited as it is, is about a stabilising the risk in the clients that we know and maintaining good mental health for them to minimise the risk. But definitely from our perspective there is a need to do something very different. We have a number of people in the adult group who are on involuntary treatment orders. We maintain close contact with them. We have one or two who are on forensic orders because of serious offences that have been committed. They require a different level of community support.

Senator ADAMS—Are they still within the community?

Ms Wigan—They live within the community. That is no different to what happens with a lot of other communities. That is where we have targeted our limited resources at this stage, with a view to moving outside of that when and as we can. That is our intent.

Senator ADAMS—Would you like to discuss the foetal alcohol issue?

Dr Drennan—Only to say that it is an issue in the community. It is very difficult for those people who are affected to progress their lives the way they would otherwise hope to. A large amount of alcohol abuse has occurred there for a long time. Again, that is because people are using it to escape from the awfulness of what they are facing. So, yes, the foetal alcohol issue is a very real problem. Those people are limited in what they are able to achieve.

Senator FURNER—Can I just ask how substantive it is as an issue.

Dr Drennan—I do not have any statistics. I don't know if you have, Christine?

Ms Stewart—No.

Senator BOYCE—Has there been any change in the incidence in the last three years or five years?

Dr Drennan—There has been a change in the policy for the entry of alcohol into the community, but that is very recent. We do not yet know the impact of that.

Senator BOYCE—But, otherwise, it does not appear to have increased or decreased in recent times?

Dr Drennan—Increasing in—

Senator ADAMS—How often do you have a paediatrician visit?

Ms Stewart—He comes monthly.

Dr Drennan—One day a month.

Senator ADAMS—Are they looking at the—

Ms Stewart—He is starting to, yes.

CHAIR—Perhaps an earlier question should have been: currently, with all the best will in the world, can we have a high level of confidence that there is the capacity for every child in Cherbourg, for example, to have a screening and can we have a high level of confidence about whether or not they are suffering from some part of the spectrum of foetal alcohol spectrum disorder? That would be the first fundamental question, I think. I would welcome any of you to provide an answer to that.

Ms Holdaway—I cannot. I am not sure whether the midwives would. A lot of the children see the midwives. So, again, that is not our department.

CHAIR—And there is no specialist team? There is no-one who is a specialist in FASD?

Ms Stewart—No

CHAIR—There is not a multidiscipline team that actually goes through and screen anybody in the community.

Ms Holdaway—No.

Ms Stewart—I think in our area you have to ask for that screening to be done.

CHAIR—Sorry for interrupting, Senator Furner.

Senator FURNER—I was leading to the question of foetal alcohol spectrum disorder myself. Are there any other alcohol related illnesses in the community that you have identified but are unable to provide any data on at this point?

Dr Drennan—Even beyond the foetal stage, people who are using excessive amounts of alcohol can have very severe cognitive impairments. In addition, they can have liver damage and damage to other organs. Sadly, we see people who when you meet them you would estimate their age as being vastly greater than their real age. Alcohol has had and is still having a huge impact in this community.

Senator FURNER—What needs to be addressed about that issue? How can we fix it?

Dr Drennan—I believe that alcohol is a symptom of so much of the underlying distress. There is also a lot of pressure. If somebody is not drinking, there is a lot of pressure by their peers on them to drink—as, of course, occurs everywhere. Alcohol and the other drugs represent a means of temporarily escaping from the awfulness of what people are going through. Tackling the many social problems in the community is going to be more effective than making a lot of rules about how much alcohol can come in. People drink for a reason, and I think that is what we need to be looking at.

Senator ADAMS—Can you list the reasons? You are talking about the underlying problems. Could you explain exactly what they are?

Dr Drennan—As I said before, there is the amount of trauma that people in this community have suffered both at their personal level at the intergenerational level.

Senator ADAMS—What has caused that? We have other communities who are sort of being able to cope with it. Why is this community different?

Dr Drennan—I do not know how well other communities are really coping with this sort of trauma. I think—

Ms Stewart—I cannot believe that they are coping with it. I do not believe they would be.

Senator ADAMS—Some of them are really starting to move forward. That is why I am asking you to describe what this trauma is exactly.

Ms Stewart—A lot of people have issues because they do not come from this community—they were brought here as children. We have got issues with death and dying. We have been having funerals once a week here.

Senator MOORE—For a long time.

Ms Stewart—For years, yes. People are dying at 45 years old.

Senator ADAMS—Through grog?

Ms Stewart—No.

Ms Holdaway—There are all sorts of reasons.

Ms Stewart—Yes. They are dying younger. There is abuse trauma. They have been traumatised three or four times in the lifetime. And there is intergenerational stuff.

Ms Wigan—We have just put two senior clinicians here because we were concerned about the community. Before coming here this morning I asked my clinicians about their concerns. The comment that they made to me was that they are increasingly concerned—and they have only been here a few weeks—about the lack of activity and the lack of engagement for school age children and adolescents and that school attendance is very low. They are concerned about the increasing amount of solvent use. We all know from the evidence that there are long-lasting physical as well as cognitive issues associated with that. Most of our services currently are Monday to Friday from nine to five. So there is nothing that happens outside of those hours that may bring them together or develop the community. The same applies on the weekend. Chrissie would know the community better than I. I am really only relaying what my clinicians have said to me.

They do tend to congregate together. With not a lot to do, you really do not have a lot of focus, other than beating off each other. They are the perceptions from my clinicians at the moment. I understand that school attendance is not very high, Chrissie, but you would know that more than I would. In fact, they quoted a figure for me of 13 per cent. I do not know whether that is correct, but that is what they quoted to me.

CHAIR—We will be talking to the Cherbourg school later this afternoon.

Ms Wigan—They were their observations. They have really only been in this community for about three or four weeks but they are the issues that they are increasingly concerned about.

Dr Drennan—A lot of the after-hours services that are provided here are provided on a voluntary basis from the leaders of the communities and people like Chrissie. But they get burnt out. They are exhausted.

Senator BOYCE—That is where you need leadership developing going on, isn't it.

Ms Wigan—Yes.

Senator FURNER—I would like to ask you a question around nutrition. You are unlike some of the other remote Indigenous communities we have seen over the last few days, where they are reliant on flying in or shipping in fruit and vegetables. I was very impressed with the market garden on the left coming in. I do not recall that being there when I was up this way last year. Would that form the assumption that your nutritional levels here are reasonably well-off, or are you reliant on other means for fruit or other types of food to be supplied?

Ms Stewart—I think it is improving slowly. We still do not have transport here. Transport is a problem. The community does not have transport in and out of Murgon, other than the taxis—and they charge quite a bit of money.

Senator ADAMS—What do they charge?

Ms Stewart—I think it is like \$13 one way.

Senator ADAMS—So \$13?

Ms Stewart—Yes, plus a fee to open your boot and all that.

CHAIR—There is a fee to open the boot?

Ms Stewart—They charge like \$2 to \$4 to open the boot to put your groceries in.

Senator BOYCE—So it is a bit like \$2 or something to take your port or something?

Senator FURNER—You have a convenience store, don't you?

Ms Stewart—Yes.

Senator FURNER—Does that not supply the types of food and veg that people are looking for?

Ms Stewart—No. But the Cherbourg Fresh do. They have fresh vegetables and milk—and that is at a lower price than in town and in the other little corner shop.

Senator FURNER—Is that separate to the convenience store?

Ms Stewart—Yes.

Senator ADAMS—Do they have bread?

Ms Stewart—Yes.

Dr Drennan—The convenience store has been overpriced, hasn't it, Chrissie?

Ms Stewart—Yes.

Dr Drennan—Very, very seriously overpriced.

Senator FURNER—Who runs that? Is that independently run?

Ms Stewart—I think that is independently run.

Senator FURNER—Is it run by Indigenous people?

Ms Stewart—No.

Senator MOORE—Ms Stewart, I have so many questions but I want to ask one particular one of your service. Does it have any medication support for the people in the community who have a range of medications? Dr Drennan, you were saying that you are bringing in varying medication treatment for the people under your care, and I am sure there are lots of people here who are on all kinds of different medication. Issues were raised with me many years ago here about when people are prescribed medication. There were concerns about their understanding and their maintenance of that process. I was just wondering whether there was anything in the community health area that took that into account with the people who live here.

Ms Stewart—Yes. We are working well with our hospital. We have got the same clients. We do a lot of education around the medications. There is also the Aboriginal medical centre.

Senator ADAMS—Do they supply packs?

Ms Stewart—Yes, they supply packs for the medication and they deliver as well. We encourage people to use them.

Senator MOORE—What about the aged care facility?

Ms Stewart—We visit there, yes.

Senator MOORE—Do we have the aged care group on the list?

CHAIR—No.

Senator MOORE—Every time I have been here it has been full. I am just wondering whether it is still full.

Ms Stewart—Yes, it is still full.

Ms Holdaway—We provide a select service to the aged care because we are not funded to do that from community health. We do that and we sometimes provide allied health, which I am responsible for, to the aged care facility.

CHAIR—I have just one question, in the area of mental health again. Given the evidence that you have provided I think it is reasonable to say there are quite a large number of undiagnosed mental health challenges within Cherbourg and the surrounding communities. What sort of advice are you providing currently to people entering the criminal justice system to ensure that the system is aware, as they should be, that some of the people who are entering the system or are within it may well have some presentations of mental health that may have an impact on sentencing and a whole range of issues? Could you briefly tell me what input you have into the criminal justice system from those people coming, for example, from Cherbourg who will potentially enter, or who are in, the criminal justice system.

Dr Drennan—I think it is highly likely that there are a lot of people who get into the criminal justice system who have unidentified mental health problems. If those problems are identified we certainly do assessments and we do a 238 report. That goes to the Mental Health Court, and then there is a decision made

as to whether they are seen to be responsible for what they have done or whether this has been under the influence—

CHAIR—Whether they are found to be responsible, is that right?

Dr Drennan—Yes. It is chapter 7 part 2 of the Mental Health Act. We support that fairly robustly, in that the district employs about six district forensic liaison officers, as we call them, who liaise very closely with the criminal justice system and the courts. We are very closely linked with that. They cover the whole district, so they provide a fairly active service around that. We also have very strong connections with the state-wide Prison Mental Health Service so that if there are people who are within the correctional facilities the Prison Mental Health Service visits them on a fairly regular basis. They are fairly well connected and they liaise very closely with us through our district forensic liaison offices. There are court liaison officers who actually go to all the courts, so we think we pull that up. But, again, it is about being reactive. If we continue to just take a reactive approach we are going to be doing that forever rather than looking at a different way of doing it.

The Mental Health Review Tribunal has trialled a model where cultural experts sit in those tribunal hearings so that the decisions and the determinations are far more culturally appropriate. We commenced that here and we certainly do that in other parts of the district as well. We have been trying to do more work around that with the juvenile justice system. As I said, it is more about being reactive and meeting the need that is presented rather than taking a very proactive approach around that.

CHAIR—Given evidence provided earlier, I think some 60 per cent in Cherbourg are unemployed. Given the issues that we have discussed today, do you think that we need to have a slightly different approach in the criminal justice system? For example, when somebody who comes from a particular demographic that has a higher risk of being exposed to the environmental circumstances that lead to a mental health condition appears before the criminal justice system, that could potentially trigger an assessment rather than have what appears to me, as very much a lay person in this matter, to be an ad hoc approach to it.

If you were making recommendations in that regard, as this committee may well be, would you have any suggestions about how you might trigger a process to ensure that everybody who comes from an environment with a higher likelihood of being exposed to mental health issues gets some sort of scrutiny?

Ms Wigan—Yes, I would agree with that. With some of the models that currently exist overseas, that is certainly an approach they are taking. As part of that approach, they are also looking at involvement of peer-type support rather than just expert clinicians, if you like. It is around the peer support movement. We are finding that the evidence is that that is producing a lot of significant positive change and positive results, particularly if you look at some of the models that are emerging out of New York, which is regarded as probably one of the leaders in this whole sphere of the involvement of peers in the criminal justice system with disadvantaged groups, for want of a better word. Their evidence and their successes are very impressive. Certainly there are some moves around doing some of that through the advocacy agencies—within my district, anyway—and taking some of those proactive approaches at a criminal justice level. I would certainly support that, based on the evidence that I am aware of and the models that I have been exposed to, in a very limited way. There is certainly a body of literature that would support that.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for the evidence you have provided today. This is an area of great interest. I know that with the huge amount of work you do in the community it is a real sacrifice to be able to provide evidence to us today, and I really appreciate that, on behalf of the committee. If there are questions from the committee that we have not asked—and there may well be some—we will provide those to you on notice. Equally, you may wish to correct or amend the evidence you have given or provide subsequent evidence, particularly on notice. You may not have had the opportunity to comprehensively consider some of the questions that have been given; they were quite large questions. If you would be able to provide additional evidence on notice, that would be appreciated. That can be provided through the secretariat. Thank you very much, again, for the evidence that you have provided today.

Dr Drennan—Thank you for the opportunity.

[12.53 pm]

ANDERSON, Mrs Jennie, Acting Chief Executive Officer, Barambah Health Centre

CARTY, Mr James Joseph, Endorsed Enrolled Nurse, Barambah Health Centre

FRIDAY, Mr Matthew Kenneth, Healthy for Life Coordinator, Barambah Health Centre

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

Before we begin, I would like to make clear to all participants that the meeting is being recorded. A transcript of the recorded meeting will be produced, and the transcript may be made public. Participants' comments recorded and transcribed from this meeting are protected by parliamentary privilege, and any act that disadvantages you as a result of evidence given to this committee is, in fact, treated as a breach of privilege by the parliament. However, I also remind you that giving false or misleading evidence to the committee may constitute contempt of the Senate. Information on parliamentary privilege and the protection of witnesses has just been provided to you. If you would like to make a brief opening statement, or provide some remarks generally about your operations within the Barambah Regional Medical Service, please do so, and then I will put it to the committee for questions.

Mr Carty—We work at Barambah medical centre. We have one doctor and three health workers. There is also Matt, who is Healthy for Life, and there is a physical activity person. We have a bit of a gym up there as well and we are in the process of building a shed all that too. The doctor sees patients, people from Cherbourg. We do a full-screen before he sees them, a health check. If they have any problems or a chronic disease, there is also QUMAX, which we have been doing. It is available to them and we put them on a care plan. There is also the PIP—Practice Incentive Program—which is just coming out. For people who are having trouble taking tablets, and a lot of the people do, we can offer them a Webster pack so that it is a lot easier for them to take them. We refer them to our Healthy for Life people, who start them on a training program—walks.

Mr Friday—Barambah Health Centre, known as the Barambah Regional Medical Service, was set up to cover the South Burnett region, concentrating mostly on the Indigenous populations in Cherbourg, Murgon, Wondai and Goomeri. As Jim said before, we have a Healthy for Life program, physical activities and QUMAX. We are looking at being registered with PIP at the moment—it is still in the process. PIP will take over when QUMAX finishes up. That is for our chronic disease clients, with co-benefits with the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme from government. Chronic disease clients who have a healthcare card will receive medications for free. Those without any healthcare card will pay a standard rate of \$5.40 per prescription. That is the new PIP. It will be a new incentive from the government.

Barambah Health Centre runs programs there. We have our wound care program, which we do. A doctor sees children who are students at Cherbourg state school and then the health workers will follow through with wound care—the dressings and other needs. We have a physical activities officer who has clients referred to him from either the doctor or from health workers. Clients are self-referring as well to the physical activities officer. They do a bit of exercise under supervision of the physical activities officer in the Centre or in the sports complex we have here in Cherbourg. We have a sexual health worker as well, who is new this year, mostly doing promotions in the centre, not only sexual health but the service that Barambah Health Centre offers to the community.

We also have our BTH counsellors—the Bringing Them Home Program. They have their programs with the counselling, and they do a lot of group work with elders in the community, doing things like taking them away for trips, getting them together and having various members express their feelings and tell their stories of their lives. BTH counsellors are also working with Link-Up in Brisbane. There is a lot of work with that with the stolen generations—linking them up, tracing their family trees and working out their family trees, their heritage and all that stuff. We also have a child abuse and sexual abuse counsellor in the centre, who has a couple of clients in the district whom she sees.

Senator ADAMS—Does she work with the children or the abusers?

Mr Friday—With the children. She only works with the children.

Senator ADAMS—Does she work with the police?

Mr Friday—She has been. She has been networking with community health and the child health nurse and the early intervention worker up there as well. She works with schools and child safety as well. She has also networked with the local children's shelter here—I forget the name.

The other thing is that our physical activities officer is working in a program with the Jumbunna Youth Justice Program, looking at setting up a program with young people doing community service activities, setting up a minigolf course. It gets them doing something, and it is not only that; they will be able to use it later on and have pride in being able to look after it in the community and saying: 'Don't go destroying this; this is our project. Don't be a fool and destroy it.'

We have a transport officer. Our clients can ring and make an appointment with our doctor—our GP. If they require transport from their home to the centre and back, they just make the appointment and we put a note next to it.

CHAIR—Whereabouts is the actual centre?

Mr Friday—In Cherbourg, at the corner of Broadway and Bligh.

CHAIR—So it is in Cherbourg.

Mr Friday—Yes.

Senator BOYCE—So you have to bring people in from—

Mr Carty—From Goomeri, Murgon, Wondai—

CHAIR—What sort of medical facilities are in Murgon?

Mr Friday—They have the hospital and—

Mr Carty—And a doctors' surgery. I am not sure how many doctors work there.

Mrs Anderson—There are a few in there, I think.

CHAIR—So the reason people would seek treatment with Barambah is that they would just prefer to come to an Indigenous-run centre?

Mr Friday—I think it is because we bulk-bill with Medicare as well.

Mr Carty—And it is a good doctor.

Mr Friday—Yes, we have a good doctor.

Mr Carty—There are white people who come to the clinic as well—not a great many, but there are some.

Senator ADAMS—What about obstetrics? What happens there?

Mrs Anderson—We do not provide any services in obstetrics at the moment. We are hoping to employ a registered nurse—and we have the funding for that—who would have a background in the antenatal and maternal aspects.

Senator ADAMS—So where do they get their antenatal care?

Mrs Anderson—They go into the hospital at the moment, I think. I think they have to go to Kingaroy to have their babies at the moment. Is that right?

Mr Friday—To have their babies, yes.

Mrs Anderson—It is a huge problem. The girls do not want to go to Kingaroy, and sometimes they hang on, which really puts their babies at risk, because they do not want to go.

Senator BOYCE—Would you have to go four weeks ahead, the way you do in some places?

Mrs Anderson—No. They will hang on and hang on, even once they start labouring. They will not go to Kingaroy, because they want to have their babies in Cherbourg.

Mr Carty—Sometimes they have to have them here.

Senator ADAMS—What about Murgon? Can they?

Mr Carty—No.

Mrs Anderson—I don't know that the facilities at Murgon are any better. I shouldn't say it like that.

Senator MOORE—There is no birthing at Murgon?

Mrs Anderson—No.

CHAIR—Can you remember, roughly, when that all happened? There was a sort of dictate about 18 months ago.

Mr Carty—Yes, at least three or four—four.

Senator MOORE—Longer.

Mrs Anderson—I have only been acting for a week, so if I am sitting here thinking, ‘You boys are doing a great job,’ that is why. From my point of view, if we are going to talk about concerns within the community, I would have to say that we have a real problem with sniffing and abuse. I would say obesity and diabetes—the issues we normally have with the Indigenous communities. Sniffing at the moment is huge.

CHAIR—I have provided each of the group, particularly the health groups, with information on Alice Springs. The committee is aware of issues in Alice Springs that have worked for a long time. We had some major interventions. You cannot buy sniffable fuel there anymore. That makes a great deal of difference. But there is a suite of other initiatives that they have used, including a whole range of things that involve council and local government legislation. They have these to deal with petrol sniffing. We were going to provide that suite of initiatives to Cherbourg, because some of them may be of use to you.

Mr Carty—Yes.

CHAIR—I will ensure that they are also provided to you. Sorry, I didn’t mean to interject.

Mrs Anderson—No, that is fine. That would be great if you could do that. I guess there are concerns around the women. If they really want to be in their community when they are delivering, that is a problem, I think. Patient compliance—actually getting them to come to us and telling us what is wrong and the trust—is a huge issue. We really need to do to work around that area.

CHAIR—Are you talking about the area of petrol sniffing or more general?

Mrs Anderson—General.

Mr Carty—With our current chronic disease clients, it seems to have improved. These clients are regularly into the centre—once a week, getting their blood done, getting their sugar checked. Those are our diabetes clients.

Senator ADAMS—It is all about chairs and renal dialysis. How many people come in here having to have dialysis?

Mr Carty—None. Up at the hospital they have two chairs, but they don’t get used very often. I think there is probably only one at the moment. She is completely taught how to do it.

Mr Friday—Self-dialysis.

Mr Carty—But there are a lot of people that don’t.

Senator BOYCE—She does it at home.

Mr Carty—Yes. She does it herself. She comes in and just goes to the machine and hooks herself up and does it all properly. Apart from that they go to Kingaroy mainly. They have chairs there. I don’t know how many, but they have chairs there and a registered nurse to run the whole thing.

Mr Friday—With our transport, we transport our clients over to Toowoomba for specialist check-ups with the renal unit over there.

Mr Carty—And to Brisbane.

Mr Friday—And to Brisbane.

Senator ADAMS—How far is Toowoomba?

Mr Friday—Toowoomba is about two hours drive.

Mr Carty—Over two hours.

Mr Friday—Two a half hours, yes.

Mr Carty—Brisbane is about three hours.

Mr Friday—Brisbane is about three hours and then you have got the Gold Coast, which is about four or five hours.

Senator BOYCE—What do you have to go to the Gold Coast for?

Mr Friday—We go to the Gold Coast for ophthalmology—

Mr Carty—Griffith University has an MOU with Barambah. They send up specialists. Every three months they send a respiratory physician, orthopaedics, an ophthalmologist—

Mr Friday—A physio and an optometrist.

Senator ADAMS—Where are your hearing services?

Mr Carty—Mainly at the hospital. I think every three months they have a big clinic. They do heaps of kids up in there, yes.

Senator ADAMS—Good.

Mrs Anderson—I think community health run a really good one.

Mr Carty—The people who are pregnant go up to a place behind the hospital called ‘the hut’, where they have a midwife and they do all the screening—

Senator ADAMS—The antenatal care.

Mr Carty—Yes, prenatal.

Mr Friday—There is mental health up there as well; that comes under the Cherbourg Community Health Service.

Mr Carty—So we work in with them, too. Say if we have a young lady who comes in and she is pregnant, we will refer her up to there. So we are not trying to duplicate the service.

Senator ADAMS—With the sniffers, what are you doing with them? How do you deal with them?

Mr Friday—In Cherbourg in past years there has been and even today there is a working group. It is a group of people from different community agencies and family members interested in this issue. They have formed this group, Snuff Out Sniffing. We have members from each organisation. They get together and come up with a plan for tackling this issue. Previously it was set up through the council’s strategic youth working group. They had two staff who oversaw the program. We had members from community health. There were two from community health: there was me, in the previous ATODS—alcohol, tobacco and other drugs—role, in prevention; and the child health nurse. Then we had the youth services in at Murgon: YACCA, with Brother Marty and the youth workers in there, Michael Bond, and CTC Connections, the other youth service in at Murgon, with Les Stewart. We used the resources of the bus and other transport vehicles they had in there; they had about three vehicles that we used—

Mr Carty—And still do.

Mr Friday—with the strategic youth working group. And it is pretty much the same core of people who were involved in the strategic youth working group who are with the Snuff Out Sniffing group, plus more family and community members of the young people who are sniffing. It is good to see that they want to get involved in being responsible for their grandchildren or children.

Senator ADAMS—So how are you getting in touch with the sniffers? Are they being brought in by the family, or do they just come and see you? What can you do?

Mr Friday—I am not too sure of the process with the CTC and the Safe Haven program, but I know they do the night patrols. They can identify who the young people are who are sniffing. Before, when Relationships Australia had the Safe Haven program in at Murgon, they would do night patrols, identify the young people and come up with a list of people. We had an agreement on identifying young people. The two people who were working at the council would go in and see the parents and get consent from them for the young people to be involved with the strategic youth working group and participate in programs. We had a couple of camps where we took them away, took them out of community. It was more about building rapport with the young people and the strategic youth working group. The Snuff Out Sniffing group formed late last year. I am not too sure on the progress because I was away towards the end of last year, but they have had a couple of meetings this year.

Mrs Anderson—I think there is another planned for the end of the month.

Senator BOYCE—I think they told us they had their opening on 28 April or something.

Mrs Anderson—Yes, that is right.

Senator BOYCE—It was Rhonda Sandow.

Mr Friday—Yes, she is with the youth service in Murgon.

Senator BOYCE—But since the night patrols have finished—

Mr Friday—No, they are not finished yet.

Senator BOYCE—They are not?

Mr Friday—The program that finished was the one run by Relationships Australia in at Murgon. But CTC at Murgon has taken up the Safe Haven program now. So they are still doing the patrols.

CHAIR—Who is running Relationships Australia?

Mr Friday—There is no Relationships Australia in Murgon. They lost the contract.

Senator BOYCE—They have been replaced by another organisation.

Mr Carty—About a month ago, I went downstairs to have smoko and the oval is just behind our centre. I could see kids in one of the sheds over there. I did not think much of it at first. I thought, 'It's a school day. What are they doing there?' I went back up and came down for lunch and they were still there. I had a closer look and could tell what they were doing—which was sniffing. I was sure they were. So I rang the school and I said, 'There's school kids down here sniffing. What's going on?' They said, 'Have they got school uniforms on?' I said, 'I think so.' I got off the phone and rang the police and told them too. This was all about 12.30 pm. I waited back for something to happen but the kids were there until 2 o'clock and still no-one had gone down. Then they started walking up. Matthew was there that day and he knew the kids so we got their names and we got onto community health or someone and passed it on.

CHAIR—Is pretty sad when you get such a low level of response.

Mr Carty—It is, yes. But then I heard that the police do not hassle them or confront them because if they run when they are so high they could drop dead or whatever.

CHAIR—We also had evidence to say that it is not unlawful, that it is not actually against the law. So it is very difficult for the police officers in that circumstance.

Mr Carty—Yes. Then I rang back the school and told them where the kids were. They said that they had rang the police as well. I just thought: who do you tell?

Mr Friday—People who are sniffing are a public nuisance and the police can do something about public nuisance.

Senator MOORE—They do it for other things.

Mr Friday—They can do it with people who are drinking in the parks or in front of shops begging for money for alcohol. When they are sniffing, I see them as a public nuisance. I live in Cherbourg and almost every night these kids are out and it keeps me awake until three o'clock in the morning until I am that tired that I fall asleep. I can hear them talking loudly, screaming and yelling, arguing—I can hear everything that is going on. They are a public nuisance. I have rang the police a few times. I have not spoken directly to the police to say, 'Why cannot we do something about it? Why cannot they be arrested for public nuisance?'

We have to look at the underlying problems. Why are they sniffing? Is it in regard to their family, their parents? The reason they are out sniffing at night is that the parents are at home and there are drinking parties going on in their home. Or there could be other things happening in the home—child abuse, sexual abuse. Domestic violence is another reason why they do not want to go home or a reason they are out at night.

Mrs Anderson—I spoke to one of the administrators at the school this morning. We were talking about sniffing. She said to me, 'The saddest thing is that the first time I saw one of the children come to school high I looked at them and thought I knew why. It must have been such a happy place because of what is going on.' It is a real problem.

Senator MOORE—Is it just petrol?

Mr Friday—Petrol and paint.

Senator MOORE—Years ago we did an inquiry into petrol sniffing and at that stage Cherbourg did not have petrol sniffers; they had paint sniffers. I am wondering whether it is still paint.

Mr Friday—Yes, it is still paint as well.

Senator FURNER—Glue?

Mr Friday—Could be, yes.

Senator ADAMS—Where are they getting it?

Mr Friday—A couple of years ago, when I was working with ATODS and youth workers, we would go out and investigate that. We found that some of the older people were supplying the spray cans, the aerosols with the paint.

Mrs Anderson—For money and favours.

Mr Friday—Yes, for money and, exactly, it could be for other favours. I am not too sure whether they were sexual or not; they could have been anything.

Senator ADAMS—Do the stores keep it locked up?

Mr Friday—Yes, the stores do. When I was working with ATODS I made it my responsibility to go in there and I had a look at Mitre 10 at Murgon plus the IGA, Wayne's World, which is another little shop in there, and a few other places. They said, 'No, we keep them locked up.' They actually have signs on the front of them.

Mrs Anderson—They get them out of mowers; you know: tin sheds.

Senator ADAMS—Oh, yes. I just wondered if the stores were doing the right thing.

Mr Friday—Yes. They had them locked behind cages.

Senator BOYCE—What about petrol? Can you go and buy half a litre of petrol?

Mr Friday—No.

Mr Carty—I do not know.

Mr Friday—Not unless you get a—

Mr Carty—A child probably could not.

Mr Friday—No, they won't.

Mr Carty—But I think they are getting it from cars, from mowers and from tins in back sheds and stuff.

Senator BOYCE—But the harder you make it—

Mr Carty—Yes.

Mr Friday—We had a few incidents where the council vehicles were broken into. The church bus was broken into and destroyed after petrol was siphoned out from it.

CHAIR—It sounds very similar to so many other areas; it is almost identical. Senator Furner has some questions.

Senator FURNER—Matthew, do you get sporting heroes up here, like Sam Thaiday, who provide inspiration about that ethos and where it can lead to in life?

Mr Friday—Yes, we do. Actually, the son of Rhonda Sandow, who works in at Yacka, is the Rabbitohs star halfback young Chris Sandow. He comes home very regularly in the off-season and even sometimes during the season. We used to get him at the state school pretty much every year with development officers talking about why he plays rugby league. They got some NRL stars to come up and do training clinics. Sometimes it would not be in Cherbourg, but they would invite the Cherbourg State School into Murgon. At the end of last year a few stars from the Brisbane Broncos, Parramatta Eels and South Sydney Rabbitohs NRL clubs held training clinics in Murgon and invited Cherbourg State School to bring some students out. They are going there and will sit down and have a talk.

In 2008 I worked with ATODS again. When I first started there, in International Youth Week we organised a day up at the sports complex. I have a good mate who is one of the chief officers of ARL Development, Steve Belsham, and we organised to get the development officers from Wide Bay and Queensland and one of the young fellas from the Gold Coast Titans to come up, work in with them and sit down and have a talk with them about how drugs and sport do not mix. In that we include alcohol as a drug as well.

Mr Carty—It would good if we could get them to come up a bit more often. If they went to the school or something, they would just love it.

Senator FURNER—Are you seeing improvements in the community since that has been happening?

Mr Friday—Over the last couple of years of working on the sniffing, you notice it is seasonal. Last year and the year before we saw a reduction in sniffing activities—chroming or solvent misuse—over winter because it is a cold time and they do not go out into the community when it is cold. So it kind of stopped and we thought, 'Oh good; it has gone down.' But, as soon as it warmed up again, they were out there.

Senator FURNER—Do you think the substance abuse still happens but inside, so we do not see it as much?

Mr Friday—At the time a lot of the ringleaders were in with the juvenile corrections and so they were put in detention centres.

Senator FURNER—So that helped.

Mr Friday—Yes, that did help during that time. A lot of the kids who we found were doing it before that were only doing it because the ringleader would say, ‘Come on, let’s go,’ and if they did not listen they would get a hit. We found there was some violence behind it as well. The parents and other family members of some of those kids decided to take them out of the community and move away for a bit. We kept in contact and the families said, ‘They are doing really well; they are finally putting their head down, doing the work at school and enjoying school and playing sports.’ One family who had four sons under the age of 12 who were doing it moved to Dalby. They found that once they moved away and the parents had more responsibility for looking after their kids they seemed to improve in the home.

Mrs Anderson—It would be nice to run some programs after school, maybe until eight o’clock, where those children are actually getting a feed as well. What I am saying is that it is important to make a safe place for them to come to whilst it might not be safe at home. They still have to go home to bed but at least they are going to go with a feed in their belly and hopefully with a high spirit.

Mr Friday—The PCYC have their programs on Thursday and Friday nights up at the sports complex. A lot of kids turn up to that. CTC, the youth service in town, are very supportive. They are not only for youth, but for families. They run family programs as well. But it is hard to empower community members because, when there are a lot of these programs and these agencies who are willing to help, I find that they are not really empowering our people to do things themselves. In our community people are pretty much taking advantage of the services and not really being responsible. I was talking to a child health nurse on Monday morning of last week about the sniffing and I was getting an update on what she knew about it. She did not mention any names but she told me about a scenario where she had a young mother come in to have her young baby weighed and measured. The nurse could smell alcohol on the lady, who asked to use the phone to phone CTC. This was on a Monday morning, and the lady requested that they come out and pick her up because she needed some food vouchers for IGA to get some food. The nurse asked her why she was asking CTC that, and the story around it was pretty much that she had drunk all her money away and did not have any money for food.

Senator MOORE—So she would have got paid on the Thursday but by the Monday there was no money?

Mr Friday—Yes.

Senator FURNER—So she had no food?

Mr Friday—No, and she had the young one. But in two minutes they were out here, they picked her up, took her into Murgon, did her shopping and took her home.

Senator FURNER—Have you come across any foetal alcohol spectrum disorder issues in the community?

Mr Carty—It would be best to ask the hospital. Are you meeting with the hospital?

Senator ADAMS—Yes, later, I think.

Senator FURNER—No, we are not.

Senator ADAMS—That is a shame.

Mrs Anderson—We probably do not see as many of the littlies as the hospital would.

Mr Friday—Community Health has seen a lot because the child health nurse works in with the paediatrician.

Mrs Anderson—As part of our PIP Program we are going to launch what we will call a hero’s campaign, where we will be encouraging them to come in and have their health checks. We will be reinvesting part of the money that we get from the PIP back into encouraging people to come down and have their health checks. The things that we have thought of are phone vouchers, food vouchers for IGA and, for the kids, maybe shoes for school—those sorts of things. We want to get them to come down and actually have the health check done and then go into the recall system so that they can be monitored. Hopefully, with a good follow-up system, we will be able to keep them from slipping through, which they have done in the past.

Senator MOORE—We could go on for hours. I want to follow up one thing with you, Matthew, in your role in Healthy for Life. Are there things in that about nutrition and diet?

Mr Friday—Yes. The physical activities people and I are looking at the Living Strong Program.

Senator MOORE—That is a standard one, isn't it?

Mr Friday—Yes, it is a standard one. I think the mainstream term is a healthy living program. The Living Strong Program is the culturally appropriate interpretation for Indigenous people. The physical activities officer and I and Jim, I think—I have not asked him yet—will do the facilitators' training as well.

Senator MOORE—Certainly in the past it has been an issue here. I am not sure how it is now, but in the past nutrition was bad.

Mr Friday—That was identified at council. I have got to give them some credit because now they have got fresh produce growing over at the farm and it is in the shops. It is great.

Senator MOORE—People are buying it.

Mr Friday—Yes, people are buying it and it is fresh and cheap as well.

Senator MOORE—And it is creating jobs.

Mr Friday—Yes, it is creating jobs.

Senator MOORE—So it is good all round.

Mr Friday—There is more promotion of that.

CHAIR—Senator Adams?

Senator ADAMS—I was just commenting that we probably should have had those people come and give evidence to us. So generally the main health issue in the community is the sniffers. Is that your main concern?

Mr Carty—No.

Mr Friday—No. It is chronic disease and wanting to close the gap.

Senator ADAMS—Have you got many elderly people in the community?

Mr Friday—Yes, we have quite a few.

Mr Carty—They all come down. They are on a care plan. They have been on the QUMAX program, and we have got a heap of them on—

Senator ADAMS—Do they get meals?

Mr Carty—They can get meals. I know that Annie Moffatt does.

Senator ADAMS—What about HACC funding? Have you got any Health and Community Care funding?

Mr Friday—Yes, the respite care that we have in Cherbourg has the HACC Program.

Senator ADAMS—How many beds are there?

Mr Friday—I do not think they have any beds up there.

Senator ADAMS—Is it like a day centre?

Mr Friday—Yes.

Mr Carty—It is a day centre. I have only been in there a few times.

Mr Friday—They do meals and maintenance of the homes as well—the yard and so on.

Mr Carty—And if any old people need any renovations or modifications, like rails, we refer them to Community Health and then they get onto the council.

Mr Friday—At the respite centre they also transport people to do their grocery shopping and to other activities.

Senator MOORE—What about sexual reproductive health? Does that happen through you?

Mr Friday—We have a male health worker and Community Health has a female worker. We work together.

Senator MOORE—You share that?

Mr Friday—Yes.

Senator MOORE—And all those things that Senator Adams and I talk about in terms of women's and men's health checks—are you doing the program from Queensland Health and encouraging guys to get tested for prostate cancer? They rolled that out to all the clinics. Has that been getting a good response?

Mr Friday—I am not too sure.

Senator MOORE—Have you been checked?

Mr Friday—No, sorry!

Senator MOORE—I saw the way you looked away!

Mr Friday—No, but I work with the men's group here in Cherbourg—the Barambah Men's Group. I am a committee member and sit on the board. We have community meetings where we promote all of the services that are in Cherbourg and Murgon. What we set out to do is provide information and just be there for men if they want to talk. A lot of times we just refer them to the other services with things like drug and alcohol problems.

Mr Carty—Our doctor goes to the old peoples home once a week as well. He sees probably four or five patients when he is up there. He visits them. This morning I went up there and did an ECG on a client and took some blood.

Senator ADAMS—Where do you have to send your blood samples?

Mr Carty—They go to QML.

CHAIR—What about the pharmacy?

Mrs Anderson—It would be great to have a pharmacy out here. I think we applied for it. Murgon is the closest.

CHAIR—So Murgon is the pharmacy you use rather than having your own?

Mrs Anderson—Yes.

CHAIR—Do you have access to a pharmacist at all?

Mrs Anderson—Only through Murgon.

CHAIR—So you have to use their facility and their pharmacist?

Mrs Anderson—Yes. Someone was telling me that the pharmacist did actually apply to bring someone out here as well but, because of fair trading and all that sort of stuff and being within a certain distance, they could not or even have an offshoot. It would have been fantastic because we are running in to town all of the time.

Mr Carty—Apart from that they go to the hospital.

Mr Friday—I am pretty sure they are supposed to pay for it but very often it is free.

Mrs Anderson—I have been here a very short amount of time and I have noticed there is a lot of community politics. I know this does happen in communities, but I think the offshoot of that is some of the organisations are not working as well as they could together. We are all trying to run similar programs instead of working together and saying: 'The hospital is going to run the antenatal. We're going to look after general health. Community health is going to look after something else.'

Senator BOYCE—I was going to ask you how you worked in with the community health centre.

Mrs Anderson—I actually went to a community health meeting on Tuesday and walked into, 'We want some of your funding money.' I was not prepared. I just thought I was going to talk about the health expo. I understand what they are saying too. Their sexual health money has now come to us and they want to run some programs to get some really good data on STIs so they want to know whether we can help. I think in the past there have not been such good relationships. I think we really need to work very hard at building them.

Mr Carty—We are Commonwealth funded and they are—

Mrs Anderson—I do not think, from what the ladies were telling me, that Queensland health do get a lot of funding. Just saying to them, 'We can find \$3,000 to help you with your health expo,' was like I had told them they had won the lottery. It does not take a lot to build relationships to work together. Now they are happy to come to me and tell me stuff. They followed me around this morning in the car asking for my signature on the thing to say that we are going to form a partnership.

Senator BOYCE—That is good. In terms of mental health they were talking about the fact that they have no resources to do anything other than the reactive clinical things.

Mrs Anderson—That is right.

Senator BOYCE—They have no resources to run social and emotional wellbeing programs and the like, whereas it seems that you do. That really should be a continuum.

Mrs Anderson—We really need to get everyone together and look at what we are creating and what we can do. Maybe I am a bit naïve, and I am only here until 30 June.

Mr Carty—I have worked here in Cherbourg since about 1993 on and off. The community is a lot better than what it was back then. I just thought I would throw that in.

CHAIR—It is good to have some relativity. Thank you for that.

Mr Friday—I have been here for just over three years and I have seen some big improvements.

Mr Carty—Yes, it is not all petrol sniffers.

Senator ADAMS—Are more people getting jobs?

Mr Friday—Yes, I think there are. Before there were a lot of people on CDEP in Cherbourg. The jobs available with CDEP were cut back. Now there is hardly anyone on CDEP. A lot of those people had to go out and find jobs. We have quite a few people who are working in the mines over at Tarong. They gained skills while working with the council and CDEP with heavy machinery.

Senator FURNER—Has that been a partnership with the Tarong power station?

Mr Friday—Yes, they deal with the Bunya Wakka heritage group in Murgon.

Mr Carty—Tarong power station, when it was Rio Tinto, actually paid for the two renal chairs. They do not have anybody to run them, so that is a problem. It would be good if they could get a nurse or someone to work Monday to Friday up there.

Senator ADAMS—How many people from Cherbourg are away having dialysis? A lot?

CHAIR—If you do not know the number but might be able to find out later, you can take the question on notice. Would that be okay?

Mr Carty—Yes.

Mr Friday—I know of one person who now lives in Brisbane—

Senator ADAMS—They moved because of it?

Mr Friday—Yes. But there are probably more.

Mr Carty—I do not know the number, but there are a lot.

Senator ADAMS—If you could find out, that would be good.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for the evidence you provided today. It has been very interesting. There may be further questions from the senators as we remember other things we should have asked you. The secretary will write to you with any questions we have. If you recall things or wish to correct your evidence, you can make further submissions. If there are things you think we may need to know about and did not have the time or opportunity to tell us today, you can make those submissions through the secretariat. Thank you very much for the evidence you have provided today.

Mr Carty—Thank you.

Mrs Anderson—Thank you very much.

[1.47 pm]

MALONE, Mrs Clarissa Hope, Coordinator, Barambah Local Justice Group

CHAIR—We are the Senate Select Committee on Rural and Remote Indigenous Communities. We are holding this inquiry into regional and remote Indigenous communities. You have received a letter which contains our terms of reference. On behalf of the committee I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land we meet on and pay our respects to the elders past and present. This meeting is being recorded. A transcript of the recorded meeting will be produced and the transcript may be made public. Your comments in this meeting as recorded and transcribed are protected by parliamentary privilege and any act that disadvantages you as a result of giving evidence to this committee is treated as a breach of privilege, so you are protected from somebody giving you a hard time for giving any particular evidence. However, I also remind you that giving false or misleading evidence may constitute contempt of the Senate. Would you like to provide the committee with an opening statement or a submission about the particular role of the justice group and issues that you think need to be amplified?

Mrs Malone—One of the main things that bothers me is the lack of education of our children due to the fact that they have middle-ear infections from the time they are born and that is never fixed. They go down once a year to Brisbane and get a grommet put in and then they are left for another 12 months. In the meantime they are having problems hearing at school so they get disrespectful in the classroom because nobody has fixed their hearing.

CHAIR—Do you think that when they go down to get a grommet put in—or surgery happens here as well, I understand—

Mrs Malone—Yes.

CHAIR—those interventions are not happening properly?

Mrs Malone—No, they are not. It is an annual thing. Once they get to high school nobody bothers with their ears anyway. That is when they start dropping out. They cannot hear, they cannot cope, they do not understand, because they are shoved in the back of the classroom. Nobody takes any notice. They are in the too-hard basket in the end.

Senator MOORE—And that is in Cherbourg and Murgon schools?

Mrs Malone—Yes, wherever there are Indigenous children.

Senator MOORE—They go to the back?

Mrs Malone—Yes. They are called disruptive children or they try to say they have ADD. Half of them are hyperactive and kids being kids. We believe that once you are in school you are being taught, and outside is play, where you are a child again.

CHAIR—Given that 99 per cent of students at the Cherbourg State School are Aboriginal children, we are obviously not talking about all of them. It is the ones down the back you are talking about. What percentage of them—is it half or three-quarters?

Mrs Malone—The last time the education department checked it was 95 per cent of the children that had middle-ear infections. That was picked up nationally.

CHAIR—Do you know when that last check was?

Mrs Malone—It was sometime last year. It was on the front page of the *Courier Mail*.

CHAIR—That was measured in Cherbourg?

Mrs Malone—Yes.

Senator ADAMS—That was Australian Hearing that did it?

Mrs Malone—Yes. The novelty had worn off once it hit the papers.

CHAIR—Can you recall anything happening after the inspections were done?

Mrs Malone—They just get the grommets put in and wait for another 12 months. Grommets are only good to get fluid out of the middle ear; that is all. They do not correct or prevent deafness.

Senator ADAMS—What about at the school? Do you have special acoustic hearing aids in the classrooms?

Mrs Malone—No.

Senator ADAMS—They do not do anything like that? Does the teacher have a microphone?

Mrs Malone—No. They do not even have a speech therapist to assist them.

CHAIR—Given that you represent the local justice initiative group, the connection that you are making is between a lack of hearing and a lack of amenity to understand the lessons. I am making some assumptions you might want to clarify. This is leading, then, to an overrepresentation of kids going into the justice system?

Mrs Malone—Yes. They are in and out of mischief because they are not listening in the classroom. They get suspended a lot. Children who are idle get into mischief.

CHAIR—When they get suspended, what happens? Are they just sent home?

Mrs Malone—They are sent home. They are roaming around the community, getting up to mischief. There is alternative school which I disagree with. Some of the kids are very smart. They know that they can go to this school in Murgon called an annexe from the high school. They do four hours of schooling and then have the rest of the afternoon off while the other children have to do the eight hours at school. They get away with it. ‘Poor little blackfella me’ is more dependent on the welfare system as he gets older, because he has no education.

CHAIR—And if they only have four hours of education rather than eight then you can understand why that is only going to be half as educated.

Mrs Malone—Yes. They do not do correct education lessons anyway because they lose interest in it.

CHAIR—What sort of things do you understand happen at the annexe? What sort of education do they provide in there? Do you know?

Mrs Malone—No, I do not. All I know is they come home early. They are not pushed back into the normal, mainstream school.

CHAIR—Can you tell me a little about your local justice initiative and the group that you run? Can you tell me some of their work and some of the work you do in that regard?

Mrs Malone—We are supposed to sit in on courts and listen to what the judges and solicitors say and see how they treat people. We can express an opinion and do cultural reports for it if the individual wants us to do it.

CHAIR—Do you ensure that every individual understands that this is a service that is being offered?

Mrs Malone—Legal service knows that is what we are capable of doing.

CHAIR—So it is their responsibility to tell their clients that that is a service available?

Mrs Malone—They should, because they are the ones who sit in with us. They will tell us that something is private. It is up to them whether they want it or not.

CHAIR—Do many people want it? Are you very busy?

Mrs Malone—No, only one person has asked for it so far.

CHAIR—It does not seem like a great deal. Why do you think that might be?

Mrs Malone—It is because they do not understand and when they go to court they get told to plead guilty anyway.

CHAIR—At the moment, you have said to me that legal aid are responsible for informing the clients that the service that you provide exists. You possibly may not know whether legal aid are passing on that advice.

Mrs Malone—I would not know, no. As I said, everything is confidential when you try to talk to them.

CHAIR—I would not have thought that making people aware of a service that is available or whether or not they had told people that that was the case would be something that would impact on the normal notion of the privacy relationship between a lawyer and a client; however, that is just an opinion of mine. Can you throw light on what may be any other reasons? You talked about a broad scope that they simply do not understand, but do you think there may be other reasons why they are not accessing?

Mrs Malone—Just that they are conditioned to say they are guilty, so they do not bother fighting anyway.

CHAIR—Who advises them to plead guilty?

Mrs Malone—Usually the solicitor when looking at their records.

CHAIR—Could you lead the committee in a general sense through some of the typical types of offences that young men and women from this community find themselves charged with in the criminal justice system at the moment?

Mrs Malone—Domestic violence, breach of the alcohol program, breaking and entering.

CHAIR—How long has this program been run?

Mrs Malone—About five years.

CHAIR—Is there any professional development offered to you and the others as part of this group to improve your understanding of the court process and your capacity?

Mrs Malone—Yes. We have had a couple of days training by the Attorney-General's Department.

CHAIR—Is it the Attorney-General's Department that funds your organisation?

Mrs Malone—Yes.

CHAIR—Have you talked to the Attorney-General's Department about why it may be that, whilst you have a very good service to offer, it does not appear to be used as often as might be?

Mrs Malone—No. We wait, visit the courthouses before they go to court and that type of thing. We sit and ask them if they want help from us doing a cultural report. No-one has ever done one on them before, so they do not acknowledge it.

CHAIR—Do you know if they have a look at the work that your organisation does? Do they ask you to put in a return about what work you have done in the last year, for example?

Mrs Malone—Yes. We put in reports quarterly.

CHAIR—What sorts of activities would you have put down for the last quarter you reported on?

Mrs Malone—Things like the number of organisations we are trying to work with. Kids sniffing petrol is a problem here and it is not illegal, but we watch them getting high as kites every day. Then the cops chase them. We panic over that because with fight or flight they could collapse. We need that fixed. A lot of parents are crying out for help.

CHAIR—The parents want what part of that fixed? Do they want it made against the law?

Mrs Malone—They want it made against the law to sniff.

CHAIR—So the police can then—

Mrs Malone—Take the kids. At the moment they just tip out what they see. The kids do not even have to do that.

CHAIR—So as well as providing this service to those people who are about to enter the criminal justice system you obviously talk to other organisations and parents.

Mrs Malone—Yes.

CHAIR—Could you talk to me about the organisations that you talk to? You liaise with other organisations and talk to parents. Perhaps you could talk to us in a general sense about the sorts of problems parents are having and what you are able to do for them.

Mrs Malone—At the moment, we are just trying to be support for them. We want it parent driven at the moment, so we will support them in any way they want. We will try to take kids on trips or get counselling done while we have them in the bush—that type of thing. The parents are very angry because no-one can help them. They are tired of chasing their children around every night. What we really need here is a children's rehabilitation centre because the rehab that we have here only takes adults.

CHAIR—What is the age they consider adult here?

Mrs Malone—Over 18.

CHAIR—Could you tell me about the kids? How old are they and what are their lives like?

Mrs Malone—They range from 10 years old to 16 years. A couple have already blacked out on the road and had to be resuscitated. Those individuals went to hospital, came out and started sniffing again. They said there was no reason to stop. No pressure was put on that child.

CHAIR—Do you talk to the parents about some of the underlying reasons why the child might be sniffing?

Mrs Malone—Some admit that they have a drug or drinking problem themselves. Some do, but some are really trying. They could have half a dozen children but just one or two who are doing this. Monkey see, monkey do, they copy one another. Peer pressure is very strong here.

CHAIR—Thank you.

Senator FURNER—I want to ask you about some evidence that was delivered in Brisbane yesterday by ASTI Legal Service. They implied the police powers were extreme. I wonder what your opinion might be on that sort of comment.

Mrs Malone—There have been allegations here of evidence being hidden on individuals. One gentleman complained twice that the police planted some glue in his car and left rubbish in the wheelie bin. They find that he is being harassed. He is already going to court over giving children glue and petrol, and it seems that they are harassing him.

Senator FURNER—Would you describe the powers as being excessive?

Mrs Malone—I think so in certain cases and for certain people—they go for ‘em.

Senator FURNER—I understood—I cannot recall the date now—that there was a time, most likely last year, an announcement was made by the police service of a reduction or a lessening of convictions as a result of petty crimes not being charged and being on report as opposed to what they used to be. I would have thought that, since those laws have been amended, there would be a reduction in the amount of petty crime that is occurring.

Mrs Malone—They keep going and searching people’s houses for grog all the time.

Senator FURNER—That happens in Cherbourg?

Mrs Malone—Every day. They just listen for the noise and they pounce.

Senator FURNER—How many people are charged as a result of possession of alcohol?

Mrs Malone—Last time they went to court there were about 130 of them.

Senator FURNER—Charged for possession of alcohol?

Mrs Malone—Illegal alcohol—they are not allowed to have heavy beers or spirits.

Senator ADAMS—Was the court held here?

Mrs Malone—Once a month and it is held here—that is the magistrate’s.

Senator ADAMS—The magistrate comes.

Mrs Malone—The JP magistrate comes once a month.

Senator ADAMS—Do you have many JPs here in the community?

Mrs Malone—There are about half a dozen of them, but only two front up for court.

Senator ADAMS—Are the others are too frightened?

Mrs Malone—No, their work stops them.

Senator FURNER—Just going back to your earlier comments about petrol sniffing, we heard some views earlier about making it unlawful for the sniffing of petrol. If that occurred and there was a law implemented that petrol was illegal to be sniffed in any community, what would then prevent those people who had been sniffing petrol to move on to another form of substance abuse?

Mrs Malone—That is true. Marijuana is easy to get.

Senator FURNER—People use marijuana up here?

Mrs Malone—Yes.

Senator FURNER—Out of all the substances abused, listing in priority, where would they sit? Would petrol sniffing be the most?

Mrs Malone—With the children, yes.

Senator FURNER—Followed by marijuana or other forms of sniffing?

Mrs Malone—Other forms of sniffing—glue, paint, pens.

Senator FURNER—Thank you.

Senator ADAMS—Do those children who go to the day care group end up sniffing or do they keep going onto school—the ones that have actually been there most of their lives as young children? Would you be able to identify whether those children end up as sniffers or do they tend to keep going to school?

Mrs Malone—I reckon they just keep going to school those young ones, because they are caught early.

Senator ADAMS—Are you aware of any people that really would like to get their young children into the day group and they cannot?

Mrs Malone—No, it is easy here.

Senator ADAMS—You can get them in—no waiting?

Mrs Malone—No waiting.

Senator ADAMS—Because they told us they had a waiting list.

Mrs Malone—No. I haven't had any problems, anyway, getting children in there.

Senator ADAMS—So most people would put their children in there rather than not give them any early education?

Mrs Malone—That is it.

Senator ADAMS—So it is a really good centre?

Mrs Malone—It is a good thing. They are learning to mix and share with the other children as well. Some of them are only one-child families. They have the company of other children then.

Senator ADAMS—Do you have a night patrol here?

Mrs Malone—No.

Senator ADAMS—So the sniffers can just go and do what they want to do at night without anybody really coming and checking or seeing who is out there?

Mrs Malone—Yes.

Senator ADAMS—Do the police come and do patrols at night?

Mrs Malone—They do patrols, but they don't do anything.

Senator ADAMS—So the community is really being held to ransom by the sniffers as far as noise goes and everything else.

Mrs Malone—Yes.

Senator ADAMS—Have any of these sniffers committed suicide?

Mrs Malone—Touch wood, not yet. Some of them are on the verge.

Senator ADAMS—Are they?

CHAIR—When you have identified some of those who are on the verge, do you have some assistance or support from outside suicide prevention services? Do you have access to them?

Mrs Malone—Nothing really for children.

CHAIR—There are some for adults, but not for children.

Mrs Malone—I do not know if you could call the mental health unit. I would not know if it is accessible. For people who want to go there, you are not going to go and spill your guts to people you know. You do that with strangers to get success

CHAIR—Is there a need for a suicide prevention team or people involved in those sorts of units that work outside the community? Should they come into the community in that role?

Mrs Malone—On a regular basis, not once a month. Everybody assumes that that is the answer—coming in once a month. The kids will say: 'You're stupid. You're only coming and going.' What is the point in coming and going when you need ongoing support. The kids seem to miss out at all times. There is no grief counselling when they lose a family member, they assume that children are resilient.

Senator ADAMS—Can you give us some guidance as to what you really need in services to improve the situation?

Mrs Malone—We need mental health counselling for the children.

CHAIR—Do you think you need to have a more specialised service for children?

Mrs Malone—Yes. Someone who can relate to the children's needs, who can coax them and find out what is their problem.

Senator ADAMS—Are there any elders who can act as mentors for these children in the community and try to get them back on to the straight and narrow?

Mrs Malone—A lot of the older people do try things. They sit down and have a yarn with them and try to find out what is going on, but they will not open up. Their little cliques stick together and that is it. I have a nephew who sniffs. He has no reason to do it. He just says it's boring—that is his answer.

Senator ADAMS—Does he play sport?

Mrs Malone—He plays football occasionally but it is more seen as a social thing than anything.

CHAIR—It is a bit of a cultural scene—the sniffing. In some parts of the Northern Territory where I am from they wear the same uniform. They would have the same colour headband. It was like a group of—

Mrs Malone—There is a group of them but there is nothing attached to it. They just come out with their American slang every now and then. It is 'cool' to do this and 'cool' to do that.

Senator MOORE—In terms of the cultural thing—I am not talking about Aboriginal culture, I am talking about American culture—do you have lots of DVDs and access to TV and movies so that the kids have that influence? They pick up the rap music and that kind of thing. That is their goal: to be cool.

Mrs Malone—That is it.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for your evidence today, it has been very interesting. We may remember questions that we might want to ask you. If that is the case we will send you a question on notice through the secretariat and you might be able help out with providing some answers. If you have some questions of the committee about the process or you might like to provide us with some information or some more fulsome answers to the questions then you can also provide that through the secretariat. Thank you very much for taking the time out today to appear before the committee.

Mrs Malone—Not a problem.

Proceedings suspended from 2.15 pm to 2.34 pm

BOAL, Ms Vanessa Lee, Head, Special Education Services, Cherbourg State School

BOND, Ms Sylvia, Community Teacher Aid, Cherbourg State School

COSTELLO, Mr Bevan Roy, Deputy Principal, Cherbourg State School

GREENHAM, Ms Jenni, Principal, Cherbourg State School

KELLY, Mrs Angela Joy, Head, Curriculum, Cherbourg State School

LEACH, Mr Paul Joseph, Teacher, Special Education Unit, Cherbourg State School

CHAIR—I welcome the witnesses from Cherbourg State School. I understand that information on parliamentary privilege and the protection of witnesses and evidence has been previously provided to you. Do you have an opening statement, or some remarks about the school and the curriculum or other processes, that you would like to give the committee? As you would have seen from the terms of reference, we have a very broad purview. For example, we have been very interested in attendance and we would be interested in what particular initiatives you have to deal with attendance. There is a whole suite of those issues.

Ms Greenham—I will start off. I have been here a shorter amount of time than the others. I have only been here this year. I came from Western Australia, where I worked in remote Indigenous communities for several years.

Senator ADAMS—Where were you there?

Ms Greenham—I was at Mount Margaret, which is north-east of Laverton. I was also at Warakurna, Tjukurla and around the Warburton area. This is very different. Since I have come to the school I have certainly noticed that it is a difficult context. The school is in a very different context to the one that I came from, but there are some amazing things happening here. I know that the public is aware of some of them but not of aware of others, I am sure.

Paul has a very different group of children to cater for and he is doing some fantastic stuff with them. If he were not doing that they would be before the justice system very quickly. He is doing some amazing stuff.

Angela, who is the head of curriculum, is very talented in her field. They had no idea I was going to say these thing! Outside of that, she has just started an amazing thing. Because there is nothing going for the girls in this community—it is all for the boys; plenty of footy—she has in her own time started a little soccer team for the girls, and her husband, who is a soccer coach and referee, has been helping with this. They play their first match tomorrow. That is rather good.

Unfortunately Vanessa is leaving us. She has been here for 10 years. She is in charge of special education, which is a huge job at our school. We have a very large number of students at our school who have been verified as having foetal alcohol syndrome. Some Indigenous people from the community, and one who is not actually from our community but who works here and has travelled throughout the world doing research in foetal alcohol syndrome, are monitoring these children over a period of time. The community is very aware of what has been happening. To us it is very sad that these figures have just come to light, because the reasons for this are unclear to the people. They immediately think: 'I'm not an alcoholic. I'm not a huge drinker.' What they do not understand is the connection between what they are taking in and what the foetus is receiving and that it only takes one drink at the wrong time.

Senator FURNER—What numbers are we talking about?

Ms Boal—Lorian Hayes, who has a degree in health—

Senator ADAMS—We were hoping to see her.

Ms Boal—did research in 1998 which showed that 86 per cent of the babies had prenatal exposure to alcohol. Some of those babies were at such a point that they went through detox after birth. The behaviours, the crying and the actual features of the full-blown syndrome, were fairly evident with some of those children—not with all. But in the long term we notice not necessarily intellectual impairments but learning difficulties, behavioural difficulties and attention deficit disorders. There are lots of little signals that these children are not developing at a normal pace compared with children of the same age.

In terms of numbers, they are talking about 86 per cent for just that one particular year cohort. From the general feeling and indications across the community, that fluctuates but is probably around that number every year if families are having babies within the community. I would say that figure would fluctuate by, as a guesstimate, 10 to 15 per cent. It would be going up and down depending on what is going on in the

community year to year. So it is fairly significant, and it is impacting significantly on students. What we are noticing in the cohorts of students is that the achievement levels of the majority of them are well below what they should be. The bell curve representation is a lot further down the scale. The significant issue is that that is layered on top of students' experiencing chronic hearing loss. We have stats that show that is up over the 80 per cent. When our students are screened it shows that 83 to 89 per cent of our students are suffering hearing loss at any given time.

For the health links that we have set up, it has taken five years to build up rapport, but the connections and interagency cooperation that we have here has created an extremely efficient system for our students. Barambah medical service comes to the school and provides an outreach service for wound dressing and general health checks a couple of times a week. The students are aware that that is there so, instead of staying home with infected boils, cut feet or whatever else, they will actually come to school. It is the same if they are feeling crook, have a headache or have runny ears, eyes or nose or any of those things. They now know they can get fixed and they are starting to self-advocate, to say, 'I need to go and see the medical people,' when the medical team are here. We also work very closely around ear health with the Cherbourg community health people, especially Pickle and Elizabeth and Alzira, and the Royal Brisbane Hospital team. That is how we ended up with the piccaninny bus. Has anybody told you about that?

Senator ADAMS—They did not call it the piccaninny bus.

Ms Boal—It is the 'healthy kids healthy ear' van; it has got 'piccaninny bus' on the side. That is fantastic because they come to the school three times a year and screen all the children. Cecil Brown has finished screening the children for the first term—everybody who was enrolled at the school. We had 100 per cent of parents sign off on permission forms that allow them to screen the kids, gather the information and feed that straight back to the school. That is fantastic because we know which kids have got major hearing issues, which kids are now awaiting the surgical list or the ENT visits and which children are referred to Australian Hearing Services and may require bone conductors or hearing aids. We complement that by having sound systems in every classroom. It took us five years to do that too, but we were very fortunate—

Senator ADAMS—You were funded for it?

Ms Boal—No. We wrote grant applications. The Lions Hearing Dogs actually funded two systems for us. We have been very fortunate that there were people working with Australian Hearing Services who said they had some that were being pulled out of schools where they are doing research and that they were available. We got those ones. They are slightly older models but they work, so we have been very fortunate in that.

We work closely with the hospital around the ENT clinics and with Dr Chris Perry, who has had the surgical team fly up to Cherbourg hospital. That only began last year because they were waiting on getting a child anaesthetist. Once they got that paediatric person they could then do the minor surgeries here at Cherbourg hospital. That saves families, especially those with lots of kids, from the dilemmas of having to take children down there, the long waiting times at hospital, the transport and overnight accommodation—and if its tonsils as well they want them there for two weeks—with all that kind of disruption and the students not getting the turnaround of coming back to school.

So those are the proactive and positive things that are really working. It is difficult because the challenges of children having hearing loss and all the other health issues prior to getting to school mean there has already been a long-term impact on their development of language and learning development in general in the early childhood phase. That is about it on health from me.

Senator ADAMS—That was very good. A lot of the issues that you have raised are being looked at by another committee. Members of that committee are on this committee as well. We have just been doing an inquiry into hearing services. The evidence you have given us has certainly stacked up with the rest of it. It is great to see that you are right on top of it, with what you are doing. That does help so much.

Ms Boal—You need people in these positions in a long-term capacity to be able to build up the communication links and sustain them. I am now stepping away, but I feel very confident that these links will be ongoing because the structures in there have been set in concrete and have been very firm over a long period of time. The other people in the other agencies are still going to be there. It is when we have a lot of transience in both health and education that there is this mishmash and people do not know who to get in touch with. I am leaving a long list of phone numbers of who people can call for this and that. All of that is embedded. That is the only reason why it is a success at that level.

Senator ADAMS—And for your new teachers coming in, you have really good orientation for them, especially on this issue.

Ms Boal—The issue with that is that there are never enough hours. By the time they have taken in the first three days, their head is spinning. After the first 12 months we do it again, and they say, ‘Oh, that is what you were telling me last year about such and such. It is all starting to make sense.’ Then they have had time to realise what they do not know. It is difficult because of the amount of information they have to take on when they come to our school. We talk about convergence eye disorder, ear health, positioning for dominant ear and dominant eye. You have to talk about attention deficit disorder, behaviour skills, where we use microskills as well as the school behaviour management plans. Then you have to deal with the odd behaviours of kids who may have slightly autistic spectrum disorder style behaviours or the ones who are leaning towards ADHD or the other children who have intellectual impairments or those children who do not meet the criteria but have significant learning delays and other behavioural challenges. That is just the special needs iceberg. That is not even looking at dealing with English as a second language or low-socioeconomic issues—and we have not got to curriculum yet. So it is very demanding of the teachers who come here. In the first year they are completely exhausted. A lot of them are still trying to find their feet because it is a completely different context to any regular state school setting.

Senator ADAMS—If a child is diagnosed with foetal alcohol—

Ms Boal—There is no diagnosis for foetal alcohol syndrome, but we acknowledge that they have issues based on that.

Senator ADAMS—So can you get a subsidy from the education department to employ someone?

Ms Boal—No.

Senator ADAMS—You can in Western Australia.

Ms Boal—Western Australia is actually the leader in foetal alcohol research in Australia. I will happily acknowledge that.

Ms Greenham—Until last year, you could not get funding for FAS.

Senator ADAMS—They were getting it at Fitzroy. They might have used that as a special place because of the alcohol and all of the rest of it. But that certainly did work and they were allowing those students who did not have the typical features of it but had behaviour problems to have special aid as well, which just made all the difference to that particular school.

Ms Boal—Where Cherbourg is positioned in Queensland education makes it unique. When you say you come from Cherbourg, everybody says, ‘Oh, Far North Queensland?’ They honestly think that all Indigenous communities are in remote areas. In Far North Queensland they fund the schools per capita, understanding that X per cent of students are going to have particular issues with hearing loss. Staph infections are another common problem.

Senator ADAMS—We met people from the Deadly Ears program up at Bamaga.

Ms Boal—In our school it does not happen that way. We have to apply for funding on a case-by-case basis.

CHAIR—How was it determined that you would be treated in a different fashion?

Ms Boal—These decisions are made regionally. We are in the South-East Queensland regions, in Toowoomba South-West. In Far North Queensland they have 30-plus schools that are largely or solely Indigenous—Islander communities under college umbrellas and things like that and other community schools—so they are dealing with large numbers. We are the only Indigenous school in our region, but they just say, ‘We’ll treat them like the other schools in our region.’

For a child to be identified as hearing impaired and to receive support they have to fail two hearing tests in a row. With otitis media, hearing loss is fluctuating and is cyclical over six weeks. If they have a hearing test and are deaf at that particular time, they may have a hearing test four weeks later and not be deaf because the eardrum has been perforated, the fluid has cleared up and it has started to heal. Then, if they have another hearing test, they may be deaf the next time. But if they have actually passed a hearing test they are no longer ‘hearing impaired’, even though for perhaps 60 to 80 per cent of the year they are deaf. It makes it a little difficult and it is a lot of paperwork.

I have actually had students who one year failed both hearing tests because at the time the hearing tests were conducted, those two or three times a year, they had ear infections and fell above the 30-decibel margin.

Then, six months later, when they had their next test they were clear, so they were no longer hearing impaired. Then they waited another cycle of 12 months and they failed the next two hearing tests. Paperwork was submitted all those times regardless of the fact that with the fluctuating hearing loss we well know that this child is probably not hearing well any year for given cycles of the infection. It is one of those little quandaries that happen in the system.

CHAIR—Do you think that overall, given that a child might just have impaired hearing, accentuated hearing aids in the classroom like audio and those sorts of things would make a difference but in that environment they are almost essential?

Ms Boal—Yes, definitely essential. I would even recommend them for schools that do not have children with large amounts of hearing loss. Early childhood ear infections are common across the board because the Eustachian tube is fairly flat and then, as we grow, it gets an angle. In the research and studies that were done by Robyn Massie seven years ago at both our Indigenous school at Cherbourg and a non-Indigenous school in Brisbane even the non-hearing-impaired students did better with sound-field systems in the classroom. It allows you to focus attention without fatigue because of the improved acoustics and it reduces any background noise. You know yourself that if you are working away studiously at something and there are lawnmowers and leaf blowers or hammers and traffic it can be fairly distracting and make it very hard to concentrate.

Senator MOORE—Every time we have a committee meeting people find things to do! It does not matter where.

Ms Boal—The paper shredder in the room next door.

Senator MOORE—Yes!

Ms Boal—Sound-field systems largely reduce that type of interference and reduces your own strain and stress in trying to listen. I would be advocating for sound-field systems in every classroom at least to year 3.

Senator MOORE—We have not heard from Bevan or Ms Bond. Could we be introduced to people by Principal Greenham.

Ms Greenham—Bevan is my deputy and is absolutely amazing. We stand side by side, the black and the white going along together, don't we, Bevan? He has a wicked sense of humour but he is great—

Mr Costello—I was going to say to 'black and white' that we get to some grey areas sometimes.

Ms Greenham—We do. It is really great because he is a respected person in the community, he has been here all his life and he is well respected by all the children and all the community members. He provides great liaison.

Sylvia is a community liaison person. She has worked at the school as an aid for many years. She has had a lot to do with children producing books, working together with the librarian, and has done some really excellent work there. Bevan, maybe you would like to say something?

Mr Costello—I deal with a lot of the behavioural problems in our school—

Ms Greenham—And attendance.

Mr Costello—and attendance, yes, but mainly it is the behavioural problems because, as Jenni said, I am a local boy—I was born and bred here. I still live out here. I know all the children. I know their parents. I know their grandparents. So I am well into it. I know it all as far as the family tree goes. That in turn helps me a great deal because I know the backgrounds and so I will know what has gone on the night before. If there are two families fighting down the road, I will know it because I live there. People talk. And when we get to school, I will know that there is going to be an issue with that child because he will have been up late the night before. So I can then let people know what to look for and what sort of behavioural issues will come from that family.

Senator FURNER—How are your attendance levels?

Mr Costello—Attendance levels, I think, at the moment are—

Ms Greenham—Eighty-six per cent.

Mr Costello—Is it up to 86? We were planning to get to 95. One of my goals for the year is to try to get it up to at least 95 per cent. It is 86 per cent at the moment, but we are working really hard to get it up.

Ms Greenham—And that is not acceptable as far as I am concerned, at all.

Senator ADAMS—So, as to the students who are not at school, do you go round and see the parents?

Mr Costello—We have got a truancy officer who goes around. She rings around to each class at about 9.30 or 10 o'clock to see who is not there, and then she will go around and find out where they are. Sometimes I go with her if I am very concerned about a student who has not been to school for a while and try to talk to the parents to see what the problem is. Sometimes it is something as simple as the student having no shoes, or there might be no food in the fridge so they have got no lunch and nothing to eat; uniforms—all these types of things come up.

Ms Greenham—Or they have gone to Woorabinda for a week, which often happens.

Mr Costello—Well, they go away, and then they come back. There are all these sorts of issues. I try to work around them. So we supply some food at school. We have got some shoes there as well that we will give children, especially now that the colder months are coming in. We have got a medical centre down here that has a program going whereby, if families are having difficulties, they can give some of these children shoes. So I am trying to overcome some of these problems, slowly. Shoes are a big problem here because they get cut feet, and if they get cut feet then they get boils and all that sort of stuff.

Senator ADAMS—Do they have a shoe shop in Murgon?

Mr Costello—There is a shoe shop in Murgon. So those are the types of issues that I work with.

Senator FURNER—Bevan, last year I took a trip up here and brought a huge box of substance abuse materials. I am wondering how that was delivered through the school, in terms of students being made aware of the dangers of substance abuse.

Mr Leach—Can I answer that in regard to my students. I run an alternative education program for students who have been identified by the school as being those probably at the greatest risk, for boys in years 5 to 7. I have got seven students with a full-time aide. One of the things we have looked at is seeing their attendance levels as a by-product of who they are as children, with one factor being their exposure to substance abuse.

Obviously we go through all the published material on substance abuse. The boys have quite a strong understanding and can articulate it. Whilst they might get the percentages wrong, they can understand the impact of harmful substances. The issue that we have got is: a traditional approach is ineffective, because they are still continuing to participate in that behaviour. What we have found successful in building on that published knowledge is linking it with their own personal attachment to how it is going to impact on them and their families, and, if they are associating with people being accused of being substance abusers by the community, how that will impact on their family, particularly their grandparents and their parents. So it is a dual-pronged approach, using the published material as well as tailoring it specifically for the impact on the students.

What we are looking at here is the pulling power on 14- and 15-year-olds and up to 18-year-olds and their vast amount of unstructured time—so the opportunity to interact with people who are engaged in at-risk behaviours, one of them being substance abuse. So in regard to hitting the core number of upper-school students, it absolutely becomes part an almost daily if not three times a week focus in the classroom. Amongst the other classroom teachers, that has been delivered into every classroom to varying degrees.

Senator FURNER—Did the material that the government provided assist at all?

Mr Leach—Yes. It assists because it gives some statistics and some knowledge. It gives a bit more credibility because it is coming from experts. So it has value, but not by itself. Irrespective of following the scaffolding for teachers in terms of delivery, it needs a dual pronged approach with the community aspect. The biggest issue we are looking at here is the influence of peers during that unstructured time. We are not looking just at after school here; we are talking about late evening and early morning roaming and extended periods during holidays. So, in terms of success for those programs, they also need to be targeted at adolescents and young adults who are not in a formal education setting.

Senator ADAMS—Can you entice them back? Are you having any success in getting them back?

Mr Leach—Absolutely. That is one of the things that we are proudest of in the program. I have been running my program with my aide for three years. We are into our third year now. In my first year out here we had a target of 30 per cent attendance. As I mentioned before, my students are at the pointy end for Cherbourg chronic non-attendance and, when they are attending, they are completely disengaged. Not only are they disengaged in their own learning and their peers' learning in the classroom but they are roaming and interrupting other classes. The success we have had obviously is built very strongly on parental-community collaboration. That is based on building up accountability for these boys in terms of direction for their lives. In

the first year we had a target of 30 per cent. Out of the cohort of eight students, on the whole it was over 70 per cent. If we were to focus on three or four students, their attendance was 90 to 95 or 96 per cent. That is purely based on this program giving them the time and the place to learn and to be up skilled in social cues, personal development, health, accountability and anger management.

Whilst it is great to look purely at attendance, it is also about educational engagement whilst they are school so that they are productive. We should also look at the number of times they are in front of juvenile justice and the number of reported cases of involvement with substance abuse or at-risk behaviour. Across all of those key areas we have seen significant growth and results. That is based on two things. As a school we have structured this program to provide the time and the place and the extremely strong collaboration with community members. When I talk about community members, I am talking about family, extended family, Barambah Men's Group, the council, a couple of different agencies, the South Burnett CTC and the football club. It is all about collective ownership for these young boys. The men's group quite strongly acknowledge that these 11-, 12- and 13-year-old boys are going to have the ability, by age, to call themselves men from Cherbourg in six or seven years time. What are we going to do about it? We cannot just turn our back on them, because in six or seven years they will have the right to call themselves Cherbourg men. So as Cherbourg men they are standing up and want to become involved.

That is one of the strong things I see in this community from the council down—from Sam, the councillors, the men's group and the elders, there is accountability. Yes, there are significant issues in Cherbourg, but at least we are facing them front on. So when the students see that level of cooperation and partnerships between the school and community that is where it is kicking in. It is the real world for them. It is just not whitefellas; it is not just the government forcing them. What we are looking at here is that most of my boys, even if they have spent the night roaming or in hospital, will most likely come to school. That is what we are looking at—getting them there. It is a safe place and a happy place. It is an enjoyable place but, most importantly, it is a productive place. That is just one example of what the school has done to cater specifically for those students.

CHAIR—We have taken evidence from across the country and there are some commonalities without a doubt. One of the greater challenges, I think we all acknowledge on the committee, is that you are not going to learn if you are not at school. But equally, we have taken evidence in places in the last couple of days where we have found an increase in attendance of 30 per cent. At the moment the evidence indicates that the school itself is saying, 'Right, we will pull resources out of there, or out of there, or we will stop going out there and save money on that,' and it is within the school system itself. They do struggle but they get resources from one place or another to deal with the significant increase in a demographic that needs a huge amount of resources—and not necessarily the same resources—to reconnect with the school system. I think there was a wide acknowledgement of the particular programs to re-engage a particularly difficult demographic. I am not sure whether I have a response for the headmaster or anybody else, but it is really about the levels of support you have got and what capacity the system generally has for you to put your hand up and say that you are having an increase in attendance and you know the increase is going to come from a particularly difficult demographic. What particular curriculum has been developed that you accept is the best curriculum to try to get these individuals to re-engage? What extra resources are being provided from the Commonwealth or the Queensland system to assist you in doing those things? Could you make some responses in that regard generally?

Mr Leach—Part of my program is running offsite opportunities for cultural empowerment, personal development, and just time to yarn. That was run through South Burnett CTC. They have widely acknowledged that that has been a very successful program—

CHAIR—Sorry—CTC?

Mr Leach—The South Burnett CTC—a community NGO. Whilst they have acknowledged that the program was extremely successful for their outcomes for the last two years, they have had to cease their funding for this component of my program. With Wondai, they have taken on domestic violence. It is a new organisation, a broad umbrella covering domestic violence and violence prevention. We have been able to tweak opportunities so that we can continue the funding. That has come about purely based on the relationships that have been built up over the years—

CHAIR—So there is no acknowledgement by the mainstream funders—

Mr Leach—No.

Ms Boal—We go cap in hand and we find community people and resources that we can use. Unless they are identified as having a specified impairment, apart from the additional funding that we get as an Indigenous school, there is a per capita—

CHAIR—If there is an acknowledged impairment under the act—

Ms Boal—Yes, under the DVSM. We do a lot of begging and borrowing and grant writing.

Mr Leach—And building up those relationships which are such an essential component—

Ms Greenham—You just have to prioritise, don't you? There are a lot of resources that we do not have that mainstream schools have, and certainly even little schools in WA have.

Mrs Kelly—We had an influx of new teachers this year. A lot came from the coast and they were used to having interactive whiteboards as part of their everyday activities. We do not have interactive whiteboards at Cherbourg—

Ms Boal—We do not have the techs they can get their laptops to—

Mrs Kelly—Yes. 'When are you getting me mine—I cannot teach without it.' The teachers that are coming in are really savvy with IT, but we just cannot provide the gear for them.

Mr Leach—From an educational point of view that is an opportunity that is just missed completely because that.

Senator ADAMS—Do you have the internet here?

Ms Boal—Yes. Our students are very good with computers and digital media.

Senator ADAMS—It is amazing just how quickly they pick it up.

Ms Boal—There are actually award-winning digital filmmakers, but we just don't have the latest and greatest.

CHAIR—I would certainly like to commend the work you are doing, Paul, and the school for supporting you. I think it is fantastic. We are seeing this across the board: people are acknowledging that if you are not at school, you are not going to get an education, and that is simply unacceptable. Some of the other evidence we have had over the last couple of days, I think in Weipa, was that we needed to ensure—other members of the committee will correct me if I am not accurate—that we did not create a second tier of education. Notwithstanding the difficulties that the demographic or cohort might represent, we did not want to have special schools effectively saying, 'All you have to do is turn up and we will give you an attendance certificate,' and that sort of stuff, which is why we are ending up with educational outcomes. It is not because of any mischief. I suspect it is about resourcing. Paul, you were talking earlier about your program and there were two aspects to it. One is a re-engagement program—just simply getting them from where they are to attend and to re-engage, which is a significant and important role.

Mr Leach—Yes.

CHAIR—The second is to have some productive and important aspects, which is obviously a stepping stone. Can you talk to me about the challenges to get these individuals to re-engage? For example, they might have missed two years. Have you thought about how you might re-engage and eventually have them at the standard of everyone else?

Mr Leach—Absolutely, and it is probably one of the things I was waiting for the opportunity to bring up. One of the key components that we have developed—whether it is for foetal alcohol syndrome, whether it is in combination with the level of trauma and grief and life experiences—is what we call 'Navigation'. One of the things is that they have built up this identity of, 'You are a truant kid; you are a misbehaving kid.' In a lot of ways they do a lot of behaviour to reinforce that. What we have done is what we call 'Navigation': absolutely break down the school as a social structure, breaking down the rules and expectations. When I say 'default mechanism', a lot of aggression and violence is an extremely successful strategy for them at home and in the wider community. Here we are with schools saying, 'Hang on, aggression and violence is not going to cut mustard here,' and these children are not understanding why. 'It works for me here. Why doesn't it work for me at school or any other social institution?'

What we have done, again with community collaboration, is break down these social structures so they explicitly know the rules that govern all social interactions in those situations as well as what is expected from them. Then they can negotiate, 'Oh, that's why it didn't work. If I try this, this is successful.' At this stage, because it is successful, we base that around getting what you want in the quickest, fairest and the most

respectful way. They can understand that, because they are still getting what they want—they are still achieving their goals, their needs. We are just giving them, through Navigation, the quickest, fairest, most respectful way—the most effective way. Once they can still see they can get what they want if they follow the social norms, it is successful and then they are learning and demonstrating that behaviour. It is all about the up-skilling of social cues. That would be the main component.

CHAIR—Mr Leach, do you have some articulated, written examples of how you go about that in terms of a program?

Mr Leach—Absolutely.

CHAIR—Could you provide that to us on notice?

Mr Leach—Yes, certainly.

CHAIR—If there is no intellectual property associated with that, I would appreciate that on notice. Thank you.

Senator MOORE—One of the things we talked about with some of the other schools was the sense of achievement of people who have achieved through the school to show kids that it can happen. We talked about the RATEP program that allows people to go through the various levels and then get their diploma and then they graduate teacher certificate and then in some cases use it and come back. Is that something that is used in this community?

Mr Costello—We have a RATEP program working in our school. At last count I think there were four people who are now out teaching and we have another one just about ready to graduate now. It works really well with the school because those people are working as teacher aides in our school. They are getting that expertise and then they go across to study in the afternoon and they can pull the practical and the theory side of it together. It has really helped.

Senator MOORE—Which institution is that linked to?

Mr Costello—JCU in Townsville.

Senator MOORE—Your school goes from pre-prep to year 7 and then the kids go into Murgon mainly. Are there buses to take them into Murgon?

Mr Costello—Yes.

Senator MOORE—And that is really the only public transport in Cherbourg—just those school buses. They take them in early, I would imagine, and then bring them back. What time is the last school bus?

Mr Costello—It would be 3.30.

Senator MOORE—If they miss that, they have to walk. There is still no graded footpath between Cherbourg and Murgon. I have been writing letters about that for about nine years. So then they have to walk, that is the way it goes. We talked with a group up in Napranum that had a program called PaL, parents and learning. There are variations of these all across the place but the one they have was developed and owned by Napranum and now they are marketing it elsewhere. It has trained tutors going into homes and getting the parents and kids ready before they get into the school system. It seems to be really useful. I am wondering whether there is anything of that kind in this community.

Mr Costello—There was a playgroup going at the school.

Ms Greenham—But also there is the childcare centre.

Senator MOORE—They came this morning. They were fabulous.

Ms Greenham—They are terrific. They come across and visit the school one morning a week.

Senator MOORE—They link their activities with the school.

Ms Greenham—Yes, and that is excellent.

Ms Boal—The afternoon care is supplied by our older students going over there.

Senator MOORE—And they have a system for their homework like that really good system they used to have whose name I cannot remember. They said they had a waiting list of about 60, so I am wondering whether there are some who get the chance and some who do not. Senator Adams, you were asking questions earlier about whether there was a discernable difference between—

Senator ADAMS—Between the ones who go to day care and then come to school as opposed to the ones who do not go to day care and then start school. Do you notice a difference?

Ms Greenham—From my experience here, I cannot answer that. I have not been here long enough.

Ms Boal—The answer to that question is yes. Even more significantly for the students who have done neither the Gundoo day care or the pre-prep experience before coming to pre-school or year 1, the difference is huge. There are significant differences in language ability and social skills. The delays there are extremely challenging to try to catch children up.

Ms Bond—Especially as prep is not compulsory.

Ms Boal—Once they come into the system at year 1 with prep not being compulsory socially they seem to be the lost planets and find it very difficult to navigate the systems. You will lose them at morning teatime if you have not spotted them and do not keep them under close watch. They will trundle off down to the shop.

Ms Greenham—It is critical because they are ESL speakers and they do not have that language. The first seven years are critical for them to be learning that language. With low literacy backgrounds, they are also not getting the stories read to them or anything like that. It is absolutely critical that they get that in those early years.

Senator MOORE—Do many of your grade 7 kids board? Do many kids go off to boarding schools?

Ms Boal—A few students, but not a significant number. Some of the students here catch a bus up to Kingaroy, to St Mary's school, once they hit grade 8.

Senator MOORE—Choosing the Catholic stream.

Ms Boal—Yes. But the majority of them go to the state school. A couple of girls in recent years have gone to Toowoomba, to Downlands.

Senator MOORE—That was a special scholarship.

Ms Boal—The Yalari scholarship.

Senator MOORE—Downlands were doing a lot.

Ms Boal—The Glennie School was also involved, and I am trying to think of the other one that has the tartan skirts.

Senator MOORE—Fairholme.

Ms Boal—Yes, thank you.

Senator MOORE—Toowoomba is my hometown. Mrs Kelly, your program for women really interests me. When I came up here a few years ago there were things for boys, and that was great, but, even then, people were saying, 'What is there for girls?' They kind of hung back when you were talking with the kids. Did you have any trouble getting the girls to participate in your program?

Mrs Kelly—Yes, I did.

Senator MOORE—I would like to hear about that.

Mrs Kelly—It started out because I am friendly with one of the local women and I was going to take her two daughters with me because I had room in our car. When I said this to these two girls they were a bit iffy about wanting to go. At the time I did not understand why, but I realised why later on. When I was talking to them in front of their friends, the friends said, 'Take us too, Miss Ange.' I thought, 'How am I going to get the whole lot of you there?' Then I thought, 'Damn it, we will just will work out a way.' So I investigated getting a bus. I found out that wherever I went, whether it was the PCYC or the council, they have been wonderful. Everyone has supported it.

The boys have their rugby league, but when I asked the girls what they did at the weekend they said, 'We go and watch the boys.' I thought, 'Wouldn't you rather be doing something?' As for getting them out of the community, because they had no concept of what soccer club was, I took four over to Wondai, to our training. They were excited that they were going with Miss Ange for the afternoon, but when we got there two of the girls would not get out of the car. They put their faces down their shirts, and it was shame. I was thinking, 'What's going on? Ten minutes ago you wanted to get here and now that you are here you will not get out of the car. What do I do?' Two got out and two did not. I knew that mollicoddling them was not the go, so I told them quite forcefully that, yes, they were a different colour from the children outside the car—they could see the white children out there—but they had as much right to be at soccer as any child there and they were to

hold their heads high, get out of the car and get over to the game. Fortunately, I bluffed them and they did. Otherwise I do not know what I would have done. We have just gone into the competition now, and a couple of them are quite nervous about going tomorrow.

Ms Boal—It is a big game tomorrow.

Mrs Kelly—But we had training yesterday, and I have never seen such smiles and light and life in their faces.

Senator MOORE—Magic.

Mrs Kelly—I could not believe it.

Senator MOORE—How old are these girls?

Mrs Kelly—They are all 11 and 12, so grade 6 and grade 7.

Senator MOORE—This will be useful for them when they go to Murgon because they will be facing a lot of white faces in Murgon. That will be great.

Ms Boal—And, hopefully, some of the friendships that they build up are going to be with people they run into, because Murgon is a feeder school for a lot of the small community schools. The soccer players of this particular club, which is based in Wondai, come from all of the Barambah district.

Senator MOORE—So are they good?

Mrs Kelly—My husband and I have been coaching and playing for years. There is one young lady who got the ball at her feet and just went straight up there and put it straight in the back of the net.

Senator MOORE—A natural. That would give her a great sense of success.

Mrs Kelly—She had never played soccer in her life before, but she knew where it had to go. She could dodge and weave and get it straight there.

Mr Costello—The other thing I have noticed is that the bad behaviour back at school is starting to decrease a fair bit.

Mrs Kelly—We had one girl come in yesterday afternoon and after she had finished her PE session she thought she might just nick over to Miss Ange for half an hour and not go back to the class. She turned up and I said, ‘What are you doing here?’ She said ‘I thought I’d just come to you and wait till we go to soccer training.’ I said, ‘Uh-uh. That’s not the way it works. Come on.’ Anyway, without a word, without an argument, she went straight back to class. I said, ‘You’ve had your try out. You’ve got half an hour’s work to do.’ I walked out and the teacher said she was fine. At any other time you would have fun getting her back there for half an hour.

Senator MOORE—That is really impressive. Chair, I have only two more questions, I promise. One is about whether Cherbourg gets involved in the visits to Canberra and Brisbane to see Parliament House.

Ms Boal—They have done historically but not recently.

Senator MOORE—I know it costs money, but perhaps politicians could support that in some way because of the special nature of things. I thought I would just throw that in because of the sense of being like every other school and getting those opportunities. Being welcomed into Parliament House and being made a fuss of is very useful.

Mr Costello—There is a group from our school that goes to Parliament House to dance. As to an official visit by our school, we have not been down there or to Canberra.

Senator MOORE—There are programs so you can do that.

Ms Greenham—The information does come in.

Senator MOORE—I know there is a heap of stuff you are trying to work through.

Ms Greenham—I know about it because at Mount Margaret we had a big trip every two years and we were planning to go to Canberra next, to Parliament House of course. In the upper classes there they were starting some great stuff on parliament in preparation. So I noticed when I came over here that there was nothing recent. I have been talking to Jim, who takes them on camp.

Senator FURNER—So we will see you there in the summer?

Ms Greenham—Or in winter, when there is snow.

Senator FURNER—No!

Ms Boal—You would have to buy parkas and—

Mr Costello—Summer time—that is the way.

Senator MOORE—There is another thing in terms of schools. You have already mentioned, Ms Boal, about the fact that when people talk about Aboriginal education they think North Queensland. That infuriates me. It is just so limiting. Is there a network of teachers in schools that are working in this very challenging but rewarding area? Do you get a chance to talk with other teachers who are working at schools up north and out west who have got the same kind of challenges, so that you can share?

Ms Boal—It is an informal network. EQ is probably an interesting organisation in itself. If you survive your first five years in EQ you know a lot of people and you create links. You talk to somebody who knows somebody, or they will say, ‘We’ve just hooked up with Chelsea from Nanango, who was up at Yarrabah. She is doing ESL and she was over here delivering PD.’ So it is informal, and people float—

Senator MOORE—Do you speak that code thing?

Ms Boal—Yes, we speak the code. We get the nod and the wink.

Mrs Kelly—That is like at Woorabinda. We went to YuMi maths in March. At Woorabinda they do not have a head of curriculum and they are looking at writing all their new programs. They did not have a science program. I had just done one so I said, ‘That’s cool. I’ll flick it to you.’

Ms Boal—We seem to gravitate towards each other in any kinds of district or cluster meetings. It is probably more challenging and difficult for our new people who have come into these schools from other states or from civilisation, on the other side of the Great Divide.

Senator MOORE—Also, the networks could be national in terms of the work and the players sharing it, because there is a special thing in working and achieving in it. Do you find the teachers who come to you want to be here? Have they said, ‘I want to come to Cherbourg’?

Ms Boal—It is \$1.50 each way. Going to an Indigenous school is productive in that you accumulate transfer points.

Senator MOORE—Of course there are transfer points, yes.

Ms Boal—Cherbourg is very appealing in that it is the closest remote school that you can go to. They have probably not quite thought through some of the reasons for being here beyond career pathways and—

Senator MOORE—Sure—building up your points to get to an end result.

Ms Boal—Yes.

Mr Leach—And it is also the geographical location. They boast: ‘I don’t have to catch a plane home. I can be home on the coast or back to Brisbane by five o’clock on a Friday afternoon.’ The other component is that there are a number of teachers, including me, who specifically choose to come to Cherbourg and work in this stream. Whether it is because of the old, strong and smart, for some reason Cherbourg has got quite a high profile. But not for one second is the geographical location not also a factor for these teachers, because you can still do your Indigenous education and your learning, if that is who you are, and there is the geographical location as well. I will just mention the Indigenous network. There is an Indigenous educators network for the Indigenous staff, who are teachers like Bevan and me and teacher aides.

Senator MOORE—It is still going?

Mr Leach—Yes, it is still going.

Senator MOORE—It has been around a while.

Mr Leach—Yes, so that is good. It is informal, depending on your contribution. As a teacher, if I was not part of the Indigenous teachers network, I would not have contact with any other teachers.

Senator MOORE—Is there any formal funding from the education department or any program to fund Indigenous teachers to meet together through the Indigenous education unit, which they formed down there with Ian Mackie and those people, which is really positive?

Mr Leach—Only our traditional—

Ms Greenham—No, just standard PD money.

Ms Boal—Who is funding the Indigenous education workers? Part of that is coming through EQ.

Ms Greenham—It is coming through—

Ms Boal—There is one for Indigenous education workers—

Ms Greenham—Doing certificates.

Ms Boal—but not for anybody who is working within the school who may be non-Indigenous.

Senator MOORE—Do you think that would be a useful thing?

Mr Leach—In my opinion, it would be one of the major factors to stop teacher burnout.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for your tolerance. I have been testing the patience of the Cherbourg Critical Incident Women's Group, but they have said we can continue.

Senator ADAMS—I would like Ms Bond to tell us what she does and how she works in the community.

Ms Bond—I have been working with the special needs unit for about 10 years, alongside Bevan and Vanessa. I had a lot to do with the cross-cultural training for Education Queensland in this area. Also I helped put the curriculum together for Indigenous studies in our school. I felt that there was a complete necessity for that to be part of the school, that that was one component missing from an Indigenous school, of all things. I still feel strongly that there is more to be done in that area, as in passing this on to other schools. I honestly feel that a lot of mainstream schools do not tap into a lot of the things we have in this area. A lot of teachers have been trained through our process and I have some elders at the back who are part of that training area. It took us 12 months to put the package together. I would like to know from one of our teachers sitting here how they find it.

Mr Leach—Absolutely necessary and that is me speaking as a person of Indigenous heritage. Obviously, as we all know the construct of the Aboriginality program specifically for here, which is what Auntie Sylvia, the elders and the community have created—my wife is also a teacher in the region—a greater awareness is showing through the mist with the realities of teaching the Indigenous students of this region. Obviously, Murgon, Goomeri and Wondai still have a significant proportion of Indigenous students. From a teacher's point of view, in regard to what Auntie Sylvia does, and people like Auntie Sylvia do—Uncle Frank—I do not think enough recognition is given. Once they see an Indigenous teacher aid or an Indigenous community liaison officer, EQ view them just as that. Auntie Sylvia and Uncle Frank have been in the education system for so many years and they have seen all the latest failures and trends of graduates. So they are an amazing teaching resource even before you mention the cultural component. That is another thing I would like to put on record. One of the recommendations to look at is to view people like Auntie Sylvia and Uncle Frank—community teachers, teacher aides—as educators of knowledge as well, not just of their community knowledge.

Ms Bond—I think our cross-cultural training would be of benefit to the QPS as well. We have had a few people interested in it, and I would like to see that go through. Perhaps they could modify it for their reasons. There is not enough done in that area as well; it is something that the police force could really benefit from.

Senator ADAMS—And, as far as the curriculum goes, are you picking up some of that with the cross-cultural area? What are you doing with your curriculum?

Mrs Kelly—The ITSIPS program that was developed at Cherbourg State School is included in our cultural studies units.

Senator ADAMS—Do you work fairly closely together?

Ms Boal—The Indigenous studies units that Sylvia has developed is now an archival wad of lesson plans.

Mr Leach—It is part of our curriculum.

Ms Boal—Yes, it is in our curriculum.

Mrs Kelly—It is the focus of our SOS, our studies of society.

Senator ADAMS—I was trying to get the link there.

Mr Leach—It is also reportable outcome on our report cards, up there with the other KOAs. That is a central component of who we are as a school, in terms of repositioning for the students the positive identity of being an Aboriginal person. That is obviously one of the formal things.

Ms Boal—Sylvia is vital in getting the networks and getting the elders up to the school. When teachers, especially ones who are new to the area, think, 'Oh, this is coming up in Indigenous studies and I really don't

know what it's about; I'll have somebody come into the class and tell the story'—or do something else. It helps to engage students and embed that into the curriculum.

Senator ADAMS—Mr Leach, I have one final question relating to the current group of petrol sniffers.

Mr Leach—Our current students who are exposed to at-risk behaviour?

Senator ADAMS—No, what I was going to ask—

Mr Leach—There is nothing concrete with respect to the allegations that are there. There is nothing we can mark it against.

Senator ADAMS—That was not actually what I was coming at. With the whole group in the community who are at risk, are you connected to all of them? I know there are some at school, but there are others out there. Can you get them back?

Mr Leach—Are we talking here about school aged children? My role is with them as students. I have former students who are now attending Murgon High School, in year 8 and year 9, and we still have close relationships with them. One of the things we have identified with my teacher aide and with working with community, with people like Auntie Sylvia and others, is that it would be a necessary step to take to have some kind of community program, in collaboration with various departments, including the high school, targeting those adolescents who are 15 years of age and older. Most of them are disengaged from formal education at the moment, or only attend irregularly. So, in terms of my communication and participation with those older peers, there is basically none unless they were former students, who know who I am and with whom I have that rapport.

Senator ADAMS—So is there anyone else who can—

Mr Leach—Yes, there is the safe haven and other community agencies. I am sure the ladies up the back will fill you in on that. The boys are aware of those, and they participate when they are out roaming at night time and in the afternoon. So they are aware of the programs. I think they are successful, because the boys are aware of them as children of Cherbourg, and they choose to participate when it fits. So that is definitely an area we could expand into, but obviously my core responsibility is to my students. To the best of my knowledge there would not be a school aged child who is completely disengaged from education in Cherbourg.

Senator ADAMS—I was just worried about the peer influence.

Mr Leach—Yes, it is an extremely strong influence.

Senator ADAMS—I was also forgetting that you only went to year 7—I was thinking of the older kids.

Mr Leach—Yes, probably the greatest thing is this pull, the tremendous peer influence that they have got. If you could break that, that would be something.

Senator ADAMS—But having someone like you working in that respect, if they are students that have been here before they would certainly respect you to a point. There may be a breaking point where—

Mr Leach—That is why I think attending school is reducing that pulling power, but obviously school is competing with drugs, with the beginning of sex, with PlayStation, with sleep.

Senator ADAMS—What about the drug issue?

Mr Leach—There are substances in the community. There are a number of children who spend a significant amount of time with the opportunity to engage or be in association with people at risk. In terms of formal allegations—

Senator ADAMS—I was just interested to get an overall view of it.

Mr Leach—We are not just talking about the students in my program. Children who are from this community would see community children first, and the opportunity to engage with at risk behaviour or at risk people is there. I hope that answers something for you.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for the evidence you have provided today. There is always a frustration from the committee when we have people like you giving evidence because we could spend all day talking to you but we do not have the time. For that reason the senators may provide some questions on notice to you if there are further things we may want some clarification on, and they will be provided to you through the secretariat. Also, having got the sense and the breadth of the discussion we are having, if you think there are other programs you would like to provide us with information on then we would certainly appreciate receiving

that in writing and any other corrections or written submissions you may wish to make. Thank you again for your evidence today.

[3.46 pm]

COSTELLO, Mr Bevan Roy, Deputy Principal, Cherbourg State School

GRAY, Mrs Lillian Jean, Member, Cherbourg Critical Incident Women's Group

LANGTON, Mrs Anna, Member, Cherbourg Critical Incident Women's Group

STANLEY, Mrs Grace Patricia, Chairperson, Cherbourg Critical Incident Women's Group

CHAIR—Thank you very much for appearing today—and thank you for waiting and for your tolerance, as we went over time a little with the earlier witnesses. There is something I will read into *Hansard* that you might have missed.

The Select Committee on Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities is holding this meeting as part of a particular 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 respects to the elders past and present. Before the committee begins this part of the meeting I want to make it clear to all meeting participants that the meeting is being recorded. A transcript of the recorded meeting will be produced and the transcript may be made public. Participant's comments recorded at, and transcribed from, this meeting are protected by parliamentary privilege. Any act that disadvantages you as a result of evidence given to this committee is treated as a breach of privilege. The proceedings in this room really are part of the Parliament of Australia. *Hansard* is recording this. The rights of everybody here giving evidence are the same as if you were giving evidence directly to the Senate, since this is a committee of the Senate. You are protected as witnesses by parliamentary privilege. However, I also remind you that giving false or misleading evidence to the Senate committee may constitute contempt of the Senate.

Mr Costello—I am not part of this women's group. I have been asked to sit in for an issue we want to bring up. I will just sit in for that part and then I will leave.

CHAIR—Thank you. Information on parliamentary privilege and the protection of witnesses and evidence has just been provided to you. Mrs Stanley, would you like to start off with a statement or presentation on the sort of issues that you are involved in.

Mrs Stanley—We as a group of ladies have met for the last five years. We marched on parliament and spoke to Premier Beattie—he came to see us twice—about child sexual abuse in our community. We got a lot of help with this. No-one was listening to us. Child abuse in our community has been going on too long and also it was being swept under the carpet. We thought, 'No, enough's enough.' We really wanted to show that we really cared for our children, our grandchildren and our relatives here in Cherbourg, especially the little children. As a group we were very concerned. There were women coming to us telling us about their children being abused.

So we ladies would get together and talked about it. Whether it was in this part of the community or that part of the community, there was always one woman living in those areas, so we would get together. If the children would speak to us, we would go straight to the police. We were working well with the police concerning this. That is one thing I can say—we had no flak from our people here in Cherbourg about what we were doing. We believe that a lot of that has stopped. Mrs Gray and I were even invited to the *Insight* show, and we spoke to them about it. They were talking about sexual abuse—that was the issue. We said to them what we were doing here, and also that all our men were not predators. We have good men in this community. That was one thing I said before we finished: we have a lot of good, hardworking men here, men who care for their children, their wives and all of their family. We know that people saw Lil and I on *Insight* because, for months and months afterwards, whenever we went anywhere for a conference people would say, 'Oh, I've seen you on *Insight* talking about child abuse in Cherbourg,' and I would say yes. We wanted to get it out in the open, because, like I said, things were being swept under the carpet.

So we were able to do things like that, but we have done other things too in this community. I do not know if you know what we have done as the Critical Incident Women's Group. We were able to get an Aboriginal person to go on a jury up in Kingaroy. We also were able to get a room built at the Kingaroy courthouse just for the children to sit in to give their evidence on closed-circuit TV. We were also able to help with getting a juvenile aid bureau in the Murgon Police Station, because our nearest one before that was in Gympie. We have done a lot of things here in our community. Whenever anything was happening people would say: 'Go and see those old girls in the Critical Incident Group about it.' Even the mayor said at the time, 'Go and see those two

old girls,' or, 'Go and see the group.' As a group we have done a lot of things in Cherbourg, and we are not taking recognition for ourselves.

We are also the ones who started Safe Haven. We were granted so many thousands of dollars to have a place built. We were given this land up here. Lil and I walked around with architects and people, showing them different areas where we could have Safe Haven built. We decided on here. But we do not know what has happened. Safe Haven now is working out of something like a shed.

CHAIR—Can you remember how much money you were given for that? If you cannot remember now, perhaps you can get it for me later.

Mrs Gray—It was \$1.6 million or something. We had the plans and everything for the safe haven, then we feel the goal posts were moved. The safe haven is now working out of a shed that they have made into offices. It is run by people who I work for—CTC. I just feel that is inappropriate anyway. The safe haven was an idea where we could take our children off the street and keep them safe. I do not know whether anybody has spoken to you about the sniffing and all that that happens in Cherbourg. That was part of it, and the child abuse. It was a place where we wanted to keep our children safe and it just did not happen.

CHAIR—You put in an application of some form for a safe house so you can get your kids off the street and you were granted money for that on the basis of your application?

Mrs Gray—Yes. A lot of it was tabled at the negotiation table and at meetings that we had with DATSIP, which I think does not exist now.

CHAIR—So now it is in some other hands?

Mrs Gray—It is in the right hands but we just feel that the safe haven is not what it was intended to be.

Senator ADAMS—It was not built the way you wanted it to be built?

Mrs Gray—No. It is just office space now. There is a patrol and that is fine. I do not mind the patrol. But where do you take the children? We have got nowhere to take them. We have not got any safe houses in Cherbourg.

CHAIR—The organisation that now looks after it, the CTC, has its offices in there. What is your understanding about how those offices are used? Is it to run the administration of that house?

Mrs Gray—Yes, and the programs that are run through the safe haven.

Senator ADAMS—Are there any bedrooms or play areas or anything like that?

Mrs Gray—No.

CHAIR—In your first application, was the money specifically for building accommodation so that people could have a safe haven?

Mrs Gray—Yes. There should be room for a counsellor and so on.

CHAIR—Can you recall what department it was or where the money came from?

Mrs Gray—It may have been the Department of Communities and state government money.

CHAIR—If that is not right, we can check up on it later. That is not important. Have you spoken to or approached the Department of Communities to voice your concerns about the use of the grant funds?

Mrs Gray—We have through our critical incident group meetings. It is just not happening.

CHAIR—Have you formally met with representatives from the Department of Communities in Queensland and told them about your concern on these things?

Mrs Gray—Yes.

CHAIR—What have they said to you at those meetings?

Mrs Gray—I am not really sure about it, but it was something about the Child Protection Act and something about the fact that we had dormitories here in Cherbourg before when we were living under the act. I do not think that is relevant. I just feel that they were just not being truthful with us. We wanted a safe place to put our children and keep them out of danger.

CHAIR—But the grant was specifically provided to build accommodation?

Mrs Stanley—Yes.

CHAIR—I just want to get that clear because, I will have to check with my colleagues, but we have a convention that we can write to the minister. We spoke to the Director-General and the Executive Director yesterday, so we can at least write to the minister to say that you have voiced your concerns at this level.

Mrs Stanley—We have been doing that for a long time. It started three or four years ago.

Senator MOORE—That was when Margaret Keech was the minister.

CHAIR—I am not guaranteeing that we will have anything, but it is useful for us to do that rather than just to take evidence. On behalf of the committee, I will undertake to get some agreement to write a letter highlighting that particular matter.

Mrs Gray—We have the plans for how the safe haven was going to be.

CHAIR—It might be too hard to find it out now, but between you, the community and us we can find out exactly what the grant program was so we can provide the secretariat with some details and, when we write the letter, they will understand exactly what happened. Sorry to interrupt.

Mrs Stanley—I would like to say, too, that they took \$60,000 out of that grant money to soil-test this area up here. So that was \$60,000 taken out for this area—

CHAIR—Which area?

Mrs Gray—It was just across the road from—

Mrs Stanley—You will see an old house up here; we were granted that land.

CHAIR—Do you know if the soil tests came back with some problem?

Mrs Stanley—I do not know.

CHAIR—Have you seen the soil tests?

Mrs Stanley—No.

CHAIR—Then we might include that.

Senator FURNER—Is this on separate land where the offices are now placed?

Mrs Gray—Yes, it is in Murgon. But we want a safe haven built in Cherbourg. The CTC is there; it is in Murgon.

Senator ADAMS—They built it in Murgon?

Mrs Stanley—They have got offices there. The safe haven is there. But this is the area we were given by the council.

CHAIR—So, adjacent to the offices in Murgon, is there a safe haven?

Mrs Stanley—Yes.

CHAIR—So there is no accommodation?

Mrs Stanley—No.

CHAIR—Thank you. Carry on.

Mrs Stanley—What we more or less wanted was to be able to keep children here who were frightened to go home because maybe mum and dad were arguing or whatever. We really wanted that, so that maybe they could stay for a couple of hours and then go home.

Mrs Gray—Or so that they could stay for a night or something. And then we could work with mum and dad and the children—have someone there to work with them to support them. But it has not happened.

CHAIR—Thank you very much.

Mrs Stanley—Another thing we are very concerned about is violence in this community. There is a lot of violence. And at times we believe the police are not doing their job. We believe that because people have come to us and said that when anyone is fighting or anything, the state police have just driven straight past; they would not even pull up to see what was happening. You see, we have not got any Aboriginal police here now. They have stopped all that. And that is one thing that we really need in this community: police liaison officers—Indigenous police, women and men.

Senator FURNER—There are three in Murgon, I understand—two or three.

Mrs Gray—Yes, but that is in Murgon.

Senator FURNER—It is 10 minutes up the road. Surely they can—

Mrs Stanley—But it isn't here.

Mrs Gray—When people in the community ring for the police, it often goes through to Gympie and they will tell you to wait, that they are on some other job. The other day I went to Barber Street, and there was an altercation there and the biggest mob of people were there, and they sent two police officers—after everything was over. And that happens all the time. After all the brawling and everything, the police come along.

Senator FURNER—Was that two Cherbourg police officers, or Murgon police officers?

Mrs Gray—I am not sure. Who is that one with the blonde hair? Does she work in Cherbourg?

Mrs Stanley—I do not know.

Mr Costello—She is based here.

Mrs Gray—Nine out of 10 times, though, they are not out here. They are always in there. Even with our community police, at least we had those guys here, working in the community, and they could stop those sorts of things from happening. Now we haven't got any community police.

Mrs Stanley—We are very concerned about violence in our community. Also, we would like to talk to you about the Barambah regional medical centre. We do not think that they are running it properly. Of the people on the board, two have been there forever, since it opened—they have been on that board all that time. And, to tell you the truth, they are not really educated. Also, that same family has got two other nieces on that board, haven't they? There are five family members.

Mr Costello—Five out of the seven board members are family—

CHAIR—One family?

Mr Costello—Yes—or related. We have been on this case for probably the last three years or more. Every time we have asked for help from the state government and, for that matter, from the federal government there have always been blockers put up in front of us—there is always something. As we said, it is run by one family. They think that they own the centre. The people of this community are coming to us—I work with these ladies on this particular issue—and saying that they will not use that centre because of that family. That family have been on that board since day one. It is all rigged at every meeting. They have a very big family within the community and at every AGM they have all their family there and they are voted back in every year. It is the same old thing every year. There is nothing we can do because it is done through the AGM.

Both Grace and I were on the board there at one stage. As we said, where were the two odd ones out of the seven; the other five were family members. That is how they work it every year. I asked the federal government body, ORIC, if they could come up and we could have a look at the constitution and maybe we could change some of those board members.

CHAIR—Did ORIC come?

Mr Costello—No.

Mrs Gray—There was one—

Mr Costello—I am sorry, once, and they got rid of him then. ORIC got rid of him because he was helping us at one stage.

Senator ADAMS—What is the term within the constitution? There surely should be a certain term for board members and then they have to be up for re-election. Is it a three-year term?

Mr Costello—I am not 100 per cent on the wording. I think part of the wording is that after every two years there would have to be a change—I am talking about the chairperson. But the chairperson has been there for eight or nine years and she is still the chairperson.

Senator ADAMS—It is up to the community, really, to go and vote them out.

Mr Costello—What we are saying is that we did say: 'Righto, let's beat these fellows at their own game. We'll go down and get membership forms and get members on so that when the AGM comes around we have got the numbers there to get them out.' We have actually done that. What happened two weeks later? We voted her out. What happened next? She is back on there. Who put her back in there?

CHAIR—How did that happen?

Mr Costello—You ask them that question.

CHAIR—Remember, this is a committee of parliament, not of government. I think this is a matter that, with the consent of my colleagues, we as a committee will bring to the attention of ORIC. We will provide them with the *Hansard* of your evidence. They will respond to us and we will make sure that we provide that response to you. If there are any inconsistencies in terms of their constitution and the act, we will ensure something results from that.

Senator FURNER—Can we flesh out some more information on this particular subject. I would like to get some understanding of what funding they receive from government, if you are aware of that.

Mr Costello—I do not fully understand that, but it is millions of dollars.

Mrs Gray—It is a lot of bucks, yes.

Senator FURNER—As financial members, do you view their annual reports?

Mrs Stanley—At the AGM—

Mrs Gray—That is another thing, if you want to take the time to, and I have because I worked there at one stage. I had no trouble with those people. It is because I am a member there and I have been for a long time. It is just that the things that they do are not appropriate at all, like using the work vehicles for their own purpose and having barbecues where they take their families along. That is a medical centre. Everybody in this community and in the South Burnett district should be able to use that medical centre without having to go down there and find those family members sitting around there and swearing and carrying on. A lot of people will not go there because that family is there.

Mr Costello—They are not very well respected in this community anyway. I want to give another example. I went down there the other day and asked for the minutes of the meeting. I am a member and I wanted to see the minutes of the previous meeting. They said straight out, ‘No, you can’t have them. You can’t have the minutes.’

CHAIR—Clearly, the evidence you have provided today will be of interest. ORIC will have an interest in some of the allegations you have made. There is not time and I do not think it is useful for you to continue to provide such evidence to us, but we will write to ORIC. We will follow it up as a committee. No doubt ORIC will act and investigate the allegations that you have made. That is their role. I can assure you that, coming from a committee of parliament, the information will attract significant interest.

Mrs Gray—A lot of people have been through there. They have been sacked or have given notice. There are that many people who have been affected—even doctors. It is hard to get doctors out in the country. We had a husband and wife who were Africans, and they were lovely people. They were both sacked. They were put off. So was the nurse. Look at all the staff that have gone through there.

CHAIR—As I said, we will provide the *Hansard* to ORIC. Do you have any other issues before we go to questions?

Mrs Stanley—Have you spoken to health?

CHAIR—We spoke to the Barambah Regional Medical Service this morning and the Cherbourg Community Health Service.

Mrs Stanley—I am just worried about this van. There is a van, it is painted and they call it the Deadly Ears. Did you hear about that? I was told they are not getting any more funding. There is only one man who can work that van, and he goes right up to Blackbutt and back this way. He said to me that they may not be getting any more funding for the Deadly Ears program. It is a program that is really needed in this community.

Senator MOORE—Everyone is very appreciative of the Deadly Ears program, so we will follow that up.

CHAIR—As Senator Moore has indicated, many individual members of the committee have been asking for evidence on hearing. We will write to the minister for health, who is responsible for the Deadly Ears program, and seek some confirmation about the future funding arrangements for the Deadly Ears program in Cherbourg. We will now move to questions.

Senator ADAMS—I want to go back to the petrol sniffing issue. Are you having any input into that? Are you trying to deal with these people? Where are you going for help?

Mrs Gray—I work as a support person. We are helping to organise the SOS program—snuff out sniffing. Children at the school are doing things. We are going to have the big day, the launch, on the 28th, at the school. So we have that program. The Safe Haven mob deal with that too. They deal mainly, though, with domestic violence. For the snuff out sniffing program I work with families—I have about 10—where the

children are kept away from the community for a day or two days just to get them out of the environment. To some it has made a difference. They have parents who experience domestic violence and the husband might have gone to jail. We have got a couple of families now where the parents are not drinking and the children are not sniffing. I just like working with families and trying to get them out of that situation. Sniffing is not going to go away—it is still happening—and sniffing is why there is a lot of violence. It is all young people committing violence here against one another.

Senator ADAMS—That is the sort of thing that your women's group helps with—

Mrs Gray—Yes.

Mrs Stanley—Anything to do with children.

Senator ADAMS—Mrs Langton, have you got anything to say? I know you are very shy, but you can tell us.

Mrs Langton—I have five children. I am a foster carer and have been a carer for 18 years now. I have children who have been sexually abused—I have looked after them through that. I also have other children off the street. I have made my house a safe haven for children to come off the streets whenever they want to.

Senator ADAMS—Do you just do that voluntarily? You are not given any financial help to look after these children?

Mrs Langton—I get government carer's money. But I just take children off the streets. I have about 13 or 14 children sometimes—

Senator ADAMS—Goodness!

Mrs Langton—I have got five bedrooms to take them in. They are mainly girls. I have only got one boy amongst them. The rest of the kids are girls.

Senator FURNER—Can you explain what happens, whether on a night or a day, with the 30-odd children that come through your house? How do you deal with that? What happens?

Mrs Langton—We just watch movies and we talk. I have five of my own and we are very close, my children and me. We have a lot of family talks. As big as my children are—they are in their 20s now—we still have family talks. We involve some of the children off the streets and we can do anything with them.

Mrs Langton—My husband plays in a band and he helps the kids too. He teaches them to play the guitar or sing. We do karaoke now sometimes whenever they come. That is all I do. I just look after a lot of children.

Senator FURNER—Do you start getting through to them about the problems that they are getting involved in?

Mrs Langton—Yes. I had a couple of big fellas there—in their 20s—who said, 'What are you rushing there for? It's just too strict.' The kids reckon that they would rather stay there because they are safe. We talk. That is all we do; we do not do anything but talk. I have a lot of them back there all the time. I have got one now looking to move in with me, because I have got the sisters. The other sisters were one and two—they are 15 and 16 now—and their baby sister is looking to come back into my care too. She wants to be with her sisters. I am trying to—

Senator MOORE—Mrs Langton, where are the original parents? Are they in Cherbourg as well or are they from somewhere else? Do they still see their parents?

Mrs Langton—They are my sisters, my family.

Senator MOORE—So it is part of kinship. In kinship, providing the safe place gives the kids safety, but mum and dad can still see them as well. So it is the best arrangement.

Mrs Langton—Yes. I try my hardest to get the parents to come and see their children, but they do not come so—

Senator MOORE—But at least they have not been taken from Cherbourg, which is what you have been able to do. Are there many children who are taken from Cherbourg and, because of trying to find carers, have to leave the community—

Mrs Langton—Yes. I have five other grandchildren but they live in Murgon. We have had to do a lot of fighting for them because their father is white and their mother does not allow us to see the grandchildren. But I stand up with these two here and try to get my grandchildren out now and then whenever I can—

Senator MOORE—Just to have access would be good. What about in the other families—I know that there have been issues with Cherbourg—have children been taken completely from the region for safety purposes or have you been able to keep most of them with people like Mrs Langton who opens her home?

Mrs Gray—I know some children who have been taken. But the ones I know stay with kinship carers—either with their grandmother in Maryborough, Brisbane or somewhere.

Senator MOORE—There are people from Cherbourg in so many places. If you turn around you will find someone from Cherbourg! So you have been able to link them with family?

Mrs Gray—Yes.

Senator MOORE—That is fabulous.

Mrs Stanley—But some of our children are with non-Indigenous people.

Senator MOORE—Away from here?

Mrs Stanley—Yes.

Senator MOORE—Do they come back for visits?

Mrs Stanley—I think some of them do. I work in a school in Murgon, and I see these children. I know who they are and who their families are. Their carers are non-Indigenous, but they seem to be happy.

Senator MOORE—As long as the carers know and understand. That is important. I know that is part of the issue with the department—trying to ensure that kids come first and, if they cannot find family, at least they find people who understand the Aboriginal heritage so they are not removed from that. So that is working okay?

Mrs Stanley—Yes.

Senator MOORE—Good.

CHAIR—Are there any more questions?

Senator ADAMS—I would just like to congratulate you all on what you are doing. It must be very beneficial to the community. Mrs Langton, well done. You did not want to talk about it, but thank you for your evidence. It is very important to know that there are people like yourself and your family to help the other children.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for taking time out of your busy lives to give evidence to us today. As you have seen by the questions, there is a lot of interest in the sorts of things that you do.

Senator MOORE—Has Mr Phil Reeves, the current Minister for Child Safety, been to see you? We will follow that up. If he has not come, he should.

CHAIR—As I was saying, there may be some questions on notice, where we do not have all the information. So we will write down those questions and the secretariat will send them to you. If you could do your best to answer them, that would be lovely. If you also have any further information that you think we may need to know, talk to the secretariat and you can send us that information or ask further questions. Thank you very much for the evidence that you have provided today.

Committee adjourned at 4.23 pm