

Even as Fitzroy Crossing's Aboriginal Children and Family Centre achieves exactly what Nigel Scullion wants, its funding future remains very much in doubt

By National Indigenous Times reporter, Geoff Bagnall

The Aboriginal Children and Family Centre (ACFC) in Fitzroy Crossing has done exactly what the Federal Government wants by halving the number of absentee days of children at the local school but despite its success it now faces an uncertain future and may cease to exist under the government's new Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS).

Fitzroy Crossing sits about 400 km east of Broome in Western Australia. It is about as remote as it gets and Sarah Cleaves, Centre Manager of the Baya Gawiy Buga yani Jandu yani u Aboriginal Children and Family Centre, said the centre that is now under threat was not only at the heart of the community but at the heart of community health.

"If this centre goes it will strip out the economic viability of this town," Ms Cleaves said.

"We see as a community this next generation as the generation that is going to break the cycle of alcohol and violence. If we shut this centre, the chances of that happening are just destroyed," she said.

And that issue of breaking the cycle of alcohol and violence is crucial because Fitzroy Crossing does not deny its problem. It has among the highest recorded Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) rates in the world. Ms Cleaves says in Australia there is a national denial of our problem with alcohol.

"We have a multi-disciplinary paediatric clinic which attends here every four weeks," Ms Cleaves said. "That clinic refers across children to our centre with FASD and other challenges.

"While the study results are still being finalised, the community expects as many as one in five children may be affected by FASD. These would be among the highest rates reported in the world," Ms Cleaves said.

So Fitzroy Crossing's ACFC was purpose-built to cater for children and families living with FASD and the facility allows the community to lead the world in FASD research.

"We fought tooth and nail to get an architecturally-design building which has been designed specifically to cater for the needs of children with Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. It's leading edge here," Ms Cleaves said.

Fitzroy Crossing is leading the world in terms of research into Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder.

"So this place here is seen almost like a beacon of hope for Fitzroy. Baya Gawiy is seen by the local community as the heart of Fitzroy Crossing. This is a place of which the community is immensely proud," she said.

The community is proud of the record of the centre in its FASD work but Baya Gawiy also has an enviable educational record.

"For the children who have come through Baya Gawiy and have been here for more than three months, when they go to kindy and then pre-primary at the school their unexplained absentee stat is 25 per cent, for the children who have been here less than three months it's 38 per cent and for children who have never come to Baya Gawiy, it is around 48 per cent," Ms Cleaves said.

"School attendance, which is what the government is very interested in and rightly so, is directly linked to whether the children are coming through Baya Gawiy," she said.

The centre caters for 38 children. Two thirds are from Aboriginal families and of these about half are working families. These families rely on the service to maintain their employment. And so Ms Cleaves says the loss of the centre would devastate not only education and health but also employment in Fitzroy Crossing because parents could not work without care for their children.

Ms Cleaves said the loss of specific ACFC funding under a National Partnership Agreement would mean all 38 of the original ACFCs are left in a precarious position.

"We have great deals of uncertainty whether we'll have any funding at all, and if so from what sources," she said.

And even a letter from Indigenous Affairs Minister, Senator Nigel Scullion provides little comfort, only stating the centre "may" be able apply under the IAS.

"We have a letter from Minister Scullion stating we may be able to apply under the Indigenous Advancement Strategy. The wording of the guidelines is less than clear but we are taking that direction directly from the Minister for Indigenous Affairs," Ms Cleaves said.

But even if they are successful, the amount and duration of the funding is at the discretion of the Prime Minister for Aboriginal Affairs.

"That is a four year agreement but there is no guarantee we'll get funding for four years because the amount of money and the time allocated is at the sole discretion of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet," Ms Cleaves said. "Whether that was intentional or not I'm not sure but that's what has occurred as a result of the Federal Government not rolling over funds."

Ms Cleaves said the situation for Baya Gawiy was precarious and pointed out the Minister for Indigenous Affairs knows of the educational and other successes of the centre, saying he and his advisers "have been informed".

"The Federal Minister for Indigenous Affairs has been sent a briefing pack which includes these figures. He received that at the beginning of last week and has been told that in discussions with one of the Senators here in Western Australia," she said.

Lisa Thorpe, Chief Executive of Bubup Wilam ACFC in Thomastown, Victoria, sees the whole Indigenous Advancement Strategy as a resurgence of the assimilation policies Aboriginal people have been assaulted with for 226 years because Aboriginal funding was now a pot of money anyone can dip into.

"They're going to assimilate us and we're going to have to compete," Ms Thorpe said. "They're phasing us out, the organisations, and saying that anybody can do the job Aboriginal people are doing," she said.

Ms Thorpe said the original 38 Aboriginal Children and Family Centres are now down to "12 or 15" with the rest "assimilated" and opened up to "all vulnerable children".

"It was wonderful to have the big National Partnership Agreement to establish these centres but we haven't even done an evaluation of where they are now," Ms Thorpe said.

“How many of them 38 still exist as Aboriginal services? How many of them do open to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people? How many Aboriginal people are using those services?”

“In that one area of early years they built them on Aboriginal money and they disappeared straight away at the end of the four years. We are down now, I think, to about 12 or 15, the rest have all been assimilated. “There are not many that are still controlled and managed by Aboriginal people that aren’t worried about their future funding.

“The rest have been picked up and absorbed by local government or bigger conglomerates that can take care of them. They say Aboriginal children can use this but it is for all vulnerable children. They built it on black money but then they took it straight away,” Ms Thorpe said.

Ms Thorpe said the Victorian Government finally came to the table last week with an offer to fund a business manager for six months to help make Bubup Wilam with financing but it isn’t in time to apply for this IAS round.

“The State Government has only just offered a person but they’re not going to be here in time to do this submission for us. By the time we get someone engaged that submission round is going to be gone,” Ms Thorpe said. “We will put in for this and we will put our best foot forward but we’re also probably the bottom of the barrel there too because there are a lot of other people vying for the same bucket of money.”

And Ms Thorpe said while the “funding process doesn’t allow you to be exclusively for Aboriginal children”, the cultural support offered by that exclusive status is still necessary to give Aboriginal children a start. “Aboriginal organisations still need support; you can’t erase 226 years of destruction in a government term,” she said.
