



*Growing Respect, Community & Leaders!*

Committee Secretary  
Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources Committee  
Parliament House  
George Street  
BRISBANE QLD 4000

## **Inquiry into the long-term financial sustainability of local government**

### **Submission: Aurukun Shire Council**

Aurukun Shire Council thanks the Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources Committee for the opportunity to address it today.

The Aurukun Shire is a very remote area of Queensland which is starkly different to most other Queensland shires. Our community is among the most disadvantaged in Australia but it has outstanding potential for growth and prosperity.

The community of Aurukun is located on the north-west coast of the Cape York Peninsula, 200km (2hrs 30 min) by road south of the mining town of Weipa and 831km (11hr 30 min) from Cairns. Nearly the entire population (99.6%) lives within the township.

From its origins as a Presbyterian Mission in 1904, the Aurukun Shire Council was constituted on 22 May 1978 when the Local Government (Aboriginal Lands) came into force.



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In September 2013 the land became freehold with the Aurukun Shire Council as trustee of the town area and reserve land together with the Ngan Aak-Kunch Aboriginal Corporation as trustee of the balance of the Shire Lease.

Together both bodies are responsible for managing the land they hold and make decisions about that land on behalf of the people. It is a role they face with courage and determination to make it the best for the people they serve.

The Accessibility Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA) produced by the Department of Health and Ageing rates Aurukun in the highest category of remoteness.

Despite this remoteness, Aurukun Shire Council prides itself on the comprehensive services provided - to list just a few:

- Airport and Skytrans agency – eight flights per week from and to Cairns
- Child Care Centre and Family Support
- Community Police
- Bendigo Bank
- Post Office
- Library/IKC Services plus the Queensland Remote Aboriginal Media Service)
- Freight Services
- Wik and Kugu Art Gallery
- Kooth Pach Guest House Accommodation
- Wuungkam Lodge (Accommodation)
- Wo'uw Ko'alam (Three Rivers) Community Centre (ex-Tavern)
- Boat ramp for recreational fishing/freight
- Training Centre
- Funerals



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Provision of these services in a remote and socially disadvantaged area comes at a price – most are run at a loss or on a cost neutral basis.

### **Challenges We Face**

- **Size** - The Shire comprises some 7,500 square kilometres
- **Isolation** - The isolation of Aurukun limits its ability to attract skilled workers. The cost of materials and services is high due to freight costs and the distance from regional centres. A packet of Tim Tams costs \$9.50 and a return airfare to the nearest regional centre of Cairns is \$1,150. The visiting veterinary service costs Council \$3,000 per day
- **Wet Season** - The climate creates special challenges. Roads outside of the community and in the neighboring Cook Shire are impassable during the wet season. This greatly increases freight costs - which flow through and raise the cost of just about everything. Extreme isolation for several months of the year also causes social and community stresses

In the Socio-economic Indexes for Areas, created from Census data, Aurukun is rated in the poorest 5% of communities Australia-wide. Aurukun is the fourth most disadvantaged Local Government Area in Australia and the second most disadvantaged Level 2 statistical area.

Aurukun is also a Welfare-Reform Community, one of only four such communities in Queensland. This means that possession of alcohol within the Shire is illegal and that Family Income Management is applied to families who do not satisfy certain criteria related to child care. Low school attendance is an ongoing challenge but will continue to improve under the new Education Queensland model.



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Financial planning and long term forecasting are difficult as we have no income from rates and the majority of our funding comes from grants with no long-term guarantee.

Our asset management plan is challenged by factors of remoteness, weather, road conditions and high levels of depreciation and vandalism. Our damage bill exceeds \$1m per year and our insurance bill would be prohibitive to most Councils.

We face challenges in attracting and retaining skilled and qualified staff. Remoteness from family, education, medical specialists all challenge those who may have skills to offer us.

Community engagement is one in which we strive to excel. We have just completed a survey of Council services which saw the local community tell us what they want and the direction they wish us to follow.

Without a sustained income base, we are less able to set benchmarks, compounded by uncertain funding for replacement of machinery, equipment and assets.

Aurukun Shire Council runs two offices. Without our support office in Cairns we would not be able to employ qualified staff for accounting and business development. This excess cost is one we must sustain to remain viable.

Everyone in this room would recall the violence reported in Aurukun 12 months ago almost to the day.



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While it has subsided and we are again on a peaceful and hopefully safe path, this comes at a high cost to Council with:

- Community Police
- Council Security Guards
- CCTV Operation
- Community Centre operation (proposed)

All of these services are paid by Council. All are necessary to rebuild the harmony and provide our community with a safe environment in which to grow.

We are not without potential to grow in prosperity. Opportunities we are keen to pursue include:

- Eco-cultural tourism
- Development of the Shire through road improvement and transport services
- Mining
- Import replacement and improved retail and service businesses
- Employment in construction – approved and anticipated infrastructure development includes a large number of new community dwellings and refurbishments
- Employment and training in other areas such as hospitality, tourism, retail and council services etc.
- Natural beauty – nothing surpasses a sunset by the Aurukun waterfront

Strategic leadership from within the community is a key outcome to Growing Respect and Leadership in Aurukun Shire Council. It is not going to be achieved tomorrow.



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For Council's succession plan, the engagement of capable community members will take time, education and sustained development of human capacity.

Cost shifting from and between Governments to Local Government does not assist us nor does it allow us to achieve that strategic leadership.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dereck Walpo", written over a horizontal dotted line.

**Dereck Walpo**  
Mayor

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bernard McCarthy", written over a horizontal dotted line.

**Bernard McCarthy**  
Chief Executive Officer

