

MURDI PAAKI

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SUBMISSION TO THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER AFFAIRS (HRSCATSIA)

INQUIRY INTO THE NEEDS OF URBAN DWELLING AOBIRIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE

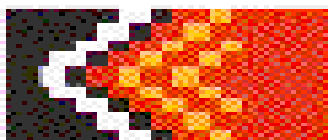
Purpose:

The purpose of this submission is to provide a response to the current inquiry being held by the HRSCATSIA in relation to the needs of urban dwelling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

This submission will put forward the views of the Murdi Paaki Regional Council who operate across a vast area in the west of New South Wales. The Murdi Paaki Region stretches from the Victorian border in the south to the Queensland border in the north. The region extends westwards to the South Australian border and its boundary on the east takes in the communities of Ivanhoe, Menindee, Cobar, Bourke, Quambone, Gulargambone and Collarenebri.

This submission will seek to comment on all the terms of reference of the inquiry.

Background:



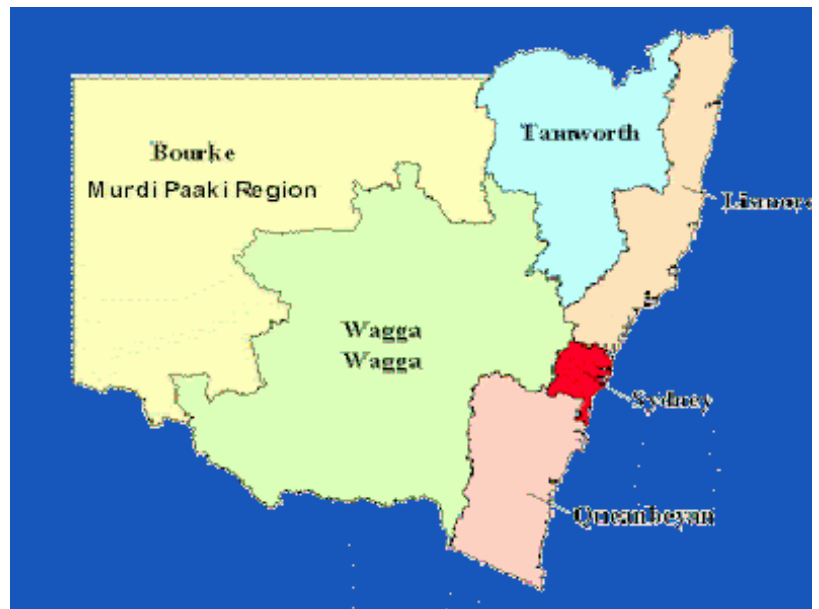
SERVING THE MURDI PAAKI REGION

The Murdi Paaki Regional Council recently lodged a submission with the current Commonwealth Grants Commission inquiry into the relative needs of Indigenous people. A copy of that submission is attached. The Council respectively suggests that the terms of reference to that inquiry were flawed in that it sought to compare the needs to the more disadvantaged Aboriginal communities with that of the least disadvantaged. These terms of reference makes no reference to the needs Indigenous communities in terms of attaining equity with that of the broader community.

As you will note from the attached map, the Murdi Paaki Region incorporates communities in the northern, central and southern western most areas of the State of New South Wales. This area is considered by the National Institute for Economic and Industrial Research (NEIR) as being the 93rd most disadvantaged economic area out of a possible 99 similar areas.

The geographical and socio economic characteristics of the Region forms the context in which this submission is based as this is the environment that effects the needs of the urban dwelling Indigenous people in the Region.

For the purpose of this submission the Murdi Paaki Regional Council have assumed that the term “urban dwelling” is broad



Terms of Reference:

- 1. The nature of existing programs and services available to urban dwelling Indigenous Australians, including ways to more effectively deliver services considering the special needs of these people.:**

As noted by the recent CGC draft report, it has long been Councils viewpoint that the nature of existing programs targeting Indigenous people is that they are far to fragmented and disjointed. It is difficult to identify the array of programs available and the agencies who are charged with their delivery. This fragmented approach to program delivery leads to continuing difficulties for Indigenous communities in accessing the available programs.

Not only does the fragmented nature of program responsibility make access a difficulty it also makes inter and cross sectoral collaboration difficult. An example of this is a situation currently causing major frustrations in the Murdi Paaki Region. At the moment many communities are attempting to develop and implement multi functional programs in the Region. Under these programs community housing will be constructed, repaired and refurbished. It is the desire of the community to provide much needed training and employment opportunities during this process. Whilst this sounds simple and logical enough the prospects of gaining additional outcomes in the training and employment area whilst providing outcomes in relation to the provision of community housing are being stymied due to the inability of responsible agencies (both State and Federal) to discharge their responsibilities.

Inter sectoral collaboration is one of the most difficult processes to achieve. Analagous to completing a jig saw puzzle, an eight piece vision will never be realised if the agencies holding two key pieces are unable to place them in the frame. This inability might be the result of lack of funding, restrictive policy guidelines or risk aversion from program managers.

When combined with the fragmented nature of funding sources and areas of program responsibility (functional silos) this situation has an inhibiting effect upon the successful delivery of programs that need to draw on the resources of at times large numbers of agencies. Program inflexibility also often means that the critical piece of the puzzle cannot be incorporated which puts at risk many of the possible outputs.

The Murdi Paaki Regional Council strongly contends that program development and delivery must react to community identified needs. Giving the community primacy in the planning and delivery processes is the only means to achieving sustainable outcomes. This has to be matched by an increasing flexibility in terms of program structures and guidelines. This has been demonstrated during the current housing/training and employment project being run at Dareton in the far south of the Region. The outputs of this program have been the construction of appropriate community housing and the training and employment of local Aboriginal people in the building trades of carpentry, bricklaying and landscaping. This multi functional program has built the capacity of the community and improved the well being of many members of that community. This program has been operating for almost 4 years now and it must be realised that this type of time frame is what is required in order to provide for enhanced community development outcomes.

Regional Council believe that the current method of program delivery needs to be reviewed in order to improve outputs and outcomes. Council believes that pooling of funds by agencies to enable single stream delivery for multi functional programs is a necessity now and in the future. Council is currently investigating options in relation to greater regional autonomy and authority and emerging from those investigations is the option for developing a structure that could provide a single stream program delivery methodology that provides outputs and outcomes to both agencies and communities.

This type of innovative approach will prove to be very challenging in terms of the functional silo mentality that currently exists in many program delivery agencies.

2. Ways to extend the involvement of urban Indigenous people in decision making affecting their local communities, including partnership governance arrangements.

The Murdi Paaki Regional Council have developed a regional framework to extend and give primacy to decision making by local Indigenous people in relation to issues affecting their communities.

This framework is underpinned by the establishment of Community Working Parties in most communities in the Region. The CWP's were established as a part of the Regional Housing and Infrastructure Implementation Manual and were established to make decisions on behalf of the Aboriginal community in relation to housing and infrastructure needs.

The CWP's allow for representation of Indigenous organisations in the community, along with members representing young people, elders, women and general community members. This forum provides for the broadest cross sections of the community to be represented. This is part of Council's strategy to fund "communities" and not "organisations" who are often service providers and do not necessarily represent more than a small section of the community.

Although established in relation to housing and infrastructure programs, Council is now seeking the advice from CWP's in relation to all issues affecting a community. The CWP structure is an evolving process that needs ongoing support from both Regional Council, communities, agencies and other service providers.

At the present time the CWP's are unincorporated bodies. Recent consultations with CWP's in relation to greater regional autonomy and authority has led to an emerging idea that the CWP's will need to become incorporated in the future. This may well lead to the CWP as having a type of Community Council status.

The evolution and development of the CWP's, in conjunction with single stream funding delivery for multi functional projects would enable communities to develop and implement programs that address their self identified needs. The evidence from projects such as that described earlier in Dareton indicates that this process will lead to both improved and sustainable outputs and outcomes.

3. The situation and needs of Indigenous young people in urban areas, especially relating to health, education, employment and homelessness (including access to services funded from the Support Accommodation Assistance Program).

The situation and needs of young people in the Murdi Paaki Region are in many ways inter related.

Recent research undertaken by the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research Centre focusing on the communities of Bourke, Brewarrina and Walgett indicates that the situation of young people in relation to education and employment is marked by a lack of participation. The lack of participation in the education system is the probable and most obvious cause leading to a future lack of participation in employment opportunities. There is an obvious nexus between unemployment and homelessness.

Aboriginal people in the Murdi Paaki Region have very poor health expectations. These poor health expectations virtually effect Indigenous people from the cradle to the grave. Whilst there are areas of improvements (immunisation levels have increased dramatically) most Aboriginal people in the region can look forward to suffering diseases of affluence (diabetes, heart disease etc) without actually benefiting from any other characteristics of affluence.

These health expectations are occasionally the cause of a lack of participation in the education and employment systems. It is more likely in most cases the lack of relevance, cultural appropriateness and support (both from family and education providers) that leads to a drop of in attendance and participation in the education system. This then leads to a lack of participation in the employment market which in turn leads to an over reliance of welfare and a reliance of public/community housing. This is the cycle of poverty that many Indigenous people in the Murdi Paaki Region find themselves in.

The CAEPR research shows a marked separation from the education system by Indigenous people from the age of 14 onwards. This results in many young Indigenous people leaving the education system without attaining basic literacy and numeracy skills. This lack of skills will obviously inhibit future participation in employment markets, particularly those which require skills other than labour. The research also shows that the employment avenues open to Indigenous people in the Region is dominated by the public and community based employment sectors.

Regional Council is unable to comment on the levels of access to services provided through the Support Accommodation Assistance Program. An inherent feature of most Indigenous communities in the Region is the high instances of overcrowding in terms of housing. This would tend to indicate that young people access accommodation through various family members. This maintenance of the family structure is a strength of Aboriginal culture but it is clearly recognised that there are many negative issues that arise as a result of such overcrowding and reliance on “family or relative provided” accommodation.

4. The maintenance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture in urban areas, including where appropriate, ways in which maintenance can be encouraged.

Within the Murdi Paaki Region maintenance of Aboriginal culture is an activity that is actively supported by Regional Council. This support takes the form of grant funded activities along with contributions and support in kind by Council to cultural initiatives.

Regional Council is currently in the process of forming an agreement with the National Parks and Wildlife Service, Dept of Conservation and Land Management and Regional Land Councils in relation to the preservation and access to sites of cultural significance. One of the impediments to reestablishing thriving cultural pursuits is access to land areas containing sites of cultural significance. The Aboriginal people within the Murdi Paaki Region are as disenfranchised as any other Indigenous group in the country.

Regional Council have limited capacity to fund activities in the Region that ensures cultural maintenance. Council fund a number of cultural preservation activities in the Region, including the Brewarrina Aboriginal Cultural Museum operations. ATSIC also makes national language maintenance funds available to several ongoing projects in the Region. Council are of the opinion that they support cultural maintenance to the limit of their capacity. An example of this is that within a “discretionary” budget of @\$1.2M annually, Regional Council allocate @\$277,768 of this to cultural maintenance activities. National cultural maintenance funds in the order of \$475,018 are also allocated within the Region.

Funding is available for cultural maintenance activities from many areas other than Regional Council. Again Council believe that the funding delivery mechanisms currently in place are far too fragmented and there are not currently joint planning processes in place with other funding agencies. The establishment of such a process would inevitably enhance the outputs produced in the area of cultural maintenance.

Regional Council also believe that the education system needs to become more proactively involved in cultural maintenance activities. Council believe that there are significant opportunities for education providers to deliver many more courses focusing on Indigenous history and culture with particular attention to local languages. Regional Council currently fund several language initiatives that operate from local schools within the region. In most instances these programs would not continue should Regional Council or ATSIC withdraw funding. This situation exists even when the NSW Dept of Education allocates millions of dollars annually to schools across the State to teach a language other than English.

5. Opportunities for economic independence in urban areas.:

The attached CAEPR research clearly describes the economic environment that covers the Murdi Paaki region.

An economic scoping of the Region reveals relatively low population levels, recent declines in traditional rural industries (wool growing), the emergence of “new” high establishment cost agricultural industries (cotton) and the

natural job redundancy brought about by the widespread uptake of mechanisation and technological advances. These characteristics result in Aboriginal communities having limited opportunities to develop self sustaining economic activities.

The decline of the wool growing industry over the past decade has meant that many avenues of employment for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in the Murdi Paaki Region has declined. Tasks that once employed people are now increasingly carried out by the property owner themselves.

The increase in the production of cotton in the region has lead to employment opportunities but these are basically seasonal (chipping) and are not what might be described as long term vocations. There are instances of industry developed training schemes in the cotton industry being established in the Region and it is Council's hope that these initiatives will eventually lead to joint venture opportunities for Indigenous communities.

The emerging citrus and grape growing ventures provide similar seasonal work opportunities. To date very few Aboriginal communities have had the opportunities and resources available to participate in these "new" industries.

Regional Council, via Community Development Employment Programs (CDEP) provide employment, training and economic development opportunities for the majority of communities in the Region. Currently CDEP operates in 13 of the 16 major communities in the Region and provides training and employment opportunities for 1170 participants in the Region. Many of these operations are developing sustainable business activities however it must be recognised that many communities do not as yet have the capacity to both develop and maintain sustainable enterprises. This is due to either a lack of appropriate business skills or a lack of resources or both. CDEP organisations, and Regional Council, firmly believe that the level of on-cost funding allocated to Regional Councils based on the number of CDEP participants is inadequate. Over the past several years CDEP have had to increasingly carry out tasks that have previously involved a specific provider ie Centrelink and the ATO.

the flexibility of the CDEP scheme is very good however Regional Council have some concerns of shifting Government expectations of CDEP schemes. For many years (most of the 1990's) CDEP organisations were encouraged to develop activities that provide for additional days work and subsequently additional income for participants. The Commission has made available supplementary business type funding programs to assist with these activities. CDEP organisations now find themselves with the added task of acting as a type of placement agencies. There is an expectation that CDEP organisations will now skills audit participants, identify areas of full or part-time employment outside of CDEP and then provide the training to ensure that participants develop the skills necessary to take advantage of such off-CDEP employment opportunities. There has been no substantial increase in on-cost funding to facilitate these new tasks. When combined with the resource strain due to the recent reform of the taxation system, CDEP

organisation now utilise much of their available funds undertaking “compliance” type activities.

On a positive front there are many examples of organisations, particularly CDEP organisations, in the Region developing, establishing and operating viable enterprises, albeit on a relatively small scale. These initiatives include broad acre farming (wheat at Lightning Ridge), grape growing (Menindee/Wentworth), tourism based enterprises (Harry Nanya Tours Wentworth), FM radio broadcasting (2 CUZ FM), service station operations (Lightning Ridge Shell) citrus growing and furniture manufacture (Coonamble). Several CDEPs also hold contracts with Shire Councils for the provision of municipal services (Brewarrina) The majority of these activities are undertaken by CDEP organisations and utilise CDEP assets and labour.

These activities are vitally important for the communities and organisations involved however the sustainability of many of these activities without the resources of CDEP would be questionable.

Regional Council firmly believe that CDEP Oncost allocations should be reviewed upwards, specific CDEP related business funding should be expanded and training in relation to business planning, development and management should be developed and delivered on an ongoing basis.

6. Urban housing needs and the particular problems and difficulties associated with urban needs.

Within the State of New South Wales there is currently an agreement between the Commonwealth, Commission and the NSW Government in relation to the provision of housing to Indigenous communities. This agreement is currently in the process of being renegotiated.

This agreement has seen the establishment of the NSW Aboriginal Housing Office (AHO). Under the agreement funds allocated under a number of programs (CSHA/ATSIC CHIP) are pooled and administered by the AHO. The AHO have established regional advisory bodies known as Regional Housing Advisory Committees (RHAC). The RHAC make recommendations to the AHO Board in relation to the proposed expenditure of the regional allocation. These allocations are in turn endorsed by the AHO Board for Ministerial approval. The six Chairpersons of the ATSIC Regional Councils are AHO Board members.

ATSIC still provide funds for housing and infrastructure through a number of programs, ie Health Impact Priority Projects (HIPP), National Aboriginal Health Strategy (NAHS). The NSW State Government is also currently delivering the Aboriginal Community Development Program (ACDP) that targets communities in relation to housing and infrastructure needs.

There are issues in relation to this fragmented program deliver structure. There are inconsistencies in the guidelines of these programs, for example some of the programs allow for the installation of air conditioning in the Far

West (NAHS), whereas other programs do not (ACDP). These inconsistencies cause many difficulties for both tenants and housing providers.

The establishment of the NSW AHO and ancillary structures (RHAC) could well be seen as a duplication to the ATSIC structure. The RHAC areas mirror that of ATSIC Regional Councils and inserts yet another layer of advisory bodies.

Regional Council also have some issues in terms of their inability to support innovative strategies that they have established in the region in the arena of community housing. Several years ago the Murdi Paaki Regional Council established the Murdi Paaki Regional Housing Corporation Ltd (MPRHCL). This organisation was established to take over the ownership or management of community housing stock where local housing organisations have either fallen into liquidation or are struggling with the management of their assets. This initiative has been successful and has been supported by Regional Council from their housing allocation. Since pooling their allocation under the current bilateral arrangements Council has not seen the level of support offered to the MPRHCL that otherwise might have been.

The Murdi Paaki Regional Council has attempted to take a strategic approach in relation to the provision of housing services to communities in the Region. The Region has been well supported by the ACDP program with an indicative allocation to communities across the region in excess of \$50M. Based on this Council withdrew from funding consideration from other programs, eg Round 2 of ATSIC NAHS, to ensure that communities not being targetted under ACDP are not disadvantaged. Programs such as these are viewed by Council as being the vehicle through which to address the backlog of demand and that ongoing programs such as the NSW AHO allocations are provided on an annual basis to cope with the emerging need.

Council believe that this approach will have long term benefits but are frustrated with some of the short term "teething" problems that exist in relation to both the ACDP and AHO processes.

Conclusion:

In conclusion I would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to put forward the views of the Murdi Paaki Regional Council in relation to the terms of the inquiry.

Attached to this submission is a copy of the recent CAEPR report "The Relative Social and Economic Status of Indigenous People in Bourke, Brewarrina and Walgett" and the submission lodged by Council to the Commonwealth Grants Commission Inquiry into Indigenous Funding in Australia. I would strongly recommend to the Committee that they view these documents as a collective as there is a clear nexus between the submissions.

Yours Sincerely

William (Sam) Jeffries
Chairperson
Murdi Paaki Regional Council