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EDUCATION, ARTS AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

Members present:

Mr NG Hutton MP—Chair
Ms W Bourne MP
Mr N Dametto MP
Miss AS Doolan MP
Mr JM Krause MP
Ms CP McMillan MP

Staff present:

Ms L Pretty—Committee Secretary
Ms H Radunz—Assistant Committee Secretary

PUBLIC HEARING—OVERSIGHT OF THE FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES COMMISSION

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

Monday, 28 April 2025

Brisbane

MONDAY, 28 APRIL 2025

The committee met at 9.02 am.

CHAIR: Good morning. I declare open this public hearing for the committee's oversight of the Family Responsibilities Commission. My name is Nigel Hutton. I am the member for Keppel 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, present and emerging. With me here today are: Corrine McMillan, member for Mansfield and deputy chair; Wendy Bourne, member for Ipswich West; Nick Dametto, member for Hinchinbrook; Ariana Doolan, member for Pumicestone; and Jon Krause, member for Scenic Rim.

This hearing is a proceeding of the Queensland parliament and is subject to the parliament's standing rules and orders. 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 hearing 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. Please remember to press your microphones on before you start speaking and off when you are finished, and please turn your mobiles phones off or to silent mode.

WEEDON, Ms Helen, Registrar, Office of the Family Responsibilities Commissioner

WILLIAMS, Ms Tammy, Commissioner, Office of the Family Responsibilities Commissioner

CHAIR: Good morning, Commissioner Williams. Would you like to make an opening address before the committee asks you some questions?

Ms Williams: Thank you, Chair. First, I would like to thank the committee for inviting Ms Weedon and me here today. I would also like to thank you for showing a genuine interest in the work of the commission, which was most evident when you travelled recently to Hope Vale. I appreciate that that took significant resources, particularly your time, and the Family Responsibilities Commission, our staff, our local commissioners and, indeed, the community are very appreciative.

Before I begin, I would like to recognise that the commission is in a period of sorry business at the moment. Not long after our appearance this morning, the Registrar and I will travel back to Cairns and tomorrow I will be travelling to Hope Vale to attend the funeral of a local commissioner. If the chair would indulge me, I would like to take a moment to recognise our local commissioner. Mr Victor Gibson OAM was awarded his Order of Australia Medal in recognition of his services to his community of Hope Vale. He was a founding local commissioner of the Family Responsibilities Commission and continued to serve until recently when poor health forced his retirement. Mr Gibson was also the deputy chairperson of the Hope Vale Aboriginal Shire Council from 2000 to 2002. Our thoughts are with his family and the local commissioners, especially local commissioner Priscilla Gibson, his wife, whom the committee had the honour of meeting during their visit. His sister Doreen Hart is also a founding local commissioner in Hope Vale. Unfortunately, too much sorry business occurs in our communities and it has a devastating impact not only on the operations of the commission but, most importantly, on the very fabric of the community.

If it would please the chair, I would like to yield the time to make the opening address to the Registrar. Thank you.

Ms Weedon: Good morning. I would like to thank the committee for the welcome and the opportunity for the commissioner and me, as Registrar, to appear today. I too would like to acknowledge the traditional owners on whose country we meet and also the traditional owners and elders of the five remote Indigenous communities in which the FRC is privileged to operate.

The FRC's annual report for the year ending 30 June 2024 was tabled in the Queensland parliament on Thursday, 6 March. The annual report provides detail on the commission's ongoing efforts to promote individual and community responsibility and improve social outcomes. I would like to talk briefly about some of the operations of the registry that underpin those efforts and some of the key strategic developments and evolutionary changes proactively being pursued by the commission.

The valuable work being undertaken in the communities we serve could not be achieved without the supporting, coordinating and administrative functions provided by the registry in Cairns. As a very small organisation operating without the benefits associated with larger government entities, the registry has excelled in developing the responsive skills necessary to operate in a dynamic and changing environment. In the spirit of innovation and advancement, the registry is always looking for opportunities to improve, and there have been some significant changes to operations.

Since the start of the 2023-24 reporting period, significant workforce planning has been undertaken, including eight staff—two within the executive management team—who have transitioned from temporary agency or higher duties contracts into the corresponding permanent vacancies in accordance with Queensland government recruitment principles and directives. As well as bringing increased commitment and security to individual roles, this permanent embedding has further solidified the team and made more robust the operational dynamics of the organisation. Reporting lines have been realigned in the corporate team to enhance workflows and productivity, and an additional qualified finance position has been established to better the commission's ability to manage risk and allow for succession planning in business-critical roles. The registry has also successfully completed the first stage of its major ICT infrastructure upgrade, which included improving system security and compliance, significantly boosting the network speed and reliability, advancing to an improved system and migrating to the FRC's own Microsoft tenant.

Other significant key projects that previously had to be sidelined have now also commenced, including the much needed replacement of the commission's accounting software, the office relocation and the essential upgrade to the CRM database. These initiatives and changes within the registry continue to place the FRC in a position to move from strength to strength in achieving its strategic and operational objectives. However, it is very important to note that they were not possible without the three-year funding security that was granted in August 2023. The FRC received the greatest tenure of funding in its history and was finally able to implement these strategic projects and changes that better place the commission in a position to meet the needs and demands of its clients.

It would be remiss of me not to mention some of the evolutionary changes that have commenced within the commission's operations in the five communities. The FRC has moved from a predominantly formal conference-based model to an ever increasing client engagement model. Whilst there is still a need for formal conferencing, the FRC and its local commissioners are now better placed to interact with clients outside of the conferencing environment and encourage individual autonomy in decision-making. In order to facilitate this change in direction considerable registry and administrative processes and workflows have been analysed and reworked. The registry staff rose to the challenges of increased workload, new responsibilities and new processes, and the local commissioners embraced this new focus to best help their community.

This new strategic direction has seen significantly more clients and community members proactively seeking the advice and support of the FRC. The last financial year saw a record number of requests for voluntary case plans, with 176 voluntary agreements entered into. This represents a staggering 238 per cent increase from the previous financial year. This is a significant paradigm shift, noting that, prior to 2020, there were no voluntary case plans entered into by clients. Whilst there is still a need for conditional income management in some circumstances, the total number of clients on conditional income management at some point in the financial year was 54, representing only 10.6 per cent of finalised conference outcomes.

The FRC is also continuing to see strong numbers of voluntary income management as it proves to be a valuable tool to community members. The evidence suggests that having been the recipient of conditional income management is in fact a positive pathway to clients subsequently seeking a period of voluntary income management. Between 17 March 2021 and 30 June 2024, 55 per cent of voluntary income management clients had had a prior conditional income management arrangement. This demonstrates the steps that clients are taking to gain agency over their financial affairs and the responsibility that they are embracing to improve their personal circumstances.

Our clients report the numerous benefits that voluntary income management provides them, which include being provided assistance with budgeting to meet their financial obligations and household needs and even to save for a particular goal. Of particular note is the benefit some clients

report that voluntary income management helps protect them from financial exploitation, providing vital stability in domestic violence, elder abuse or coercive control situations, and helps protect the most vulnerable members of the household, including the elderly and children.

It is important to note that the success of this client engagement approach and the increase in voluntary engagement could never have been achieved if the commission was not valued and respected and if the FRC had not proved its worth in the communities it serves. The outcomes being achieved are testament to the FRC's professionalism and commitment, to the positive relationships that have been built with our stakeholders and to the trust that has been established and maintained by local registry coordinators and local commissioners in the community.

The commitment to change and the flexibility to adapt and evolve is bearing fruit, and the demand for FRC services continues to increase. Whilst it is not without its challenges, the FRC model is unique in its administration and operation and the evidence indicates that it is working. In closing, I would like to thank you again for the time allowed to make an opening address and acknowledge the bipartisan support received by the FRC and the very active and genuine interest shown by the parliamentary committee in the work and achievements of the commission. As the commissioner noted, the recent visit to the community of Hope Vale was very valued. We look forward to continuing to work with the committee. Thank you very much.

CHAIR: On behalf of the committee, I would like to express our condolences for the very sad loss to the community of Hope Vale. Thank you for taking the time to be with us today for this review at a time of sorry business. My first question is drawn from the annual report. The FRC has now served the communities of Far North Queensland for a period of 16 or 17 years. How does it continue to be relevant and where do you see it going in the future?

Ms Williams: Indeed, that is a question that I am often asked: where to from here? The Family Responsibilities Commission was established with policy settings from the Cape York Welfare Reform. In May 2022, I made a submission to the Queensland government. I provided the then oversight committee with a copy of that submission. That submission included the program, logic and theory of change of the policy settings for welfare reform of which FRC is a piece of infrastructure. In short, the program logic for welfare reform recognises those community members who are the most disadvantaged—I am talking about people who do not have a job, who are by definition in receipt of welfare payments or come from a family that are in receipt of welfare payments and who have undertaken antisocial behaviour of a kind that is noticeable to the commission through an agency notice. For that cohort of disadvantaged people, the theory of change recognises that there are some basic building blocks of individual capability and confidence. It moves from steps of respite between periods of dysfunction and despair right through to engaging and taking personal responsibility and then, ultimately, enjoying the life we all enjoy. Whether you live in Brisbane, Cairns or Longreach, we all go through periods of hardship and disadvantage, but we have networks around us and the basic skills and support structure to look within our network and to demonstrate personal agency.

Ultimately, the goal of the FRC is to move from the commission being the point of reference for community members in their most vulnerable periods—as the Registrar outlined in the annual report—and people being compelled to come to the commission because they lack insight or do not have enough understanding or the ability to navigate the complex government or NGO system to engaging in a proactive way. That is what our data is showing. Ultimately the goal, per the program logic, is that community members are able to navigate that system themselves and that when they have periods of vulnerability, they can utilise their own networks. A key part of that is having a job, being able to transition off welfare and being able to make informed decisions for themselves about their livelihood and economic security.

Ms McMILLAN: Thank you so much, Commissioner and Ms Weedon, for travelling to be here. On behalf of the opposition, I acknowledge sorry business and share in your loss. I also acknowledge the number of First Nations people who lose their lives prematurely and the work that needs to be done. Commissioner, I have a philosophical question in relation to the role of the FRC. We know that First Nations people continue to be disadvantaged across our country as a result of 235 years of colonisation and the associated trauma for families. Can you talk us through the role that the FRC provides in developing distributive leadership throughout our five discrete communities and how that contributes to the self-determination which we know is so important for First Nations people?

Ms Williams: First of all, I draw the deputy chair and the committee to section 4 of the Family Responsibilities Commission Act. Section 4 is the main objects of the act and section 4(1) (b), in particular, states, 'to help people in welfare reform community areas to resume primary responsibility for the wellbeing of their community and the individuals and families of the community'. Section 4(1)

(a) also talks about building local authority. On that point, I would like to emphasise how the act, in terms of the order, lists community first. People automatically assume in the interpretation that 'local authority' only means local commissioners, but it then goes on to say, 'to help people in welfare reform community areas to resume primary responsibility for the wellbeing of their community and the individuals and families of that community'. So, yes, the FRC conferences individuals and makes legally binding decisions relating to an individual and their family, either by order or agreement, but my ultimate objective in administering this act is how I collectively support individuals to be in a position to make decisions for their community, to be empowered to start thinking of themselves as citizens of their community and to be inspired to take a leadership role.

That piece is often overlooked by government, even historically by the commission itself, because our focus has been on the individual. Ultimately, the end goal is building personal agency. We do that in two ways. The first is through the local commissioners who are appointed through powers under the legislation by the Governor in Council. Those commissioners are not appointed to be mere advisers to me; they are appointed as decision-makers. That is a real point of difference in terms of the structure of our organisation. Our enabling legislation makes them a decision-maker, as distinct from the justice group or even elders who sit on a Murri Court who merely advise the decision-maker.

The act requires the Registrar and I to ensure that not only staff but also local commissioners receive training. We invest heavily in the professional development of our local commissioners. That sometimes involves convening all 36 local commissioners to Cairns to undertake about a week's worth of training. We train them in conflict resolution and negotiation and bring subject matter experts in. For example, at the most recent conference with the local commissioners in Cairns 18 months ago, we brought subject matter experts from the domestic and family violence network in Cairns to talk about coercive control.

The deputy commissioner and I undertake training with commissioners about statutory interpretation and brief them about changes to government policy because, as a public sector entity, I also have to find relevance in our operations to the priorities of the government of the day. That is how we support building the capability of local commissioners, many of whom have very senior leadership roles in their community, but at an individual level for our community members, as we have been evolving and responding at their speed, at the speed of trust, we have now seen an increase in clients who want to self-refer to the commission and who want to be supported outside of a formal setting from conference. We maintain a case management relationship with that individual and their family for periods up to 12 months to help them to not only be their own advocate and navigate the service system in their community but also to link them into the opportunity hub. Those hubs were originally funded as part of the Cape York Welfare Reform package to help community members to access opportunities.

Miss DOOLAN: I would also like to pass on my condolences to Mr Gibson's family and the communities that have been impacted by his passing. My question is to Ms Weedon. I know you have mentioned the voluntary income management program and how it has increased in recent years and then steadied over 2023-24. Could you elaborate on why the uptake of VIMs has levelled and how you believe community attitudes have changed in that space?

Ms Weedon: It is significant to note that the absolute numbers of voluntary income management have remained steady for the last couple of years but the ongoing trend over recent years has shown significant progression upwards. The total number of requests for voluntary income management though has increased, as opposed to the number of arrangements put in place. I believe that the attitude around it is changing quite progressively because the FRC has established itself as an organisation of trust. Extensive time and effort is put into maintaining not only relationships with the clients but also relationships with the wider community and members of the community who are not clients as a result of a trigger notice that the Registrar has received.

Like anything, trust takes a while to build. It has to be earned and it has to be maintained and valued. I think that is an ongoing trend as members of the community and clients see that this is a mechanism that they can use to help support and protect themselves and their family members. It is humbling to see clients who make comments about how it has positively impacted their lives and their ability to take care of their children and provide for basic necessities such as school supplies, lunches and those kinds of basic things that may otherwise be taken for granted. It continues to be a work in progress, I think like all things, but the evidence definitely suggests that there is a positive trend there.

Ms Williams: If I could add to the Registrar's comments, there is also a historical context that I can brief you on that may shed some light on the question because the Registrar joined the commission in the past 18 months and this predates the Registrar's period—it is before her

commencement. First of all, the product has changed. The commission is the only entity in the country that has the ability to make a decision about income management that binds the Commonwealth secretary to the Department of Social Services that administers the Commonwealth payments. In every other jurisdiction in the country—you may have heard of the cashless debit card, for example. That is a mechanism out of Canberra. The settings have been established and it is applied generally in a uniform manner. In Queensland, it is the commission that determines that only if it is a decision of last resort or a person volunteers and our decision binds the secretary. Those settings have remained the same.

What has changed is the mechanism upon which clients access their funds. If you look at any of the graphs of the commission the Registrar refers to, at any one time there were approximately 20, if that, voluntary income management agreements each year before 2020. The mechanism that was used then was the BasicsCard. It was very basic technology. It just had a magnetic strip at the back. Clients were restricted to only those retailers that signed up to accept that card as a form of transaction, so basic card, basic technology. With our legislation those settings remained the same, but what then changed was the cashless debit card, which had a microchip. In around 2019-20, our jurisdiction finally received access to the cashless debit card, which meant our community members can use that card anywhere in the world, quite frankly, even for online shopping. It opened up our clients to online shopping and to travel with their card outside of their community and it would be used. There was a big uptake. That was part of the reason.

The other part of the reason you will see a slight change in the numbers is that now the period has started changing for our clients. Initially, our clients would sign up for three months or six months on a voluntary basis or the commission, as a decision of last resort, would consider that a time period at the lower end of the spectrum might be most appropriate for that client. What has happened is that because clients like it then, as opposed to signing up only for three months and having four applications a year, when it expires they want to sign up again and we are finding that they are signing up for longer periods. The individual number might decrease but the period might very well increase. It is technology driven, confidence and usability.

Ms BOURNE: My deepest condolences for the loss of Mr Gibson from Hope Vale. The report identified a variety of ongoing challenges for the FRC in terms of reporting, so the preparation of submissions to the Queensland and federal governments and also parliamentary committees. Would you mind expanding on that a little?

Ms Williams: This goes back to the question of the chair about relevance. I am very mindful, as the commissioner and CEO of this organisation, that we are a public sector entity and, yes, we are a commission and we have quasi-judicial responsibilities akin to, for example, QCAT, but unlike QCAT we are also a public sector entity. I have three lots of shareholders that I have to maintain relevance for: community or local government, the federal government and the state government. I have a statutory relationship with our minister and a working relationship with the department. I am very mindful that, as an independent commission but part of the Queensland public sector, my responsibility is to ensure that we find relevance to the agenda of the government of the day—the state government and the federal government. I am acutely aware of the need to ensure alignment with Closing the Gap, obviously at a federal level, and I am also mindful of state government priorities.

In order to ensure that government can have the benefit of the FRC's unique perspective, I find that it is best to be able to ensure that the FRC can provide briefings to appropriate ministers or directors-general, and also to respect the important role of committees and the parliament to ensure that the legislation that you consider in the House has relevance and impact for our very vulnerable community members. Consequently, the commission has started establishing a very small compliance and legal policy team. Until very recently, I was it so I am a jill-of-all-trades.

Currently, we have two very talented legally trained staff members who work part time. They have policy experience and they work with me in the preparation of submissions and briefs so that we can use the very privileged platform and access that I have to ensure that the voices of our local commissioners and our clients are able to be heard before a committee such as yours. The elder abuse submission that we have made to this committee is, in fact, a submission that we were honoured to prepare because they are a highly marginalised group. That is why I believe a good use of FRC resources is to build that capability to support those elders and our local commissioners to inform our submissions to your committee.

Mr DAMETTO: Thank you very much, Tammy and Helen, for coming along this morning to brief the committee and answer some of our questions. Tammy, I want to thank you for taking the time to show us around Hope Vale so we can have a better understanding of what the FRC does. It was invaluable to interact with the commissioners up there. Commissioner, thank you very much for your Brisbane

time up there. With any role or position, it is always good to have an ongoing funding source. I note that the report states that the three-year funding model is helping to retain commissioners and also adds a bit of longevity and some assurance that the FRC will continue into the future. Would you like to comment on how the three-year funding arrangement is working and any ways it could be improved?

Ms Williams: I will make some remarks and the Registrar has some remarks that she wishes to share. When I was appointed, I was appointed for nine months only. That was five years ago. Until the most recent MOU period—in which for the first time our local commissioners' and, indeed, the commissioner's and deputy commissioners' appointments are tied—the commission had to operate with its decision-makers being appointed without any certainty or any real sense of continuity and it was very difficult to ensure succession planning. I was appointed for nine months. The deputy commissioner, before I commenced, was not even reappointed, which placed the commission at extreme risk because, unlike other bodies that have a CEO, this is not a traditional CEO model where a deputy or anyone can fill the role of the CEO. It is by appointment of the Governor in Council. Officially, I must fulfil these functions continuously unless I have been granted leave by the minister and the deputy commissioner or another person is appointed as acting commissioner. That has happened only once during the period of my term. Although I might have a Christmas break, I am never officially relieved of my duties unless that occurs under, I believe, a section 24 acting appointment. To operate without a deputy during that period was extremely stressful for me and the commission. It meant that if something were to happen to me then the functions of the commissioner could not be filled by anybody. In fact, during that period I had a period of poor health but I had to keep working. There were decisions that had to be made.

On top of that, historically the commission's funding—and it is not just state; it could also be federal because we are funded by both entities. Unfortunately, the decision to fund whether the FRC should continue would often be delayed and made in the final quarter of the financial year. There was one year in which my appointment and the appointments of the local commissioners did not go through the process before 30 June so my term ceased, as well as that of all the commissioners, and the commission had to operate with no decision-maker. It was just the at the time, Ms Maxine McLeod. We were not the only entity. I believe that there was a process issue. At that time, our registrar wrote to the committee and we were all reappointed very shortly thereafter, but it was stressful. I had to stand down and we had no commission or commissioners. We have also had the issue over the past five years, except for these last two years, of our funding being 12 months or we might have a commitment for 12 months but by the time the funds were released from the Commonwealth to the state three to six months could pass so we would often have to report a going concern environment.

The executive management team, who is made up of the Registrar, the deputy commissioner and our head of finance, would prudently ensure that while we were operating we would always operate significantly under budget to ensure a surplus so that I was not in breach of any fiducial responsibilities should there be a delay in funding. That meant that for many years—and it predated my time when Commissioner Glasgow was the commissioner—we could not operate at full capacity because we had to always put money aside for a surplus to ensure that, if the commissioner were to be wound up, either Commissioner Glasgow or I could make good on all fiscal commitments either to staff, to leases or to other commitments. It also meant that important legacy and critical infrastructure could not be upgraded. I would never want to be in a position to sign a cheque for \$500,000 to upgrade our records management system if I only have a 12-month appointment or 12 months of funding.

As is in our current annual report and as the Registrar has remarked, because of the three-year funding and the three-year appointments—and the former committee were very good at advocating on our behalf—the executive management team could approach these three years in the following way: the first 18 months was a growth period, and we are growing, and we are now consolidating our operations. We do believe that the outputs and impact are a direct result of that stability and being able to grow the commission—not just our frontline service but also, in particular, our corporate team to ensure we have robust corporate governance and compliance processes that underpin our operations.

Our funding expires on 30 June next year. My appointment and all the commissioners' appointments expire. I would hope that the federal and state government through their CBRC process could start considering the proper funding requirements and resourcing needs of the commission not in early 2026 but in November this year to start informing the Treasury process, to start working with the Registrar about what is the true establishment that is needed for the commission to take the commission to that next level and, ultimately, to be responsive to other communities that very much have been requesting the Family Responsibilities Commission to work in those communities.

Ms Weedon: I would like to make a couple of additional points. Operating in a period of constant uncertainty, which has been the historical nature of the commission, has a psychological impact on the people working in the organisation in terms of not knowing whether the funding is going to continue and therefore whether there is going to be a job there at the end of the 12 months or the period of funding. The three-year funding agreement was a huge welcome relief. However, that time is going incredibly quickly, noting that we are almost about to enter into our final year of that funding.

What is significant as well to note is that when operating in such small finite periods of funding you cannot get traction on key projects and changes that are going to benefit the performance of the commission and its operations because we have to be continually mindful of our fiscal responsibility. Outlaying and agreeing to large sums of money to improve baseline systems would not be fiscally appropriate if the commission is then going to wind up in a matter of months. A lot of those key projects that I referred to in my opening address earlier have effectively been on the backburner for a number of years. It has been something that the commission has wanted to do—to significantly upgrade its customer relationship management database, to make vital improvements to its ICT infrastructure, to look to move to premises that can properly support what we are trying to achieve. None of those could be commenced with a short-term funding arrangement. It is just not possible.

Obviously in going through government procurement processes due and proper process takes time. By the time some of those would be completed, the commission could potentially be wound up. All of that impacts the performance. With a greater degree of stability you get better outcomes, and we are certainly seeing that.

To further answer your question, a longer term trajectory only improves our ability to be more strategic in our planning because the strategic plan that we have at the moment has a longer term vision but is still constrained by the fact that our funding is due to expire in June 2026. It is not difficult to imagine what we could plan for and what we could achieve if we had an even longer funding arrangement in place.

Ms Williams: With reference to the statistics that the Registrar read in her opening address, the commission's FTEs are quite small. We are an organisation with fewer than 25 FTEs. The Registrar stated that, in the 2023-24 reporting period, eight of our staff transitioned from temporary agency or higher duties contracts. It was very difficult for us to offer permanency to staff or be attractive to recruit through SmartJobs because we could not offer longer employment opportunities. That meant that a big source of our recruitment was agency. The mark-up of an agency contract was not particularly cost-effective. We have been able to make some savings in that regard, as well as ensure there was permanency for many of our staff, to be able to enjoy leave entitlements and even to see improvements in their own wellbeing.

CHAIR: Commissioner, with leave of the member for Scenic Rim, I would like to ask you a question in regard to performance indicators. On page 18 of the FRC annual report, 'Performance Indicator 6: Helping to Close the Gap on disadvantage for our clients in Aurukun, Coen, Doomadgee, Hope Vale and Mossman Gorge' states—

The Commission continues to develop an appropriate assessment tool to best measure our contribution to Closing the Gap targets across the 4-year term of the Strategic Plan—

which I know the Registrar just referenced—

The FRC hopes to report against this performance indicator in the future.

Would you be able to elaborate for the committee on what sort of assessment tool you are developing and what is the status of this work?

Ms Williams: The status is that it is ongoing. In order to develop the assessment tool, we first have to upgrade, as the Registrar said, our most basic platform—our records management system. Our CRM had actually expired its warranty. It was not eligible for upgrades because it had not been updated. The Registrar has been overseeing a procurement process. We have a successful tender to start upgrading that process to ensure that our records management system is fit for purpose. We are anticipating that there will be approximately six months worth of work which means we cannot make any changes to our system. We can operate while the contractor is developing that system and upgrading to a new system, a new platform. That is the first building block.

The other building block is brand new infrastructure. Even in Doomadgee we have had to think innovatively and engage Starlink. With the internet provider that we had originally, the connection would drop out. Even our telephones would drop out periodically in the middle of a conference call at Doomadgee. That is how basic we have had to upgrade our infrastructure. The first part is upgrading infrastructure—new laptops and hardware. Now it is the records management system. The next phase is our performance framework.

When thinking of the performance indicators for Closing the Gap, there are two parts to it. It is not just about the targets—for example, incarceration rate to decrease over a period of time by 15 per cent. There are targets, but there are priority reform objectives as well. An example of a priority reform is building capability of the community sector, empowering or sharing information with other partners. There are a number of actions that the Australian government has identified for government entities to prioritise in order to use as design principles when administering programs to achieve a Closing the Gap target.

We are currently working on a program in Aurukun. We have not officially launched it yet. We are quietly working on a pilot, but its design principles are very much based on how do we decrease over-representation? First of all, how do we empower First Nations people who are part of the criminal justice system to actually be part of it through having greater agency and confidence in the instructions they give their legal representative? What is the piece that the FRC can have in terms of sharing the information that we have with our clients and enabling our clients to share their information that they have with us and make it available to the courts and their legal representative? The FRC has been co-designing a program in Aurukun that looks at ultimately how we can reduce the incarceration rates of First Nations people from Aurukun in custody. We do that, first of all, by empowering our First Nations joint clients in that process so that the court can make an informed decision.

CHAIR: I think you have answered questions about the journey that you are on. Do you have enough access to data from localised communities? I am thinking of the role that the FRC plays and the fact that you have access to a whole series of metrics related to school attendance, incarceration and court related systems. The Closing the Gap KPIs are quite broad and not really community specific. Do you have access to enough data to help you to measure the work that you are doing against those KPIs?

Ms Williams: The issue with some of our data, when trying to measure our work, is that the data that is collected by agencies is often at a regional level or community-wide level. We operate at the individual level. A perfect example might be school attendance. I do not have jurisdiction for every child in Coen because not all children come under my jurisdiction as some of those children belong to families that work. The children who come under my jurisdiction are those that come from families that are unemployed or their family are in receipt of payments, so it is quite specific, individual unit level data. You cannot compare oranges to apples.

Another example would be the crime rate in a community. I do not have jurisdiction for every criminal in a community because there are some criminals who have jobs, and I do not have jurisdiction over them. You need to distinguish between meaningful data to the commission and understanding that, for many agencies, they just cannot maintain those data sets at that individual level. I appreciate that the community or regional-wide data gives you a sense of trends; it gives you a sense of issues. That is the first point I wanted to make.

The second point is we do incur pushback from other agencies, including NGOs, community-based organisations that do not understand the FRC's jurisdictional remit and will say, 'We do not need to comply with your data request.' A big part of the Registrar's time and my time is actually going through our legislation and trying to provide those entities with a statutory interpretation exercise so they understand that they must be compelled to provide me with information. On that point, I understand that the Acting Director-General of the Department of Women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships, Communities and the Arts, Kathy Parton, has written to a number of directors-general to make them aware of the FRC's powers, and to ensure their requirement to comply with our legislation. That is the first time that that has happened since I have been part of the commission.

Another example of where the lack of sharing of information in a coordinated way is a barrier, I refer you to my correspondence in the head of this meeting this morning which relates to the Queensland Corrective Services. That is an example where we have a power to receive information from the Commissioner for Queensland Corrective Services, pursuant to section 93 of the legislation. However, it is not disseminated to the commission in a coordinated way, therefore when we receive that information, it is either not timely or it is presented to us in a way that we cannot really make use of it in the most fulsome way that we should be able to. So, any assistance that the committee can provide in reminding ministers of their responsibilities and also to encourage greater sharing by the Commonwealth with the FRC and also the Queensland Government Statistician's Office would also be most helpful.

CHAIR: Thank you very much. I do apologise, Commissioner. I know that I have questions from both the deputy chair as well as the member for Scenic Rim. Time is coming to a close. We do have the Minister for Women and Women's Economic Security, Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Brisbane

Strait Islander Partnerships and Minister for Multiculturalism, the Hon. Fiona Simpson, along with the Hon. Leeanne Enoch, the shadow minister, both waiting for us. I will officially declare this hearing concluded. Thank you to everyone who has participated today. Thank you to our Hansard reporters, as well as our team from the secretariat. A transcript of these proceedings will be available on the committee's webpage in due course. I declare this public hearing closed.

The committee adjourned at 10.04 am.

PROOF