Supplementary submission

Child Safety Commission of Inquiry 2026

Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership (Cape York Institute) Submission

May 2026

Contents

CAPE YORK INSTITUTE
FOR POLICY & LEADERSHIP

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Via email: info@childsafetyinquiry.qld.gov.au

Dear Commissioner Anastassiou,

Thank you for the opportunity to meet with the Commission and speak to our April submission.

The day of our meeting came the unbearable news that the body of Kumanjayi Little Baby, taken from a family home at Old Timer's Town Camp near Alice Springs, had been found in a dry creek bed. Little Baby had been exposed to extremely unsafe, alcohol-fuelled circumstances when she was at her most vulnerable. Despite enormous public expenditure directed towards additional services in Alice Springs, the conditions that placed her at risk remained unchanged. We refer to this tragedy not to prejudge matters properly reserved for other processes, but because the pattern is tragically familiar.

When alcohol becomes structurally embedded in daily life, it does not sit innocently alongside poverty and disadvantage. It helps to organise them, shaping how time is used, how income is spent, how families function and how children grow up, and holding communities back until it is brought under control. Children in Cape York and across remote Queensland continue to live in circumstances where alcohol-driven dysfunction, harmful adult behaviour, disorder, and the erosion of family responsibility place them in avoidable danger. The State intervenes most decisively only after serious harm has already occurred.

Alongside alcohol and drugs, gambling has become a second drain on already thin household resources. The powerful and predatory gambling industry deliberately concentrates poker machines and betting outlets in low-income areas and online casino algorithms, inducements and bonuses are geared to keep vulnerable people playing and chasing losses. Money that should buy food, uniforms, rent and electricity is instead pulled into pokies, online betting and card games, often funded by passive welfare. The result for children is the same as with grog: they go without, routines disintegrate, and nights are given over to adult pursuits, while harm is normalised.

Neither the human nor financial costs of this ongoing failure are acceptable. We cannot afford a system that continues to fail families at the bottom of our society. Without a new approach, children will continue to suffer serious harm, and some will die.

Your invitation to make a supplementary submission is therefore timely and important. From our reform experience in Cape York, we believe the lessons about what must be done are clear.

Our central contention is that Queensland's child safety crisis cannot be resolved through more services alone, nor through a policy mindset that treats the visible symptoms of harm while refusing to confront the conditions that produce it. When the State fails to enable early levers of family responsibility—around school attendance, child wellbeing, family conduct, rent, alcohol, and welfare-supported behaviour—coercion does not disappear. It simply arrives later in harsher forms, including child removal, detention, and, at times, criminalisation.

The Family Responsibilities Commission (FRC) remains one of the few serious responsibility-based mechanisms in Queensland capable of acting before these late-stage interventions become necessary. However, the work of the FRC must be strengthened through practical support for families who are attempting to take responsibility, and through expanded

opportunities—including real, minimum wage jobs for all those who want to work. Cape York's experience shows that family responsibility can be rebuilt, but also that responsibility withers when people do what is asked of them and the minimum opportunities required for progress never arrive.

This submission also deals more fully with the central role of alcohol and gambling in child harm. The Commission's inquiry into child safety cannot avoid the fact that, in communities such as Aurukun, alcohol policy is child protection policy. Where drunkenness, violence, neglect, educational collapse, gambling, and the erosion of adult responsibility accumulate within homes, children bear the full weight of policy failure.

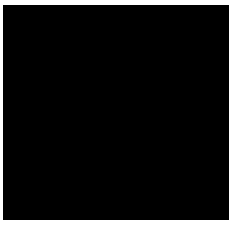
This submission does not ask the Commission to add further ornaments to the existing system. It asks the Commission to confront the deeper structural misdiagnosis that has governed policy since Forde: the refusal to treat alcohol and drug abuse as epidemics in their own right, and the refusal to accept that genuine self-determination for First Nations families at the bottom requires both the right to take responsibility and the State's fulfilment of its fundamental duty to children by providing the foundational opportunities every Australian family requires to get ahead.

We are grateful for the opportunity to assist the Commission further.

Yours sincerely,

Noel Pearson
Founder
Cape York Partnership

Fiona Jose
Group Chief Executive Officer
Cape York Partnership



Kirsty Davis
Chief Executive Officer
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Introduction: The Commission at the Fork in the Road

Commissioner, you asked what it will take to end a crisis that has deepened across thirty years of inquiries.

Queensland has become a serial inquirer while remaining a reluctant reformer. The answer does not lie in another round of rhetorical commitment to 'early intervention', nor in further expansion of a fragmented and often ineffective service system that already costs billions yet frequently fails to reach those most in need.[1] It lies in whether Queensland is prepared to support institutional reform capable of rebuilding family responsibility and expanding genuine opportunity so that capability can grow.

A recurring barrier to meaningful reform in Queensland has been the tendency for governments to substitute endless consultation for decisive action. Consultation is essential, particularly where reforms affect communities and local authority. But too often it has become a mechanism for delay, dilution and avoidance.

The result is 'death by a 1000 consultations'—including, tragically, the literal death of vulnerable children. Urgent reforms are deferred through further meetings, reviews, and engagement processes while, children continue to experience neglect, violence, chronic truancy and developmental harm.

Governments repeatedly seek levels of consensus that are rarely achievable in any community, particularly where it is clear the reforms needed challenge entrenched interests, alcohol availability, passive welfare settings or longstanding dysfunction. Communities are treated as though unanimity is a precondition for action, even where many local leaders—particularly women and Elders are already calling for stronger responsibility-based measures. Governments must support local reform leadership and act with the courage necessary to protect children and rebuild the conditions in which families can succeed.

For Cape York, the Commission should recommend a responsibility-based early intervention framework that combines enforceable behavioural expectations with practical support and real economic opportunity.

Family Responsibility Can Be Rebuilt

The Family Responsibilities Commission is Child Protection, Not Adult Punishment

The Faily Responsibilities Commission (FRC)[2] responds to patterns of child harm, chronic truancy, violence, neglect and welfare-fuelled instability that are concentrated, visible and longstanding in particular communities. It is not designed as a blanket punishment model. Its structure is restorative and support-oriented, combining conferencing, local leadership, case

[1] CEDA (Committee for Economic Development of Australia). 2021. *Disrupting Disadvantage Part 2*. CEDA.

[2] The FRC is a statutory body established under the *Family Responsibilities Commission Act 2008* (Qld), operating with the benefit of complementary Commonwealth social security legislation.[2]

planning, referral pathways and, where necessary, conditional welfare mechanisms aimed at changing family conduct before children are removed or adults become entrenched in the justice system.

Criticisms that responsibility mechanisms of this kind are inherently discriminatory or punitive misunderstand their rationale and function.

The moral logic of the current system is, in many respects, inverted. When the State refuses to use proportionate, early responsibility mechanisms when children first show signs of risk, coercion does not disappear. It is merely postponed until it arrives in harsher forms—child removal, residential care, youth detention, imprisonment and other life-long impacts. While many enthusiastically espouse support for children's human rights, the FRC helps to deliver them.

The FRC is therefore best understood not as discriminatory exceptionalism, but as an earlier, more humane and more child-centred alternative to the blunt force of the tertiary system. Its legitimacy rests significantly on local authority. Community evidence consistently points to the importance of Local Commissioners being known, trusted and capable of speaking with local knowledge, cultural understanding and moral authority that distant bureaucracies cannot replicate.

For these reasons, the FRC should be understood as a serious child protection mechanism. It hardwires responsibility into early intervention while also offering support, preserving the possibility of family stabilisation, and seeking to keep children safe before the State resorts to removal and downstream coercion.

In a child safety system that too often acts late and bluntly, the combination of local authority, statutory footing, case management and conditional income support remains one of the most important reform lessons Cape York has to offer.

Evidence of Family Responsibilities Commission success

The FRC and associated Cape York reforms have been extensively scrutinised. A substantial evidence base has accumulated over the life of the model, including through independent evaluations and reviews.

Four evaluative exercises are particularly relevant:

1. the 2010 KPMG Implementation Review of the FRC
2. the 2012 Cape York Welfare Reform Evaluation
3. the 2018 Queensland University of Technology Strategic Evaluation of Cape York Income Management
4. the 2014 Health Outcomes International Evaluation of Cape York Wellbeing Centres, which provides evidence about outcomes for FRC-referred clients.

Further details of these evaluations and their methods are set out in **Appendix A**. Together, the evidence shows that the FRC has strengthened local authority, supported behavioural change, improved school attendance outcomes, and enabled more purposeful engagement with supports.

The independent 2012 evaluation of the Cape York Welfare Reform trial concluded that, after only three years, the trial showed "a level of progress that has rarely been evident".[3] It identified "subtle but fundamental shifts in behaviour" which, if sustained and built upon, could yield significant longer-term results. The evaluation also found that improvements in school attendance, educational attainment, money management and willingness to take responsibility provided a foundation for greater engagement in the economy.

Strengthening Local Authority

A consistent finding across the evaluations is that the FRC strengthened local authority. The involvement of Local Commissioners—Elders and respected community leaders with statutory powers—enabled responsibility to be asserted through people with local knowledge, cultural authority and community credibility.[4]

The FRC's conferencing model was credited with encouraging compliance with behavioural obligations, driving attitudinal change, helping individuals confront problems, restoring Indigenous authority, and shifting ownership of problems back towards the local level. The conferencing process was also found to resonate with traditional Aboriginal dispute resolution practices and restorative justice principles.[5]

This matters because early intervention is most effective when families are not simply referred to distant services, but are called to account by people who know them, understand the local context, and can insist on responsibility in a way bureaucratic systems rarely can.

Conferencing and School Attendance

The evidence also indicates that FRC conferencing can change behaviour. Linked data analysis undertaken as part of the Cape York Welfare Reform Evaluation found that FRC conferencing was followed by improved school attendance outcomes for the children of those conferenced.

In Aurukun, where the available numbers allowed these more rigorous analyses, primary school attendance rose from levels as low as 30 per cent to around 75 per cent during the trial, which remains a record high for Aurukun. That improvement cannot be attributed to conferencing alone, but the linked data analyses suggests that FRC conferencing had a direct positive effect on school attendance for the children of conferenced clients.[6]

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[3] See Limerick, M. (2012). "Evaluation overview." In *Cape York Welfare Reform Evaluation 2012*. Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.

[4] See Chapter 5 Authority Leadership and Social Norms.

[5] Ibid at p. 34, 37, 38 & 49. See John Von Sturmer's Summary Report, at p. 6. Limerick (2012) op. cit. at p. 6.

[6] Limerick (2012) op. cit. This type of analysis is important, as it tends to suggest a direct or causal link between FRC conferences and subsequent improvements in client's behaviour. As was stated in the evaluation report, "These types of analysis, while costly and time consuming, provide an excellent basis for evaluating the efficacy of specific measures". Analysis was conducted for Aurukun, where numbers were large enough. The significant positive effect of conferences did appear to diminish over time, suggesting a need for ongoing adaptation.

This is highly significant for child safety. In communities where chronic non-attendance is one of the clearest early signs of parental dysfunction, neglect or household disorder, improved school attendance is not merely an education outcome. It is an early child-protection outcome.

Income Management and Household Stability

Income management under the FRC model has also produced important stabilising effects. Its immediate purpose is to ensure that a proportion of income support is directed towards essentials such as food, rent, utilities and children's needs, rather than being diverted to grog, gambling or chronic disorder.

By 2023, more than $33 million had been protected under Conditional Income Management across the five FRC communities, with most expenditure directed to grocery stores and supermarkets. This represents practical protection for children and households where parental dysfunction, addiction or financial instability would otherwise place basic needs at risk.

The 2018 Strategic Evaluation of Cape York Income Management examined outcomes for income-managed FRC clients through event history analysis. It found that while income management did not necessarily eliminate repeat breach notifications, it appeared to increase the time between breaches. [7] This suggests that, when situated within the broader FRC model of conferencing, case planning and referral, income management can contribute to stabilisation and behavioural change over time.

FRC Referrals and Engagement with Support

The evidence also challenges the assumption that pressured or mandated engagement with support is necessarily ineffective. FRC referrals are not identical to voluntary engagement: they often involve people who are more resistant to change, or who have not yet acknowledged the seriousness of the problem. The relevant question is therefore not whether voluntary support is preferable in principle, but whether FRC referral is more effective than leaving people to drift until crisis, removal or imprisonment occurs.

The Wellbeing Centre Evaluation found statistically significant positive changes among FRC-referred clients, indicating that the FRC referral pathway can lead to meaningful engagement and behaviour change.[8] Cape York Partnership's MPower data also indicate that FRC clients are more likely to engage in budgeting and financial coaching than other voluntary MPower members, that participation is strong among FRC-referred clients including those subject to case plans, and that many remain engaged after their case plans end.

This is an important practical lesson. The FRC creates structured pressure towards responsibility, but it also directs people into supports that can help them change. In that sense, its value lies not only in enforcement, but in the way local authority, statutory powers, case planning, income management and practical supports are brought together around families before the tertiary system takes over.

The Evidence Base Supports Strengthening the Model

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[7] QUT (2018) op. cit. at p. 63.

[8] HOI (2018) at p. 7.

The evidence does not show that the FRC is a complete solution, or that every family changed. Nor does it remove the need for adaptation, stronger supports and better opportunity structures. But it does show something crucial: behaviour, norms and family functioning can change when local authority, statutory responsibility mechanisms and practical supports are aligned.

The proper lesson is therefore not that the FRC should be treated as a finished model, but that it should be strengthened, expanded and better supported. The evidence accumulated over more than a decade provides a foundation for a more capable responsibility-and-opportunity system: one that acts early, protects children, supports parents to change, and reduces reliance on the blunt and costly interventions of child removal, detention and prison.

Responsibility Systems Work When Responsibility and Opportunity Are Joined

Cape York's reform experience demonstrates that entrenched disadvantage is not immutable. When responsibility is made clear and joined to genuine opportunity, children and families can build the capabilities that change life trajectories. Behaviour can stabilise, families can rebuild, and children born into severe disadvantage can move into education, employment and independence within a single generation.

This was the central design principle of the Cape York Welfare Reform agenda and the FRC. The FRC was never intended to operate as a standalone compliance mechanism. Its purpose was not simply to identify dysfunction or impose consequences, but to make responsibilities clear, use local authority to confront harmful behaviour, and then connect families to practical supports capable of helping them stabilise, change course and build capability over time.

Without those supports, the FRC risks becoming little more than a conferencing and monitoring mechanism rather than a structure that helps families convert effort into lasting change.

Cape York's welfare reform model has therefore always rested on a simple proposition: if families at the bottom are asked to take responsibility for their children, finances, schooling and future, they must also be met with real support and opportunities to progress. Responsibility must be joined to practical pathways for stability, skill development, saving, planning, economic participation and asset-building.

For this reason, Cape York developed a broader architecture of responsibility and opportunity supports around the FRC rather than relying solely on passive service delivery. These supports were designed not merely to provide assistance, but to protect effort, reward discipline and convert small acts of responsibility into education, stability, savings and assets.

Through the Pama Platform (a web/mobile-based application) and associated Opportunity Accounts, families have been able to save towards school costs, training, vehicles for work, housing and other long-term goals within structured arrangements designed to protect savings from immediate pressures and chronic financial instability. In practical terms, money put aside during periods of responsibility is protected and directed towards opportunities for children and families rather than dissipated through crisis, grog or gambling.

These products were designed as capability-building tools, not simply savings accounts. Families were supported through financial coaching, budgeting assistance and practical guidance delivered through programs such as MPower and the Opportunity Hubs. The objective

was not merely financial management, but the development of knowledge, good habits, planning skills and economic competencies that allow families to move towards greater stability and independence.[9]

The same principle applied to parenting capability. Programs such as *Strong Families* and *Home Pride* combined peer mentoring, cultural knowledge and structured, hands-on support to help parents strengthen routines, child development, behaviour management and family functioning within the home itself. The policy lesson is clear: parents who take responsibility must be able to access practical supports that change day-to-day behaviour and household functioning, rather than receiving generic referrals that rarely alter outcomes.

In Cape York, the clearest evidence sits in education. Between 2005 and 2024, the Cape York Leaders Program enabled young people from some of the most disadvantaged circumstances in Australia to attend quality secondary schools in Brisbane and regional centres. Approximately 94 per cent of participating students completed Year 12. By contrast, Year 12 completion in Cape York outside the program remains around 5 per cent or less.

Around 70 per cent of CYLP graduates have secured full-time employment, earning on average about $50,000 more each year than welfare recipients. This is what closing the gap within a generation looks like: a child born into entrenched disadvantage finishing school, entering work or university, and beginning adulthood on fundamentally different terms.[10]

That success depended upon a deliberate architecture of responsibility and support. Families accepted expectations around school attendance and behaviour, saved towards education costs, and remained engaged with their children's schooling. Local leaders and institutions held the line around expectations, while practical opportunities were opened through scholarships, boarding support, financial coaching, savings products and structured case management.

Community evidence from Aurukun, Coen, Hope Vale and Mossman Gorge points to the same pattern repeatedly. When local authority is combined with practical supports and genuine opportunity, families respond. School attendance improves, parents engage more consistently, tenancy compliance strengthens, money is managed more effectively, and children gain access to opportunities that would otherwise remain closed.

These are not marginal shifts. They indicate that when local authority, structured support and opportunity are aligned, families are better able to stabilise and meet basic responsibilities before the tertiary system intervenes.

The most effective child safety intervention is therefore often earlier and more developmental than the downstream coercion that dominates public expenditure and public debate.

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[9] Recent data from the Cape York Partnership *Impact Report and Empowerment Report 2026: Stories and Statistics from Opportunity products and Programs* show Opportunity Products and programs are associated with sustained improvement in financial capability and education participation.

[10] An independent review of the Cape York Leaders Program by Gargun, *20 Years of Educational Impact and Leadership Development Report 2025,* found a Year 12 completion rate of around 95 per cent and a student retention rate from Year 7 to Year 12 of 85 per cent, exceeding national averages.

At the same time, Cape York's experience demonstrates that responsibility cannot be sustained on promises alone. The reforms showed that people at the bottom are willing to respond to higher expectations, but they also revealed the limits of responsibility when opportunities remain absent.

This became one of the central lessons of the Cape York Welfare Reform trial. Communities accepted conditional welfare, local authority mechanisms and higher behavioural expectations, but many of the promised opportunities—particularly employment pathways and broader economic participation—did not materialise at sufficient scale.

In Cape York, labour markets remain small, thin and geographically isolated. Many people want to work; the continuing constraint is often not motivation, but the limited availability of jobs and economic opportunities. Jobs are not interchangeable with income support. Work builds skills, structures life, and anchors responsibility in ways welfare cannot. Where work is absent, the link between effort and reward breaks down.

The Cape York Welfare Reform Evaluation reached the same conclusion, finding that sustainable improvement requires "fundamental behaviour and norm change, matched with genuine opportunities", and that the absence of opportunities remained "the most significant challenge for the transition from welfare dependence to economic self-reliance and ongoing social stability".

This is the central lesson for the future of reform in Cape York and beyond. Responsibility systems work when they are not punitive shells, but practical developmental systems. They work when local authority can insist on responsibility while also directing families into meaningful supports and opportunities that help them act on those obligations.

When responsibility and opportunity are deliberately joined, children who would otherwise have been written off can thrive, and babies born at the bottom can close the gap within the course of their own lives.

What Happens Without Early Responsibility Systems

When the State refuses to use early levers of responsibility, coercion does not disappear. It simply arrives later, after the harm has deepened, in harsher and more destructive forms—emergency child removals, police intervention, court orders, detention and imprisonment—repeated within families and across generations.

The idea that avoiding early firmness is somehow less coercive has become one of the central policy errors of the last generation. In practice, it means the State abandons the field early and returns only once the damage has become severe, at precisely the point where the prospects of repair are lowest and the interventions required are most traumatic.

This pattern is visible across remote and discrete communities where authorities often know which families are struggling, but lack effective mechanisms to insist on changed behaviour before crisis occurs. Schools know children are not attending. Housing providers know rent is not being paid. Police and service systems know alcohol and drug use are escalating, violence is becoming normalised, and parenting is deteriorating. Yet where there is no local forum with authority to call parents in, speak plainly, set expectations and connect families to structured supports, these warning signs accumulate without decisive intervention.

The first truly forceful act of the State then arrives not as prevention, but as removal.

The absence of early responsibility systems does not produce freedom. It produces drift, and drift produces crisis. Parents are left to fail in private until the consequences can no longer be ignored. Children remain in unsafe, chaotic or educationally barren environments until their harm becomes sufficiently visible to trigger formal intervention.

This late coercion carries a double cost. The immediate human cost falls on children: separation from parents, dislocation from kin and country, disrupted schooling, and the instability that follows repeated intervention. The broader social cost is long-term and cumulative. Disadvantage calcifies, welfare dependency deepens, and another generation grows up without the habits, expectations and opportunities that support stable family life and economic participation.

Not every child in care proceeds into youth detention or adult prison. But the same pipeline of disadvantage is reinforced when the only strong instruments routinely used by the State are downstream, crisis-based and disempowering.

This is why early responsibility systems matter. A mechanism such as the FRC can act as a circuit breaker before children are removed, before court and prison become dominant institutions in a family's life, and before dysfunction hardens into destiny. But these early interventions only work when they are backed by structured supports—parenting assistance, budgeting and savings tools, education supports, counselling, treatment, and pathways to employment and housing stability.

Without that wider architecture, governments are left with a perverse model: weak, passive and hesitant when families first begin to slide, and then severe, expensive and coercive once the damage is entrenched.

That is the practical lesson. Early responsibility systems are not an alternative to child protection and justice systems; they are the means by which reliance on those systems can be reduced. Refusing to use them does not avoid coercion. It simply postpones it until it is more traumatic, more dislocating and far less effective.

FRC Expansion: A Family Responsibilities and Opportunities Commission

Cape York Institute proposes expanding the Family Responsibilities Commission into a broader Family Responsibilities *and Opportunities* Commission. The new model would formalise reciprocal accountability.

Under the current system, responsibility obligations largely fall upon individuals and families, while governments and institutions are rarely held accountable when the opportunities necessary for progress fail to materialise. The proposed FRC model would seek to rebalance this asymmetry.

Under such a framework:

- where individuals and families fail to meet agreed responsibilities, proportionate interventions and supports would be activated to protect children and restore stability

- where governments or institutions fail to deliver agreed opportunities—including schooling, training, treatment, housing, employment pathways or capability-building supports — mechanisms would exist to compel delivery and institutional accountability.

This is a critical reform principle. Responsibility can only be sustained when effort is matched by genuine opportunity. Families cannot reasonably be expected to meet higher obligations while the foundational pathways required for progress remain absent.

The long-term objective of a FRC model is therefore not welfare compliance, but capability development: creating a system in which responsibility and opportunity are deliberately joined so that children and families can move towards stability, economic participation and independence over time.

We propose the new FRC be established in conjunction with the commencement of the proposed *Personal Responsibilities and Opportunities Act* (PR+O Act) in Cape York Peninsula following a two-year design process, with rollout beginning in 2029. Cape York will serve as the first region to demonstrate that structural reform can close the Opportunity Gap for children and young people within a generation. The design phase will refine the legislative proposal, delivery mechanisms, and partnership arrangements necessary for effective implementation.

Opt-In Across Cape York

Cape York Institute proposes the new FRC be established to operate across Cape York through an individual and family opt-in model in addition to the community opt-in approach that has characterised the FRC to date.

In accordance with the principle of self-determination reflected in the *Family Responsibilities Commission Act 2008* (Qld), responsibility-based reform cannot simply be imposed across Cape York or any other region through a top-down administrative process. Addressing entrenched disadvantage requires agency. Families who want a different future for their children should not be prevented from pursuing it because governments are unwilling to support reform unless unanimity exists within a community or region.

The FRC was never conceived as a one-size-fits-all solution for Queensland. It began in four Cape York communities, and later Doomadgee, because those communities were prepared to accept a higher and more structured standard of responsibility around school attendance, child safety, housing, lawful behaviour and financial responsibility, and to vest authority in Local Commissioners to support and enforce those standards. That voluntary opt-in origin goes to the heart of why the model has retained legitimacy on the ground.

For many years, Cape York Institute has maintained that future expansion should occur through voluntary participation rather than blanket imposition from above. There has been sustained interest in the model from leaders in Cherbourg, Kowanyama, Yarrabah and Lockhart River, as

well as from leaders within the African community in Brisbane, communities in Logan and Redbank, and regions in South Australia and the Kimberley.[11]

At the same time, experience has demonstrated that communities are not monolithic. Views differ within families, across generations, between leaders and over time. Leadership changes, local politics intervene, and governments often seek what amounts to complete community consensus before supporting reform. In practice, this creates an impossibly high threshold. Unanimity is rarely achievable in any community.

Cape York Institute has seen circumstances in which strong local leaders—particularly women concerned about child safety, alcohol abuse and educational failure—have sought stronger responsibility-based reform, only for those efforts to be resisted by others with an interest in preserving the status quo.

An individual and family opt-in model resolves this problem by locating legitimacy where responsibility ultimately resides: with individuals and families themselves.

Under such a model, families seeking a different future for their children could voluntarily enter into responsibility-based undertakings linked to practical supports and guaranteed opportunities. Participation would not depend upon shifting local politics or the requirement that every local interest group agree before reform can occur.

Importantly, this approach recognises that self-determination operates not only at the collective level, but also through the agency of individual families seeking to build better lives for their children.

A Family Responsibilities and Opportunities Commission would preserve the core strengths of the original FRC model—local authority, early intervention, behavioural expectations and practical support—while creating a scalable pathway for expansion across Cape York and potentially beyond.

The Model Can Apply Outside Cape York

While cultural authority adds a unique dimension to the local authority of the FRC as it operates in Cape York, there is no reason the FRC or the expanded FRC model could not operate in any region where there are many families stuck at the bottom. The position of 'Bottom Million' families is the predictable outcome of how passive welfare and the epidemics of addiction operate—and these issues are primarily structural. Structural solutions are also needed for non-Indigenous Australian families at the bottom. Putting local authority at the centre of a new model for responsibility and opportunity could work in any region or community, including in urban areas of entrenched disadvantage.

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[11] Such demand has been formally noted in submissions to inquiries and formal correspondence which is a matter of public record. See e.g. Yarrabah Council's submission to the Social Security (Administration) Amendment (Income Management and Cashless Welfare) Bill 2019, seeking an FRC model.

Recommendation

That the Queensland Government establish a Family Responsibilities (and Opportunities) Commission under the proposed Personal Responsibilities and Opportunities Act to expand the current FRC model into a broader framework of reciprocal accountability between families, governments and institutions.

The expanded model should preserve the core strengths of the existing FRC—local authority, early intervention, behavioural accountability and practical support—while ensuring that responsibility obligations placed on families are matched by enforceable commitments from governments and service providers to deliver the opportunities necessary for progress, including education, housing, treatment, training and employment pathways.

The new FRC should operate through both community opt-in and voluntary individual and family opt-in arrangements, recognising that self-determination also includes the agency of families seeking a different future for their children.

The Queensland Government should commence a two-year co-design and legislative development process with Cape York communities, with implementation to begin in Cape York from 2029 as the first demonstration region for closing the Opportunity Gap within a generation, and with scope for future expansion into other regions experiencing entrenched disadvantage.

Joining Local Authority of Community Justice Groups with an Expanded FRC System

Queensland already possesses a statewide community justice infrastructure capable of supporting and extending FRC-style mechanisms: Community Justice Groups (CJGs). Established from 1993 following recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, CJGs were designed to bring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authority into the justice system through local leadership, cultural legitimacy and community-based responses to offending and harm. Today, approximately 40 CJGs operate across Queensland, including in each of the current FRC communities.

Over more than two decades, CJGs have demonstrated their value as trusted local institutions with deep cultural authority, community knowledge and longstanding relationships with families. They support courts, victims and offenders, deliver diversionary and community safety initiatives, and increasingly undertake domestic and family violence work and other prevention-focused activities. Queensland's continued investment in CJGs reflects recognition that they are a critical part of the State's justice infrastructure.

However, the experience of the current model also demonstrates its limits. Most CJGs remain volunteer-based, with inconsistent capability, uneven resourcing and very limited formal authority. In many regions, CJGs are expected to carry significant community responsibility without the powers, professional support or legislative mechanisms needed to interrupt

entrenched cycles of harm. Their role is advisory rather than decision-making, leaving government systems to continue relying primarily on downstream interventions such as courts, child protection and imprisonment.

The Commission now has an opportunity to build on — rather than replace — this existing infrastructure by integrating and strengthening CJGs into an expanded FRC model. Rather than creating entirely new governance structures, the State can invest in and formalise institutions that already hold local legitimacy and community trust.

Under this approach, CJGs would provide a source of local authority for FRC-style conferencing, case coordination and responsibility mechanisms. Selected CJG members could transition into remunerated quasi-judicial Local Commissioner roles, supported by targeted training, legislative authority and clear accountability frameworks. This would preserve the fundamentally local grounded nature of the model while equipping communities with practical tools to respond earlier and more effectively to escalating harm.

Importantly, this approach honours the original intent of CJGs as a justice innovation grounded in local authority, while recognising that volunteer structures alone cannot carry the weight of complex social governance responsibilities. By combining the legitimacy and relational strength of CJGs with the structured powers and accountability mechanisms of the FRC, Queensland could create a more effective and efficient system — one capable of confronting harmful behaviour early, strengthening community responsibility and reducing reliance on crisis-driven interventions.

The model would focus finite public resources on strengthening an institution that already exists across the State, rather than building parallel systems from scratch. It would also place structured authority, supported decision-making and development-focused conferencing into the hands of trusted local leaders best positioned to work alongside families before disadvantage hardens into child removal, detention or imprisonment.

Recommendation

That the Queensland Government formally integrate Community Justice Groups into an expanded Family Responsibilities Commission/Family Responsibilities and Opportunity Commission framework by:

1. Recognising CJGs as the primary local governance and community authority structure underpinning FRC-style conferencing, case coordination and responsibility mechanisms.
2. Establishing a pathway for appropriately selected and trained CJG members to serve as remunerated quasi-judicial Local Commissioners with authority to:
    - convene and oversee conferences
    - make culturally informed decisions
    - direct referrals and case management responses; and
    - apply proportionate compliance mechanisms, including conditional income management and other statutory levers where appropriate.
3. Embedding clear legislative linkages, governance arrangements and performance frameworks to ensure local authority is exercised transparently, fairly and effectively.
4. Prioritising early intervention, behavioural accountability and family support through community-led mechanisms designed to reduce reliance on courts, prisons and child protection systems.

This approach would create a scalable, community-led justice and social responsibility model that builds on existing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance structures while equipping communities with meaningful authority to address harm locally and earlier.

School Attendance and Truancy as Early Signs of Child Harm

Chronic truancy is a visible sign that adults are not putting the child first. A child who is repeatedly absent without good reason is a child whose parents or carers are failing to meet a basic duty – to safeguard their child's right to education, daily supervision and a stable routine. Persistent non-attendance is therefore a form of neglect. It tells us that in that home, adult priorities, habits and, too often, alcohol or other dysfunction are being allowed to override the child's rights and interests.

Queensland law already recognises that parents have a legal obligation to ensure their children of compulsory school age are enrolled and attend school, and gives government the power to enforce this as a last resort. But in practice, these levers are almost never used. The result is a dangerous pretence. On paper, children have a right to schooling, yet in practice adults can repeatedly deny them that right with minimal consequence.

In 2014, the then Cape York Academy proceeded some way down the existing prosecution pathway in Aurukun after efforts of the FRC and active Student Case Management had been made with the parents of persistent non-attenders. The school followed the required process including by issuing compulsory school attendance letters, Failure to Attend Notices (Form 4) and Warning Notices (Form 5), before seeking consent from the Department of Education for prosecutions to be initiated. While the school's actions (issuing Forms 4 and 5 etc) correlated with increases in aggregate school attendance at school, the Department of Education did not follow through with initiating any prosecutions or taking any other action to improve the situation for the children involved. Exerting pressure on parents to take responsibility is needed to deliver on human rights of every child.

Our argument is that chronic non-attendance must be treated openly as child negligence, not just as a schooling problem. When a child is not at school, day after day, they are unsupervised, cut off from mandated reporters and exposed to whatever instability exists at home. In communities where alcohol-fuelled disorder and passive welfare have eroded family responsibility, regular school attendance may be the only reliable sign that a child's life is on a stable footing. When that sign disappears, the system should respond in the same way it would to any other signal of neglect.

That is why we propose shifting the responsibility for enforcing school attendance away from the education bureaucracy to a body whose explicit mandate is to uphold parental obligations to children — either the Family Responsibilities Commission, or a dedicated Truancy Commissioner. Under a responsibility-based model, chronic truancy would trigger a formal conference where parents are confronted with the neglect inherent in not sending their child to school, supported to change, and, if they refuse, subject to escalating consequences. Income-management tools could be used where necessary, and genuine prosecution would sit at the very end of the chain as a last-resort lever.

The purpose is to send a clear signal that keeping a child out of school, without good reason, is a breach of the child's rights. By relocating these powers to an institution that sees truancy as child harm rather than an administrative inconvenience, Queensland can finally use the levers it already has to insist that adults put their children first.

Recommendation

That the Queensland Government formally recognise chronic school truancy as an early indicator of child neglect and transfer responsibility for enforcement and intervention from the education bureaucracy to the Families Responsibilities Commissioner or a dedicated Truancy Commissioner.

Under this model, persistent non-attendance should trigger mandatory responsibility conferencing, intensive family support and escalating accountability measures—including income management and prosecution as a last resort—to ensure that parents and carers uphold their obligation to place their child's education, supervision and wellbeing first.

The State's Protective Role: Children's Rights, Adult Conduct and Public Regulation

The State is not a residual actor that appears only after families fail. It helps shape the conditions in which children are raised through its decisions about schooling, alcohol availability, welfare settings, housing, policing and service design. When those settings permit foreseeable harm to children, government cannot retreat behind the language of adult choice or parental autonomy.

This is especially true where adult conduct is placing children at risk. A child's rights to safety, food, sleep, schooling and freedom from violence must take priority over any perceived adult right to drink, neglect school attendance, misuse of welfare income or otherwise maintain conditions of disorder around children. In this respect, public regulation of alcohol, schooling and welfare is not an intrusion on family life, it is part of the State's proper protective role where basic parental obligations are not being met.

The same principle applies elsewhere in public policy. Government does not treat road safety as a matter of private choice alone. It regulates speed, drink driving, seatbelts and vehicle standards because the consequences of inaction are foreseeable and intolerable. Child safety demands the same logic. Where children are being raised amid alcohol-fuelled dysfunction, chronic truancy, neglect and violence, the State must act early and structurally, not simply arrive later to remove children after the damage has been done.

That is why this submission argues for a stronger early-intervention architecture—one that uses responsibility mechanisms, local authority, school-attendance enforcement, alcohol controls and welfare levers to change the conditions around children before harm hardens into removal, detention and intergenerational failure.

Alcohol as a Central Driver of Child Harm

Governments have treated the adult's "right to drink" as a principle requiring constant accommodation, but have shown far less determination to structurally support the child's right to safety and schooling, and the adult's right to the dignity of work rather than a life hollowed out by passive welfare. The first task of public policy in these communities is not to make drinking easier. It is to rebuild the conditions in which adults can take responsibility and children can grow up safe in their own homes.

Alcohol policy must be understood, in communities such as Cape York, as child-protection policy. It is because alcohol is one of the principal proximate drivers of the violence, neglect, family instability, school failure and developmental damage that place children on the path into the statutory system.

The central error in Queensland policy has been to treat alcohol as though it were merely an adjacent social problem rather than one of the forces actively producing the child-safety crisis. In places such as Cape York, alcohol abuse has long since ceased to be a secondary symptom waiting upon some future structural transformation. It has developed its own momentum, its

own social norms and its own destructive logic, and now reproduces disadvantage directly through the conditions in which children are raised.

The child-safety mechanism is plain enough. Alcohol abuse degrades parental responsibility. It diverts scarce household income away from food, clothing and stable routines. It keeps children awake while adults drink, fight and party into the night. It contributes to domestic and family violence, chaotic homes, school non-attendance and neglect. It exposes children repeatedly to fear, disorder and adult behaviour that normalises harm.

The scale of harm borne by children already in the system shows why these conditions matter. The Children in Care Census 2024 reported that 88 percent of children in care had experienced neglect, 83 percent emotional abuse, 46 percent physical abuse and 68 percent exposure to domestic and family violence. The same census reported that 41 percent had a diagnosed or suspected disability or neurodevelopmental disability, 31 percent had limited to severely limited intellectual functioning or developmental delay, and 20 percent had a diagnosed or suspected mental illness or behavioural disorder. Among children aged 10 years and over, 28 percent were recorded as self-harming now or in the past or suspected to be, and 12 percent had attempted suicide.[12]

These figures are not detached from alcohol. They describe the cohort of children shaped by the environments alcohol helps to produce – violence in the home, neglect of daily care, unstable routines, trauma exposure and developmental adversity. Where alcohol-fuelled disorder is widespread, the damage is not episodic. It is cumulative, and it is written into children's bodies, brains, behaviour and life chances.

The historical record of the AMPs reinforces the point. The original restrictions were introduced because levels of violence, injury and social disorder had become intolerable[13]. Where supply was constrained (and enforced), the early results were improvements in precisely the indicators that matter for child safety – reduced assault, reduced injury, reduced pressure on women's shelters and health services, and safer household conditions for women and children.[14]

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[12] Queensland Government, Department of Child Safety, Seniors and Disability Services, Children in Care Census (2024 p 12-13)

[13] See Fitzgerald, T. (2001) *Cape York Justice Study*, Department of the Premier and Cabinet.; and Queensland Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy and Development (1999) *The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Task Force on Violence report*. Brisbane: Queensland Government.

[14] Margolis, S.A., Ypinazar, V.A. and Muller, R. (2008) 'The impact of supply reduction through Alcohol Management Plans on serious injury in remote Indigenous communities in Australia: a ten-year analysis using data from the Royal Flying Doctor Service', *Alcohol and Alcoholism*, 43(1): 104–10; Margolis, S.A. et al. (2011) 'Increasing alcohol restrictions and rates of serious injury in four remote Australian Indigenous communities', *Medical Journal of Australia*, 194(10): 503–6; West, C., Muller, R., Clough, A.R. and Fitts, M.S. (2018) 'Have Alcohol Management Plans reduced violence against women in Cape York, Australia?', *Violence Against Women*, 24(14): 1658–77; West, C., Muller, R. and Clough, A.R. (2018) 'Injuries and alcohol management plans in remote Indigenous communities: a two-community comparison', *Injury Prevention*, 24(3): 236–9; Jennings, S., Whitaker, R. and Turner, R. (2012) 'Chest trauma in Far North Queensland: alcohol management can make a difference', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, 36(1): 94–5; Dorman, A., O'Hagan, S. and Gole, G. (2020) 'Epidemiology of severe ocular trauma following the implementation of alcohol restrictions in Far North Queensland', *Clinical and Experimental Ophthalmology*, 48(7): 879–88.; Smith, K., et al (2019) *The Alcohol Management Plan at Pormpuraaw, Queensland, Australia: an ethnographic community-based study*. Canberra: Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education.

The deeper policy failure is that Queensland has too often approached alcohol as though the principal rights at stake were the rights of adults to consume it. That is the wrong frame. In Cape York, the rights that matter most are the child's right to safety, sleep, food and schooling, and the adult's right to the dignity of work and the conditions necessary to take responsibility, rather than the destructive cycle of passive welfare, idleness and alcohol availability.

Alcohol Management, Supply Control and the Limits of Individual Choice

The first principle in these communities cannot be that adult liberty always prevails. No adult has an absolute right to drink where the exercise of that claimed liberty strips children of safety, sleep, food, routine, schooling and freedom from violence.

The rhetoric of the "right to drink" has too often obscured the rights of those with the least power. Children do not choose the drinking environment around them. They do not choose whether household income is swallowed by alcohol sales. They do not choose whether nights are punctuated by fights, parties, fear and police attendance. They simply bear the consequences.

Nor is the true adult right at stake in Cape York merely the supposed 'right to have a drink on the balcony after a day's work'. The more urgent adult right is the right to the dignity of work itself, and the corresponding responsibility to care for one's children, send them to school and keep them safe in their own home. Public policy should be structured to support those responsibilities – not to entrench passive welfare on one hand and alcohol access on the other, while children bear the cost.

The facts from Cape York make the moral balance plain. Excessive alcohol abuse in these communities causes elevated levels of violence, crime, child maltreatment and neglect, social disorder and poor educational outcomes. Alcohol has been identified as a major cause and trigger of family violence in Cape York communities, even where formal restrictions remain, because illicit supply and home brew continue to feed the problem. A significant decline in parental responsibility accompanied the rise of alcohol abuse, and the use of scarce family resources to support addiction has long been associated with children not being properly fed, not sleeping properly and missing school or arriving too tired to learn.

For this reason, alcohol management cannot be treated as an isolated licensing issue. It must be understood as part of a broader architecture that reduces supply, restores responsibility and builds genuine alternatives to the alcohol-centred way of life that has emerged in too many remote and discrete communities. In practical terms, this means holding firm on effective Alcohol Management Plans, strengthening early responsibility mechanisms such as the FRC and our proposed evolution to a Family Responsibilities and Opportunities Commission, and ensuring that adults who respond to expectations around parenting, schooling and household conduct are met with real pathways into work, treatment, rehabilitation and stable housing

Supply reduction is not a complete answer. Sly grog, home brew and displacement effects are real. But leakage is not a reason to abandon supply control. It is a reason to enforce it properly

and to combine it with treatment, rehabilitation, expectations around schooling and parenting, income levers, and the rebuilding of a social environment in which adults are structurally supported to take responsibility.

Queensland's deeper failure has been to alter supply settings without adequately investing in the broader architecture of demand reduction, and substitutions of responsibility and opportunity. The evidence on AMPs has long pointed to the absence of sufficiently impactful policies and programs in treatment, rehabilitation, diversion and support, even as governments moved to reconsider or relax restrictions. That failure does not justify liberalisation. It strengthens the case for a more complete policy response in which supply control is held firm while genuine recovery, behaviour change and adult responsibility are rebuilt around families.

Gambling Also Structural Extraction from Children

Gambling is now a second major drain on already thin household resources in Cape York and similar communities. Research endorsed by Cape York Institute and the Alliance for Gambling Reform shows that local government areas where at least 10 per cent of residents are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander have far more poker machines per head and much higher losses than other regions, with Queensland among the worst. In practical terms, communities that lack reliable healthcare, banking and basic services are saturated with machines designed to keep people playing and losing, much of it on passive welfare income that should be buying food, uniforms and power cards for children.

The gambling industry compounds this harm by targeting vulnerable people through both venue placement and online systems. Poker machines are concentrated in regional centres that service remote communities, including Mossman, Weipa and Cooktown, while powerful online gambling and "social casino" products use algorithms, inducements and VIP offers to identify who is lonely, already losing or up late, and then keep them betting, often via "scambling" schemes and WhatsApp groups that siphon whole pays from households. Every dollar lost in this way is a dollar taken from children's food, sleep, schooling and safety. The volatility and shame created when money suddenly disappears from already overcrowded homes is directly experienced by children as chaos, distress and neglect. Any serious child-safety strategy must therefore treat gambling regulation, like alcohol policy, as core child-protection work, not as harmless entertainment, but as a predatory system that convinces parents they are generating income while in reality stripping money from their children's food, housing and schooling.

Restoring Transparency

One of the gravest policy failures has been the withdrawal of regular public reporting on the very indicators needed to assess whether alcohol settings are protecting children. Queensland previously published quarterly and annual reporting on key indicators in discrete Indigenous communities, including child safety metrics and school attendance, but those public mechanisms ceased after 2016/17.

That retreat from transparency has real consequences. If child safety notifications, substantiations, and protection orders, school attendance and alcohol-related harm are no longer publicly tracked at community level, governments can loosen restrictions while insulating themselves from scrutiny about the consequences. At the very time the future of

AMPs was being contested, public visibility of alcohol related harm was reduced. CYI objected to this practice in its earlier AMP advocacy, correctly identifying it as secrecy that removed pressure for genuine reform.

The Commission should recommend restoration of regular public reporting, at community level, on child safety notifications, substantiations and protection orders, school attendance, domestic and family violence indicators, serious assault, injury and alcohol-related hospital presentations, injuries, and offending in AMP communities. Without transparency around AMP breach data Queensland cannot credibly claim to be protecting children while refusing to publish the evidence that would show whether its alcohol policy is protecting them or exposing them.

Recommendation

That the Queensland Government formally recognise alcohol and gambling harm in high-harm communities as core child-protection issues, not merely matters of individual lifestyle or consumer choice, and maintain or strengthen Alcohol Management Plans and related supply controls unless and until child safety indicators demonstrably improve.

The Government should adopt a whole-of-system responsibility framework that combines firm supply reduction with early intervention, treatment, rehabilitation, income management, school attendance enforcement and pathways into work and stable housing, while restoring transparent community-level public reporting on child safety, school attendance, domestic and family violence, alcohol-related harm and gambling losses.

Any proposal to relax alcohol restrictions should be subject to explicit child-safety tests, including impacts on neglect, violence, school attendance, household stability and the preservation of family resources for children's wellbeing.

Case Studies: Loosening the Tap: Alcohol Availability and Rising Harm

The recent history of Alcohol Management Plans in Queensland shows, in compressed form, what other societies have learned over much longer periods. When alcohol supply is tightened, harm falls. When the tap is loosened without a stronger responsibility-and-opportunity architecture in place, alcohol quickly re-asserts itself as the organising force in community life, and children pay the price.

Aurukun: Votes No to Return of Grog

Aurukun was the first community in Australia to implement an Alcohol Management Plan in late 2002, introducing a zero-carriage limit prohibiting alcohol from being brought into the community, with the sole exception of a tightly regulated council-run tavern selling only light and mid-strength beer and diluted spirits.

When Indigenous councils were barred from holding liquor licences in 2008 and the Aurukun canteen closed, the combination of the AMP and loss of the licence effectively rendered

Aurukun a dry community. The history is clear: AMPs were introduced in the face of intolerable levels of alcohol-fuelled violence, serious injury and social breakdown, and the early experience in Aurukun reflected the broader evidence from Cape York – reduced serious injuries, fewer assaults, less visible disorder and a safer environment for women and children.

That history is also reflected in the community response to any proposal to loosen controls. In 2019, when Aurukun Shire Council sought to hold a limited trial alcohol event, the community response was decisive: 33 written submissions opposed the proposal and only five supported it, with concerns expressly framed in terms of returning to high rates of domestic violence, poor school attendance, deteriorating health outcomes and elder abuse. In April 2025, the Council reaffirmed support for the AMP in its current form.

Aurukun shows what governments too often refuse to face. Where communities have lived through the worst of alcohol epidemics, the memory of harm is long because the damage to children is long. Women and elders know that when nights are surrendered to drinking, fighting and noise, children do not sleep, do not eat properly, miss school and absorb trauma that later appears in child-protection files and youth-justice rosters.

Kowanyama: From Zero-Carriage to 35 Standard Drinks a Day

Kowanyama shows both the gains that can be made when alcohol supply is tightly constrained and the speed with which those gains can be put at risk when restrictions are loosened. An Alcohol Management Plan was first introduced on 5 December 2003, declaring the community a dry area with a zero-carriage limit, aside from a council-run canteen permitted to sell only light or mid-strength beer for on-premises consumption.

The early evidence from Kowanyama is precisely what a child-protection system should want to see. Queensland's own indicator reports and independent research on AMP communities show that, after zero-carriage and related controls were introduced, rates of serious assault and assault-related hospital admissions fell significantly, particularly for women and for injuries involving alcohol.[15] These improvements describe a community in which serious violence and injury, much of it alcohol-related, were substantially reduced, meaning fewer children living in houses marked by assault, fear and nightly chaos.

After the original canteen's liquor licence was revoked in 2008 and the premises closed, Kowanyama had no licensed takeaway outlet and a zero-carriage limit remained in force under the AMP. For several years the community operated under one of the strictest alcohol regimes in Queensland, with tightly controlled on-premises consumption only and no lawful carriage of alcohol in the wider community.

The later shift was substantial. Two temporary 6-month periods between 2020 and 2021 allowed limited takeaway sales, initially justified as part of COVID-19 public-health arrangements and then extended while works were undertaken at the local social club. In 2022,

[15] Queensland Government, Quarterly report on key indicators in Queensland's discrete Indigenous communities, July–September 2008 (Kowanyama section, hospital admissions for assault); Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Multicultural Affairs, Discrete Indigenous Communities 2012–13: Annual Bulletin (showing decreasing trends in reported offences against the person in Kowanyama).

the Liquor (Kowanyama) and Other Legislation Amendment Regulation permanently amended the AMP. The local social club obtained a full liquor licence permitting both on-premises and takeaway sales, and the zero-carriage rule was replaced by a legal allowance of 4.5 litres of mid-strength beer or premixed spirits (less than 4 per cent alcohol) and 2 litres of unfortified wine per person per day, six days per week, in the restricted area—roughly 35.5 standard drinks.

That arrangement should not be dignified as a "limit". It is a licence for harm. It authorises a quantity of alcohol fully capable of driving family violence, serious assaults and household instability of the kind that brings children into contact with Child Safety.

Takeaway conditions were initially constrained, but over time the number of trading days and the practical ease of obtaining takeaway alcohol have expanded. Whatever the exact pattern in a given year, the structural reality is that a community which operated under a zero-carriage regime for nearly two decades now has a legal entitlement to carry and consume large volumes of alcohol in precisely the setting where serious assault, domestic and family violence and child neglect have already been shown to fall when supply is tightly controlled.

From a child-protection perspective, this is not a technical licensing issue. Assault and domestic and family violence are among the central pathways by which children are harmed and removed. With 68 per cent of children in care in Queensland already having been exposed to domestic and family violence, policy choices that increase alcohol availability in a community like Kowanyama are policy choices that increase the likelihood that children will be woken at night by assaults, witness injuries, live in fear and eventually enter the child-safety pipeline.

Lockhart River: The Disastrous Social Club Experiment

Lockhart River demonstrates how quickly child-safety protections can be weakened once alcohol returns to a community that had been effectively dry for more than thirteen years. On 3 October 2003, an AMP introduced a zero-carriage limit. The local canteen could sell beer only, with limited hours and no takeaway. In the years immediately following, the State noted improved school attendance, government statistics showed reductions in alcohol-related offences and hospital admissions for assault, and local reports indicated declines in alcohol-related clinic presentations and fewer women seeking assistance at the women's shelter.[16] Those are classic upstream child-protection gains– less violence, fewer alcohol-related injuries, and more stable conditions around children.

When the canteen's liquor licence was revoked and the premises closed on 1 November 2008, Lockhart River became, in effect, a dry community under the AMP. For more than a decade, the combination of zero carriage and the absence of a licensed premises formed the backbone of the community's alcohol management.

In July 2022, that backbone was weakened. A licensed social club reopened in the old canteen building, refurbished at a cost of $2 million, operating under a Restricted Liquor Permit for on-premises consumption. As of May 2025, Council records show the club remained $67,746 in

[16] ABC News, Qld Govt claims drop in violence due to alcohol plans (Online 5 July 2004).

debt to the Council. While the funding relationship is unclear the Council is recording a loss from the Social Club line item showing that the venue is drawing on public resources.

The expenditure pattern is stark. Analysis of local data indicates that $572,687 was spent on alcohol at Lockhart River's social club in 2024/25, and for every $20 spent on a meal, $116 was spent on alcohol. That is not a pattern of moderate social drinking. It signals a community economy in which alcohol purchases heavily outstrip spending on basic necessities, with inevitable consequences for children's access to food, stability and routine.

There is also a structural tension in Lockhart River's position. The Council is financially exposed to the continuation of the social club while local government is also drawn into the liquor-licensing architecture as a consultee on applications and community-impact statements under Queensland's regulatory framework. That is precisely the kind of conflicted institutional position child-protection policy should avoid. When children's welfare ought to be paramount, the local public authority should not be tied, even indirectly, to the financial performance of an alcohol outlet.

The policy trajectory remains troubling. Council minutes from February and May 2025 record that the new Community Safety Plan for Lockhart River includes an AMP amendment and the results of an AMP amendment survey, indicating an intention to change the existing protections. A notice to social-club members in October 2024, ahead of a 4 November AGM, listed "Changes to Carriage Limits survey" as an agenda item, indicating consideration of weakening the remaining zero-carriage protection and pursuing takeaway liquor. If that occurs, Lockhart River will have travelled in less than a generation from a firm zero-carriage AMP with demonstrated reductions in alcohol-related harm to a regime that normalises on-premises drinking and moves toward expanded takeaway, in a community where children already live with the consequences of adult drinking.[17]

Exposure to violence in the home and community is itself an injury. Any policy that increases the level of alcohol-related violence in Lockhart River is, in effect, a policy that increases the likelihood that local children will be damaged, notified and removed.

Mornington Island: Children Paid the Price for Takeaways

Mornington Island illustrates how alcohol settings, household resources and chronic neglect converge. For almost two decades, Mornington operated under a formal prohibition regime. After violent incidents at the pub, including a major brawl in the late 2000s, the island's tavern was closed and Mornington became a dry community under its AMP, with a zero-carriage limit and no legal licensed premises, even as home brew and sly grog persisted.

From 2022 onwards, that setting has been progressively unwound. The pub opens for special events such as State of Origin, and the AMP has been amended to allow significant carriage of alcohol in the restricted area. As from late 2023, the AMP permits each person to bring into the restricted area up to 11.25 litres – 30 cans of beer or premixed spirits up to 4 percent alcohol by volume. Alcohol is brought into the community via a council-mediated ordering and depot

[17] Lockhart River Social Club Aboriginal Corporation, Notice of Annual General Meeting (Facebook, October 2024) ("Changes to Carriage Limits survey" agenda item).

system, either ordered through Council or ordered from another supplier and collected from the depot during carriage hours.

Expenditure data show the scale of alcohol entering the island under this regime. Internal analysis of local records indicates that alcohol purchases facilitated through the Council's ordering and depot system totalled $1,864,907 in 2025 – about $35,863 each week. In the context of a small, low-income community where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households have a median weekly household income of $624, that volume of alcohol represents a very substantial share of the income available to adults, even allowing for non-drinkers and young people who are neither buying nor earning.

School attendance at Mornington Island State School has been poor for a long time and has not improved under the current alcohol settings. The school's own reports show overall attendance falling from around 76 percent in 2015 to below 50 percent in recent years, with attendance just 48 percent in 2024. This long-running attendance crisis cannot be attributed solely to recent alcohol decisions, but it underscores that a large share of children on the island are already missing substantial amounts of school – one of the clearest early signs of neglect and failure of adult responsibility to the child.

In this environment, it is not credible to treat alcohol policy as peripheral to child safety. A high carriage limit, special pub on-off drinking events, and very large volumes of alcohol entering the community via the depot system sit alongside chronically low attendance and the broader state-wide picture in which most children in care have experienced neglect and exposure to domestic and family violence. Together these facts point to a setting in which children on Mornington Island are at heightened risk of going hungry, missing sleep, missing school, and witnessing violence in the home – all the familiar pathways into the child-protection system.

Cairns – Shifting the Problem from Business to Children

The State proposes to re-criminalise public intoxication. Cairns business and civic leaders want visible drunkenness removed from the CBD—fewer intoxicated people on the Esplanade, fewer drunks near shops and tourists, and strong powers to push people on. Civic leaders are also objecting to more cheap bulk liquor outlets.

Rather than confront the hard work of real reform—reducing supply, enforcing responsibility, and building treatment and support—the government is choosing the path of least resistance. It will reassure Cairns by keeping the CBD "tidy" with recriminalisation, push the problem drinkers back to the Cape, and reassure those who resent Alcohol Management Plans by loosening restrictions in Cape York communities.

Queensland cannot claim to protect women and children by recriminalising public drunkenness in regional towns while simultaneously lifting alcohol limits on the streets and into the overcrowded homes of Cape York children. It's hoped that this move will push the problem is not solved, it is shifted. The State avoids confronting drinking parents and the alcohol industry, and instead relocates the problem in Cairns onto Cape York's youngsters.

This is an illogical strategy to end alcohol devastation. It is a strategy to move it out of sight and back onto the smallest, most innocent shoulders in the State.

From the Ground

Case Study: Seen, Foreseen, and Still Allowed to Happen

A 25-year-old Aurukun man and his partner have a young child and a baby together. The mother has another child from a previous relationship. All three children have been taken into care. Both want the children back. Grandmother and aunties are helping, but there is no structured in-community support to help the couple reset their home, their lives and for them to demonstrate safe parenting.

This is how the pipeline is perpetuated. The system is strong at removal, weak at prevention, and reunification. Young parents are told to "do better", but in Aurukun there is no intensive, home-based parenting program that comes into the house several times a week, works on routines, hygiene, supervision, budgeting and conflict, and helps them create a child-ready home. There is no home-pride or "reset" support for FRC Local Commissioners to refer to, for parents to demonstrate in concrete form, that the couple is taking responsibility and building capability.

The Grandmother says without that scaffold, this family, and others she knows, are left on the conveyor belt. Each new child is predictably removed. The State spends heavily at the end of this pipeline but has not invested in the modest, practical, in-community supports that would give parents like this a real chance to change and bring their children home safely.

FRC working hand-in-glove with child safety early, conferencing when concerns arise, followed by an integrated plan that includes intensive in-home parenting support, practical home-organisation help and clear capability milestones for reunification. The FRC is a lever, not the whole machine. It cannot, by itself, solve the problem; it needs structured, responsibility-building supports working intensively with families to interrupt the pipeline where it begins, instead of merely responding to its downstream consequences. (Told with permission of the Wik Grandmother of the Clan)

Change, led by locals

At the FRC we do not condemn people, we sit and listen to their story. Then we set out the issues plainly — the court matters, the school absences, the Child Safety worries — and we work with families to build a plan they own. Because we are local people, we understand the history and the trauma, but we also insist on responsibility. That is why more and more people now come to us voluntarily. They know we are here to help them change, not to write them off. Hope Vale FRC Commissioner

Coen Before and After the FRC

Since the FRC started, Coen has changed. Before, too many children stayed home and parents were not facing the hard conversations about grog, rent and school. Now people know Elders will call them in, speak straight and recommend proper support. If the FRC was taken away, we know exactly what would happen — school attendance would fall, alcohol and drugs would rise, and the community would slide back to the old days. Coen Local Commissioner

Local Elders Insist on Responsibility

At the FRC we tell parents calmly but firmly – this is your responsibility. Because we are Wik speakers and local leaders, families hear us. We see more children in class, some going on to boarding school. If this Commission wants to see prevention, it needs to come and see what FRC conferencing looks like on the ground. Aurukun FRC Commissioner

Stepping in Early

As Commissioners, we say FRC is the family that tries to solve many problems before court and prison do. We sit with parents whose kids are in trouble, young men on the edge of detention, families in crisis. Sometimes we have to recommend income management, and it is hard. But we see the difference when rent, food and school costs are covered, and children are not going hungry. Without these tools, we would be sending more people into the justice system instead of turning them around. Aurukun FRC Local Commissioner

Supported to Take Responsibility

People talk about closing the gap in big reports. Out here we see what actually works. Kids from this community are in high school, college and university because the FRC and O-Hub stood behind parents and insisted on responsibility with real help. We hope that our children will stand equal with other Queensland kids. Aurukun community leader

Protecting Kids From Chaos

The FRC and O-Hub helped me sort my money, get counselling, and keep my kids safe at home. Without them we would be back in the days when people drank in the street and our children walked through that chaos. These local institutions are the difference between a community that is trying to heal itself and one that has given up. Mossman Gorge resident

Case Study: My Justice Journey — a partnership between the Family Responsibilities Commission and ATSILS

My Justice Journey is a practical justice reform developed in Aurukun through partnership between the Family Responsibilities Commission (FRC) and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service (ATSILS) Queensland. It was designed to close a longstanding gap between what happens in community, under the guidance of Local Commissioners and support services, and what the Court is able to see when a person appears for sentence.

Under the initiative, FRC clients who consent can have verified information from their case plans shared with their ATSILS legal representatives. That information may include engagement in counselling, drug and alcohol programs, parenting support, income management or other steps taken under the FRC model to stabilise behaviour and take responsibility. In this way, ATSILS lawyers are able to place before the Court credible evidence of rehabilitation, cultural supervision and practical effort towards change.

This partnership brings together authorities that are too often disconnected in the lives of First Nations defendants – the authority of the Court, the authority of legal representation, and the authority of local Elders. It allows sentencing to take better account of work already being done on Country, under local cultural leadership, rather than treating each court appearance as if it occurs in a vacuum. It also demonstrates what can happen when a statutory body and a community-controlled legal service work together around a shared objective – responsibility, rehabilitation and better outcomes.

The initiative was developed over 18 months and supported 110 participants using the FRC's existing operational resources. That is significant in itself. In a system accustomed to new funding rounds and proliferating programs, My Justice Journey shows that practical reform can be achieved by connecting institutions better and by ensuring that courts can recognise genuine effort when it occurs. It is a culturally informed justice pathway that deserves close attention because it strengthens, rather than bypasses, local authority.

Rex's Story — My Justice Journey in Action

Rex [redacted] story illustrates what becomes possible when local authority, personal responsibility and real opportunity are brought together. A [redacted] man from Aurukun, Rex was already in serious trouble with police and the law when Local Commissioners intervened through the Family Responsibilities Commission. Like too many others in Aurukun, he was on the familiar path from community dysfunction into court and prison.

The Local Commissioners confronted him with a clear choice – continue on the path he was on, or work with them to change direction. Under the FRC process, Rex agreed to engage with local services, follow a case plan and begin taking practical responsibility for his conduct. It involved behaviour change work, Elder oversight and a willingness to submit to discipline.

A crucial part of Rex's turnaround was that responsibility was met with opportunity. Through Cape York Employment, a real and purposeful job was created, that matched his skills and interests. This mattered because it was not make-work or a work-like activity tied loosely to

welfare. It was real employment, with real expectations and real pay. If Rex did not show up, he did not get paid. If he worked more, he earned more. That distinction gave substance to the change he was trying to make.

As Rex progressed, the work he was doing under his FRC case plan was able to be communicated to the Court. The Magistrate could see not only the offending, but the concrete steps he had taken under the guidance of Local Commissioners to change his life. Rex's own assessment is powerful – without the intervention of the Local Commissioners, he would have gone to jail.

His story shows that even in one of the hardest most disadvantaged places in the country, change is possible when people are required to take responsibility and are then met with a real chance to move ahead. Rex's story is evidence of the central Cape York proposition– restore authority, require responsibility, provide opportunity, and some lives will turn.

They told me off and turned me around

I was stuck in and out of court, always one step from jail. When the Elders and the FRC got involved, it was different. They didn't just tell me off, they pushed me into counselling, helped line up a real job where if I didn't show up, I didn't get paid. With their backing I stuck it out, earned respect at work and showed the court I could change. If not for them, I would be sitting in prison now instead of planning a future.

Young Aurukun man, My Justice Journey

Case Study: What success looks like in one of Australia's hardest places

Keri [redacted] of the [redacted] stands in the tradition of the strong women who have carried Cape York reform in homes, communities and public life for decades. Across Cape York, women have driven much of the practical reform effort as mothers, grandmothers, advocates, commissioners, school champions and community leaders, and Keri's story is one expression of that wider leadership. Her life brings together the central themes of the reform project – child safety, family responsibility, education and local authority.

She grew up in a family shaped by service, courage and a fierce commitment to the safety of women and children. Her mother, Alison [redacted] was Aurukun's first female mayor and a determined advocate for women and children. Keri carried that legacy forward into her own life and leadership. From those foundations came a clear conviction that children need safety, structure and education to build a different future.

That conviction guided her parenting with purpose and discipline. Keri left school at the end of Year 11, when Aurukun had no secondary options, and she set a firm goal for her own family. Every one of her children would finish Year 12 and step into adulthood with real choices. Education became the key she insisted on for her children's future.

When the Cape York reform agenda opened a pathway, Keri embraced it fully. She backed stronger schooling expectations and the opportunities created through the Cape York Leaders Program. She trusted the reform vision and committed herself to helping her children walk through the doors it opened.

Four of her five children, [redacted], came through the Cape York Leaders Program and all completed Year 12. Keri describes the program as a structure of care and support, with mentors, support officers, boarding staff and peers helping hold children steady while they studied away from home. That network gave her children continuity, encouragement and confidence during the hardest years of their schooling.

Her youngest son, [redacted], shows the full strength of that pathway. His journey ran from the Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy in Aurukun, grounded in the science of learning and Explicit Direct Instruction, to a CYLP scholarship at [redacted]. He went on to win the Education Queensland Excellence in Visual Arts Award, begin university study, and move into cultural heritage work while planning further study in psychology and social work.

Keri's leadership also shaped reform within Aurukun itself. Through leadership rooted in family responsibility and children's wellbeing, she helped give practical force to Cape York's reform agenda. She vividly remembers the days of the wet canteen, and has fiercely protected prohibition.

Her role as a Local Family Responsibilities Commissioner gave further expression to her true belief in early intervention to build capability of young parents.

Keri [redacted] story shows how reform succeeds when women are enabled to lead, families hold the line, and effective institutions back children. In one life, the architecture comes into view – child safety, family responsibility, Direct Instruction, the Cape York Leaders Program and strong local leadership. Her children's achievements, and her own example, show how reform can build capability, responsibility and opportunity for the next generation.

Appendix A

KPMG Implementation Review

The 2010 KPMG Implementation Review conducted a relatively sound community consultation process, described as follows on pp. 171-2 of their report:

> *The four community sites of the Cape York Welfare Reform and FRC sittings — Aurukun, Coen, Hope Vale and Mossman Gorge — were each visited for between five and seven days in total for local consultations and to observe the FRC in session in the communities. Two rounds of site visits were held for each community except Coen, where 'sorry business' (a funeral and associated cultural commitments) required the first scheduled visit to be cancelled.*
>
> *The first site visits were timed to coincide with FRC conference sittings held in the communities, and the second visits were held at least two weeks after the first. This was to provide community members with time to consider the Review, ask questions and discuss whether and how they might want to participate in the Review; and enable the Review to hear from community members when the FRC was not in session in their community...*

Cape York Welfare Reform Local Program Office (LPO) in each community relayed information to community members and service providers about the Review process and opportunities to engage with reviewers. LPOs connected reviewers with community members able to provide translation services and work as Local Evaluators and conduct evaluation surveys. LPOs organised meetings between Review staff and local Mayors, community Leaders, Community Justice Groups, Men's Groups and Women's Groups to ensure broad representation of community sentiment.

The review found the FRC was successfully restoring local authority by supporting local and emerging leaders in Local Commissioner roles to make decisions, model positive behaviour and express their authority outside of the FRC. Local Commissioners were found to be providing essential support to conferencing processes, including helping people feel at ease, providing translations, communicating in a cultural way, providing contextual information in the conference, using local knowledge to validate or challenge information provided by participants, and encouraging participants to interact with the FRC in a positive way.

The review found that the involvement of Elders and Respected Persons as Local Commissioners (and their legislative mandate and decision-making powers) strengthened and legitimised their authority. It states, "Community based stakeholders generally reported that the Local Commissioners were well selected, are good role models and, importantly, represent the different family or clan groups well." One Local Commissioner described:

> *People come to us for advice and help more now that we are Local Commissioners; they come and talk and ask us for advice. We have more influence in the community, and we can particularly influence people in our families.*[18]

[18] KPMG (2010) op. cit. at p. 90.

Cape York Welfare Reform evaluation

The 2013 CYWR evaluation was relatively thorough and comprehensive. The evaluation report concluded four years of evaluation activities across Welfare Reform communities. The evaluation process was planned by the three trial partners at the outset of the trial. The evaluation framework was designed to assess the entire trial program rather than focus solely on outcome data from discrete trial components.

Evaluation activities commenced as early as 2009 with extensive data collection, surveys, fieldwork, and analyses conducted during 2011 and 2012. The mixed-method evaluation was guided by the overarching Program Logic for CYWR, as well as individual program logics for each of the 15+ programs/activities listed in the Project Board Agreement.

The evaluation commissioned in-field experts—including anthropologists fluent in ancestral languages—to capture the voices of local community members and through:

- a Social Change Survey canvassing 35% of the adult population of the CYWR communities
- case studies
- face to face interviews.

The evaluation engaged external advisers, Professor Deborah Cobb-Clark and Dr Annie Holden, for quality assurance and advice on the overall evaluation strategy and methodology. The evaluation also included independent assessments of changes in service provision, and a review of the validity of the theory of change and assumptions underpinning the trial.

Finally, individual unit-data were used to measure individual behaviour change post intervention. These kinds of analyses provide the most rigorous approach as they suggest causation rather than mere association of changes observed.

The CYWR evaluation found that the FRC was successful in restoring local authority.[19] The CYWR evaluation states,

> *Most community members and other stakeholders believe that the FRC has strengthened leadership, particularly through the Local Commissioners' listening, guiding and supporting role. The FRC conferencing process resonates with traditional Aboriginal dispute resolution practices and is consistent with restorative justice principles… Residents believe…that the FRC can strengthen leadership and encourage people to take responsibility for their behaviour.* [20]

The Cape York Welfare Reform evaluation and Wellbeing Centre evaluation found signs of reductions in alcohol related presentations and changes in attitudes toward drinking, gambling, cannabis (although alcohol continued to affect families, increasing the risk of abuse and neglect). The Cape York Welfare Reform evaluation notes:

> *There are signs that people are taking on greater personal responsibility and raising expectations, particularly in areas such as sending kids to school, caring for children*

[19] Ibid at p. 37.
[20] Limerick (2012) op. cit. at p. 6.

and families and their needs, and accessing supported self-help measures to deal with problems.[21]

And:

... Males were not involved with their children, my partner was not involved in raising any of our children, now you see fathers walking their children to school and supporting their partners when they have difficult times with the children. The next biggest change has been that everyone is starting to see what happens in the community as their responsibility. Other changes have been that people are realising that everyone has rights, especially children, people have become very self-centred over the past few years, having parties and doing things which really make life hard for other people.[22]

And:

In survey responses and qualitative feedback, improved money management is seen as an important outcome of the trial, with community members reporting a greater capacity to meet the needs of their families and children through the BasicsCard (issued under Conditional Income Management), the MPower financial management assistance service and SETs.[23]

Strategic Review of Cape York Income Management

The Strategic Review of Cape York Income Management is a relatively rigorous mixed-methods evaluation of Income Management in FRC communities over 10 years of FRC operations from 2008 to 2018. The review was conducted over a short timeframe (June to September 2018) using available quantitative data from the FRC, administrative data from government agencies and existing qualitative data from interviews, focus groups, FRC publications and other available articles, reviews, and research papers.

Where possible, reviewers conducted interrupted time-series analyses to determine trends in outcomes pre-FRC, immediately after the implementation, and trend thereafter. Analyses also included regression analyses of attendance, child safety and data on offences and compared results with non-FRC communities to determine if observable change in FRC communities significantly differed to trends in other communities. These analyses of aggregate community level data are less valid for assessing the impact of the FRC than individual unit record file data, as individuals who have had no contact with the FRC are included in the (noisy) aggregate community data.

The review provided a robust attempt to measure impact and triangulate findings with 10 years of rich qualitative data from various sources. The complete list of data sources used in both quantitative and qualitative analyses, as well methods and procedures are provided (see Strategic Review of Cape York Income Management — Appendices).

[21] Ibid at p. 2.
[22] See John Von Sturmer's Summary Report, at p. 15.
[23] Limerick (2012) op. cit. at p. 4.