

MEDIA RELEASE

For release on 6 August 2015

Mayor Frederick Gela is urging Australia's leaders to drive down the high cost of living to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders health outcomes.

Mayor Gela is calling on the PM to address the critical issue of the high cost of living in his upcoming visit to the region. "We know that improving access and affordability to fresh produce, increasing available health services and providing adequate housing contributes significantly to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders health and life expectancy." "When politicians talk about Closing The Gap why aren't politicians addressing the statistics? We are a dying race of people."

Torres Strait Islanders, on average, earn \$25,000 less per year than people living on mainland Australia however they are paying up to three times the price for food (of average quality), petrol and transport.

A practical solution to address the higher cost of living for our people is to implement a Torres Strait Island Freight Equalisation Scheme, like the one Tasmania has had in place since 1976, which received \$105 million in Commonwealth funding in 2013-14 and another \$203 million expansion of the scheme was announced in the Mercury News in March 2015.

"The Torres Straits is in a position where we need it more than Tasmania – if we seriously want to improve our health." "Why are we treated differently?" These are the issues we ask the Prime Minister to address."

A recent report estimated that healthy foods such as fruit, vegetables and lean meat are 10 to 100 times more expensive in calories per dollar – and, that it is much cheaper to purchase higher calorific foods. A consumer in the Torres Strait can expect to pay nearly *three* times the price for a single litre of milk, compared to a regional town.

Council's Executive are developing a deeper understanding of our cost base and the high cost of living and encourage the Australian Government to commission a cost of living study for the Torres Strait region. This will ensure more realistic

projections for sustainable business and employment outcomes, strategic Public Health service delivery, and adequate funding provision.

The high cost of freight and travel for community members also contribute to the growing gap between low income and high cost of living.

Many communities are severely restricted with travel options and suffer major access issues. Residents of Dauan and Ugar have no landing strip and are limited to helicopter at great expense. Travel options are dependent on tidal heights and weather and coastal conditions. Previously residents from Ugar were entitled to a State Government subsidy to ensure fairer accessibility for transport as a return flight from Ugar can cost over \$3000. This was secured by Island Council prior to amalgamation.

The subsidy was in place initially for 3-years but was extended for 5-years due to responsible management of finances. Unfortunately the funding program was withdrawn in 2013.

TSIRC also subsidised air travel over the Christmas season in 2014 for both Dauan & Ugar communities from our own revenue to support families who were unable to afford travel costs.

The cost of petrol, which is not only used for cars but for intercommunity travel by boat, is also significantly higher. Current petrol prices in the closest regional town of Cairns retail for \$1.34L while you can expect to pay \$3.80L in some of our communities.

Further information can be obtained by contacting our Community Engagement and Media Officer, Bianca Barling on 0400 856 333 or bianca.barling@tsirc.qld.gov.au

More information on the Freight Equalisation Scheme is forthcoming as a separate Media Release.