



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

**HOUSE OF  
REPRESENTATIVES**

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES  
STRAIT ISLANDER AFFAIRS

**Reference: Capacity building in Indigenous communities**

TUESDAY, 5 NOVEMBER 2002

PORUMA (COCONUT ISLAND)

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**  
**STANDING COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER AFFAIRS**  
**Tuesday, 5 November 2002**

**Members:** Mr Wakelin (*Chair*), Mr Danby, Mrs Draper, Mr Haase, Ms Hoare, Mrs Hull, Dr Lawrence, Mr Lloyd, Mr Snowdon and Mr Tollner

**Members in attendance:** Mrs Draper, Ms Hoare, Mrs Hull, Mr Wakelin

**Terms of reference for the inquiry:**

To inquire into and report on:

Strategies to assist Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders better manage the delivery of services within their communities. In particular, the committee will consider building the capacities of:

- (a) community members to better support families, community organisations and representative councils so as to deliver the best outcomes for individuals, families and communities;
- (b) Indigenous organisations to better deliver and influence the delivery of services in the most effective, efficient and accountable way; and
- (c) government agencies so that policy direction and management structures will improve individual and community outcomes for Indigenous people.

**WITNESSES**

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**Committee met at 3.28 p.m.**

**FAUID, Mr Raymen, Councillor, Poruma Island Council**

**PEARSON, Mr Francis, Chairperson, Poruma Island Council**

**PEARSON, Mrs Ida Mai, Councillor, Poruma Island Council**

**FORDHAM, Mr Michael, General Manager, Torres Strait Regional Authority**

**CHAIR**—Welcome. Thank you to Mike Fordham for looking after us and to Raymen for his help. As you know, we are a parliamentary committee and we are looking at how you do things so well; we are really interested to know that. We are an extension of the parliament, so you need to respect what we are trying to do. We have all met, so we do not need to be too formal. We just need to have a chat. It is a privilege to be able to spend some time with you to understand what happens here. I suppose it would only be fair to ask: do you have any problems, and is there anything the government could do better?

**Councillor Francis Pearson**—Yes.

**CHAIR**—Can you tell us about it?

**Councillor Francis Pearson**—After the walk around the community, I was going to take you to the more southern end of the island to see the biggest problem we have, which is erosion. I have been stressing this to my other colleagues in our meetings over the past three years. We need to know how we can go about helping each other. It is not only us in the Torres Strait; there are about five other islands that are in the same boat.

**CHAIR**—Yes.

**Councillor Francis Pearson**—Where our resort is sitting is where the erosion is happening. We do not want to see a big lump sum of money go to waste. So that needs to be fixed.

**CHAIR**—What are some of the ideas that have been suggested to fix the erosion?

**Councillor Francis Pearson**—First of all, money is a big thing. Money can make things move. I have done my homework, searching for different ideas as to how we can go about fixing this problem. But the only thing is the money. If we have money, I know where to go to purchase all these materials. You need things like stones, sand and a cage.

**Mrs HULL**—How is the soil erosion affecting the community? What would be the benefit of fixing the soil erosion? How would that help?

**Councillor Francis Pearson**—Our revegetation group did a lot of planning to prevent those things from happening. Because the trees were not fully grown, the weather and the tides have made some movement. Because our wharf was built, it changes the movement of the tide. These are the things that have been happening now. We are trying to find another solution as to how we can prevent that. If you go past the eastern end of the wharf, it is all sand. The western end

of the wharf is all rocks. There is a south-easterly blowing at the moment. When it goes back to a north-westerly, that will change and there will be stone over this side and sand over the other side. We have been watching all this movement every time and we know what has been happening. It did not happen like that before. The tide just sort of flowed backwards and forwards on the sand, and there was no sort of damage as such.

**Councillor Faud**—One of the ideas that Francis wanted to mention is that we are looking at building a seawall. If you look at the front of our island, the deep water is not far away; it is pretty close to shore. When we get the westerly blows, it creates a lot of waves which pound our foreshore. So one option we are looking at is putting in a seawall just to break the waves before they hit the shore.

**CHAIR**—It is quite clear that the change has come since the facility down there was put in. How many years has it been since you noticed the great change in the erosion? Would it be 10 or 20 years?

**Councillor Ida Mai Pearson**—It would be more than that. The beach used to be way out there before. It was all sand down here and at the back it was further out. It was suggested at previous councils that we change and use the airstrip to keep on building, because we have a lack of land for housing to accommodate our people. They suggested that in the previous councils, in Gibson Pearson's time, to see if it were possible, but they said that it would cost too much to build and put the airstrip at the back. That used to be land at the back before. So all the sand has piled up and on the top you can see there is a sort of sandhill up there. They put that suggestion in—it was a thought of the past council, like I said—but they said it was going to cost too much.

**CHAIR**—We are limited in regard to that, and no doubt you will continue to work on that with the various agencies and authorities. On another area, there is obviously great pride here and great spirit in terms of the respect amongst your people and for your community. How do you think you have achieved that? It is a great credit to you, and I am interested to know how you have achieved a strong community, without patting yourselves on the back too much.

**Councillor Francis Pearson**—It is just family here, and we tend to respect each other. There is friendship among us. It is not like Thursday Island and all that where there are people from all different islands living on that little island. On Poruma, we are very close to each other.

**Mrs HULL**—Do you have other islanders coming to live here?

**Councillor Francis Pearson**—No.

**Mrs HULL**—Why is that?

**Councillor Ida Mai Pearson**—It only occurs by marriage. We are still linked as in the family. I can say that for myself because I am not from here.

**Mrs HULL**—So the only time that you have someone new come to the community is if they marry someone who lives here?

**Councillor Ida Mai Pearson**—That is right.

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**Mrs HULL**—Why is that so? Why don't other people come and live here?

**Councillor Ida Mai Pearson**—That is how it has been in the past, and we intend to keep it that way.

**Mrs HULL**—Stay insular, that is good. You do not have any problems then, do you?

**Councillor Francis Pearson**—That is true.

**Councillor Faud**—A lot of that is a reflection of our culture, too. It is our cultural belief to have respect circulating in the community. Like Francis mentioned, we are one big family staying here; we are all connected one way or another. I think that has a lot of input as to how the community has been functioning in the past. I think our track record speaks for itself. We have all been working together, and we are trying to work with the younger generation that is coming up as well. We are teaching them that our community has functioned in the past and the way we should be working together. After all, we are all related to one another.

**Mrs HULL**—Lots of your children go away to school and some of them come back to live in the community—such as you, Francis; you have come back to live in the community. You learn a different way of life when you are living in another community, say, in Cairns or Thursday Island. So when they come back to Poruma, how do you keep law and order? How do you keep people on the straight and narrow? How do you stop them bringing culture from another place into your community?

**Councillor Ida Mai Pearson**—I think religion plays a big part in it. This is a very religious community. If the children bring something back from down south, it only lasts for a month, maybe two or three months, and after that it will fade away because religion plays a big part in it. There are only two religions in the community.

**Councillor Francis Pearson**—It is a small island. Information does get passed around very quickly. If something strange has been adopted into the community, everybody suspects it. If it has been accepted, then it will stay; if it has not, you will see it for only a month and then it is gone—all back to normal.

**Mrs DRAPER**—Francis, I have a question from a health perspective. The committee is aware of outcomes in general for the Indigenous community in terms of shorter life spans, diabetes and heart disease. Is there anything specific to Poruma Island in terms of health concerns?

**Councillor Francis Pearson**—I will direct this to Ida because she has been studying health and working in the health area.

**Councillor Ida Mai Pearson**—I had been nursing for 17 years before I was elected as a councillor. From what I have seen over my 17 years on Poruma, we have had a lot of people dying from cancer. I really wanted to find out why this was happening in a small community like this. Diabetes, hypertension and those sorts of things normally occur because of food intake, dietary habits and lack of exercise or something like that. I always wanted to know why cancer was a main disease being experienced in this community.

**Mrs DRAPER**—What would the majority of the cancers be? Are they limited to breast, lung and bowel?

**Councillor Ida Mai Pearson**—There is a variety. Three people died from lung cancer. Others suffered from bladder cancer and bowel cancer. I cannot see that people are getting it from family history. If you are getting it from generation to generation, it only shows up as bowel cancer; but it is in different areas.

**CHAIR**—Has anyone done a study over a period of time, apart from you having a look at it yourself? Has anyone else been supported to do research?

**Councillor Ida Mai Pearson**—No-one at all. Everything is focused on diabetes and hypertension.

**CHAIR**—We talked earlier today about some of the health issues over on Thursday Island with the Torres Strait Regional Authority, and there are issues here that are not our direct responsibility, but we have noted how it is done a little differently perhaps from other areas. That is something that we have just noted, and that is all I can say at this time.

**Ms HOARE**—We have seen the IBIS store and the tourism complex. There is also a freezer operation for fish product. Do you have that here? I am interested in knowing how you export your fish product and where that would go.

**Councillor Francis Pearson**—The buyer on the island is in partnership with a middleman in Cairns. I believe they export it overseas. We only know that ours goes from here to the next person in Cairns.

**Ms HOARE**—The boat that would deliver the supplies here would pick up the frozen fish product, or would that go by plane?

**Councillor Francis Pearson**—By boat. A shipment comes in every week on Monday. It delivers cargo to the IBIS shops and other people who buy things from down south or Thursday Island. The fish goes at the same time, if there is stock to be sent.

**Ms HOARE**—Is the community getting a good price for the product?

**Councillor Francis Pearson**—It varies. Sometimes there is competition between here and other islands. Divers speak to each other to find out the prices which each buyer pays. If people tend to go there, then the price goes up. If the market price falls wherever they are selling to, then the price goes down.

**Ms HOARE**—What part of the island's income would come from fish product?

**Councillor Francis Pearson**—Crayfish?

**Ms HOARE**—Yes. How much income would that bring to the island?



**Councillor Francis Pearson**—It is more or less balanced between product from the sea and the project that we have on the island. It is balanced.

**Ms HOARE**—About half and half?

**Councillor Francis Pearson**—Yes.

**Mrs HULL**—With respect to women's needs on the island, are any specific programs in place to encourage women—say, in relation to health, looking after their child's health through diet, ensuring that they do not eventually succumb to diabetes and such things? Are there any specific programs that you run on the island that encourage them to cook in different ways, or are we looking mainly at a westernised diet now so that you are getting a lot of prepackaged food and the children are eating a lot of prepackaged food?

**Councillor Ida Mai Pearson**—The program comes from the health department. We have a health centre here and there are two health workers and a clinical nurse. They actually deliver those programs. I have not been in that area for a while but when I was there we usually had women's health come along—a diabetic clinic, where Dr Singh comes along, and you also have a nutrition team that comes with Dr Singh. I suppose the patients that are diabetics that have those problems are the ones who get seen more. We would like to see somebody from a different organisation actually ask to come into the community and teach and do a workshop. About two years ago we had the HACC service come in. They were doing it for the older people. They actually did training for their own staff. They encouraged clients on the island to attend, and any other people. The health workers did attend, and it was to do with nutrition. They taught them how to cook with their own food. It was interesting because most of them thought that cooking it with a different method would be the same—like greasy food and those sorts of things. But at this time now, because we do not have outside resources coming into the community besides the health department, everyone has turned to westernised food.

**Mrs HULL**—Some of our communities have a significant amount of domestic violence. Do you have a high percentage or a percentage of domestic violence that you deal with as a community at times?

**Councillor Ida Mai Pearson**—No. We have only one or two people, but it is always resolved.

**Mrs HULL**—That is interesting; it is always resolved?

**Councillor Ida Mai Pearson**—Yes, it is always resolved in the community itself.

**Mrs HULL**—How is that? What is the reason? As the chairman says, you do it well here. How do we deliver what you do well here to another community that may be experiencing difficulties? That is part of the role that we should be looking at. How is that resolved if you have that problem?

**Councillor Francis Pearson**—Like I said earlier on, we are more or less a family. If the problem is with someone younger, there are two or three ways you can go and speak to them. You can either go through the uncle—big uncle or younger uncle—or you can go and speak to the grandpa. Then you will have time to speak to the ladies—the aunties, the grandma.

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Everybody speaks in a different way and helps. Then you find a solution real quick instead of just going straight into a big solving problem—like going to the council and all this or going to court or something. There is always a good way to go, the culturally appropriate way.

**Mrs HULL**—Do you have any incidence of, say, alcohol abuse or any type of substance abuse on the island?

**Councillor Ida Mai Pearson**—No, we do not have any.

**Mrs HULL**—Do you have alcohol on the island? Is there alcohol on the island at all?

**Councillor Francis Pearson**—No, it is a dry community.

**Councillor Ida Mai Pearson**—It is a dry community. The community does not allow a canteen to be on this island. The people are allowed to have their share of alcohol, but they have it to themselves.

**Mrs HULL**—But they cannot actually buy it here?

**Councillor Ida Mai Pearson**—They cannot buy it at all. If it has been mentioned that somebody did sell alcohol to somebody, it will get back to the council. The people would know about it and they would be very upset with the person that did it. Like I say, in a day that person would be the last. They would get very bad daggers. I do not think they would want to do it again, and they never do do it again. It goes back to religion. Religion plays a big part in this. Everybody knows that the Bible carries the law. Like the chairman said, everybody is really close family, so they all respect each other. If someone has the advice, someone will take that advice.

**Councillor Faud**—So all the churches are there. The lady from the church and the members go out of their way to do a bit of counselling on them from the spiritual side as well and contribute in that way to solving the problem, whether it is domestic or whatever it is. The church is very helpful, too. Like the chairman says, it is everybody. We all contribute and try and help each other. After all, we are all one family.

**Mrs DRAPER**—So there are two religions, Assemblies of God and Uniting Church?

**Councillor Ida Mai Pearson**—Church of England.

**Mrs DRAPER**—Church of England and Assemblies of God?

**Councillor Ida Mai Pearson**—Yes.

**Councillor Francis Pearson**—When we do counselling, it is not like you make an appointment. It is like saying, ‘Why don’t we go for a walk?’ It is like I do not want Raymen to know that I was talking to someone. It is like we just stroll along just doing nothing, but we are communicating and we are solving our problem in the family way. We do not want anybody to know that he has a problem or she has a problem. It does not make you look bad or make you upset.

**Mrs HULL**—Has it always been a dry community?

**Councillor Ida Mai Pearson**—Yes.

**Councillor Francis Pearson**—Yes, ever since alcohol was introduced to the Torres Strait or whatever.

**Mrs HULL**—I find this very interesting. How have you resisted it? Just because you have a religious community, you have been able to resist the people wanting to come in and sell alcohol on the island; your whole community basically says no and objects to it?

**Councillor Ida Mai Pearson**—Yes.

**Mrs HULL**—That is wonderful.

**Councillor Francis Pearson**—An issue was pointed out to us with regard to the tourist resort down there. Everybody was saying, ‘Oops, we have a canteen coming into the island.’ The question went around like this, and we said, ‘No, it is not for the community; it belongs to the resort and only for the resort. If you want to have a beer, you pay the price of accommodation.’ Nobody would go and pay the accommodation price to have one beer. It is a no-no.

**Mr Fordham**—They can still bring alcohol in themselves.

**Mrs HULL**—Yes, I know. But in most of the communities a lot of the income is made through alcohol; it is a dichotomy. You have a problem of alcohol abuse and a kind of community failure. The canteens are usually operated by the council, so there is money made out of it. It is money made out of the sale of alcohol that actually goes back into delivering things. I wonder how you can resist that. How do you stop somebody coming in here and setting up a licensed premises?

**Mrs DRAPER**—They cannot without council permission.

**Councillor Francis Pearson**—Yes. They still have to come through our way—the decision makers.

**Mrs HULL**—That is really interesting to me.

**Councillor Fauid**—I think it is really up to the individual council. The past is always there as something for you to look back on and learn from. If a mistake has been made in the past, then you make sure you do not repeat that in the future. What you are saying is true: a lot of the communities generate their income from the canteen, but they have to look at the other side of it—the effect it is having on the community. We realise that. The council before us realised that. There are other options—like tourism, for one. You can generate money just as well as you can from the canteen but it is not affecting the other side of it—the people in the community—whereas the canteen does. If you go back to the council itself or the leader of the community, it is up to them to look at it, to look back in the past and ask, ‘Where did we go wrong?’ and to make sure we do not repeat that in the future.

**CHAIR**—Heading into slightly different territory: the island has come from its history, has had its challenges and is now looking to the future. You have your fishing and tourism, which is a new venture. You have these erosion difficulties, and with some of these new ways and with the pressures of development will come new challenges. That forms part of our inquiry about community capacity and part of your relationship with the Torres Strait Regional Authority and how that is going to work. You have worked through your plan, which is a three-year plan. I do not want to make this question too complicated because it is really just about the future, about the community capacity and education.

We talked earlier about that bit of welding—a job that requires someone to go there and come back—and the cost of it. That is one simple example of developing the skills for new industry and for the maintenance of your houses and everything else. In your plan, where does the Torres Strait Regional Authority fit and how is that going? How do you see your next generation in terms of education and skills? Does anyone want to have a go at that? There is the Torres Strait authority part and how that is working and how it can help and develop, and there is also the next generation and their skills.

**Councillor Francis Pearson**—The Torres Strait Regional Authority's support comes along with the money. That is where things start to develop. When there is not enough money, there is less development. That is the biggest support we get. We also get advice from different angles about how we can build whatever project we are trying to venture into.

**CHAIR**—You are on the authority and the council, aren't you?

**Councillor Francis Pearson**—Yes. Not only that, but we get ideas from other councils. Other chairpersons sit around and put their views and I think, 'There is something new. I might try those ideas back at home in a different way.'

**Councillor Ida Mai Pearson**—In time to come, all the money we get from TSRA will help us start building up small businesses like welding. It costs us a lot of money to go to TI and come back. That is the reason we have set up a workshop. I look after the CDEP part of the project. The aim of our council, with Francis and Raymen, is to get our people trained. From the TSRA we get our CDEP funds to bring people in to help train our people to develop these skills. Our vision is for Coconut Island to be the central island for training, so we have put in for some other infrastructure to build a training centre. Our training centre will include, along with our own library, a state library with two classrooms. We have a small training centre at the moment—we are using the church accommodation. It is a kick-off for this council that we have started with RATAP, and that is for education.

We have got three students who are doing RATAP in primary school teaching. In that time we have put in for funding for two computers to join in with JCU to assist the students, but the space is not adequate enough to hold more people to do more training. We have got courses and training workshops coming into the community. In our community, our people cannot go away because they have got their family commitments, so we are trying to bring training to the community. By doing that, we will establish something that will assist our community in bringing income into our community. That is our long-term goal.

**Councillor Faid**—Just adding to Councillor Ida Mai's point: it will probably save TAFE a lot of money. We can also cater for the eastern islands. There are three islands: Mer or Murray

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Island, Darnley Island and Stephen Island. We can always cater for them, so we only have to bring one person from TAFE to come out to run a course here. To add to that again, we are also looking into getting a new council chamber; the training centre will be a part of the new council chamber. It also can provide the younger generation with skills in the administration area, if you have a bigger office space. These are the things we are looking at to help the next generation that comes along.

**CHAIR**—So it is very much in the plan and you can see improvements coming for yourselves and for the next generation through that structure.

**Councillor Ida Mai Pearson**—It has been three years since our election, and we have done a lot of training and building up skills with our CDEP participants. Like I said, TSRA has a lot of input into that with the CDEP funds coming in, assisting us with bringing in motor mechanics, welders, cabinet-makers and those sorts of things. We also have tourism. Before tourism started coming up, we started putting our ladies into hospitality courses, and they had to travel to Cairns. We have tried to cover every area of what we are trying to establish in training so that we can develop. But, like the chairman says, it all comes down to money. Like I said, we thank TSRA for assisting us in that, but they can only give so much and we always try to seek funding elsewhere.

**CHAIR**—I should ask about funding from the state governments and their departments. I heard earlier that you have got pilots that connect here, and they would be a source of income too, I guess. So there are various opportunities. In relation to the state government and other agencies, do they deal directly with you? Do they deal directly with your council or is it through the authority?

**Councillor Ida Mai Pearson**—It is through DATSIP and sometimes TSRA.

**CHAIR**—So that is about where it sits. There is nothing to stop the state coming directly to the communities?

**Mr Fordham**—No, there is not.

**CHAIR**—But it would be sensible to go to the authority and work through them.

**Mr Fordham**—If they are trying to coordinate across programs and to joint-fund and those sorts of things, then it is better. It depends on what it is. The bulk of the dealings between the community council and the state are through DATSIP because they ‘own’ the legislation by which the councils are established and the rules and all that sort of thing.

**CHAIR**—I have one last question about health emergencies—and you would have the odd one, I guess?

**Councillor Ida Mai Pearson**—Yes, we have experienced it.

**CHAIR**—What happens with health and what happens with an emergency? Do you bring a helicopter out and bring people in? What happens?

**Councillor Francis Pearson**—When an emergency does happen, you have to wait until the morning.

**CHAIR**—Yes, for the aeroplane.

**Councillor Francis Pearson**—Helicopter, and it will only happen in the morning.

**CHAIR**—To do it in daylight.

**Councillor Francis Pearson**—Yes.

**Councillor Ida Mai Pearson**—And it goes through the health department. If there is an emergency, the health workers ring in and they decide whether it will be a fixed-wing or a chopper. Only yesterday we had an accident here and, because it was late in the afternoon, they sent a fixed-wing plane out. If it is a chopper, it costs about \$5,000 to \$6,000, but a charter for a plane is only about \$600 or \$700. The time for the patient to get from here to Thursday Island would be about two hours.

**Mrs DRAPER**—Is that by chopper?

**Councillor Ida Mai Pearson**—No, by plane. By chopper it would take, say, an hour or half an hour, depending on the weather.

**Mrs HULL**—I would like to come back to the type of leadership that takes place on the island. Could you explain how the leadership has developed over the years and how important that leadership is in making sure that you continue to have such a successful community?

**Councillor Francis Pearson**—I am on the council. Before I was elected as chair of the community council, I was in the education department teaching for about 10 years. It has been an experience for me. These are only my first four years. I have learned something different. I had no experience whatsoever in politics. I guess some of the knowledge about how they operate has been passed to me by the previous chair. As a group we sit and talk about how we can take our community ahead. When I have grasped all this information, I can ring around and ask former chairs, ‘What do you reckon?’ They give their ideas to me and I put it together. I work it out on how we think, what is best, and then we go from there.

**Mrs HULL**—What are you doing to ensure that the younger people are provided with the skills to be future community leaders? Do you have anything in place that provides some leadership skills and training for your young people so that they can be confident and able to take the community forward in future years?

**Councillor Francis Pearson**—I have never come across a thought like that, but I do believe that you need better education and better outside knowledge. You can put that together, take it back home and you will see whether it benefits the island. If it does, then you put it into practice. It happens with the support of everybody.

**Councillor Ida Mai Pearson**—With the CDEP, before we start we ask each individual coming in what they would like to be. If they say that one day they would like to be a leader,

then as a CDEP officer—and I also do training as part of CDEP—I say to them, ‘If you want to be a leader one day, then you should take these courses.’ This council very much supports training and sending them to build up their skills to become a leader, a carpenter or whatever they want to be, not what the council wants them to be—it is up to them.

**Mrs HULL**—So you use CDEP as leadership training for the future?

**Councillor Ida Mai Pearson**—Yes.

**Councillor Faud**—I am also looking at putting up a program—and I am working with the school as well on this—to adopt a student into certain areas. It could be with the ward officer or the reporting officer from the aerodrome. The student would come and work with us for a couple of hours to find out about the role we play in the community, and we give them a bit of insight into all those areas. It will be about working with the school kids—working down from the CDEP—to give them a career pathway in their mind as they study in their respective grades.

**Mrs HULL**—You have one policeman here?

**Councillor Francis Pearson**—Three.

**Mrs HULL**—I am only asking this question so that I can understand what kinds of things are in the community. Is there anything that the younger people tend to move towards? If they are going to be a bit mischievous and troublesome, is there any particular area in which they are troublesome or mischievous?

**Councillor Francis Pearson**—Youngsters are youngsters. They find something to do.

**Mrs DRAPER**—No matter where they are.

**Councillor Francis Pearson**—No matter where.

**Mrs HULL**—But that is the sort of thing I am looking for, just so that I can understand the sorts of things. Then how do you deal with that? You have three policemen who live in the community. So how do you deal with any troublesome issues with your younger people?

**Councillor Francis Pearson**—Whatever trouble is happening in the community, the police go and speak to them and they find a way with them. Whoever those people are, they bring them to us and we have a yarn with them.

**Councillor Faud**—He used to be a schoolteacher, so they respect him from that side as well.

**Mr Fordham**—Just to clarify—and this is not to denigrate the individuals—they are not policemen; they are community police officers, funded entirely by the council. The council basically gives it a high priority here, so there are three of them.

**Mrs HULL**—This is interesting for me, having been into different communities on different issues like substance abuse. Some of our Indigenous communities have an extremely difficult time with substance abuse, whether it be with aerosol sniffing or a whole host of things. If we

can understand why it is not here and why you do it so well, we can perhaps come together with some thoughts as to how other communities could be assisted in overcoming the problems.

**Councillor Ida Mai Pearson**—I think it comes back to the family ways again; everybody is connected. For example, you have somebody sniffing down the road and someone goes by; this is a very small community and you are not supposed to be doing it. I live down the other end of the island. If my kids are down here, for sure Francis or Raymen will say, ‘What are you doing down here? You are supposed to be home. You are not supposed to be down here.’ Even if you find somebody jumping off the wharf and they are smaller, because he is an uncle he is allowed to correct my child. It is like ‘Uncle Francis is there; I can’t swim here. We have to go somewhere else.’ That is the reason why: family is very closely connected here, so you cannot find any problems. There are problems, but they only last for a day or they are a very small problem. Like I say, if there is petrol sniffing, aerosol sniffing, someone will come back, and by that time tomorrow it is corrected.

**Councillor Faud**—So everyone can be an eye and an ear for each other here. If I am up that end, Francis or Ida might be down this end and might see my kids; they can be the eyes and ears for me. They will direct the kids, and the kids will respect them for who they are. That is the way I think communities should work in together—have effective communication with each other and pass that on to kids.

**Councillor Ida Mai Pearson**—By the time night comes, the father or the mother already knows what the child did that day because we would go back and say, ‘I gave your kid a smack down there because he was doing this,’ and the next day he does not do it. Then somebody else will do it and they will do the same thing there. So it does not last long.

**CHAIR**—I think there are some lessons for all of Australia here somewhere. Would you like to say anything in conclusion, because we need to finish up? Does anyone want to say anything in conclusion to the committee?

**Councillor Faud**—Yes, I would like to say something. It is about a council area that I look after; as service manager, I look after services in the community. When you landed on our airstrip, you probably noticed the dust. I spoke to the federal minister Warren Entsch about it when he visited us a few times, and I also spoke to the main roads department. It concerns our airstrip because, with the tourism we are building now, we will probably get more planes coming in here. At the moment we probably get about three service flights a day and occasionally a charter comes in. Usually at this time of the year, because of the blast from the prop, we have to close off about 200 metres on the west side where planes come in to land. When planes set down or start to take off, the blast from the props seem to dig or blast all that away.

It is not only there; I think it is everywhere. But this is a problem mainly because of our water; a lot of dust goes in there. That comes back to the environmental health side of things. I have noticed that a lot of the dust goes in the water there. The water officer has spoken to me about it a few times. We have a sort of plastic cover on top but still dust gets in there. We have outlets going into the dam as well. I am still talking, trying to get some sort of funding arrangement to try to fix the problem because our water supply is right next to the airstrip. That has been a concern for me and I have stressed it to our chairman and council here during our



meeting. I have pointed out to them my concern for the water dam, especially in the dry season. The dust flows straight over the dam area.

**CHAIR**—We need to be quite plain and not mislead you about the role of our committee. It is quite difficult in that we cannot influence those decisions directly. You are quite right to go through your local member and the authority et cetera. We are looking at an Australia-wide issue and we are not able to pick up the individual issues other than in a broader context. But certainly we have got it on the public record. I, personally, will mention it to Warren again.

**Councillor Fauid**—You should talk about it as a health issue. It is an environment issue, but eventually it will lead to a health issue. This is about the airstrip itself, but I am really coming from the health environmental side as well.

**CHAIR**—But, in the broader context, the issues of development and growth and how they impact on your environment, your water and your airstrip are part of this ongoing concern about community capacity to handle such issues.

**Mrs HULL**—Just leading on from your last comment, do you think governments and your communities should form partnerships? You have been using CDEP, so obviously there are partnerships with government there. Do you think it is important that governments form partnerships with your communities, apart from funding for various programs? Do you think all that is needed is the funding of programs and some assistance, when required, and then for you to run your communities yourselves; or do you think there is a need for government to have a partnership with you?

**Councillor Francis Pearson**—I believe that we are the third or the second choice for the selling of the strip.

**Mr Fordham**—I was not going to get any hopes up but, under the HEMPT program, Boigu has just been completed, and it is now between Mer and Poruma as to which is next. The aerodrome reports, to my mind, indicate that Poruma is next. The sort of process we would go through is to work with the councils and go off to Queensland Transport and try and get fifty-fifty funding with them. We would then bring in the HEMPT pool and employ project managers and designers and so on and go ahead with it. But it would go back to the board to make the decision about that allocation.

**Mrs HULL**—So, for communities to be successful, you think it is important for governments of all persuasions to be in partnership with them?

**Councillor Francis Pearson**—I believe so, yes. We have ties with the state and the Commonwealth; they are in partnership with us in some other developments.

**Mrs HULL**—So you do not think the government should leave you alone and let you get on with it?

**Councillor Francis Pearson**—If they leave us alone, where will we get the money from? We need that.

**CHAIR**—I have to get this right: Poruma. I will get the pronunciation right eventually!

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**Councillor Francis Pearson**—The name was Coconut but it is no longer Coconut. That is scrapped, out the door. It is Poruma.

**CHAIR**—I thank Ida Mai, Raymen and Francis, the chairman, for your wonderful hospitality and help today. We will go away but we are probably 12 months away from putting our report to the parliament. You will get a copy of what we recorded today with you. We are very appreciative and incredibly impressed with what we saw. Thank you.

**Councillor Francis Pearson**—I would like to say thank you very much for your visit and for being the eyes and ears for our concerns. Thank you very much, Mr Fordham, for being here too.

Resolved (on motion by **Mrs Hull**):

That this committee authorises publication of the proof transcript of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

**Committee adjourned at 4.22 p.m.**