



**SUBMISSION TO THE QUEENSLAND PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION
INQUIRY INTO SERVICES IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES**

3 NOVEMBER 2017



**TORRES SHIRE COUNCIL
68 Douglas Street, Thursday Island**



TORRES SHIRE COUNCIL

To Lead, Provide & Facilitate

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8 November, 2017

Queensland Productivity Commission
PO Box 12112
George Street Queensland 4003

Dear Commissioner,

Torres Shire Council (TSC) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Queensland Productivity Commission's Inquiry into Service delivery in remote and discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and commends the Queensland Treasurer, the Hon. Curtis Pitt MP, for commissioning the Inquiry.

As a mainstream council TSC is representative of a 75% Indigenous population. The Shire's administrative hub is located on Thursday Island. The Shire includes Thursday Island, Horn Island and Prince of Wales Island along with the uninhabited islands within the Thursday Island group. Thursday Island is the regional center for the Torres Strait Region and the Northern Peninsula Area accommodating a very high number of Government bodies at Federal, State and local levels. Thursday Island acts as a hub for delivery of services throughout the region to the jurisdictions of the Torres Strait Island Regional Island Council (TSIRC) and the Northern Peninsula Area Regional Council (NPARC). Many services are delivered as fly-in-fly-out services FIFO coordinated through the Horn Island Airport which is owned and operated by the TSC and is the regional airport and the only "highway" in the region.

Accommodating a large number of both State and Federal Government bodies within our Shire imposes a significant burden on our communities as well as on Council's sustainability and capacity to deliver services. There are 36 Federal/State Government departments represented within Torres Shire Council's footprint. A continued unco-ordinated expansion of Government bodies widens and complicates the gap between Government and community and impedes 'Closing the Gap'.

Given the complexity of Government bodies there is need for a whole-of-government audit of duplication of services and of bureaucracy and an audit of expenditure to gain a true perspective on where the funds are being spent and the achievement of actual outcomes on the ground in relation to our distinctive local needs and resources.

There are a number of social impediments that constituents of Torres Shire are faced with by the ever growing complexity of Government presence:

- Lack of housing with the majority of housing taken by Government departments. TSC is faced with a major housing crisis with demand for housing greater than supply and resulting in overcrowding with multiple generations living within Indigenous households.
- Limited land available to expand social housing due to the large proportion of Government presence and minimal private rental available.
- Highly inflated housing cost due to the size of the demand for housing by Government departments and their staff who often stay as temporary or short term placements from the mainland. This has led to weekly rental costs of up to \$1200 per week and an average purchase price of a standard house starting at \$500,000 up to \$1 million. This has forced a high percentage of locals' particularly young people/families to relocate to Cairns or further as they

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simply cannot afford to live on their own island home.

- The social housing rental policy applicable to the TSC area places an income threshold of \$80,000 per household. This impedes career development of Indigenous people as community members have to live within these means or face the dilemma of being evicted. There is little to no availability of private rental so options are either remain at a lower income level or relocate to the mainland. There is an urgent need for consideration of change to this model to a similar model adopted on the outer islands and where no income threshold applies due to the limited housing market available in the region.
- Stifled by government red-tape of our economic development, local small business expansion and innovation.
- High cost of living impacted by marine freight transport. The Torres Strait region tries to cope with unacceptable living standards caused by the exorbitant cost of living prices which suffocate our potential for economic stability and growth with a heavy overburden of high priced basic living costs. This high cost of living would be seen as unacceptable elsewhere in Queensland. Support from both Federal and State Governments for a bipartisan approach to fully examine the adverse economic circumstances confronting our families through the high cost of living is required urgently. Council considers that a full investigation of the zone rebate should be undertaken to more appropriately reflect cost of living. Government workers receive high locality allowances as compared to local employees where business does not have this capacity to pay.
- Lack of skills transfer and succession planning for Indigenous people to Government positions (both qualified and unqualified positions) contributing to unemployment rates or continued occupancy of positions at lower levels.

There is no ex-gratia rates paid by Government to Council yet the expectation for services are the same as the population at large. While large Councils have the capacity to absorb these costs the TSC is not a large Council in terms of general rate collected. There are approximately 1,100 rateable properties however only 880 can be subject to a general rate levy. This in effect represents approximately \$330,000 that cannot be levied to assist in servicing Government properties. Council charges a land tax through a utilities and rate service which only represents approx. 6% of the net operating budget. Yet the State and Federal Governments require the continued service to be provided for these properties and their employees who are essentially housed within the Torres Shire Council jurisdiction to outreach services across the Torres Strait and Northern Peninsula Area to meet Close the Gap targets and to protect Australia from the impact of diseases such as TB stemming from Papua New Guinea, bio-security (plant and pest infestation control particularly stemming from Western Province, PNG) and border protection. Council is in need of funding from Federal and State Government to support these branches of government in the region and this should be recognised by this inquiry.

Torres Strait has, over the past decades, consistently called for greater coordination in governance, effective service delivery and stronger leadership. Federal and State Statutory Agencies in the Torres Strait have on many occasions duplicated the functions of Local Government ranging from administering roads and infrastructure funding to public health and safety programs which currently predominately resides under the charter of Local Government authority. There is need for an improved and genuine partnership between Government and Local Government to effectively deliver real outcomes that best addresses local needs and builds local employment capacity and capability. A different model of service needs to be adopted one that gives back decision-making, management, planning and service delivery back to Local Government. It is time for a whole-of-government approach to governance giving back decision-making and service delivery for local councils.

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Torres Shire Council also acknowledges the 2017 Summery Report which highlights the sixteen draft recommendations of the inquiry to date. We have included separately Councils response to the matters outlined on page 30 of the report.

Council looks forward to receiving the Final Report.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Malone', with a large, stylized loop at the beginning.

Mayor Vonda Malone
TORRES SHIRE COUNCIL



BUILDING CAPACITY

DOES THE RANGE OF TRAINING OPTIONS AVAILABLE FOR COMMUNITIES AND THE PUBLIC SECTOR SUFFICIENTLY MATCH WHAT IS NEEDED?

Torres Shire Council does not believe that the range of training options available for communities and the public sector sufficiently matches what is needed. Local government and private jobs are not filled by local people but rather by FIFO staff with the common reason provided being that local personnel are not sufficiently trained or and the general feedback is that the local staffs are not qualified to undertake the roles. Some departments such as Qld Health and Community Enterprise Qld have in place a transition plan to transfer positions back to communities. This should be applied across all Government departments operating in Indigenous communities and supported by an effective training/succession plan.

Quantifying the need – the first question is how has the needs being measured? Do we really know what the need is over the next five (5) years to ensure that the training programs offered are proportioned appropriately?

A State-wide skills audit for Indigenous communities including the likes of local indigenous councils, government departments, NGO's and the business sector for each community should be completed. The data collated from the State-wide skills audit will form the baseline for the training needs over the next 5 years.

WHAT IMPEDIMENTS EXIST TO ACCESS FORMAL TRAINING PROGRAMS AND OTHER METHODS FOR BUILDING CAPABILITIES?

Impediments including:

- Cost of travel for everyone living in the remote island communities of the Torres Strait who require travel, accommodation and incidentals to be able to travel within the region and to Cairns or further south to access training programs.
- The pressures of being away from family and community support networks for Indigenous people while attending training programs.
- Language barriers and lack of appropriate cultural support while being away from family for prolonged periods including lack of understanding of training providers of students local cultural responsibilities and requirements.
- Lack of student friendly flexible delivery options and methods for completing training programs.
- The Thursday Island TAGAI TAFE College offers a very limited option for locals to engage in appropriate training and does not accommodate flexible training programs (i.e. night classes or weekend training courses).

DO MECHANISMS FOR BUILDING CAPABILITIES NEED TO BE BETTER RESOURCED?

There is a need for improved resourcing of mechanisms for building capabilities in the Torres Shire. This includes improved resourcing of:

- Recognising the importance of local knowledge and resourcing of community consultation processes to allow communities to define and build services and programs that are appropriate for the needs of the specific community (a one-size-fits-all/blanket approach will not work).
- Recognising and respecting the diversity in culture, leadership and development which are unique to each community.
- Subsidising travel for low income earners to upskill themselves to be job ready.
- Fully funding and supporting appropriate teachers to be able to successfully offer a wide range of flexible training programs locally.
- Strengthening the support network (including appropriate cultural support) for Indigenous Students.
- Developing these mechanisms in partnership with the community.

ECONOMIC AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

These tend to be issues where Australian Government policy is active. The Commission is seeking further input from stakeholders on the role of Queensland Government in relation to these issues:

Are there Queensland Government policies that impact on these issues? If so, how?

We wish to highlight the negative impact of specific Queensland Government policies in the areas of Housing, Homeownership, and Sale of Land Transactions. These current policies are subject to a high level of red tape delaying outcomes due to the complex levels of bureaucracy within multiple Government departments.

Are the impacts supportive of, or impede development?

There is a need for a mechanism to address specific cases of high levels of bureaucracy and red tape within the Queensland Government bringing key community driven initiatives, programs, funding and service deliveries to a grinding halt due to the bureaucracy built within the State structures.

If they impede development, what could be done about it?

Council would welcome Queensland Government's review of and removal of bureaucracy within government that ultimately becomes a blockage to service delivery.

The challenge of increasing local employment in government service provision, in particular, practical proposals to both open up more positions to locals and assist locals in being ready for the opportunities

We particularly commend this focus of the inquiry and would welcome a specific partnership with the State and Federal Governments in this area. We propose that:

- This focus to be included in all service delivery agreements.
- The development of whole-of-government short and long term plans to support employment within the Torres Strait, recognising Thursday Island as the hub of the region training and employment programs to be funded by the Queensland government.
- Recognition of the diversity in culture, leadership and development across all the Queensland Indigenous communities and to further build specific programs from the community up approach (not Government identified and downwards).
- Empowerment of local control and accountability supported by appropriate training in good governance for public and private institutions.
- Enabling people to have a say in decisions which affect and impact their lives on a daily basis.
- Custom built longer-term programs (grass roots level of engagement) to make real outcomes to ongoing issues.

MUNICIPAL SERVICES AND INFRASTRUCTURE

How can non-Indigenous Councils with significant Indigenous populations participate more with Indigenous Councils?

Indigenous Leaders Forum

Inclusion and partnership of non-Indigenous Councils within the Indigenous Leaders Forum (ILF) – which has been established by the Local Government Association of Queensland. All the Indigenous Councils are active members of ILF and ILF is held twice yearly. Over the past years, ILF has given the local leaders a collective voice on local and regional matters. During ILF, the membership decides on priority issues, reach a consensus and deputise to State and Federal government for actions.

Shared Resources

Council supports implementing shared resource arrangements with smaller Councils. This will enable use of valuable specialist services to support communities. The arrangement can be formalised through Sister-City agreements.

Community Cabinets

Bringing regular community cabinets to remote communities to allow our community members to engage with parliamentarians, Director-Generals and policy advisors on the areas of concern which are specific to our unique communities.

Torres Strait 10 Year Development Plan

Torres Shire local government area has a total of over 30 State and Federal government services operating from the Shire. The State and Federal government are the highest landowners in the Shire, and are exempt from general rates, rates on vacant land and headworks fees and charges. All State and Federal government developments within Torres Shire have been completed in silo to the local government as there is no legislative requirement for government to notify the local government of development plans.

It is vitally important in moving forward that the State and Federal governments provide bipartisan agreement to funding a Torres Strait 10 Year Development Plan. This plan will allow all levels of government to understand the funding commitments and proposed developments for the region, identify the funding source, and most importantly, discuss the growing need of the infrastructure required to be funded as a result of State and Federal government developments.

For further clarification on the Torres Shire Council Submission to the Queensland Productivity Commission – Inquiry into service delivery in Indigenous Communities please contact the Chief Executive Officer, Mrs Dalassa Yorkston on telephone (07) 4069 1336 or via email to - ceo@torres.qld.gov.au
