8 November 2017

Queensland Productivity Commission
PO Box 1211
George Street
BRISBANE QLD 4003

Dear Commissioner,

Re: Submission to Service delivery in Queensland’s remote and discrete Indigenous Communities

The Queensland Council of Social Service (QCOSS) is the state-wide peak body representing the interests of individuals experiencing or at risk of experiencing poverty and disadvantage, and organisations working in the social and community service sector.

QCOSS delivers services in remote and discrete Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Communities through the Rural and Remote Workforce Initiative – a program to support educators in early childhood education and care services achieve required qualifications. We support and advocate for and with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, organisations and communities across Queensland. Further, QCOSS believe that without a commitment to reconciliation there can be no end to poverty and disadvantage for individuals and families in our communities.

QCOSS, together with our members continues to play a crucial lobbying and advocacy role in a broad number of areas including:

- place-based activities
- citizen-led policy development
- cost-of-living advocacy
- sector capacity and capability building.

We welcome the opportunity to participate in this Inquiry and are very supportive of the work of the Queensland Productivity Commission in this regard.

Overall Approach

We believe that the reform agenda stepped out in the draft report is suitably ambitious and takes the brave step of seeking not to adjust a broken system, but to create a new system that has the potential to radically change these communities.

Critical to this is the approach to address the root causes of many of the issues being faced in these communities. This includes the significant power imbalance that exists between the Indigenous community and the non-Indigenous community; the systemic racism experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; and the trauma that these issues have caused, and continue to cause. Until these issues are acknowledged and process for healing undertaken these communities will continue to experience unacceptable outcomes across the range of wellbeing indicators.
QCOSS is very supportive of the approach being taken to reform in this area. In particular we note the following elements:

**A place-based approach** – This approach places decision making and accountability in community, ensuring communities develop a shared vision, work together to achieve community and individual outcomes and are collectively responsible for those outcomes. It is important that this approach works from the strengths of the community, and seeks to build on these to address the challenges. QCOSS has been supporting place based projects in a range of communities across Queensland and has a deep commitment to this approach as being critical to supporting communities to work together for outcomes.

**Focus on outcomes** – establishing shared social and economic outcomes across a community provides the basis for action. Resources and funding can then be allocated to achieve those outcomes across the community. At an individual level, this places people at the centre of service delivery.

**Pooled investment** – development of a funding pool will be critical to ensuring that communities have access to flexible funding that enables them to address identified challenges and achieve agreed community outcomes. Continuing the current siloed programmatic responses will only serve to stymie the reform process by applying rigid funding rules upon community agreements.

We also acknowledge the importance of land tenure. While this is not an area of expertise for QCOSS, we know that housing is a basic right, and failure to access safe, accessible and affordable housing risks a range of wellbeing indicators. Land tenure is critical to achieving housing outcomes as well as the economic development that will underpin the achievement of community level outcomes.

**Implementation**

For the purposes of this submission, QCOSS is keen to focus on issues of implementation. The best intentions in the world can be brought down by poor action. While we don’t intend to engage in detailed discussion of implementation at this point, there are a number of important points we believe need to be considered and/or emphasised.

**The whole** – this is a substantial and well considered package of reforms, that together have the potential to create profound change in these communities. What will be critical is that the reform agenda is considered as a whole.

These communities have experienced incremental approaches to reform time and time again with limited success. To achieve long lasting and sustainable change, reform must be holistic and ambitious. The time for piecemeal approaches is past.

**Long term** – change of this significance cannot happen overnight. The implementation process must recognise and accept the long-term view - this is reform that must be undertaken over lifetimes, not election and budget cycles. Again, communities have seen reform come and go, to achieve the buy in, a public and permanent commitment must be made and is required for the ongoing structural reform being recommended.

**Integrated investment** – while all the recommendations are important, of particular importance is the provision of a funding pool that can be accessed to support the agreed community vision and plan. Retention of siloed programmatic responses – led by rigid guidelines – will undermine the intent of the reform agenda. If communities are truly to have say over their outcomes, they must have a say as to how money is spent.
Community Readiness – implementation of a reform agenda of this scale and importance cannot be undertaken lightly. Success will be predicated on the commitment and readiness of individual communities. It is recommended therefore that a staged approach is undertaken with targeted communities. That this includes strong community engagement and discussion to ensure commitment, readiness and focus across the community. If done well, this engagement would include capacity building elements and would form the basis for the community plan and community governance through the identification of key community members and structures to support implementation.

Oversight – as outlined in the draft report, oversight of the reform program as well as of ongoing implementation must be independent from government and the communities and be transparent. This includes:

- Transparency of data - need to establish baseline of investment to ensure that there is no cost shifting and that performance and accountability data is shared and seen by all.
- Evaluation – critical to success will be a strong commitment to evaluation both across the reform agenda itself as well as within service delivery approaches. The evaluation framework must not be implemented as a punitive approach, but one of learning and continuous improvement. One in which failure is accepted and learning is celebrated.

Resourcing of implementation – it will be critical that the process of implementation itself is sufficiently resourced. Funding to support the range of implementation activities including independent oversight and support for local governance and planning cannot be taken from service delivery funds. It must be provided in addition to current investment levels. Critical to this will be the establishment of the baseline investment as well as ongoing reporting against that baseline.

Opportunities for improvement

While we respect the constraints placed upon the Commission through the terms of reference, there are several areas that QCOSS believes are critically important to wellbeing in these communities which have not been adequately addressed through this report.

At the base of wellbeing lies the ability to financially support your family. To afford the basics of life – food, rent, electricity and beyond this, it’s also ensuring the affordability of what people today regard as the essential: the ability to pay bills on time, to send children on school excursions, get dental and health care as needed. The costs of these items continue to impact on the lives of many Queenslanders and is exacerbated in rural and remote communities, and for those of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent.

Most people experiencing poverty are outside the workforce, sole parents and those dependent on income support. This impact is often greater for those in remote Indigenous communities. The low rates of various income support payments, particularly NewStart and Youth Allowance and Family Tax Benefits, will continue to affect significant portions of these communities. While they remain in receipt of income support – they continue to lack the means to afford the basics of life. Failure to address this most basic principle has the potential to derail the reform agenda.

While the role of the Federal Government is acknowledged in the report, much more attention will need to be given to this critical role as implementation occurs. In addition to income support issues raised above, the importance of the Federal Government role in employment programs and policy, as well as through the provision of funded services cannot be overstated.
As outlined in the draft report, economic participation is critical to individual and community wellbeing. The relationship with the Federal Government will be important to the achievement of a range of outcomes in communities.

We would also refer the Commission to the Family Matters Campaign and ‘Our Way - A generational strategy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families’. These are both focused on ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people grow up safe and cared for in family, community and culture. They provide an evidence based approach based that includes prevention and early intervention; trauma-informed healing; integrated and holistic services that align with the approach being taken by the Commission and should be center of the implementation of the proposed reform.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide feedback. We look forward to any opportunities to stay engaged and influence this important Inquiry.

Yours sincerely

[Signature]

Mark Henley
Chief Executive Officer