



# **COMMUNITY SUPPORT AND SERVICES COMMITTEE**

**Members present:**

Mr A Tantari MP—Chair  
Mr SA Bennett MP  
Mr MC Berkman MP  
Ms CL Lui MP  
Dr MA Robinson MP  
Mr RCJ Skelton MP

**Staff present:**

Ms L Pretty—Committee Secretary  
Ms K Swaine—Committee Support Officer

## **PUBLIC BRIEFING—OVERSIGHT OF THE FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES COMMISSION**

### **TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS**

**Thursday, 18 April 2024**

**Brisbane**

## THURSDAY, 18 APRIL 2024

**The committee met at 8.01 am.**

**CHAIR:** Good morning. I declare open this public briefing for the committee's inquiry into the oversight of the Family Responsibilities Commission. My name is Adrian Tantari, member for Hervey Bay and chair of the committee. I would like to respectfully acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today and pay our respects to elders past and present. We are very fortunate to live in a country with two of the oldest continuing cultures in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people whose lands, winds and waters we all share. Other committee members with me here today are Mr Stephen Bennett MP, member for Burnett and deputy chair; Mr Michael Berkman MP, member for Maiwar; Mr Rob Skelton MP, member for Nicklin; joining us soon will be Dr Mark Robinson MP, member for Oodgeroo, by phone; and Ms Cynthia Lui MP, member for Cook.

This briefing is a proceeding of the Queensland parliament and is subject to the parliament's standing orders and rules. Only the committee and invited witnesses may participate in the proceedings. Witnesses are not required to give evidence under oath or affirmation, but I remind witnesses that intentionally misleading the committee is a serious offence. I also remind members of the public that they may be excluded from the briefing at the discretion of the committee.

These proceedings are being recorded and broadcast live on the parliament's website. Media may be present and are subject to the committee's media rules and the chair's direction at all times. You may be filmed or photographed during the proceedings and images may also appear on the parliament's website or social media pages. I ask those present to turn their mobile phones off or to silent mode.

**BANKS, Ms Camille, Manager, Compliance and Legal Policy, Family Responsibilities Commission**

**MASSEY, Mr Wayne, Executive Officer (Corporate), Family Responsibilities Commission**

**WILLIAMS, Ms Tammy, Commissioner and Chief Executive Officer, Family Responsibilities Commission**

**CHAIR:** I welcome witnesses from the Family Responsibilities Commission. Good morning, Commissioner. I invite you to make an opening statement before we start our questions.

**Ms Williams:** It is always a pleasure to appear before the committee. I, too, would like to acknowledge the traditional owners on whose country we are meeting and gathering today and I would also like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the five communities with whom we have the pleasure of working.

I would like to thank the committee for its continued and genuine interest in the work of the FRC. I refer the committee to the recently tabled annual report of 2022-23 and my correspondence summarising our key achievements. I also refer the committee to the Family Responsibilities Commission's youth justice submission wherein the commission is seeking an amendment to the Family Responsibilities Commission Act, and I note this committee has oversight for our legislation.

I note and respect the committee's limited time and so I am happy to yield my time for the opening and be directed by committee members as to areas of interest in those documents, or you may wish to understand a little more about our operations post the tabling of that report.

**CHAIR:** Thank you. We will move to questions. I will move firstly to the deputy chair, the member for Burnett.

**Mr BENNETT:** I would like to start by acknowledging the FRC and the local commissioners and your determination and continued work in communities. I think the work you do is a real credit and we have witnessed that firsthand. In talking about the commissioners, are you able to enlighten the committee about the recruitment and selection of your commissioners? Do we still have a strong elder base that is willing to participate in the five distinct communities?

**Ms Williams:** I would like to thank the deputy chair for his question. For this new financial year the FRC has been fortunate to finally receive a funding MOU, which is multi-year. It is a three-year funding period which commenced on 1 July. That also has resulted in the Queensland government simultaneously appointing commissioners, including myself, for the duration of that funding period. Historically, local commissioner appointments—and similarly my own appointment—were aligned with the funding periods and the appointment process had limited lead-in time. There is now stability amongst the commissioners and two new commissioners have been appointed for Coen.

You may recall from our previous annual reports that we spoke about the risks to local authority, particularly in Coen, as a number of commissioners over the years had either retired or were no longer available to continue with their commission duties. We have broader clan representation in Coen. Although we are always seeking in particular more of a gender balance, we do not have male commissioners in Coen. We still struggle, in particular with Aurukun, with ageing commissioners.

One of the difficulties that we do have with all commissioners is that under the legislation the act prescribes eligibility requirements, and this is an issue that we have been advocating about for some time, at least through the period of my successive appointments for the last four years. Whilst I appreciate the responsibility and the need to ensure that local commissioners and commissioners such as myself are of distinguished stature and expertise, some of the requirements, particularly with local commissioners, mean that it is a very high bar for community members to meet. For example, a community member is unable—is disqualified from being eligible—to be a local commissioner if they have ever been the subject of a certain FRC decision such as an order, yet the act allows community members to be eligible to be a local commissioner if they had been found guilty of an offence and it is a spent offence or domestic violence. If there has been a domestic violence order but a period of time—I believe it is five years—has passed, a person is still eligible to become a local commissioner. Unfortunately, if they have ever been the subject of an FRC order and if we are regarded as an early intervention mechanism, they are disqualified from ever being a local commissioner.

The other component in terms of quality assurance and being part of appropriate regulations is for our commissioners to have blue cards. That also makes it very difficult. Although we have lots of interest from community members—it is important to renew local commissioners—the reality is workforce development, that pipeline, is very difficult. That therefore means increasingly each year added pressure is added onto the deputy commissioner and myself to balance our time across the five communities to supplement local commissioners' workloads. We would continue to recommend that the committee look at the eligibility requirements for local commissioners. My recommendation would be that if a community member has been the subject of an FRC decision, a certain decision such as an order, a period of five years is to pass—similarly to domestic violence—and they could be considered as part of the recruitment process.

**CHAIR:** Before I move to the next question, I would like to mention that the member for Oodgeroo has joined us by phone.

**Ms LUI:** You mentioned the male-female representation in Coen and trying to get that gender balance right. Can you talk about the other communities and whether or not there is a good gender balance across the board?

**Ms Williams:** Historically, I understand there was a higher number of male commissioners—this is over the 15-year history of the FRC. At the moment we have more female commissioners than males. I do not have the percentages in front of me, but I would suggest that in every community percentage wise we have more females than males. We certainly have male commissioners in every other community but Coen.

**Ms LUI:** I have a follow-up question with regard to the blue card. This is something I hear quite a bit in remote communities. I was wondering if you could describe the types of challenges that you face or you see with recruiting commissioners in community.

**Ms Williams:** I would like to thank the member for Cook for her question. I note that the member is also our local member for some of our communities in Cape York. Thank you for always showing an interest in our work and the progress of our clients, your constituents. On the issue of the blue card, first of all I should say I formerly had a role in the Queensland Family and Child Commission and was part of the executive team that initiated the blue card inquiry. I subsequently moved out of that particular commission before that inquiry was completed. It is an issue that I am aware of broadly for Queenslanders. In another former role I used to hear appeals in QCAT for blue card applications, so I bring that perspective.

In terms of my role as commissioner—and I can speak only with regard to challenges for our personnel and also for our clients, our community members, because we only have jurisdiction for a subset of community members—one of the issues was, first of all, that of infrastructure. In terms of simple things such as meeting the time requirements for blue card applications or if there are requests to submit additional information to Blue Card Services, the infrastructure such as mail through the post is difficult. It could be mail not arriving in time and community members do not have postboxes at their house. They have to go down to the agency that administers Australia Post. Then there are issues of capacity of community members in order to read the correspondence from Blue Card Services and then prepare a response. Although there may be supports in community that can help with literacy, from my experience having been on QCAT they need to have an understanding of the legislation and an idea of the kind of evidence that the decision-maker may wish to have that is considered relevant to reconsider the matter. It is that expertise that is missing.

Fortunately for our commissioners and staff, the commission will assist our commissioners in applying for, reapplying and renewing their blue cards. General community members do not have the access of the FRC to do that or to assist them with even basic information, like saying, 'You may have committed an offence but what might be relevant to the decision-maker is understanding your networks, the attempts and the strategies that you have put in place through counselling and ongoing relationships with Apunipima.' Most Queenslanders would not necessarily understand those evidentiary processes, let alone our most vulnerable community members.

On another issue, I am not prepared to put an opinion but I would at least suggest that it may be meritorious for there to be a designated review on whether there is merit in blue cards having some kind of provisional or restricted basis for First Nations people living in remote communities. I would not want to pre-empt the merit of that, but there needs to be an appreciation that access to and the ability to be eligible for a blue card has continuously been an issue that most people recognise has been a difficult bar for First Nations people to meet. I am aware of some of our clients who are seeking employment at the school to be a bus driver. They have no intention of leaving their community and only want to be the groundsman in their community but they may not ever be able to get a blue card under current arrangements. A possible suggestion that is worth exploring is whether there could be a provisional or restricted blue card available with restrictions applied—limited to a jurisdiction or location, limited to while a person is in a certain role and reviewed on a regular basis, which could be yearly or twice a year—and that provisional status would be suspended should their circumstances change.

The FRC in its submission to the ATSIP department as part of the future directions review of the commission—and I believe I have provided the former chair with a copy of the submission for the committee—had recommended that a role the FRC could play in our community in terms of blue cards is the provision of information to the decision-maker if consented by our clients. How that would work is, if one of our clients was applying for a blue card and if they wanted to be able to demonstrate all the supports they are engaging in under an FRC decision, perhaps arrangements could be made that they could consent for me as commissioner to release to the decision-maker a certification to say that this client is a client of the FRC and has been ordered or has agreed with the FRC to participate in drug and alcohol programs, anger management programs et cetera and is on a period of income management voluntarily. Then it is a matter for the decision-maker as to how much weight he or she might like to place on the independent report or certification from me as an independent officer.

**Mr BERKMAN:** I am really glad you could join us this morning. Thank you for your time. You have provided the committee and another committee with really useful information about the dysfunction of the youth justice trigger. Obviously, youth justice has become a huge issue here in parliament, in community and in the recently dissolved committee. Despite differences of opinion, one of the underlying points of agreement is the vital importance of early intervention and prevention. Can you outline for the committee what the consequences are for those early intervention programs and supports for young people of that youth justice trigger just not operating for the last decade?

**Ms Williams:** I would like to invite my colleague Ms Banks to provide a response first and then I will add to that.

**Ms Banks:** From the FRC's point of view, the longer it takes to operationalise the youth justice trigger, which already exists in the legislation, the more missed opportunities there are for early intervention and that holistic community response and support. Operationalising the Childrens Court trigger or the youth justice trigger represents a very effective and also cost-efficient way that the FRC can contribute to the youth justice crisis that is current in our communities and elsewhere in Queensland. We believe we can make a real difference to the trajectory of some of these young offenders in our communities. As the commissioner mentioned, it is within the remit of this committee,

having oversight of the FRC Act, to assist to progress this change. We also think it is a complementary intervention. The FRC's trigger and the FRC's legislative framework has a focus on parental responsibility rather than the safety of the child. I guess that is another point of difference for the FRC as well.

In relation to your question in terms of the consequences, yes, the commissioners have been crying out for the youth justice trigger to be operationalised for some time, as have other members and leaders of our communities. We believe we can make a really strong contribution. There are many benefits for the trigger to be operationalised as soon as possible.

**Ms Williams:** If I could add to that, the FRC provides a holistic response, a multidisciplinary response, because in our legislation there is the ability under a case plan instrument to join up multiple agencies through a linked service system. What exists now is that, because our commissioners live in community, they have an idea of who is offending, but it is very difficult to have an honest conversation with a parent about that child's alleged offending. Even if that young person is convicted, that child may not necessarily be residing with their parents, so the parents may not know the extent of the offending or the parents may not wish to be honest about that child's offending. In the absence of the trigger, it means I do not have authority to receive information from the courts, from the police, that relates to the circumstances of that offending.

I have been in a conference in Hope Vale where we were able to conference a parent on another notice because we could not receive the Childrens Court notice. The act allows us to take into account and speak to the parents and family members about other relevant information, so we will mention concerns about the young person's behaviour and possible involvement in activity. If the parent denies it, there is nothing further we can do. If the parent volunteers and asks for help, then we could provide support on a voluntary basis, but it is very hard to have an honest conversation about the extent of the issues. To make it very clear, this is not about double jeopardy of punishing again the young person; our triggers are to identify what are the causal factors that have led to it.

The other risk that is perpetuating disadvantage and challenges in our community is that at the moment there are programs—whether it be through sentencing options or other early interventions—that are focused on the young person and their changed behaviour, but if those children return to their household and that family has not changed with that child to support them in their new behaviour, it really is a wasted opportunity. It is very hard for that child in that dysfunctional and potentially toxic environment to try to turn their life around without their family simultaneously being supported—and to understand why dad's DV is creating circumstances for the child not wanting to be at home or why particular trauma in the household may have contributed to some kind of cognitive impairments in the child.

The reinstatement of the FRC's trigger is not about choosing this option over another option or policy. This is a complementary measure to add value to the existing suite of programs and interventions that are already in place, but this is a particular focus on the entire household and kinship if required.

**Mr BERKMAN:** That was a really helpful answer, thank you. We are obviously well aware that the FRC's operation is confined to those prescribed communities. Could you help the committee with any further information on how much movement there is from those cape communities to other regional centres like Cairns and Townsville? I am trying to flesh out how the absence of those courts and those mechanisms in community relates to the issues that are kind of more visible in those other larger regional centres.

**Ms Williams:** That is a very good question and thank you for providing me with the opportunity to respond. First of all, the FRC was originally set up as a trial in the four communities in Cape York. Doomadgee is an illustration of a community being able to join. To become part of the FRC model is through a regulation and an instrument. There does not need to be an amendment to our act.

What I know about our clients or the children of our clients is that they are mobile. Although they may have their family and their traditional connections to the communities in which we operate, they are very mobile—into Cairns and down to Townsville. Some may even be in boarding school in Brisbane or Toowoomba and for various reasons might become disengaged at school. The FRC Act was designed to take into account the mobility of First Nations people, so the jurisdiction test that we have is not limited to a person living in a community and the offending happening there. As it is in Coen, we conference non-Indigenous people because they are community members. We need to be able to show that there has been at least three months residency in a community since the commencement of the act and that there is still ongoing connection with that community.

Under the powers of our act we receive information about people's addresses, et cetera, for me to be satisfied that there is a sufficient connection with that community. For example, when there was the unrest in Aurukun and 200 community members were displaced and moved—some to Cairns—we were still able to, under our jurisdiction, conference those members in Cairns even though they are connected to Aurukun. In order to operationalise the youth justice trigger, we would need some education of the courts in Cairns and Townsville, even perhaps the registry in other larger regional centres, so that their registrars and the court are aware that if there is a connection to one of our five communities they are compelled—there is no discretion—under the legislation to provide me with the details of the offence and then the legislation requires me to take into account a number of considerations to determine whether it is appropriate for me to list that matter for conference with the elders.

I get input from the elders as to the use of that power. It is very proportionate. For example, in relation to school attendance, we might receive a notice for a child not attending school, but a closer inspection of the facts is that that child was with mum down in Townsville because mum was giving birth and there was no other caregiver. I would not conference mum in that circumstance, but if I saw that there was a pattern of behaviour or mum had to stay in hospital because of difficulties with that birth then it might prompt a conversation of conferencing other family members to say, 'As a family, what are you going to do about supporting mum and her children?' Those are conversations that are had at conference by our local commissioners. Under our legislation that is how the youth justice trigger operates. It is no different to the other triggers proportionately and with extreme care as required by the act.

**Mr SKELTON:** Volunteer referrals to service providers have increased from 14 in 2020-21 to 55 in 2022-23. This is a significant increase. Could you tell us about how community attitudes have changed in this space?

**Ms Williams:** This is an area of our operations that we are extremely proud of. The FRC has two predominant avenues in which we can interact or engage with our clients: one is mandated through the triggers and the other is purely self-referral. I would hope all of us in this room—appreciating that from time to time we all have peaks and troughs in our life with our children and family and we might need support—have our own networks to pull us aside and say, 'It is okay and I recommend you go and see this person or go to this organisation.' The hope for the FRC for our clients that we work with as per our legislation, those that are mandated to come because we have received the trigger or the canary in the coalmine to say something is happening, is that we need to invite these people to come and have a conference so that we can have these conversations. Where we need to get to is the normalisation of help-seeking behaviours that I have just described that we experience.

**Mr SKELTON:** It has been a problem.

**Ms Williams:** That is right. The first step of that is for the FRC building up the trust over time of community members saying, 'Well, I have experienced the FRC. I have seen the FRC. I have got a problem,' and now there is no legal reason for me to insert the powers of the FRC, but they are choosing to come to the commission to say, 'I've got this problem happening in my life.' When a community member comes in for voluntary income management, what our data is showing post this report—our most recent data from 1 July to the end of March—is that we have 50 conditional income management orders and 83 voluntary income management orders and 54 per cent of those voluntary income management orders were people who were previously on CIM where we have administered as a decision of last resort because their circumstances are of such risk that they must be on income management. Our current data is showing that more than half of our voluntary management orders are from people who used to be on CIM. Then we have another percentage of people who have never had an intervention with the FRC coming to the commission. That is where we want to go and that is what I am extremely proud of.

We have seen a trajectory, at least since I have started appearing. You might remember that when I first came about 4½, five years ago I talked about how we were starting to see a change in orders to family responsibility agreements where clients are coming to conference and they are agreeing to have support. That was demonstrating to me some insight into their offending or their conduct. What we are now seeing is people who have no requirement to be with the FRC seeing the FRC as an advocate. Credit has to be given, of course, to those individuals, but credit also has to be given for the fact that the FRC during COVID was one of the few entities that maintained a presence. We worked extremely hard to find a way where we could comply with the health directives and ensure the workplace health and safety of our commissioners and staff to continue to provide a presence on the ground for our clients, because we knew that is when they were most vulnerable. We built up that

trust and then of course increasingly, although there are still capacity issues of our service providers, our clients are saying, 'We are ready for help.' The risk that we have is that there is not enough help available. There may be programs on the ground, but there are concerns—as we have even in our own organisation that I spoke about in relation to commissioners and about the workforce pipeline—to actually deliver those services, including at the school.

**Dr ROBINSON:** Earlier you spoke about early intervention with some of the young people, some of the struggles and some of the obstacles and barriers you faced. Excuse me if I have missed some of that somewhere, but I want to widen that in terms of youth crime more broadly, which seems to have increased in some areas. Can you outline and tease out a bit further some of the barriers that you face? You have already talked about some of the early intervention issues. Can you widen the scope of that in terms of how the FRC is trying to tackle those issues? As a follow-up, if you have more detail on early intervention, that is of course fine too. Obviously these are very exhaustive topics, but wherever you feel it is helpful for the committee to more broadly understand the youth crime issues and how we can help.

**Ms Williams:** My assistance is limited to what I know about our clients and their children. The FRC's ability to intervene is limited. Certain conditions must be fulfilled first and satisfied, and they are that they are within jurisdiction and we have received a trigger notice or there is a referral or a voluntary referral from the person themselves. The ability for the commission to exercise its powers is time limited. Our interventions, in order to respect human rights, can only be for a period anywhere from three to 12 months. They cannot be longer than 12 months. Any time after that it would have to be a client volunteering for further assistance or we would have to wait until those jurisdiction requirements are satisfied again—for example, we receive another notice of triggering conduct. That is our limitation. Every year, I believe, in the annual report there is a section about our notices. We do a breakdown of the notice type. In particular I refer the committee to page 31. It is a table and it has 'CS', 'DS', 'DVB'. Those are shorthand for child safety, District Court and domestic violence breaches, as an example. The reason we report these is because we want to make the point that our clients experience complex behaviours—they demonstrate complex behaviours. Whilst the majority of our clients only present to us on a single notice type—the majority of our clients might only get, for example, education notices or they might only be housing notices—about a third of our clients have multiple notice types. What we have been noticing for a number of years is the trend of a mixture between child safety, court notices—this is the parent—and education notices. Sometimes in the courts it is a DV. What that says to me is the complexity and the level of entrenched disadvantage and dysfunction in the household. I have been measuring what we call complex conferences, so the matters that require the significant time and resources of the commission.

Since 2020 what I would define as a complex conference was approximately 53 per cent of our matters. Currently for this present financial year 67 per cent of all of our matters that we conference are deemed complex. It requires a significant amount of work beforehand and conferences are taking longer with additional parties attending, and we have now had to implement intensive case management after conference to support these families. To be quite specific with your question, it is the behaviours of the parents that are impacting the young person's life outcomes. We also know that, for adults who have been named as offenders in court notices, their issues are becoming more and more complex. Unless we start improving the capacity of service delivery in communities, the household issues are going to compound. The answer is not as simple as more programs; it is ensuring that there is a pipeline of staff that are able to have an ongoing presence in community that are qualified to deal with these increasingly complex behaviours that a subset of community members are exhibiting, including young people. I will refer to my colleague. She also has a contribution.

**Ms Banks:** I wanted to add that I think potentially what is missing in some of the other interventions for young people or young offenders is the holistic approach. Indeed, the FRC offers a model of accountability that is different to traditional Western models of accountability such as the courts. We understand, through research, that culture and family are protective factors in reducing the risk of recidivism. The FRC Act in fact sets out that Aboriginal tradition must be taken into account when commissions are making decisions.

Picking up on what the commissioner mentioned, the additional benefit that the FRC has is that it provides a fulcrum between not only the individual accountability of the young person and the family but also the service providers. Through our case management and monitoring powers, we are also able to hold the service providers to account so that once a referral is made we can then ask for information about how that person is going. Indeed, we have our intensive case management program where families who require that assistance can access those services. In terms of other

interventions that may have different approaches and through the criminal justice system focus solely on the behaviour of the child, the FRC offers quite a holistic approach that focuses on the changed behaviour of the families and, indeed, the communities of the young offenders.

**Ms Williams:** For our communities, we are part of the solution as to what has been identified are the problems. I note and refer the committee to the covering letter of the submission from Robert Gee, Director-General, to the Youth Justice Reform Select Committee which states—

This relatively recent trend is also characterised by young offenders who have been observed to have or demonstrated multiple or chronic risks: one or more parents in or have been in custody; misuse of substances including more serious drugs; significant violence and disadvantage in the home; poor parenting or lack of parenting support; lack of stable accommodation ...

It continues. The reinstatement of the FRC's trigger will help allow a further joining up of those interventions. We are not the only solution, but we are part of the solution.

**CHAIR:** Commissioner, it is noted within your report that school attendances, in notices that were issued in the year, were approximately up by 8.5 per cent from the previous year. We know there is a correlation between disengagement of youth in school and behavioural issues outside of school. I have noted that you have actually instituted an Elevated School Response program. Can you outline what you do with regard to that Elevated School Response and how you go about implementing that program within those communities?

**Ms Williams:** It is a pleasure to speak on that point. I have asked our team to provide me with an analysis of our Elevated School Response programs in Aurukun, Doomadgee and Mossman Gorge for student participants for term 1. Let me make this remark first: school attendance levels, particularly in Doomadgee and Aurukun, are at unacceptable levels. The FRC is not a school attendance model; we do not have jurisdiction for all students. However, what I can say about the students of our clients who participate in Elevated School Response is that we have seen an overwhelming increase in school attendance. Before I explain that actual statistic, I will answer your question about what it is.

In a previous annual report—and I think in a previous committee appearance—I made the statement that those school attendance levels are unacceptable. Not only is it a response for the department and for parents, but it requires a whole-of-community response and a whole-of-government response because of the entrenched issues, the interconnection of issues. As a public sector entity with my executive team colleagues, with the commissioners and with the staff, we had agreed that, if we state it is not acceptable and business as usual is not acceptable, what is going to be our response as an entity? We cannot fix the whole thing, but what can we do to support our clients?

We undertook a co-design process where we received feedback from parents and from the school and in particular, if we use the example of Aurukun, designed a temporary strategy to support our parents and clients. This is how it works in Aurukun: if a client comes to conference and we have received notices relating to school attendance, and there is an acknowledgement of those issues, we have the power to refer the client for my support service. Ordinarily, the school attendance program would be operational. That includes the school bus, as well as school attendance officers. For a variety of reasons, including the ability to fill positions, that bus in Aurukun is not regularly scheduled—does not operate. Sometimes teachers have to drive the bus. We have reported on safety issues of children going to school. The principal also identified that there was a cohort of students, whom we had identified are also children of our clients, who are a part of NDIS as well, so we had a priority list. The parents at conference said, 'Yes, we still want support.' We would make a referral under our legislation to the school attendance program, but knowing that that program is not operational, with the assistance of the Executive Officer of Corporate, we have made funds available out of our own budget to employ our commissioners in the mornings on some days. I make available our vehicle for our clients who have agreed on a case plan for the FRC to provide enabling supports to assist, to overcome some barriers to go to school.

In the absence of ongoing and regular parenting programs, it will essentially mean that the FRC commissioners will go to a parent's house, help that parent with some routines in the morning and, with the parent's consent, that child, sometimes with the parent, will hop in our car and we will ferry them to school and even assist the child settling in the classroom. We do not have capacity to do that every day because our commissioners are so elderly and I do not have enough commissioners. However, I am happy to continue this program for as long as the school needs it and the parents are happy to consent in the absence of a functional school bus and a student attendance officer program. Those are the criteria for the ESR and school attendance.



In three communities—Aurukun, Doomadgee and Mossman Gorge—we have a total of 153 student participants in term 1. We have data for 130 of those children. Of those 130 children, I will share the following: in Aurukun, we have 52 student participants in that term and we have data for 46 students. Of those 46, 91 per cent of those children had increased school attendance compared to the previous term.

**CHAIR:** That is good.

**Ms Williams:** For the previous term, we did not have jurisdiction or they were not part of the ESR program. For Doomadgee, we have 88 student participants in term 1. We have data for 71. We evaluated those 71 students on the data and 85 per cent of those students have increased school attendance.

For Mossman Gorge, we have 13 student participants. The model there is different insofar as the state schools provide a bus out. It was being reported to us from parents, students and even the school that children were not catching that bus because of behaviours on the bus. The bus drivers were concerned about safety issues on the bus, the school was concerned and then also there were reports from the parents that the bus driver who did not necessarily have familiarity with clients perhaps was not necessarily always picking up children at the right location, so I have made available our commissioners to be on that bus. Some 76 per cent of those students have increased school attendance. It is reported to the commission from the principals that there is settling of behaviours from home to school into the classroom. Again, I will continue to make our resources available to support the clients who are participants of our program while the school attendance program is able to be implemented in an ongoing manner with local people employed.

**CHAIR:** Thank you, Commissioner. Time is running short. I know committee members will have a whole range of questions they would like to ask. I will ask the deputy chair to ask the last question.

**Mr BENNETT:** It really is important to hear the success of FRC. I ask you to perhaps comment, if you are comfortable. I noticed on 13 April there was an article in the *Courier-Mail* about school attendance and the troubles of those students in Aurukun. I invite you to comment on that. From your experience on the ground in Aurukun with regard to the Thriving Communities reforms—and when we visited that community with you, we heard that that was really the desire of the community to have that decision-making peak body and the person to go to for those complex issues of the Wik people—would you be able to comment on the Thriving Communities reforms, particularly that decision-making body, and how that is running? We get very disturbed when we read those articles about kids feeling somewhat intimidated to go to school, or threatened in cases. It was quite a serious issue, wasn't it, that was raised?

**Ms Williams:** Yes. Thank you, member. I note the two parts to your question. In terms of Thriving Communities, I do not have a lot of visibility in that because I work very much on an individual basis with clients in the same way as a court, but it is also important for me to be aware of the broader structure. It just so happens that later today I will be receiving a briefing from the department. That will be one of the questions I will be asking: what is happening with various government reforms and policies in each of our communities? I do not have particular visibility of the implementation of Thriving Communities, but I am aware, for example, at the school that there is a board that has been established which one of our commissioners is on. I do not believe she is necessarily appointed because it is a commission's reserved role on the board; she just happens to also be a commissioner and have expertise in this school. That board is providing leadership to the school. Our commissioners and our local registry coordinator have close relationships with the now former principal and other staff at the school.

I am cautious to comment broadly on media reports because it relates to the entire school population and, as I explained, I do not have responsibility for the entire school population—

**Mr BENNETT:** If I can interrupt, Commissioner. For the broader community that have not been to Aurukun and seen that—we fell in love with the place and the work you are doing—those media reports on the broader statement of how those five distinct community groups are struggling to get the kids to school is probably what I was referring to. You mentioned the buses, and I guess your strategies are working in that space. My question was probably more about the article, not the specifics of it, but the added value of the challenges that the commission and the commissioners face dealing with that complex issue of school attendance. I was not trying to corner you. I will not ask you to comment on a *Courier-Mail* article.

**Ms Williams:** I appreciate that. There are lots of causal factors for that situation of the school attendance, but it is important that I at least offer to the committee that, because of the types of causes, the response and the solution are not going to be easy and simple. The other message I

have for the committee and to put on the public record—at least from what I know about our clients—is that it would be unfair and an injustice to them if there is a perception that our clients, the parents, do not want to send their kids to school or children do not want to go to school. As my Elevated School Response data tells you, when parents are supported, when children are supported, and there are a number of conditions—the environment is they are feeling supported and encouraged—the kids go to school. Aurukun has a history of good school attendance. I just want to leave it at that. It is not the case that this is a community of parents and kids who do not want to go to school. There are barriers.

Another question, of course, is the education outcomes. That is a different question. However, you also cannot discount the fact that Aurukun, Doomadgee and Mossman Gorge have children who have also been eligible for boarding school. The senior children who remain in community either have not been eligible for boarding school or have chosen not to go to boarding school, but you cannot look at education outcomes for a community and ignore those students that are successfully enrolled in and graduating from private schools throughout this country, and some are going on to university and some are employed.

It is a complex picture. There needs to be an acceptance that school attendance is at unacceptable levels. It cannot be business as usual for everyone and therefore we need a heightened, whole-of-community response and a heightened whole-of-government response. As the Commissioner of the FRC, along with our commissioners, I continue to offer my support and to have as much agility as possible to provide whatever assistance is required within the parameters of my legislation.

**CHAIR:** Thank you, Commissioner. With that, we are out of time. I want to thank you, Commissioner, Ms Banks and Mr Massey for being here with us today. That concludes the briefing. There is nothing outstanding from it in terms of questions on notice. Thank you to everyone who has participated today. Thank you to our Hansard reporters. A transcript of these proceedings will be available on the committee's webpage in due course. I declare this public briefing closed.

**The committee adjourned at 9.04 am.**