Cunnamulla: A Coordinated Approach to Intervention

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Abstract:

In South West Queensland, Cunnamulla represents a significant Aboriginal community, with five traditional language groups in the surrounding area. Whilst Cunnamulla has a small and relatively static population, young people are significantly over-represented within the juvenile justice system.

This paper explores the issues and needs surrounding Indigenous young people and the families within the Cunnamulla community, both from a historical and contemporary perspective, utilising data from a survey conducted by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships in November 2007. Risk factors such as involvement in the child protection system, cultural dislocation, disabilities and family dysfunction are discussed in a community context that is currently exacerbated by a lack of coordinated social activities for young people. The re-invigorated initiatives of the Cunnamulla Community Justice Group are discussed as integral and overarching components of a community led response to young people at risk.

In response to these issues, the Department of Communities has adopted a collaborative approach across the relevant business units, with aims that include reducing the number of Indigenous young people in custody, and working with families to divert young people from entry, and re-entry, into the youth justice system. This intra-department collaboration has broadened to link with other stakeholders, including Education Queensland and Paroo Shire Council.

The paper highlights the findings of the "what works" literature, in terms of effective and sustainable interventions that address youth crime, and their application within the Cunnamulla community. In particular, multi-system and coordinated approaches are discussed in terms of addressing needs across a number of domains. Future directions and goals are identified as priorities for the Department of Communities.

Cunnamulla and its people

Cunnamulla is a small country town on the Warrego River in far west Queensland, situated in Paroo Shire. The word Cunnamulla means either "big waterhole" or "long stretch of water" in the Kunja (*kun-ya*) Aboriginal language. Cunnamulla was established in the 1860s to service the vast sheep and cattle industries of the area. Today, Cunnamulla still supports these industries and is the gateway for travellers heading west to opal fields.

Cunnamulla is situated centrally on the crossroads of the Balonne Highway (Adventure Way), connecting St George and Thargomindah, and the Matilda Highway, connecting Charleville and Bourke. Cunnamulla's economy is dominated by agricultural production, with the main products being beef, harvesting of wildlife and wool. Opal mining continues in the area, with tourism becoming increasingly important to the local economy.¹

The Kunja people represent the traditional owner group in Cunnamulla, with four additional language groups: Kooma (Nebine River), Kullilli (Barcoo River South), Budjiti (Mid Warrego River) and Mardigan (Barcoo River North).

Information from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) suggests that as at 23 April 2009, the Paroo Shire held a population of 1,955 and had declined by 3% from the previous year, contrasting from the broader population growth experienced by South West Queensland. As at the time of preparing this paper, census data was available up until 2006 only, however revealed several areas of interest²:

- As at 2006, 27.6% of the Paroo Shire population identified as Indigenous, significantly higher than the 2006 Queensland State average of 3.6%³. It is critical to note that this group was almost exclusively Aboriginal, with only seven people identifying as both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and no-one identifying as Torres Strait Islander only. Further, of this cohort, 38.6% were aged 14 years and younger, compared with 15.3% of the non-Indigenous residents, demonstrating a relatively young Indigenous population.
- Education levels are highlighted as an issue amongst Indigenous youth in Cunnamulla. For persons aged 15 years and over, 16.9% of Indigenous persons had finished year 12 or equivalent, compared with 33.5% of non-Indigenous persons.
- In terms of the Socio-Economic Index For Areas (SEIFA) advantage/disadvantage index, there has been a noted reduction from 913 to 893 between 2001 and 2006 in the Paroo Shire, highlighting growing socio-economic disadvantage.
- Perhaps the most salient statistic, however, is that in 2006 the census suggested
 that there were a total of 111 Indigenous young people in Paroo Shire aged 10 to
 19 years. As at 1 July 2009, there were a total of 13 Indigenous young people
 from Cunnamulla subject to youth justice orders⁴. In the Queensland justice
 system young people are deemed criminally responsible at age 10, and as

¹ Information obtained from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships Cunnamulla profile

² Data extracted from the Indigenous Regional Profile, Office of Economic and Statistical Research, 2006

³ Information obtained from Australian Bureau of Statistics report 4705.0 - Population Distribution, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, 2006

⁴ Information obtained from the Department of Communities Integrated Client Management System

juveniles until age 17, therefore the true number of young people aged 10 to 17 in Cunnamulla would be less than 111. Even assuming that this population demographic has remained static since 2009 and that all 111 young people fell in the 10 to 17 age cohort, a concerning 11.7% of these young people would be represented in the juvenile justice system. Therefore, whilst the actual numbers of young people are comparatively low with other areas of Queensland, proportionally this over-representation merits significant investment in intervention.

Queensland Government Services to Cunnamulla young people

In Queensland, tertiary responses to young people involved in the criminal justice system are provided by Youth Justice Services and Youth Detention Centres. In relation to Cunnamulla, the primary service is the Charleville Youth Justice Service Centre, which operates as a satellite service from the Roma and Toowoomba Service Centres. Young people from Cunnamulla who are remanded in custody or sentenced to Detention Orders are held in the Brisbane Youth Detention Centre, based in Wacol, some 800 kilometres east of Cunnamulla.

In addition to these tertiary services, diversionary options exist within the juvenile justice system, including the use of Police caution and drug diversion, and the restorative process of Youth Justice Conferencing. A Youth Justice Conference affords the opportunity for a young person charged with an offence to meet directly with the victims of their actions, and to make direct reparation. This option is available as an alternative to court proceedings or sentencing in the form of an Indefinite Referral, or as a component of court proceedings in the form of a Conference Before Sentence. With regards to Cunnamulla, a Youth Justice Conferencing outpost is located in Charleville and includes staff based in Cunnamulla.

In addition to the services directly mandated to addressing youth offending, other key government agencies have a direct presence, including Child Safety Services, who operate form both Cunnamulla and Charleville, and Disability Services, where a Local Area Coordinator is based in Cunnamulla. As discussed further in this paper, given the assessed needs of Indigenous young people in Cunnamulla involved in the justice system, these services play a critical role in the provision of coordinated service delivery.

An additional role of the Department of Communities in Queensland is to fund a range of non-government service providers, including youth services. With regard to Cunnamulla, the following is noted:

• The Department of Communities funds a Youth Support Worker in Cunnamulla, who works with young people from the age of 12, including a large proportion of the Indigenous young people in the community. The aim of the service is to identify issues that are important to young people whilst encouraging them to become engaged in their community. The activities provided promote the development of leadership, social and personal skills needed for successful community living, while promoting a positive profile of young people in their community. The service operates a drop-in centre on week days between 2.30 and 5pm, and twice a week from 6pm to 10-pm, offering positive alternatives to offending or anti-social behaviour. The service is also involved in the organisation of camps and other activities aimed at building young people's skills and cultural identity.

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⁵ Youth Justice Conferencing provisions detailed in Part 3 of the *Juvenile Justice Act 1992*

- Additionally, the Community Support Service, also funded by Department of Communities, is operated by the Paroo Shire Council, and provides information, advice, referral services and additional support to members of the community and to local non-government organisations. It also provides community development services targeting residents in the Shire through activities such as community education, skills training, volunteer training, service development, network development and organisational coordination.
- Further, the Department of Communities funded Indigenous Family Violence Service provides information, advice, referral, counselling and support including group work to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people affected by domestic and family violence. It recognises and responds to the specific needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities and seeks to address domestic and family violence in culturally appropriate ways. The service is provided through a case management approach on an individual and group basis and through community education activities with a focus on early intervention and prevention. The service is operated by the Cunnamulla Aboriginal Corporation for Health, and operates in Cunnamulla, Charleville and St George.

Issues affecting young people in Cunnamulla

Analysis of the issues affecting young people in Cunnamulla currently subject to statutory supervision, as at the time of preparing this paper, reveals the following areas of relevance:

- In terms of demographics, it is important to note when contextualising this information that all current clients in Cunnamulla identify as Aboriginal, representing significant over-representation of the Indigenous community within the criminal justice system.
- Further, the average age of clients in Cunnamulla is 13.8 years, younger than the former Darling Downs regional average of approximately 16 years.
- The risks and needs of young people subject to supervised orders within the youth justice system in Queensland are assessed using an adapted version of the Youth Level of Service Case Management Inventory (YLS-CMI) that allows for the identification of a number of key areas for intervention. Assessment is undertaken upon the commencement of supervision, and is reviewed on a regular basis, the frequency dependent on intensity of intervention.⁶ This assessment process was introduced in 2006, to enhance the consistency and quality of client assessment across Queensland Youth Justice Services and Youth Detention Centres. In terms of the risk/needs assessment regarding the current clients from Cunnamulla, it is noted that 46% were assessed as high risk, 31% as moderate risk and 23% as yet to be assessed. Again, this data suggests the need for thorough intervention.
- 61% of Cunnamulla clients had at least one immediate family member with a history of involvement in the justice system, highlighting both inter-generational offending in terms of parental involvement in crime, and offending across sibling groups.

⁶ Youth Justice Service case management practices detailed in the *Youth Justice Practice Manual*, Department of Communities

- 69% of young people were assessed as having substance abuse issues, and peer association issues that contributed to their offending. These two issues are further intertwined in terms of young people engaging in substance misuse in a group context.
- Brief Analysis of the offending histories of this current client cohort revealed that
 property offences and assaults comprised the majority of offences, and that
 offence histories ranged from a period of two to four years. Recidivism is
 therefore a significant issue, as are subsequent periods spent in custody either
 on remand or serving sentence.
- Further, it is noted that 61% of these young people had either prior direct involvement or familial involvement with the Child Protection system.

Offending trends

Brief analysis of Childrens Court appearance data between 2004 and 2008 illustrates a significant upwards trend in the number of finalised court appearances between 2004 and 2008, most notably between 2005/6 and 2006/7, where the number more than doubled. It is further important to note that there have been only two non-Indigenous young people sentenced in Cunnamulla over this four year period.

Cunnamulla Finalised Childrens Court appearances 2004-2008				
Time period:	2004-2005	2005-2006	2006-2007	2007-2008
Indigenous	24	33	77	93
Non-	0	1	0	1
Indigenous				

This data highlights two main areas – firstly the potential increase in demand associated with increased finalised court matters should this trend continue, and secondly the need to acknowledge the high, almost exclusive, Indigenous court appearance rates that suggest the need to progress options such as the establishment of a Youth Murri Court, to offer a more culturally appropriate response by the justice system.

The "What Works" principles

Day, Howells and Rickwood (2004) discuss the *What Works* approach to offender rehabilitation, which has strong influences on Australian correctional service delivery, including the Queensland Department of Communities. Notably, five key principles can be applied in the Cunnamulla context in terms of effective offender rehabilitation:

Firstly, the *risk principle*, which suggests that offenders most likely to re-offend should receive the most intensive intervention. Implementation of the YLS-CMI into the Department of Communities assessment processes has afforded a more comprehensive understanding of the risks and needs of young people involved in the juvenile justice system. In terms of Cunnamulla young people, as discussed above this risk assessment data confirms the need for more intensive interventions.

The **needs principle** which highlights that intervention should be targeted to dynamic risk factors that are more amenable to change, as they are more directly related to recidivism. In the case of Cunnamulla, these issues would include peer relations and substance misuse, however the more static risk factor of intergenerational offending

⁷ Information obtained from the Strategic Planning and Performance Management Branch, Department of Communities

and familial attitudes towards offending, should also be considered in the context of a relatively small community.

The **responsivity principle** which focuses on client and program characteristics that influence an offender's ability to learn in a therapeutic situation. These factors can also be understood as contextual variables. With regards to Cunnamulla, the relatively low population numbers and low socio-economic status of Cunnamulla, and solely Indigenous offender cohort are important factors to consider, as is the younger age demographic in terms of intervention typology.

The *integrity principle* that highlights the need for strong program integrity in terms of the extent to which program delivery is congruent with the program theory and design. This is a particular challenge in the Cunnamulla Community, where remote and visiting services can serve to heighten deficits in service delivery, which may have an impact on intervention.

Finally, the *professional discretion principle* discusses the ability for professionals to make decisions based on characteristics and situations not covered by the preceding principles, and to allow for professional judgement in a rehabilitation system, as opposed to rigid adherence to static principles. When approaching complex issues such as ongoing youth offending in Cunnamulla, the professional judgement of the local service delivery areas is paramount in creating effective and sustainable interventions.

The above principles are therefore relevant and important to establishing effective interventions for young offenders in the Cunnamulla community, and highlight the need for intensive and coordinated government responses.

The Cunnamulla Survey

In November 2007, the Aboriginal community in Cunnamulla with the assistance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services, Department of Communities, conducted a face to face community survey with over 120 adults aged 15 to 60+8. The survey collected and collated data about the Aboriginal community relating to short, medium and long term goals. It was important as the Department of Communities worked to build the capacity of the community to engage effectively with three levels of Government at future Negotiation Tables that there was a shared understanding of the short term and long term priorities that would require attention and responses.

The survey clearly highlighted the need for the community and Government to focus their energies to initially respond to six priorities including improving access to jobs, engagement with young people, reducing engagement with the justice systems, improving educational attainment, improving community housing conditions and better collaboration processes between Government and the community.

The survey also identified other interesting data including the close alignment between the Aboriginal community's long term goals for Cunnamulla and those of the Paroo Shire Council. It also identified that the Aboriginal community in Cunnamulla are long term residents with large numbers of adults living in Cunnamulla for 11 years or more.

⁸ Information extrapolated from *Priorities for the Cunnamulla Community*, a Cunnamulla Survey 2007

The Cunnamulla Regional Collaborative Team

With the results of the Cunnamulla Survey came the need to establish a regional response to the issues facing the Cunnamulla community, and in 2008 the Cunnamulla Collaborative Team was created, with the following vision:

"To improve the wellbeing of young people and their families through a process of effective engagement that results in locally lead solutions to address Aboriginal priority issues."

Core membership was comprised of: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships, the Community Capacity and Service Quality team, Youth Justice Services and Youth Justice Conferencing and included the involvement of the Regional Executive Director. A conscious decision was reached to meet in Cunnamulla at least twice per year, to enhance the visibility of the group and to directly engage with the community in context.

The Cunnamulla Collaborative team established the following objectives:

- To develop an agreed approach to engagement.
- To build capacity from within the community to address underlying issues through partnerships to provide leadership within the region by providing the key link between the community and the department.
- To explore the historical, political, cultural, economic and geographic impacts (with the community) associated with identified issues and the community's capacity to respond to them.
- To develop an action orientated business plan outlining a schedule of activities for 2007 to 2008 and beyond.
- To provide leadership in best practice community engagement.
- Positive information Sharing.⁹

The primary agenda of the Cunnamulla Collaborative team was to explore the needs of young people in Cunnamulla and provide enhanced, coordinated interventions. Through regular and consistent meetings of the group, information sharing between business areas was enhanced.

With enhanced internal communication strategies came greater engagement with the Cunnamulla community, including with the Cunnamulla Community Justice Group, and the local state school. For example, following direct connection between the Cunnamulla State School principal and the Charleville Youth Justice Service Centre at a meeting of the Cunnamulla Collaborative in 2008, the issue of engaging young people was discussed. It was apparent that a number of young people subject to youth justice orders were disengaged from school, and Education Queensland was keen to explore options to address this issue. In addition, the Youth Justice Service had noted the logistical issues of engaging young people outside of school hours, when as a visiting service from Charleville this posed after hours travel considerations.

From this connection came a simple solution – to engage young people at the state school. The use of office space within the school ensured confidentiality and non-identification of young people subject to youth justice intervention amongst their peers. With the requirement to report to the Department at the school, came

⁹ Information extrapolated from the Cunnamulla Regional Collaborative Team, Terms of Reference, 2008

increased attendance on the part of young people, and an increased working relationship with school staff. As the result of this relationship, the Cunnamulla State School assisted with the implementation of a new program aimed at addressing anger management issues, *Aggression Replacement Therapy (ART)*, and were a significant contributor to the success of this program, both in terms of practical contribution and in terms of broader promotion of the program within the Cunnamulla community.

An additional collaborative initiative has been the renovation of a Drop In Centre in Cunnamulla, attached to the local Anglican church. A program was developed that saw young people complete community service hours through the restoration of this centre and afforded the development of associated renovation skills. As a result, the centre has become a functional venue for the delivery of a number of programs facilitated by the Paroo Shire Council. From the interest shown by local businesses, Elders and Paroo Shire Council in the quality of renovation in the Drop In Centre came renewed interest in the provision of community service activities by these services. Paroo Shire Council are now an approved community service agency and are exploring a number of community service options with the Charleville Youth Justice Service Centre.

Whilst the above are simple examples of intra-Departmental collaboration, they represent the enhanced outcomes that are achieved with a multi-systemic approach to an arising issue – resources are greater and results are improved with an increased service delivery capacity.

In March 2009, Premier Bligh announced a revised approach to Queensland Government service delivery that would herald enhanced and easier access to government services by the Queensland public. With this move came the amalgamation of a number of key government departments into the new Department of Communities, including: Sport and Recreation Services, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships, Child Safety Services, Housing and Homelessness Services, Disability Services, Community and Youth Justice Services, Multicultural Affairs Queensland, and Office for Women.

This amalgamation of services provides increased opportunities for collaboration at a regional level, and significant expansion of the Cunnamulla Collaborative Team across key areas that provide services to youth.

The Cunnamulla Negotiation Table

As further evidence of collaboration, in June 2009, the first ever Negotiation Table between government and the local Aboriginal community was staged in Cunnamulla.

The event was initiated by Queensland Government, which had previously set up Negotiation Tables in 33 other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across the state. The inaugural Cunnamulla forum was to be co-chaired by Cunnamulla community representative Michelle Shute and Wayne Briscoe, an Executive Director in the Department of Communities' Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships.

A Negotiation Table is a forum where Indigenous community members can meet with representatives from the federal, state and local governments and local businesses to share knowledge and decide on better services and opportunities for their local Indigenous community.

The negotiation table process was highly successful, and further consolidated Queensland Government responses to Cunnamulla, including those targeted at youth. This negotiation table process will continue on a regular basis in Cunnamulla.

The Cunnamulla Community Justice Group and local Elders

In Queensland, Community Justice Groups (CJGs) were created in 1993 in response to the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. CJG members support Indigenous victims and offenders, both adult and juvenile at all stages of the legal process, encourage diversionary processes and develop networks with other agencies to ensure that issues impacting on Indigenous communities are addressed. There are currently 41 statutory and non-statutory groups located throughout Queensland. 10

These groups hold a formal role under the *Juvenile Justice Act 1992* and are entitled to be represented and heard in Childrens Court proceedings involving Indigenous young people. In Cunnamulla, the Community Justice Group represents a critical partner in addressing youth offending, both in terms of direct client involvement, and broader engagement with the Indigenous community.

Recent invigoration of the Community Justice Group in Cunnamulla has heralded greater connection with the Department of Communities, with the aim to address the over-representation of young people in the juvenile justice system, particularly those in custody. In terms of current initiatives, two main areas are considered a high priority, namely working towards the establishment of a Youth Murri Court in Cunnamulla, and enhancing transitional activities for young people exiting custody.

As a means of progressing these issues, in June 2009 a group of CJG members and local Elders visited the Brisbane Youth Detention Centre and Brisbane Youth Murri Court, supported by staff of the Department of Communities. This was the first time these respected Indigenous leaders had visited either site and represented a significant positive step forward. Through enhanced connection between the CJG and Brisbane Youth Detention Centre, opportunity exists for program activities to extend across both custodial and community domains, and for young people to maintain a strong connection with their Indigenous community whilst in custody.

Future Directions

With the expansion of the Department of Communities comes the opportunity to further align and coordinate interventions for youth in Cunnamulla, both directly in relation to youth justice intervention, and in those areas that are key and integral to safe and empowered families, such as Child Safety Services.

A current initiative of the Department of Communities is to establish integrated case management processes across key service areas, to best meet the needs of complex and high needs clients. This approach is fundamental to intervention success in Cunnamulla. Further, such multi-systemic approaches to intervention around youth crime have been established as having a significant impact on recidivism. In Western Australia, there is a successful MST program for youth justice system clients (the Intensive Supervision Program), which commenced operation in 2004. Evaluation findings of the Western Australia program provided to Senate Estimates Committee in May 2006 (sample size was 30 cases) showed that for participants six months post completion there were outcomes such as a 27.4%

¹⁰ Information sourced from the Department of Justice website <u>www.justice.qld.gov.au</u>

reduction of days in custody, 13.3% reduction in number of times in custody and 64.1% reduction in number of convicted offences. 11

Further expansion and consolidation of the Cunnamulla Collaborative Team will occur as a result of the recent machinery of government changes, with continued aim to provide a coordinated approach to engaging with the Cunnamulla Collaborative.

In addition, engaging with the Community Justice Group and local Elders remains a high priority, in terms of both progressing the establishment of a Youth Murri Court and enhancing program service delivery to Indigenous youth in custody and in the community.

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