



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES
STRAIT ISLANDER AFFAIRS

**Reference: Community stores in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
communities**

THURSDAY, 2 APRIL 2009

KOWANYAMA

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING
COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER AFFAIRS**

Thursday, 2 April 2009

Members: Mr Marles (*Chair*), Mr Laming (*Deputy Chair*), Mr Abbott, Ms Campbell, Mr Katter, Ms Rea, Mr Kelvin Thomson, Mr Trevor, Mr Turnour and Mrs Vale

Members in attendance: Mr Katter, Mr Marles, Mr Turnour and Mrs Vale

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

The operation of local community stores in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, with a particular focus on:

- food supply, quality, cost and competition issues;
- the effectiveness of the Outback Stores model, and other private, public and community store models; and
- the impact of these factors on the health and economic outcomes of communities.

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Committee met at 2.25 pm**HUDSON, Mr Thomas, Mayor, Kowanyama Aboriginal Shire Council**

Councillor Hudson—Mr Chairman, Committee Members, Councillors, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like to welcome the committee of inquiry to Kowanyama today for this forum, and my wish is that everyone will participate in it.

CHAIR (Mr Marles)—I thank you, Mayor, for that welcome. I welcome all the people present to this hearing of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs and to our inquiry into community stores in remote Indigenous communities. I start by acknowledging the traditional custodians of this land and I pay our respect to elders past, present and future. The committee would also like to acknowledge the presence of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are here today and who reside in this area. We would also like to thank the community of Kowanyama for having us here and for allowing us to conduct this public hearing, which is a very important contribution to our inquiry.

These are formal proceedings of the Commonwealth parliament. Those who will be providing evidence need to be aware that everything that is said must be factual and honest. It can be considered a serious matter to attempt to mislead the committee. I invite all the people who are giving evidence to make comments that will help us in our inquiry, which is to improve the current government administration of community stores in remote communities.

This is a public hearing and a transcript of what is said today will be placed on the committee's website, which forms part of the Commonwealth parliamentary website. If you would like any more details about either the transcript or the inquiry, please feel free to approach the inquiry staff who are at the hearing today. At the conclusion of the formal part of the hearing today, whereby we will be having a certain number of witnesses who have been booked in to give us evidence, we will be holding an open forum. That is an opportunity for anyone who would like to put up their hand to have a say about the way in which the community store in this community is run or to put any ideas that they might have about the running of community stores. If you are interested in making a contribution, I would ask that you approach one of the committee staff members and give them your name so that we can provide it for the *Hansard* record.

Before I ask the committee members to introduce themselves to you, I acknowledge your local member, Jim Turnour, who has been really instrumental in providing advocacy around this issue of the situation relating to community stores and the prices in them. It is really in large measure due to his efforts that you have not got this parliamentary committee meeting in your community today. I will now ask the committee members to introduce themselves.

Mrs VALE—Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Danna Vale. I am the federal member for Hughes, which is in New South Wales. It is based in an area between Sydney and Wollongong. My area goes from Sutherland Shire across to Liverpool.

The traditional elders of my area are the Gundungurra people. I pay my respects to and honour your elders here and the people of your area.

Mr KATTER—Good afternoon, everyone. I think there would be only two people here who would remember me in my guise as a minister for many years. I acknowledge James and Thomas. It is incredible that you are both still in a position of power and influence in the community 20 years later. Thank you very much for coming along today.

Mr TURNOUR—Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you, Thomas, for your kind welcome today. I thank the elders and traditional owners for having us on their country and I pay my respects to you and your community.

CHAIR—My name is Richard Marles. I am the chair of this committee. I am the federal member for Corio, which is an electorate based in Geelong in Victoria. I noted, as we went in to have lunch—and I thank everyone for providing us with that lunch—that you have got a picture of Polly Farmer, the Geelong great, in the reception area of your council, so I feel very much at home. We are running on a very tight schedule today so we will try to move this along as quickly as we can.

[2.30 pm]

DICK, Mr James Richard, Councillor, Kowanyama Aboriginal Shire Council

HUDSON, Mr Thomas, Mayor, Kowanyama Aboriginal Shire Council

JAPP, Mr John, Chief Executive Officer, Kowanyama Aboriginal Shire Council

PARRY, Mr Walter, Councillor, Kowanyama Aboriginal Shire Council

PATRICK, Mr Griffith, Councillor, Kowanyama Aboriginal Shire Council

SANDS, Mr Robbie, Deputy Chief Executive Officer, Kowanyama Aboriginal Shire Council

YAM, Mr Michael, Councillor, Kowanyama Aboriginal Shire Council

CHAIR—Welcome to the table. I invite you to make an opening statement about the situation of the community store in this community and then we will ask some questions.

Councillor Hudson—One of the things that I find with the store at this stage, as I speak, is that it seems to be run out of Brisbane, not from within the community. I find that ownership is taken away from us. It should be run from within the community. This even goes right down to ordering the things on the shelf. You find some difficulties during the wet season. When we have had some cyclones we have found the shelves pretty light on. Another thing about the store, and this was brought to my attention some months ago, is that there is nothing there on the shelf for diabetics. I find that very sad, because they should be catering for all levels of requirements within our community. I think ownership and training are vital. I think we should be looking more at community involvement with the store and having ownership to make it operate a bit better.

CHAIR—Does anybody else want to add a statement before we start asking questions?

Mr Japp—I would add that council did put a submission in to the committee. It has the issues in general that have concerned council as was indicated in a meeting prior to the submission being put in.

CHAIR—We are certainly in receipt of that submission and we appreciate the time that you have taken to prepare it. The store is currently stocked by road, is that right? During the dry season do you get a delivery once a week? Is it more frequent than that?

Councillor Hudson—About once a week. It gathers pace when it comes to the end of the year. In the lead-up to the wet season they put on two or three trucks to fill the store up. I think we did not see that last year. I do not know what really happened but they missed those last trucks. When we put in for our flood relief thing, as everyone else in the gulf did, they did jump into line with us; they had their things come by barge through Pormpuraaw. Our query on that would be as to the cost of them bringing it over here and whether that is going to be in the actual cost on the shelf.

CHAIR—At the moment the community is cut off from Cairns by road. You do not get any barges?

Councillor Hudson—No.

CHAIR—So there is no sea freight in?

Councillor Hudson—No.

CHAIR—During the wet season, does that mean air is the only way in which products can be brought in?

Councillor Hudson—If you do it right and you stock the store to its full capacity, the only things that you would bring in by air would be milk and fresh vegies and other perishables. Those are the only things that you would bring in by air.

CHAIR—How often should that be occurring—twice weekly or once weekly?

Councillor Hudson—Once a week.

CHAIR—Is that what has happened over the wet season? Has there been weekly airfreighting?

Councillor Hudson—I think we have seen more this time because the store was a bit bare. We have seen planes come in more than we have before.

Mr Japp—Can I just clarify that. There was one week when there was an aircraft every day and there was a Friday when there were three aircraft on that one day.

CHAIR—What was that to do with? Why do you need to have that frequency of aircraft?

Mr Japp—Lack of stock.

CHAIR—So really the point you are making is that if it had been organised properly a lot of that stock could have been brought in by the end of the dry season?

Councillor Hudson—If it had been managed by the manager of the store onsite and not managed out of Brisbane it would have been a different story.

CHAIR—How long have you been cut off by road this year?

Councillor Hudson—This year we have been cut off since January.

CHAIR—When do you expect to reopen again?

Councillor Hudson—The trucks will probably be rolling in at the end of May if not early June.

CHAIR—By my maths, that is four or five months. Is that typical?

Councillor Hudson—That is typical, yes.

CHAIR—Is there any formal consultation that you are able to have with the store operations? Obviously you would have a relationship with the local manager of the store, but I understand your point is that a lot of this is run out of Brisbane. Do you get to talk to the people in Brisbane much about how the store is being run and what you would like in it?

Councillor Hudson—Not really, not an ongoing discussion. They did say to us last time the deputy CEO and I met with them just after Christmas that they would be open for this and that. But the practice has changed dramatically and the practice that is running now is affecting our community. When we, those of us who live here, walk behind the store and see for ourselves that it is bare in the middle of January it shocks us because it should be at full capacity. Talking to them in the middle of the wet season is not going to any good. We should be talking during the dry season leading up to the wet season to prepare for it.

CHAIR—Could you make a general comment about the quality of the products which are in the store, including the fresh fruit and vegetables?

Councillor Hudson—The quality of the meat is something we have been finding that community members have been talking about. They are saying that the frozen meat is too dark and too old. I guess it has been frozen too long. Our people like meat fresh, with a bit of blood dripping off it. It turns them off when they see the darkness and how long it has been frozen, and they will not buy it. The rest of the products on the shelves are not the problem; it is the prices attached to them.

CHAIR—Say something more about the prices. Are they very expensive?

Councillor Hudson—Very expensive, yes. We did some research. John?

Mr Japp—Robbie has done some very recent work.

Mr Sands—The concern of the community with the pricing is that ABS statistics show that we are the seventh most disadvantaged community in Australia and the third most disadvantaged community in the state. Because of that disadvantage, the number and frequency of flights bringing in fresh stock is because the end user pays,

which is the community. For us, being the third most disadvantaged community in the state, the cost of living is very high and we have to put up with those costs.

Mr KATTER—When they look at ‘disadvantage’, is that in terms of cost of living or overall?

Mr Sands—I think it is a social and economic survey through the ABS.

CHAIR—To get some context there, could you describe the other food outlets in town for me, please. You have the cafe.

Councillor Hudson—Yes, there is the cafe. I have not seen any problems with the cafe. Maybe the other members have, but I have not seen anything. The guesthouse prices seem to be over the heads of people and they are simply not catering for the community.

Mr KATTER—Who owns the guesthouse?

Councillor Hudson—It is privately run by Evelyn. She is a Filipino lady with a European partner.

CHAIR—The cafes are privately owned?

Councillor Hudson—The cafes are privately owned, yes.

Mr KATTER—Are they locally owned?

Councillor Hudson—No. The three of them are owned by outside.

CHAIR—Are there any other food outlets?

Councillor Hudson—Yes, the church.

CHAIR—Can you describe what the church provides?

Councillor Hudson—I have had a lot of discussions with the people who are running the church and I think it is beyond their control too, because it seems to be run out of the main office. They tell them what to order and things like that. They have been lacking a few things, and things have to come on the plane and then the price goes sky high. I think they realise that and they are working on trying to cater better for the community.

CHAIR—Where is the main office—in Brisbane again?

Councillor Hudson—I think it is in Brisbane.

Mr Sands—Cairns.

CHAIR—But it is run by the church?

Councillor Hudson—No. What do they call themselves? The diocese.

CHAIR—And what sort of food is there?

Councillor Hudson—At the coffee shop?

CHAIR—No, the church.

Councillor Hudson—That is the coffee shop. The coffee shop is the church outlet.

CHAIR—Sorry, I am confused now. There is a cafe, the guesthouse and the church. So there are three?

Councillor Hudson—Three of them.

CHAIR—At the church, what sort of food is there?

Councillor Hudson—The food I think is just pies, hot dogs and things like that. Mostly it is just tinned stuff and kitchen items, and then they have frozen meat.

CHAIR—The final question from me: to what extent do people supplement their food with fishing or hunting? Is a lot of fishing or hunting done?

Councillor Hudson—Absolutely. We are a people who love our Mother Nature and we live off it.

CHAIR—Are crops grown?

Councillor Hudson—Council do have a farm, but it runs more or less in a very low profile way. We are not in the area of making profit. But it is not possible to grow now, because the soil is a bit too wet and it becomes muck when you are trying to grow vegies. But as soon as the winter starts coming in they grow tomatoes, lettuce and things like that. The outlet from there goes to our old people's home and to the children at the school. We also have some fruit up there, an orchard that also gives them out.

CHAIR—Do you sell any of that produce to the store?

Councillor Hudson—We do sell a bit to the store, yes, but they do not grab a lot because they say that it is not to the standard—like our eggs, for example. We have some chooks up here, but the previous manager did not want the eggs because they were not to the standard. We do sell bananas. They take bananas. But with the rest we try to encourage our elders in the old people's home and children to get fresh vegies into them by giving them free packages.

CHAIR—Could you quantify to what extent people do live off the land? Is half their food intake from living on the land or is it more?

Councillor Hudson—I would say half, yes, especially in the dry season. There are fish, geese, ducks and things like that. Yes, it would be half of it.

Mr TURNOUR—This year the food ran out in early or mid-January, I think you said. In previous years, where you have had the store stocked properly before the wet season, you have not run into those problems?

Councillor Hudson—No, not what we are going through now, I think. I have been here for 29 years and I have never seen any barge coming to Pormpuraaw to start sending over from there. This is the first time I have ever seen it.

Mr TURNOUR—Do you know when the centralisation of the operation of the store started to happen out of Brisbane? Has it always been like that?

Councillor Hudson—It has always been like that, I think.

Mr Sands—To clarify, I think it was probably in the last two years that they centralised the ordering system.

Mr TURNOUR—I have gone through your submission and I just want to ensure that we have things exactly right. The desire of the community council would be for the state to continue with the divestment process with the local store here. Is that correct?

Councillor Hudson—Yes.

Mr Japp—That is my understanding, both with the previous council and with this council. Council had not asked for the store, but the then minister and the government had made a decision to divest the store. Council was approached on the basis of whether we were willing to take on that store. The previous council said yes, because of the issues we have been discussing. Council took legal advice and accounting advice and spoke to Outback Stores and a number of other suppliers. Council would have expended at least \$20,000 to \$25,000 on that advice. To date, we do not know where things stand. As the Deputy CEO has said, as the third most disadvantaged council in Queensland this council cannot afford that sort of money. When things were dangled in front of us by saying, ‘Do you want to take on a store?’ we followed the processes required. We showed due diligence and we expended money that we just could not afford to expend and get nowhere.

Councillor Hudson—I would like to add a bit more to that. I think you all know that the store has been on the agenda for 10 years or more. I think the views have changed over that time. When it was first put to council, council said that the project might be too big, because to stock for the wet season would cost in the vicinity of \$2 million and there were second thoughts about it. Thoughts have changed now as we have gone down the track; because of the needs, we see that it has to run with the community.

From my leadership and my team I think we would probably be looking at some agreement, and I think we have agreement around it, to put the bakery within the store. It may be a stepping stone that some of the things in there could go out, little by little, into private hands—things such as the fishing and tackle section, the hardware section and your pots and pans can just go to another section. I would think that would be one of the ways in which we can tease it out to become privately owned or moved into other hands.

Mr TURNOUR—I appreciate that. I just wanted to get things clear. Do CDEP people work within the store?

Councillor Hudson—No.

Mr TURNOUR—So all in the store are on full award wages?

Councillor Hudson—Yes.

Mr TURNOUR—That is a bit different from other communities. Has the store sought to utilise CDEP labour?

Councillor Hudson—The rules on CDEP have changed from time to time. If we have to do it now, the host agreement has to be attached—in the past, I am talking about now, because CDEP is also changing as we speak. It never came to that final result.

Mr TURNOUR—Thank you.

Mr KATTER—Thomas, Noel Pearson gave a great speech in Canberra, and he talked about capabilities. He said: ‘Whitefellas have capabilities that we don’t have. They’ve inherited it from their parents.’ One of the things that I know is that you can take over a store like that and do it under a company structure so that if you go broke, it is: ‘I don’t lose the money; this company that I’ve set up loses the money.’ That is why a lot of whitefellas will have a go: they know they can go through a company structure and they cannot personally be bankrupted; only the company will be. That opens up the way for private ownership without that terrible risk-taking that exists. Your preferred model would be local ownership, or private ownership if you could have it, wouldn’t it?

Councillor Hudson—Yes. I am glad you brought up the issue of a private company. We have people in town already doing that. It is a cattle company and it is different, and it has a board of its own. So we have a structure in place in which we can slot the retail store, and it would not be ripping down any part of the council structure.

Mr KATTER—You understand that there can be Bob Katter and there can be a ‘Bob Katter Pty Ltd’, and that ‘Bob Katter Pty Ltd’ can go broke but Bob Katter does not?

Councillor Hudson—Yes, I understand that quite well.

Mr KATTER—Good. But that is the preferred model that you would like if you could do it?

Councillor Hudson—The thoughts around it at this stage are in that sense, yes.

Mr KATTER—Another question is: if the road into here is bitumen and sealed—and I think very strongly that the road should come into here and then there should be a road from here up to Pormpuraaw; I spent an awful lot of time on that at one time—will it be out for much of the year? We still have big floods.

Councillor Hudson—Yes, it will. There are two big bitumen roads coming into Normanton, and in the last flood they went under. You cannot build anything to overcome Mother Nature, because she will still be there. I would think that instead of sealing the road all the way you would focus first on the crossing, because the road itself can cater well into the wet. The only thing stopping you in the wet is the river crossing. The river comes up and you cannot cross it. If we have to go down that track, I would urge you to look at the crossing first and the sealing later. But, as I said, you will not be able to do it all year. It all depends on Mother Nature. Once there is a cyclone or a big wet in these areas there is some big water from Aurukun to Normanton. It is one sheet of water and it just becomes little islands here and there.

Mr KATTER—I have one final question. When we got the barge going out of Karumba it was backloading. Georgie Raptis and that mob were sending prawns south and the trucks were coming back empty. So we get backloading very cheaply—also from Brisbane and Townsville. They are sending prawns over there as well, and the trucks come back empty. So we have backloading. The net result of that was that the cost of getting goods into Weipa was 50 per cent cheaper using that backloading. I do not know whether that is available now. George is still sending stuff out of there by road, but not a lot of stuff. But it would be worth having a look at. Secondly, we could not come into Pormpuraaw or Kowanyama because there were no landings there. Is it possible to build a landing and get the stuff back from the landing to here?

Councillor Hudson—Absolutely. We have got a road that goes to Topsy, where there is a big creek mouth that can cater for a barge to come in. It just needs the road to be upgraded to all-weather.

Mr KATTER—So that would be operating all year round?

Councillor Hudson—It would, because there is—

Mr KATTER—Even during the wet?

Councillor Hudson—Even during the wet. If you upgrade the road to that standard it will take it through the wet because there are no creek crossings. There is nothing.

Mr KATTER—Chair, that is a very valuable piece of information. We will have to cost it, but we can get a boat across the Norman River. We would be setting up now so that we will not ever be out again like we were this time—once we get it set up

properly. But then we can get out of Normanton and Karumba into here—if we decided that was the best way to service it, Jim.

Mrs VALE—Thank you very much for all being here today. Mayor, I am particularly interested in the fact that you say there has been a tradition, a history, of market gardening, even if it does not happen in the wet. You also said you have an orchard and some fruit. Could you tell us what fruit you have available.

Councillor Hudson—Oranges, mandarins, mangoes—it is not a very big patch but it is all varieties—and lemons.

Mrs VALE—It is encouraging to know that there is some kind of local market produce that is available here. When the dry season allows, is there any growing of leafy vegetables such as lettuce?

Councillor Hudson—Yes. As I said, it is the end of the wet now and we are going to have some cool weather coming in before we get the really cold winter. Our farmers will be preparing the ground and starting to put in lettuce, shallots, cabbages and things like that.

Mrs VALE—Yes, and I notice you said you had chickens—though someone said the eggs were not of good quality. Does that mean they were not all the same size?

Councillor Hudson—The store manager of the day said that, but we—

Mrs VALE—How do you check the quality of an egg? I mean, an egg is an egg.

Councillor Hudson—I must say that we have a good store manager now, but it all depends on the store manager of the day. In the past we had a Chinese store manager here, so he filled all his shelves with Chinese food, and we do not eat Chinese food. That goes to show that it all depends on the manager of the day.

Mr KATTER—You shouldn't remind me of the old days, Thomas!

Mrs VALE—Just for the benefit of the people who are here, especially the women—the mothers and grandmothers—we are particularly interested in the nutrient value of the food that is available, its accessibility, the reliability of supply, its quality when it is delivered to the store and how long it lasts. I will not ask any more questions at the moment, but I would just like to flag with some of the mothers and grandmothers that are here that we really do need that kind of evidence. I really look forward to perhaps hearing from somebody in the open forum.

I also want to ask some of the mothers and grandmothers about how much baby formula costs, about the health of mums and bubs, how long children are nursed for, at what age they normally go onto formula, what kind of training is in place for mothers when they actually start to give the baby solid food and what kind of solid food they go on. Is that food available and reliable? That sort of information is really important to the health of the family.

Councillor Hudson—Do you want me to answer?

Mrs VALE—I do not know if you would be able to answer all those questions, Mayor; can you?

Councillor Hudson—I can answer the last one. We have a mother and baby centre here which plays a very active role in early pregnancy for mothers and babies. That is being run and supported solely by the funds of council. This moment, as I speak, we are probably finding it a little bit difficult to carry on in that area with the flow of money, but we are still keeping our heads above water. That centre is also training mothers, especially first-time mothers, how to feed their babies and other things. Through the mother and baby centre they get a kit. All the stuff they need for a child is given out from there for the mothers and their babies. They are picked up and go there every day for the feedings and learn things like how they should look after and treat their child. We do that off our own back. As a matter of fact, we have done that through a building that was supposed to be demolished by the state government. That is now a hospital. We said, 'Don't knock it down; we will make use of it.' That is the use we have made of it.

Mrs VALE—What is the kind of food that the children start to eat when they go onto solids?

Councillor Hudson—I am not too sure about that.

Mrs VALE—That is all right. I am sure there are mothers here who can tell us. Also, I want to know about the cost of providing nappies for babies and whether the babies actually have disposable nappies, because that is a big health issue too. Disposable nappies are known to prevent nappy rash and other issues regarding babies, so I would be really interested in hearing from some of the women.

CHAIR—Thank you, everyone, for the submissions you have given to us. I am intrigued to hear about the cold winters you get here, but time probably prevents us from inquiring into that! We appreciate your time.

[2.59 pm]

McDOWELL, Mr Ian, Private capacity

CHAIR—Would you like to make an opening statement, and then we can ask you some questions?

Mr McDowell—Over several years I have been involved in managing retail outlets, both for myself in Noosa Heads and in the remote Indigenous areas of Gapuwiyak, Ramingining, Waruwi, or Goulburn Island, Aurukun and, most recently, here. Over that period I have seen and experienced all sorts of things relating to your terms of reference, which would be the three main items that I would like to discuss with you.

CHAIR—Why don't you expand further on the issues that you would like to talk about.

Mr McDowell—Transport is a fairly emotive issue for everybody in most Indigenous communities. People seem to have this idea that if you go to Cairns you can buy a product for X, Y, Z dollars and that, therefore, if you come to a remote community it should be X, Y, Z dollars plus a little bit. Unfortunately, that is not reality. It could be reality if the government cared to subsidise transport to a massive degree, but producing the product, buying the product and then putting it into a community is an extremely costly chain. I think the perception that we should be able to provide food in remote communities at the same price as we are able to provide it in major cities is a complete fallacy and it can never happen. The closest you could get to that would be to have a group that is fairly large in buying capacity purchase in bulk and distribute in bulk. The cost per item would then come down. Unfortunately for this side of the country, most of the communities I have seen and stores that I have managed do not have sufficient warehousing capacity.

CHAIR—When you say 'this side of the country', do you mean Queensland?

Mr McDowell—Yes, and New South Wales. The warehousing capacity in all these communities is inadequate, to say the least. Over time I guess nobody has given much thought to the fact that warehousing is probably the integral part in the purchase, storage and quality of food. Traditionally, I do not think that people have really thought about it. Where we have been able to get a weekly supply of food, it is not a major issue. However, in a place like this, where there is an interminable time gap between fresh food coming in and the wet season and then more fresh food, the alternative is extremely costly. I am talking about air transport.

CHAIR—Let us just talk about the freight for a moment. Presumably, during the dry season, when product can come in by road, the cost that freight adds to the products is not that great?

Mr McDowell—In relation to the wet season, no. In the dry season it is a fairly equitable figure right across the country.

CHAIR—During the dry season here, for example, would you have a sense of what added price would be put onto products by virtue of freight and transport?

Mr McDowell—In terms of the percentage of the purchase price, we would be looking at somewhere between 10 per cent and 15 per cent.

CHAIR—In the dry season?

Mr McDowell—Yes.

CHAIR—What happens to those figures in the wet season?

Mr McDowell—You can double those, and even triple them, if you use air transport.

CHAIR—We heard earlier evidence that, over the last wet season, there was a flight every day to supply the store. Is that right?

Mr McDowell—Yes, that is right. But it was not every day of every week.

CHAIR—No, but there were occasions where there were successive days when freight was coming in.

Mr McDowell—Yes, and sometimes multiple flights per day.

CHAIR—What did that do to the freight costs of those products?

Mr McDowell—Not having the full knowledge of what the contract rate between the government and Commander Air is, I cannot really comment on those figures. I could, however, suggest that each flight would be in excess of \$5,000. Carrying 2,000 kilos you do not have to be very smart to work out that it is about \$4 plus a kilo extra that is being added somewhere.

Mr KATTER—Ian, did you pay that money?

Mr McDowell—Remember that I am the manager.

Mr KATTER—Yes, but did your company, your business, pay that \$5,000? I will check on this but I am certain that the resupply into Karumba and Normanton was paid for by the government.

Mr McDowell—The only thing we got resupplied under that arrangement was fuel.

Mr KATTER—I could be wrong. Do not quote me on it till I check it out.

CHAIR—In your experience in other parts of Australia, are the freight logistics associated with this place unusual?

Mr McDowell—Yes, totally.

CHAIR—In that sense, Kowanyama is very remote, is it?

Mr McDowell—During the wet season, yes. You would say the only way into Kowanyama during the wet season is by air.

CHAIR—In your experience, are there many other places where you could find a situation like that?

Mr McDowell—No. Throughout the Northern Territory there are one or two places where they are isolated to the point where they have to carry wet-season stock.

CHAIR—Can I put to you the proposition—because I think you put it neatly—that there is an expectation that there is a certain price in a major capital and that in a remote area you should be paying that plus a little bit. We have asked the question consistently around the Torres Strait and Cape York about the estimation of the cost of freight as part of the purchase price, and the figure you gave is pretty consistent. Why can't we then assume that prices should just be 15 per cent higher here than they would be in Cairns?

Mr McDowell—There are all sorts of other issues. The company I work for in the Northern Territory, for example, had benevolence towards their communities. The community members were the board of directors of the company. They purchased expertise in their management, and that management then ensured that their stores were equipped with the best available managers to manage their stores. I do not think that is happening in very many places. In the Territory, the profits that were gained from the store were returned to the community in several ways. One way was ensuring that the locals had full-time employment. Another way was ensuring that there was a training program for the locals, that at the end of the day they received recognition in a certificate for retail management that goes through to level V. That was authorised and organised through the Northern Territory university.

The other thing that the company did was provide benevolence to that community. For example, if there was a funeral then that company provided money for the town to organise the funeral out of the profits of the organisation. A loose summary of the profit break-up was that 50 per cent of the profit went to developing the store. So we did not have the situation of a store being built 15 years ago with no further development. I have seen that now several times in Queensland. I have also seen it in some council-run stores in the Northern Territory, where the profits are gleaned off and not put back into the industry.

The other thing that company did with the profits was support education. Any child that was in the community who was deemed to require further education had it paid for by that company—the one or two or three children from the community. For example, one young lass, a fully Indigenous girl from Elcho Island, finished up with a

pilot's licence, and the arrangement is that when she finishes her commercial licence she will fly for the organisation.

CHAIR—What is the company that you were just describing?

Mr McDowell—ALPA.

CHAIR—Which is the Arnhem Land group.

Mr McDowell—Correct.

CHAIR—Do I take it that part of your submission is that, if there were better warehousing infrastructure at the community stores themselves, you would be able to cut down on freight costs?

Mr McDowell—Absolutely.

CHAIR—Would you explain that a little further.

Mr McDowell—At the moment we have chiller containers, freezer containers and one or two freezers for the storage of various goods. We have a warehouse out the back with an ambient temperature of in excess of 35 degrees. I guess, if you were to store dry food in 35 degree temperatures for up to four months, by the time you broke it open it would not be real fresh. Anyone living in a city forced to eat food like that would probably not feel very favourably about that organisation. For example, I cannot imagine Coles or Woolworths customers putting up with something like that. However, it is the accepted practice in remote stores.

If that storeroom were air-conditioned at a constant level then the product would be a lot fresher. The storage of frozen and chilled goods in containers that require hand-stacking is ludicrous. Prior to the wet season, 10 pallets of meat arrived in this community as one load, which had to be hand-stacked into freezers. Have you any idea how long that took? Have you any idea what happened to the last pallet of meat? Can you imagine what would have happened in an ambient temperature of 36 or 37 degrees? I can. I have done a health inspectors certificate, so I know what to expect. I have done food-handling certificates and I know what to expect. Yet I can take you there now and show you some of the sausages we were trying to sell that would probably kill a white man.

Mr TURNOUR—Effectively, you are saying that they defrosted and then you froze them again and put them back out for sale?

Mrs VALE—If they are that dangerous, why would you put them back out for sale?

Mr McDowell—I do not.

CHAIR—I am sorry. I am confused. Are they on the shelf at the moment for sale?

Mr McDowell—No.

CHAIR—So you have taken them off the shelf because of their state?

Mr McDowell—I did not put them on the shelf. As soon as I recognised what was going on I left them in the freezer.

CHAIR—You left them in the freezer. Why aren't they just thrown out?

Mr McDowell—That is a lot of sausages to throw out in one hit. It is probably about 200 kilos.

CHAIR—What happens to them?

Mr McDowell—They will go. I will make sure that they finish up buried in the tip, but it is no good doing that in the wet season when you do not have equipment to dig holes. It is no good throwing it out there, because of opportunism and various other things.

Mrs VALE—I am sorry: when you say that they are back in the freezer, you do not mean on the display shelves; you mean back in your storage?

Mr McDowell—Yes. I hope that clears it up.

CHAIR—I think it is in your submission that making sure that the freezing chain is not broken is critical.

Mr McDowell—Absolutely, for long storage. If you talk to any health person, any nurse or any nutritionist, they will tell you that as soon as you break that cold chain you cause a deterioration in product, whether it is chilled or frozen. I can give you the ideal scenario: the product is taken out of a chilled transport container, which is either sea freight or road freight, and it is put via a forklift straight into a freezer or chiller so that it is unloaded inside that cold requirement. It is out of the chill for the period of time that you take it off the load and put into the cold storage. That is miniscule compared with what is happening at the moment. In that way we are able to preserve and protect the quality of food. The cost of that is something that everybody needs to fully understand. The cost to the community of not doing it is equally large, isn't it?

Mrs VALE—You said 'by forklift'. Do you actually offload by forklift and pack by forklift?

Mr McDowell—Ninety per cent of the product that comes into this community is on a pallet. It is carted by road and palletised.

Mrs VALE—And you have a forklift?

Mr McDowell—There is a forklift.

Mrs VALE—Why was the meat having to be offloaded by hand?

Mr McDowell—It came off the truck by forklift but it has to be stacked into the freezers and containers by hand.

CHAIR—You have touched on this a little in what you have said so far, but I would like to go in a little more depth into the issue of governance and what you think, in your experience, is the best model of governance of these stores—whether the best model is for them to be run by a state government or whether they should be run by a private company or a local council? What thoughts do you have about that? It might be a horses for courses thing, but I am keen to get your take on all that.

Mr McDowell—Whether I maintain my job after this will be another question.

Mr TURNOUR—You have already tabled your submission. I need to be looking at it!

CHAIR—Certainly in relation to that, you are giving evidence under—

Mr KATTER—This committee would take a very dim view if your candour resulted in an adverse finding upon your management.

CHAIR—For the record, it would be unlawful for anyone giving evidence here to be put in a situation where they were prejudiced because of the evidence they have given. That should probably be restated for the record. I am keen to hear what you have to say.

Mr McDowell—The question of ownership of these stores should not rest with anyone other than the community. The community should own the stores. It should not be run by the community. If we were able to take all the communities of the cape and elect two members out of every community to represent their store and put them in a room, their desires and aspirations would not be different. They would all have the same desire and aspiration—for their community store to be able to provide for them. Until there are people trained and educated to the level where they are complete retailers, there is going to be a need for professional retailers to be employed. However, those professional retailers must also be teachers.

CHAIR—Explain that.

Mr McDowell—Working in an Indigenous community is a lot different to working in Cairns, Brisbane, Melbourne or Darwin. Within a community—and I am probably preaching to the converted—there are many things that are different to white people's communities that are taken for granted by the locals. A simple example is that the people that go to work every day in our store are to be congratulated. They should be supported and provided for. There are so many in this town that do not go to work. There are so many people in Indigenous communities right across Australia that do not go to work. You offer them work; they do not want it because of the benevolence of our government. There is some argument that maybe there is an ethic there. It has

crept into the white society and now it has crept into Indigenous society. That is the first point that I would like to make.

The second point is that they have culture aspects that we do not fully understand. Their cultural background is something that the passer-by does not fully grasp. I have done cultural courses in the Northern Territory dealing with Yolngu people and other people. I have not done a cultural course here, so I do not know what the culture is. But I do respect the fact that the locals have a set culture. They have requirements on their lifestyles that you and I could not imagine. They have relationships that are, to use a simple term that they use, poisoned relationships. To try and put that concept to someone who has never had any training or experience is impossible. You need to work in that environment to understand it. To expect the locals to work at our pace and to do what we do is impossible. From that point of view, I think working in communities is a lot different. There are so many aspects to it.

CHAIR—In terms of the governance model, it seems like you are advocating—correct me if I am wrong—the ALPA model that exists in Arnhem Land. Is that the kind of model that you think is working best?

Mr McDowell—From the three or four models that I know, there is the council model that is so subject to the management level of the person that they employ, the IBA model, the Outback Stores model, which is a conglomerate thrown together, employing people out of major cities—the turnover of staff there is horrendous—the government model that has problems with bureaucracy and response times, and the ALPA model that is able to respond to and reflect what the Indigenous community want. So I would suggest yes.

CHAIR—It seems to us from evidence that we have received that there is a bit of a tension between, on the one hand, trying to create a critical mass so that you have buying power, which by necessity means some central entity creating that mass, whilst at the same time, on the other hand, having the local capacity to react to what the community wants in terms of what you put on the shelves in a local store. How do you deal with that? Firstly, do you accept that that is the sort of tension we are dealing with here? If so, why do you think the model you have just described covers that best?

Mr McDowell—The model that I described is run by the local people. So they set the pricing, they set the core range of products and they have a say in how much profit they want to come back. They are in communication the whole time in relation to their store, whereas in the other models they are not. It is a removed arrangement. The people are virtually powerless to have much of a say, as per what is going on in this community.

CHAIR—So is it essential from your point of view that there is the capacity to do the ordering of product lines from the store level?

Mr McDowell—I think there are various ways of doing ordering. Utopia would have it that it is all done by one body purchasing a whole lot and sending it out to the stores. I have come here to tell you that it does not work and will never work. Coles and Woolworths have tried it and they have more brains, more people, more facilities

and more resources than anybody else has got. If they threw it out after three months then nobody else is going to have a go at it.

CHAIR—I am just trying to get clear what you are saying. Do you think it is important that there is the power for the local store manager to be able to make the orders for that particular store?

Mr McDowell—I think so, because you are able to reflect what is required. However, there is that core range of products that you have to carry. Given that there is a core range, the range that you do carry should reflect what is going on in that community.

CHAIR—Are you able to comment about the profitability of the store here?

Mr McDowell—I am unavailable for that.

CHAIR—Is that because you do not know or because you do not feel you are in a position to—

Mr McDowell—I am not privy to that information.

CHAIR—Fair enough. How many people are employed in the store here?

Mr McDowell—We have six people.

CHAIR—Are any of them on CDEP?

Mr McDowell—No. One good thing about this operation is that the people are fully employed and paid according to the national award wage.

CHAIR—Do you control pricing?

Mr McDowell—That is nothing to do with me. Prices are set by a central authority.

CHAIR—Again, do you think pricing is an important thing to hold in the store manager's power?

Mr McDowell—Given that you would know all the variables to make up your price, then sure. But I do not know any single store apart from those stores that are run by councils—and, I might add, not very profitably—that would have access to all that information, and it is so variable. For example, the ALPA model had 17 stores. If they go to a body and say, 'We want to buy,' they are going to have a hell of a lot more impact than the government model that I am currently working for, with six stores. In fact, the ALPA model provides free cartage on fruit and vegetables. They provide fruit baskets for every mother who has a child in the community. They provide fruit baskets to every mother who brings her child back for vaccination. Those sorts of things are free, they are benevolent and they are organised by the community. They have had their own nutritionist employed for 10 years.

CHAIR—Do you have the benefit of a nutritionist?

Mr McDowell—I believe one is going to be appointed.

CHAIR—You may not be able to answer this question, given what you have just said, but are you aware of there being any policy within the store that you are running of trying to make the fresh fruit and vegetables and meat as cheap as possible, perhaps at the expense of some of the other, less healthy items?

Mr McDowell—I do not know that that is the case, but the given is that everybody tries to make fruit and vegetables as cheap as possible. Having said that, I will say that this store that I am running at the moment has the greatest turnover of fruit and vegetables of any store I have ever run. It is running at about 12 per cent.

Mrs VALE—This one here?

Mr McDowell—Yes.

CHAIR—What do you put that down to?

Mr McDowell—I think the health centre has a lot to do with it, and the education of the people, where they have been taught that a healthy option is what is required.

Mrs VALE—Who is teaching the people that? Is that the health centre?

Mr McDowell—I believe so. Further than that, I think all organisations in the town purporting to deal with the people should be reinforcing the healthy option. All our small stores in the town should be reinforcing the healthy option. Whilst you cannot be autocratic and say, 'You shall not buy,' you have to at least have the facility in your store to provide for every given dietary requirement. If I have a criticism, it is that it has taken a long time for that to happen here.

Mrs VALE—Are you aware of any school programs that offer nutritional guidance? You might not be the right person to ask that.

Mr McDowell—I guess you could ask the school that.

Mrs VALE—I think perhaps some of the women might be able to tell me that too.

Mr McDowell—Yes. I think they have in the past had cooking demonstrations and various other things with the kids.

Mr TURNOUR—Thank you for your submission. It is pretty detailed, going through your thoughts on the models and the like, so I appreciate that and I will go through that at a later date. Thank you.

Mrs VALE—You gave us the consumption rate of fruit and vegetables, which is really good. Do you have a similar measure for the consumption of junk food, like

soft drinks with their high sugar content, or potato chips with their high salt content? Is there any way that a store could give us that kind of information?

Mr McDowell—It is pretty easy with the chip one—we do not have any.

Mrs VALE—You do not stock them, you are out of them or what?

Mr McDowell—We ran out of them.

Mrs VALE—That is a lot different to saying you do not have any—whether you have run out or whether you did not have them at all—when you consider the impact on families.

Mr McDowell—I do not imagine there is any retail outlet anywhere in Australia or the world that does not carry either Pepsi or Coke.

Mrs VALE—Yes, I know they carry it. I was just wondering about the consumption rate. You gave us the consumption rate for fresh fruit and vegetables, which is high, and I was wondering whether you could also give us the consumption rate of junk food.

Mr McDowell—I have not bothered to pull out that figure because it is totally huge.

Mrs VALE—Okay. That is the sort of information that would be handy to know. Also, I acknowledge the training that you have had here, being cultural training and also food-handling training. Do you think there would be any value in also making sure that store managers are trained in basic nutrition?

Mr McDowell—I guess that is a given.

Mrs VALE—We have actually found that it is not. It would just be interesting to know. In some evidence we had here somebody—was it you, Bob?—said that when the Chinese man owned the store there was Chinese food—and I think it might have been the mayor who said this. Obviously, he did not have any understanding of the basic nutritional needs of the community here.

Mr McDowell—If I could address that, in the Northern Territory when the intervention started we were all issued with licences. A licence was issued on our knowledge of food requirements, on how our store was presented, on the records that we kept and on the cleanliness of the store. My wife and I were the second couple in the Northern Territory to receive a licence. The only organisation there that has a licence is ALPA.

Mrs VALE—Could you also give me some information from the store regarding the consumption of baby formula?

Mr McDowell—I could do that.

Mrs VALE—Is it a high content? Do you know?

Mr McDowell—It is fairly low.

Mrs VALE—I think that is about it from me. Thank you very much.

Mr TURNOUR—Danna did bring up one thing that I want to note and we have heard from others about this, and it would be interesting to know this because you are from the community store. As they have been doing with other stores, has Coca-Cola Amatil talked to those of you in the community stores about new fridges, about trying to reduce the amount of fizzy drinks, and about other healthy drinks on offer?

Mr McDowell—As soon as the road opens we are the first community in this area to receive all the new fridges and arrangements.

Mrs VALE—Even though they have got high sugar too, do you actually offer fruit juices too from the store? They are not as bad as Coca-Cola. Do you have any fruit juices that are available that have no added sugar?

Mr McDowell—Yes. We have 100 per cent fruit juice that has fructose and no sugar added. Obviously, we have to provide a range. Since we have been there we have been building that range to cater for everybody.

Mrs VALE—Are there times in your store when the fruit and vegetables run out and there are none available for families?

Mr McDowell—Not completely run out, but we have been short on certain lines and that has probably been due to several things: one is storage and another is cartage because we can only put two tonnes on a plane—say, 20 bags of spuds.

Mrs VALE—I understand. I suppose the quality of what was left would deteriorate.

Mr McDowell—No, we are pretty stringent about our quality.

Mrs VALE—Ian, if ever there were a possibility of being able to purchase fresh eggs or fresh fruit and vegetables locally, even on the understanding that in this community it would only be for six months of the year, would the store be inclined to actually have those kinds of items for sale if they met the appropriate standards?

Mr McDowell—I think in the past the store has purchased under local arrangements quite freely. I would draw the line a little bit at eggs because there are certain requirements for eggs under the health act, aren't there?

Mrs VALE—I have yet to investigate eggs, but I should imagine that if they were fresh. But I do not understand the different quality that eggs can have. But anyway thank you very much for that.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Ian, for the time that you have given to us today.

[3.34 pm]

BAUMGARTNER, Ms Laure Alice, Dietitian, Royal Flying Doctor Service, Queensland

CAMERON, Ms Elizabeth (Liz), Recreation Services Manager, Kowanyama Aboriginal Shire Council

CREEK, Ms Josie, Coordinator, Women's and Children's Services, Mothers and Baby Centre, Kowanyama Aboriginal Shire Council

PRITCHARD, Dr Adam, Medical Officer, Royal Flying Doctor Service, Queensland

KITCHENER, Mrs Thelma, Tuckshop Convenor, Kowanyama State School

WARBROOK, Mr Kevin, Anglican Church Coffee Shop

WARBROOK, Mrs Susan, Anglican Church Coffee Shop

WHITFIELD, Mr Rodney, Private capacity

CHAIR—We are now at the point of the open forum. As we have a number of people who have indicated that they would like to talk and we do not have a heap of time, I would encourage you to try to be as brief as you can whilst still absolutely getting your point across. I invite Laure to come forward and start the forum.

Ms Baumgartner—As a dietician with the Royal Flying Doctor Service, I have been working in Kowanyama only for a couple of months. You would be aware that three members of the Royal Flying Doctor Service made a submission.

CHAIR—Yes, we heard from them this morning in Aurukun.

Ms Baumgartner—Yes, the details are in that. I am also a member of the Dietitians Association of Australia, which, I noted, has made a submission in conjunction with the Public Health Association of Australia. Having read that, I think some of their points are quite valid. As one who is working in Kowanyama, I think the important thing is that there is only one store here. We know that there are a couple of coffee shops and a guesthouse. In a community where the dependency is on one store, the importance of healthy and nutritious food is higher than where there is greater choice. Therefore the responsibility of that store is much greater. It is the only place that people can get their food supply. So I think it is really important that we investigate the nutritious options available there by having a look around the store. I have met with Ian, who has a lot of goodwill. I am not sure if I can speak on other people's behalf, but I think he tries really hard and he has some nutritional knowledge so on that aspect he is really trying. But there is a disproportionate amount of sugar and soft drink in the store. There are only four or five aisles and soft drink takes up

half and the other half is sugar, so a huge amount is there. Some of it, I have been told, is related to the fact that it is all going through Brisbane, so they may not actually be ordering that much soft drink; it is just that is what gets sent up and sometimes it is not that the store actually requires that much. Soft drink is a huge issue.

You were talking earlier about baby formulas. I do not have any concrete evidence. Anecdotally, the women here do have quite good breastfeeding rates. They do not necessarily breastfeed exclusively because sometimes children are cared for by aunties or grandmothers and therefore formula is used in some cases. The breastfeeding rates are quite high, but that is anecdotally.

CHAIR—Part of the submission that we got from the Royal Flying Doctor Service this morning was about the contribution to health that is made by the takeaway shops. Would you make any comment about that here?

Ms Baumgartner—Some of the takeaway shops are open at different times from the stores. I guess that means there are times that there is one fewer option when you go to shop. I could not comment anymore. As I said, I have been here only a short amount of time.

Mrs VALE—I refer to the transition with a mother stopping breastfeeding and weaning her child and putting the child on an introduction to solids. Do you have any idea what kind of food is used for the child to be introduced to solids? In Western culture we usually start with Farex or something like that.

Ms Baumgartner—I have not been here long enough to be able to make a comment. I think some of the child-health nurses and some of the mothers and grandmothers would be able to answer that question. Sometimes problems do occur in that transition period.

Mrs VALE—We have heard evidence that up to the time they are breastfed they are really healthy but when that period comes the children are not quite so healthy.

Ms Baumgartner—If you look at growth rates generally, you do not find any problems in the first six months, which is generally when they are either exclusively or nearly exclusively breastfeeding. It seems that the problems occur after that time.

Mrs VALE—We need to make sure that they have good nutritional access.

Mr TURNOUR—Laure, I want to ask you a question. Isn't it right that there are three takeaway outlets—the cafe, the coffee shop at the church and the private store? Would it be a fair assessment to say there are a lot of people in the community who eat takeaway?

Ms Baumgartner—Yes. Again, I have not been here long enough and I am sure the community members can answer that question for themselves. Takeaway is quite frequent in a lot of the diet histories that I have taken. But I would have to say that is a problem all around and in cities as well. The problem is that we actually do not know

what Australians are eating because we have not had a national nutrition survey since 1995. It has been 14 years, so we do not actually know what Australians are eating.

CHAIR—I hear you. I know you have only been here two months, but are there nutritional options being provided at the takeaways?

Ms Baumgartner—No.

Mr KATTER—I think it is an appropriate comment to make to say that where the Flying Doctor Service is doing this nutritional education program the results have been extraordinarily successful. It has almost doubled the intake of fruit and vegetables to the other communities. So I think very fine tribute should be paid to the Flying Doctor Service's initiative.

CHAIR—Yes. It is very good. Mrs Kitchener?

Mrs Kitchener—I work at the Kowanyama State School as the tuckshop convener.

CHAIR—What would you like to say to the committee?

Mrs Kitchener—It would be good to get discounts from the store, actually!

CHAIR—For the tuckshop?

Mrs Kitchener—Yes, because we do go through a lot. Right through the year I do bread. Before, we were doing buns, but I have swapped the littler children over to bread because the kindy and prep kids cannot get their mouths right around a big, full bun. It would be good if the store could give us some discounts when we do go there and shop. We have slowly run out of the stock that we ordered at the start of the year and it does cost us a fair bit of money to fly it in.

CHAIR—Did you order all your stock from the store?

Mrs Kitchener—Not all of my stock. I usually get my stock from Island and Cape down in Cairns. That is where most of our stock comes from. When we are slowly running out of that the stock I am restricted in how much I can order for the tuckshop. Now I have to start buying some things from the store just to tide us over for tomorrow and next week, and then we will be going on school holidays. Other than that, our little tuckshop runs pretty smoothly.

CHAIR—Do you have an emphasis on healthy foods?

Mrs Kitchener—Oh, yes. We have to. Healthy eating has been implemented Australia wide. I do healthy stews for the kids, and dampers, buns, pancakes, pita pizzas and all that. I had to implement healthy eating, and the kids enjoy the meals that I cook. I do put my heart into it. I rock up to work every day. If I am crook and have to go out then the tuckshop gets operated by one young fellow that has only just recently come in.

Mrs VALE—Good on you, Thelma. It is great to hear that you are doing stews and stuff. Do the other women make such meals for their families like stews or vegetable soups?

Mrs Kitchener—Of course. There is a lot of that. I have learned a lot of my cooking skills from coming up this way. A lot of people up this way eat a lot of buns, homemade bread and dampers. There is nothing unhealthy about damper because it is only just baking powder and flour and it rises up in the oven. I serve that. I have a set menu. For example, tomorrow, Friday, is pie day. Monday is going to be stew and rice. Tuesday will be spaghetti and mince. Wednesday will be a chicken burger. I have not decided on Thursday of next week just yet, but it is a set menu.

Mrs VALE—In my part of the world some of our children in our local primary schools have a school garden and they grow carrots, tomatoes, lettuce and stuff like that and they actually do sell it at a discount to their school tuckshop.

Mrs Kitchener—Unfortunately, we have not got that at our school.

Mrs VALE—I was just wondering if you had had any opportunity for doing that. It is a great way to teach kids how to garden too. One of my schools, Loftus Primary, also have a worm farm. The kids do not eat the worms of course but the worm farm is there to provide nutrients for the next crop that comes on. So kids are really learning basic husbandry. I was just wondering: do you think the children at your school might enjoy that sort of activity?

Mrs Kitchener—I would say they would if they introduced it into the school program, but we have not got anything like that.

Mrs VALE—That is all right. Things can change and things can happen, can't they.

Mrs Kitchener—Things can change.

Mrs VALE—Thanks for what you are doing and thanks for the good meals you are providing for the schoolchildren.

Mrs Kitchener—Thank you.

Mrs VALE—Can I tell you, Thelma: posh restaurants in Sydney, if they are serving damper, charge extra for it.

Mrs Kitchener—I only charge \$1.50 a slice here, so it is cheaper. Plus, it is made by an Aboriginal woman, so therefore it would be better!

Mrs VALE—Absolutely.

Mr TURNOUR—What percentage of kids are eating out of the tuckshop? Are there kids who are bringing their own lunches or does everybody go to the tuckshop?

Mrs Kitchener—A lot of the parents send money to school nearly every day for their children. Half the school does eat from the tuckshop. Some mothers do make their children sandwiches from home and the kids take their sandwiches and drinks to school, but the majority of kids do buy from the tuckshop. We only have 250 kids. My takings could be close to \$2,000 a week. But I did not do too bad for the first two weeks; we took in \$5,000 for the first two weeks of school. That was because the kids do not worry about sandwiches when I have buns and dampers happening. They buy them like mad. I know what to cook for our kids here.

Mr TURNOUR—Keep up the good work.

Mrs VALE—Did you bring any samples?

Mrs Kitchener—No. I am going to be doing dampers next week, so you miss out, sorry.

Mr KATTER—I am very strongly opposed to bans on grog, so a lot of people probably disagree with what I am going to say.

Mrs VALE—Yes, Bob.

Mr KATTER—When they introduced the grog bans, did the take at the tuckshop go up?

Mrs Kitchener—Actually, we had to put some prices up at the tuckshop only because we had incidents last year of people breaking into the tuckshop. Someone switched off one of—

Mr KATTER—Sorry, that was not where I was going. The sale of meat in Mornington Island and Doomadgee doubled after the ban on grog. There was a big downside to this. I am interested as to whether the take at the tuckshop went up or down after the ban on grog came in.

Mrs Kitchener—I see what you mean now. It sort of went up a bit because the parents that were drinkers would have saved that money for the canteen. But now children come nearly every day. So it sort of has gone up. Last year I made more money, being the tuckshop convenor for last year and part of this year, than the tuckshop convenor that they had for the last eight years before I came on.

Mrs VALE—Did you ever think about the contract for Parliament House in Canberra!

CHAIR—We are going to have to keep it moving. Thank you very much, Thelma, for your contribution.

Mr KATTER—It was very uplifting to hear about what you are doing. Very good.

Mrs VALE—Really good.

CHAIR—We will now hear from Kevin and Susan Warbrook.

Mrs Warbrook—I was born into an Indigenous family and grew up in an Aboriginal community called Murray Bridge in central New South Wales. I have lived and worked in Aboriginal communities my entire life. We know a lot about culture and law. We see in this community that there is not provision for diabetes and things. We are working with the church towards that. We have introduced things like grain bread, whereas they only had white bread in the church store before. We have introduced Sugarine, more diet drinks, more fruit juices. We are trying to go that way. We have talked to Laura, the dietitian. We have got some posters, pamphlets and things to put up to try and go that way.

CHAIR—What organisation do you run?

Mrs Warbrook—The Anglican church store, which is called The Coffee Shop. It is a bit confusing!

CHAIR—What products do you sell there?

Mr Warbrook—We sell a fair bit of meat and some tinned foods. Of course, we have only come in during the wet season; we cannot change over to the other stuff because of the cost of freight.

CHAIR—Is it a takeaway store?

Mrs Warbrook—No, it is like a convenience store.

CHAIR—Do you do takeaway food as well?

Mrs Warbrook—We do pies. That is the only takeaway food we have.

CHAIR—Sandwiches and stuff like that?

Mrs Warbrook—No.

CHAIR—Do you have any comment about the quality of the store in Kowanyama?

Mr Warbrook—We have not really been here since when it was dry; we have only just come into the wet, so, being new to it, we do not really have much comment on how it works.

Mrs Warbrook—We also worked through the Territory. We worked in Lajamanu in the Tanami Desert and then out through Western Australia—a lot of stores there over a period of 10 years. We also came in here on the tail of bad management, where there was no wet season stock in our store. That is why we are freighting each week.

CHAIR—Are you freighting by road or by air?

Mrs Warbrook—Air.

Mr Warbrook—We can only do it by air.

CHAIR—What is that doing to your costs?

Mrs Warbrook—We have kept the costs the same, actually, as in the wet season. We have not added it on; we have tried to absorb it and get through it. It is only a few months. If we can absorb it and get through it, and keep our costs the same as they were in the dry—

CHAIR—Are you responsible for your own purchasing?

Mrs Warbrook—To an extent we are. We place orders and we might get the stock. It is a bit of a lucky dip!

CHAIR—But orders are done from here rather than from—

Mrs Warbrook—Rather than from Cairns, yes.

CHAIR—Where are you ordering out of in Cairns? Is there a wholesaler?

Mrs Warbrook—Through wholesalers like Campbells and Bidvest and through other wholesalers. We sell a lot of fishing gear and bait—the sort of thing that people want on weekends.

CHAIR—Is the store profitable?

Mr Warbrook—Last year it was not profitable; it made a loss. Other than that, we cannot really know because we do not get the figures on how it is running.

CHAIR—Would you have a month-by-month reconciliation?

Mr Warbrook—No.

Mrs Warbrook—Not really. We are not privy to the figures.

CHAIR—In that sense you do not do the accounting at the store?

Mrs Warbrook—No.

Mr Warbrook—All we get is what the stuff costs when it comes in. Other than that, with all the other costs—the running costs and everything—we have no idea. We are not privy.

CHAIR—Do you control pricing at a store level?

Mrs Warbrook—No, that is done through our office in Townsville. We put the prices on because it is all manual—we do not have a POS system—but we are told what we have to sell it for by Townsville.

CHAIR—Is the head office in Townsville or Cairns?

Mr Warbrook—Townsville is the head office.

Mrs Warbrook—That is the diocese.

Mr Warbrook—We order through Cairns. The distributing centre is in Cairns and the head office is in Townsville.

CHAIR—The head office is in Townsville but you ordering out of Cairns?

Mr Warbrook—Yes.

Mr TURNOUR—Would you like to add any comments regarding the terms of reference, your previous experience and any recommendations that a committee like this should make around governance, transport and those sorts of issues?

Mrs Warbrook—We worked for a company called Aboriginal Business Development in Western Australia. They also helped with funeral costs—not with money but with goods. We provide a drum flower, flowers, funeral wreaths, blankets and things that are necessary for funerals.

Mr Warbrook—That company has finished, but they have started up a big buying group which different community stores can buy through.

CHAIR—What is the name of that?

Mrs Warbrook—Western Buying. We can give you a contact for them, if you like.

CHAIR—Yes, that would be good.

Mr TURNOUR—Thank you.

CHAIR—We have caught you at the tail end of this hearing and I would be interested to get more information from you. I wonder if you might look at the terms of reference for the inquiry if you have not already done so and, if you have an opportunity, give a couple of pages of your thoughts. You do have some experience across the area that we are looking at and we would love to hear more of that.

Mrs Warbrook—Okay.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for giving us your time. Is there anyone else who would like to make a contribution to the committee?

Dr Pritchard—My name is Adam Pritchard. I am a doctor with the Royal Flying Doctor Service. I have been in Kowanyama for a little more than a year. I would like to thank the committee for coming up and looking at these issues. It is obviously really important and it is part of a much larger issue with respect to Aboriginal communities—welfare and so many other issues.

It is really important for me to be able to give advice to people about their health and for them to action that advice, working in conjunction with Laure and the other people and nurses at the clinic. It is disheartening, in a way, to give someone some advice and then see them not be able to put that into practice—if you say, ‘Eat more fruit and vegetables. Eat healthy options’ and they are not then able to buy those things at the store. It was good to listen to Ian, to hear his thoughts and the ways in which he is trying to do that. I think it is a really important issue.

Danna was mentioning that we run cooking classes through the clinic and through the mothers and babies centre. That is currently happening, and I hear that it is quite well attended. I would like to reiterate what Laure said. Breastfeeding is quite common. They do not use too much formula, in my experience. When babies come off the breast it is important to get a food which is high in iron to allow them to develop properly. That is being missed, to a certain extent, up to the age of three or four years.

Mrs VALE—What kinds of foods—spinach and liver?

Dr Pritchard—Leafy vegetables are good. Obviously something else they can use is iron fortified feeds. We do dish out quite a lot of medical iron to children to try and boost the iron.

Mrs VALE—Like good old-fashioned lamb’s fry and bacon?

Dr Pritchard—Yes, that is right. It is really important to try and encourage those things. Leafy vegetables are good. It is part of a whole process. There are a lot of other things that you need to get from your diet to be able to absorb the iron properly.

CHAIR—Thank you for making your statement.

Ms Cameron—My name is Liz Cameron. I am the recreation services manager for Kowanyama Aboriginal Shire Council and the manager of the new multipurpose centre that we are building. This is my second term with the council. I was the sport and recreation officer for nearly 2½ years and I had 12 months in a different position in Julia Creek last year. First of all, I will give you my opinion of how the store is going: it is getting worse. When I first came here, the variety of foods that we could buy was a lot bigger than it is now. The percentage of the store’s food as opposed to non-food items has reduced. There is a whole row of toys. Toys are good but they are not a necessity. The range has reduced. I am gluten intolerant and when I first got here in January I could buy brown rice. But I basically bought the store out and it is only just now back in stock. That is quite a while. The only other bread and cereal foods that I could buy were vermicelli noodles which were made out of beans, and there were a few of those little rice cracker things. That was about it.

Another point to make is that I was funded by the Queensland government's department of sport and recreation. Our motto was Eat Well Be Active and that should be reflected in the store, but I do not think it is. If everyone in this community, which is 1,200 people, had their two fruit and five vegies each day then we would quickly run out of the food in our fruit and veg section. We are looking at a kiosk in our new facility and we want to strongly promote healthy eating in that facility: low sugar, or better sugars, such as fruit juices; there are fizzy soft drinks you can buy that do not have any sugar in them at all and they do not have the more damaging preservatives in them. So there are options out there, you just have to search for them. We want to do more foods like Thelma is making at the school, produced by local people: stews and rice and home-made dampers, local barramundi. That is what the council and I are looking at for our store; we do not want to sell just hot chips and Coke.

Mr TURNOUR—During the dry season, when the road is open, do you self order out of Cairns for those gluten free products?

Ms Cameron—During this wet season I have been ordering online from health-food stores, or you buy from health-food stores when you go to Cairns.

Mr TURNOUR—And then they get packaged up and sent out to you by air transport?

Ms Cameron—Yes, and I think the rate is cheaper than the planes. The freight rate that you pay for Australia Post is cheaper than what you would pay for the stuff to come in on the planes.

Mr TURNOUR—So you take up the Australia Post option, the box that is sent out through the postage process.

Ms Cameron—Yes.

Mr TURNOUR—There is a certain size box that you can get, isn't there? It is the same as what the stations get, I understand. Is that correct?

Ms Cameron—One example from my work: we do movie nights; we bought 15 kilos of popcorn and the freight was about \$26. It is half of what you would pay to put it on the plane.

Mr TURNOUR—You said that the range of produce in the store had gone down. How long have you been here?

Ms Cameron—I first came here in 2005.

Mr TURNOUR—So that was four years ago. When did you see the change come about?

Ms Cameron—I have definitely noticed it since I have been back—how much our range has been significantly reduced.

Mr TURNOUR—And from the evidence we heard earlier, I just want to know whether you have thought about this or whether you can confirm this: prior to 2005 there was self ordering from the store and the store manager was ordering, whereas now, since you have come back, there is a central ordering situation. Am I correct in my assumption based on the evidence I have heard? Have you made any inquiries in relation to that?

Ms Cameron—Can you say that again?

Mr TURNOUR—Basically, in 2005, in that period when there was a greater range, my understanding, from the evidence we have heard today is that the store manager was still ordering, whereas today we are seeing more centralised ordering out of Brisbane. Is that the reason for the smaller range?

Ms Cameron—I do not think I can comment on that.

Mr TURNOUR—That is fine.

Ms Cameron—Things have changed, definitely, and there is more shelf space now for things like two-minute noodles and white flour and white rice. Half an aisle is white rice and this much is brown rice, and we could not even get it for about two months. In terms of the locals and giving them choice, why are we promoting so much space to things like two-minute noodles and less space for the more wholesome foods that people should be eating? The Queensland government should be promoting the same message that all of the other departments are promoting.

CHAIR—Thank you for that.

Ms Creek—My name is Josie Creek. My title is women's and children's services coordinator. That entails child and maternal health, women's shelter and children's playgroup. I want to talk about some of the issues for programs in the zero to five age group. That is generally the area where we look at child and maternal health and recognise the drop in weight and the health of children between two and four that we have identified with the child health worker. We are working towards looking at programs that would cover those areas and getting the parents and the women's group to come along to various programs that would help them, such as cooking programs. We have identified that there has been a drop in those areas as well. And we are working quite closely with RFDS and the various areas in that—nutrition as well.

Mrs VALE—Thank you very much for that information. What kind of food do babies go on after they have been weaned, when they are about to go onto solid food? What is the normal manner of doing that? What kinds of foods do young mothers normally use?

Ms Creek—You generally feed them what you are eating, stews and so on—that is, mashed potatoes, vegetables and rice.

Mrs VALE—That is mashed up for baby?

Ms Creek—Yes.

Mrs VALE—So there is no—

Ms Creek—There are different strengths, I suppose you could say. You have smooth and they go up as they get older.

Mrs VALE—Do any mothers use, say, Farex as an introductory solid?

Ms Creek—Yes, I did. I now care for a 13-month-old child. He came into my care when he was six months old, so I have had him for about six months. In the beginning there was Farex on the shelf, but when they get to a certain age and need to advance into the next range I did not find that on the shelf. What I have also found with baby foods is that there is no variety on the shelves. It is always the same sorts of tins. If you go to Coles you can get a variety.

Mrs VALE—Is Farex still available on the store's shelves?

Ms Creek—I have not seen it.

Mrs VALE—It is such an important transition for babies to start with that.

Ms Creek—Yes. Also, this child is on formula. He was on S21, formula 1, and now he has advanced to formula 2, and they have only recently started to bring formula 2 into the store. I was having to purchase that down at the coffee shop, and the price range between the two areas is quite different. Down there it is \$35 for a tin and it is \$32 something here.

Mrs VALE—You are probably aware that in Western culture some of the mothers use the tinned food but also mash up their own carrots and pumpkin and vegies for baby. Also, one of the benefits of Farex is that you can introduce mashed fruits so that the children get a taste for fruit as they are growing. Is that available here?

Ms Creek—Yes.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for your contribution. Is there anyone else? We will probably need to make this the last one, given our time constraint.

Mr Whitfield—Good afternoon. My name is Rodney Whitfield. I am with the Kowanyama land council. My previous employment up until December last year was at the retail store. I was employed by the retail stores for a number of years.

CHAIR—Where?

Mr Whitfield—All over. I was just relieving. I have been through each store in all the communities. Up until, probably, February or March 2008, they had taken on the central purchasing role and used Kowanyama as a model. They were advised that if they wanted it to work it would have to be the core range of ordering and in

conjunction with the manager, who happened to be me. Then that just got thrown out the window.

Mr KATTER—When did central ordering start?

Mr Whitfield—Probably March last year. There was a change of management down there. Things just fell in a heap, so to speak.

Mr TURNOUR—Fell in a heap in terms that the central ordering people were not working effectively with you as the manager? Is that what you are saying?

Mr Whitfield—For it to work effectively. On a core range—I am talking of all six stores—as Ian pointed out, things like rice, sugar, flour, damper and all that attract a better price, which is passed on to the community. As the end result, that will be the top 50 or 100 items, and the manager is left to suss out where to buy the rest at the cheapest price he can get.

Mr TURNOUR—In terms of falling in a heap, the core is happening but you are not allowed to do other things? I still am not clear.

Mr Whitfield—It is broken down. ‘Falling in a heap’ is the wrong expression. It just did not work. The communications were between the management in Kowanyama or all the stores and head office in Brisbane. We were always at loggerheads arguing and fighting rather than providing a service to the community.

Mr TURNOUR—So under your views and your experience what would be a better model?

Mr Whitfield—I have always said that the communities are better off with a direct input to the way the store is managed and operated and the way the funds are disbursed. Back in the ACC days I was hoping that the state government would allow retail stores to combine under the direction of the ACC. Then each community had their representative and the body would run the stores in each community. That gave them the direct responsibility.

Mr TURNOUR—That is the Aboriginal Coordinating Council?

Mr Whitfield—Yes, but that closed down, as you know. There has been nothing since. No-one has made any attempt to combine the stores again. The direct result of this is that we are flying in six planes, maybe more, a week. I have been here since 1983, and I have never experienced flying in these groceries.

Mr KATTER—You have been here since what date?

Mr Whitfield—Since 1983. I first met you in 1984, Bob, out at Rutman Plains.

Mr KATTER—I was a different shape then!

Mr Whitfield—I was in different shape, and my hair was a different colour, too! My manager has been here since the early seventies, and he has never, ever seen that store run the way it is now, where they are flying in groceries and stuff that can be stored before the wet comes in. My point there is: where is that cost going to go? That is a cost of \$30,000 or \$40,000 a week. Who is going to pay for that? The community? That is all through the mismanagement down in head office in Brisbane.

CHAIR—Thank you for that. That is a really important contribution to make.

Resolved (on motion by **Mr Katter**):

That this committee authorises publication, including publication on the parliamentary database, of the transcript of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

CHAIR—I declare the meeting closed, but I would also like to thank the Hansard reporters for their efforts, the secretariat staff for putting today together, the House of Representatives media unit, who have been filming the hearings over the last few days, and of course all of you for coming. I might leave the last word from us to your local member and then ask Councillor Thomas to close the day.

Mr TURNOUR—Mayor and councillors, thank you for having us here today. I thank the traditional owners. It is greatly appreciated. Thank you for the support you have given to the secretariat in organising today, and thank you very much to the community for having us. It is good to be back here. I am sorry it is for such a short period of time, but it is great to have other members of the parliament here. I get to travel around and talk to people firsthand, but having other members come up and hear directly from you about the issues that you face will help me in my advocacy in Canberra in relation to these issues, so I really appreciate that. Again, thanks very much for having us.

Councillor Hudson—Thanks, Chair, and thanks, members of the committee. One thing that I guess you can take home from this afternoon is that the store is one of the things that have been on the agenda for some time. But, as you can see, members of the community are taking it seriously, because especially during the wet it is the only point for us to get our food from, because we become an island and our hunting habits more or less decrease. When it gets dry, we more or less live off the land. We will go out, and the store becomes a second point to visit. But please take it seriously. I would like to see outcomes at the end of the report. Most of all, I would like to thank everyone that had input today. It is really good, because it is not only coming from the council; it is coming from the community members.

As we know, health is one of the biggest deals in our society. Both governments, the federal and the state, want to close the gap, and I believe a lot of the food outlets in our communities are the main focus in closing the gap. People look at alcohol. Alcohol is probably just a minor little thing that sits on the side. It is a problem, but no-one is focused on our shelves. As you know, in Aboriginal communities diabetes is a very big problem, and weight. Of course, you can see me—I am overweight. There are those sorts of things, and that comes from the shelf. It does not only come from the beer. The focus is on that beer and I think the focus should be broader. Thanks

very much for your input. I would like to thank the justice group for letting us use this centre. Have a safe flight home.

Committee adjourned at 4.17 pm