



Cairns Region Report



Purpose for our visit

Assistant Commissioner Jenna Roberts was invited to attend the Leader's Forum hosted by the Remote Indigenous Women's Shelter Network in August 2025.

The Leader's Forum (the Forum) marked an opportunity for the Commission to hear from the Remote Indigenous Women's Shelter Network (the Network) during the first in-person gathering of all shelter leaders in its 21-year history. These shelters are often the sole shelter providers in their regions and play a vital role in delivering culturally safe, community-led support to women and children impacted by domestic, family and sexual violence in the most remote and complex geographical locations across Queensland.

During the visit, Assistant Commissioner Roberts engaged with representatives from the Network, stakeholders across the Queensland Government and local community.

Who we engaged with

- QLD Government representatives, including:
 - Minister for Families, Seniors and Disability Services and Minister for Child Safety and the Prevention of Domestic and Family Violence, the Hon Amanda Camm MP
 - Department of Families, Seniors, Disability Services and Child Safety
 - Matt Smith MP, Member for Leichhardt
 - Office of the Victims' Commissioner
 - Department of Housing and Public Works
 - Queensland Police Service
 - The Families Responsibilities Commission
- Queensland Council of Social Services
- Local Cairns Indigenous radio station, Bumma Bippera 98.7FM
- The Remote Indigenous Women's Shelter Network, comprising of representatives from 15 shelters across 14 communities in North Queensland, Far North Queensland, Cape York, the Gulf of Carpentaria and the Torres Strait Islands, including:
 - Warringu Women's Shelter, Cairns
 - Yarrabah Women's Shelter, Yarrabah
 - Junkurji Janay, Mossman
 - Cooktown Women's Shelter, Cooktown
 - Coen Women's Shelter, Coen
 - Pytham Women's Shelter, Lockhart River
 - Nawamba Women's Shelter, Mount Isa
 - Doomadgee Women's Shelter, Doomadgee
 - Kowanyama Women's Shelter, Kowanyama
 - Maantchangk Women's Shelter, Pormpuraaw
 - Ma'aathan Women's Shelter, Aurukun
 - Western Cape Women's Shelter, Weipa
 - Northern Peninsula Area Women's Shelter, Bamaga
 - Lena Passi Women's Shelter, Thursday Island
 - Tablelands Women's Shelter Atherton Tablelands

What we heard

Our engagements revealed key insights into the challenges and opportunities in delivering services to support women and children escaping domestic, family and sexual violence, particularly in remote and regional communities.

The Forum highlighted the breadth of work underway across the Network to support women and children impacted by violence. Driven by the leadership of the Warringu Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporation (Warringu), it marked a key milestone in formalising the Network's Terms of Reference and provided an opportunity for deep dialogue to shape future priorities. The Network will circulate a detailed report to all invited representatives, including key messages and opportunities that arose from discussions.

Sustainable and outcomes-focused funding for shelters

Stakeholders strongly recommended the implementation of long-term, sustainable funding models that reflect the complex and diverse needs of shelters, particularly in remote and regional areas. Existing funding arrangements often limited self-sustainability by imposing reporting requirements that prioritise quantifying outputs over meaningful outcomes, limiting the capacity of services to respond flexibly and effectively to client needs.

Stakeholders highlighted that a one-size-fits-all approach to funding and reporting fails to acknowledge the varying cultural contexts and levels of need across communities. Government investment should support outcomes-based funding that enables shelters to deliver place-based, trauma-informed and culturally safe services.

Funding models often limit the self-sustainability and local ownership of shelters, creating complexities around long-term planning and service stability. Properties are owned and managed in vastly different

ways across the sector, with inconsistent support for asset maintenance and governance, further complicating effective service delivery and local decision-making processes.

Stakeholders noted the importance of sustaining what is already working. Pilot programs and trials, especially those co-designed with communities, require time to build trust, establish partnerships and achieve measurable impact. Without secure and ongoing funding, these initiatives risk losing momentum and community confidence. There is also a pressing need for increased investment in under-resourced areas of the service system, such as programs that work with men who use violence and men's healing. Comprehensive and sustained funding approaches will help ensure a more effective, integrated response to domestic, family and sexual violence and deliver better outcomes for women, children, and communities in remote and regional areas.

Greater recognition of cultural leadership

Stakeholders identified workforce development and retention as critical challenges in the delivery of domestic, family and sexual violence services, particularly in remote and regional communities. Stakeholders emphasised the need for strategies that recognise and support the unique skills and knowledge held within local communities, including the cultural leadership and lived experience of Elders.

Despite playing a vital role in service delivery, community engagement and cultural safety, Elders' contributions are often under-recognised and uncompensated. There needs to be a focus on

culturally informed workforce development strategies that formally recognise the expertise of Elders and embed their leadership within service models. This includes appropriate remuneration, training pathways that reflect cultural knowledge, and mechanisms to elevate lived experience as a core workforce capability.

Strengthening the cultural capability of the sector in this way will support workforce retention, improve service quality, and foster greater trust and engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

We sincerely thank everyone who generously shared their time and insights with us.

