

**Living under the Family Responsibilities
Commission: Experience and Testimony**

*‘Speaking straight, speaking from the
heart’*

Summary report

John von Sturmer & Stuart Le Marseny

September 2012



With the exception of the Commonwealth Coat of Arms and where otherwise noted all material presented in this document is provided under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Australia (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/au/>) licence.

The details of the relevant licence conditions are available on the Creative Commons website (accessible using the links provided) as is the full legal code for the CC BY 3.0 AU licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/au/legalcode>).

The document must be attributed as the Living under the Family Responsibilities Commission: experience and testimony 'Speaking straight, speaking from the heart', summary report.

ISBN	DOC	978-1-925007-03-9
	PDF	978-1-921975-96-7

1 Introduction

The project brief required a minimum of 10 in-depth case study interviews with individuals or families living in Aurukun, Hope Vale and Mossman Gorge. The brief specified that the case studies were to focus on individuals' lived experience of change. The research questions for this study included the following:

- what are people's views about what change has occurred, how, why and for whom?
- what support has helped to bring about change (either informal or formal)?
- what are peoples' views about benefits to them or their families?
- how and why do some people confront barriers and why do barriers remain in place?
- how change for individuals contributes to making communities better or worse?
- how change spreads through families or communities?
- whether any benefit from change could be shared with other communities?'

This paper provides a summary of some of the key findings from the study. It commences with the methodology, followed by our reflections on the research questions. A summary of the shared experiences and testimony by the interviewees is provided in the next section. These interviews have been divided into three categories based on the kind of interviewees. This paper ends with our final remarks about the FRC based on our experience and the things we learned from the people we interviewed.

2 Methodology

The principal researcher, Dr John von Sturmer, has been associated with communities in the Cape since 1969. Preliminary scoping work for this study was undertaken in Hope Vale at various dates throughout July 2012 and in Aurukun and on Wik lands over the period 23-30 July. The formal part of the brief involved visits to each community – Hopevale on 7-8 August, Mossman Gorge on 9 August, and Aurukun on 14-17 August. During these community visits and at all stages of the formal brief Dr John von Sturmer was extensively assisted by Stuart Le Marseny who has been conducting research in the region since 2009, specifically in relation to Welfare Reform and the working of the Family Responsibilities Commission (FRC). Subsequent to the formal community visits Le Marseny was able to explore some elements of the current situation in Coen.

During the scoping phase the principal researcher developed a checklist of topics that might be addressed – though the interviews themselves were intended to remain loose and exploratory. This was based partly on a perceived need to allow an unprejudiced exploration of people's present concerns and aspirations in order to locate their involvement in and attitudes to Welfare Reform.

While the brief specified a minimum of 10 intensive interviews or case studies the researchers ended up having discussions with 50 or so individuals, with some people choosing to be interviewed with one or more other person. These interviews have been synthesised into three sections based on the kinds of interviewees: Community Members, People of Influence, and the Commissioners. For privacy reasons all names and individual identifiers have been removed.

In a significant number of cases there were more or less formal interviews conducted with people outside the FRC conference facility; but often they just 'hung out.' In other cases the researchers visited people in their homes and in rarer cases at their office or their work location. In the latter case these discussions were authorised by work bosses. Often interviews were undertaken in group situations, with one primary discussant but others sitting by silently. All were carried out in the public

gaze so there was no effort to establish so-called privacy. This approach has tremendous advantages for it means responses are already witnessed and in this sense verified.

There was an awareness during the interviews of what might be called 'mantra speak' – people speaking the official line or engaging in the forms of discourse that have currency in the broader world of policy debate. As one Commissioner said: 'In the beginning people might say pretty much what you expect to hear. But later, when they learn to trust you, they will open their hearts'. There were a few instances of this – but because of the long-term standing of the researchers in the region and a willingness to confront 'the party line' people soon 'opened their hearts'.

Ethics approval was granted for this research by the Cairns and Hinterland Human Research Ethics Board.

3 Reflections on Research Questions

Having done the research and written up the field notes and converted them into more or less summary reports, how now would we answer the research questions? Let us do an interview with ourselves:

Q. What are people's views about what change has occurred, how, why and for whom?

It may be important to distinguish between changes in general and those directly attributable to Welfare Reform and the Family Responsibilities Commission. It is important to note that the restriction on alcohol has had an enormous 'calming' effect. It makes life more liveable. Anybody who has lived within these situations during the heavy boozing days knows how destructive and intolerable the situation was then. It is destructive of social relations and of personal ambition: the capacity to plan, even to react, to take the initiative in anything like a sustained way.

At no time during our interviews did anyone say that the curtailment of drinking was a bad thing. In the more or less recent past drinking was taken as the very sign of personal liberty – and being able to participate, on equal terms, in the whiteman's world. Grog culture was seen as akin to mainstream culture. That model, based on notions of discrimination, has by and large fallen by the wayside – even though in some cases curtailment of drinking (and other practices) might be seen as a limitation on personal liberties.

It is the unstated message that the quarantining of money through the BasicsCard (or through other strategies – for example, getting trusted people to act as your banker) is aimed principally at halting the expenditure on alcohol. It isn't just a case of humbugging – but humbugging for what? One can speak about quarantining money for people to have the money to meet the needs of their children or of daily living (the pursuit of whitegoods and other expensive consumables seems to be a bit of a red herring in this respect); alternatively it can be seen as being quarantined against 'waste' – the purchase of alcohol, principally, but also gambling.

The world of young people is not one we were particularly able to penetrate. It did not come to us – and our efforts to set up meetings did not work. How these worlds are to be accessed by anyone other than other young people is a moot point – and it may be worth adding that it would be a mistake to see it always under the head of 'finding new leaders'. This is just to repeat a mode of thinking that relies on the notion of creating an elite that can then 'guide' or direct others. Yet one thing the ordinary punter will not be guided by is the elite; just the opposite.

In Hopevale there was a strong orientation to an active notion of democracy: people pulling together for community events, people not getting above their station, people not thinking they are better than others, people thinking about the community before themselves. We might link that to the situation in Aurukun where a number of people are concerned with the idea of community service, about being

able to sort out problems with the young men, about being 'good helpers' – both useful and wanted. In fact we could say that about all the communities: the notion of personal service, the whole idea of caring linked with wisdom which, when you think about it, is central to the notion of elder. These are not just people of age; they are people of standing. It is something a lot of people aspire to. Having said that, however, these desiderata can indicate just the opposite: hierarchies, 'top end of town/bottom end of town', incipient class and caste differences, marginalisation, difficulty in finding points of insertion into the world of social responsibility itself. That needs to be thought of broader than mere self-responsibility which lies on the side of 'respectability' and perhaps duty. These do not translate into responsible action, if we can make this distinction; responsible behaviour is not enough without a sense of social purpose. Social purpose, is it only to be about getting kids to school?

One may need to note that a primary 'beneficiary' of Welfare Reform has been the Commissioners themselves. In the distinction between Commissioners and Clients it is easily forgotten that in a significant sense the Commissioners themselves are clients of the system created. While this has the potential to create tension within their home communities it also provides them with a basis for social caring and practical action; yes, it gives them a purpose. Yet, we might ask, is laying down the law – or even counselling – a sufficient action base?

Among the older people particularly there is a tendency to compare the present with the old mission days. Although some of the demands of the 'new order' may appear to stress some of the values of the mission past - proper behaviour, good house-keeping, school attendance, 'neighbourliness', house maintenance, community values, anti-booze, good order – there is a clear recognition, even among flag-bearers of the old mission regime, that the values of the past are inadequate to the present. There is an identifiable – and identified – tension between the need for good order and the maintenance of personal liberties. Critical to much discussion was the position of young people, young boys, entering their teens. This was singled out, over and over, as a particularly troublesome coterie. It points, among other things, to the difficulty encountered in these societies to find proper structural or institutional frames to contain or to generate (and maintain) adequate identity structures for the young. At an age when it might be expected that they would be subject to forms of secondary socialisation (within ceremony, for example, or preparing to enter the work force (as in the old cattle industry days), they are now handed over to largely external agencies (boarding school, prison, the magistracy and the criminal justice system in general)– or, to put the case dramatically, abandoned to their own communities. In a fuller analysis we would examine the role of gender differences. Notably we established that a significant number of young women sought at least physical separation from their families. This was thought of as creating an independent life. At the same time we might note the general tendency to drift back to the community of origin – or even other communities. Let us pose the question this way: what is the future of the young people if they are not given a present? The problem of young people is about finding proper bases of incorporation in the existing social order. Habitually, however, they are seen as the very embodiment of disorder.

On the issue of change in general this is a difficult topic to broach in any meaningful way. You can say, 'Well, what will this place be like when your son or daughter is your age now? Will things be different?' Generally the view will be that things will be just the same. Different buildings, different people, different agencies derived from outside. One of the changes one might expect is an increasing capacity to envision a future – but there is little evidence of that. This is not to say that people lack plans or ambitions. Much of this at present focuses on country. How realistic this is or how feasible is hard to say. There has been little infrastructural development over the years to assist such movements which founder on many things, not least the absence of roads and all-weather transport arrangements.

In the case of Aurukun what was conspicuous were two things: (1) not just an active maintenance of tradition but even a strengthening in some cases; and (2) the development of what might be called a 'psychologised ego' or self. As to the second this is clearly a function of various models based on

psychological models (anger management, etc.) and counselling in general. We now see the emergence of a narrative 'I' which did not exist in the past. We find people being able to articulate their own feelings and fears where once they were inclined to enactment. People report modifications in their own behaviour or attitudes. In some respects it's a replay of the old 'We have seen the light' except the Christian overtones of the latter are now more or less absent. The old broadcasting of complaints continues; a sort of public rendering – literally a 'publication', a making public, of grievance. This is no doubt healthy and it coincides with traditional practice – one moreover modified to centralised living in little townships. Uninformed Europeans or visitors will, however, be apt to treat it as an early warning sign of inevitable conflict – or a form of 'improper' behaviour in itself. The public airing of grievances is a safety valve – and invites intervention by restraining, caring hands.

The role of the Commission might be seen in that way – as a place for airing grievances, though the initiative in the first instance lies with the Commission. It becomes not just a sounding board (an image made by several Commissioners themselves) but a strange and unaccustomed answering voice, one that announces the 'complaints' and concerns of 'the community': what is acceptable behaviour, what is unacceptable, what are the responsibilities that are to be met by someone who wishes to maintain membership of that community? It announces only to receive answers (this is in the most ideal scenario) and to enter into a negotiation.

Q: What support has helped to bring about change (either informal or formal)?

Anything that stabilises. Anything that shifts from accusation to the true recognition of problems. Support to be effective has to be instantaneous in the first instance. In other words, not just a recognition of the problem but taking immediate steps to remedy the situation - with back-up and long-term support. Support is not support if it is offered or promised but not delivered.

The first step is the notion that there are people prepared to listen. The Commissioners tend to pride themselves on their capacity to listen and to attend to the real nature of problems; this view that they have of themselves is more or less endorsed by feedback we have received from each of the CYWR trial communities. But people have also pointed to counsellors from within Wellbeing Centres and probation officers as being good people to talk to. The question then is what do the Commissioners offer that the 'mainstream' machinery of counselling and monitoring and treatment do not; and vice versa?

Within the communities it probably must be remembered that the local Commissioners *are* the mainstream. It is the slow recognition of this principle that is probably one of the major instruments for a conceptual shift – and the future ownership of problems at a local level. In the Aurukun case the fact that the local is the mainstream is symbolically, practically and strongly made by the fact that conferences are conducted principally in Wik-Mungkan. The Commissioners themselves are well aware of the significance of this – and note how much more confident and forthcoming people are in Wik than if they are required to speak in English. This is less a question of competence than one of comfort. Wik is the language of equality: as if to say, we are all equal before Wik. English is the language of hierarchies and externally-derived statuses.

Q: What are peoples' views about benefits to them or their families?

The benefits are largely perceived in terms of the operation of the BasicsCard and the capacity it gives certain people to manage their income; the negatives are also seen around the operation of the BasicsCard, notably the loss of discretionary powers. Because the card is a thing, a concrete thing, it can attract feelings both positive and negative about the operation of the welfare reform package in general. There is a general view that the card should operate on a voluntary basis – and not tied to punitive regimes. It should itself be seen more positively. On the other hand the notion of compulsion is useful to those people who wish to claim that their voluntary self-assignment under the income management scheme is compulsory. The power to refuse is central to the assertion of personal

identity; yet many people cannot refuse – just as some people cannot curb their compulsion to demand.

While all agree that the operation of the FRC has been decisive in encouraging parents and grandparents to get their children or grandchildren to school, and that school is in itself a good thing (perhaps education rather than school itself), higher rates of school attendance would not in itself be seen as a benefit of the scheme. School attendance is seen more as a requirement rather than as a value in its own right. It is unlikely that the provision of statistical data – a proposal put forward by at least one commentator – would shift this perception markedly, though it is obviously a desirable shift.

To talk about benefit or non-benefit would require a full discussion of existing value frames. Assessment of benefit can only occur within a value frame. If we took superficially what people say are core values – family, togetherness, unity, satisfaction – then we would have to address what has improved family life and reduces anxiety or resentment. One might add to this the importance of culture – which may be translated as respecting local meaning frames: what gives meaning to life, interactions, ways of seeing and explaining the world. These things are difficult but only because they are difficult to grasp. They don't appear concrete or material. It is doubtful in this context whether 'well-being' as a notion has any precise equivalent in traditional thought. It is not a cultural category of any long standing. Such matters need to be thought about rather carefully and with sensitivity. Imposed conceptual frames are as painful and limiting as any form of imposed reality.

Q: How and why do some people confront barriers and why do barriers remain in place?

We did attempt wherever possible to ask people about their future ambitions or what they thought a good life might look like. Much of this focused on questions of a return to country. There is a view that with present council arrangements – which focus on community as the core notion, not country – this will all come to nothing. What the consequences of thwarted ambitions are likely to be is hard to say – except one has the sense that it will consist of a steady abrasion of any sense of will. This is what we are seeing at present, more or less – though there are sites of initiative. As someone said astutely, 'Agencies are the new outstations.' Can every family have its own agency? That is the practical – if not the conscious – ambition of some people. It is a process that begins with personal attachments to a key figure in the agency or service provider. Such ambitions are not hard to frame for they are more or less readily available.

Q: How change for individuals contributes to making communities better or worse?

A good example is cutting down on noise. Noisy parties, loud music, riotous behaviour, rowdy neighbours have direct impacts. Children cannot sleep and people become irritated and annoyed. Personal satisfaction is likely to lead to a tempering of such behaviour. Noisy behaviour as someone pointed out, is a cry for attention. It's like children crying. But it can't be the task of neighbours to determine or guess what that cry for help is about. Many commentators, though noting the benefits that may flow to individuals through particular arrangements (such as the BasicsCard, parenting programs, respite care, counselling, etc.), are aware that an 'individualistic' approach may be inadequate. While individuals are to be treated as irreducible entities with a full existential, moral and willed status, there are social issues that apply generally (or at least widely) and matters of infrastructure and opportunity. As one person said, 'It's no point training someone or 'putting them right' for an opportunity that does not exist. It's like having a car without gasoline – or a jerry can of fuel and no vehicle.'

There can be no question that free-standing, self-initiating individuals put less pressure on families than those who are not. This is a simple truth.

Q: How change spreads through families or communities?

Apart from the question of immediate relief there is also the question of long-term change. The operation of the FRC, to the extent that it engages people of significance and knowing from within the community, has the possibility of arriving at case-based experience and understandings that can slowly build up not only an awareness of general patterns (a sense that 'it is not just happening to us') but of strategies for dealing with such situations. If knowledge is appropriated by external agencies then the capacity of local situations to arrive at their own adaptations becomes progressively limited. Alternatively, it may be useful for the local scene to 'displace' its difficulties onto external agencies. We have seen that with drinking – and the 'dumping' of drunks onto the police or the hospital. The development of analogous situations is easily envisaged. Whenever a situation is thought of as problematic it is only a short step away from being 'externalised' – made someone else's responsibility. The trick then is to look for possibilities – opportunities to engage the local in tasks or projects that can be easily achieved and within definite time limits. A good example is the enormous capacity people show in organising funerals. The trick might be to work out how to transfer some of the drive and initiative that is taken in relation to the dead to the living.

Q: Whether any benefit from change could be shared with other communities?

A rational approach might be to bring all communities under a single arrangement. This is initially attractive – for conceptual and administrative reasons, among others. However, another view would be that it is like a bad gambler who bets all his money on the one horse. There may be merit in hedging one's bets. People hedge their bets by maintaining, in many cases, a range of social options. To reduce social options itself can be a significant source of anxiety. The aim then might rationally be to maximise the range of alternatives. People can then vote with their feet.

At present we are unaware that there has been any study of whether communities under the scheme are drawing in more residents as a result of the scheme or not; or whether the scheme has any bearing at all on demographic shifts. It is unlikely that anything of any statistical significance would show up. In the case of Aurukun there are many people wanting 'out' – but in none of these cases is the operation of Welfare Reform put forward as any sort of factor. As far as we are aware neither Welfare Reform nor the FRC is a 'push' or 'pull' factor. In the words of one respondent: 'The FRC, it's there, it's just there'.

The most positive aspect of the scheme is the presence and recognition of the Commissioners themselves. This is in the role of moral guardians or guides. The fact that this role is now being recognised – albeit on a part-time basis – is almost certainly a positive step. Most people would agree with this. The fact that their role continues outside the conference and the FRC meeting room suggests that rather than being paid a fee for sitting days they might better be placed on a retainer. To this certain conditions might apply. The scheme might be extended to recognise all people of similar standing. There is probably a contradiction in asserting a principle of equality and not recognising parity between people of similar standing. In any case the principle enunciated by many commentators suggests that any scheme should be subject to general community discussion and agreement; and not be imposed from outside. In other words, a possibility or option, not a requirement. Yet there might be a view that where communities demand certain commitments from government that a *quid pro quo* in terms of certain requirements that must be met might not be considered unreasonable.

4 Shared experiences and testimony

This section summarises the key points made by the people who generously shared their stories and insights with us. Neither Welfare Reform nor the Family Responsibilities Commission was to be the entire story. Indeed, initially it was quite difficult to get people to address the Welfare Reform/FRC issue; particularly but not only in Aurukun the primary interest was in return to country and in escaping community conflicts and tensions. Also, taking our guidance from an early set of discussions with

prominent commentators within the Aboriginal scene, it was considered desirable – if possible – to see how things worked on the ground, trying to ‘fix’ responses within living situations at both the household level and within habitual patterns of familial (and broader) dealings. In short, what was the general tenor of daily life – and where did Welfare Reform/FRC fit within that? The checklist was intended more as indicative and as a guide than anything else. For all intents and purposes it was quickly abandoned – though the issues that informed it continued to lurk behind the scenes.

Were time restraints not so pressing it would have been desirable to take our event notes back to the people involved for their approval or comment. After all there can be a big difference between what people are prepared to say and the written account of it. Yet, let us say this: Aboriginal worlds are not private worlds. People stand by what they say. What is intolerable is any notion that people are talking about you behind your back; direct confrontation is best – so that the ethos of the FRC conference is not necessarily as threatening as it might be to people from other cultural backgrounds. This is not to say that there are not protocols about who can speak and about what.

This involves a principle of discretion. And in these circumstances we have made a reluctant decision to be discrete. Therefore rather than present each case study individually this summary has presented the views, opinions and experiences of people in similar circumstances. This allows for a mix of views from people of similar backgrounds to be presented together.

With this in mind the interviews have been divided into three categories based on the kind of interviewees. They are:

- Community Members: Includes a range of community members with differing levels of contact with the FRC and welfare reform initiatives
- People of Influence: Comprises people who have held office on the community council, senior traditional owners, and influential figures involved in land councils and similar structures.
- The Commissioners: Current FRC Commissioners

This summary combines opinions, experiences and observations from all the interviewees in each category. The narrative in each category is not from one voice, it combines a number of voices of people interviewed from each category.

Category 1: Community Members:

The brief specified that the case studies were to focus on individuals’ lived experience of change. For some life is taken on the run, in a sense in the public gaze; for others life is to be lived invisibly – quietly and without fuss. Yet even so for any given situation there is a constant circulation of people just as there is a constant circulation of issues to be confronted or dealt with.

This section summarises interviews with people who shared their ‘lived experiences’. Some of these interviews were conducted in groups of two or more respondents. The section has been grouped into two types of comments: people’s opinions of the impact of the FRC and people’s lived experiences and aspirations for the future.

People’s opinions of the impact of the FRC

Assessment of the FRC: A group of 5 workmen were interviewed together. The general response of this group of respondents to the FRC was extremely negative. ‘We are not happy’ is how they put it, ‘it’s no good’. One man added: ‘I was on FRC once. I went before the court on a drink driving charge. I was fined \$500 and directed to the FRC. They told me to attend a course. I said I was a worker, I’m too busy working. I’m on probation, 9 months. They said if I don’t attend the course I’ll be sent back to court.’ His view is that things should be left to the court – and he is happy to pay his fine and to report

to the probation officer. 'I work 5 days per week. I keep on reporting to probation. But the FRC keeps on pursuing me about anger management and drink driving. I was referred to MPower to learn to budget my money. I didn't see them. I know how to budget my money. I said this to the FRC but instead I continued to get letters from MPower. Look, I've [successfully] saved for 5 cars - 3 to 4000 dollars each. This suits me. I like cars, I don't need a Toyota. See, I know how to save. There's no respect; it's none of their business. I have 2 kids, I put food on the table. Me and my partner we know how to do things'.

There was a specific complaint, namely, that the FRC Commissioners had access to their 'story' – by which they meant their file or records. They were aware that this could lead to arguments. Who has a right or need to know? The Commissioners, being members of the community, could not guarantee confidentiality or anonymity.

Another worker, not part of the above group, had a different opinion. 'It's good', he thinks, but admits to knowing little about it. This ignorance of course could be feigned – as a way of not getting too involved in the issues. He continues: 'When people misbehave they are put on the BasicsCard, 6 or 7 months. People are able to save money'. Saving is treated as a self-evident good. This is a widely spread view. There is a pattern in this too of equating the FRC principally with the BasicsCard issue and being linked with issues of misbehaviour.

The FRC, it's there, It's just there: 'The FRC is like the AMP (Alcohol Management Plan), it is just there, it is part of the community and we are used to it now. The FRC offers more support and more job opportunities for us. I see some good points with the FRC'. When questioned if there have been any bad points he responded: 'No, no real bad points, education is really important and anything that gets the kids to school is really good'. It is clear that the respondent does not see the FRC as a cure-all, nor does he have exaggerated expectations about what it can achieve or strong negative feelings in terms of limitations placed on personal 'rights' or liberties. It's a steady, don't-rock-the-boat position, itself a willingness to try new structures and ideas. The interview confirms a general view that has developed progressively over the days of interview that the FRC is now part of the furniture or taken-for-granted of everyday life. It provides some opportunities, an outlet for certain talents, limited personal support, and forms part of the institutional furniture of the communities in which it is located. Even so, in some cases there is passionate opposition and resentment.

Family Matters: The respondent says that the close relationship between her and two of the FRC commissioners was problematic at times when she was first required to attend the FRC conferences, even though when these situations arise, any commissioner directly related to any client is excluded from participating in that sitting. She said that 'it used to freak me out to have my close family as FRC commissioners even if I was not dealing with them directly'. Later though, she said that she was able to talk to both of them at family gatherings about the situation 'and everyone was OK about it'. In today's FRC conference both family members were participating in the conference as FRC Commissioners and there was no perceived conflict of interest as the respondent's attendance was voluntary and there would be no decisions made in the sitting. The sitting was only to discuss her transition from being involuntarily on the BasicsCard to being a voluntary client (at her request), and she was happy to talk to her brother and sister about this.

After being placed on the BasicsCard she was motivated to reduce the school absenteeism of her daughter and through a range of reward strategies that were negotiated between parent and child and with the assistance of the school attendance officers and the FRC Commissioners, the absenteeism was reduced to an acceptable level within six months and then over the following six month period brought within Education Queensland guidelines.

Due to the acceptable school attendance record over the preceding 12 months, her case plan with the FRC was coming to an end, and the BasicsCard was to be withdrawn at the end of the fixed 12 month

period so she was asked to attend the FRC hearing to discuss her transition off the BasicsCard with the FRC commissioners.

She spoke openly about the antagonism she felt towards the FRC and the commissioners when she first had to come to the commission hearing, and that she refused to do what was asked of her, principally because she did not want to be told what to do. She claims not to feel any hostility towards the FRC now, and stated that she feels the FRC 'really helped her when she needed it' and that she felt the FRC 'was doing a good job in the community'. She believed that the majority of the community held a similar view of the FRC.

In the later part of the interview she spoke a great deal about the BasicsCard, how initially she was angry at being made to have the card, but how she had quickly adapted to using the card. It helped her to manage her money and to save for significant household items. She said that because of the BasicsCard she had been able to purchase several large household items, including a fridge, washing machine and lounge suite. The respondent had told the FRC in the conference that she wanted to keep the BasicsCard and had asked to be placed on the Card on a voluntary basis because it made managing her money and her life easier. She had also asked that the FRC 'not tell anyone in the community' that she was on the BasicsCard on a voluntary basis otherwise she would be humbugged for money.

Loss of flexibility: Of course there were opposing views on the BasicsCard. Two community members approached us specifically to have their say. They have a definite view to put and they instruct us to write it down: 'BasicsCard we don't want. There's no money for travel, for taxi, for boarding in Cairns when sick, for sending money for relations.' 'They only run BasicsCard for kids clothes. [Our cloths store] is not on the list of shops. They have to send a FAX, ring Income [Management]'. Their remarks were focussed on the loss of flexibility and their capacity to establish and negotiate their own networks: a loss of discretionary power.

Double Jeopardy: This respondent was referred to the FRC by the Magistrate's Court for fighting and received a \$500 fine. He does not agree with the FRC structure and thinks it should go. As to how well the Commissioners are doing their job this is irrelevant. It's not the point. It's the whole structure that is at fault. This takes in the referral system, the necessity to appear before the Commissioners, and the BasicsCard. He agrees that children should go to school but does not agree with the referral to the Commission of the primary carer in cases of school non-attendance either. The respondent does not stop to talk when he leaves the Commission and is clearly disgruntled the researcher notes: 'He might have come up to me to complain but he does not. It has been a short encounter. If he has been put on a BasicsCard – he is the recipient of a Centrelink benefit as well as being subject to the Magistrate's referral – he has been subject to a second set of 'double jeopardy' arrangements. He is well aware of this hazard. The consultation seems hardly to have been long enough for any sort of working strategy to be developed – so I suspect he has simply been subject to a further set of referrals, as well as the BasicsCard. My discussion with him suggested that another, more sympathetic strategy would be required. My assessment was that he was already bitter – and it would take little to entrench that bitterness. He has already said to me in quite insistent terms that a lot of people complain about the current FRC arrangements – 'even the ladies', he says. I presume he insisted on this point for it is often women who are said to be satisfied with the BasicsCard or to voice their approval. He sets out to rupture that view or at least to cast a shadow over it.'

Loss and Anxiety: Both respondents readily state that they were very anti the FRC in the beginning and when they were put on Conditional Income Management (CIM) due to not complying with their FRC agreements, they were very angry towards the FRC. Now, three years later, they both have a very different attitude to the FRC. When asked what the FRC does in the community, one replied: 'The FRC is there for the community and will help to guide us through our problems; they can control the fights from both sides. The FRC is a good thing; they can find a way to help young parents be good parents. The FRC can help young guys not go to prison. The FRC are like counsellors for men

and women, they help out. I hope that when the little ones grow up the FRC is still here to help them, help the next generation, and the next generation after that'.

In the three years previously, the respondent had been to a number of FRC conferences for child-related matters, had been put on a CIM order, and had her children removed by the police and Child Safety Services to the safe house within the community pending final assessment of the situation. If the final assessment had been negative the children would have been removed from the community and placed with alternate carers. At this point she said: 'I was desperate to avoid losing my children, I went and saw them every day at the safe house at 9:00am and worked really hard. The FRC helped prevent the children being taken from me, by helping me to know what to do. I had to fly down to Cairns and go to the court, and I had only 28 days to tell the magistrate that I was a good parent'. It was a very complex and confronting situation for a person with limited education and no knowledge of the judicial system: 'I would not have been able to do this by myself, the FRC helped me to do this, and told me what else I had to do, and I got my children back. I had to do a parenting course here in Aurukun. I graduated about two months ago and I had lots of other work to do, too, I had to go onto the BasicsCard to show them there would be money for the children, and that I would pay my rent and everything. Now my kids are good and I am happy. Life now is a little bit OK. I still go to the clinic and talk to others and get support. I am going to write a letter to the FRC and tell them what a good job they do, and they are helping the community'.

Individual's lived experience and aspirations

Looking to the future: This respondent placed great store on the success of family members at secondary school and beyond. Sectors of this family are now beginning to access tertiary education. There are expectations – not merely hopes – that a recent successful family member will return as a teacher. The respondent points out to me that now 4 students from her community have made inroads into the tertiary sector.

Return to Country: People like this respondent are apt to pass beneath the radar. A quiet life with modest ambitions. One senses that such people receive little if any official support. Our conversation reinforces the view of a deep desire on the part of many, many people to 'return to country', In this instance there is a definite plan in mind: to run cattle. Whether this is a feasible ambition given the land tenure situation is another matter. On first appearances it seems that the FRC is more geared towards managing people's behaviour than it is towards assisting them with their ambitions. Maybe the linkage between the two sets of objectives needs to be considered more carefully.

'I float therefore I am': What she has learnt is the hard-luck story and how to tap into the aspirational account - the story she gauges people wish to hear: woman seeking independence attempting to live a 'normal life' in her own home. In all likelihood she will continue to drift. What advantages this gives her are hard to assess. In her case there is a pattern of flight – possibly of outlasting one's welcome; in other cases there is a desire for flight not always acted on, if at all. There are the drifters or floaters, and the would-be floaters and drifters. In her case the pattern was probably established early on by having at a very young age to fend for herself and being abandoned. She now repeats that pattern of abandonment – but at the same time attempting to create new attachments that she is almost certain to undo or compromise. The question: how to stabilise the life conditions of such people? The pattern is not a new one – for it has strong parallels within the traditional past.

Category 2: People of Influence:

This category incorporates opinions, observations and experiences of people who have held high office on the community council, or who speak with authority as the senior traditional owner of the land on which the community is located, or have been influential figures in the land council or similar structures over a long period of time. We might think of them by and large as senior statespeople. They tend to have a broad overview of the impact and benefits of the CYWR trial on their respective

communities. This summary has been divided into seven themes that were brought out in the interviews with the six 'people of influence'.

Selling the CYWR trial and council opposition: The respondent proposes that 'The whole scheme [the CYWR trial] would have been better if it had been voluntary. People need to be led to it, not driven.' It is this that continues to convince him of the merits of the FRC, the desire of at least some people to put themselves on the BasicsCard voluntarily. 'This', he says, 'is when the message has got through.' His view – shared by others – is that the scheme was not sufficiently well 'sold': the ideas were good but the package and its *raison d'être* were not properly or persuasively presented. There was a tactical fault: 'People needed to have an experience of gain or benefit, first-hand, in their own lives. The FRC compelled people, people were confronted with their behaviour.'

Initially there was support but then the reaction became hostile. This suggests that the issue was not the ideas but who were the winners and the losers in the implementation. 'There was no back-up plan for dealing with a hostile response. The Council Chairman went feral. The complaint? 'Big money is being spent but we see nothing of it. We do not control the purse strings. Control is elsewhere'. With the loss of Council support Welfare Reform lost an important cog in the local machine. They met with Council. Some people were vociferous, others were prepared to concede the scheme's merits. There might even have been a willingness on the part of Council to hand things over in the right circumstances. The critical thing was to get certain people sponsoring or promoting the scheme'.

At the end of our discussions I (JvS) noted the following questions: what is the role of the council? how might it be made a productive partner? To these questions we may add: how are community members to participate in the program other than as those administering it and as those administered by it? how is one to achieve greater local participation? How is the community to 'own' the process?

What's good, what's bad: The interview began with a 'what's good' and 'what's bad' approach to the FRC. While on the good side it was conceded that the BasicsCard allowed better financial and self-management arrangements, it was the bad column that soon started to fill. This began with the remark that the FRC process tended to target certain people: 'Some people were copping it more than others. A person might appear before the court. It is their first offence, alcohol-related. They might have one can too many. Next minute they're up before the FRC.' In saying this she clearly sees the FRC as operating under a punitive rather than a supportive light. The respondent makes explicit certain community resentments. In addition to the issue of commissioners having to clean up their own backyard first and the potential desirability of neutral people from other communities, people with no history, she identifies another area of grievance: 'Here there are good parents. They feel they are not receiving enough positive recognition. Instead they feel they are being put under the spotlight, one false move! They kick up a stink about this.'

Welfare Reform, a discriminatory regime: The respondent put the view strongly that the differentiation of people between those under Centrelink and those in normal employment was unfair and discriminatory (another respondent expressed similar sentiments, noting that people on Centrelink benefits are potentially subject to sanction via the BasicsCard because of school absenteeism but parents who are employed are not. This is a major loophole in the system if it is supposed to be geared to child welfare). 'Those receiving Centrelink benefits or entitlements could be subject readily to the FRC 'big stick', but there should be one law for everybody'. Without drawing the conclusion explicitly it was not hard to see that she was alluding to the capacity of the current FRC (and more broadly, Welfare Reform) arrangements to create pariah groups. This is the force of the remark that some people are targeted all the time. 'At the same time', she says, 'there are not enough carrots'.

Who gets the jobs, who gets the benefit: Whatever the facts of the situation there is a strong perception (particularly in the larger communities) that non-locals are over-represented in the welfare reform process with the acute and pointed observation that it is the 'Europeans' who receive regular

fulltime salaries and the local Aboriginal people who are engaged part-time. Welfare Reform has not really created employment opportunities for local community residents. Also the point is made that it is one thing to administer a scheme – and another to be administered by it. But in both cases it may be legitimate to talk about a dependency situation: dependent on the arrangements and protocols put in place.

Significant changes: According to this respondent within the community there have been four significant changes directly attributable to the FRC:

- (1) 'There has been a significant reduction in the amount of alcohol related incidents such as public nuisance and domestic violence, with many people declaring their houses 'Dry Houses'.
- (2) There has also been a significant increase in the 'general cleanliness of the community'.
- (3) There has been a very significant shift in the attitude of community members towards sending their children to school. He feels 'the general attitude of community members towards school being a priority has increased'.
- (4) The FRC has enabled members of the community to deal with the 'wider world' through 'helping with Centrelink issues and helping to change community attitudes towards community members living and working outside of the community when they wanted to, and coming back when they wanted to'.

When asked what still needed to be done within the community, he expressed the view that 'We need to keep people busy, keep them occupied, it is the ones with nothing to do all day that cause the problems. If there is no work available or people do not want to work, we can strengthen the community and keep people occupied by increasing the range of cultural activities like fishing, and camping, particularly with the young men.

Too much Talk: 'The FRC deals with the person not the issue.' His list of priorities are drugs, gambling, alcohol, violence. They are repeated over and over. They do not include housing, they do not include education, he doesn't refer to the council, he doesn't refer to the high cost of store goods. The three tasks, he says, are to identify and to address underlying problems, to change attitudes, and to find employment for people. He himself provides no specific details about any of these issues, or about how they should be approached. He reiterates his point that interventions should be issue-based, not person-based. 'We are dealing with issues here, not persons'. There is reference to improving communication skills. This probably involves improving the capacity of agency operatives. Before, he says, there was more looking at families but the approach has become increasingly individual-oriented. The respondent makes a plea for working within clan groups.

The latter part of this discussion draws attention to a tension in the FRC – not that people are to be conceived as members of households but also as members of 'interactive' sets. The FRC and Welfare Reform generally takes the community as the primary unit of conceptualisation – the community and the 'free-floating', independent individual. However, in terms of actual alliances and social interaction land-based identities remain critical. These are not merely an historical reality but frame future aspirations in relation to cultural transmission, the maintenance of land-based (and linguistic) identities as things in themselves (both individual and group), and ambitions to 'return to country'. In the respondent's community – but not just there – it is a pressing issue and in very many cases one of the first things people wish to discuss.

Why I support welfare reform: 'My view, as I see it, from my perspective, I'm for Welfare Reform. It put FRC in place to deal with issues in the community. 'The community understands FRC in a way; the community needs to listen to them. It's a service, the community has to understand that. I myself went before the commission because of my grandson. There is a need for everyone to have a full understanding of how this all works and to develop other (new) habits. We need to satisfy one another and to deal with ganja and grog. I ask myself why my grandson has not gone to school. This is what the FRC challenges me with. I can't keep on coming up with excuses. This puts me in an awkward

position. We need to clean up first issues first'. On the issue of the school she states: 'Direct Instruction is 2 years old. For the first six months I noticed that the kids were not settling in – but in [over] time they have become more focussed. Before that the kids were in and out of the classroom, just running about. With the new program in the school reading and writing skills are getting better each day. The kids will be able to compete with mainstream curriculum. That's what we want.'

Category 3: The Commissioners:

While we strived hard to avoid making our study top heavy it was hard to avoid engaging with the commissioners. In many cases this engagement was initiated by the commissioners themselves. In some cases this reflected a desire to establish how they were thought about in the community. A general theme is how early hostility was overcome – yet they are sometimes accused, even now, of 'wearing too many hats'. This is regardless of the virtually universal esteem in which the commissioners seem to be held.

There were at least four main topics involved in the discussions:

1. how the FRC/commissioner role is evolving and how the commissioners see this themselves;
2. how the role of commissioner has changed self-perceptions and created new skill bases among the commissioners themselves;
3. what forms of support the commissioners may require or consider desirable in the future; and
4. preparing the next generation of commissioners.

This section summaries experiences and opinions from local FRC commissioners and has been described under six themes.

Change, Vision, Values: 'There was initially a great deal of animosity towards us as commissioners and members of the FRC within the community. There was a lot of abuse. When we started we were sounding boards for the clients, both for their aggression towards the commission, which they did not understand and in regard to the frustration they had with their problems and their circumstances. People came to the FRC angry – annoyed at being summoned and to a degree because they were being made accountable. Later this would change – just as the FRC itself changed, developing more of a counselling function. People were annoyed at their predicament, not at us. It was their predicament that made them angry. Now there is almost no aggression towards the FRC, as you can see from the clients that are here today, they are quite happy to be here, they are dealing with their problems in a positive way and they can see that there are solutions to their problems. That is the really big change in the last four years... At the beginning people did not speak from the heart. They spun any old line, the usual things, the usual excuses. But later this would change. As for council, there was no one there who would take any responsibility.'

'Before the FRC started there was nowhere for people in the community to let their feelings out in a safe environment. In public meetings they would just blow up as they let their feelings out, fights and assaults were common. Now when people come to the conferences they are sometimes still very angry, but they are angry at their situation, they are not angry at us as commissioners, and members of the FRC. They realise that we are an alternative to the courts that can only punish them; we can help them to resolve their problems and to find solutions for the situations they have. Community members realise that we can get very close to people in the conference, we can get close because we know the people we are seeing. We see them every day in the community, at the shops and in the street, we also know their parents, their children, so there is no point in trying to tell us things that are not true. Because of this and because they know that we will never discuss what happens in the conference, they open up to us very quickly. It is something that works.'

'There have been a number of really big changes in the community since we started. The first is that fathers and partners are taking a much bigger interest in their children. Before the FRC this was a very chauvinistic place. Males were not involved with their children, my partner was not involved in raising any of our children, now you see fathers walking their children to school and supporting their partners when they have difficult times with the children. The next biggest change has been that everyone is starting to see what happens in the community as their responsibility. Other changes have been that people are realising that everyone has rights, especially children, people have become very self-centred over the past few years, having parties and doing things which really make life hard for other people. 'The biggest change though, has been that people can now have the things they want, things such as white goods in the home and food for their family and children in the fridge and cupboard. This is possible because of the BasicsCard, they can manage their money and save for the things they want. We have women coming into the conference asking to be put on the Basics Card and requesting us to tell their partners that the FRC made them go on the Card, so that they can have money for food and rent every week.'

Biggest challenges: 'The people who do want to change, some people do not want to change. Change is frightening for many people and success is just as frightening for many people, what will I do if I have to take responsibility for my own problems and I cannot blame someone else? The opposition of the council is also of great concern, this has been going on from the beginning, and I think it is getting worse. The council often broadcasts on the radio about getting rid of the FRC, not only the FRC but Alcohol Management Program (AMP) as well. I don't know what would happen if this AMP was stopped, and the grog started coming in again, it would be terrible and it would undo much of the work we have done over the past four years.'

A wider view: The respondent strongly believes that the children from the community have to experience the outside world, and that boarding schools in other areas of Queensland should be explored as an alternative education pathway in addition to the nearest secondary school. He believes that 'children need to be challenged' and that 'children should stay away from the community for longer periods of time, live with other families, or go on long holidays to other areas during the school holidays and only return to community for the Christmas break. This will give us a new generation of leaders in the community that have a wider view of the world, not just here and the local community politics'. He believes that 'the CYWRP and the FRC are bringing a wider view of the world, and are showing the community the standards necessary for young adults to operate in the wider Australian community. This will be one of the principal successes to come from the FRC working in the community'.

The Product wasn't sold: This respondent believes that many of the difficulties experienced by the CYWR trial and FRC in his community could have been avoided by a greater degree of consultation with the council prior to the CYWR and FRC being implemented. He believes 'the FRC product was not sold right to the people in the community', and the principal people assigned to 'sell the product did a poor job'. He did not know if the poor relationship between the council and the CYWR trial and FRC could be salvaged at this point in time as the council views the FRC as an alternative power structure in the community and therefore a threat to the power of the council. He believes that this is a matter of perceptions only and is not really the case. His considered view is that 'the council is seeking to have authority in areas that are not the business of the council'. Even so the FRC to be seen in this way is not such a negative thing. The council has too much power, much more than a council in any similar-sized mainstream town and due to being the principal employer in the town, people were hesitant to speak against the council.

We should work together, we're all one people: The Commissioner believes that 'the authority of the FRC has assisted in strengthening the local business and governing body which is not a council, but a community organisation that needs the support of other organisations to get respect'. Indeed, it is worth considering carefully the position of this community that operates without a council – given

the difficulties noted for situations in which there is a community council. The Commissioner believes one of the biggest influences the FRC has had on the community is to assist with relationship building and act as a bridge between the organisation and other government and non-government stakeholders, a role, the Commissioner readily acknowledges, 'it has filled on numerous occasions'. The FRC is very respectful of the role of the organisation within the community and if an outside organisation approaches the FRC for advice or assistance, they are told by the FRC that they have to see the community organisation first before the FRC can become involved. In short, the FRC does not set out to undercut existing structures but seeks to work alongside them.

The future of the FRC: 'I see the FRC as people having accepted it, it is here, they understand what it is all about, how it works and our roles. I see that a lot less people will need to attend conferences in the future'. He sees this as a good thing: 'Less people attending conference would be an indicator that the issues causing people to be clients of the FRC and therefore having to come to conferences were being resolved. The Wellbeing Centre is working well, clients are more trusting of the counsellors and are completing the programs, the hotel is also limiting the amount of alcohol that can be taken away by some community members that have a history of not being able to handle alcohol. They serve them XXXX Gold (beer instead of spirits) so they are very positive steps... In general I think it is going to be a lot better for our people. There are a lot more support services for people and a lot more employment for people on country, particularly with the ranger program, which is providing positive employment for people on their own country'.

Q. What do you think will happen if the FRC stops?

'If it stops it will gradually go back to the way we were. It will not happen overnight, but it will happen. We will not have a mechanism in place to deal with people when they have behavioural issues. At the moment we are nipping it in the bud, so to speak'.

Q. What do you mean by nipping it in the bud? Are you getting to issues faster now than when the FRC started?

'Yes – we can have discussions now that we could not have had in the past, with the clients, the Wellbeing Centre Staff, the hotel and other community members that can help us with people who are going off the rails. We can have these discussions because we are trusted'.

Q. What has been the biggest change in the community since the FRC started?

'Before the FRC there were only a few, about 2 or 3 very dominant people in the town who did most of the talking, the others were not confident enough to speak up. This was also apparent in the earlier days of holding conferences, where people would mostly listen to what we (the Commissioner) had to say, now they speak up a lot more and tell us their story, what is going on in their lives, why things are happening. This has transferred now to people speaking out more in public as well, so many more people are confident enough to speak in public meeting'.

Q. Has the FRC strengthened or weakened the Justice Group?

'Yes and No - I believe the FRC has strengthened the justice groups, due to there now being a larger group of people who have the confidence to express their views than there used to be, and this is very positive. Alternately the FRC has taken on some of the role that the Justice Group should be doing, this could be seen to be lessening the strength of the Justice Group, but overall I think the FRC and the Justice Group work well together'.

5 Observations relating to service delivery and cultural considerations

It is questionable whether a programme geared to the individual as such can translate into a 'group' or community undertaking and there appears to be little modelling of the relationship or connexion

between the two levels. (Of course in reality there are all sorts of intermediate positions – the household, ‘family’, and what is referred to in Aurukun as ‘clan’ or ‘clan groupings’.) One may be challenged on saying this but there can be no automatic translation of individual benefit, even where this is perceived consciously, to group consciousness or sense of project.

It would be an interesting issue to see how it positions Hopevale in relation to relations living in Cooktown and further afield: what we might call the Guugu-Yimidhurr diaspora. Also, in terms of its relations with Wujal Wujak, its ‘sister community’ under the Lutheran Mission and given the generally close links with the Gugu-Yalanji world. It’s useful conceptually to think of the Guugu-Wara, Guugu-Yimidhurr and Gugu-Yalanji as constituting a single cultural block, with many shared concepts and actual social and historical dealings. This signals a conceptual problem with the Welfare Reform programme, that its field of operation or jurisdiction does not coincide with the Guugu-Yimidhurr ecosphere. It is very much community-centred or focussed rather than seeking to match the actual dimensions, dynamics and modalities of the life world. It fits within a community development model rather than something that is more fluid, offers a (wide) range of options, and relies on multiple strategies for operating one’s daily life. It’s full, let us say, of ‘hither and yon’. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that there is a singular failure of agencies to come to grips with local knowledges or sensitivities, or even local issues. There is a hazard that difference is treated as aberration. For example, a couple yelling at each other all weekend in Wik-Mungkan may be interpreted by outsiders as a sign of domestic violence. However, anyone who has a long-term and informed engagement with the community will readily interpret this as a form of broadcasting – of making the conflict a social rather than a private or purely domestic event.

Matters of cultural awareness or sensitivity apply everywhere, whether it is in the school and the material circulated there, or in the parenting programme, or in the notion of what constitutes proper or acceptable behaviour. Without making a particular point of it, exposure to actual teaching materials suggests two forms of cultural bias: the (unconscious) promotion of certain cultural practices that do not apply locally, and an (unconscious) ideological bias. None of these remarks is intended to question the goodwill and competence – within certain narrow limits – of service providers.

In some cases service providers had not been subject to any locally produced or presented induction programme. Induction is via notes and websites in which – frankly – one can have little confidence. If we focus on the issue of support it is clear that these programme deliverers are themselves being very inadequately supported – despite the presence of an informed and caring local Aboriginal ‘crew’ of workers. Critically it is undoubtedly the personal links that providers can create with their Aboriginal clients that is the key component in any successful outcome – both for the client and the deliverer. However, how this is not to be perceived as a relationship of mutual dependency – creating a dependency relationship that relies on external rather than internal sources and only goes to increase – to an inordinate degree - the European presence. At the same time this is coupled with a mode of detachment that means cycling the providers through a range of communities without offering them much chance of acquiring more than rudimentary and often mistaken notions of how the local scene works. This is a general and major societal failure: the difficulty in what may be called creating proper communicative bases.

Apparent ‘acceptance’ (as demonstrated by the ‘crew’) is an indicator of a low-level (but deeply alienating and deeply felt) awareness of the reality and levels of cultural and ideological colonisation at play. People may say ‘Too many Europeans’ but without specifying what that entails. In any case there is no or little objection to Europeans as such. What is not examined – or brought into focus – is how the assumptions and the life ways of the ‘outsiders’ intrude into local practice, impose alien notions of propriety and proper practice, and limit recognition (both as a fact but also as a basis of proper remuneration) of the real skills that local people acquire from and bring to their life world. Certification is always about lack, not about what people already know. Indeed, it seems that many of the programmes assume so-called ‘mainstream’ models when in fact, it is doubtful that any reputable

social scientist would claim that such a thing exists: it is a phantasm that exists principally in the imaginary, or a sort of self-assuming carelessness. This situation may change at any moment.

Indeed, what would serve to assist the debates that already seem to be flourishing at Hopevale (principally) and in formulating, in some specific detail, an analytic understanding of people's social positioning? This task is being avoided or deflected by an apparent attention to the individual – as the key unit of social understanding and action. In the absence of proper attention to this task one can easily expect further social dissidence and discord. One respondent stresses the importance of statistics: 'People find them convincing', he says, as if they too want the hard data. But not only are they apparently unavailable, it is a key question: what are the relevant statistics, how do they relate to local core values and life ways, to what extent do they engage with people's self-perceptions and aspirations for themselves and their offspring? Most critically, what are the evaluative schemata people themselves consider pertinent? It is by addressing such questions that the service providers themselves become truly accountable. Otherwise we are likely to find ourselves back in the habitual situation of yet another failed programme – 'it will all fall into dust, the horse has bolted' – and the recipients of the programme back in the situation of being blamed for failure and not the providers. Yet it is ultimately not a question of blame but of understanding – and of providing effective points of enabling on all sides. Realism depends on an unblinking attention to what is actually present.

6 Final Remarks about the FRC:

The following remarks are not meant to be exhaustive but arise from a consideration of respondents' comments and observations of the FRC's workings. The main thrust of the remarks is to address how the FRC has been seen over time, how its role has evolved, how it operates in the present and how its function might both be re-defined and better supported.

The general response, one might have to say, was that it was now a fixture. While this perception might point to a desire for stability and the maintenance of the known, it does not necessarily connect with people's stated ambitions or objectives.

1. Respondents think of the FRC largely in terms of the Basics Card; other parts of its work are considered in a secondary light;
2. The nexus between school attendance and the use of the BasicsCard is clearly understood and recognised;
3. This nexus and the system of referrals means that the FRC continues to be perceived principally as a punitive mechanism;
4. Having said this, there is evidence that the FRC is being thought of increasingly as having a 'helping' role; this is most likely to be the case with repeat clients who encounter the FRC under a more supportive guise;
5. Positive experiences of dealing with the FRC or its individual Commissioners are likely to be decisive in terms of people's attitudes both to the FRC in general and particular Commissioners in general;
6. The same applies to being on the Basics Card where people have experiences of positive benefit, either in terms of being better able to manage their finances, being able to quarantine their financial resources against insistent demands, being able to establish a savings regime, or to achieve targets in terms of purchasing household goods or other desirables;
7. This suggests that concrete experiences are more important than abstract ideas or principles in developing attitudes to the FRC and its work. Those without a concrete experience of working on the

FRC or appearing before it or having a positive or negative set of encounters are likely to feel strongly about the FRC; others are largely indifferent;

8. This is true except of those used to seeing themselves as having a community function and who may feel themselves excluded from the FRC process; it may also be true of those who have alternative bases of action and influence;

9. Having said this, all FRC Commissioners claim to have been attracted to the Commission's work because of their concern for their community and the prospect of 'being able to help'; in perhaps the majority of cases they already occupied positions of prestige and influence, and in most cases seem to have maintained those roles since joining the FRC;

10. Commissioners claim that as the FRC has matured it has tended increasingly to see its functioning more and more and more in terms of early intervention and counselling;

11. While the movement to counselling might be seen as a natural progression, even inevitable, there may be a perception that this encroaches on the role and functions of other agencies and core institutions;

12. There are instances of significant overlap in membership between the FRC and other key institutions;

13. There might be further attention paid by the Welfare Reform process to inter-agency relations in general and in particular, to the school, hospital and council;

14. In two of the communities (at least) the Commissioners seem to have a representative function – representing their 'clan' (or 'tribe'); while this underlying structure remains there is a movement – self-perceived in at least one case – towards a more 'professional' role, in other words, operating on a community-wide basis and irrespective of family or other networks;

15. This points to a contradiction in the structuring of the Commission: are the Commissioners intended to represent their 'families' or are they meant to stand as generally recognised authority figures or figures recognised as 'community leaders'?

16. If the Commissioners are to be thought of as more professionally oriented, what additional skill sets may they require - not forgetting that it may be important to recognise fully their existing skills and knowledges; and how are their relationships with other agencies to be structured/developed and nurtured without recreating the divide within agencies (and community councils) between staff (professionally conceived and consisting largely of non-locals) and residential 'Aboriginal representatives' or facilitators;

17. In the case of the FRC, it is easy to conclude that the indigenous Commissioners are essential to its operation (though in one case there is a view that the Commissioners should not be locals but drawn from other communities). Yet does the same situation apply in relation to other agencies – where local residents seem fairly much to occupy an adjunct role and to service the 'professional' staff?

18. The issue of gambling was only raised once directly, and on that occasion specifically as a problem. Whether gambling as an activity is a problem or whether it is not more useful to consider the issue of problem gamblers is hard to say. Our own view would be that gambling is a widespread and complex phenomenon – deserving of more systematic consideration. Most attention seems to focus on community-based gambling – and the almost axiomatic view that it operates as a sort of banking/re-cycling mechanism. There is less attention to what we might call institutional or mainstream gambling in the guise of the TAB (in Cooktown, Port Douglas and Cairns) or the Casino in Cairns. This may be because these institutions are accessed by the 'people of influence'. There is a

definite 'class' aspect to gambling and the specific forms it takes. How it relates to the issue of welfare reform and to what is considered proper or improper behaviour is at this time an open question.

19. On several occasions the issue of 'Aboriginal ingenuity' was raised – often in a mock humorous way - by non-indigenous operatives or commentators. These remarks focussed on the various techniques people had devised for scamming the BasicsCard, including illegal use of other people's cards, and for getting advances against bills (telephone bills were cited as a case in question).

20. There is a serious aspect to this apart from the obvious illegality of certain 'ruses' – and that is the capacity of well-intentioned welfare reforms to extend zones of criminality. It is easily argued that not only are Aboriginal people over-represented in relation to appearances before the criminal justice system but are at high risk of being constituted virtually as a criminal class. Part of welfare reform might be to concentrate on ways of de-criminalising the Aboriginal life world. Therefore, there are powerful reasons for considering the 'criminal potential' of any reform or intervention. A simple example is that of grog-running which regularly follows the imposition of interdictions against the introduction of alcohol into 'dry' communities. One commentator noted that having a criminal record limited life options - and therefore the importance of creating mechanisms which did not encourage an 'easy' criminality or the too ready acquisition of a criminal reputation.