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Queensland
Family & Child
Commission

Service delivery in Indigenous communities
Queensland Productivity Commission
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To Whom It May Concern

The Queensland Family and Child Commission (QFCC) is pleased to provide feedback to the Queensland Productivity Commission's (QPC) inquiry into service delivery in remote and discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

The QFCC supports a review of government investment in remote and discrete communities to identify what works well and why, with a view to improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

We invite you to meet with us and the Public Service Commission's (PSC) Community Insights team to discuss what we have learned from the Strengthening Community Controlled Organisations project. The QFCC believes significant systemic change in funding, service delivery, governance and evaluation is required to ensure government money is well spent and outcomes are achieved.

Through the Strengthening Our Sector Strategy, the QFCC is leading the development of sector wide workforce planning and development strategies. This includes building the capacity of non-government organisations and increasing collaboration across the child protection and family support sector.

This year the QFCC partnered with the PSC to design and implement a project to strengthen Community Controlled Organisations (CCOs). In its early phases, the project aims to create a more meaningful capacity-building partnership between government and CCOs, and recognising CCOs work in systems which influence how they define and build success in communities.

The first phase of the project involved interviews with key stakeholders from government, regulatory authorities and peak bodies. Some emerging themes from this phase of the project are highlighted below.

A systemic response is needed to drive longer term change

Consultation shows a need to build 'capability and capacity' widely, including in the government and community sectors, as well as in CCOs to improve services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children.

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Defining community controlled organisations and their success

Consultations highlighted significant divergence in opinions regarding what a CCO is, how CCOs are described, and the level and range of their existing capability. Also, while some elements of success were identified, there was no clear and concrete shared perspective on what constitutes success for a CCO.

Service delivery

Consultations revealed general agreement that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are best placed to understand the service needs of their communities. They hold cultural knowledge and skills essential to delivering these services in an effective way. There is concern that these are not adequately recognised, valued or remunerated by government.

There are also unique challenges facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities that increase the complexity of service delivery. In particular, services must be answerable to community and sustain cultural legitimacy, or risk becoming irrelevant in the eyes of community. Services must balance this need for cultural legitimacy against the funding and compliance requirements of government.

While there is considerable agreement on the commitment from government to support these organisations, this is complicated by limited cultural understanding within government, and implications for policy and practice development.

There are also issues relating to procurement. These include inflexible contracting, culturally inappropriate compliance requirements, and competitive approaches to procurement that do not recognise local cultural practice and relationships. These impact on an organisation's ability to provide seamless services to community.

Governance

There are divergent perspectives on whether communities should be self-determining and managed flexibly or become more professional and skilled at delivering on government expectations. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities face many of the same challenges as other remote communities, such as attracting suitably qualified staff and reducing the impact of isolation.

Added layers of difficulty include stereotyped perceptions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations' competency and capability, along with differing understandings between community and government about what 'capability' means. In particular, the term 'capability and capacity' should refer not only to complying with multiple reporting requirements, but also to maintaining cultural legitimacy and appropriateness.

Funding

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities receive multiple small amounts of grant funding from various sources. Consultation shows this often results in under-resourced communities, which require single services to meet multiple compliance demands. Often, grants do not include any additional resources to support organisations to undertake compliance and governance work while delivering services.

Underpinning many of these challenges is the sense that the contract management role has in many cases become too narrow. A more developmental approach may contribute to the success of organisations.

Evaluation

It is the QFCC's view that to collect useful data, evaluation techniques must be considered in the early stages of program design. This includes developing a program logic clearly describing the activities leading to outputs and short, medium and long term outcomes. This program logic can then inform the development of the evaluation plan, which will need to be appropriately resourced.

Program logic should be co-designed with community to ensure that outcomes align with community priorities.

Typically, very little time and funding are allocated to evaluation. As a result, evaluation may be designed around data collection techniques which seem efficient, such as online surveys. However, these are generally not appropriate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The QFCC instead recommends face-to-face data collection methods, allowing sufficient time to gain the trust and support of community members for evaluation before it begins.

Evaluation of a project is usually required by the end of its funding period, whereas certain outcomes may not be achieved until some-time after the project has closed. It is also generally agreed that there is a lack of understanding about what constitutes successful outcomes for services in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

A central, independent body to coordinate and oversee evaluation in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is an interesting suggestion. If done well, this may reduce the evaluation burden on communities (by identifying and avoiding duplication), build Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander evaluation capacity, and deliver on promises to co-design evaluations with community and provide feedback about findings. It could also be a mechanism to continuously collect outcome data common to many services and programs, and minimise the data required for individual evaluations.

It should be noted that findings to date have not captured the voices of CCOs, community or clients. The second phase of the project will gather these perspectives.

In order to harness the value of CCOs, it is important for government to consider more flexible, culturally appropriate approaches to procurement. Government will also need to build its internal capacity to respond to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and support CCOs to be recognised as leaders in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service delivery.

I trust this information is of assistance and look forward to facilitating a meeting to provide information in more detail. To arrange a meeting, please contact [REDACTED], A/Assistant Commissioner, Advocacy, Policy and Sector Development on [REDACTED] or by email at [REDACTED]

Yours sincerely



Cheryl Vardon
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- 2 JUN 2017