

**Submission by Bourke Shire Council to the  
House of Representatives Standing Committee for Aboriginal and Torres Strait  
Islander Affairs  
Inquiry into the Needs of Urban Dwelling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander  
Peoples**

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***Background information***

- ◇ The total population of Bourke was estimated to be 2775 people at the 1996 ABS Census.
- ◇ The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population was estimated at 859 (850 Aboriginal people; 9 Torres Strait Islanders).
- ◇ The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population was 31% of total population.
- ◇ The median age for the indigenous population was 19 years, compared with 33 years for the non-indigenous population.
- ◇ Depending on where people came from originally, sections of the community tend to be quite mobile, and there is an identifiable circulation pattern, which includes Bourke, Enngonia, Weilmoringle and Brewarrina, that contributes to short-term population fluctuations. Notwithstanding this, in terms of permanent residence, the Aboriginal population tends to be comparatively sedentary.
- ◇ Bourke is the only urban centre in Bourke Shire which conforms with the definition of 'urban' adopted for the Inquiry. Smaller centres including Enngonia and Wanaaring also have village-based Aboriginal populations.

***Housing***

- ◇ There are three distinct locational patterns for Aboriginal community-owned rental housing in Bourke. Twenty dwellings are situated within a discrete former reserve (Alice Edwards Village) approximately two kilometres west of the western fringe of the town, adjacent to the Darling River outside the town levee. There are twenty-one dwellings situated in an enclave at the western end of the town but within the town boundary in an area developed specifically for Aboriginal housing by the Aborigines Welfare Board in the 1960s, and thirty-three other dwellings are scattered throughout the town area. In addition, there are a number of houses owned by the Aboriginal Housing Office within the town area (once again, mostly located in identifiably Aboriginal housing areas) and Aboriginal people also live in mainstream public housing, private rental accommodation or, in the case of a few households, are owner-occupiers.

- ◇ A survey of ninety-eight dwellings rented by Aboriginal households, undertaken in 1998 in conjunction with planning for the NAHS project, identified an average population per dwelling of 5.2 people. Thirty-nine per cent of dwellings surveyed had six or more people resident and 8% of dwellings accommodated ten or more people. Sixteen dwellings had two families living in them and a further five dwellings housed three families. The total number of distinct family groups living in the ninety-eight dwellings surveyed was 124, which represents an average of 1.27 families per dwelling.
- ◇ The housing need identified was for thirty-four new houses to meet existing needs, plus seventeen extensions comprising twenty-eight bedrooms and several bathrooms to relieve crowding.
- ◇ The condition of much of the existing housing is poor because of crowding, poor design and construction standards and lack of routine maintenance.

### ***Economic status***

- ◇ The community survey conducted in 1998 established that the overall unemployment rate in the Aboriginal community was 55%, with 53% of the town workforce and 69% of the Alice Edwards Village workforce looking for work. This was approximately twice the unemployment rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across NSW as a whole, according to 1996 Census data. It should be borne in mind that the 1998 survey sample comprised people living in rental housing, predominantly renting from community housing organisations or the Department of Housing – it is possible that the unemployment rate among owner-occupiers is lower. The workforce participation rate for the survey sample was 57%, which is only slightly higher than the 1996 Census workforce participation rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for NSW as a whole.

### ***Local Government involvement***

- ◇ Council has a co-operative relationship with the Aboriginal community. Council is represented on the Bourke Working Party which was established initially to plan and direct the implementation of the ATSI-funded National Aboriginal Health Strategy Environmental Health project but has broadened its focus to embrace an holistic approach to community development. There is one Councillor who is an Aboriginal person.
- ◇ Council is active in the Barwon Darling Alliance, a coalition of Local Government Councils and the ATSI Murdi Paaki Regional Council which, inter alia, is working strategically to provide opportunities for economic development in indigenous communities in the region.

- ◇ Council provides raw and filtered water supply, wastewater collection, treatment and disposal, garbage collection and disposal and a range of community services and facilities which are intended to be equally accessible for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. In practice, the concentration of the Aboriginal population at and beyond the western end of the town compromises access to facilities such as the swimming pool and the youth centre, since the Aboriginal population tends to be transport-poor.
- ◇ The water supply and wastewater reticulation infrastructure at Alice Edwards Village is owned by the Nulla Nulla Local Aboriginal Land Council and is not part of Council's system. Council owns the sewage pump station and rising main at Alice Edwards Village, and Council checks the system each day, and maintains it. Council does assist the Land Council in responding to problems within the private systems but is not funded to do so.

### ***Issues arising in relation to the Terms of Reference***

- ◇ Aboriginal people living in Bourke have access to a range of programmes and services provided both by mainstream agencies such as Council and State and Commonwealth service providers, and by Aboriginal community controlled organisations such as Gundabooka CDEP, the Bourke Aboriginal Health Service, the Murdi Paaki Regional Housing Corporation and Muda Aboriginal Corporation, which provides a broadcast and language service. Different individuals and groups within the Aboriginal community prefer to access either a mainstream service or an Aboriginal specific service, depending upon relationships. Generally, the areas with the greatest population concentration of Aboriginal people are not well provided with social infrastructure and community services. The Bourke Working Party has tried to address this problem by seeking funding under the NSW Government funded Aboriginal Communities Development Programme (ACDP) without success. There appears to be a lack of recognition on the part of funding agencies that it is futile to provide housing and physical infrastructure, particularly where housing is concentrated, without also meeting needs for community facilities.
- ◇ The Working Party structure was developed and pioneered by the ATSIC Murdi Paaki Regional Council as a model for extending the involvement of urban indigenous people in the decision-making process. In Bourke, the Working Party comprises representatives of each Aboriginal community controlled organisation; a number of grass roots Aboriginal community members; Council; ATSIC; the NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs; NSW Health; DEWRSB (from time to time) and other agencies. The direction for action comes from Aboriginal members of the Working Party (agency representatives are non-voting) and, provided that sectional interests are not too dominant, and that funding agencies are prepared to acknowledge the expertise of Aboriginal people in finding solutions to their own problems, such a structure is an excellent model for maximising community involvement in decision-making.

- ◇ At a regional level, organisations such as the Barwon Darling Alliance are well placed to foster partnership between Local Government Councils and the ATSIC Regional Council, with a view to developing regional strategies that have the potential to benefit all urban-dwelling indigenous people within the region. The Barwon Darling Alliance is currently involved in providing 35 traineeships in Civil Construction in association with local CDEP's and DEWR?? Further traineeships are currently being planned.

The Alliance is also in the process of ensuring that banking services are not lost to the communities within its area.

- ◇ Bourke experiences problems with sociopathic behaviour among young people, which is a reflection in part of lack of parental control. Problems arising from poverty, unemployment, poor rates of retention in the education system and substance misuse are all contributing factors to this, and there is now in Bourke a sizeable minority with no apparent social norms. Initiatives have been put in place from time to time to address these issues but have not been effective in the long term. There is a need for credible indigenous role models to provide an example for younger children but action is needed to address the needs of what is increasingly appearing to be a lost generation, in an holistic way. The Barwon Darling Alliance and constituent members are working with the Unity of First People of Australia (UFPA) to address this problem through a Community Justice Program. This program has great potential, however is lacking in Government support at the State level.

The Premier has introduced a Regional Co-ordination Program which also has the potential to have a positive effect however is also lacking in resources.

- ◇ Bourke is fortunate to have an Aboriginal community organisation (Muda Aboriginal Corporation) with a specific charter to maintain Aboriginal culture. Muda provides a radio broadcast service, and teaches Aboriginal language (Jandruwandha and other languages) to community members. The organisation is regarded as a good model for the maintenance and cultivation of Aboriginal culture in the community.
- ◇ Economic independence is a difficult issue because of a general lack of skills in the Aboriginal community, coupled with decline in the rural economy. The Barwon Darling Alliance is developing programs to address these shortcomings. Gundabooka CDEP has also a number of initiatives in place including a building operation, a nursery and a security service. An employment and training strategy which will train approximately twenty community members to trades level in building or landscape gardening has been developed by the Bourke Working Party as an element of the NAHS/ACDP project but the Working Party is running into difficulty obtaining support for its initiative from NSW Government agencies because of a lack of co-ordination and a disinclination on the part of the agencies to trust the community's ability to develop its own solutions. Bureaucratic control and territoriality is a serious impediment to attainment of economic independence.
- ◇ Urban housing needs are much as defined above. Funding has been committed by both ATSIC and the NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs to meet housing need; however, lack of progress in delivering the ACDP has frustrated the community's desire to implement housing and infrastructure programmes in a co-ordinated way. Housing

management has been an issue for Council. Prior to 1998, community owned housing was managed by two community organisations which had poor management skills. There was a substantial rate arrears owing to Council as a consequence of non-collection of rent and inadequate financial management. The Murdi Paaki Regional Housing Corporation was established by Murdi Paaki Regional Council in 1998 as a means to address problems with local management of community owned housing across the region and since MPRHC took on management of Aboriginal community housing in Bourke, the situation has improved to the stage that MPRHC is now collecting in excess of 95% of rent income and is effectively managing more than 400 houses across the region.

### ***Other issues for Council***

- ◇ Fiscal equalisation grant funding provided to Council through the NSW Local Government Grants Commission's Financial Assistance Grants (FAGs) take into account to a limited extent the above average indigenous population as a proportion of the total population when calculating disability factors. However, only the general and community service components of the FAGs are predicated to any extent on indigenous population. It needs to be recognised that there are financial implications to Councils, particularly those with discrete Aboriginal settlements, in the area of works. Maintenance and management of physical infrastructure in discrete Aboriginal settlements (in particular, roads, water supply and wastewater infrastructure) has been problematic over many years because community organisations (usually Local Aboriginal Land Councils) do not have the technical or economic wherewithal to maintain infrastructure. Where Councils have been committed to working in partnership with Aboriginal people (as is the case with Bourke), services have been provided even though the infrastructure is situated on private land. The COAG *National Commitment to Improved Outcomes in the Delivery of Services to Aboriginal Peoples and Torres Strait Islanders* commits Local Government Councils to providing municipal services to indigenous communities, and makes some vague comments about financial support to do so, yet there is **absolutely no arrangement in place** whereby Council can recoup the cost of complying with the *National Commitment*. Councils in areas such as Bourke have very limited rate income. With Council now recognising the benevolent status of Aboriginal housing organisations, the general rate revenue formerly forthcoming from property owned by Aboriginal housing organisations valued at \$15,000 for the 2000/2001 financial year is no longer available. Council strongly supports the co-ordination objectives espoused by the COAG *National Commitment* but feels that, in the absence of a source of grant funding which realistically meets the expenditure incurred by Council in holding up its end of the *Commitment*, the burden is unsustainable.