VOICES4COWPER

ALL IN THIS TOGETHER

voices4cowper
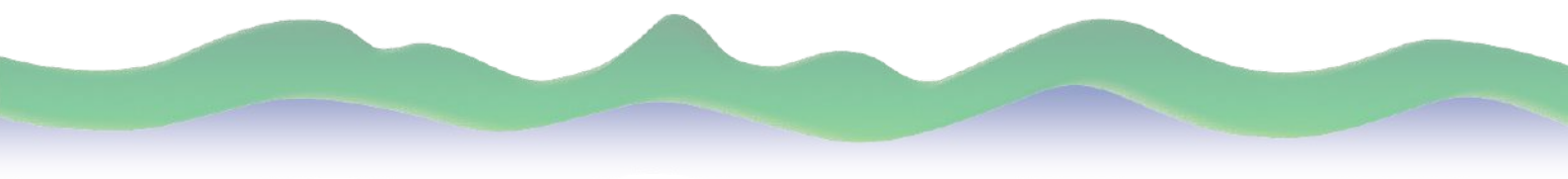
The Voices4Cowper committee acknowledges and pays their respect to the countries on which the Cowper electorate sits. We respect Gumbaynggirr, Dunghutti and Birpai countries and the Ancestors, Elders and Custodians who have cared for the land and waters and all life, in these countries, through time. We acknowledge the young custodians and emerging Elders today, as we seek to support the democratic process and the continuity of life here.

Penny Adams

Contents

Voices4Cowper was created by a small group of people from across the electorate who sought to generate community ownership of political dialogue. Kitchen Table Conversations were used to gather community concerns and ideas and place these at the centre of the political process.

Penny Adams

V4C is a non-party-political, incorporated association with membership from across the Cowper electorate. We came together out of a shared desire for a more meaningful connection between the people of Cowper and our political representatives.
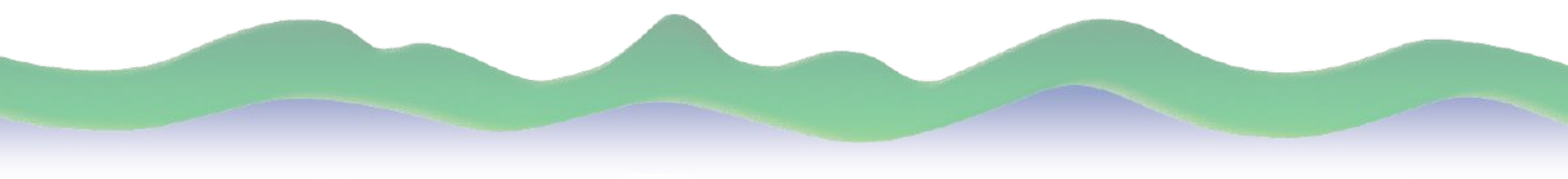

We have no affiliation with any political party or independent candidate.

We are an entirely volunteer run organisation. Our minimal overheads are funded by small private donations.

Penny Adams

Our values

- **Respect –** for each other
- **Integrity –** being true to our values
- **Inclusivity –** of all points of view
- **Trust –** in each other and the process
- **Constructiveness –** to make democracy work better
- **Transparency –** we're open about what we're doing
- **Equality –** of all people
- **Non-party political –** for the community, no one else

Our vision

Facilitating a more meaningful connection between the people of Cowper and our local member

Cowper covers an area from Port Macquarie in the south to Coffs Harbour in the north. The main towns include Bellingen, Bowraville, Coffs Harbour, Crescent Head, Dorrigo, Gladstone, Hat Head, Kempsey, Macksville, Nambucca Heads, Sawtell, South West Rocks, Port Macquarie, Ulong and Urunga (AEC, 2019).


Figure 1 Australian Bureau of Statistics (2017) 'Map of the Federal Electoral Division of COWPER' [PDF MAP]. Profile of the electoral division of Cowper. Accessed 20 September 2021

In the 2016 Census, there were 159,321 people in Cowper (Commonwealth Electoral Divisions). Of these 48.4% were male and 51.6% were female and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people made up 6.1% of the population (ABS, 2017).

Reference: (ABS) Australian Bureau of Statistics (October 2017) 2016 Census QuickStats-Cowper, ABS Website, accessed 20 September 2021.

(AEC) Australian Electoral Commission (November 2019). Profile of the electoral division of Cowper (NSW). AEC website, accessed 25 September 2021.
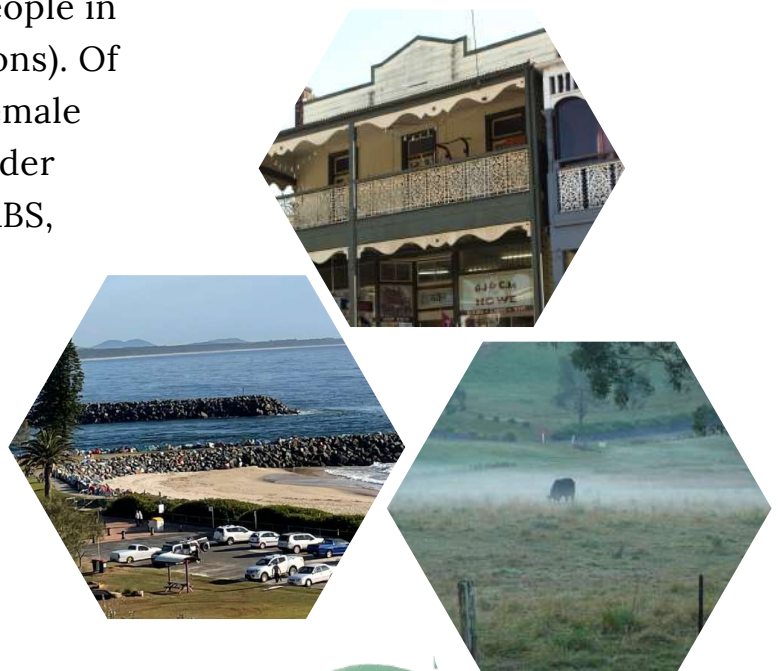
What we've done

Voices for Cowper held 49 Kitchen Table Conversations (KTCs) where 260 participants were asked the six questions below. Each KTC had a scribe who didn't participate in the conversation but wrote down what was said in note form. When a person's comments were supported by other group members, this was also recorded.

The data analysis team then put together the scribes' notes from all the KTCs. They looked at all the responses to each question to identify common themes and the words relating to those themes. They then searched the notes to make sure that every mention of each of the words for each theme was counted. Through this process we were able to build a robust picture, both of what mattered to participants overall, and the relative importance of the various issues raised. Finally, we identified key words and phrases that articulated the issues and concerns for inclusion in the report.

What we asked:

Living in Cowper
• *What are the good things about living here?*
• *What is important to you and your community?*

Political Representation
• *What would strengthen the connection between local people and our local member?*
• *What practical things can we do to improve engagement and trust in democracy?*

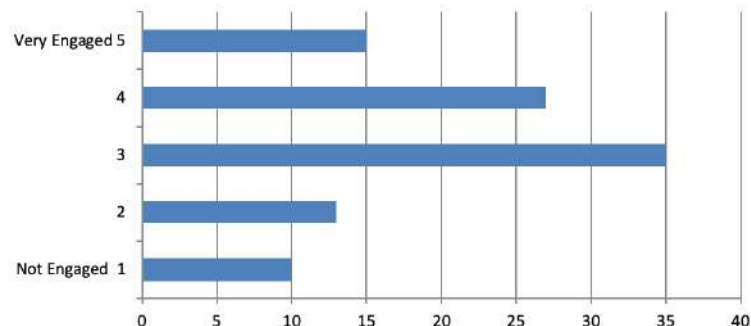### Issues and Concerns
• *What are the big issues both within and beyond Cowper that should be addressed by our local member?*
• *Do you have anything more you'd like to say?*

Percentage of KTC Participants Based on Length of Time Living in Cowper

23% Years 30-80
34% Years 0-9
18% Years 20-29
25% Years 10-19
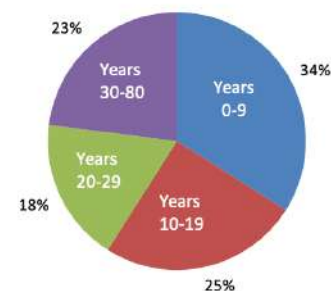
Political Engagement of KTC Participants (%)

Very Engaged 5
4
3
2
Not Engaged 1

# The good things about living here now

Natural Environment
• The natural environment – the beaches, oceans and rivers; the mountains, hills and valleys; the forests, birds and animals; the overall habitat richness and diversity; and the congenial climate
• Natural beauty of this place

People & Community
• Tolerant accepting, friendly, kind, generous and happy people and communities – people help others in times of need
• Social and cultural diversity
• A community that values the importance and visibility of local Indigenous culture

Physical Amenity
• Space and freedom – the agreeable mix of cities, towns and villages; peacefulness and lack of big city traffic and congestion; beautiful places to walk and ride; and fresh, clean air and water
• A place where people can achieve a healthy work/life balance
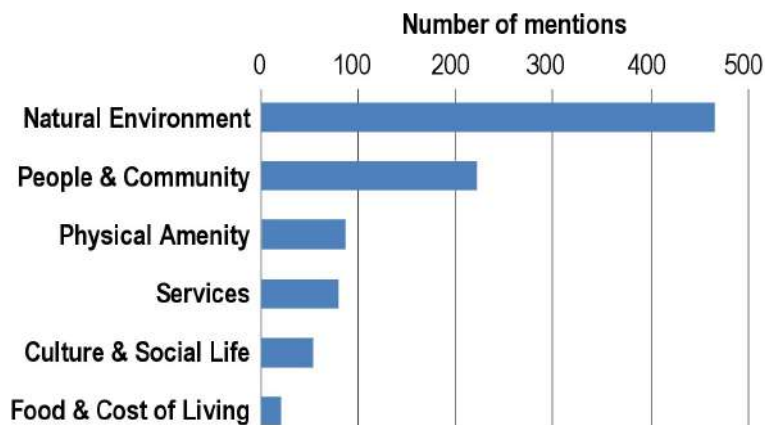
• the natural environment
• the people & the sense of community • physical amenity of the area
• availability of good services • a vibrant cultural & social life
• local food production
• reasonable cost of living

Services
• Availability of services, particularly health, education and transport
• Access to good hospitals

Cultural & Social Life
• A vibrant and interesting cultural and social life with opportunities for art, music, film and festivals

Food & Cost of Living
• Access to locally produced food
• A reasonable cost of living

Number of mentions

Category	Number of mentions
Natural Environment	~460
People & Community	~230
Physical Amenity	~100
Services	~105
Culture & Social Life	~65
Food & Cost of Living	~30

The issues that are most important to our community

• a diverse, tolerant & a just society • the natural environment & its protection • consultative & responsive government at all levels • ready access to education & training • support for local employment • access to affordable housing • quality health & wellbeing services • a vibrant cultural & social life • a balance between development & the environment • engagement with our Indigenous communities • support for young people • sustainable farming & local food production • good transport services • support for local businesses

Community
• Socially and culturally diverse; inclusive, kind, tolerant and accepting
• A just society, rejecting of poverty and inequality

Number of mentions
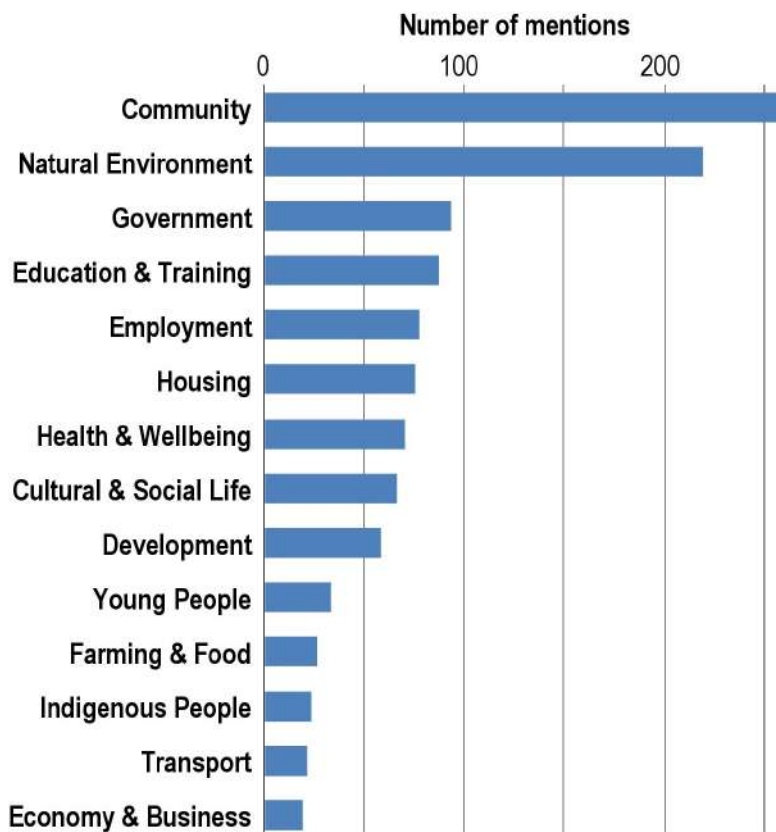
Natural Environment
• The natural environment, from the local region to the planet as a whole – appreciation for its richness, diversity and the importance of maintaining its health
• Protection of the natural environment – references to destructive logging across the region

Government
• Transparent and accountable governments at all levels
• Better planning with citizens having more of a voice
• Councils that are more engaged, active and flexible
• Local newspapers that provide insight and foster debate on local issues

Education & Training
• Ready access to schools, universities and TAFE
• Good quality and accessible education

Employment
• Policies to address high unemployment levels in the region
• A focus on local jobs growth to allow people to remain and work in their communities – especially young people

Housing
• Access to affordable housing – need more flexibility in housing options, including social housing
• Programs to address increasing homelessness in the area

Health & Well-being
• Access to a full range of health and well-being services - from GPs to specialists, hospitals, mental health, aged care and palliative care
• Accessible and good quality services – there are long wait times for some services

Cultural & Social Activities
• Availability of cultural activities and a vibrant cultural/social life

Development
• Encouragement for development that benefits community
• Control over development when it threatens the environment
• An awareness and planning for the impacts of increased tourism in the area

Young People
• Acknowledgement of their needs in relation to education, employment, housing, mental health and social activities

Farming & Food Production
• Strong local food production and distribution, with a focus on sustainable farming

Indigenous People
• Engagement and respect, safety and social opportunity
• Support for teaching culture and language
• A commitment to address issues of social disadvantage and social justice

Transport
• Good transport infrastructure – currently there are limited opportunities for cycling
• Local airports

Economy & Business
• Support for entrepreneurship and local business development

• a strong relationship between the local member & the community based on accessibility & responsiveness • put representing community needs before those of the party • greater transparency & accountability in government • enable community groups to interact and engage with political issues • listen to young people & encourage their participation in the political process • a diverse & independent media that promotes open discussion • encourage individuals to take responsibility & engage constructively with the political system • education to increase community understanding of the electoral process • more control & transparency in relation to political donations

Strengthening Connections with the Local Member

• Increase engagement through better communication, accessibility and responsiveness to the community and a willingness to be accountable to them for decisions made in the parliament
• Regular public forums such as Town Hall meetings
• Prioritise representing community needs over the party line
• The current local member is not well known – need a clear statement of the policies he supports
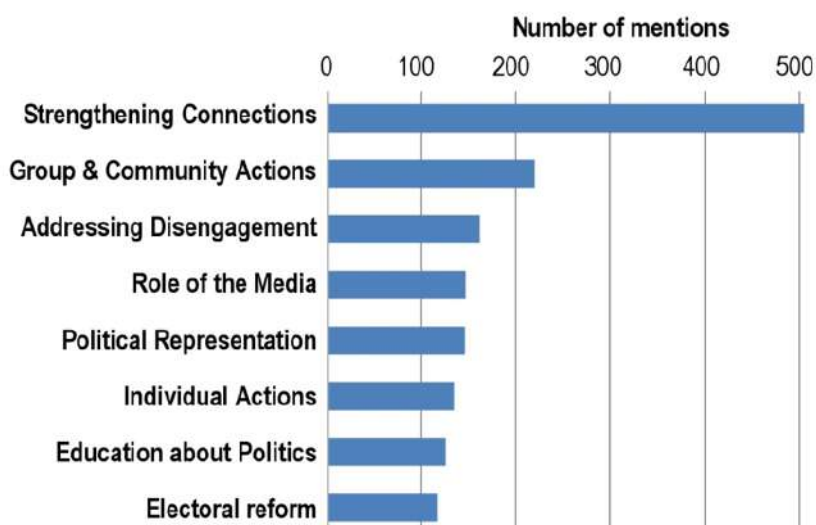
Group & Community Actions to Encourage Political Engagement

• More opportunities for large community forums where people meet, network, share opinions and listen to others
• Online forums to facilitate access for more isolated communities
• Regular small group gatherings (such as KTC's) to encourage engagement with the disengaged, each other and the local member
• Regular meetings with the local member and alternative candidates in a debating/discussion format to enhance the profile of the representative and alternative parties or candidates
• Support Indigenous leaders to guide engagement in their communities

Addressing Community Disengagement from Politics

• A party system that is more responsive to community concerns
• Restore trust in politics by enhancing transparency and accountability through the establishment of a federal integrity commission, and by limiting the influence of donors and lobbyists
• Clearly define and communicate the roles and responsibilities of the three tiers of government
• Increase both the calibre and diversity of political candidates
• Listen to what young people want, involve them, and provide education about the political process
• Address the mistrust in government in Indigenous communities by acknowledging past trauma and injustice, racism and the complexity of laws

Role of the Media in our Democracy

• Effective democracy requires a diverse and independent media, including a strong, independent ABC
• Factual reporting and holding politicians to account across all the media
• Local papers to communicate and highlight local issues
• Social media is a valuable tool to enhance engagement, but processes are needed to deal with misinformation and negativity

Political Representation

• The role of the local member is to represent the community rather than just toeing the party line
• Diversity amongst parliamentarians, including more women, people with diverse experience and backgrounds, and independent candidates
• An Indigenous voice to parliament
• Citizen juries and/or referendums to decide on important issues between elections

Individual Actions to Encourage Political Engagement

• Lobbying, letter writing, protesting, rallying and self-organising actions, including grass-root activities
• Focus on positive messages, maintain courteous relations with the local member and meet negativity with genuine enquiry
• Find out what people want and work collaboratively to find solutions within the democratic process
• Supporting independent candidates when parties are not responsive to community concerns
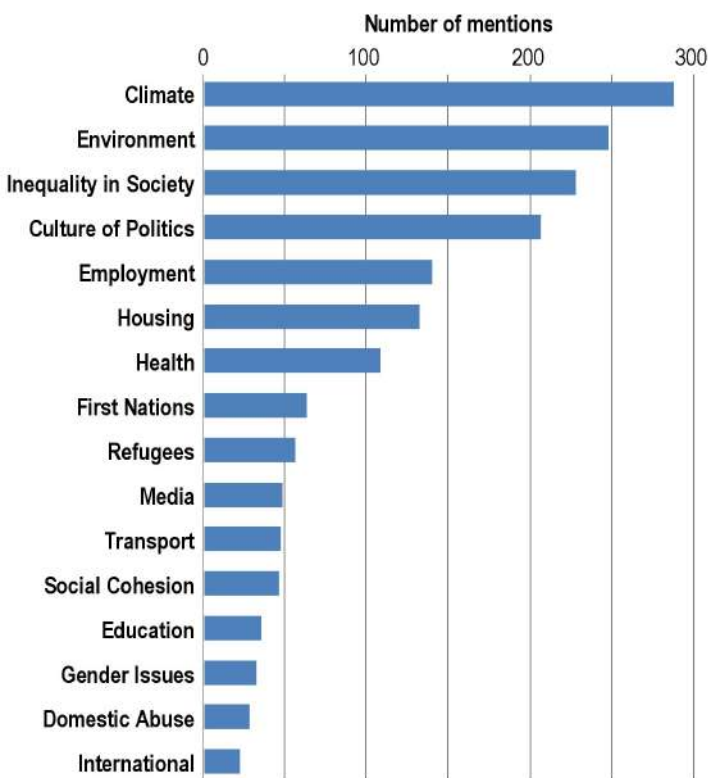
Education about the Political Process

• A formal role for schools, TAFEs, and universities in educating people about our political system
• Community education programs to explain the voting process and how the political system works
• Home education – politically engaged parents are likely to foster political awareness in their children
• Listen to Indigenous people to ensure that education targeted to their communities is culturally appropriate and relevant

Electoral Reform

• Increased control and transparency in relation to political donations, party funding, and election advertising and expenditure
• Cap political donations and publicly fund elections
• Make the voting system consistent across the three tiers of government
• Fixed 4-year parliamentary terms

• climate change • land use, habitat loss & biodiversity • environmental protection • food security & sustainable agriculture • inequality in society • changing the culture of politics • a federal corruption & integrity commission • regional employment • housing affordability • aged care • mental health • Indigenous voice & constitutional recognition • refugee support • media diversity & integrity • transport • a more caring society • free education • gender equality • domestic abuse • relations with US & China

Number of mentions

Issue	Mentions (approx.)
Climate	~280
Environment	~250
Inequality in Society	~230
Culture of Politics	~210
Employment	~150
Housing	~140
Health	~110
First Nations	~70
Refugees	~60
Media	~55
Transport	~50
Social Cohesion	~55
Education	~40
Gender Issues	~35
Domestic Abuse	~35
International	~30

Climate Change

• Global warming – for many, nothing else matters if climate change is not addressed
• Transition from fossil fuels to renewables – faster action, particularly in the electricity generation and transport sectors, along with support for workers to move into new industries
• Leaders who accept the reality of global warming and set binding targets, including Net Zero by 2050

Environment

• Land use practices that protect habitats and biodiversity – logging is of particular local concern
• Land management based on strong federal environmental protections and Indigenous knowledge
• Protection of waterways – the impact of intensive blueberry farming is a local concern
• Food security initiatives that focus on sustainable agriculture and regenerative farming practices
• Waste reduction and support for an effective recycling industry

Inequality in Society

• A commitment to reduce inequality between generations and regions in our society

• A new economic model that is not reliant on unsustainable growth and prioritises what is important for all members of society (e.g. Gross National Happiness as used in Bhutan)

• Higher taxation rates to support better services – as long as everyone, including multinational corporations, pay their fair share of tax

• Re-evaluate privatisation policies which have often led to poor services in 'unprofitable' regions (e.g. increased health costs, and poor support and care for vulnerable people)

• Job seeker and other pensions are too low; need to consider a form of universal basic income

The Culture of Politics

• A strong federal integrity commission to improve integrity, transparency and accountability in decision making

• A political structure that is more civil, collaborative and bi-partisan; promotes empathy and fosters citizen agency and participation

• Long-term vision and planning, that involves both an independent public service and the innovative work by Australia's many think tanks

Employment

• Regional self-sufficiency through support for local manufacturing, eco-tourism, Indigenous-based tourism, local food industries and small business

• Secure employment, particularly for casuals, and better protections for vulnerable workers

• Wage rates that better reflect the true cost of living

Housing

• More public housing to address the crisis in housing affordability and increasing homelessness

• A more diverse housing stock, including multiple occupancy dwellings, and removal of negative gearing on investment properties

Health

• A properly resourced aged care sector with independent oversight
• Increased support for mental health, particularly for young people
• Legislation to enable voluntary euthanasia

First Nation Peoples

• Acknowledge frontier battles and on-going unconscious racism
• Support for the Uluru statement, a treaty and constitutional recognition for Indigenous peoples

Humane Treatment of Refugees

• More support services within Australia

Media

• Encourage diversity and integrity; processes for dealing with misinformation
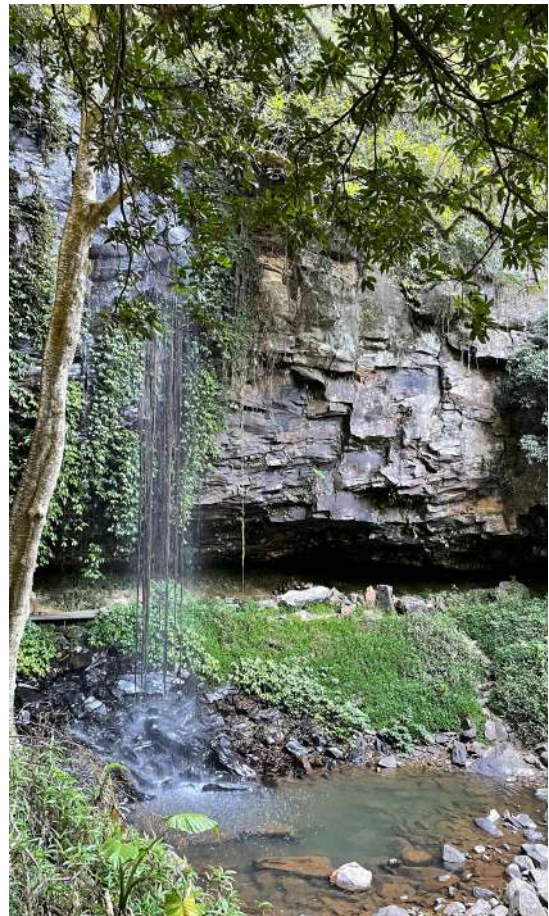• Support for an independent public broadcaster (ABC)

Transport

• Better rail services, more cycling and walking tracks

Cohesive Society

• More connected, caring and cooperative, and less individualistic society

Education

• Free education at all levels along with more government investment in public schools

Gender Issues

• More support for women, including reduction in the gender pay gap
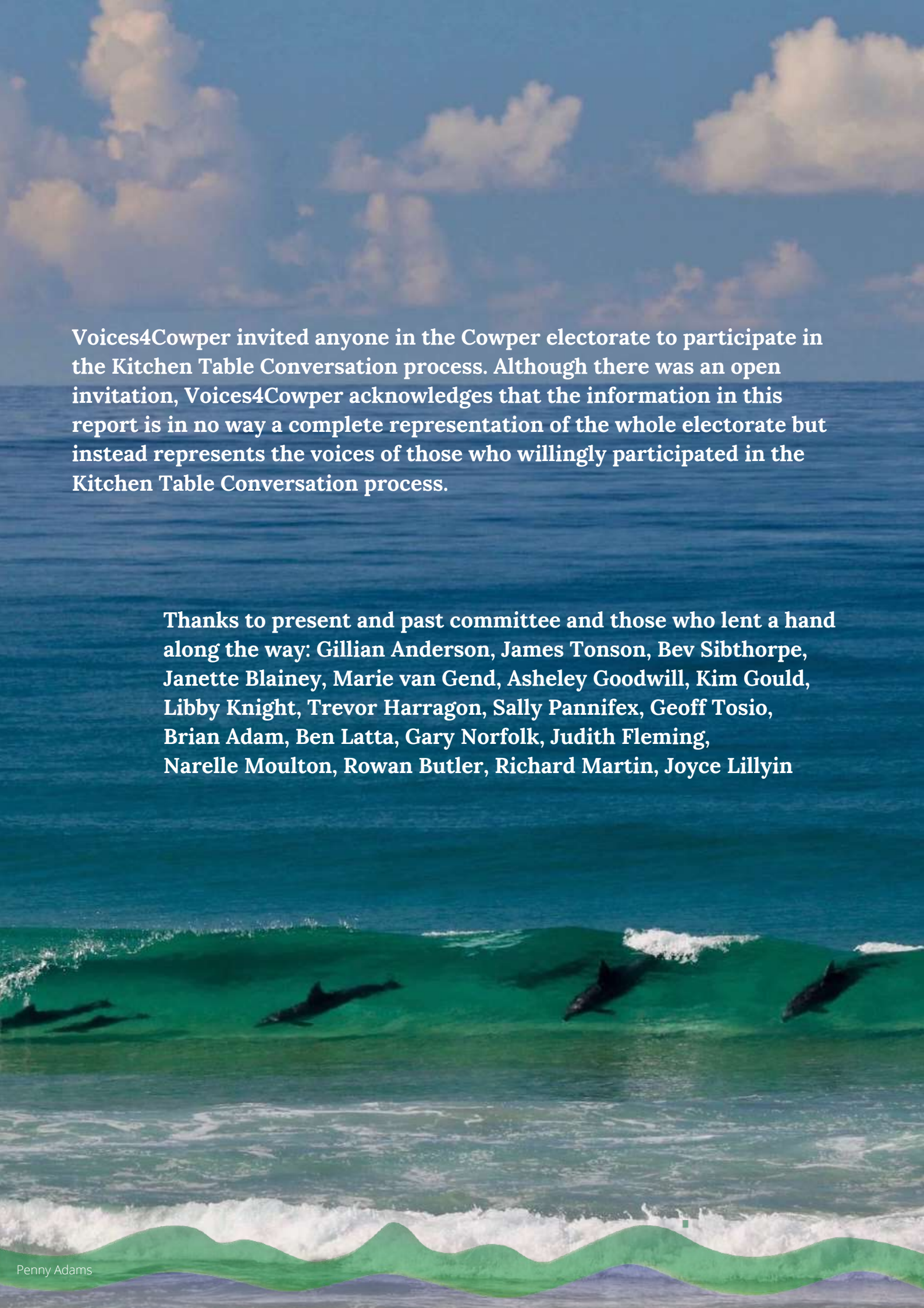
Domestic Abuse

• Increased support for women's safety and engagement with men on taking responsibility

International Issues

• Australia's relationship with the US is seen as too close
• Greater care in navigating the rise of China internationally

Voices4Cowper invited anyone in the Cowper electorate to participate in the Kitchen Table Conversation process. Although there was an open invitation, Voices4Cowper acknowledges that the information in this report is in no way a complete representation of the whole electorate but instead represents the voices of those who willingly participated in the Kitchen Table Conversation process.

Penny Adams