



TORRES SHIRE COUNCIL

To lead, provide & facilitate a sustainable, safe and culturally vibrant community

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Productivity Commissioner

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INTRODUCTION

A big Esso for inviting Torres Shire Council to follow up its original submission (October 2022) to the Review and our meeting with your team here on Thursday Island, on 7th October 2022, with a submission regarding Review Paper Two – Review of National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

Council confirms that during the discussion between the Productivity Commission (the Commission) team and Deputy Mayor Gabriel Bani, Cr. John Abednego and CEO Dalassa Yorkston, key themes discussed were:

- Statistics for the Torres Shire (the region of the Torres Strait and Northern Peninsula) show the wide discrepancy in outcomes between the Shire and region and the rest of Queensland – and the gap is not closing. The differences in incomes and rates of homelessness are particularly concerning, especially in light of greater costs of living in the Torres Strait and Northern Peninsula.
- Provision of government services by State and Federal governments are crowding out local delivery. There are more than 30 agencies on Thursday Island serving the Torres Shire. Many of the jobs could be done by local people, but it's an unequal playing field with mainland government organisations offering non-local staff subsidised travel and housing.

- The Torres Shire Council’s Masig Statement (August 2022) is about governance reform – empowerment for the people of the Torres Strait and Northern Peninsula Area to make their own decisions.
- Culture and language revitalisation is the core foundation of improving outcomes for Torres Strait Islander people. Culture has to be central to restoring health and wellbeing. This point is further highlighted in the attached study jointly conducted by the Australian Governments NHMRC, James Cook University and the Queensland Government¹, which amply illustrates the devastating impact of cultural erosion in our communities. Furthermore it demonstrates the interconnectedness of measures that not only result in the disturbing prevalence of dementia but also impacts on all of the priority reform areas.

It is with these key messages in mind that Council wishes to address the questions raised regarding the Commission’s proposed approach. Council has previously addressed the priority areas and would welcome an opportunity in 2023 to further discuss these areas. Council has principally focussed on the approach and measures to assess socio- economic outcomes as these are matters for which Council regards as primary considerations. Council in making this observation reaffirms its submission to the Productivity Commission’s Issues Paper, June 2019, that:

“... delivering better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is premised on self-determination. Regional autonomy has been the aspiration of Torres Strait Islander peoples since the Inaugural Island Council Meeting in 1937. This aspiration has been outlined in numerous reports and enquiries involving both State and Federal governments for decades, including the Report to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs –Torres Strait Islanders - A new deal - A Report on Greater Autonomy for Torres Strait Islanders (August 1997) and from the Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA) initiated Greater Autonomy Task Force, which created the Bamaga Accord (October 2001)”. Council notes that this aspiration is now enshrined in the 23rd August 2022 Masig Statement - Malungu Yangu Wakay (Voice from the Deep).

In 2019, Council noted:

Whilst the Commonwealth has committed to co-design of Closing the Gap from 2019-onwards, the Productivity Commission notes that of the Closing the Gap targets set to 2018, only two of the

¹ Strivens Edward, Russell Sarah, Quigley Rachel, Miller Gavin, Sagigi Betty, Thompson Fintan, (30 September 2021) ‘Prevalence of Dementia in Torres Strait Islander Communities’, Collage of Medicine and Dentistry, James Cook University.

seven were on track. The Issues Paper stresses better evaluation of policies; and in so doing somewhat misses the point. Certainly, evaluation and evidence-based decision making are central to determining the success or otherwise of programs and initiatives; but if these programs do not come from - and are not designed by - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, they will continue to fail.

The Issues Paper notes the total spend and per capita spend on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was \$33.4 billion as at 2015-2016 and per capita \$44,886.

It fails to note that the targeted allocation of money at poor performing programs and entities and failing to support those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations kicking goals leaves any intelligent observer with the impression that the Federal Government throws money at troubled organisations and communities to “keep them quiet”, rather than achieving discernible and measurable improvements based on a self-determination model.

For too long, policy makers and governments have over-complicated the root cause of policy and program failures affecting First Nations people. They have argued, as indeed may be discerned in the Productivity Commission’s Issues Paper, that a locus of such failure resides in policy and program evaluation. Council submits that the root cause is the absence of indigenous agency, indigenous policy design and indigenous program control. Council asserts that the primacy of focus now should be on the co-design of the programs emanating out of the work of the Joint Council, and consequently and subsequently there must be the co-design of effective and objective evaluation of the programs.

It is for these reasons that Council believes that greater attention to how as well as what is being evaluated is so important.

Questions relating to the Commission’s proposed approach to the review

How could the Commission’s proposed approach to the review (described in section 2 of this paper) be strengthened? In assessing progress on the commitments in the Agreement and the range of actions governments are taking, the Commission will be seeking to understand whether they will collectively lead to the structural changes envisaged by the Priority Reforms. The Agreement recognises that ‘structural change in the way Governments work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is needed to close the gap’ (cl. 6). Such change can be interpreted as deep and enduring changes to systems, processes and institutions. It is these sorts of changes that the

- *Commission would like to pay particular attention to in the review, including through case studies (Section 2).*
- Council is of the view that one approach is to regionalise the review, by which we mean that the Torres Strait and Northern Peninsula area is a distinct region as indeed are the APY Lands in South Australia and the Homelands in the Northern Territory that can provide the Commission with an excellent opportunity to gather not only case studies but a deeper and more detailed examination of progress of the priority reforms. It will effectively involve, as indeed the Reform does, all tiers of government and will be culturally appropriate and accord with the Masig Statement that calls for such an approach in progressing the aspirations of Torres Strait Islanders and Aboriginal people. It would also mean that the case studies that are undertaken will be through indigenous engagement and program evaluation will integrate indigenous agency.

Council has proposed to the Queensland Government that the Government Statistician (Queensland Treasury) produces a report card on 23rd August of each year (the anniversary of the signing of the Masig Statement) based on the table reproduced in this submission, using data from the regional profiles. The regional approach, rather than an individual LGA approach, connects with the proposal of regional voices regarding the proposed Voice to Parliament. A further benefit with this approach is that this data includes **both Queensland and Commonwealth** data and is a practical way to track progress in Closing the Gap.

Questions relating to the socioeconomic outcomes

- *Which socioeconomic outcomes should the Commission focus on in the review, and why?*
- *Are the targets and indicators for the socioeconomic outcomes appropriate?*
- *Can you point to instances where implementing the Priority Reforms is having a tangible effect on the socioeconomic outcomes?*

The socio-economic outcomes Council and the region's local governments have requested the Government Statistician to focus on in preparing a score card each year are outlined below.

This data from the region covers the Northern Peninsula and Torres Strait region. We have sought support from both the Queensland and Commonwealth Governments in preparing this annual score card. We feel this comparison is not only achievable but provides reliable comparisons. Furthermore, it is our view that once the region reaches parity with Queensland, the issue then becomes more one of the federation reaching parity by the target date.

Council notes that the Closing the Gap Agreement was developed in partnership between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives and all Australian governments and commits governments (including the Queensland Government) to working in full and genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in making policies to close the gap. Finally, it is to be noted that the Queensland Regional Profiles also apply the national census data and other relevant Australian data sets.

The age of death in our region is still 12 years less than the median age of 80 in Queensland. Council’s LGA median age projection is 34.5 years as of 30 June 2041, whereas the median age projection for Queensland is 40.7 years as at 30 June 2041.

Council would appreciate the Department of Education sharing its data on an annual basis regarding how the region is tracking in all five domains of the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) and this data should form part of the annual score card tabled on 23rd August each year.

Council again draws attention to the table of comparative socio-economic statistics referenced earlier in this submission. Council seeks better disaggregated data on youth unemployment and would appreciate the inclusion of employment by age and gender in addition to the data available on professions, occupations and industries and that this data form part of the proposed annual score card.

Category	Our Region	Queensland
Estimated Resident Population (ERP)	0.2% estimated growth over 10 years	1.5% over 10 years
Age Profile	30.7% = Aged 0-14 62.6% = Aged 15-64 6.7% = Aged 65+ 27.3 years = Median age	19.3% = Aged 0-14 64.6% = Aged 15-64 16.1% = Aged 65+ 37.8 years = Median Age
Population Projection	Increase 0.6% per year over 25 years 30.3 years = pop mean age as at 30 June 2041	Increase 1.6% per year over 25 years 40.7 years = pop mean age as at 30 June 2041
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Population	81.2%	4.6%
Births and Deaths	205 registered births 29 registered deaths (2020)	59,490 registered births 31,367 registered deaths (2020)
Migration	12.6% with a different address one year ago	17.5% with a different address one year ago
Country of Birth	4.6% born overseas	22.7% born overseas
Language spoken at home	70.3% a language other than English	13.5% a language other than English

Family Composition	43.2% of total families = couple families	41.2% of total families = couple families
Household Composition	64.% one family households of total households	70.0% one family households of total households
Dwellings	77.6% separate houses	74.8% separate houses
Dwellings by tenure type	6.9% fully owned	29.1% fully owned
Homelessness	376.1 per 10,000 persons	45.6 per 10,000 persons
Number of Motor Vehicles per dwelling	7.2% with 3 or more motor vehicles 35.3% with no motor vehicles	20.0% with 3 or more motor vehicles 5.7% with no motor vehicles
Internet Access	68.2% with internet access	83.7% with internet access
Schooling	62.2% with year 11 or 12 schooling 58.0% with no school qual	63.6% with year 11 or 12 schooling 59.1% with no school qual
Degree or Diploma	58.1%	59.1%
Profound/Severe Disability	2.9%	6.0%
Socio-economic disadvantage	No person is in the least disadvantaged 81.8% in most disadvantaged quintile	20% are in least disadvantaged 20% in most disadvantaged quintile
Remoteness	100% in very remote	1.1% in very remote
Total Personal Income	\$28,903 = median income	\$40,924 = median income
Total Family Income	\$64,646 = median per year 17.7% = low-income families	\$105,248 = median per year 6.9% = low-income families
Unemployment	16.8% = March 2022	4.9% = March 2022
Building Approvals	5 new houses ending 31 May 2022	26,001 houses ending 31 May 2022

The first observation Council would make is that progress on a number of these reforms is historical rather than as a direct consequence of, or causatively linked to, the Reforms (the best example being educational achievement, where families have been very invested in their children's education and a significant cohort of children/young people each year attend boarding school). Certainly, the funding supports provided through the State and Commonwealth schemes have been important but so too has the funding support from families – despite the fact that 20% of our community is in the poorest quintile in Queensland. Non-government schools do award scholarships for sporting and tuition fees only. Whilst there are a number of primary schools both public and private in the region, there is only one Government funded highschool and children and young people from the outer islands board on Thursday Island and attend the highschool.

Why is Council referring to this detail? Because it is our view that the available data should be accompanied by qualitative data (which, of course, the Commission understands, hence the case studies) and not just quantitative data and this data is best captured through collaboration with particularly local governments and the service agencies (government and non-government) in the region. Equally, Council would encourage a re-think about case studies.

Experiential input is intended to be one of the purposes of these case studies, but the risk is that they will be framed in an entirely Eurocentric way – with language, precepts and concepts that may not be culturally congruent with the experiences of Torres Strait Islanders and Aboriginal people of the region. The best approach is capturing the lived experience of our people through culturally safe engagement in the region.

Council does not want to reduce the drivers frustrating the achievement of the reform outcomes to economics alone, nevertheless, economic factors are critical and the early 2023 Premier's Cost of Living Summit here in the region will be an invaluable source of quantitative and qualitative data collection.

Council successfully called for this Summit and has, in preparation prepared several issues papers, Council recommends dedicated research involving the Commonwealth and Queensland Productivity Commissions. Council is more than pleased to elaborate further once the proposal is presented to the summit as follows:

Important qualitative and quantitative from such research may also feed into the Commission's work regarding the Reforms.

Are there alternative ways of assessing progress? How can the Commission's review be done in a way that will complement the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led review?

Council believes that the proposed approach contained in our October 2022 submission to the review provides further elaboration of the proposed regional approach. It is, in our view, the best approach to ensuring that the Commission's review is undertaken in a way that complements the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander – led review. It also answers the Commission's query regarding putting the engagement principles enunciated in July 2022 into practice.

Questions relating to the selection of case studies

- *The Commission would like to include case studies that cover the range of actions that governments are taking to implement the Priority Reforms (summarised in table 2). The case studies would focus on what's working, and why, and what isn't working, and why.*
- *The socio-economic metrics outlined above provide some insight into areas that require further examination (e.g., why is education doing so well but housing so poorly? What is the impact of high Torres Strait and Aboriginal languages use in the region on the priority reform areas?).*
- *Can you provide examples of specific government policies or programs that are making a strong contribution (or are posing a barrier) to progressing the Priority Reforms or socioeconomic*

- *outcomes that the Commission should focus on as case studies? Please also provide any existing evaluations, data or other research that could support the Commission's analysis.*

It is Council's view that the details that will emerge from the nearly 2023 Summit referred to above will provide excellent examples to answer this question.

What criteria should the Commission use to select case studies? Are the Commission's suggested criteria in section 2 appropriate? Are there other criteria the Commission should use?

Council would like to contribute further, in early 2023, regarding this question as it is germane to how Council is examining how the region's peoples provide clear input from their lived experience. Council has already commenced work in this regard but will be in a much better position to submit much greater detail to the Commission in early 2023.

Council appreciates the ongoing opportunity to provide input into the Commission's important work and looks forward to discussing these matters with you further.

Yours faithfully,

DALASSA YORKSTON

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER - TORRES SHIRE COUNCIL