

**REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS BEFORE**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL ISSUES**

**INQUIRY INTO OVERCOMING  
INDIGENOUS DISADVANTAGE  
IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

---

**At Dubbo on Wednesday 12 March 2008**

---

**The Committee met at 8.45 a.m.**

---

**PRESENT**

The Hon. I. W. West (Chair)

The Hon. G. J. Donnelly

The Hon. M. A. Ficarra

Dr J. Kaye

The Hon. T. J. Khan

The Hon. M. S. Veitch

**CHAIR:** Thank you for being with us this morning. We are grateful for the opportunity of being in Wiradjuri country and we are grateful to have elders of the Wiradjuri people here to welcome us to their country. It is with great pleasure that I ask Russell Ryan to welcome us to country.

**Mr RYAN:** I am one of the elders, as are John and Ray Packham. It is good to be able to come here and talk to you. This Standing Committee on Social Issues is about bringing people together—Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people—and looking at reconciliation. It is a good thing and I think it should happen. It should have happened a long time ago. Without further ado, on behalf of the Wiradjuri people of the land in Dubbo, I take this opportunity to welcome you. Thank you very much for your time and patience. I ask everyone to stand for a minute's silence.

*Members, officers and witness stood in their places.*

**CHAIR:** Thank you for that, Russell. On behalf of the Committee I acknowledge that we are meeting on Wiradjuri land and we pay our respects to elders, past and present. Today is the fifth day of the hearings of the inquiry into overcoming indigenous disadvantage. We have been meeting on Gadigal land, Dharug land, Dunghutti land, and now Wiradjuri land. Today the Committee will be hearing from representatives of the Dubbo Local Aboriginal Land Council and representatives of the Council of Australian Governments [COAG] to talk about issues affecting indigenous people in the Dubbo area.

This afternoon the Committee will visit the Aboriginal Employment Strategy offices to hear about employment programs for Aboriginal people. I again acknowledge that we are meeting on Wiradjuri land. In reporting the proceedings of this Committee members of the media must take responsibility for how they publish and interpret anything that is said before this Committee.

**TONY SUTHERLAND**, Director, Western Zone, New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council, PO Box 273, Dubbo, and

**STEPHEN JOHN RYAN**, Councillor, Central Region, New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council, Bultje Street, Dubbo, affirmed and examined:

**CHAIR:** Thank you for being with us.

**Mr RYAN:** On behalf of our people I sincerely welcome you to our country. I am the New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council [NSWALC] councillor for this region, which takes in 10 communities in the areas going as far down as Nyngan, Quambone, Gulargambone, Wellington and Dubbo. I was mandated or voted in by the membership of the land council in May to represent them at local, regional and State level. Our role is to advocate on behalf of local land councils at all levels, to assist them wherever possible, to maintain communication between NSWALC, the administrative arm and the local community to try to ensure that we receive the benefits we were supposed to get out of the Aboriginal Land Rights Act—the State Government's form of compensation for our dispossession in New South Wales. We try to ensure that we, and generations to come, receive some worthwhile benefits. I am only too pleased to see you here today. I hope that NSWALC, this Committee and all governments can work together to try to ensure that we close the gaps.

**CHAIR:** Thanks, Stephen.

**Mr SUTHERLAND:** I am the director of the western zone of the New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council. We provide support services and advice and ensure that local Aboriginal land councils comply with the requirements of the Aboriginal Land Rights Act. The areas that I take in include the central region. Councillor Ryan just referred to some of the towns in that region. However, my region includes the western region and the north-west region. Basically, the area covers Balranald down south, past Dareton to Broken Hill, Tibooburra, Wilcannia, Bourke, round through Brewarrina, Goodooga and up to Mungindi, Toomelah and back down round Moree, out to Mudgee and Wellington and back to Dubbo. It is about 75 per cent of the State, which is a large part of the State. We have 37 land councils that are geographically dispersed. They come from very small and sometimes struggling communities.

**The Hon. MICHAEL VEITCH:** I want to gather your thoughts on the shared responsibility agreements. Could you advise the Committee what involvement you had with the shared responsibility agreements? Could you then tell us what you think are the good and bad things about it?

**Mr SUTHERLAND:** Because this is such an important Committee, and the information that you gather hopefully will produce some good outcomes, I compiled answers to some of the questions as I did not want to forget anything. The answer to that question is that the New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council has not had any formal involvement in the shared responsibility agreements. The reason for that is fairly simple. The Howard Government had a strict policy of not involving any Aboriginal representative bodies in its dealings with local Aboriginal communities. NSWALC and local Aboriginal land councils [LALCs] are elected Aboriginal representative organisations.

I note, however, that the Liberal Party, The Nationals and minor parties in New South Wales have always supported Aboriginal representative bodies through the Aboriginal Land Rights Act in this State, as demonstrated in the most recent significant amendments that are now batted down. The picture at the national level is looking bright with the Rudd Government seeking to engage the Federal Opposition in a bipartisan approach through the proposed joint national policy commission to look at a range of matters with the initial emphasis on housing. We have yet to see the shape and structure of that commission, but we are hopeful that politics can be put aside in the interests of improving the wellbeing of our people.

I wish to comment on the success and failure of the shared responsibility agreements. We understand that the Federal Government publishes the results of all shared responsibility agreements around Australia. Given our non-involvement, that is a question that you should probably put to some of those people who participated in them.

**Mr RYAN:** I have been involved and I am still involved in rolling out shared responsibility agreements in Dubbo, but not as a State councillor or as a past chairperson of the Dubbo Local Aboriginal Land Council. Our working party unlike the Murdi Paaki working party are made up of indigenous language groups in this town. We are trying to make sure that everyone from the 10 different language groups that have come to Dubbo has a seat at a table when we are negotiating with the Government. What do shared responsibility agreements mean to me? Yesterday we had a working party meeting where we spoke about the lack of feedback from the Indigenous Coordination Centre [ICC], the council, the Department of Housing, and whoever else benefited—all the partners in the shared responsibility agreements to the Aboriginal working party.

We are advocates on behalf of the Dubbo community and we signed off on them, but we are not getting any feedback. To me a lot of good Aboriginal money is going unchecked, which is what happened in the past. Working parties are a good concept. The local land councils were not officially part of the signing, but they were represented by the Dubbo community working party. So far as our community benefiting is concerned, we have two ovals in Dubbo. I presume that that is a benefit. But the Aboriginal people of west Dubbo will not be able to use those ovals, or they will be using them less, given that the community regeneration program saw west Dubbo close down. Council has a good oval there for anyone who moves into west Dubbo and takes our place. There are some good things.

Given that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission [ATSIC] is no longer there, the Aboriginal dollars that are supposed to be benefiting communities must be rolled out somehow. I am just not sure whether there is enough knowledge, or that sufficient outcomes or measures have been put in place to try to ensure that those dollars are benefiting the people they were intended to benefit.

**The Hon. MICHAEL VEITCH:** You mentioned the demise of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission [ATSIC].

**Mr RYAN:** Yes.

**The Hon. MICHAEL VEITCH:** Do you think there should be some other process to replace ATSIC?

**Mr RYAN:** It must be an Aboriginal watchdog of some sort. ATSIC had its faults but at a national level we had someone who could at least advise the Federal Government and down to local government on what we need out here. At the moment, without them, we are like a ship without a captain. Some individuals brought about its demise, but there has to be something. The problem with any community is that there are million dollars worth of resources everywhere, but we have overlaps here and there and many people are still falling through the gaps.

In the end, ATSIC started developing some good policies. Violence prevention was a good national policy, but unfortunately it was never signed off. I am biased because I was a councillor for the region. But we had never had time to work up some of those policies. There needs to be something to replace ATSIC. Let us learn from past mistakes to get it right. I know the Rudd Government and the State Government truly want to work with us. We have to have something at the national level that we can kick it up to and have things flowing down. The Howard Government did what it pleased with regard to who it listened to.

**Mr SUTHERLAND:** This is another question that I prepared a response to. I know it is a bit formal, but please bear with me. The simple answer is yes. Many Aboriginal people spent many years calling for ATSIC to become a body like the Senate estimates committees, which hold the Federal Government accountable. We know that the Rudd Government's policy platform clearly commits it to establishing a national representative body that will hold the Government accountable, not the other way around. This clearly implies that the Rudd Government model for a national representative body will not be the same as ATSIC in the sense that it will not have any service delivery functions. We would see it having a similar role to the Senate estimates process for Aboriginal people and representative organisations. They will be able to find out how and why money is being allocated for specific services and set benchmarks and ultimate outcomes. Clearly, the Rudd Government must consult Aboriginal people about what that body would look like and would have to take account of the

fact that New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council and the land rights system in New South Wales already has a representative structure.

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** I understand that you are appointed by the chief executive officer or the director general.

**Mr SUTHERLAND:** That is true.

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** Can you describe your function or what you do?

**Mr SUTHERLAND:** We are the administrative arm of the New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council. First, we must implement the corporate plan for the council. In simple terms, we provide support to 37 land councils. We provide advice to those land councils on how they should be conducting their business in regard to their responsibilities under the Aboriginal Land Rights Act. We also check that they are complying with the requirements of those functions.

It is a difficult job. We are dealing with some very small land councils. In many cases their capacity to fulfil the requirements is very low. They are little communities and many people have left. The people living there have not achieved high educational outcomes and their experience in the workforce is very limited. There is the pressure of making hard decisions—particularly with regard to housing—where they have direct relations with their family. It can be divisive in the community. There are many difficulties we have to confront in undertaking our role. Not the least is that we have a huge geographical area to cover and we do not have many staff. In a nutshell, we provide support, advice and compliance functions.

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** We heard yesterday about the effects of non-compliance in terms of the stopping of funding for land councils. In your area, of the 37 councils, how many would be non-compliant at any one time?

**Mr SUTHERLAND:** A significant number of our land councils are non-compliant largely because of lack of capacity in the towns. About 50 per cent would probably fall into the unfunded category because of non-compliance. Sometimes the Act prescribes there are certain things we have to do in ceasing funding or taking other action with land councils that do not comply. Sometimes it is difficult. They have a certain date when things have to be done. If reports are not furnished by that date, there is an automatic generation of a breach that could lead to that land council being unfunded. However, sometimes the responsibility for providing those reports lies with a third party. The legislation does not take that into account. Sometimes land councils are penalised because third parties are not providing information.

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** Some of those land councils might be non-compliant for a week or a month, but that is fixed.

**Mr SUTHERLAND:** Yes. However, in some cases it is a little bit too high. But it does get fixed. We have a really good system where we do case management with those land councils. Every land council is audited once a year and that highlights its weaknesses and strengths and things that need to be corrected. In the Western Zone, we do a mini audit four times a year to take early intervention action to prevent those things from happening and to keep the land councils in compliance mode.

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** How many of the 37 land councils would provide housing?

**Mr SUTHERLAND:** I would suggest possibly 31 or 32. It is probably one of the biggest functions for land councils.

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** Does the Aboriginal Housing Office provide housing in this area?

**Mr SUTHERLAND:** Yes.

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** To an extent the Department of Housing would be providing housing.

**Mr SUTHERLAND:** Yes.

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** So 32 of the land councils provide housing.

**Mr SUTHERLAND:** Yes.

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** Are there other organisations providing community housing here as well?

**Mr SUTHERLAND:** We have organisations within the Department of Housing and the Office of Community Housing and private rental.

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** If we talk in terms of community housing—

**Mr SUTHERLAND:** The vast majority is provided by the Aboriginal Housing Office and the Aboriginal land councils.

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** You might have alluded to this already. Are there providers of community housing that are too small to efficiently provide that housing?

**Mr SUTHERLAND:** The land councils or external providers?

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** I want to leave it open.

**Mr SUTHERLAND:** That is an area that the New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council is currently looking into—that is, the viability of the continued provision of housing and the size that a housing company needs to be to ensure viability. If you open that to private practice that is how things flow out. With some of these housing companies, they need numbers to be viable. A small housing company that has very few houses to look after—about 20, 30 or 60—will not be a viable organisation simply because they need economies of scale. At some stage there is going to have to be some type of rollout of a housing model that accommodates land councils and deals with the provision of housing that those land councils are becoming involved in and wanting. The Act suggests that all incomings—rents and so on—have to meet all outgoings. Those rents have to be set at a certain level. To do that with Aboriginal housing is very difficult.

**The Hon. MARIE FICARRA:** You talked about non-compliance of some of the local land councils. Are you providing governance and compliance training to rectify that in the short and long term?

**Mr SUTHERLAND:** Very much so. The New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council has just elected its board. All the land councils are going through local elections now to elect boards. The New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council is currently in the process of rolling out governance training to every board member. We may miss some because of work and family commitments. However, a process will be put in place to catch those people who fall through the first round.

The council also has responsibility to implement community and land business plans to ensure that land councils are focused on core business. Training is being rolled out to local land councils covering what is required in those plans and how to put them together or to work with a consultant in putting that plan together and implementing it. In saying that, our zone office will be supporting the development, monitoring and implementation of those plans.

**The Hon. MARIE FICARRA:** Perhaps Councillor Ryan might like to comment.

**Mr RYAN:** About governance in our communities?

**The Hon. MARIE FICARRA:** How do you feel it is going to be a help to you in your operations?

**Mr RYAN:** Governance in any community—whether it is our community, your community or any other community—is always necessary. We were working on governance and capacity building within our communities before we were required to do it under the Land Rights Act. Every man and his Mirrigan is running governance courses and getting government funding. Whether they are actually building governance is another question. We certainly have, and always will, look at the capacity requirements of our communities and try build up their governance. A lot of land council personnel have taken it upon themselves to join up with these Mickey Mouse courses—some are not Mickey Mouse; they might be Donald Duck courses.

Mr Khan raised the housing question. Housing management is bogging down the Land Rights Act. Viability can come in any shape or size. You can have one house and still be viable. We know that big is better, so we are trying to encourage bigger organisations. The main housing provider for Aboriginal people in New South Wales is the Department of Housing, not land councils. They have done a woeful job. They have totally inappropriately and woefully created ghettos. There is West Dubbo, Bathurst and so on. We have the capacity and the knowledge to ensure that our people are housed in a culturally appropriate way, not in the Redferns, Everley Streets, or West Dubbos. It is about choice. With regard to non-compliance, do we have an administrator in the Western Zone?

**Mr SUTHERLAND:** No.

**Mr RYAN:** Not one. You can get non-compliance for not dotting an I or crossing a T. That speaks for itself. That land council system does not have an administrator in the Western Zone. We know housing is an issue, but I have not seen one profit-making social housing provider yet. That is what social housing is about. We are relying on government funds. Mr Mal Brough, in his wisdom, took \$16 million out of New South Wales and has thrown a spanner in the Aboriginal housing works.

We are hoping that you or this Government can put enough pressure on the Federal Government to try to ensure that the word "remote" defined by the Commonwealth is not going to discriminate against the Aboriginal community in New South Wales. According to the Government's definition, we do not have a remote community, therefore, we are not entitled to any of the chip money that we have been relying on rebuilding community after community because the Government got it wrong in the first place. So, they should not penalise us.

The other issue we have got is that a lot of our housing stock, if you like, was inherited. They were former Aboriginal reserves where the Government put us against our will. We were living in shoeboxes made of fibro, asbestosis and God knows what. We inherited them in 1983 under the land council system. But we inherited also the lack of facilities: water, power and sewerage. Some people would say it is an inherent basic right to have those. We are still catching up on that. Mr Brough or the previous Commonwealth Government pulling out our ACDP money or stopping that, there is no way we are going to be able to get on top of making sure that the infrastructure on Aboriginal reserves is fixed up to an adequate state. There is also the problem of who is going to maintain the system once they are put in? Councils will come to the gate of the Aboriginal reserve and say, "That's where our responsibility stops, even though we're paying your rates" in a big way.

So, something has to give soon or we are going to have to turn around and keep replacing millions of dollars that have been spent on infrastructure. A lot of our reserve communities have not got individual water meters. How do we make them pay for that in their rent. Some of the houses are still third-world country standards, as are the services. I am hoping that with the Labor Government at both Federal and State levels we can start doing deals with the land council, with whoever else and the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and try to fix the basic human rights that our people are being deprived of in the reserves—communities that this Government in all its wisdom created.

**The Hon. MARIE FICARRA:** I thank Councillor Ryan for his comments. It is good feedback we have heard as we have been travelling around. I know you have problems with health, housing, education and various other major things. You just talked about housing infrastructure. What do you see as the prime challenge in this area as a local land councillor? Could Tony then answer that on a broader scale? What should we be focusing on in this region?

**Mr RYAN:** I think it is the attitude of the non-Aboriginal people. For 220 years when you first landed—not you necessarily; I can tell you are not of English origin—all they did was tread us into the ground. We are still being trod into the ground. Let us hope that "sorry" the other week might change things. But that is the main thing. We are not being given a fair go. And this Closing the Gap, well, I hope you are able to close the gap through this inquiry. But it is about attitudinal change. I admit a lot of attitudes have changed, but you convinced us back then that we are worthless, that we will not work. But when we step up to the plate for a job or to get educated, you are not educating us in a way where we understand how it fits in with the big picture.

Millions of dollars being thrown around in our communities, but we are all running off in different directions. We are not being coordinated. We are not talking to one another. It is a communication thing. A lot of it is to do with the attitude that I am carrying around in my head. Some people might say I am a racist. So I will not stop and talk to a non-Aboriginal person, unless I have to. But I am willing to accept the "Sorry" and move on, as is the rest of the land council network. Poor old Tony is like this: he has got a carrot in one hand, a stick in the other. He has got a gunjabul on one hand and a mudge on the other. So, that is a bit confusing.

**The Hon. MARIE FICARRA:** Where do you see the major needs for your larger western zone?

**Mr SUTHERLAND:** Can I just relate a conversation I had with a mate of mine the other day about this? You just kind of notice it, like government and things like that, they are coming out and saying, "What is it that we can do in little country towns to provide development opportunities, to increase employment" and so on. I kind of said to him, "Mate, well, we had it. We had that 20 years ago". This is a conversation I had the other day. I said, "20 years ago in Gilgandra"—I come from Gilgandra about 65ks down the road. We would rock up to football training. We would have three sides. We would have a first grade, reserve grade and juniors. The rugby union had the same. If you did not turn up for training you did not even get a spot on the bench, we had that many numbers. And as a result, over the last 20 years we are lucky to scrape up one side out home now.

But the problem is there are things that we probably cannot change. It is a result of localisation, government restructuring, improvements in information technology and stuff like that that things have changed. Previous to that we had four major banks out home that were always putting on trainees, we had a railway system operating, we had the forestry operating, we had a timber industry. I know there are environmental things in that, but we had all of this stuff. Our communities were vibrant. Our farming industry is thriving and as a result of all of these changes our communities now are dying.

Like, our young people are leaving in droves. They have to: we are becoming like aged care communities. How we roll that back I do not know, but if that is having a problem with the general community, it is having a significantly worse problem in the Aboriginal community because whilst we had that in place initially, we were still struggling to get engaged. Now it is even more difficult to get engaged because the competition is even stronger. So, if I can relate that back, the simple answer is getting out of poverty and that is just extremely hard to do.

**Mr RYAN:** Just on that, we cannot, unlike governments, separate health from housing from education from the rest. I know governments have got to, but it is the coordination of all those services. It is fine for me to have a job and then I might be dressing properly, but if I have not got a feed at home or if I am going through a drug and alcohol addiction, what is the good of me having a job? I am only feeding my habits. What is the good of this kid going to school of a morning? When he gets to school he is not being taught; he is out there changing the sprinklers because the mayor's son needs teaching ahead of him. But then he comes home to a house that is not a home. The bigger picture stuff is more coordination. We know there a lot of resources there already, but if we start talking to one another, working in partnership, like the SRAs are supposed to do I think we will find some improvement. The dole will not solve everything. Starting to listen to what we need and how we might fix it, not you come along and fix it for us. But that is the bigger picture.

**CHAIR:** Councillor Ryan, could you expand on the word you used earlier, "choice" regarding housing?



**Mr RYAN:** Choice of location or type of housing?

**CHAIR:** You indicated that what was going on here with the type of housing one of the big things you did not have was choice?

**Mr RYAN:** I am originally from Dubbo. We did not have many choices. A lot of the communities come from other language groups, a lot of the Aboriginal community in Dubbo now. They had a choice to move to Dubbo; it was not a forced settlement. If they wanted access to health, decent education and to a job, they were encouraged to move to Dubbo. They did not have many choices where they were located in Dubbo. They put us all in specific low-income areas, if you like. That just inflamed the problem. They presumed we were black so we will live next door to one another and be happy. But they were not taking into account no, just because we are black does not mean we still have the same cultural teachings. When they closed down west Dubbo there was no choice; you were out of there.

Maybe the Aboriginal community brought some of this on themselves, but we have to go into the history of how we ended up in there. We do have some choices. We have choice of housing providers. We have DOH, private rental or the land council or Aboriginal housing system. We have a few choices. With the real estate agents there is not much choice there for us. If we do happen to fluke a private home, it is the cost factor that is involved. But DOH does not give our people many choices. The land council can only buy in specific areas with the amount of money. It might seem like Aboriginals have got a lot of choices, but we have not, when you look at it.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** The employment issue and opportunities presented to us by witnesses over the various hearings have been important in looking to the future for Aboriginals. What continues to strike us as we travel around is that witnesses have been saying that inside the towns—they may not necessarily be a big regional town, even some of the bigger ones—you can go into the big businesses, big retail businesses, other service providers and virtually see no Aboriginals at all even though they live either in that community or are associated with that community. That leads us to conclude that there is this unclear but nonetheless present reluctance to employ Aboriginal people. I gather that is the same in Dubbo as well?

**Mr RYAN:** Absolutely.

**DONNELLY:** What is your view about what more we can do to encourage employers to not hold this reservation of employing Aboriginal people, particularly young Aboriginal people, in the service industries to give them a start, to give them a go? Clearly, the reluctance is out there. It is unspoken, it probably is not even conceded but it is there. Surely it is something we can try to break down over time?

**Mr RYAN:** Yes. I think Dubbo is no different to Kempsey or Wilcannia even. You will not find many Aboriginal people sitting in the shops or managing the shops. Even though you go to the AES this arvo, they will tell you we are doing our best. There are that many employment dollars in communities now for Aboriginal people, it is shameful to note exactly how many Aboriginal people are actually employed. We have got job network providers hanging out of our ears, if you like, that are going through the motions of finding positive work for us. The economic environment does not allow for a lot of the employment today, but let us hope that picks up. Coordination I suppose of the employment dollar going into the training. It goes back to how the teacher taught us in school. The withdrawal of CDEP across this nation will take away any bridges or burn the bridges we have been trying to build over the years to bridge the gap to try to persuade businesses to give Aboriginal people a go, whether they are young or old—it is an attitude thing again of business owners.

Mr Lynch is talking about Job Compacts, which is a good initiative. We have had these specific employment programs in rural areas for years. It is fine while the heat is on, but when the media stops, the promotion and that sort of stuff, you will see the number of Aboriginals dwindle. I know in Dubbo there were three businesses that said they would point blank not even sign the Job Compacts agreement to just try to take on an Aboriginal person. That is not too bad; I suppose that is 3 out of 20 that said they would sign an agreement to say, yes, we will look at employing Aboriginal people. If CDEP and all the other employment training dollars are used properly in the future, we can make it worthwhile for businesses to give our people a go. That is the employment area and training

policy under the Howard Government. Let us hope it changes now. If CDEP use it properly—I know a lot of our communities did not use it properly—I know you are talking to Birrang and the others, if you find out first where all those dollars are, let our people know and perhaps get a better stage of utilising all the dollars, then we might get a bit further. We need to try to step up our education outcomes so we are confident enough to put in for the job. There are a lot of issues and employment is only one of them. Everything impacts on everything else.

**Dr JOHN KAYE:** I will pick up on the Hon. Greg Donnelly's comments and address my first question to you, Mr Sutherland. I would like you to give us the benefit of your imaginative powers and look forward 20 years to an optimistic future for employment opportunities and economic development for the communities in the area that your land council serves. What do you see as the best-case scenario? What sorts of sustainable economic activities will generate jobs and community wealth? I am not talking about jobs in the traditional sense that allow us to define community wealth in a different way; I am talking about jobs that will allow for sustainable development within these communities.

**Mr SUTHERLAND:** I guess it depends on how we define the word "sustainable". Are we talking about the financial sustainability of some of these communities with economic enterprises? If that were possible in a lot of these communities it would have already been done.

**Dr JOHN KAYE:** I meant socially sustainable—I should have been clear—to sustain societies, to keep young people in society and to give society the dynamism that a complete age profile would bring.

**Mr SUTHERLAND:** As I was suggesting, a lot of our communities are small and isolated and that is particularly the case in relation to our land councils. We are trying to refocus land council onto the core business of land councils, which is going back into culture re-identification, getting involved in culture, land acquisition, the preservation of traditional sites and things like that. I believe there is huge scope. Some of our communities—and I include myself in this equation—have to get re-identified with our culture. We have to start looking at the important things. There is scope in those communities because traditionally land has been so important.

We have organisations such as the Catchment Management Authority, National Parks and Wildlife, and all those types of areas. We must engage our people in the things that are important to them, which include the preservation of land and the preservation of our culture. We must try to combine the economic and employment type things and get a good fit. Hopefully we will get some good outcomes, but in paying for that I cannot see how it will generate anything. There would be no self-generating income; it would not pay for itself.

One of the outcomes would be that fewer and fewer of our young people would be imitating foreign cultures. It is so distant from our Aboriginal culture that it is not funny. Young people are adopting foreign cultures, as are many people in mainstream society. I believe that in some of the towns in western New South Wales we have an opportunity to re-identify people, enable them to work in the environment, and encourage them to start doing some environmental protection.

**Dr JOHN KAYE:** Earlier Councillor Ryan and you said that young people were leaving the areas around Dubbo. Do you know where they are going and what befalls them when they leave?

**Mr SUTHERLAND:** I will speak in general terms. Overall, young people are not just leaving Dubbo. Dubbo might be somewhat luckier than other towns, as we have universities, base hospitals and employment opportunities. Young people are leaving other towns as there is no employment for them. A lot of them are going on to jobs. Where I come from I noticed that a lot of young fellas are going into the Army or into the armed services, and quite a few are going away to universities. However, in the Aboriginal community, the flow out of the community is not as great as in the non-Aboriginal community.

Aboriginal kids are still fairly strongly attached to their families and they are reluctant to leave. Some do, and they go on to great things and they do very well. A lot of times they will try to come back. But our people are not leaving anywhere near as much as the non-Aboriginal population. When they remain in these communities there is not much there for them.

**Dr JOHN KAYE:** Councillor Ryan, you made what I believe to be an important observation. When someone asked you what you saw as being the most important thing you said that it was engagement by non-Aboriginal communities with Aboriginal communities—people talking to each other—which I think is an important issue. From a State Government level how should we encourage that to happen? What things could be done at a policy level to cause that to happen?

**Mr RYAN:** Let me correct that statement. I do not think I said that our young people were leaving the community, unless I touched on the fact that a lot of them were going to jail. But I never said that. What was your question?

**Dr JOHN KAYE:** How do we get non-Aboriginal people to acknowledge Aboriginal people, their culture and their validity?

**Mr RYAN:** What we have to do is have a learning experience, not only for your community but also for our younger people on who we are and what we are. As I said, in the past if you were black that was it. If you were black you were Aboriginal. You never bothered to dig any deeper, or you were not told that just because you were black it did not mean that you were Wiradjuri. You need to understand where we are coming from. I suppose that we are asking for empathy and we will try to empathise with you. It is about trying to understand one another and the difficulties that we all face. It is as simple as that. That will come about from awareness and education—not necessarily institutional education.

You need to find out what works, what does not, and who we are. Many of us are still carrying a lot of grief over what happened in the past. But you have said sorry now so we are over that. We are able to move on but you should try to work out who we are. We are individuals, families, communities, language groups, and the Aboriginal nation, if you like, of the Australian nation. We are also part of this country. We are an integral part of this country because we are caretakers. The outcomes that I see—we have already started talking about it in the Murdi Paaki area—are natural resources. We are caretaking them. We need to participate more in the timber industry and the meatworks industry.

We do not have a very good track record in the agricultural industry because, as Captain Cook said, we were not farming the land with tractors when he first came here, therefore terra nullus kicked in. That seems to have been proved wrong. We are caretaking those natural resources on behalf of Mother Earth. Let us participate in the enjoyment that comes out of those natural resources, which is culturally appropriate. We might then see a resurgence in our positive feelings towards ourselves as Aboriginal people in this country.

**CHAIR:** Thank you very much. Unfortunately, as we have run out of time we will ask Tony to submit to us any other written information that he might have. We appreciate you giving us the wealth of your knowledge and experience, which are extremely impressive. I only hope that we can engage with you again in the near future. Our interim report is due at the end of June and our final report is due at the end of the year, so we will seek your good services for future reference.

**Mr RYAN:** I think most land council people have said at all your hearings that we are only too willing to work with any governments to improve the lot of our people. Amendments to the Land Rights (New South Wales) Act now mean that we do not only look after members of land councils; we are also responsible for the Aboriginal communities. Thank you.

(The witnesses withdrew)

**CRAIG TOOLE**, Operations Manager, Strategic Operations, Birrang Enterprise Development Company, 9 Colliers Avenue, Orange, affirmed and examined:

**CHAIR:** Would you like to make some opening comments before we go to questions?

**Mr TOOLE:** Birrang Enterprise Development Company is a community development employment project [CDEP] provider that basically covers the Binal Billa area of New South Wales. I acknowledge the traditional owners and custodians of the land as the first people of this country. I am ready to answer questions.

**The Hon. MARIE FICARRA:** Could you tell us what are the objectives of the program? What do you do and what do you deliver in the local area?

**Mr TOOLE:** Birrang is a CDEP provider that uses host employment. We solely do the host employment side of things, whereby we actively seek out businesses and introduce them to indigenous participants we have who are willing to work in areas. We try to match the host business with the participant who has a definite interest and a willingness to work in that industry. We combine the two. We use the CDEP program, which offers 15 hours of work, and we put that person into a job and the CDEP pays the wages.

**The Hon. MARIE FICARRA:** What has been the success rate? How long have you been going?

**Mr TOOLE:** Birrang has been going since 2003. We have covered different areas and we have slowly gone from Griffith into Orange. We have seven field officers, five of whom are straight through the CDEP program covering areas out to Balranald, up here near Dubbo, down to Tumut and across to Lithgow. Two New Careers for Aboriginal People [NCAP] officers who are under our auspices basically cover the north and south of New South Wales.

**The Hon. MARIE FICARRA:** Realistically, what sorts of feelings did you find in the community when you started? How has it progressed over time? Has there been acceptance and participation?

**Mr TOOLE:** I think there is a definite need for a CDEP, especially in smaller areas as was referred to by previous speakers, where there is not a large labour market. The CDEP offers people an opportunity to gain skills and develop ideas where there might be none. If we are looking at that side of things there is development in that area. As has been said, there is fragmentation in the job market. There are a number of different providers and different ideas. The CDEP has changed and it has been changed, which is a good thing. But the thing is that it has existed and it is the focal point of a lot of indigenous communities as a job area, as somewhere they can look at work. They feel comfortable with the Community Development Employment Project [CDEP] program and the ideas it puts forward.

**The Hon. MARIE FICARRA:** What about the community acceptance of what you are trying to do and the success rate of indigenous people?

**Mr TOOLE:** There is an increasing acceptance from businesses. We continually work on it and strive to bring into play the fact that there is a huge pocket of people who are disadvantaged, who need jobs and who are willing to work. Getting that message across can be hard. We sometimes see ourselves as salespeople. We are continually plodding along trying to get that person into a position and to get the host employers to understand that there is a market and there are people willing to work. It does take time. But in the past eight months we have had 87 employment outcomes, which is full-time work. Our target was 70, so we are at 124 per cent of our target at the moment. The system works and it achieves results.

**The Hon. MARIE FICARRA:** Have any particular areas been most successful?

**Mr TOOLE:** In a lot of areas you can say there are standardised areas of work. Traditionally male indigenous people like working outdoors. There is still a lot of that. We have a lot of situations

where people say, "I want to work outdoors. I like gardening and building." Our idea—and it has been touched upon here—is that we want to get Aboriginal faces into big banks, post offices and regular retail stores on a continual basis, not just one-off. When we highlight that, big banks say they have a national program. You then read the fine print and there are 35 jobs available across Australia. There is that big gap. Instead of targeting smaller branches and towns, we are going to the head office, the corporate end and pushing the program to them and saying, "Get involved. This is what we can do and offer." As the previous speakers said, there are a lot of programs and resources that can be utilised. It is a matter of bringing them together and putting them together as a solid object so that people can see where we can go.

**The Hon. MARIE FICARRA:** Are you using your relationship with elders to encourage younger people to participate in the program?

**Mr TOOLE:** Yes, it happens on a regular basis. We sometimes even have father and son who are both working through the CDEP program. We have fathers who bring their sons in at 18 years old and say, "Join up; they will find you something." There is an understanding: The CDEP has changed; its focus is more on job orientation. It is focused on getting away from community activities. That is not putting down the fact that they play a necessary part in communities out west—remote area communities. We still need something that makes people come to work and gets them ready and skilled without pushing them out of their area or country for the sake of having to get a job.

**Dr JOHN KAYE:** Can you tell us about the range of things you do? Is it purely taking people and slotting them into existing employment opportunities or are you also trying develop Aboriginal entrepreneurial skills?

**Mr TOOLE:** There is a lot of job readiness and job preparation training. That is coming together with job networks and training providers to get people skilled up. We try to develop their skills in an area they want. We get someone coming in wanting to be a welder and we look at how we can do that. If you look at a 20-year aim, our aim is for that person to start their business. It is not a cut off. We have things like the New Careers for Aboriginal People Program. There is mentoring right through the process. Looking at the big picture, that is the idea; that is, not only develop the person and the job skills, but also that person's ability to work for themselves and start their own business and go back to their community as a source of employment.

Business development is part of any CDEP, again in partnership with other bodies that are out there to develop a business plan having had someone come through the program. There is the example of a young fella who has a mowing business and \$85,000 worth of contracts. He started mowing on a CDEP program. He was given the idea and the money came along and he has now bought a small business and turned it into something large. It does happen. I know a lot of communities with other CDEPs where they have developed businesses that did not exist. Warren has a recycling business that came about through the CDEP and collecting recycling. Visy got on board and turned it into a business. It does happen and that is the big picture.

**Dr JOHN KAYE:** I refer to your source of funds. Is it all CDEP money?

**Mr TOOLE:** Yes, with the exception of New Careers for Aboriginal People, which has its own funding.

**Dr JOHN KAYE:** Is that a Commonwealth Government program?

**Mr TOOLE:** State.

**Dr JOHN KAYE:** What percentage of your funds comes from CDEP?

**Mr TOOLE:** Most of our funding comes from CDEP. New Careers for Aboriginal People provides ongoing costs for the running of the program. However, it gives Birrang as the auspice. There is not a great deal in return, other than the fact that we have two mentors in our program who can go out and see people and develop jobs. They have their own networks that open up to us. Our funding is through the Department of Education, Employment and Work Relations, FaCSIA, whoever. It is based on a figure per person and the agreement we have through them.

**Dr JOHN KAYE:** Can you tell us about your success rates? How many people do you have coming through your doors a year? How many are placed in jobs and, of those who are, how many end up going on to subsequent employment beyond the CDEP program?

**Mr TOOLE:** Through our contract, we are given a number of places. Ours is 235 people. They have to be started and in a business or some form of work. We can only use businesses that are recognised and reputable. They are all basically at other work in the CDEP system to cover hours. Our system bases that on the needs of the business and the needs of the employee. That could be three hours, five days a week, two full days, or some combination. If you are looking at full-time/part-time, their full-time is part of their CDEP. Of those 235 on the books, 87 were put into employment outcomes. They are off all subsidies and all forms of payment and into the workforce. Of that, 82 per cent have full-time jobs.

**Dr JOHN KAYE:** Do you have a sense of how long they last?

**Mr TOOLE:** At the moment, 70 of those 82 have gone over 13 weeks after coming off the scheme. That is for this year only. That is where the monitoring comes in with New Careers for Aboriginal People. After they have come off, we make a quick phone call asking how the system is working and whether they are happy with the job.

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** That is 235 places you are given.

**Mr TOOLE:** Yes.

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** Who allocates those places?

**Mr TOOLE:** The Department of Education, Employment and Work Relations.

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** What area do you cover?

**Mr TOOLE:** This is where there is overlap. We cover an area from Lithgow, down towards the Victorian border, down to Balranald and up into the western New South Wales areas—Dubbo and out west to a small extent. However, there are other CDEPs in the area. We do not want to tread on anyone's feet.

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** Do you know how many CDEP places would be allocated in your area overall?

**Mr TOOLE:** No, we are not party to those figures, unfortunately.

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** Do you have any idea of the unemployed Aboriginal population in the area you service?

**Mr TOOLE:** This is the problem we have with the CDEP program. We are not allowed into certain areas because they are not deemed to be areas of great unemployment. Unfortunately, some of those areas seem to have a higher rate of Aboriginal unemployment than the employment figures give out. There is overlap. I could not guess the official figures. You can look at figures, but unofficially I believe they are much higher than it is said.

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** If more were where allocated, would you be able to ramp up the scheme assist more people?

**Mr TOOLE:** We believe we could. The system we are working on does achieve results. In a normal year we could approach the Department of Education, Employment and Work Relations and ask it to top up those figures. However, because of the change in government, all the cards are off the table at the moment. As it is, we do not know where we stand with funding after the end of this financial year.

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** So the word has been passed down the chain that there is no point in putting in for more money.

**Mr TOOLE:** I do think it has been put out, but people are giving the impression that there are changes. No-one knows what they are and no-one is willing to gamble on them. For that reason, a lot of people are telling CDEPs that it is a steady-as-you-go approach at the moment.

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** I gather there are criteria about the people you can put people through a CDEP program. Is that right?

**Mr TOOLE:** Yes.

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** What is the youngest age?

**Mr TOOLE:** The youngest age is 15. However, there are circumstances. They must be living away from home. In other words, there must be problems at home and they must be on an allowance. Our idea is to use the mentoring program to guide them back home and into schooling. We use that approach to get them back into school. We take them on rarely at that age for that reason.

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** One of the things that this Committee has heard is that unfortunately among the Aboriginal community there are many kids who have dropped out of school pretty early.

**Mr TOOLE:** Yes.

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** Certainly earlier than the general population. If you are picking up people only at 18, those kids may not have been in employment and out of education for four or five years by the time you have a go at them. Is that right?

**Mr TOOLE:** The youngest we can take them is 15. Many of them are living away from home anyway, so they can come along to that program. That is a big difference. There is a big gap. They could have been unemployed and living at home with their parents, which cuts them off from the scheme. In that case, our guidelines state that there is nothing we can do.

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** I am not being critical of you.

**Mr TOOLE:** Yes. It is something we have highlighted when we go looking at industries. Our board, our staff and our participants have highlighted school as an area that they would like to get a lot more people into. If they see that they have Aboriginal faces in the school it may get the children through a few years and difficulties. It could even be someone doing the gardening who could talk to the boys if they were having trouble at lunch time or smoko and guide them. We have actually approached a lot of schools in this area, down in Bathurst and Orange and have 45 positions that we are currently trying to fill. It is something we are trying to do that way to make sure the schooling can be a forefront of basically CDEP keeping kids in there.

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** Are you able to give us a breakdown over the past few years of the demographic you place and also the industries in which people have been placed?

**Mr TOOLE:** Yes. It is quite wide ranging and it is something we are proud of. We have beauticians, mechanics, a number of people who have started their own businesses, as in the example of the lawn mower. You have a community Yorta Yorta out past Balranald that is looking at aquaculture and certain gains there. It is every industry. We are looking at trainees, apprentices, diesel mechanics, boilermakers, beauticians. We even have one girl is into makeup and does piercings. She started her own piercing business. It is starting to get more and more a wide area of demographics. There have been builders out at Condobolin. We are starting to get that flow-on effect where it is not just one area, not just one employment option. It is starting to spread out.

**The Hon. MICHAEL VEITCH:** Earlier you said that the enterprises have to be reputable, is that right?

**Mr TOOLE:** Yes. Businesses have to be reputable.

**The Hon. MICHAEL VEITCH:** So that would rule out being a politician then! I am from Young so I know the area. Can you tell us exactly how your mentoring program operates and what contacts you have?

**Mr TOOLE:** First of all, a lot of our field staff are trained as mentors—there is only one that is not. Usually CDEP is our first contact with these members of the community. The mentoring starts from that first position where we interview them. When they are filling out the paperwork, which has to be filled out, we are talking to them—the mentoring is starting. "What are you interested in?" We find through this process that a lot of people say, "Oh, I'm interested in gardening" and then you find out that they actually are interested in admin. But it just takes dragging out because the whole idea we have is that we are selling what you want, not what you think you can get but what you really want from it—a position, a lifestyle. That is where the mentoring starts. It continues in that form.

The field officers are going out with a person to the job place, to the industry, and putting forward their case. They are helping them with things like their résumé, their dress, their confidence and just building that whole mentoring thing up. Then through our contacts and host employers we look at, okay, is there anything else. We have had a number of cases where a few of our participants have had trouble getting to work. It might be something they will not tell at first and a host employer cannot drag it out of them. We then use the mentor again just to involve that person and get them talking and find out, okay, "I don't have a car", "I don't have pushbike", "I can't get to work sometimes."

**The Hon. MICHAEL VEITCH:** Or a driver's licence?

**Mr TOOLE:** Or a driver's licence, which is a big problem. There can be things like just a regular phone call when they are at work, during their working hours, "How's it going?" A call to the host employer themselves, "How are they going?" "Oh, well, they're going well. We would like to see them develop." That is where the NCAP can come in: development, traineeships, apprenticeships, further life skills and just taking them down the whole track, whereas now with time-based CDEP they have only got the 12 months. The NCAP can continue on after that. So, they still have that background, they still have someone pushing them. You also have Job Networks that have mentoring. We utilise their services because it is a wide area. Centrelink mentors as well. There are a number of programs through BVET and things like that where they actually have mentors as well. I cannot remember the name of the program but there is another program where there are mentors. There are a lot of mentors out there. We get to the point where we would like to think they are saying, "Righto, I'm right. Can you stop turning up."

**The Hon. MICHAEL VEITCH:** I worked in a disability employment organisation for a number of years before I became a politician. A lot of mentoring we were doing was not just with individuals but with their partners or their family because a lot of the family support has to be there as well.

**Mr TOOLE:** Yes.

**The Hon. MICHAEL VEITCH:** Do you do much work with families?

**Mr TOOLE:** To a little extent. I think that is where we call on, say, for instance, Job Networks, people who can provide that better service. It may be a community mentor even through Aboriginal Medical Services [AMS], someone who they can just talk to. It may be as simple as a Centrelink contact, or Centacare. It depends on each situation. They are all unique and that is where we try to head with it. It is no use trying to fit everyone into this hole because it is not going to work.

**The Hon. MICHAEL VEITCH:** Councillor Ryan told us about the number of linguistic groups. How do you accommodate the language groups in such a broad area?

**Mr TOOLE:** It is a problem. Again by networking, the fact that our people do regular visits to those areas. They have their own series of networks, their own series of community. As Steve said, you can even get to a community where there are two groups. It is about being localised enough, I



guess, to go in there and say, "All right, this is what we can do in this case." "I don't know how we can help here. I'll speak to this person who may be able to." I think, as we were talking about, that fragmentation has to stop. There has to be an ability. There are mentors out there and probably a lot of them, but it is still very fragmented. You have that trouble of having to know the area before you can go in and make wide changes.

**The Hon. MICHAEL VEITCH:** You need Champions.

**Mr TOOLE:** Yes.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** You said you have been doing some work knocking on the doors of corporate offices trying to penetrate at that level and explain to them the work you do and some of the opportunities you are trying to create. Are you having any real success in that activity?

**Mr TOOLE:** It has been a slow process. We find a lot at the local level are happy to meet with us. You do get the occasion, and it happens quite regularly, where they say, "Oh, we can't make a decision at this level. You'll have to speak to so-and-so." We have meetings with two banks next week with their heads of indigenous employment and we are hoping that something will come of that. It is a slow process; it is getting to know the right people. As I said, there are a number of areas and when you talk to AES this afternoon, they have programs going here. One of those banks has programs in the northern part of New South Wales but not in the southern part.

We are trying to tap into that part of their operation. It could have happened earlier but it has not as yet and we are hoping that we can get in there. But there is probably a greater understanding. It is still not good enough. I still think that we do not have enough cross-cultural understanding. So you have a business and business cannot see past a dollar sign in a lot of cases. And if you look at the profits of large banks, they are in communities where there is nothing and they are reaping profits from everywhere. I think it comes back to corporations having to say, "Okay, well, we can help here. How can we help?" The CDEP offers them that without even a cost in some cases.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** The people who ultimately go on and find some permanent employment and, obviously, set some real examples in what they have been able to achieve, like the young fellow who has that decent sized lawn mowing business, are they then further engaged by yourself in any way to try to perpetuate their example amongst their peers and community—a sort of knock-on effect to try to use it as an example of what can be achieved?

**Mr TOOLE:** We do. We highlight those examples. We also try then to get them as a host business so that other participants can see, "Well, this is my boss, he's 19, he's got \$85,000 in contracts. Why can't I do this?" We try to utilise those people then as hosts, the idea being, okay, they are aware of how we work, they know the system and hopefully they can act as a business mentor to someone coming through.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** As the CDEP program operates now compared to the way it was, if you had a say, so to speak, in how it could be further refined or improved and you could make a recommendation, what would your thoughts be on that?

**Mr TOOLE:** I believe it is necessary, definitely, to be part of the system, the area, the ruralness of New South Wales. I understand the changes in the Northern Territory and it brings it more into a similar situation as New South Wales. I believe there still needs to be the smaller CDEPs with community-based activities where you do not have job markets, the idea being, okay, if we can start something up there you have the source of employment at least. You have people pulling together. You have community pride because of the projects that are community orientated. There is still that "they are community" and they are not going to leave that area. That is their country. So, it is no use trying to say, "Well, there are jobs elsewhere." It is a matter of doing what you can in those areas to keep the people getting to work, to focus on ideas, to look outside the dots at programs that could run. I believe that is a necessary part. You could not ever take that away from CDEPs. There needs to be that community or there is nothing. That is part of it.

With refining, I believe as it moves on targets will increase. I believe we can make a difference in a number of positions we get. I think it is like any business. As a business develops

looking at it from a corporate side, you move the targets; you change the feel of it to suit. Competition is a great thing and I think we need that with CDEPs, Job Networks, providers of all things because it brings out the best in people. It gets to the stage where everyone is trying to develop an idea. I think that fragmentation is one limiting factor. You have the participant as one person but it can have different offshoots. Everyone is trying to get the best. It should be more focused on that person saying, "What is your goal? What is your path?" I do not think you could change it much other than refining as you go, developing it more.

**The Hon. MARIE FICARRA:** If I were to go to a local retailer like Coles supermarket, or Woollies, or where you may have larger department retail stores in the major centres, would I see any indigenous faces?

**Mr TOOLE:** You would be lucky.

**The Hon. MARIE FICARRA:** Have we tackled these big Coles and Woollies stores that are providing the services and said, "Why aren't you employing indigenous people?"

**Mr TOOLE:** A lot of them do have Job Compacts. Again, it is one of those things like the idea of the bank with pages on their website about indigenous employment options and then in fine print there are 35 jobs across the whole of Australia. It is easy to say, "We're doing this. We're in it for the long run. We've signed this agreement. We're looking at it" and then say, "Righto, we've done our bit."

**The Hon. MARIE FICARRA:** So a bit of public pressure perhaps should be applied to those major retailers?

**Mr TOOLE:** I think from the corporate side there needs to be said, "Okay, you're making money out of these communities, you're really there taking their dollars, now put something back."

**The Hon. MARIE FICARRA:** They can train them up?

**Mr TOOLE:** Yes.

**The Hon. MICHAEL VEITCH:** Following on that very good question, this is a bit of reverse psychology, I guess, with big business. What do you think about the idea of maybe someone within that company being specifically given the job to ensure that Aboriginal people were employed? For example, rather than you going to all of these large corporations, the company actually employs someone whose specific role is to ensure that Aboriginal people are employed?

**Mr TOOLE:** A number of them have them. As I have said, banks have indigenous employment officers. For instance, the ANZ has Bruce McQualter, a very staunch and big supporter. The Aboriginal Employment Strategy [AES] will fill you in on that.

**The Hon. MICHAEL VEITCH:** Is he the indigenous person?

**Mr TOOLE:** I am not too sure. He is from Tamworth.

**The Hon. MICHAEL VEITCH:** I will not hold that against him.

**Mr TOOLE:** He was manager of the bank in Tamworth and he could see that there was this big gap. He then made moves to fix that gap through traineeships at the school. His daughter is doing medical indigenous studies at school. He travels around spruiking its benefits and he is a big supporter. Unfortunately, it is very hard to find someone of his calibre in every place. I think that is the problem. It is easy to have it as a job title and to implement it in a small way; it is difficult to run with it like he has. He has just run with it.

**The Hon. MICHAEL VEITCH:** Of the positions that are available, how many are entry level?

**Mr TOOLE:** A lot of the big companies, for instance, the ANZ, are getting into the school and using cadetship programs. At the end of year 10 they look at people who could possibly go into a career in banking. They do the Higher School Certificate [HSC] with time off for school and work, and during the holidays they are given more paid work through the bank. Of course, they are all entry level, but if you are talking about the development of a career that is where you have to start someone, especially in big business.

They do not want old people; they want people whom they can mould and get up through the ranks quite quickly. With big business I think that is one of those things that we have to change. We have to say, "All right, I can see that you want people of a certain age and of a certain calibre. We can give you some, but how about on a CDEP program you take one older person from the community and put that person in as an example so there is someone else there as well?"

**CHAIR:** Would you like to make any closing comments or suggestions to us that we can use in our recommendations and the like?

**Mr TOOLE:** Definitely. I believe that the strong changes that have been made to the CDEPs have increased their ability to deliver results. I think they are a necessary part of communities. From that point of view I think that there must be some changes with relationships. Again, I think that it is in the area of communication. Instead of one person or a group of people doing something we all have to get together and work out a strategy. We have to approach the banks as a conglomerate and say, "All across the area this is what we have. Here is an idea." We have to say to any big business, "This is what we want you to do" so we have a more united front that gets them to a point where they say, "We will lose profits if these people decide that they do not want to bank with us, shop with us or buy our products."

I think that is one area in which we can improve. I would like to think that funding would continue in its current form past the dates we have been given and that we will soon find out what is happening because we have a lot of hosts and a lot of participants who are saying, "Where are we?" We have them with quite a few businesses. With things like National Parks and Wildlife, they held a meeting in Peak Hill. They wanted us to say where this program was going. Something must come out sooner rather than later to show us the direction in which we are going.

**CHAIR:** Thank you very much for coming; we appreciate it.

(The witness withdrew)

**ANJALI PALMER**, Regional Manager, Department of Aboriginal Affairs, PO Box 26, Bourke, affirmed, and

**MARK DE WEERD**, Director, Department of Education and Workplace Relations, 17 Duke Street, Coffs Harbour, and

**LOUISE BYE**, Coordinator, School Community Partnerships, New South Wales Department of Education and Training, Level 1, 188 Macquarie Street, Dubbo, sworn and examined:

**CHAIR:** I invite you to make some brief opening comments and we will then go to questions.

**Ms PALMER:** I am here today with Mark and Louise as a member of the Council of Australian Governments [COAG] action team focusing on the Murdi Paaki trial and its outcomes. I acknowledge Wiradjuri country and elders, past and present. My role here today is to talk about the Murdi Paaki COAG trial and how we operated as the action team focusing purely on the outcomes of the COAG trial.

**Mr De WEERD:** I also acknowledge the traditional owners, the Wiradjuri people, and pay my respects to elders, past and present. I was a representative on the COAG action team for a period of five years and I continue to work with indigenous communities across New South Wales.

**Ms BYE:** I acknowledge that this is, was and always will be, Aboriginal land. I would like to pay my respects to elders from the Wiradjuri community, past and present. I am currently the coordinator for the school community partnerships with the New South Wales Department of Education and Training. I was a member of the COAG action team for three years, but I am still working with the New South Wales Department of Education and Training.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** It would helpful if you provided the Committee with an overview of the trial, its objectives and its initiatives. From that we could ask you further questions.

**Mr De WEERD:** The Council of Australian Governments initially announced the COAG trial in 2000 on the basis that there was a need to improve the way in which governments worked with indigenous communities. Trial sites were selected in each State and Territory. In New South Wales the Murdi Paaki region was selected as the trial site. In 2002 it was announced that the New South Wales Department of Education and Training and the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training, as it was at the time, would provide leadership on behalf of their respective governments to work with indigenous communities and other government agencies to improve the way that governments work with indigenous communities, but also to support indigenous communities in strengthening their community governance so that they are in a position to work effectively and as a partner with government in the process.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** I referred to the achievements of the objectives. Could you lay out for us the indicants that were used and tell us whether or not they were achieved?

**Ms BYE:** There were a number of priorities at the beginning of the trial. One was about whole of government, in particular, the Australian Government. That was about streamlined service delivery, harnessing the mainstream and looking at reducing the duplication of services. So there were two parts to the work that we were doing: first, what the government was doing and, second, strengthening community governance. A number of priorities came from each of the trial partners. When Mark spoke earlier he said that the other trial partner was originally the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander [ATSI] Commission and Murdi Paaki Regional Council.

As you might be aware, during the trial, ATSIC was abolished and the regional council became the Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly. So we have always had a community partner in the regional structure and we have also had 16 local community working parties. There were priorities from the State Government, the Commonwealth Government and from the Murdi Paaki region. The priorities within the Murdi Paaki region were about the health and wellbeing of our young people,

educational attainment and retention, helping families raise healthy children and strengthening community and regional governance. Those were the outcomes that we were working towards.

A number of structures were put in place, which we will talk about, to ensure that we had a whole-of-government process, a strengthening of the community and local governance, and we were working towards the priorities that had come from the community level.

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** Could we go back to those outcomes or objectives that you described as key performance indicators? I take it that, at the end of the day, you were looking at achieving the trial's objectives. Is that right?

**Ms BYE:** Yes.

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** I take it that you also had mid points, if you like, for the outcomes that you expected to get year by year?

**Ms BYE:** Yes.

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** Let us look at retention rates. Are you able to point to any outcomes that met your objectives?

**Ms BYE:** We have measured outcomes through trial. I am just focusing on education and the State Government of New South Wales Department of Education and Training. We hold two community governance workshops every year. Up to five members of each working party are invited to the community governance workshops. We also have the service providers, key agencies and the partners involved in the trial. At the 2006 and 2007 workshops, Trevor Fletcher—the deputy director general of the department—showed the improvements made in terms of Aboriginal student performance in Basic Skills Test, which is done in years 3 and 5, and in other results in years 7 and 9. I will give some key indicators.

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** Is this with regard to the Murdi Paaki trial or is it statewide?

**Ms BYE:** No, it is the Aboriginal students at the Murdi Paaki schools. We can get other information for you. I have only a snapshot. The data presented demonstrated that there had been movement with the band 1 students. In terms of students in band 1 and year 3, they have moved considerably; that is, two bands in two years. This is the band 1 students—the lowest performing students—and an aggregate of the 2004, 2005 and 2006 results. For year 3, we had 163 students in band 1. By year 5, there were only 36 students left in band 1. There has been an improvement.

For numeracy, as I said, it is the same. In 2004, 2005 and 2006, in year 3 we had 120 students in band 1. By year 5 there were 27 students in band 1. That indicates the movement out of the bands. There has been some progress with retention rates, but we would certainly like to see more. But, for years 7 to 10, we moved from 68.8 per cent in 2004 to 70.4 per cent in 2005. The apparent retention rates for Aboriginal students from years 7 to 12 moved from 20 per cent in 2004 to 21 per cent in 2005. The area of need that we must work on is retaining Aboriginal students to year 12.

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** Is this primarily as a result of the Schools in Partnership program—the extra funding provided to schools?

**Ms BYE:** We are talking about 16 schools across a huge region. We would like the opportunity at a later stage to talk about some of work that has been done in the trial. There are a number of factors; having the Department of Education, Science and Training and New South Wales Department of Education and Training being the lead agencies in the trial and having a focus on education, made a difference. The work we have been doing with leaders and principals has been done through a number of programs like What Works (Western), which is about leadership in schools.

Work has also been done to strengthen community governance and to help working parties become more involved in education. We will talk about that later. We have working parties with education subgroups. We have been talking to the Australian Competitive Grants people about education priorities. However, there are also specific programs, like the Reading to Learn Program,

which is a literacy program across our schools. There is also the work being done by champions within both schools and communities, and the work through a whole-of-government approach to addressing disadvantage across the regions. There are a number of reasons.

**The Hon. MICHAEL VEITCH:** You spoke about champions. How do you identify them?

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** I do not want to cut you off from explaining what has worked. You do not need to skip over it. I am happy to have it wash over me about what has worked and what has not. That is why you are here, and that is what we want to hear.

**The Hon. MICHAEL VEITCH:** How do you identify the champions?

**Ms BYE:** As I said, we have not had an opportunity to talk about the structures and processes, so I am making assumptions that you are aware of that. The process of people getting involved in the community action planning process and becoming involved in the working party identified champions and leaders within the community. I believe that the relationships and the partnerships formed between schools, working parties and also government agencies identified champions and leaders within our schools and communities. The trial provided opportunities for people to work differently. As I said, it provided the opportunity to try, to take a risk and to do different things. However, the focus was always on what the communities were saying to us. As I said, those four priorities came from a community base, from the regional assembly. That was the benchmark for any work we were doing. We asked ourselves what we were doing against these priorities. This is what the community has said is important.

**CHAIR:** Can you also tell us whether any communities had difficulties with the consultation process? We have received some reports from communities saying they had difficulties relating and being part of it.

**Mr De WEERD:** One of the critical points is that when the trial was first announced and the consultation started, communities were clear that they were sick of governments telling them how to do their business and wanted an opportunity to provide leadership at a community level and to have government support, not people telling them how to do it. As a government representative, I know it can be tricky in terms of providing support without telling communities how to do their business. We gave them the opportunity to determine their governance structures through community working parties. We then provided support through administrative officers and community facilitators to support those governance structures.

The makeup of the community working parties structures was again determined by them as Aboriginal people in their communities. It was not determined by us as government representatives. When there were issues in some communities, they asked us for support. Our support was to assist them in refreshing their community working parties or providing other assistance that they required from us. It was not about going in and saying, "You must disband as a community working party or have new elections." It was us supporting their needs.

I have read the submissions that you have received from two of the communities suggesting that we should have played a stronger part. The challenge was allowing communities to make decisions about how they as Aboriginal people established and managed their governance at a local level.

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** Ms Bye, you quoted figures about movement of students out of band 1 to band 3 performance between two successive Basic Skills Tests. That is great. Can we benchmark that against what happens in the general community? Do you see general improvements regardless of whether it is Murdi Paaki or not? You would not be able to do that here. However, I would appreciate your providing the Committee with data. Did Murdi Paaki do more than all the other programs put together? There are movements. Is it your opinion that Murdi Paaki did add value in terms of educational achievement, or is that simply the general trend of things?

**Ms BYE:** It certainly is my view that, yes, we did get the achievements, but you need to recognise we were coming from a very low base and there is a lot more work to be done. Yes, we

benchmark Aboriginal students across the State. So, we can compare an Aboriginal student in a Murdi Paaki school against a non-Aboriginal student in a Murdi Paaki school and then across the State.

**Dr JOHN KAYE:** What leads you to believe that the schools in the Murdi Paaki process actually added value to the educational process for Aboriginal children?

**Mr De WEERD:** The key for us was the fact that we now had indigenous people engaged in the process and making decisions alongside school principals and school staff, and that Aboriginal people were empowered in being able to engage with schools and other service providers, which they might not have had that opportunity in the past. The trial was establishing structures and processes with long-term goals in mind. What you need to recognise is that the Aboriginal people in the Murdi Paaki region had not been engaged that well in the past. So, this was about providing them that opportunity, recognising that by starting with Aboriginal people being able to be involved in decision making that longer term we would see outcomes as a result. So, it was about establishing partnerships and structures that would allow Aboriginal people the opportunity to make decisions about their kids and their future.

**Ms BYE:** You also heard before that we have had a review of Aboriginal education and that it is the department's priority. I will pass over to Anjali because there is the Two Ways Together process as well. We have also had government agencies with much more focused energy around meeting the targets. There are a number of things.

**Ms PALMER:** I think that information also is covered in the New South Wales Government's submission to the inquiry. But I would like to talk about what Mark was saying about community and school partnerships or the community engagement that has happened as a result of the Murdi Paaki COAG trial, which has enabled government to engage on a one-on-one basis, on a level playing field, with communities to actually make things happen in those communities. I understand that there has been criticism of the government structures and the trial itself by agencies and community members, and that is to be expected. That is absolutely to be expected because there are different views, different imprimaturs and different agendas that people have. Having said that though, the evidence is clear for us as the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and coming in after the trial was in place for three years. I have been in this job only two years. I have come in at the tail end. I was in a different role in this region and have worked in this region on and off for the past four or five years.

So, seeing the difference in the sense that an agency such as DAA or DOCS or DET or Health can engage with the assembly and engage with the working party through the community working party forums and actually discuss what can we specifically do for a town like Wilcannia and XYZ? What can we specifically do in a town like Goodooga that is going to make a difference for our young people? What can happen in a place like Gulargambone that can actually deliver for our young people? So we have put in place several different community development government engagement strategies and, of course, underpinned by Two Ways Together, which has enabled us to continue what has been established as a result of the COAG trial and transition that to a certain extent seamlessly and continue the work in partnership with the Australian government agencies as well.

Overall, that engagement and capacity of agencies to then say, "Okay, I need to do XYZ. This is an issue that has come up" or, "We've got funding to do ABC" in a community like Bourke, "Who do I need to talk to? What I need to do?" They can attend the working party and present—you know what the funding is for—the outcomes and objectives we want. The process of engagement that happens to the community working party then enables those outcomes and adds value to what you are doing. Because in the working parties we also have government agencies participating and sometimes there are interagency groups that support working parties as well. For me those criticisms around working parties, whether they operate and whether they function, essentially my response—I get these calls every so often—is that if you do not participate in a forum, then I do not think you can criticise that forum for not doing what you want it to do. You have to be part of the discussion to make things happen.

**CHAIR:** Is there a process to facilitate those concerns—

**Ms PALMER:** Absolutely.

**CHAIR:** —and to have them properly documented? They investigated to understand why it is that that person has that view, rightly or wrongly?

**Ms PALMER:** Absolutely. Mark and Louise probably will be able to answer that in terms of the COAG trial itself. If I get these sorts of complaints and questions, I will go to that community and sit down and have a talk and work out what the problems might be and enable some discussion and negotiate some solution around that. Of course, we use the regional assemblies significantly in that process as well.

**The Hon. MARIE FICARRA:** It is important, if we have submissions, to be duty bound to ask these questions. The Dharawal elders group was talking about the conduct of the community working party meetings, and the structure and governance in those meetings. If there is criticism, whose responsibility is it to make sure the meetings are being conducted in a proper manner? Who has that responsibility?

**Mr De WEERD:** I can start by saying that the chair of the Walcha community working party is a member of the Dharawal elders group and has been for the past couple of years. Generally through the COAG process there was a representative from the COAG action team at each meeting. Our role also was to support the CWPs in conducting the meetings. In some cases there were issues and we supported the CWPs to deal with those issues at the meetings. If they were around community governance, we would then refer that to the Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly for support and guidance. As I said, we did not want as government representatives to determine how or who was involved because that was a decision for that local Aboriginal community. So, we refer to the Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly to provide advice and support to that CWP on issues related to governance.

**The Hon. MARIE FICARRA:** The conduct of the meeting is important if we are now going to rely on the outcomes that came from this trial. Were you happy with the way the meetings then were conducted after these representations were made?

**Mr De WEERD:** You have to except that at some meetings there will be robust discussion. I would not say that the meetings, the ones I participated in, were anything other than robust discussions and had participation by Dharawal elders group at those meetings. When we did have issues, it resulted in the refresh of that CWP taking place, and that was supported by the Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly. So, there was due process in place to deal with those issues.

**Ms BYE:** The other thing is that government expected each of the working parties to develop a code of conduct and terms of reference, which happened. The other thing was that, as I said, we had two community governance workshops held every year, which talked about governance and about the trial and supporting people on CWPs. Minutes were taken at every meeting and they were public records and public documents. As I said, at the meetings Mark and I attended, well, each of the action team attended up to four working party meetings every month. You are talking about the broader community. The working party reflects what is happening at the community level. We would attend meetings and we would want to progress some issue, but the local issues always took place. This was the place where the discussions needed to happen. So that is what needed to happen. As Mark said, we could not come in and say, "Right, we want to stop that discussion now. We need you to move on to this."

**The Hon. MARIE FICARRA:** If I could stop you there. That is not my point. My point is that there are procedures and methods of meetings to make them legitimate in their outcomes.

**Ms BYE:** Exactly. There is an agenda, which went out. There is a chair and motions moved. Everything was recorded on the public record.

**The Hon. MARIE FICARRA:** Do we make it clear to people that there are certain meetings procedures and they should be followed? Is this training given first, because you cannot just conduct a meeting in any ad hoc fashion?

**Ms BYE:** Exactly.



**The Hon. MARIE FICARRA:** There are procedures and rules. Is training and guidance given to those working parties?

**Mr De WEERD:** There is work done with each CWP and they are well aware of the meeting procedures and have, as I have always indicated, developed their own meeting procedures and code of conduct documents that support the process that CWPs go through. They are all well attuned to managing or conducting meetings properly.

**CHAIR:** Before we move to questions on outcomes, can you give us an indication of how the agendas are compiled? Who determines what is on the agenda?

**Mr De WEERD:** What is discussed at the meeting varies between each CWP.

**CHAIR:** Who actually determines what is on the agenda?

**Mr De WEERD:** The CWP themselves.

**The Hon. MICHAEL VEITCH:** With all due respect, this Committee has heard from countless government departments about all of their programs and just how wonderful they are. Can you tell me what did not work in the Murdi Paaki trial?

**Mr De WEERD:** For me it was the fact that government was not able to respond well enough to the needs and aspirations of the Aboriginal community. The CWPs undertook a planning process that determined what their priorities were and the actions they needed support from government on. Government was not able to effectively or in a timely manner respond to those because working whole of government can be complex. Each agency has its own processes that it needs to follow. So, for five or six agencies to respond to the one issue in the community can take time, and for each agency to go through its due process takes time. So, for me the thing that did not work well enough was how quickly we were able to respond to the needs of each of the communities.

**Ms BYE:** And in that response it was very much a single focus or a single agency response. What the community planning process identified was the need for a combined response from a number of agencies. That was very clear in that community action planning process. For me, as is said, it was the time—five years working to establish the relationships and the partnerships that needed to happen. You were talking about outcomes, but what I saw at the end of five years was that when I first came on board and we went to the community governance workshops there was a great deal of suspicion from the working parties about government, about the process. They certainly came on board and were committed to another government process that was coming along, but by the end of the trial at the last government workshop each of the working parties could stand up and talk about their community action plan, talk about what was happening in their community and they have a much stronger understanding of the services that were coming into the community and the partnerships that needed to happen.

I would have liked to see more buying from local government. I would have liked to see the original shared responsibility agreement with local government as a signature to that. Government agencies or representatives came to working party meetings. I would have liked to see them look at the community action plan, instead of what I heard them say time and again, for example, "I represent this agency. Here are a couple of pamphlets. This is the website and these are the programs I deliver." I would have liked them to look at the community action plan and to say, "I have noticed that this is your priority. My suggestion is that you need to contact this person and talk about this program", or, "This program meets your needs."

There certainly is a gap. I think that the working parties have a very good knowledge of government services. Another point I would like to make is that time and again government agency representatives would come in and say, "We deliver these programs" and the working party would say, "We do not see evidence of that." So there was big mismatch as a result. As I said earlier, government agency representatives must be able to come in and tailor their responses to the needs of the working party.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** I refer to the participation rate of Aboriginal children in school. From the commencement of the trial to its conclusion do you have any information about improvements in the participation rate of Aboriginal children in primary schooling? In other words, do you have any indication of improved participation rates or reduced levels of truancy? What sort of information came out of the trial?

**Ms BYE:** Even though I work in the Department of Education and Training my focus has been on the whole of government and not on operational stuff. I think you are meeting with Carole McDiarmid, the regional manager. I can only give you a sense of what is happening. I am not involved in the operational meetings around data and outcomes. I am aware of them but I just think that needs to come from Carole McDiarmid and Mr Fletcher, with whom you are also meeting.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** Was any emphasis given to that as being an important part of the trial for Aboriginal children?

**Ms BYE:** Retention and attainment, yes.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** Participation in schooling?

**Ms BYE:** Yes, definitely. As well as the community governance workshop we held specific education workshops each year where we had the school principal, the working party chair, the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group [AECG] and other people as well specifically looking at the education priorities within the community action plan. We did that over three years. The first time you could see that there was not a good understanding from both the working party and the schools about what was in each plan. One of the other outcomes I saw was the movement after three years towards a common language and a common understanding that enabled principals to say to community members, "It is important that your kids are at school."

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** When did the trial conclude?

**Ms BYE:** It concluded on 31 December 2007.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** So it has just finished?

**Ms BYE:** Yes, and there was a transition process to make sure that it is ongoing. It just did not stop.

**The Hon. MICHAEL VEITCH:** The trial is completed. What positive aspects of the trial are still in place? What is the future for those things?

**Mr De WEERD:** We established the Murdi Paaki Aboriginal Young Leaders Project. I would have established that a lot earlier but we set it up only within the last 12 months to develop leadership amongst young Aboriginal people across the region. That is still taking place. We have a group of 46 young Aboriginal people in Canberra this week meeting with various leaders. Government structures were established. Obviously the Aboriginal community owns community working parties and the regional assembly, so they will continue as long as they want those structures in place.

From a government level we continue to have the structures in place that were established as part of the trial. They were established so that they could be sustainable. So we have several subgroups that focus on various issues, that is, education and training; employment and economic development; law and justice; environment, culture and heritage; families, health and young people; as well as the Murdi Paaki Aboriginal Environmental Health Forum that focuses on housing. So those government structures are still in place and they will continue. A number of projects that were put in place will also continue. For instance, community facilitators were put in place to support the 16 communities. They will continue at least until the end of this year.

We had a roll out of evaporative air-cooling units in communities across the region. At the moment six communities have benefited from that project and we are looking at continuing to roll out those units. Through the COAG trial, Goolooga, for example, benefited from a new building to

support youth activities. That building will be in place for youth activities. Similarly, in Gulargambone we are looking at establishing a cinema. Funds have been made available for that and work is currently being undertaken. That will continue to be in place.

In Walgett we have provided support to the mobile Police Community Youth Club [PCYC] unit that supports youth activities in the community. We also renovated the local cinema in town so that will also support the work that the PCYC is doing. A transport strategy was put in place in Walgett to support Aboriginal community members from Gingie and Namoi reserves to be able to come in and access services in the town. So a number of structures and outcomes were achieved that are long standing and that will continue beyond the COAG trial.

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** Anjali, I think you referred earlier to a number of government departments that participated in the trial. Do I take it that in participating in the trial those government departments have become more responsive to community needs? Is that the general outcome that you looked for?

**Ms PALMER:** Absolutely. When you are operating from afar you assume that something is happening on the ground. You make assumptions based on what information or intelligence you have gathered, which may or may not be correct. When you are sitting across the table you have a conversation about what needs to be put on the ground, what can and cannot be done and why it cannot be done. So even if you are talking about rolling out Aboriginal justice groups, the Attorney General's Department would come into those communities, talk to the community working parties, the police and the courts and establish the position in an appropriate place to deliver services appropriate for that community.

Apart from the better engagement that has enabled a better understanding of what happens. We constantly struggle with a region that has significant capacity in some respects but that needs assistance in other respects. There is then tension between what we need and what head office is ruling out. We are told, "These are the programs that can be rolled out and that is it. You can do X, Y or Z, but you cannot do A, B and C", even though A, B and C are much better suited to a particular rural or remote community. The tyranny of distance causes a lot of problems.

When people travel those distances they realise what difficulties might be posed if they say, "Yes, you can have a hub in Bourke, but you cannot use that hub in Bourke to provide services to Wilcannia which is about four-and-a-half hours away. You need to rethink that." So for us it is also increasing the capacity of government agencies, which we talked about outside. The capacity in the region or the lack of capacity is not just in communities; it is also in agencies and service providers who provide services remotely or through outreach. People need to be in the region and people need to be on the ground to see how it works or how it does not work.

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** I have a follow-up question. Would you like to explain to us how the Department of Community Services [DOCS] has improved its service delivery and its responsiveness to community needs?

**Ms PALMER:** I will not be able to give you data relating to caseworkers and all that sort of stuff. I know that there is a roll out and I know that the Department of Community Services has allocated funds for the Brighter Futures Project and those sorts of initiatives that are being provided. I know that DOCS has made a commitment. A senior project manager was appointed for Murdi Paaki. He is the interface for service provision between community working parties and the Department of Community Services. I know that a senior DOCS officer is allocated to attend every community working party and to engage with communities at that local level.

There are issues specific to the Department of Community Services that can be taken up and addressed locally. While the Brighter Futures Project that has been rolled is based in Dubbo they have spent a lot of time in those communities employing local people, building the capacity and training people in local communities to build that up. Certain agencies are doing a hell of a lot more engaging in those activities, having a local presence, and working through the community working party and the governance structure that has been established. DOCS participates in the subgroups that we have talked about. It is on the health, families and young people and the economic development subgroups.

We are working with DOCS to roll out the family carers strategy, which will improve employment outcomes as well as provide more carers in the community over the next 12 months.

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** Are you telling me that Department of Community Services has the confidence of Aboriginal communities out west?

**Ms PALMER:** You will have to ask the Aboriginal communities about that. I cannot speak for them.

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** It is part the trial. You must have a feel as to what the community and the working groups are experiencing.

**Ms PALMER:** The assembly and some assembly members will be here later. That is a question that I would put to them. At every stage there are criticisms of different government departments, different non-government departments, or politicians. You take that as par for the course and you work with communities to improve that situation. That is what the COAG trial has enabled. When something comes up it is not escalated to a place where there is conflict. Rather, the trial has enabled conversations at a local level so that we can develop solutions. That has been the strength of the trial.

**CHAIR:** Referring to outcomes I assume that one of the major outcomes would be to achieve ownership by local communities, engagement by local communities, with local communities being the driver for the whole thing to have any sustainability or any longevity.

**Ms PALMER:** Absolutely.

**CHAIR:** I assume that that is a fairly basic premise of the COAG trial?

**Ms PALMER:** Yes.

**Dr JOHN KAYE:** I did not understand quite how this works. Could we take it down to a more concrete level? I refer to the Department of Community Services and to the way it is operating under the Murdi Paaki trial. In what ways have the Aboriginal communities changed DOCS' behaviour? What were the outcomes of that changed behaviour, or were there none? What you said sounds great but I want to know what things DOCS did as a result of Murdi Paaki that it was not doing before. What is it not doing now that it was doing before, and how did that happen? Just give us one example.

**Ms BYE:** I am happy to do that. I can talk about my experience but I do not work for DOCS, so it is not a complete picture. The Gulargambone community action plan contains this statement, "Where is DOCS?" That statement is in its community action plan. As part of the work that DOCS was doing, as one of the key agencies in the trial, there was a need to get into Gulargambone and work with the working party and the community. As Anjali said, a senior position was put in to look at DOCS' response across the region as part of the COAG trial.

That person attended working party meetings and then was the liaison back to the Department of Community Services to take up the working party's issues. If you were to go to Gulargambone now, the working party and the community would be able to tell you about what the Department of Community Services is providing within the community. It is starting the conversation. Moving from 'Where is the department?' to having a departmental representative at the working party and knowledge of what the department is doing within the community.

**Ms PALMER:** The other thing is that the Department of Community Services senior staff had a two-day meeting with the assembly last year. As a result there was an agreement that they would pilot local service level agreements in two communities. Gulargambone was the subject of one of those agreements. Those service level agreements will talk about how the Department of Community Services will work with the communities at that local level and what they will do in terms of providing those services and supporting the communities in achieving their goals as far as community services, young people, child protection and those sorts of things are concerned.

**The Hon. MARIE FICARRA:** I think Ms Bye said that is one of the outcomes from the trial. That is why we are here, to see what works and what can be done better. Recommendations were made to government agencies and it took a long time for them to respond. Should there be one department that has oversight of those agencies coming back or should it be ad hoc? Could it be the Department of Aboriginal Affairs coordinating a response for indigenous communities? I want to hear your opinion.

**Mr De WEERD:** It is a broader issue of each department having the flexibility to respond. That is, the flexibility to use its funding innovatively and not be tied to policies and guidelines which may not meet the needs of the community but which will have the same goal in terms of the outcome. It involves providing a level of flexibility to enable workers on the ground to respond to the needs of the Aboriginal communities and to be able to commit to the broader priority or agenda to support that community.

**The Hon. MARIE FICARRA:** How long did it take for agencies to respond or to say what they were going to do based on the recommendations from the trial? Who keeps an account of that? How do we know how long it takes one government agency or another? If it is that ad hoc, communities will become frustrated.

**Ms BYE:** A regional group met sometimes every month, but at least every three months. That was the role of the regional group to ensure that agencies were responding. It was one of the challenges. My observation is that agencies that do their core business well are much better placed to deal with whole of government. The strategic directions and plans come from the state level and the local community priorities join at the regional level or the manager level. There should be some key people working around that. Aboriginal business needs to become very much part of core business. That is happening, but for some agencies it is an add-on. It needs to be very much part of core business.

I want to make some comments about community governance around the balance between community and governance. It is frustrating. I worked out that there were probably 800 working party meetings. This involves community people giving up their time to go to a meeting without resources or without financial remuneration. There were 800 meetings held over the trial where community members met to action their 10 community action planning process. I also acknowledge that at one point we had seven chairs of the working party who were women.

**Ms PALMER:** In relation to the coordinating agencies, I do not think we need that. There is a governance structure and the regional engagement group. In terms of the transition process, there is also the regional group that Louise was talking about. Through that process, the regional engagement group supported by the regional management group could do a lot of this stuff and make it happen. Murdi Paaki is working in the sense that, because of the trial, they are two to three years ahead in terms of the governance structures. We have an opportunity to continue building on the outcomes and the structures that have been put in place. There are a heap of lessons for all of us.

Having said that, not every other region needs a similar structure. The concept of community and regional governance is critical if the Government needs to engage with Aboriginal people and determine how that governance structure is established in each region and it needs to be driven by the community and those regions.

**CHAIR:** Thank you for your time this morning. Unfortunately, we are on borrowed time. Do you wish to make any closing remarks? Otherwise, thank you very much for your time and your wealth of knowledge. It is important for the Committee to feed upon that and to seek further assistance. We have the interim report to present in June and the final report at the end of the year. Thank you for your assistance.

(The witnesses withdrew)

**ALISTER FERGUSON**, Chairperson, Bourke Aboriginal Community Working Party, PO Box 580, Bourke,

**RICHARD WESTON**, Delegate, Broken Hill Community Working Party,

**JEANETTE BARKER**, Chairperson, Ngemba Community Working Party, PO Box 117, Brewarrina, sworn and examined;

**WILLIAM JEFFRIES**, Chairperson, Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly, PO Box 612, Bourke, affirmed and examined:

**CHAIR:** Would you like to make an opening comment before we go to questions?

**Mr JEFFRIES:** I thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Committee and to give our thoughts on what we believe to be some of the key opportunities to overcome indigenous disadvantage. For some of us it has been a life-long exercise working in that field. The way we do business in the Murdi Paaki region probably offers some opportunities to be able to overcome those disadvantages that impact on our community. In saying that, overcoming indigenous disadvantage is probably the most confronting issue facing Australian society generally today. Interest rates, mortgages and so on pale into insignificance when compared with indigenous disadvantage. That is an indictment on Australia.

However, there is an opportunity now, given the responses—particularly from Government—to look towards that. My thoughts about this very complex and problematic issue are to have government investment or government involvement that goes beyond an electoral cycle. It has to be for one or two generations. The problems that we confront in our communities are two and three generations old. We are not going to be able to change these things in an electoral cycle; we are not going to be able to change them in the five-year trial period suggest by the Council of Australian Governments. We need longevity in the investment process and a governance framework that builds across that period.

Aboriginal people also have a responsibility. It is not just the responsibility of government. It is also our responsibility to ensure that our communities have good governance and leadership and are empowered to be in those positions. Those aspects build strong resolve and resilience in people to deal with the issues that impact on them. Responsibility in itself tells us there should be a partnership between government and Aboriginal people, or at least a parallel approach that demonstrates what each is doing. If we continue to work in isolation, we will be back in 5 or 10 years talking to an inquiry about the same issues.

The trial at the Murdi Paaki clearly underlines that are benefits from greater coordination and collaboration between government agencies and Aboriginal people. Community governance is our foundation and what we bring to any partnership or relationship. It is a process that we have ownership of; it is not a government instrument, as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission [ATSIC] was. It is a process developed over 15 years and it is ongoing. These are strategic arrangements from our perspective about our involvement in the whole aspect of government service delivery.

Our focus is on planning, advocacy and accountability. The accountability applies to government and non-government funded services. Our own organisations also come under the scrutiny of community working parties, governance structures and the regional assembly. They are also funded to deliver services; we cannot just point the finger at the Government. Our own organisations also require scrutiny of some magnitude to ensure they are delivering services. We do not handle any moneys; we deliberately chose that. We do not take any fiscal responsibility. We do not want to duplicate what someone else is already doing.

There are a couple of things that we have been deliberating about governance arrangements. One is not to embed our arrangements in legislation and the other is not incorporate that under the Corporations Law. One is that the legislative process will never be abolished in any Parliament as happened to ATSIC. And as far as corporations law goes, we will never have an administrator

appointed to us to remove our power and responsibilities. Mindful of the ATSIC experience, we do not want our structure to be torn down by some sort of political ideology. I will leave it at that.

**Mr WESTON:** I just want to make some opening comments. I am here as the delegate for the Broken Hill Aboriginal Community Working Party. I am not the chair of the working party. We have a setup where we elect two people to the different functions. One is the chair and one is the delegate to the regional assembly. At the moment I am currently the delegate. In my working life I work for the Maari Ma Health Aboriginal Corporation, which has a key role in the delivery of health services in the western part of the Murdi Paaki region covering the communities of Broken Hill, Wilcannia, Menindee, Ivanhoe down into the Wentworth Shire. The Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly is the most disadvantaged region in New South Wales, particularly for Aboriginal people. Issues around chronic disease are very challenging along with education outcomes and a whole range of indicators. But the way of addressing that and coming to the title of this Committee—overcoming indigenous disadvantage and closing the gap—for our region, the right model of governance is the Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly and the community working party structure. I strongly believe that that is our vehicle and voice for overcoming disadvantage.

**Mr FERGUSON:** I would just like to make some comments particularly on the progress since the duration of the COAG trial. We have worked flawlessly to achieve a whole range of outcomes, and in some sense we have managed to achieve that. But I am not here today to pretend that things are not quite rosy in our neck of the woods. There certainly is room for improvement. Going back to the achievements in the establishment of various localised subcommittees that we have formed as a platform to establish a dialogue and engagement from the various three tiers of government, we certainly have made improvements in the dialogue, but I think there is a bit of confusion at the moment because the COAG trial has expired. I think it should be made clear and simple to government agencies and departments, and more so the local services, that we are still in place and we simply are not going to go away because the job is far from finished. As I think Sam touched on earlier, we have a four- or five-year process with the COAG trial. I think it is only a starting point, particularly with the theme of the inquiry today in closing the gap to indigenous disadvantage. I will just leave it at that.

**Mr JEFFRIES:** It was remiss of me and for protocol reasons I neglected to pay my respects to country and acknowledge the Wiradjuri nation.

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** You were sitting in the public gallery when we were asking questions of the public servants. I do not believe we are any wiser after an hour. What do you say specifically are the areas of improvement as a result of the Murdi Paaki trial and in what areas has there not been improvement?

**Mr JEFFRIES:** I think the educational outcomes can be demonstrated by Trevor Fletcher and company, when you meet with them. I think they are remarkable achievements from our end of it. I think that is because of the new relationship that has been established by community people and the principals, the processes that we have put in place with the Department of Education and Training, and DEST themselves having these conferences and workshops that brings that relationship together. I do not think that the AECG played any role in that. It is a new relationship that I think has come about by the principals and the community. For the school it was a different group of people to engage with. It brought to the school environment a different aspect of community life.

It got the Department of Education and Training and DEST out of their comfort zone of working in a school environment and put them in the mix of the community melting pot. So, to my mind that has been a fairly significant achievement. What I am fearful of is that if we do not continue to build on those gains that we made through the trial by having some relationship with Commonwealth and State governments in partnership with Aboriginal people, we will be trying to develop some strategy in the long term again, or we will be coming back around the table again, looking at ways to make these improvements. Secondly, one thing we did not have a lot of success on was employment.

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** I am sorry to interrupt you. We have identified education, but are there any other success stories from the trial?

**Mrs BARKER:** I would just like to acknowledge country, the Wiradjuri people on whose land we meet and also pay my respects to elders past and present. As a community member and at a personal level the knowledge that we have gained at the community level has been of the most benefit we have ever received. Knowing how things happen at the government level, not fully understanding how they do business but at the least having that understanding. The meetings we have had with the people at that level to come and sit, to come down to our level, has been phenomenal for me. We cannot go to their level and converse with them. So, it has been a great achievement I think for them to be able to come and sit down and work and talk with us and give us a better understanding and the knowledge that we never had before. For me, that is the greatest achievement. As for things being done, not a lot has been done, but we are hopeful for some of the things to happen.

**Mr JEFFRIES:** To add to the further success was that we got government to change the way it does business. The primary goal of the COAG trial was to get government to change the way it did business, and they did do that. In saying that, the point that we agreed to work on was to get government to respond to a planning process; to more or less get away from the submission-based process and focus on issues that are impacting on communities that have been identified by communities. So, it was getting a response to a planning process at a reasonable level, underpinned by a community planning process. I had 15 years with ATSIC but this is the first time that the planning process has been completely owned by Aboriginal people. It is not something that was owned by ATSIC or whatever. This is owned completely by Aboriginal people. There are community action plans and there are regional plans. So, it was getting government to respond to that planning process against the priorities, aligning their service delivery to the priorities that we have identified through the planning process.

**CHAIR:** Has that been rolled out uniformly or is it patchy?

**Mr JEFFRIES:** I think it is a bit patchy. It was hard for DEST and DET to get full cooperation from their respective agencies at a Commonwealth and State level. Understanding that each agency has separate Ministers, sometimes Ministers wanted to hold off on certain things to do a media release at a certain time. That does not get any kudos for us when we are continually waiting around for those sorts of ideologies to pointscore while we are sitting and watching the issue getting further and further into being something we cannot control or deal with. So, there were some of those things that were impacting on that. I think also having two agencies as lead agencies that Aboriginal affairs was not their core business but were actually focusing on their core business of education in trying to assist communities to get to the outcomes we have identified. I think we demonstrated line agency responsibility through the trial, particularly in the latter part of the trial when the regional council was abolished and Aboriginal programs at a Commonwealth level were dispersed across a number of agencies.

**Dr JOHN KAYE:** That was the regional council ATSIC?

**Mr JEFFRIES:** ATSIC, yes. All the programs of ATSIC were dispersed across a number of agencies. The coordination then became such a nightmare. The attempts by the Commonwealth to coordinate their programs through indigenous coordination centres just did not work for us at all. I still think it is a flaw in the Commonwealth's process about coordination. The numbers do not add up for me. I thought a single agency delivering a range of programs was more coordinated than half a dozen agencies delivering one or two programs each. To my mind the numbers just do not add up.

**CHAIR:** On the question of the rollout being uniform or patchy, is that a core agenda item for the community and the ongoing longevity of this trial? Has that been addressed in any way, if it is working at Brewarrina but is not working at Bourke?

**Mr JEFFRIES:** Coming out of the trial there was a transition period to hand over lead agency responsibility to the Department Aboriginal Affairs and also to the Department of Family and Community Services at the Federal level. Part of that underpinning of that transition was a regional partnership agreement being put on the table since August 2006 to continue the relationship between Aboriginal people and government. To this date the agreement has not been signed. So I think now already we are fearful that some of the government agencies now are not engaging with community working parties. So, they are starting now to go back to engaging with corporations or service providers and thinking that they are engaging Aboriginal people, but they are not.



**The Hon. MARIE FICARRA:** To get an idea of the line of communication, can you explain the relationship between the regional assembly, all your working community parties, the other stakeholders and the local indigenous communities? How does it all work?

**Mr JEFFRIES:** My attempt to answer that will be a description of how the community governance and regional governance operate in our region, how it actually forms and how it operates. Community governance is a process we have developed as an ATSIC regional council based on the outcomes of what our communities wanted to see. They wanted to see different governance arrangements applied to the western part of New South Wales because they believed that an ATSIC regional council was not the right governance structure for them. The main concern was that they did not have their person or a member from their community sitting at the table of regional council. So, understanding a Westminster-type election process did not necessarily give them representation at the table. So, developing a new model that encompassed their representation was very apparent to the whole of the 16 communities.

At the community level the composition of the community working party or the community governance structure is decided on by the community themselves. It can be a board of expertise, it can be made up of all local indigenous service providers, groups, individuals, it can be family based. In one community we have a family-based community working party structure. Or it can be a combination of all. It is up to them to decide what they believe is going to be the best representation that will support their community.

How they then bring that composition together, by election, by nomination or by choosing people, is entirely their decision. The regional assembly is then borne out of each community nominating a delegate from his or her community working party to take a seat on the regional assembly. I am chairperson of the assembly. I am an independent person. I am number 17. In a sense, my term as independent chairperson did go up until the end of the COAG trial. It has been extended until 30 June this year. Essentially, the leadership should come from within the 16 people and they should elect their own chairperson and stuff. That is how it comes together. We developed our own charter of governance. One side describes our relationship with government around service delivery but the other side describes how we as Aboriginal people relate to each other internally within our own communities and externally across the region.

**The Hon. MARIE FICARRA:** What about the relationship with Aboriginal land councils and so forth? I know that they are not part of the official structure but is there any relationship?

**Mr JEFFRIES:** There is a relationship with local land councils at the community level. Depending on the composition and the structure at a local level I would say that they have a seat at the table. Whether or not they choose to participate is their choice, but I am assuming that in most circumstances they would have a seat at the table. At a regional level, this year we will probably undertake a new approach to developing arrangements with a regional office of the land council, the zone office, and the two newly elected officers. We must remember that the land council was in administration for the better part of three or four years. We have never had an elected focus on the land council in our area while it was under administration. So there will be opportunities for us to develop new relationships at a regional level between the zone office and the two elected regional councillors.

**The Hon. MARIE FICARRA:** I refer to the recommendations that were made to various government agencies and to the frustration in obtaining a response. Was the regional assembly involved in ensuring that someone monitored those responses from government agencies, or was that a different regional working party?

**Mr JEFFRIES:** The one thing we try to champion our responsibilities around is holding government and non-government organisations accountable for their service delivery. We also played a role in relation to its responsiveness, whether it was timely, and whether it was efficient or inefficient. We would make representations to respective Ministers or the directors general of those departments to ensure that we got better responses or something that fixed up the problem they had created by being unresponsive at a certain time. I think one of the benefits of the COAG trial was giving us access to people at the level of director general and secretary, and also ministerial access. So

those things enabled us to unblock some of the real blockages. I do not know how you translate that across Australia, but it worked for us to have that sort of access to ensure that those blockages were dealt with at certain times.

**The Hon. MARIE FICARRA:** You have had much success in setting up this infrastructure over many years. You also put in a lot of your own time voluntarily. What would you like to see happen based on your experiences? What should we be doing now at a national and a State level to go forward, based on the successes of the trial?

**Mr JEFFRIES:** I think the Commonwealth Parliament should establish a governance framework that brings closer coordination and relationships between Commonwealth and State responsibilities in delivering citizen services. We are citizens in this country and this is about accessing citizen services. Some specific things relate to Aboriginal people that do not relate to anybody else in the country, that is, cultural and heritage matters. I think those sorts of things are the bread and butter things of Aboriginal people which make them still have that connection to country and all those sorts of things. I do not think a lot of people understand that. We do not hold that against anybody; it is a relationship thing that we hold dearly within our hearts.

We need a governance framework that more closely aligns Commonwealth and State responsibilities. We must be responsive to issues. Rather than an application or a submission-based process, communities should be identified if they put up a planning process for the next five or 10 years that suggests their investment will require \$15 million. Those are the sorts of things. That may be easier said than done but we have never tried it. In a country as mature as Australia we should be able to overcome those legislative and bipartisan complexities to ensure that those things happen. As I said in my opening statement, I think indigenous disadvantage is the most compelling and confronting issue that Australian society faces. If we do not address that we are not governing the country in the right manner.

**The Hon. MICHAEL VEITCH:** I ask Alister, Richard and Jeanette to talk the Committee through their views about the good and bad things regarding shared responsibility agreements [SRAs]. I would like to hear your views about the good and bad aspects.

**Mr WESTON:** In Broken Hill it is quite easy. We have not signed any shared responsibility agreement, but we were very close to signing. We were poised to sign a community-wide SRA, which would have meant one SRA for the whole community rather than an SRA for every little project that took place. Probably one of the criticisms of the trial is getting bogged down in the bureaucracy of getting a document or agreement around projects, such as putting a park in a community or things that could have been dealt with a little more simply bureaucratically.

For us in Broken Hill the successes of the trial have been around Aboriginal people taking responsibility. I guess that is our share of the shared responsibility. So we have developed our own terms of reference. We have developed a code of conduct for the way we behave in meetings. We have developed selection criteria for our chairperson and our regional assembly representative. We have had three chairpersons over the past five years and we are due for another election. We do that on a regular basis and there have been three different people. We have been involved in guiding a housing project, renovating 40 houses owned by Aboriginal housing providers in Broken Hill. That was a \$2 million project that went over three years during the trial.

We were instrumental in lobbying and supporting local high schools for a cash-out of the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme, a Commonwealth-funded project. A bucket of money was sitting there but it was not being used because they could not find the tutors. We were able to convince the Department of Education, Science and Training [DEST] to cash out that money, put it in the hands of the school, and let the tuition go on in the school. I can talk about Broken Hill High School where I think the results have been stunning. In a short period 77 Aboriginal students are in the at risk years, that is, years 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12.

The Hon. Trevor Khan wanted to see outcomes and evidence. I am with him on that but, unfortunately, working parties do not collect the evidence; government departments do that. I can only speak anecdotally, but I sympathise with him. That has been a good project. I can tell you about another school in our community—a small primary school, which is no longer so small. It has 250

primary aged students plus another 30 in a preschool. That school has 44 Aboriginal students this year, across the primary age, which is 20 per cent of its school population. Over the past four years that school has had an Aboriginal school captain, a popular election that it runs, and last year the deputy school captain was an Aboriginal lad.

Aboriginal kids are now achieving academic awards at the end of the year that are not specifically Aboriginal awards. These awards are across the board. All the anecdotal evidence is worthwhile evidence to think about. Aboriginal kids are starting to get on a par with non-Aboriginal kids, and that is really what community working parties and the regional assembly are about. It is about helping our kids to reach their full potential. That is why we want to engage with people like education and health across the board. I will refer to a few other successes. We are working with our local city council on local Aboriginal protocols. We are working with local council on supporting it to develop its Aboriginal plan.

It might be of interest that Broken Hill has the fastest growing Aboriginal regional population in Australia, which was highlighted in the Taylor report back in 2006. We comprise 6.5 per cent of the total population in Broken Hill, which is roughly a population of 20,000. The community working party completed its own community action plan, which outlines our goals and aspirations for our community. Our heavy priorities over the year are employment and education. We have a strong engagement with police who attend every second meeting and present data and statistics about hot spots, so we are starting to have conversations about real issues rather than gripes about coppers.

The Department of Community Services [DOCS] regularly attends our meetings. The local area manager attends on a regular basis. I know the previous group was asked a question about DOCS. I think the answer is that DOCS carries a lot of baggage with Aboriginal people, going back a long way. I have seen a change over the last few years in it wanting to engage. Eight or nine years ago when I first came into contact with DOCS on a professional basis it was defensive and it did not want to engage. But it is now starting to be more proactive. It is starting to reach out and people are starting to realise that in the Murdi Paaki region Aboriginal people have a positive attitude.

We believe that we can overcome our disadvantage. The evidence is there. Internationally, the life expectancy gap in Canada and in places like New Zealand with the Maori people is close to five or seven years. We can turn around that system. The thing that strikes me about the features or characteristics of the Murdi Paaki region, the regional assembly and my colleague sitting at the table, is that they want to engage. We will be critical. We will demand statistics because we want to see the stuff that works. That is what we are after. We want to implement what the evidence tells us will work on the ground. That evidence sometimes comes from overseas.

Our structures, our community working parties and our regional assembly are developing grounds for our capacity and leadership, decision making, strategic thinking, and trying to set the agenda for our region and our communities. There are also great forums for debate and discussion. We do not all agree. We know that there are criticisms in the community. In Broken Hill we have our critics. We have people who do not turn up or front up to the working party on a regular basis. They criticise it behind its back, but they still come. We cannot stop people from coming. It is an unincorporated community forum and we do not shut the door. We cannot do that.

Every Aboriginal person in the Broken Hill community has an opportunity. I guess it is about them having the confidence. It is a challenge for us to ensure that people feel welcome, but there is also this thing called responsibility. At the end of the day we all have responsibility for ourselves. If we want to take that a bit further we have responsibility for how our communities operate and function. Broken Hill has a diverse Aboriginal community. We have tribes from all over Australia, including local traditional owners. So it is a melting pot, which can create a lot of tension. But the community working party process and the protocols we have put in place have helped us focus on issues and be constructive.

It does not mean that we are perfect by any means; we have never claimed that we are perfect. We have critics but we are a work in progress. We are an evolution of what was talked about 30 or 40 years ago around self-determination and community control. We are just a natural evolution of that process. We have a lot of capacity in our communities. We have people sitting here who have been invited to Aboriginal corporations and who have been working in their communities for a long

time. Things like chairing meetings and setting agendas is not the important stuff; it is the relationship that is going that I think is really important.

**Mr FERGUSON:** I would like to go back to Mr Veitch's questions about shared responsibility agreements. In terms of the outcomes, we could say we have successfully managed to negotiate and facilitate the introduction of the Wangkumara language into the high school curriculum at Bourke. That is a first for New South Wales. That is a major achievement. That was embedded within the shared responsibility agreement as an add-on. Louise Bye, Anjali Palmer and Mark De Weerd touched on that earlier.

We are conscious that Bourke is diverse. We share the Aboriginal community with 18 various language groups, including the traditional owners. It was our focus not to exclude anyone and we deliberately set out once the resources were established and became available for the various language groups to provide for them to be introduced. No-one was excluded. It gets the community off side, particularly when we chose to go into the Wangkumara group. That was purely because those resources were readily available and their culture has been maintained and protected by the Aboriginal corporation. It is full credit to those people.

This has been an ongoing campaign for about 16 years. I have been at the forefront of being involved in negotiating, facilitating or navigating. One of the key features is that we have a large population of Wangkumara people. The past government policy was to move people to the Bourke reserve. Those large populations still exist; they are still here in our communities. In terms of going back a little more to grassroots as a traditional owner, one thing we do not do is exclude anyone.

One of the highlights is education. We have worked hard to improve school attendance. We have a range of Aboriginal staff within the various government-funded schools. They are all going through professional development as well. The other thing, particularly on cultural and heritage issues, is that we are also going through the process of establishing cultural protocols and developing terms of reference. We can make our position clear. In terms of any service providers or the various tiers of government services are concerned, they know first hand how to engage with the local communities. We are aiming to roll that out on a regular basis in the Murdi Paaki region as well.

One of our key functions has been eliminating duplication. Some days I find myself at the local level attending three meetings talking about the same issues. We have been the lead agency or community representative.

**The Hon. MICHAEL VEITCH:** We sympathise with you.

**Mr FERGUSON:** We are in the process of eliminating all that. One of the successful achievements was that we just had the community working party recognise the Aboriginal community justice group as the peak body for justice issues. We successfully completed our crime prevention plans for Bourke. That will act as a template. Again, that is a first in New South Wales under the Crime Prevention Division of the Attorney General's Department. That has been recognised as a conduit for the rest of the Murdi Paaki region as well.

One of my portfolios is the law and justice subcommittee of the Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly. We are also looking at the concept of having integrated meetings, because health is sometimes related to law and justice, education and so on.

I know that the Committee appreciates our position, but it is really difficult. For people like us at the table, it is our passion to improve the disadvantage of our people. We have seen it for years. We have positioned ourselves, particularly after the old ATSIC regional council days. We have come ahead in leaps and bounds. No doubt there is still a lot to do, but we are there for the long haul. The key point is that we are involved in a voluntary capacity. We have our core roles and day-to-day jobs. Some of us are lucky to be employed in our area. I emphasise that too.

**Mrs BARKER:** I go along with what both Richard and Alister have said. Our community is the same. Our framework is a beauty, because we own it and no-one can take it away from us. It is only as good as we make it with the community working parties and the regional assemblies. Ours is one of five shared responsibility agreements. They are a good thing. They make people be responsible

and accountable for the outcomes that the community has identified. One is the re-engagement of youth. It is a program transforming education. We have released a plan that will establish Brewarrina as a centre of best practice and include all three tiers of government. It is early days, but recently, for the first time ever, the school rated 5 per cent higher than the State average. That is extraordinary.

We also have a community bus. The community identified that as a need to go to funerals and sporting events. That is going well. We have having trouble telling the community that they have to pay for that. There is no recurrent budget and we have to try to find ways to fit it in the budget for them to afford the fuel and maintenance. We also have a parks and gardens shared responsibility agreement. That was an opportunity for me to engage in community beautification. But we are having a few problems with that. It is still there and we are persevering with it. We have the homemakers program. That was an excellent program. It has fallen by the wayside, but it is there and we need to pick it up. We have to start in the homes.

We are going to make a difference to indigenous people and our kids with education. I strongly believe that we have to begin in the homes. That is where it all comes from. The Brewarrina business centre was a priority for the community. Our community organisations come with baggage and we could see the need for a place to do our accounting and reporting, which we were falling down on in our organisations. We saw the need for the centre to be set up. We have a shared responsibility agreement for that. We have had teething problems because we did not get the right staff with the same vision as ours. We have saved three organisations from going to the wall. I think that is a great outcome.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** I refer to the demise of ATSIC and the model of regional assembly and regional working parties, which we have seen at Murdi Paaki. Are there equivalent models operating outside New South Wales, in other States and Territories? Are they starting to operate, or are you at the cutting edge? I know that you are part of the formal Council of Australian Governments trial. Beyond that, are there any other similar frameworks growing organically or with support in other States and Territories?

**Mr JEFFRIES:** In our modelling exercise we looked at international experiences in New Zealand, Canada, America and Greenland, and the Inuits. We looked at all of their governance and assembly models. It came back to our own backyard with the Torres Strait Regional Authority, which was a Commonwealth legislated authority. It was made up of all the island councils, which were incorporated under the Queensland Local Government Act.

There was some sort of synergy; we thought the island councils were similar to our community governance structures and working parties across our region and then having a regional body that encompassed all those island councils or our community working parties. We were seeking a regional authority embedded in the legislation under the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Act the same as the Torres Strait Regional Authority. It would have been a different type of model. Ours would have been fully constituted under the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Act. The Torres Strait Regional Authority is not totally under the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Act, it is part of the Queensland Local Government Act and the Commonwealth statutory arrangements. That is the only evidence of correlation between what we are doing and what others are doing.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** Where will the funding come from to continue the structure and work to you doing? How do you cover basic costs like buying petrol to attend meetings like this?

**Mr JEFFRIES:** Since July 2005, when ATSIC and the regional council were abolished, the regional assembly has got funds from the Commonwealth Government—\$141,000 a year—to meet with Government. They were very specific in the wording of the agreement: "Meet with Government to advise them of issues that are impacting on communities in the Murdi Paaki region". They never funded us for governance or advocacy functions—the things that were important—but they did fund us to meet with Government from time to time to advise on those issues. That ceased on 31 December because the trial finished.

Our costs are underwritten by the three major corporate structures in the region, which were initiatives of the previous regional council—the Maari Ma Aboriginal Health Corporation, Murdi Paaki Regional Enterprise Corporation and Murdi Paaki Regional Housing Corporation. Those three

are now underpinning the cost of the operation of the regional assembly. I believe the Department of Aboriginal Affairs still makes available \$250 a month for the individual working parties to meet and to cover catering costs and so on. We have no government funds. As we have said, everyone's time is completely voluntary. I have almost a full-time job being the chairperson of the regional assembly without remuneration. We are not here to talk about that. But no-one gets any financial benefit from being involved at the regional or community level.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** This is not meant to be a loaded question. In terms of improving the relationship between the Commonwealth and the State in dealing with indigenous matters—to streamline—do you have a view about what can be or should be done to improve the synergy between those two levels of government?

**Mr JEFFRIES:** A bilateral agreement was signed between the Commonwealth and the State in March or April 2005 at the abolition of ATSIC about the relationship between the Commonwealth and the State in relation to indigenous affairs. It is meant to be all encompassing of the Two Ways Together framework. The Commonwealth, in partnership with the State, is responding through the State's Two Ways Together policy. I think it needs to be completely tightened up so there is no abrogation of responsibilities.

Particularly now, given that the new Rudd Labor Government might want to have a look at it because it was an agreement signed up with the previous Howard Government where shared responsibility agreements were a cornerstone of indigenous affairs policy. We still have not seen policy statements from Minister Macklin about if those things are to remain as part of the indigenous affairs policy.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** Jeanette, you made a comment about the importance of home and life at home being the cornerstone and very important in dealing with a number of issues that face indigenous communities. Could you elaborate on what you were getting at?

**Mrs BARKER:** As a community member I know what is going on in my community and I know that the kids at home are in dire straits with what is going on with the drugs, the alcohol and taking alcohol home, partying on and the kids not being able to attend school at night-time. I believe parents are very young. They do not have what I had, the structure I had with my grandmother, my mother and my sisters. Parents at home today do not have that structure and they are floundering to look after themselves. I believe that we as community members need to be looking at that and go and work with those families on the ground. I believe that is the only way we will get results like from the generation I was brought up where we had values, we had models and we had boundaries.

At the moment our communities do not have anything and that is what is coming out of the home, I believe. I can see that is what is happening in my community. All of us need to be responsible to stop what is going on. We have a meeting with the Minister of DOCS about these parents who are collecting this money to send these kids to school. Community members know that they go down the street every pay day, they spend that money in the pub, they buy drugs with it and our poor kids are left to suffer. What are we going to do about it? That is what I talk about when I talk about home life needs to be addressed.

**The Hon. MARIE FICARRA:** You are all volunteers and are not remunerated for what you do. Do you hold a lot of respect amongst your own Aboriginal community for that? We keep hearing that there is a lot of suspicion over the various committees and structures that have been set up where so-called indigenous community leaders are reimbursed and paid for their time. I am not trying to make an excuse, your expenses should be covered, but the fact you do this voluntarily, does that bring a lot of respect for your position within your own indigenous communities?

**Mr JEFFRIES:** You would hope so.

**The Hon. MARIE FICARRA:** I think you should be congratulated.

**Mr JEFFRIES:** I think testament that we are here shows there is a certain level of support that has enabled us to continue to participate and lead, particularly from Jenny, Richard and Alistair's

point of view, on their communities' behalf, and from my position I lead on behalf of the whole region.

**The Hon. MARIE FICARRA:** The Committee thanks you.

**Mrs BARKER:** It depends on who you ask that question, but I know that we do not. But where do they come when they need help? They know where to come, so that gives me joy in my heart.

**Mr JEFFRIES:** Just one closing remark, and I think it will further answer your previous question about what we think should happen. If we have any chance at all of overcoming the indigenous disadvantage, there needs to be a real seriousness between government about fixing this problem. They have to overcome the political ideologies and differences that separate them on this particular issue. I think a government's framework that aligns Federal and State responsibilities to respond to priorities that have been developed through a planning process, determined by Aboriginal people and then have a cycle of reporting back against delivery of those services. If we do not see the benefits, we do not know what to continue to work on. We still need some relationship between Aboriginal people and government to ensure this stuff happens. So, some partnership of some degree underpinning all of this whole framework would be something we see as an idealistic way to approaching and working on indigenous disadvantage.

**CHAIR:** Thank you very much for being with us today. Your submissions are vital to the outcome of our deliberations. Any recommendations we might propose need your concurrence and ownership. We thank you for your expertise today.

**Mr JEFFRIES:** Thank you. Just one final closing comment. Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning at the University Technology Sydney submitted a submission to the inquiry and attached to that submission is a report called Governance in Action in the Murdi Paaki Region—community governance in action. It is a chronological history report of the Government's development of the region since 1993. It is attached to the report. I just wanted to bring that to your attention as part of their submission.

**CHAIR:** We have received that submission.

(The witnesses withdrew)

**DARREN JOHN TOOMEY**, Chair, Dubbo Aboriginal Community Working Party, affirmed and examined;

**CHAIR:** Would you like to make some opening comments before we proceed to questions?

**Mr TOOMEY:** No. I just thank you for the opportunity to be here. Hopefully I can help and assist in putting some of the recommendations to bridge the gap on Aboriginal disadvantage.

**The Hon. MICHAEL VEITCH:** You were in the public gallery while the last group gave evidence. I asked a question about good and bad things with shared responsibility agreements. Can we have your comments?

**Mr TOOMEY:** The Dubbo Aboriginal Community Working Party has been involved in a couple of shared responsibility agreements. I think they are a great idea. I actually share resources from different agencies, obviously. The fact that we need to monitor, review and get regular feedback from those SRAs is very important. In saying that, I think also obviously they are very important. I think obviously the Government thinks that way and we have to follow suit.

**The Hon. MICHAEL VEITCH:** We need more feedback.

**Mr TOOMEY:** For example, because we are a voluntary committee, obviously we have portfolios that we need to attend regular meetings. Unfortunately, this falls on a couple of members because of work commitments and other commitments. If we can then get that feedback and they attend our meetings, which we meet once a month, and have regular updates and feedback so all the members can actually provide some feedback.

**The Hon. MICHAEL VEITCH:** Can you give an example of the shared responsibility agreements in which you have been involved?

**Mr TOOMEY:** The one that comes to mind is the Dubbo Youth Strategy, which has a couple of parts to it. Obviously, fixing up the oval in West Dubbo and also doing up the park, and also a bit whole of State and also engaging young Aboriginal children to become involved in sport and actually getting them involved and getting them into mainstream sport. The second part was to engage the parents to become referees and coaches and get them involved so it was more like a family-type program where we are trying to encourage sport.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** Can you give us an overview of the specific work done by the Dubbo Aboriginal Community Working Party as part of the whole Murdi Paaki trial? What is your experience and your insights?

**Mr TOOMEY:** I am not too sure about the Murdi Paaki trial. I am not too familiar with the COAG trial. The fact that the working party, I have just been chair for probably the last six months or a bit longer.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** Give us a view then of the activity of the party, what it does and what it seeks to achieve?

**Mr TOOMEY:** The working party, which meets every second Tuesday of the month, is a link between the community and the three tiers of government. Last year we signed off on a memorandum of understanding [MOU] with Dubbo City Council, which you will probably ask me about later. Dubbo City Council also auspices its funds and we meet on a regular basis. The working party concept obviously is to replace the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission [ATSIC] with small community participation. Obviously, we have struggled over the years to get members on and to retain them.

We have now set up a structure. We had some community meetings in the past to get some ideas from the community. We also have portfolios. Obviously when you become a member you sign up and you join a portfolio, so we cover health, education, housing, elders youth, women's business, social justice and all that type of stuff. We try to get to those meetings as much as we can. We try to



have a link with all other Aboriginal committees, such as the Aboriginal Justice Advisory Group, which is run through the Attorney General's Department. Obviously we have members on that. We try to become involved in local Aboriginal land council meetings with the police and other committees.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** Do you sense that there is some enthusiasm for the work of the community in Dubbo? Is there a feeling that it is playing a useful role? Is there support within the local community?

**Mr TOOMEY:** Yes and no. Obviously Dubbo is very unique and different pockets of the community may not understand the concept of the working party. We have people who complain about the working party but it is up to us to lift our profile. We have strategies in place at the moment to receive some training in media and we have some strategies to increase our participation of members and to lift our own capacity. After that we will filter out in the community.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** Can you tell us about the financial support and funding that you receive to support your activity?

**Mr TOOMEY:** We receive funding from the Federal Department of Families and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs [FaCSIA]. We work closely with the Indigenous Coordination Centre [ICC] and we also receive funding from the Department of Aboriginal Affairs [DAA]. This year we negotiated some funding from New South Wales housing. We will be working together with them and forming an MOU.

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** Can we talk about the MOU that you have either developed or are developing with council?

**Mr TOOMEY:** Yes.

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** What is it? What does it entail?

**Mr TOOMEY:** I have brought not brought a copy of the MOU with me. Mostly it is an agreement between council and the working party acknowledging each party. It is basically an open door for communication. We sit down and we negotiate any issues that arise and we go from there. The next stage of the MOU is to auspice our funds and to give us some support. We meet there regularly. We are looking at developing a cultural protocol with council and across other agencies—a cultural protocol relating to cultural awareness, welcome to country, and all that type of stuff. Dubbo is very unique. We need to sit down and work out some sort of cultural protocol with the working party and council.

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** Do you have any expectations of developing performance indicators with council with regard to things such as service delivery and also with regard to employment levels?

**Mr TOOMEY:** Definitely. At the moment we are negotiating with council to develop an Aboriginal employment strategy. I would like to mention that Dubbo City Council employs me as an Aboriginal liaison officer, so I have a conflict of interest. It helps in liaising with the community and then to link with council.

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** In those circumstances are you able to indicate to this Committee how successful council has been in achieving levels of employment for members of the Aboriginal community?

**Mr TOOMEY:** Obviously it has started over the years. The fact that I am employed is a bonus. We have some traineeships but the next step is to develop Aboriginal employment strategies and have Aboriginal people employed in different divisions right across council.

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** If you were asked to identify what you saw as major blocks to overcoming indigenous disadvantage in the Dubbo community, how would you identify them?

**Mr TOOMEY:** Basically the attitudes of people. We have put in strategies and programs to alleviate those problems. We are involved in job compacts, an initiative of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs [DAA], to increase Aboriginal employment in the private sector. We are also working closely with the job providers. Obviously a lot of Aboriginal people are employed in government departments. We need to break that cycle so they can get into the private sector. Basically, it is up to the community to support and mentor young people coming through and to assist them with their correction and employment.

**Dr JOHN KAYE:** I understand that the community working party is there to fill a vacuum that was left behind as a result of the demise of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission [ATSIC]. Can you give us an outline of how you operate compared to how ATSIC operated? What is there that must still be done? What can you not do that ATSIC did do?

**Mr TOOMEY:** Obviously the working parties have a different structure and a different role from that of ATSIC. I believe that there was no formal training and roll out of the working parties. This is my second time as a member of the working party. When I first joined I was a bit frustrated and I did not understand the concept of the working party, but now I do.

**Dr JOHN KAYE:** Did you get that just through experience? Nobody told you and there were no training opportunities?

**Mr TOOMEY:** That is correct. Obviously now that we have a bit of an understanding we have put in place structures to give the community some sort of direction. We have been involved in dealing with different tiers of government on a regular basis. Some of our members have done some training in governance, which is now compulsory. You need to be up to date with that. We are always looking at some training and we are looking at doing some media training so that we can roll it out and get that profile in the community, which will assist community members to have more of an understanding about the role of the working party.

**Dr JOHN KAYE:** If any gaps were left behind when ATSIC went, what is not being done that was being done when ATSIC was around?

**Mr TOOMEY:** There are gaps there, which is why we delayed talking about it. My understanding is that we still have a long way to go. We need to be trained to get submissions through ministerial support and through to the Parliament and to have that link directly. At a local level we have been to all the government meetings and we work with different departments on the 2020 vision. I do not know whether you are aware that nine strategies are involved in that. We lead agencies along those strategies and we support and provide advice and that link to the community.

**Dr JOHN KAYE:** Does your community working party [CWP] have a relationship with CWPs in other towns and communities in other areas?

**Mr TOOMEY:** Not formally. A while ago we spoke about the fact that we should be linking up with other regional working parties, providing support to one another and sharing ideas. I think every working party is different.

**Dr JOHN KAYE:** One benefit of the Murdi Paaki trial was the linking of a number of community working parties. What benefits do you believe would result from linking up those CWPs?

**Mr TOOMEY:** Supporting each other. It takes a unique person to be involved in this sort of committee and you have to be committed and passionate about your commitment. Obviously it will assist us in sharing ideas, sharing resources and networking with each other.

**Dr JOHN KAYE:** There will always be people who will stand outside the formal process and who will find reasons for not wanting to be part of it. Sometimes those views will be valid and sometimes they will not. I am moving in politically different areas, but what strategies does your CWP have in place to engage those people who have been critical of your CWP and who have stood outside the process?

**Mr TOOMEY:** All I say to those people is that I invite them to come to the table and to raise those issues at the table. Obviously you can sit back and whinge all you like, as people do across the board, but I invite those people to come along. If they want to be members they do not have to negotiate any sort of criteria; they can become a member, sit at the table and talk about issues there.

**The Hon. MARIE FICARRA:** Was there a reason why the Dubbo working party was not part of the COAG trial? Is there an historical reason?

**Mr TOOMEY:** I am sorry, I cannot provide information about that.

**The Hon. MARIE FICARRA:** What relationship has your working party had with other indigenous organisations and with elders in the Dubbo community?

**Mr TOOMEY:** We try to involve different people from different backgrounds because Dubbo is very unique and diverse. At the moment we have a large turnover of members, mainly people who have been there for a short time. But we always send out invitations. We try to encourage people and we try to pick people in the community that we feel have the necessary skills to be on the working party. Obviously we need people who have the capacity to participate and who are very passionate about the community. At the end of the day it is voluntary. As Mr Jeffries mentioned, we do not get any sitting fees or anything like that. We just go along to our meetings and we go from there.

**The Hon. MARIE FICARRA:** In the previous session, Jeanette Barker, who is sitting in the audience and who is chair of the Brewarrina working party, said that the biggest challenge was what happened in the family home trying to improve the lot of young indigenous families and the social issues that surround them. What are your views? How do we get into that home or family level?

**Mr TOOMEY:** I think especially in Dubbo with the 2020 vision, agencies are working together and they are looking at families and not just at individuals. In the past they would just concentrate on young people. If we took them away from their home environment they would be in the same situation once they went back. We are looking at some strategies. Obviously there are dysfunctional families. We need to work with those families and, at the same time, we need to focus on different people—mums, dads, uncles, aunties and the kids themselves. I think that is one strategy that we need to work on. We have talking for years about getting a cultural centre in Dubbo. Maybe we will have an opportunity to pursue that. We will let families go there and engage in some programs.

**The Hon. MARIE FICARRA:** Are there young indigenous mothers and fathers that are not getting the parenting skills and that do not have support networks to help them when they get into trouble with alcohol or drugs? Is that a matter of concern?

**Mr TOOMEY:** Yes. Obviously a lot of young people are becoming young parents. The Government gave us baby bonuses, which might play a big part in that at some stage. They are having children at a young age and they do not have any skills. There are programs around. I am aware of the Hey Dad! Program, which is designed to work with Aboriginal dads, pops and uncles and give them a bit of an overview of how to be a parent. The Hey Dad! Program was implemented and designed by Centacare. I am also involved in a men's group. We are trying to target young males to assist in those types of programs and to become mentors to young people.

**The Hon. MARIE FICARRA:** To develop that network of mentors.

**Mr TOOMEY:** That is the key, if the community do it. Obviously the men's groups around the western region are very important and they play a big role in the community, the same as women's groups.

**Dr JOHN KAYE:** I would like to ask a slightly tricky and sensitive question. Dubbo has a number of Aboriginal communities. However, there is only one community working party. Does that work, or is there an argument that you need separate community working parties? I can see arguments both ways, but what is your view?

**Mr TOOMEY:** We need to sort that out between ourselves. One working party working together in the same direction will be a lot more beneficial rather than having separate working parties. We are here today to discuss the disadvantage in our communities. That is one of the reasons why—we are all doing our own things.

**Dr JOHN KAYE:** Does community friction play out in the working party?

**Mr TOOMEY:** Yes.

**Dr JOHN KAYE:** But you can handle it in that context.

**Mr TOOMEY:** I always invite critics to come to the table and discuss the issue. They may come up with an idea that will assist us. We are there for the community, not ourselves.

**CHAIR:** It sounds like most community groups I have been involved in.

**The Hon. MICHAEL VEITCH:** A bit earlier, in response to a question, you talked about how you work with other Aboriginal organisations. Can you talk us through that?

**Mr TOOMEY:** I will give a bit of background. We were working with a \$300,000 budget for three years for an office, a car and two staff members. Now we have a \$35,000 budget. Out of that, we have come a long way in relation to working closely with government departments. Obviously, different organisations have had some issues. But we tried to reflect and have each member attend meetings and have that link between the community organisations.

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** You went from a budget of \$300,000 down to \$35,000. How did that happen?

**Mr TOOMEY:** Government.

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** State or Federal?

**Mr TOOMEY:** I do not know. You would have to speak to one of the Indigenous Coordination Centre people. I will get that information.

**The Hon. TREVOR KHAN:** I would appreciate that.

**Mr TOOMEY:** In saying that, we are still moving forward and doing a lot of things behind the scenes with shared responsibility agreements and memorandums of understanding. We are endeavouring to move in the right direction.

**The Hon. MICHAEL VEITCH:** We have heard a lot about the importance of education in Aboriginal communities. An important part of that is language. There is such a diverse range of clans or traditional people here. How does that play out? What is your view about the importance of language?

**Mr TOOMEY:** It is very important. We have TAFE running some courses. At one stage I would like to learn my language. I am Wiradjuri. I am from just down the road at Wellington. I have a large family base there. Language and education are very important. If we share that and get a bit of culture, that will help our young people and give them direction in the future.

**The Hon. MICHAEL VEITCH:** As a Wiradjuri man you should know that the first Aboriginal language spoken in the New South Wales Parliament was when Linda Burney spoke Wiradjuri. You should be very proud of that.

**Mr TOOMEY:** Yes.

**CHAIR:** Would you like to make any final comments?

**Mr TOOMEY:** I thank you for the opportunity to come in and to provide some evidence.

CORRECTED

**CHAIR:** Thank you for coming.

**(The witness withdrew)**

**(The Committee adjourned at 1.07 p.m.)**