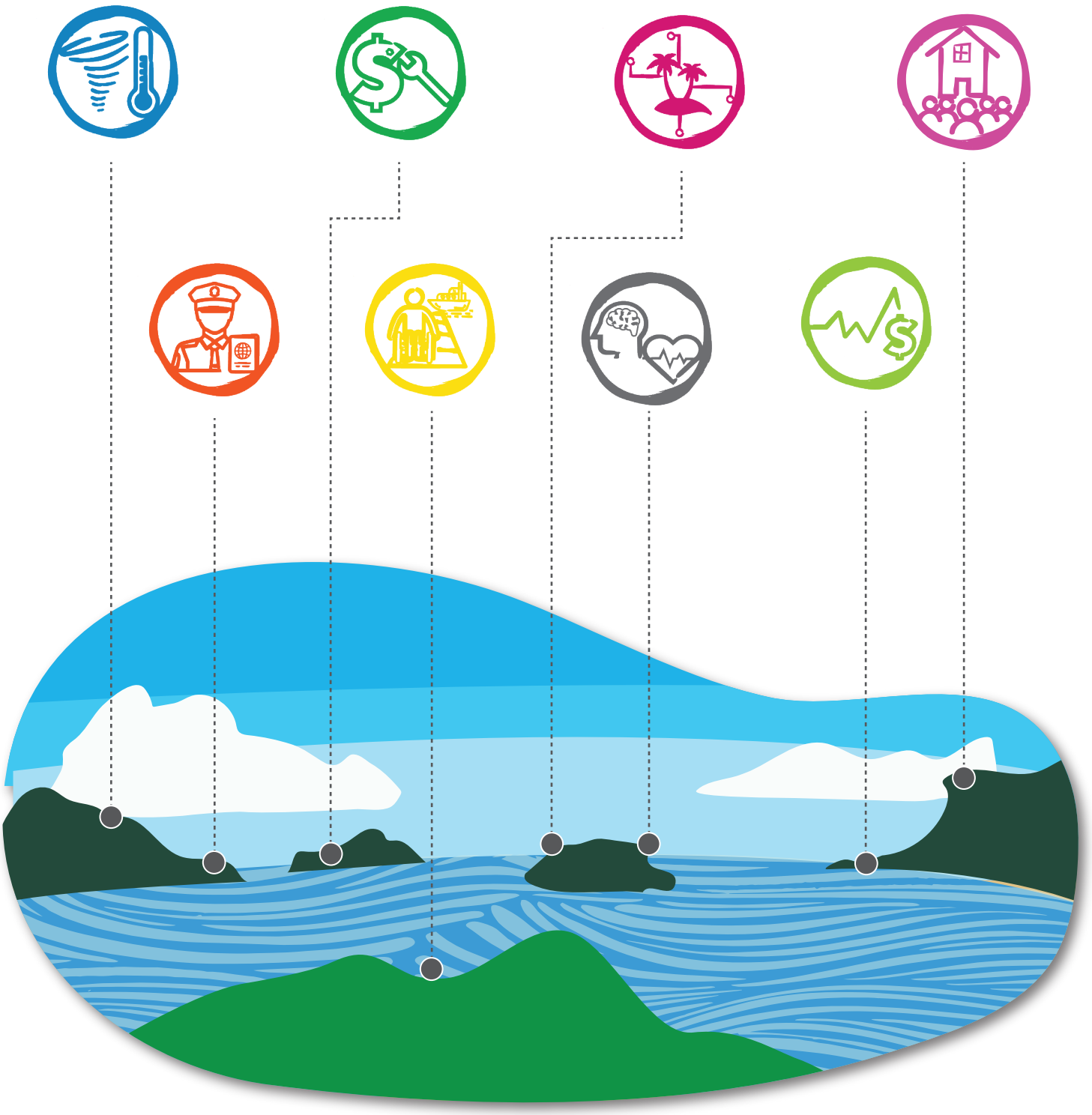
Torres Strait Island
REGIONAL COUNCIL

Federal **Election Initiatives** 2019



CONTENTS

Message from the Mayor 3

Initiative One 4
Support Climate Change Mitigation & Protection from Natural Disaster Impact

Initiative Two 5
Repair Federal Funding to Local Government

Initiative Three 6
Support Digital Transformation & Connected Islands

Initiative Four 7
Address Homelessness, Overcrowding Issues & Adequate Housing

Initiative Five 8
Evolve International Border Protection & Infrastructure

Initiative Six 9
Support Equitable Access to Community Services & Marine Infrastructure

Initiative Seven 10
Foster Community Health & Wellbeing

Initiative Eight 11
Foster Indigenous Well-Being through Prosperity

OUR 8 FEDERAL ELECTION INITIATIVES

Firstly, I acknowledge our Lord, Native Title Holders, our Elders past and present, and the people of the Torres Strait.

The Torres Strait Island Regional Council has developed an enduring relationship at both the State and Federal levels of Government. We look forward to further nurturing and growing this relationship in the delivery of our key policy focus areas post the 2019 Federal Election.

> “Our 8 strategic initiatives are core to the livability of our communities and ultimate sustainability of our region.”

Our organisation represents 15 island communities located within an area that consists of 42,000 square kilometers of ocean, and an international border which we share with Papa New Guinea.

Geographical positioning increases our vulnerability to the effects of climate change, complex social issues and unique infrastructure provisioning challenges that require innovative thinking for us as a local government, and an open, collaborative approach together with our federal representatives.

We look forward to discussing our initatives with you.

Cr. Fred Gela, Mayor
Torres Strait Island Regional Council

INITIATIVE ONE

Support Climate Change Mitigation & Protection from Natural Disaster Impact

What is the issue?

The Torres Strait region is uniquely exposed to the effects of climate change and the continuing recovery efforts communities face to remain resilient in increased severe weather events.

Why is this important for our communities?

If proactive and sustainable solutions for both coastal defence and extreme weather protection aren't reached within the next 5 years, urgent measures will need to take place for the complete displacement of communities from their traditional island homes.

What are we seeking?

- Realisation of the previously promised bipartisan $20m Commonwealth contribution to rectification works.
- Collaboration with Council to ensure climate change and natural disaster mitigation programs are sustainable, supportive of local industry and employment outcomes.
- Ensuring that local government is not worse off under current reforms of the Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangement.
- Investment in pilot program(s) for renewable energy production and consumption offset solutions, such as electric vehicles and associated network charging infrastructure.

WHAT DO WE KNOW?

- According to the Commonwealth-funded Reef and Rainforest Research Centre, sea levels in the Torres Strait are expected to rise by up to a metre by the year 2100, and up to 15 centimetres over the next two decades. All of our 15 island communities are experiencing visible coastal inundation concerns; however, the highest priority for coastal protection works are the Warraber (Sue Is.), Masig (Yorke Is.), and Iama (Yam Is.) communities.
- When partnered with the correct investment, local knowledge and labour has delivered in communities like Poruma (Coconut Is.), where Council utilised geotextile sandbagging techniques to deliver rectification works considerably below market value. This has been further evidenced in the Commonwealth commissioned Torres Strait Seawalls Evaluation Report, in 2018.
- The Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements (NDRRA) are vital in assisting councils and communities to recover from major natural disasters. It is critical that the costs of restoring government infrastructure are shared across all levels of government, and that the Commonwealth remains committed to meeting up to 75% of those costs.
- Regionally we have witnessed significant increases in extreme weather events; rebuilding infrastructure to its original state and condition is no longer sufficient. It's a very expensive band aid application year after year, ie. road repair. Betterment funding is a more sustainable alternative, for example, following a severe weather event, dirt roads that are damaged are sealed instead.

INITIATIVE TWO

Repair Federal Funding to Local Government

What is the issue?

The current funding arrangements for local government are no longer fit for purpose. The decline in core federal funding to local government has reduced the capacity of councils to develop and maintain the key services and infrastructure within their communities, which fuels the risk of reducing standards of living in our communities and across the nation.

Why is this important for our communities?

The Financial Assistance Grant scheme (FAGs) is practically the life blood of small Indigenous Council's that have no rate base or only minimal rateable land. Our Council is unique in comparison to other local government organisations; we service a population base of 5,000 people, spread across 42,000 square kilometers of ocean and 15 individual island communities, each with their own unique characteristics and service requirements. All of which is managed by a total asset base of $1.5b, with an annualised depreciation of $40m and a total operating budget of $60m.

What are we seeking?

- Repair funding assistance to local government by restoring the quantum of Financial Assistance Grants to at least 1% of Commonwealth taxation revenue.

WHAT DO WE KNOW?

- The Commonwealth collects around 80% of taxation; however, responsibility for service and infrastructure delivery falls to states, territories and local governments.
- Nationally, local government spent $34b in 2016. The Commonwealth provides around $2.3b in FAGs to local government or just under 7% of annual expenditure.
- The Commonwealth Government's funding to local government through FAGs is critically important. Untied in the hands of councils, the FAGs enable councils to provide a mix of services and infrastructure appropriate to their local circumstances and maintain the well-being of their communities. They help equalise the level of services across local governments nationally – particularly in rural, regional and remote areas – and they help fund the growth in demand for local government services in line with population growth.
- FAGs were equal to around 1 per cent of Commonwealth taxation revenue in 1996. However, despite an annual growth rate in Australia's Gross Domestic Product of an average 3.47% from 1960 until 2017, FAGs have declined by around 43% in relative terms over the past 20 years, and now amount to approximately 0.55% (2018) of Commonwealth tax revenue.
- Additional investment through local government is essential to help maintain the living standards of all Australians by fostering the equitable provision of local government services and infrastructure and maintaining local economic growth.

INITIATIVE THREE

Support Digital Transformation & Connected Islands

What is the issue?

Geographical positioning of our island communities and complex reef systems pose a significant challenge for conventional telecommunication solutions, quite literally requiring digital bridges between our islands. Inadequate or band-aid style investment approaches in connectivity will drive an even greater digital divide for our communities in economic participation, social inclusion and access to essential services like allied health and tertiary studies.

Why is this important for our communities?

All communities, whether they be in the major capitals or in regional towns, need to be future-ready. Linked-up, smart communities will foster innovative approaches to environmental and societal issues and ensure equitable access to the benefits of the knowledge economy.

What are we seeking?

- Further investment in the Smart Cities and Suburbs Program, with a strategic focus on regional and remote infrastructure development.
- Leverage return on infrastructure investment through new tech and pilot programs that foster renewable energy, digital adaption and automation opportunities for remote communities.
- Establish a Digital Local Government and Rural/ Regional Telecommunications Program to increase the community benefits of improved technology, connectedness and innovation.

WHAT DO WE KNOW?

- The Torres Strait is only at the precipitous of its digital transformation journey with an existing program by Telstra and TSRA currently provisioning access to mobile and fixed line broadband services to some residents for the very first time. This consists of 12 separate projects on 10 of our islands, providing radio link upgrades on multiple islands, which lays the foundation for future telecommunication improvements.
- Whole-of-Government business transformation strategies that result in an interconnected government and collaborative citizen-centred approaches will underpin tomorrow's smart cities.
- Rural and regional Australia and its telecommunications connectivity capabilities will also underpin business transformation and interconnectedness.
- Uptake of electric and autonomous vehicles in Australia will be limited by patchy telecommunications services in rural, regional and remote areas.

INITIATIVE FOUR

Address Homelessness, Overcrowding Issues & Adequate Housing

What is the issue?

Access to safe and secure housing is a critical pillar to ending the disparity between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and the non-Indigenous population. Our Council is the largest provider of housing within the region, however inadequate funding has meant there is consistantly a significant number of households on our waiting lists. Over half of our waitlisted applicants are in desperate need due to an overcrowded situation, homelessness, safety or medical concerns.

Why is this important for our communities?

Homelessness and housing stress can profoundly affect the mental and physical health of individuals and families, as well as impact on their education and employment opportunities, and their ability to participate fully in the community.

What are we seeking?

- Continue to provide at least $5.5b over the next decade to address the needs in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities particularly overcrowding, homelessness, poor housing conditions, and a severe shortage of housing in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across Australia.
- Renew the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing and acknowledging the need for increased local engagement and use of local services and resources.
- Work with Council to develop innovative partnership models on housing, assisting in facilitation of the home ownership realisation process for our communities.

WHAT DO WE KNOW?

- Home ownership was realised for the first time in our region last year, which resulted in 5 homes being divested on Poruma (Coconut Is.). Several other LHA leases have been signed off and registered following this great outcome. Council through the aid of grant funding is working to bring LHA properties up to a liveable standard and assist in insurance costs in order for the private ownership process to begin.
- Regional and remote Indigenous Council's that have no rate base or only minimal rateable land are solely reliant on funding and operational budgets to address community accommodation needs.

INITIATIVE FIVE

Evolve International Border Protection & Infrastructure

What is the issue?

The Torres Strait region is arguably Australia's most critical location for border protection; Geographical positioning, complex reef systems and international border proximity provide an ideal pathway for illegal immigration, drug trafficking, and biosecurity risk.

Why is this important for our communities?

Border breaches can have an irreversible effect on our ecosystem, cultural places and communities. Our communities within close proximity to the border regularly face 'overstaying' incidents, which causes additional burden on Council services and infrastructure.

What are we seeking?

- Build an open, collaborative partnership with Council in border management and service commitments to the region.
- Investment in operational hubs, increasing serviceable reach, response times and the ability to provision vessels within the region; ultimately resulting local employment opportunities.
- Partner with Council in strategic infrastructure delivery and innovation, such as coastal and marine facility surveillance equipment.

WHAT DO WE KNOW?

- The two Fast Response vessels, specifically appointed to this region have been missing for an extensive period, due to surveying requirements. These vessels have operational reach concerns, primarily for incidents within the proximity of the international border due to refuelling activities being restricted to Thursday Island.
- Bay Class vessels and helicopter services are typically provisioned as alternatives, however, also lack the operational reach to cover our 42,000km2 ocean footprint. The Bay Class vessels have had an incredibly poor track record of success in this region.
- Extensive vacancies of key Border Force positions on at least 5 of our islands have been attributed to the reduction of employee entitlements such as rent assistance and remote area allowances.
- Concerns have been raised regarding the derelict state of several of the Border Force offices within our communities.

INITIATIVE SIX

Support Equitable Access to Community Services & Marine Infrastructure

What is the issue?

A significant proportion of our community infrastructure, particularly our marine equipment is at risk of disrepair. Whilst some of our community facilities are relatively new, many were built decades ago and like our infrastructure, require significant upgrades to ensure they continue to meet the needs of the community, and compliance with accessibility requirements. In addition, Council also provides airport infrastructure within our communities for delivery of certain goods and passenger movement, however the cost for air travel, within and out of the region, is largely unaffordable for lower socioeconomic communities.

Why is this important for our communities?

Our 15 communities are located across 14 separate islands, so our waterways are our national highways; shipping is our lifeblood, and our communities have a complete reliance on it. Aside from the provision of materials needed for upgrading core on-ground facilities, such as community halls, Council offices and recreational/sporting facilities, the majority of our most fundamental services have a reliance on our marine infrastructure, for example our electricity generation and drinking water desalinisation equipment is currently operated using diesel fuel. This is a critical item that is restricted to sea freight provision only.

What are we seeking?

- Promote equitable access to community services and stimulate local economies by investing in a Local Government Community Infrastructure Program.
- New investment in the maintenance of community infrastructure will create employment, industry access ie. tourism, art, fisheries, etc. promoting the retainment of key skills within our region.

WHAT DO WE KNOW?

- The cost of maintaining infrastructure, including marine landings, in this remote region is astronomical compared to urban and regional centres. The snowball effect of chronic underfunding means that marine and other transport facilities are not being renewed and replaced in a timely manner to comply with asset maintenance and disability access upgrade requirements.
- The recently completed Kirirri (Hammond Is.) Island wharf project, funded by the QLD & Commonwealth Governments, and Council, cost over $6m. This project provided an accessible wharf suitable for public transport for the entire community, to meet the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth).
- Wharf Infrastructure - 13 of our communities have jetties, however;

  - 9 have less than 5 years of remaining life left and are being repaired regularly, however are incapable of servicing anything other than small recreational vessels.

  - Only 1 currently meets Disability Discriminations Standards.

  - The estimated cost to replace these 9 jetties is in the order of $55 Million.
- Essential Marine Infrastructure – Mooring Dolphins;

  - Mooring dolphins are critical marine infrastructure in allowing barges to safely moor at our communities, particularly in rough weather, to allow the provision of fuel, grocery and other essential items.

  - 3 communities have no mooring dolphins at all - being Mer (Murray Is.), Poruma (Coconut Is.), Masig (Yorke Is.); Poruma and Masig's previous dolphins have collapsed into the ocean.

  - 2 communities have very poor condition dolphins, being Saibai and Dauan (Mt. Cornwallis Is.).

  - Estimated combined cost to replace/reinstate dolphins at the above 5 communities is $18M.

INITIATIVE SEVEN

Foster Community Health & Wellbeing

What is the issue?

The cost of health care is increasing; greater priority needs to be given to preventative health to keep people well and to reduce the burden on the hospital and primary care system.

Why is this important for our communities?

Residents of regional and remote communities face numerous barriers to accessing certain health services and can also lack access to preventative information and programs, having further impact on health and wellbeing inequalities, and poorer quality of life outcomes. There are also a range of other concerns, ie. social isolation and affordability, for community members required to travel for health care away from the region.

What are we seeking?

- Take urgent action to develop new and sustainable arrangements for funding in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to ensure that services, including preventative programs, are meeting the needs of communities and that there has not been a shifting of responsibilities and costs onto local government.
- Commitment to consult and work with Council on policies and programs aimed at meeting the existing and preventative needs of our local communities, including the upgrading of associated facilities/infrastructure, connectivity and smart tech, to drive further access and long term solutions within communities.

WHAT DO WE KNOW?

- Water and sewerage infrastructure provision has not kept pace with population growth in remote Indigenous communities. In the last 12 months (Feb 2018 to 12 Feb 2019) approximate costs directly attributed to the running of 11 mobile desalination units within our communities was $2.1m. This figure also includes having to procure emergency desalination plant equipment which was $230k, with an additional $85k in freight and mobilisation costs on Saibai Island.
- Family health and well-being is supported by local government in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and is a major focus of municipal service and infrastructure delivery. To achieve the best outcomes for communities, appropriate and sustainable resources must be provided for these service delivery functions.
- It is estimated that around 10% of Gross Domestic Product is spent on health care.

INITIATIVE EIGHT

Foster Indigenous Well-Being through Prosperity

What is the issue?

There is an urgent need to redress the social and economic disadvantage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, however solutions on ground, need to be collaborative in approach and provide the ownership ability of outcomes.

Why is this important for our communities?

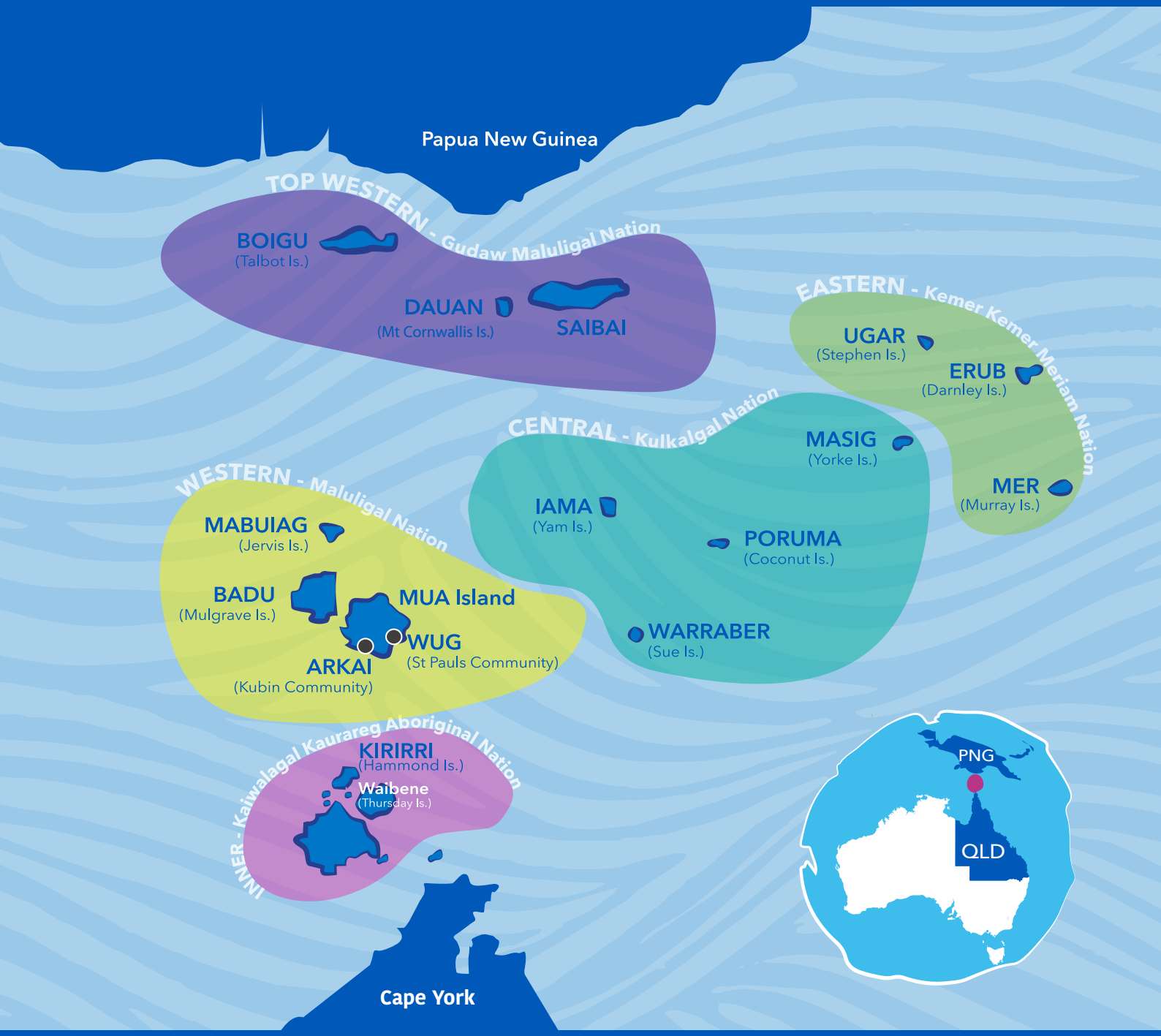
Initiatives aimed at closing the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australians, specifically in the areas of housing, health, early childhood development, education, economic participation and remote service delivery are vital if our nation is to defeat the economic and social impact of entrenched disadvantage in our remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

What are we seeking?

- Commitment to consult and work with Council on proactive economic, social and enviromental solutions to the needs of our local communities.
- Stimulate and encourage private sector investment to solve of some of regional and remote Australia's toughest issues, by incentivising renewable energy solutions, digital development and smart-tech within regional and remote communities.

WHAT DO WE KNOW?

- As the major contributor to employment within our region Council has 83% of all roles based within local island communities. We are actively working on the rentention of vital trades and skill development within our region with a growing apprenticeship program, that leads to full time employment and ongoing mentoring.
- Council has implemented a clear return on investment model for funding partners in of infrastructure and operational program delivery aligning to supplier diversity best practice, with a majority (82.5%) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce and are well on track for gender parity with 44% employment and in 44% of our leadership roles.



We welcome engagement from all political and media representatives involved in the Federal Election process to discuss further our 8 Initiatives, livability within our communities and the ultimate sustainability of our region.

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