



COMMUNITY SUPPORT AND SERVICES COMMITTEE

Members present:

Ms CP McMillan MP—Chair
Mr SA Bennett MP
Mr MC Berkman MP
Mr JM Krause MP
Mr CL Lui MP
Mr RCJ Skelton MP

Staff present:

Mr K Holden—Committee Secretary
Ms C Furlong—Assistant Committee Secretary

PUBLIC BRIEFING—OVERSIGHT OF THE FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES COMMISSION

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

MONDAY, 8 MARCH 2021

Brisbane

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The committee met at 11.00 am.

CHAIR: Good morning. I declare this public briefing open. I would like to respectfully acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today and pay our respects to elders past, present and emerging. 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. I acknowledge my great colleague Cynthia Lui as a First Nations woman. I also acknowledge any other women sitting in the room this morning who may be First Nations women.

With me here today are: Stephen Bennett MP, the member for Burnett and deputy chair; Michael Berkman MP, the member for Maiwar; Jon Krause MP, the member for Scenic Rim; Cynthia Lui MP, the member for Cook; and Robert Skelton MP, the member for Nicklin. The purpose of today's briefing is to assist the committee with its oversight of the functions and performance of the Family Responsibilities Commission. The briefing provides an opportunity for the committee to ask questions about the operational focus, strategic goals and activities of the commission. The committee's proceedings are proceedings of the Queensland parliament and are subject to the standing rules and orders of the parliament. The proceedings are being recorded by Hansard and broadcast live on the parliament's website.

Media may be present and will be subject to the chair's direction at all times. The media rules endorsed by the committee are available from committee staff if required. All those present today should note that it is possible you might be filmed or photographed during the proceedings by media and images may also appear on the parliament's website or social media pages. I ask everyone present to turn mobiles phones off or to silent mode.

Only the committee and invited officers may participate in the proceedings. As parliamentary proceedings, under the standing orders any person may be excluded from the hearing at the discretion of the chair or by order of the committee. I ask that responses to questions taken on notice today be provided to the committee by 10 am on Monday, 15 March 2021. The program for today has been published on the committee's webpage and there are hard copies available from committee staff.

McLEOD, Ms Maxine, Registrar, Family Responsibilities Commission

PATERSON, Ms Tracey, Executive Officer (Finance), Family Responsibilities Commission

WILLIAMS, Ms Tammy, Commissioner, Family Responsibilities Commission

CHAIR: I welcome representatives from the Family Responsibilities Commission. Commissioner, I invite you to make an opening statement after which, I am sure, committee members will have some questions.

Ms Williams: Thank you, Chair and committee, for the invitation to meet with you. I too would like to acknowledge the traditional owners on whose country we gather today. I also acknowledge the traditional owners and elders of the five communities which we are fortunate to work with. They are the communities of Aurukun, Doomadgee, Coen, Mossman Gorge and Hope Vale. There are four communities in the cape and one in the gulf. I also acknowledge the honourable member Ms Lui, who is from the Cook region. Four of our communities are within your electorate. I send warm greetings from your constituents.

In terms of opening remarks, I first of all refer the committee to our annual report, which we do have two copies of, which was tabled in parliament in February. I also refer the committee to the letter I wrote, accompanied by a brief on a longitudinal assessment. I will not go into any detail in terms of those in my opening remarks but I am happy to take questions relating to those documents.

Instead, I thought it was prudent for me to revisit the four challenges I highlighted to the committee in my previous appearance in November 2019. I paraphrase the challenges that I identified. First, was the challenge relating to uncertainty surrounding the future of the FRC. In

November 2019 I identified that there was a need to finalise the MOU. Unfortunately, we are still at that position. That challenge remains current. The FRC did receive a new MOU; however, it expires on 30 June 2021—in approximately 16 weeks time.

The second challenge which I identified in November 2019, which is still current but we have nonetheless made some progress on, is the need for clear and consistent information for community members regarding the Social Security (Administration) Amendment (Income Management to Cashless Debit Card Transition) Bill 2019. Subsequent to my appearance before the committee in November 2019 that bill was passed by the Commonwealth parliament. We are moving towards a transition date of 17 March 2021 for the five communities in which the FRC has responsibility for managing income management. The FRC has been working with the Department of Social Services, DSS, to support community members who are currently being income managed to transition from the BasicsCard to the cashless debit card.

The third issue I identified in 2019 was the appointment process of commissioners, especially local commissioners. Subsequent to my appearance, commissioners, including myself, were reappointed for a term to expire at the end of this financial year. What we have is a number of key events occurring which severely impact the future of the FRC beyond 30 June. One is our funding. There is uncertainty as to our funding. All statutory positions of commissioner and deputy commissioner will expire on 30 June.

It means that come 1 July there will be no CEO, so I am the CEO under the Public Service Act. I am also the commissioner who has responsibility for oversight of the local commissioners who are not legally trained to ensure that decisions are made appropriately within a legal framework, that our decisions are consistent with the Human Rights Act and that we follow procedural fairness and natural justice. I have not been advised whether I will continue beyond 30 June. However, I very much would like to if the invitation were extended to me.

At the moment there are 29 local commissioners appointed across all five communities. They make the majority of our decisions. The decisions they make at conference are legally binding. All of their appointments are due to expire. I will shortly invite the registrar to provide you with further detail in relation to the appointment process, but this is a matter which causes the executive management team of the FRC great concern.

At the commencement of this financial year there was a delay in appointments for various reasons. Our appointments are made by the Governor in Council on recommendation from the minister. Appointments usually involve a significant appointment process. Over the last 12 years we have calculated that it takes on average three months to undertake the appointment process. Criminal histories are required. There needs to be an assessment of suitability because we are quasi-judicial officers and we exercise independence. There must be a lot of rigour around our selection and appointment process.

The Family Responsibilities Commission Act also stipulates factors which may deem a commissioner or a local commissioner disqualified from appointment. One of the factors which can disqualify a local commissioner from being appointed or a person who is proposing to be a local commissioner is if they have ever been the subject of a certain FRC decision. The FRC is the only entity that holds that information. It is confidential information. Although the appointment process is made through government to the Governor in Council, we do play an important role in providing advice to the department or to the minister about suitability. We only put up the names of people whom we can be assured have never been the subject of an FRC decision. As of today, the commission has not been asked to provide any input into the appointment process. It concerns us that we are approximately 16 weeks out from our term of appointment expiring as well as the issue of our funding uncertainty.

The final issue we identified in November 2019 was the quality of service delivery in some of the communities. This was particularly elevated again during the COVID response. The FRC was able to continue to work in an agile manner, noting health requirements, especially social distancing. However, what we have encountered some issues with was that we would make orders to refer our clients, our community members, to support services. We are of the view within the FRC that income management in itself is not a mechanism that changes behaviour. It is a decision of last resort. It is a mechanism that can stabilise a family situation and can ensure access to basic requirements of life are fulfilled such as food, rent and other direct debits.

One of the features under my leadership and our current executive management team is to ensure that we bolster the referral of community members to support services. We have been working hard over the past 18 months to support our local commissioners in helping to identify underlying

behaviours that can impact on families and then make appropriate referrals to match a skill or capability deficit or support they may need. For example, if we see that there may be an issue with school attendance for a particular vulnerable family, we go behind the issue to identify what is causing that family not to send that child to school. It could be alcoholism. It could very well be housing instability and homelessness. It could be supporting a parent to deal with undiagnosed health issues involving a young person. They are matching that family to the support they can get to help stabilise their home circumstances.

I hope I have been able to outline for the committee why referral pathways are a critical part—a key element—to the success of the FRC and supporting capability building in our communities. Until there is appropriate quality assurance of service offering in community, and also ensuring specialised services that community members can access, the full supports available to community members will not truly be met. Although that was an issue we identified in November 2019, it continues to be an issue that the FRC prioritise.

The final challenge that I add to that, which I did not refer to in November, but should the FRC continue beyond 30 June this year, is the matter of domestic and family violence. The local commissioners continue to express concern around the lack of appropriate perpetrator programs available for community members in welfare reform communities. This matter has been elevated to the Family Responsibilities Board through its most recently published quarterly report. If there is anything further, I am happy to now take questions.

CHAIR: Thank you. I note your first concern around the MOU, so I will follow that up as chair with the relevant minister. I also note your expiry date as the commissioner being 30 June 2021. That will be another matter that I will follow up on your behalf.

Ms Williams: Thank you.

CHAIR: I note that our committee will have some questions particularly relevant to your last two concerns. The second concern you raised was a federal government issue rather than a state government issue. I know the deputy chair, the member for Burnett, would like to ask the first question.

Mr BENNETT: With reference to the MOU, I note in 2019 you reported about the MOU and the negotiations issue, but a previous commissioner, Glasgow, also raised it in the 2018-19 report. That report talks about a deficit of about \$183,000 at that point in time. I am just after a bit of guidance about where you are financially, and is there an explanation as to why the MOU negotiations have not progressed in a timely manner in your opinion?

Ms Williams: First of all I will invite Tracey Paterson, who has responsibility for finance, to commence answering that question. Then I will add to it.

Ms Paterson: The deficit I believe for that year was in relation to a bit of a time delay. Whilst it was a deficit for the year, what happened was that with a delay in the MOU signing we did not receive the six months worth of federal funding until the following year. What that meant for our 2019-20 year, which was the following year, is you will notice there is quite a large surplus of \$1.4 million where we received the \$900,000 from the year before from the federal government. It suddenly arrived in our account so we were quite flush, as you would say, in that particular year.

From a financial position, we are quite stable. We do have a surplus, which you would see in our annual report. However, the executive management team has spent a bit of time analysing that surplus, just working out areas where we can use that to better our own operations. We need some particularly in our ICT area. We are also acutely aware that it is important that should the FRC funding not continue, we need to be able to satisfy all of our staff entitlements, contract negotiations, lease expiry clauses and all those sorts of things. We believe we are in a good position to do that as well as take on, again if our funding is extended, some really good projects we have identified that we would like to do with those funds that are sitting there.

Mr BERKMAN: Thank you very much for your time here this morning. That was a really helpful overview of the remaining challenges. I want to touch briefly on school attendance. The annual report notes that that is still a really key issue and the most common type of notice that is being issued. I understand from previous annual reports that this has been a challenge for some years in terms of getting verified school attendance numbers. First of all, can you give an indication of whether that issue around verification of attendance has been resolved usefully and, otherwise, what steps, if any, are being taken either through the commission or through the education department to address that and to get kids into school: providing incentives, whether that be breakfast and lunches and the like, or any other initiatives that have been taken?

Ms Williams: Thank you. I should also explain our roles. We have a term called registrar, and it may not be familiar for some. If you think of the FRC as a quasi-judicial body, like any other tribunal, for example QCAT, you have a registrar and the registrar is responsible for the administration of the legal processes. A key part of Maxine's role as the registrar is the receipt of the notices and checking for jurisdiction. One of the notices that state agencies are required to give us under our legislation is the school notice. I have the role in the same way as if you think of QCAT and the president or the deputy president of QCAT. They are akin to a judicial officer that oversees the legal decision-making. Because your question relates to notices first, I will ask Maxine to speak on the question of notices and the information exchange that occurs between our agency and the department.

Ms McLeod: Yes, school attendance has been one of our major concerns from the time that we commenced in 2008. I would have to be honest and say, yes, it has been an uphill battle because it is also very dependent on the support that we get from councils in a community as to whether families are really encouraged to send their kids to school. What I can say is that at the moment all of our FRC communities have improved their school attendance from term 3 to term 4. Term 4 was the last one. Term 3 was July to September and term 4 was October to December.

The other thing I can say quite proudly is that out of the four top performing Indigenous primary schools in Queensland, three are FRC communities. Hope Vale actually topped the state for term 4. We are very proud of that. Hope Vale's attendance came in at 83.4. We all think 100 per cent is the only thing that is acceptable—90 to 100. We are striving. We do not think that is good enough, though we are very proud that it is the top for term 4.

The two other schools were Coen, which came in at 75 per cent and Mossman Gorge, 73.9 per cent. Those schools topped Lockhart, Mornington, Woorabinda, Cherbourg, Mapoon, Bamaga, Wujal Wujal, Kowanyama, Yarrabah, Napranum, Normanton, Palm Island and Pormpuraaw. We are quite proud of that, but we certainly do not believe that we have come to the end of the road. We believe it is a generational change—we have stated that before—and it really does take a generation to start having the impact and the change of behaviour and the values. It really depends on the values that those families have as to whether those children go to school.

There are two communities that we do have concerns with. Aurukun school for term 4 came in at 42.1 per cent. There are a lot of factors playing into that, not the least of which is the unrest that occurred in early 2020. That was in January. That school was very badly affected. They lost about 50 per cent of the students with the families leaving community. Most of those students were still on the roll and being reported as being absent. I can say that we are seeing a little bit of improvement. Our registry coordinator says he sees better engagement with community members and the school itself.

The school commenced term 1 this year with a walking to school group which was very successful. The principal noted the biggest win for the school was roughly 40 disengaged children from the top end re-engaging at school this year. These children became completely disengaged from school after the community unrest and did not attend school for the entire year. Then, of course, COVID struck in March. Schools in mainstream towns and areas could say the children will have to learn at home through a computer and remote learning. This is not so easy when you have a town like Aurukun or Doomadgee where most of the families do not have computers. That was a big difficulty.

The principal states that they are delighted to have the disengaged children back at school. They advise that they will continue to address the attendance issues on a day-to-day basis and are keen to continue to work closely with the FRC to assist us to support attendance. The principals give us an idea and say they think attendance is up to 60 per cent. I am a bit reluctant to say that. It can fluctuate quite a lot from one day to the next, from one week to the next, but they do report that they do see an improvement.

Doomadgee again is the worst performing. Their published school attendance for term 4 was 35.8. There are again a lot of factors in Doomadgee. They also had unrest in 2020. Coupled with COVID it is still not business as usual. What we have found is certain communities actually reacted differently to COVID. Some communities could deal with it quite well, other communities were very badly affected by it. The other incident with Doomadgee was that towards the end of 2020 unleaded fuel was reintroduced. Before that it was Opal fuel. We had quite a few child safety and welfare notices on fuel sniffing. That impacted the kids very badly. We then reported to the FRC Board that volatile substance use counselling was required urgently for the community and that the fuel provided in community should revert to Opal. We are now very happy to say that that has happened. The board listened to us. The Australian government also played a large role in that and they have gone back to Opal so we are very happy to say that.

The Doomadgee school reports they continue to experience issues with behaviour of children who do not attend school regularly. When attending school they struggle to keep up with the curriculum. They therefore have behavioural issues. The FRC identified that the school attendance officers—there is a school attendance officer strategy that is funded by the Australian government and delivered to the Queensland schools to manage. We reported to the board that we felt a supervisor was required to give it a better framework and we are happy to report that that also has occurred and that the school has advised that they are very happy with their attendance at the moment. It is certainly not in the seventies. They do say that some days are in the 70s and the high 60s. We will not know until we get the term 1 results. We are still very much reliant on the published school attendance.

You were asking about the information we get. The published school attendance comes in a good six and sometimes eight weeks after term, so we very much rely on information on the ground and when our first notices start to feed through of student absences.

Ms Williams: Your question related to information that we receive. I must make this point quite clear. When we talk about agency notices from, in this case, the education department, there is a requirement under section 40 of the act for the department to notify the FRC within no more than 10 days after the third absence happens in a school term—so three unexplained absences in a school term. The law requires the FRC to be notified within 10 days of that third absence. I am not aware in the last 12 months of the FRC having a delay in the receipt of those notices. There appears to be compliance by the education department for the provision of notices.

The second part of our information, which Maxine is referring to, that we receive is not the notices but information sharing. There are provisions commencing at section 90 of our act which allows me as commissioner to request information from prescribed entities that help commissioners to make decisions. If we have received a notice for family X and we conference that family about non-school attendance, I can then ask the education department or the school to provide me with additional information that relates to that school attendance. That is where the delay happens.

The protocol that the education department has asked is that we direct those inquiries to the director-general. Then it has to filter back down to the principal. There is a delay in terms of real-time information that our commissioners can use at conference to make decisions about that family in order for us to put into context whether that child's absence is part of an ongoing pattern or whether it is an unusual pattern in which the family might need support.

It is that delay in information exchange that can happen that can be problematic for us in making decisions that are in the best interests of that particular child or vulnerable family. I hope that explains for you, first of all, the performance of the schools, some of the issues that we are facing in terms of two of our communities but also the information-sharing difficulties in some circumstances.

Ms LUI: Commissioner Williams, my question is in relation to your letter to the committee. In that letter you highlight that there has been a 69 per cent decrease in child safety investigations in FRC communities, a 32 per cent decrease in agency notices about residential tenancy agreements and a 23 per cent decrease in agency notices for convictions in the district or supreme courts. I look after an electorate that is quite remote. Can you advise how these results have been achieved and whether there is a continuing downward trend in agency notices?

Ms Williams: Thank you, committee, for taking the time to read that brief and for your interest in our work. Your last question, which is fresh in my mind, is about whether there is a continuing downward trend. The downward trend that we are especially able to see and which we are able to monitor from quarter to quarter is the number of agreements that commissioners are entering into with clients to receive support. An FRC legally binding decision can be made in two ways. It can be made by order of the commission, so that will be after some time in conference. If we do not see that a family has enough insight and is prepared to accept responsibility, we can order that particular client to undertake drug and alcohol rehabilitation or parenting or income management. An alternative is that we can make a legally binding decision by agreement. That is where clients are identifying that they need some help and are willing to accept support, and then we will make a decision by agreement. That is where we are seeing within our quarterly reports shorter periods and an increase in clients wanting to engage with the commission by agreement. It is just under half.

In terms of the question that you asked that related to agency notices, I am cautious about identifying trends over quarters because, as you know, our communities can fluctuate too readily due to environmental factors—for example, Aurukun had the Aurukun unrest. Doomadgee had a spate of petrol sniffing. In such short periods of time it is hard to get a sense of overarching changes in socio-economic conditions. That is why for our report we looked at 12 years. We have been at this

for 12 years—half a generation. The methodology we used was we took the first six years for notices for certain triggers and compared them to the most recent six years. Over that time we were able to identify some trends which incorporate the FRC as an important piece of infrastructure but by no means are they solely as a result of the FRC. It is very much also to the credit of individuals and families, the work that council is doing and other social services and government working collectively in those communities.

Mr SKELTON: Commissioner, you mentioned that to find out background information with regard to the children's attendance there is a lag with having to report to the director-general. Is there some way that we as a committee can take away some of that red tape so there is more local dialogue going on between the council, the commissioners and the principals and deputy principals themselves?

Ms Williams: I would very much appreciate your support in this area. What we think could be prudent is if there was perhaps a delegation made within government where we could still comply with the legislation. Section 90 says a prescribed entity is the chief executive of a department that is responsible for child protection services, education, housing services, adult corrective services and criminal justice matters, or the Police Commissioner. We have to work with all the other agencies as well. For example, with Child Safety we have some really good relationships in our regional areas. That is where my colleagues and I meet with our regional counterparts in other agencies and similarly with the police. I do not engage directly with the Police Commissioner. Even though the act defines a prescribed entity as the Police Commissioner, there is clearly a delegation within the Queensland Police Service that empowers the officer in charge of each of our communities to engage directly with me under our legislation. If you could assist in arranging an internal delegation within the department, that would be really helpful.

Mr KRAUSE: I missed the first few minutes, so forgive me if I ask a question that has been answered in your open statement. I wanted to touch on an issue in relation to conditional income management. In 2019-20 there was a growing number of clients placed on a case plan and referred to support services concurrent with conditional income management. Have any outcomes from this shown up in your data or reports?

Ms Williams: Again, it is difficult without doing a longitudinal assessment. I am cautious to identify trends prematurely, but I will say this: in the time that I have been the commissioner I have observed, first of all, a growing capability of our local commissioners to deal with clients with increasingly complex needs. Hence you will see in our annual reports or our quarterly reports a small but not insignificant number of clients that come to the commission with multiple notices. It could be an education notice. It could also be a housing notice. It could also be a domestic violence notice. Although the majority of our clients come to the FRC on a single notice in a quarter, there is a small cohort who have quite complex needs.

The commissioners have been supported by me and the deputy and also the registrar in helping the commissioners to identify clients with complex needs and how to have quite difficult but supportive conversations and in helping clients to identify the suite of issues that they are experiencing. That has caused, in turn, commissioners to see the value in referrals to support services. That is why one of the trends that you will see in recent years is a decrease in a single order just for income management and a growing trend of an income management order but with a referral as well to support the behavioural change.

What we are also seeing from year to year is the decrease in the period of time in which a client is ordered for a term of income management. Our income management tool can be used. We can use the variable of time and percentage. It could be income management from three months up to 12 months. It could be income management from 60 per cent up to 90 per cent. What we are starting to see—it is a very early trend—is a decrease in the length of time for clients on income management now and a lowering of the percentage. Our average would be under 75 per cent and from three to six months.

That is an interesting trend to keep an eye on. That is why it was important for the registrar and me to make ourselves available to the Senate when they were debating the social security bill. It was important for us to advocate the unique needs of our clients in the Cape and Doomadgee because the application of our income management model in the Cape is vastly different to that in other jurisdictions. It is only through the commission that those community members are subjected to income management, and it is a decision of last resort.

The other trend I should also note is the number of clients who come back to the commission. They have a legal right to come back to the commission after we make an order to seek an amendment or to end our order. Our current statistic is that for 65 per cent of all clients who come Brisbane

back to the FRC after a period of time has passed—because they believe their circumstances have changed to warrant either an early ending of their order or an amendment—those requests are granted.

Mr KRAUSE: If I could put it this way, are you saying there has been an increase in income management—

Ms Williams: There has been a decrease.

Mr KRAUSE: The incidents of them going with other types of referrals is resulting in shorter orders for smaller amounts of income and overall better outcomes.

Ms Williams: Yes. I would also say, compared to a number of recent years, the number of clients actually put on income management is slowly decreasing. The number of clients who are placed only on a case plan referral has increased. The number of clients who have a dual order—so income management and a case plan—is increasing. The number of clients who are on income management in terms of the variables of time and percentage is decreasing—so fewer people on income management and if they are on income management the time is slightly decreasing and the percentage of the amount of their welfare that is quarantined is also decreasing. Coupled with that, the number of clients who come to the FRC asking for us to reconsider our decision because their circumstances have changed is increasing. We are a highly nuanced model. We are not an income management model; we are a case management model. Income management is only one of our tools, and it is applied in a legal framework.

Mr BENNETT: One of your areas of concern you raised with us is quality of service delivery in communities. Following the Productivity Commission inquiry into service delivery in discrete communities, I want to ask about the local Thriving Communities Partnership consultation process. Are you able to update the committee on how that looks?

Ms Williams: I have not been briefed on Thriving Communities for some time. The point that I do make is that the FRC is a piece of infrastructure that is legally based. Thriving Communities, like welfare reform, is a government policy. The FRC is not either/or. The FRC operates as long as its legislation has not been repealed. Quite often we have community members who might hear about Thriving Communities who ask, 'Does that mean that the FRC will no longer exist?' All I say back to communities is that the FRC exists as long as there are three factors: one, that this piece of legislation has not been repealed; two, that there are commissioners appointed to make legally binding decisions—our appointments are independent of government, so our decisions are independent of the executive—and, three, that there is funding to continue. It is the latter two that I am concerned about. Come 1 July the FRC Act will still be the law in our welfare reform communities, but we will have no legally appointed officers to administer that law. It will also mean that come 17 March our clients will have transitioned from the BasicsCard and will be subjected to the CDC, but if the FRC is no longer in existence I do not know what will happen to those clients.

Mr BENNETT: Just to clarify for the committee, you are not aware that any of the required consultation within the Thriving Communities framework has happened?

Ms Williams: All I know is that there has been some consultation in Coen. I have not seen the report on that.

Ms LUI: Commissioner Williams, the annual report 2019-20 advised that FRC decisions have an increased focus on capacity building. Would you please explain how that works in practice and what it means in terms of outcomes for FRC clients?

Ms Williams: I refer the committee to my earlier remarks where I described that our decisions—and if you use the analogy of a tribunal or a quasi-judicial court—are legally binding. They are made in two ways: by way of order of the commission or by way of agreement with the commission. That is on the basis of when we receive agency notices where a community member is mandated to appear or come within the commission's jurisdiction because of an agency notice. The other way in which we can have jurisdiction in a community is if a client who is not the subject of any agency notice by any of the government agencies voluntarily comes to the FRC.

In terms of the commentary we made in the annual report about increased capability and also insight by clients, I have made that statement on the basis of a very small but nonetheless not insignificant number of clients who come to us purely on a voluntary basis. They are not required to come but they are identifying some risks in their household—in particular, elder financial abuse or for women there might be financial abuse in their relationship—and they are coming or referring a friend to come to the FRC without being required to come.

The other area is the growing number of clients who have been past clients for the FRC over the last 12 years who they themselves are recognising that the FRC can match them with appropriate services—so to help them navigate access to support services. That could also include secondary referrals to Cairns or Mount Isa for Doomadgee clients or even Townsville. It is very difficult for a vulnerable person to work out what support they need and where they go to receive it.

The fact that a client is now starting to recognise that they need help and they willingly agreed in a legally binding decision to get support I think really demonstrates and is good evidence that there is some personal accountability that is being developed. That is one of the main objects of the FRC Act—supporting individuals to take personal responsibility for their own lives and for that of their family.

The FRC is mindful that any intervention or interaction we have with a client and their family must be proportionate. It must be justified and it must be about supporting clients. That is where our commissioners have been receiving a lot of support—to help clients to identify that.

CHAIR: Commissioner Williams, the committee thanks you for the operational review workshops that were conducted, particularly with a focus on, as we know when those sorts of workshops are canvassed, the notion of building identity and authenticity around future planning of the FRC. Would you please advise any outcomes for the clients and staff that resulted from both the workshop in 2019 and the strategic planning workshop on 21 January 2020?

Ms Williams: One of the main outcomes was implementing a change management process which had buy-in from various parts of the organisation. We do not have a lot of staff. We have grown. We have 17 staff members but we have 29 local commissioners. What was important for me and my colleagues on the executive management team was ensuring that local commissioners who are at the coalface of our decision-making are best informed about our community, the issues that are faced by community members and whether we are getting cut-through in our organisation through our approach. Those workshops we held involved representatives from that local commissioner group. Our strategic planning and the operational changes we need to make were informed by local commissioners. I wanted to ensure that Cairns operations were aligned as best we can and driven by the needs on community.

One of the statutory requirements of my role—because I am the only legally trained commissioner—is to ensure that there is appropriate training of commissioners. The deputy commissioner and I went through some statutory interpretation sessions with the commissioners and explained to the commissioners the need for us to track our internal performance against parts of our legislation. Consequently we developed internal dashboards or reporting tools that are just for each community. I do not let other communities see the dashboard performance of each community. This is just their business in which they are accountable and I am accountable to them.

Maxine and I review on a quarterly basis with each local commissioner group from each community so they can actually drive the performance change in their community. For example, one of the dashboard indicators was about adjournments and reschedules. Our act requires us to make timely decisions for early intervention. For one community there appeared to be a trend of perhaps excessive adjournments being made, so we had a conversation that was focused for that particular community about what the law says in terms of timely decisions and what the law says about the factors upon which we must take into account an adjournment. They have now been able to make the decisions for themselves as to balancing the need to obtain additional information—for example, we spoke about the Department of Education—versus the need to make a timely decision because it is in the best interests of children. An unnecessary delay may place a child at risk.

That is an example of structuring our internal reviews and having some honest conversations within our organisation about our performance and what we need to do in order to link our service delivery with the legislation and outcomes for our client. I think that is a good example of how local commissioners have been empowered to work out and to decide what organisational change they need to do differently about their decision-making.

CHAIR: We probably have time for one very quick question.

Mr KRAUSE: I want to ask a question about the Griffith neighbourhood project. Commissioners were informed in 2019 after they had worked on that project for a number of years that there would be some changes to that. Information I have indicates that ministerial champion Minister Farmer advised, after the commissioner requested the minister reconsider the decision, that the Youth Empowered Towards Independence had been approved as a successful deliverer of a program for a 12-month period from 1 July 2019 to 30 June 2020. Could you update the committee on the current program's success in comparison to the program previously preferred by the commissioners?

Ms Williams: I was not the custodian of the role of commissioner at the time when the neighbourhood project was being delivered, so it is difficult for me to make a comparison from firsthand experience. All I can respond in terms of your question is what commissioners are telling me at the moment—that is, that they still see today a service delivery gap for clients who do need support in that area relating to youth sexual violence. I am talking about Aurukun. I understand that this is consistent with some assessments done by Cape York Partnership. They have initiated an inquiry which is being conducted—I think it is Pru Goward. I await the outcome of that report. At the moment, the commissioners in Aurukun are advising that they do not believe that their service requirements in order to make referrals for young people and their families are appropriately matched.

CHAIR: On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank you and your staff for your attendance here today. I thank our Hansard reporters. A transcript of these proceedings will be available on the committee's website and the parliamentary webpage in due course. I declare the public briefing closed.

Ms Williams: Thank you, Chair. I thank the committee for your interest in our work.

The committee adjourned at 11.59 am.