



# LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

14<sup>th</sup> Assembly

## PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE

### Public Hearing Transcript

9.30 am, Monday 4 October 2021

Spinifex Room

DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel Alice Springs

82 Barrett Drive, Alice Springs

**Members:**

Mr Joel Bowden MLA, Chair, Member for Johnston  
Mr Mark Monaghan MLA, Deputy Chair, Member for Fong Lim  
Mrs Robyn Lambley MLA, Member for Araluen  
Mr Bill Yan MLA, Member for Namatjira  
Mr Yingiya Mark Guyula MLA, Member for Mulka

**Witnesses:**

**Tangentyere Council**

Dr Anna Flouris: Executive Officer, Strategic Development  
Michael Klerck: Social Policy and Research Manager

**Ingkerreke Services**

Skye Thompson: Chief Executive Officer  
Cathy McConnell: Senior Administrator

**Central Desert Regional Council**

Diane Hood: Chief Executive Officer

**MacDonnell Regional Council**

Jeff MacLeod: Chief Executive Officer  
Roxanne Kenny: President

**Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet**

Brendan Blandford: Regional Executive Director, Central Australia

**Central Australian Aboriginal Congress**

Donna Ah Chee: Chief Executive Officer  
Dr John Boffa: Chief Medical Officer, Public Health

The committee convened at 9.30 am.

## LOCAL DECISION MAKING

### TANGENTYERE COUNCIL

**Mr CHAIR:** Welcome everyone. It is 9.30 am, Monday 4 October. My name is Joel Bowden. I am the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee and the Member for Johnston.

The committee are all here except Lawrence Costa, who is unavailable today. We also have the Member for Mulka joining us. On behalf of the committee, I welcome you to this public hearing. I welcome to the table to give evidence, from Tangentyere Council, Dr Anna Flouris and Mr Michael Klerck.

This is a formal proceeding of the committee and the protection of parliamentary privilege exists. You can say things and not be sued for it. The obligation is there not to mislead the committee. That applies to everyone. A transcript will be made for use of the committee and we may put this on the website. Depending, we may decide to put that testimony on the website.

If, at any time during the hearing, you are concerned that what you may say should not be made public, you can simply ask that we go to an in-camera hearing, which means it becomes private and we do not publicise that part of it. At any stage if you feel the testimony you want to give should be private, please let us know and everyone will go out and we can go into a private hearing.

I ask that you state your name and position for the record, then we can start.

**Dr FLOURIS:** I am Dr Anna Flouris, Executive Officer for Strategic Development, Tangentyere Council.

**Mr KLERCK:** I am Michael Klerck, Social Policy and Research Manager for Tangentyere Council.

**Mr CHAIR:** It helps, because we have Elise on the headphones over there. Try to speak clearly into the microphone. Would either of you like to make an opening statement or make some comments.

**Dr FLOURIS:** Yes, thank you. Good morning. Tangentyere Council welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Inquiry into local decision making and to be here today.

For more than 40 years, Tangentyere Council has been the leading Aboriginal organisation that supports the Alice Springs town camps. We have proven the value of self-determination of town campers through re-empowerment and community control for many decades.

Following the direction of our town camp leadership, we have recently strengthened our approach to this service delivery. We have developed our own town camper wellness framework and it now underpins our outcomes-focused approach to support services through a formal agreement with the Northern Territory Government for local decision making. It is supported locally by the Commonwealth through the NIAA.

Our framework has seven dimensions pertaining to identity, country, shelter and housing, knowledge, community, healing and leadership. In July 2002, we executed this LDM agreement with the Northern Territory Government and began undertaking our robust LDM process that genuinely places Aboriginal leadership and community control at its centre.

We, therefore, commend the Northern Territory Government for developing the LDM framework and support the ongoing partnership with town campers to progress the transition of government services and programs to Aboriginal community control.

Our LDM approach is unique. Tangentyere Council has two roles throughout this process. First, as a frontline service provider, we are in the strong position to hear from community members and stakeholders about the daily opportunities for local decision making. We are, therefore, incorporating a place-based focus, with localised town camp-specific workshops, priority outcomes and planning.

Second, as a peak for town camps, representing 16 town camps in the Alice Springs region, we are also taking a regional and sector-wide approach.

Through the LDM process, we have initiated a robust consultation with town campers to determine localised priorities to improve town camper wellness based on our framework. Consultation includes a detailed survey tool to measure the wellness of town campers—more than 30 workshops to date in 16 town camps, with an additional 32 planned—master planning and safety mapping in partnership with residents at each location, as well as general feedback through all of our existing programs, services and our town camp AGMs.

In partnership with the NT Government, we will support the implementation of these priorities and have already developed a number of long-term regional strategies and place-based local agendas for each town camp.

A strong example of the success of the LDM framework is the case of municipal services for town camps. The agreement between NTG and Tangentyere to transition all municipal and essential services in the town camp is a positive outcome for local decision making.

Consolidation of these services under Tangentyere has been an aspiration of both individual and corporate members since the Alice Springs transformation plan. This is evident through our Town Camper Wellness survey and through decades of camp AGM's.

The alignment of these services in LDM means that LDM processes, including built environment master planning sessions, yield information that can immediately be actioned. Through these processes we have been able to identify a range of crime prevention through environmental design issues that require amelioration and/or mitigation.

Some of these issues are within the scope of the existing service delivery. The maintenance of street lights is one example of such an issue. Tangentyere undertakes a quarterly audit of street lights within our delivery footprint. Our LDM master planning workshops were able to identify the prevalence of street lights requiring repair on town council beyond our delivery footprint. We have reported the issue to the relevant department and third party provider.

Our LDM process ensures stronger accountability and better reporting mechanisms for service delivery. It is but one example of a service delivery outcome that benefits from and strengthens LDM. Crime prevention through environmental design is a priority for our municipal services in town camps. The consolidation of these services as outlined in our LDM agreement will ensure that town campers are direct stakeholders in the delivery of the service and as true local decision-makers.

As of this day, we have developed an additional 15 strategies that we are working to implement in partnership with the Northern Territory Government. The opportunities of our unique approach are further detailed in our submission. To capitalise on these opportunities genuine resourcing and expertise are needed to support the capacity building of existing government structures, as well as adequate resourcing the transition of services and programs.

Transparency is also integral in transitioning programs and services to community control. This includes prompt data sharing and service mapping to improve local understanding of each sector as relevant to the community members, including the relevant funding envelope.

The key objectives and significance of the LDM framework must also be clearly and regularly communicated across the Northern Territory Government agencies. These agencies should swiftly respond to the community-driven strategies and ensure timely but supportive transition of services to community control.

Tangentyere Council is an Aboriginal community-controlled organisation with 40 years of strong governance. We have battled government policies that have threatened community control and local decision making for a very long time. The LDM framework and our LDM agreement genuinely places Aboriginal leadership and community control at the centre of reform.

It is a committed avenue for collaboration and coordination amongst all relevant stakeholders with the aim of improving outcomes for town campers. It incorporates a place-based focus and regional or sector wide approach. We look forward to further strengthening the partnership between town campers

and the Northern Territory Government through the LDM framework. We welcome ongoing conversation and, most important, action for town campers.

Thank you for having us this morning.

**Mr CHAIR:** Thank you Dr Flouris. We will now open to the committee to ask questions, perhaps beginning with our Members of the Legislative Assembly who are in Alice Springs.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** We look forward to seeing your submission, we have not received a submission from you.

**Dr FLOURIS:** It was submitted about two weeks ago. I can email it through again. Sorry about that

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** That is okay. One of the reasons we are doing this inquiry is to look at ways to improve the model, to make recommendations to government to improve and work better for the people on the ground. Do you have any suggestions as to how it could work better for you in Tangentyere?

**Dr FLOURIS:** One of the first things, for us, is it is really important for town campers to understand what could potentially be on offer—understanding what services might be able to be transitioned. We have requested with our LDM partners, which is across the Northern Territory Government and the NIAA services Australia, for them to undertake some service mapping. In some cases we made that request in October last year, in others November last year and some more recently and we are yet to receive any detail of that.

For the Northern Territory Government agencies to understand the importance of why that information has to be translated for town campers so that we can think about what those services might be able to look like under community control. That is one of the things that we would recommend.

**Mr CHAIR:** Doctor, can I ask, when you say translated, translated into language?

**Dr FLOURIS:** It could be in language. In the town camps, we have quite a few...we work across 13 different language groups.

**Mr CHAIR:** Which is my next question. Thank you.

**Dr FLOURIS:** We would not necessarily translate everything into language. It is more about making sure that with our staff, with our board—we have an LDM subcommittee that meets every two weeks. That is how seriously we are taking this. That subcommittee is made of eight members of our executive team. Our executive has a representative from every town camp. It has the president of every town camp council association on it—in order for the LDM subcommittee to be able to understand it and talk through what it should like when we are talking about it to people in town camps.

**Mr CHAIR:** Thank you.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** You mentioned your municipal services. Who is providing those at the moment?

**Mr KLERK:** I can speak to that point. Please let me know if I am speaking at an appropriate level or not. At the moment, Tangentyere Council delivers municipal and essential services on a number of town camps. Ingkerreke Services delivers municipal services on other town camps. It is not really a 50:50 split though because Tangentyere delivers those services on some of the larger town camps: Larapinta Valley—which is 90 hectares—Hidden Valley, Abbots, Karnte, Mount Nancy and Palmers. For the other town camps, the services are delivered by Ingkerreke.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** That is interesting, because you have two Aboriginal organisations providing those services. Is it your intention for Tangentyere to take over the whole contract or would you be happy for another Aboriginal organisation to work with you?

**Mr KLERK:** From the perspective of the local decision making agreement, obviously, Tangentyere historically was established by town campers to deliver services on the town camps. The aspiration is to consolidate that service delivery with Tangentyere. Our governance, at every level, reflects the residents of the town camps. There are 16 town camp associations—11 of them are associations and

five are Aboriginal corporations. The residents of those town camps are the members of those associations and corporations, and they are also the members of Tangentyere Council. The aspiration is to consolidate that service delivery with Tangentyere.

**Dr FLOURIS:** It is worth noting that Tangentyere is really conducting a very robust survey and a number of workshops. We will have completed almost 70 workshops at the end of this project. So far, we have 120 household surveys and each of those surveys has 96 questions on it that take about an hour to complete. We are doing that with our researchers who have more than two decades of experience and can speak in language about that.

We explicitly ask some of these questions so that we are truly representing what town campers are telling us they want to see happen. In this case, this is something that has been very strongly advocated for through our survey.

**Mr YAN:** Thank you, Dr Flouris. It is quite interesting that you say that because a number of my questions are about how Tangentyere is going about those consultations because you have such a large footprint in our community with so many diverse groups, as to how you are best placed. Are you getting good feedback from your town camps back from the process you have identified? From the people on the ground, up through to the executive level?

**Dr FLOURIS:** Yes, we are getting really strong engagement. In all honesty, it took about 12 months to convince people to come along to some of these consultations because people did not really believe that the policy would mean anything for them or that they would be heard. We have continued to work the program anyway and work the project for the last 18 months on top of that, even throughout COVID-19.

We have run four workshops in every single town camp. We already have staff in quite a few of the town camps that are there daily. We have youth workers. We are combining a whole bunch of our services to make those workshops very attainable for people. We are getting very high participation in that. We also have our men's and women's groups which we have been meeting with regularly as well as our LDM subcommittee. As I said earlier, 120 households out of the 250-odd occupied households have completed the survey to date. That is much higher than anybody expected. Given the amount of interest we have had, our project is now running as a research project. In fact, it is now being funded by both AIATSIS and Lowitja because of the number of people and level of detail we are going to, which is very exciting for us.

**Mr YAN:** That is really good to hear. We have heard a number of submission about how difficult the LDM process can be to implement and push across a community. Is there any advice you would give to other organisations on how they could progress their LDM priorities?

**Dr FLOURIS:** That is quite a hard one, because we are fortunate enough to be able to drive to all of the town camps within a short period of time. Some of our town camps are only a couple of minutes away from head office. We have 260 staff who work in and out of those town camps. More than half—I think it is about 65%—of those are Aboriginal and often from the town camps. We are in a unique position; that we have had to dedicate a team to doing this. Between Mike, me and our researchers—and we now have three more dedicated staff—do this through the AIATSIS and Lowitja funding we have been able to receive.

That is because Tangentyere believes it has to happen like that—we genuinely have to hear from as many people as possible and as often as possible.

**Mr KLERCK:** Historically, we have had a really good opportunity because, even before local decision making was a policy—Tangentyere was excited by the policy—prior to that we had annual general meetings and other association meetings on the town camps regularly. A lot of what those meeting have shown us—I have work for Tangentyere for quite a number of years now—is a lot of these issues of aspirations and needs have been identified through those AGMs in the past.

Even previous Public Accounts Committee inquiries were very much about what the members of the town camps were telling us about things like housing, for example. Our structure reflects that. We have town camp associations and town camp residents who are members of both these associations and Tangentyere. That has really helped to frame things up for us as well.

**Dr FLOURIS:** Having said that, one of our recommendations, which you will get in the submission in about an hour—my apologies—is really about how we resource government support as well. At the moment, we have dedicated staff who go out and run those AGMs and quarterly meetings in all of the town camps. They are all self-funded positions.

Similarly, it took us a year-and-a-half to be really get some momentum in the LDM work because we needed to have staff to do that level of consultation. One of our recommendations is resource that part of governance and supporting governance structures properly so they can have some secretariat support. That would be very helpful.

**Mr YAN:** In addition to that, in other submissions we have read and heard how organisations work with government to develop their local decision making agreements. Other organisations are looking at this at the moment—there are a number of other Aboriginal organisations and community-control groups. What is your idea on the time line it takes for an organisation to sit down with government and develop their local decision making policy?

**Dr FLOURIS:** It will depend on each organisation. Because we are trying to represent 16 town camps, we have been working with government on this. We have monthly meetings with different parts of government.

In addition to all the consultation we are doing with town campers, a process we started in October last year was the initiation of implementation working groups. That brings together the relevant NTG stakeholders, as well as Tangentyere and some of our board members where possible, to discuss each of those issues of our wellness domain.

That means that every month we have a one-hour conversation just about housing. The next week, we will have another hour-long meeting where we talk about knowledge and education systems.

We have been able to work that closely with government because of the commitment of the staff within the department, which is really great. At each of those monthly meetings, we have been able to table all of the issues that are arising with people. We do not always have the answers. We bring some of those questions to that table and put some of that responsibility back to the Northern Territory Government about helping to develop some of the strategies with the town campers. We are hoping those 15 strategies we are working on will have an implementation plan by December. We have a number of different NT agencies that are working with us on those.

**Mr YAN:** That is good to hear. Doctor, how long have you had that process in place? Has that been since you signed your local decision making agreement, or was a lot of that in train prior to signing that agreement?

**Dr FLOURIS:** With regard to housing and shelter, it was in train for probably about a year prior to signing the agreement, shortly after we signed the commitment agreement which was in 2019. The rest of it has been since October last year—about three months afterwards when we started our other implementation working groups.

We foresee that those groups will continue into the implementation phase of the LDM agreement next year, and hopefully for the next eight years after that.

**Mr YAN:** Excellent.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** I have been around a long time too. Ever since I came to town I have been in and out of town camps. Tangentyere has certainly gone through some highs and lows. Although from my perspective the town camps have never looked so good, you still have a long way to go, do you not? A lot of that will depend on what you have been describing—good governance and processes.

Do you have mechanisms in place to safeguard the organisation and the residents if things start to go pear-shaped? They have in the past. I will be honest with you—there have been stages where services have not been provided that well and there have been problems. That is my concern. Sometimes your aspirations do not match with what is provided, as with any business or organisation. You are taking on the whole lot, are you not? You are taking on all parts of the management of town camps, effectively. How can you safeguard yourselves and residents from problems that may arise?

**Dr FLOURIS:** Do you want me to take that?

**Mr KLERCK:** Yes.

**Dr FLOURIS:** I would say that we—in our partnership—have a long way to go. That is actually not just on town campers and one organisation; it is the partnership with the Northern Territory Government that will help us safeguard against that.

That is why we are having these monthly meetings. It is about looking at a realistic plan over an eight-year period. We, by no means, have any intention of asking for community control of every government service in the next 12 months. It is unrealistic and it will set us up for failure—you are right. We want to make sure we are working with the relevant Northern Territory Government agency, to be able to develop a realistic implementation plan and that we are working together on the program.

A good example of that is some of the work we are doing with the Department of Education. We are looking at supporting our youth programs with after-hours learning. They have come to the party and committed, for at least the next term, a dedicated teacher who will come out and work with our youth workers to make sure our programs in particular sites have some strong educational outcomes at the end.

We cannot guarantee that teacher will be available in Term 1. That is not up to Tangentyere. I again say that we, as a partnership through this LDM agreement, have a long way to go. We welcome that challenge.

**Mr KLERCK:** I agree with everything Anna said. Also, it is important, when we look at issues—for example, housing—that we look at in a holistic way. When we look at the issue of housing moving forward and the transition of housing services, we need to consider everything. We need to consider things like the National Construction Code and the National Indigenous Housing Guide. With the built environment of the town camps, which we do not currently have control over, we need to consider things like the Alice Springs Town Council subdivision guidelines. We need to consider issues like crime prevention through environmental design and health, and what the expectations on infrastructure and managing those spaces and housing are.

We need to consider issues such as national accreditation in terms of housing management, we are looking at ISO accreditation. We have to look and do these things holistically. One of the most important things when we talk about transitioning housing is to look at the condition of the assets, for example, where do they currently sit and where they should be sitting moving forward.

In terms of developing and looking at a community housing model we have to take into account all the best-practice evidence. We look at our partnerships with groups such as the University of Newcastle, School of Architecture and Built Environment to bring in some of that best practice. Community control is very important.

We also look at the standards, what we should expect and what our members and residents should also expect. We look at these issues holistically.

**Mr CHAIR:** Can I just touch on that, around the different departments, groups and organisations. I think you said 16 town camps—five that you are directly merging, the larger ones. And the data sharing piece that you are talking about. How does that work, as in how do you share the data across? You have some top line measurement tools, can you give us some quick numbers off the top of your head around households and people who are residing in town camps—the 16 town camps, I think you said 250 households.

**Mr KLERCK:** There are 270 households with about 245 occupied.

**Mr CHAIR:** And how many are living in town camps in Alice?

**Mr KLERCK:** That is a really good question because it depends on whose dataset that we look at. If we look at the number of people listed on tenancies that is one number. And if we look at the numbers collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in terms of Census work that is another number. As you are aware it is a Census year so we have been working very closely with the Australian Bureau

of Statistics to get more accurate numbers. If you look at the work Tangentyere has done in the past that is yet another number. These are challenges.

When we talk about how to define people living in town camps, we have residences that are not necessarily listed as tenants. We have people who are visitors, who could be short term or reside within the town camp for a long time. If you look at the Aboriginal Medical Services congress' numbers and how they define people, it talks about presentation. It is a really good and important piece of work and a challenge to try and bring those datasets into some sort of alignment.

Our estimate, historically, has been 1950 people but the number of houses that are currently occupied will have an impact on that. We would like to see all of these houses occupied and turned over more quickly when they are vacant, however that is not always the case, it requires investment.

**Dr FLOURIS:** The data sharing question is also a great one. It is why it has taken so long to get anywhere on the service mapping and we have been lucky to have great staff with the Chief Minister's office here in Alice Springs, where they have helped us create templates and have workshopped with other agencies around what particular parameters in language may look like for different topics. We are in the process of where everyone has the tool and there is a lot of talking—I get regular calls now—as the staff from different departments are pulling their data together. It is focused just on the service, we have not done much data sharing outside the Department of Education for anything else.

**Mr MONAGHAN:** I have a few questions. Firstly, I have seen the beautiful artwork that was donated to the Territory government recently around the vision of the LDM in Tangentyere. It reminded me of where power should sit. In the past a school council had created a dot painting for their vision of their community and their local education. It required the individuals to explained to a white fella, like me, what that was. It was a lovely shift in power and when I saw your artwork I thought, 'Here is a lovely shift in power'.

I pick up on what you said quite often in your opening speech. You talked about our local decision making policy. I would like you, if you could, to expand on what you think that vision looks like for your LDM.

**Dr FLOURIS:** Absolutely. I think that image encapsulates it really beautifully. When we first started talking about local decision making with the executive, it was very quick that we realised that when we asked about could transition to community control, people were really thinking about what issues they had that were quite basic and day-to-day. People would often talk to us about housing issues. Mike cannot go out to a town camp without somebody listing a whole bunch of things that are going on for that household at that minute.

We decided to sit down over about five months' worth of workshops with the women's family safety group and our men's family safety group, and talk about what it means to be well. How do we think beyond the basics? What are all of those concepts? That is where the wellness framework and the seven dimensions came from. For us, when we talk about LDM, it is about having control over those seven items. They are detailed in the submission but I can go through them briefly.

We have seven components that are all integral to one another but at the centre of that is really the identity. That is about having a positive sense of self and culture which underpins all the other dimensions and is fundamental to overall town camp wellbeing.

The cultural wellness refers to an ability to both enact one's cultural values as well as interact effectively with people from different cultures and working towards eliminating racism and systemic discrimination. We then go on to keeping country which really encompasses the interactions between individuals and their habitat at a local community as well as a global level. It looks at safety in nature, home, work and in the community.

We talk about shelter and access to the basic things that people need to live their life, looking at financial and occupational wellness, stable and healthy housing, clean water, clothing and health food, etcetera. Then there is the domain of knowledge which looks at formal as well as informal experiences in the classroom, at home, and in community throughout the course of one's life. It is looking from early learning to the elderly age, and what education knowledge looks like. When we talk about that, a lot of town campers refer to cultural knowledge as being very important as well.

Community really embraces positive relationships in connections with families and others, including love. Healing is about having one's physical, developmental, psychosocial and mental health needs met to achieve optimal developmental trajectories and opportunities. Leadership is engagement with peers and community, including governance and decision making determining systems and having a voice and a say in what matters.

When we had the initial months' worth of workshops, we spent just the first few workshops just talking about what wellbeing looks like and what it means. There was a whole bunch of words that came out. We asked people to draw those if they felt comfortable. The language in the framework as well as the imagery was workshoped with both men and women. We had 52 separate engagements over those five months. That is how the image came together.

What was really great about that was when we asked people what wellness looks like and to draw those images. People drew snapshots of the town camp, as you can see in that art piece. That says a lot about community control and where the power should sit.

**Mr MONAGHAN:** One of the challenges that I hear, obviously, is in that 16 town camps because part of local decision making in other places are one community with a number of different families but still one community from one songline or whatever it is.

You have 16 with, I suggest, many layers of experiences within cultural families, songlines, whatever seen in that. Identifying a local decision making, I am hearing you say that you went for the overarching wellbeing notions that are common to all as a pathway. Did you try to go the other way? Why did you choose that way?

**Dr FLOURIS:** Just to clarify, we are doing both.

**Mr MONAGHAN:** Okay.

**Dr FLOURIS:** We are looking at the overall because that is our regional and strategic approach, and our sector-wide approach. We are also looking locally. Once we have completed the surveys, we are taking that information over the next two months. We are workshoping all of the town camps. We are taking the data from every town camp back to that town camp. That is open to community. We will run three different workshops about that, so each community can determine what the priorities are for their town camp. We will draft that up into a local agenda. There are two bodies of work that feed into each other from our end, yes.

**Mr MONAGHAN:** My last question is about the relationship with Ingkerreke council. How has that been impacted and what does that journey through the process of LDM look like?

**Mr KLERCK:** In that one area of cross-over—we are talking about municipal and essential services. For a number of years, the aspiration from Tangentyere and its members—even pre-dating local decision making—has been very clear about consolidating municipal and essential services delivery under Tangentyere on the town camps. That has been clear for a number of years. It has been a difficult journey because it is an issue that has arisen a number of times at various points in time where we could be talking about renegotiating a municipal essential services agreement.

Unfortunately, the agreements have tended to roll on. That has been really clear and a conversation that has happened between the organisations. There is no surprise in that for anyone.

Obviously, different organisations have their own motivations for doing the work they do. Sometimes, aspirations will be at cross-purposes. It is really clear that Tangentyere has been the primary service provider for the town camps and that our membership hails from the town camps.

The organisation was established and incorporated in 1979 to deliver services related to things like tenure, housing and essential services. That is part of the history, but it is also very contemporary. Yes, it has been very clear.

The beauty of delivering services like municipal and essential services is that it strongly links up with local decision making and the work of place-based master planning, where we consider things members have identified they would like to see, like bollards to stop cars leaving the road network and

driving in common areas, speed bumps to stop people driving recklessly, additional street lights or street lights needing to be repaired.

We have some very strong processes internally for making sure street light function is audited. That is not necessarily the case across the board. We also hear directly from our members through these consultation processes, but also through general meetings about what needs to be reported and passed on to other organisations.

We have been really clear, as an organisation.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** I have one last question.

**Mr CHAIR:** We were scheduled to go to 10 am, but we will keep going because it is important that we continue to discuss it while we are here.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** Thank you. I noticed in the *NT News* last week that you have won a tender for the maintenance of houses over 22 months for \$2.5m. I truly do not know how it works. Was that because you signed the local decision making agreement with government are you just handed that contract? How does it work? How you come to the price is the other thing.

**Mr KLERCK:** I did not directly come to the price. Across the board there has been housing maintenance. There has been a request for tender for housing maintenance services in large parts of the remote Territory, but also in other areas like the Alice Springs town camps, the Tennant Creek town camps—I am not aware of all of them.

In some places, that was an open tender process where any organisation with an interest in doing the work could put in a request for tender. In other places, there was more of a select tender process where organisations with local decision making agreements, for example, were asked to put in a request for tender response and a schedule of rates. Even though there was a select or direct tender process, it was up to the department of Infrastructure, Planning and lands to look at the schedule of rates and request for tender documents and consider them, I assume, in light of quantity surveyor-type prices, to see whether the schedule of rates was fair and the organisation's assertion that it cost this much to do these tasks fair. They would have gone through a full procurement process.

Tangentyere Constructions was approached as a provider. Housing maintenance services are a little different to what has been in place previously. Housing maintenance services are little different to what has been in place previously. Previously on the town camps, there was a property management contract which saw Tangentyere Constructions employing housing maintenance officers who could do works up to \$100. Anything above that threshold would have to go back to the department, previously Local Government, Housing and Community Development, and it would then generate work orders for one of a number of panel contractors to undertake work. Tangentyere Constructions is one of those contractors but there were others. Housing maintenance services reflects more of a consolidation of service delivery. It works off a schedule of rates. Sorry, I think I have answered more than your question.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** You were competitive. It was part of a competitive tender process.

**Mr KLERCK:** We had to be competitive. There was a direct tender process, as in Constructions was the only organisation that was approached but that schedule rates and the overall request for tender had to be judged in a competitive way. Clearly there is a set of prices which are deemed reasonable in terms of what quantity surveyors might say. This is my understanding. You would have to talk to people to get their details. You had to be competitive.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** You were the only organisation that tendered.

**Mr KLERCK:** For the Alice Springs town camps, yes.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** Was that a part of their LDM agreement, that you automatically win that tender? You are the only ...

**Mr KLERCK:** Not automatically win the tender, no. The local decision making agreement outlined an aspiration to consolidate that service delivery but, of course, we still had to respond to a request for

tender and provide a schedule of rates. I am assuming that if the schedule of rates and the request for tender was deemed unreasonable or it did not match up to what was a reasonable set of costs, we would not have automatically won, no.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** Okay.

**Mr CHAIR:** Any further questions? No. Anna and Michael, thank you for coming in. We appreciate your time. I have a bit of a history with Tangentyere. My old man worked there for a while. Thank you. I appreciate the complexities of the town camps and outlining that. I wonder whether you may be able to provide us—I am not sure if it is in the submission—some of that top line data pieces about the number of people, houses, etcetera, because that gives a bit of a top line figure to look at. We have to write a report at the end of this. I will be trying to put in as much information as possible.

**Dr FLOURIS:** We can add that information now and send it through. Happy to do that. Thank you.

**Mr CHAIR:** Thank you very much for coming in.

**Mr MONAGHAN:** Thank you for offering to tour us around this afternoon.

**Dr FLOURIS:** We are looking forward to it. There is afternoon tea as well.

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The committee suspended.

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### INGKERREKE SERVICES

**Mr CHAIR:** Thank you and welcome to the Public Accounts Committee hearing today, 4 October. This is a formal proceeding of the committee and the protection of parliamentary privilege and the obligation not to mislead the committee applies. A transcript will be made for use of the committee and we may put this on the website. If at any time during the hearing you are concerned that what you will say should not be made public, you may ask the committee to go into a closed session and we will take your evidence in private.

Can I ask you to please state your name and the capacity that you are appearing today for the record? I then invite you to make an opening statement and some remarks.

**Ms THOMPSON:** Skye Thompson, CEO, Ingkerreke Services.

**Ms McCONNELL:** Kathy McConnell, Senior Administrator, Ingkerreke Services. I am sitting in for Jozan Collins who is sick today.

**Mr CHAIR:** Welcome. Skye, do you want to make an opening statement and some brief remarks?

**Ms THOMPSON:** A bit about the organisation. We are one of the larger service providers for homelands in the NT. We have a membership of 12 in our governing committee. We provide a service to various homelands in the NT as far as the Kings Canyon region and in the Central Desert region, which we just recently acquired. We have the closer homelands towards Iwupataka Land Trust and surrounding Alice Springs and towards the east.

We provide municipal and essential services to 11 of the town camps. With this volume of work, we have been able to work on about 85% Indigenous employment that has been an advantage to cover such a footprint.

We did not answer the three specific questions in relation to this inquiry as we are not sure how the LDM will work for us. With our governing footprint it is quite small but with our service provider footprint it is large. With LDM we have been in discussions with a couple of NTG reps and were lucky to get the minister in for a visit and he is going to work with us on opportunities where we can talk about LDM and how it would work for us being a Homeland Service provider.

**Mr CHAIR:** Thank you. We will open it up to the committee for questions.

**Mr YAN:** I note in your submission that you talk about your organisation being a large part of a local decision making organisation. How is that working within your organisation now without a formal process, such as the one that we are talking about?

**Ms THOMPSON:** In terms of our governance structure we have always, since beginning in 1985, been quite strong in the 12 member homelands. Tangentyere helped out the organisation to be established and then they were able to break away. That has always been a strong vision of the board to have control. Being a small amount of homelands when it started, the board knew that they had to be in a position to grow to be sustainable. That was when they began an arrangement with the (Iwupataka homelands to be the central provider for those homelands.

It has always had the structure of the 12 and those governing rules and so forth were always contained there. Expanding the service provision to partnering up with Ngurratjuta doing their homelands. It has always had a strong governance with those 12.

**Mr YAN:** You have those 12 board members, how are they promoting local decision making or giving feedback to your executive?

**Ms THOMPSON:** Our rule book is that the 12 Directors have to be affiliated with the homelands of the 12. It does not work as best as it should due to family dynamics and things that change, but we have 12 members making up membership of 36 and from that 36 we have 12 directors. Each year we have an AGM where three members from each homeland are the voice of the people on the ground. In some circumstances it is a lot stronger than others, depending on the family dynamics but that is how the structure of that rule book has been since the start of the corporation.

**Mr YAN:** Looking at your submission, and from listening to what you have said now—and we have heard previously from Bridgette Bellenger in our last hearings—there has been some difficulty and probably absence of government in some respects in promoting local decision making in our region. How are you progressing to date? I note you have made some initial contacts and are waiting on some more. Has that progressed?

**Ms THOMPSON:** At the moment we are in talks with Brendan Blandford. We have a board meeting coming up on 20 October where Brendan, the minister and Bridgette are coming to the board to talk about LDM and how it would apply to us given that we are a little bit different, where our governance footprint is so small but our service delivery is quite big. We are in early talks to inform the board of what an LDM would look like and how it could work for us and the organisation—early stages.

**Mr YAN:** Listening to Tangentyere, as they have said, it is reasonably easy for them to consult with their groups because everyone is fairly close to town. You are on the opposite end of that scale. What assistance would you see government providing to you to be able to do that consultation?

**Ms THOMPSON:** We need to work out what our LDM would look like, to be able to then go to the ground where the people are who we are servicing, to be able to get that voice in. It is quite different to how others have been able to get theirs to work pretty much straightaway. That is where we need to talk with the people in government to give us some direction on what is the best way to approach ours. There is no real answer to that yet.

**Mr YAN:** Yes, I understand. Your footprint is enormous.

**Ms THOMPSON:** Yes, our footprint is enormous, but our governing body is 12 and it will always be 12. That is what it is. Getting the board to understand—they have aspirations as well where they would love clinics, schools and so forth on their homelands. We also need to be in line with government on what it is expecting out of this process as well. We do not want to put false expectations to our members or residents if it something that is not doable.

**Mr YAN:** Thank you.

**Mr CHAIR:** Is there an understanding of what LDM is out there?

**Ms THOMPSON:** Not really. A couple of years back, someone was to come in and talk to the board about it, and it did not eventuate. LDM, from the early discussions, feels like it is a way of securing that we could be in a position to be in service delivery for a particular area. Ours is very complicated because we are servicing central desert homelands, Ngurratjuta homelands and are looking at opportunities with other homelands. It is not just our little 12 member group. They understand that we cannot stay as little as we are to survive.

**Mr CHAIR:** Has mobility been reduced during the past 18 months, in the sense of travel, which may have reduced the amount of engagement?

**Ms THOMPSON:** No, I do not believe so. We have a recurrent team that goes onto our homelands on a quarterly basis and a fortnightly basis to the town camps. We also do six-monthly visits—our admin staff—and we also have an infrastructure manager who pretty much roams around our whole region. No, I do not feel there is.

**Mr MONAGHAN:** With the scope of the LDM—and we heard from Tangentyere about the wellness scope—some of that is obviously outside of what you guys deliver, as a council. If one of your 12 homelands engaged in an LDM outside of your board, how would that be catered for within your structure? What would that look like? They might want to look at some social aspects of LDM.

**Ms THOMPSON:** I guess with those conversations we already have children's ground and the healing centres that are on our homelands. It is a matter of working together and working out that we will not be in particular sectors. We are not interested in the health sector or the wellbeing sector. Linking up with the medical providers, Congress—those linkages need to remain there.

We are focusing on the homeland service provision being municipal essential services and housing repairs and maintenance. It is a matter of keeping those advocacy roles in with what we do for the people who are out there, because there is no use duplicating services on the ground—it is not right.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** I am reading your submission; I have not read it before coming today. You have a revenue of more than \$9m and you provide housing repairs and maintenance and municipal and essential services to 46 Northern Territory homelands across Central Australian, and municipal services to the 11 town camps, which we heard earlier.

Do you just provide those services—apart from the town camps—to your own homelands? Are they specifically to your own?

**Ms THOMPSON:** The 12 member homelands are our own. Then we have a service provision to homelands in the Kings Canyon region, in the Watarrka region, which is your west. We have a few to the east and then our own primary ones to the north. We have just taken on five in the Central Desert region as well, so our footprint has grown a little bigger.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** You service far beyond your own homelands?

**Ms THOMPSON:** Yes.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** This is a big business you have?

**Ms THOMPSON:** Yes.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** I am wondering, it sounds like you could stand to lose through local decision making? You could potentially lose the contract to the town camps and beyond if other communities get on board with LDMs?

**Ms THOMPSON:** That is right. Yes, that is why we understand the LDM is very important. We need to talk with the government—which is our next plan—to inform our board and management of how we can embrace this, because it is here. Because our governance footprint is so small but our service provision is so big, we need the bigger service provision to be able to survive, we need to have some conversations about how it would look.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** It is very interesting for us, as a committee, to consider the viability of your businesses and how that overlaps or works in with local decision making ...

**Ms THOMPSON:** We are hoping our past performance plays a big part in this because the government has always supported what we are doing. We are regularly being approached to have discussions about possible other areas to provide a service to. We know that we have our current contract until 2023, which is only 16 months away. We know that strategically we need to be in a position to either grow or go, basically.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** Speaking of going, your sister company—well, I do not know if it is a sister company—Ingkerreke Commercial has gone, has it not?

**Ms THOMPSON:** Yes.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** There is a warning sign there that if businesses are not viable, Aboriginal ...

**Ms THOMPSON:** On the services side, we have done everything right and we are growing bigger and bigger. We have not downsized. We have improved our service delivery and been able to employ over 85% of Indigenous people in the organisation. We are constantly being approached in the homelands sector to grow.

We are looking at the national housing registration at the moment. That will be in line with our strategic planning for when the current contract runs out.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** Fascinating.

**Mr GUYULA:** I am interested to hear about the homelands, because that is what got me in here—the resources, infrastructure and services that were pulled out from homelands and a lot of the people—not just around here but up our way as well—in the Northern Territory. Most of them left.

I have been up and down the road here in 2018, I think, when the electorate was called Stuart, with the former member. I met the communities and saw houses and some empty homeland houses. People said, 'These people from here, they have all gone up into town—Katherine, Alice Springs or even Darwin. Most of them are camping in Knuckey Lagoon or Palmerston, around those areas.' I felt really worried about how we can try to persuade them to come back home so that there is healthier living.

Have you tried to think about those people out there? I have always driven up the road and want to sit down with the countrymen out there in the streets, 'If we improve resourcing and stuff, and get the homelands back to how it was before, would you be happy to go back home?'. That kind of thing. How would you be looking out for those people, those empty homelands, and the people stuck here and maybe up the road in Katherine and in Darwin areas?

**Ms THOMPSON:** Since COVID-19 hit, we have seen a very big push back to homelands. We have had a few that have not had a lot of people staying there. We have been lucky enough to get some funding through the CLC to upgrade some infrastructure, being power and water. Homelands have always missed out a bit when it came to infrastructure, like particular housing upgrades and so forth. We utilise the HEA as best we could and improve the houses that are on the homelands.

A lot of houses on our homelands are tin sheds. They are not brick houses. We work with people who are there to encourage them to pay a service fee so that, in line with the government at repairs and maintenance money, we also have a bit of their input which encourages people to be on the ground. When they see stuff happening on the ground, their place is being serviced. It is more of an encouragement to go back.

When we have our quarterly visits that our field staff do, they see their homelands with grass being cut, rubbish being picked up, this and that. We are still maintaining the places for them to come back to. We have just found that major push since COVID-19 has hit, that people are wanting to go back. But it is the same thing that we have been saying. Our population on the homelands is growing but the infrastructure is not. There has not been a new house on a homeland for over 15 to 20 years. We are doing the best we can with the infrastructure we have.

We have sent letters to ministers and so forth to say, 'Hey, don't forget about us'. Our population is growing but our infrastructure is not. All we keep doing is—it used to be MESSPG; it is now called

'homelands capital'—ensure that our infrastructure is up to date to handle the population as is. There is no plan for when the population gets any bigger because there has never been that availability.

**Mr YAN:** One final question from me, Skye, is in your submission you talk about the changes to homelands and service provision that was announced recently and then was wound back. I suppose the question is hypothetical in some respects but do you think if you had have progressed further on your local decision making journey earlier on then there may have been a bit more input into some of those changes that were announced and have been wound back? Do you think now with improvements in local decision making, your engagement with government, you may be able to have more input into some of those changes?

**Ms THOMPSON:** I think if the LDM is still—I cannot make too much comment. I do not know enough about it, but in terms of what we are doing now for when the contract runs out, we have a linkage, a representative, with NT Housing board—we are ensuring that we are putting in plans for when this ends, being a whole lot of strategies to get us into a position for when 2023 hits. In terms of LDM, I cannot comment on it. I do not know enough about it. It has never really been very clear how it is going to benefit us and, being a homeland service provider, how it would help us.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** That is really valuable feedback for this committee because there is such a difference in progress across the Territory. Some groups progress to quite an evolved stage whereas you are saying you do not really have a sufficient grasp of the concept to even comment. It is very interesting for us. Thank you.

**Mr CHAIR:** I am going to ask about communications. What are the telecommunications and mobile like out on the homelands that you are servicing?

**Ms THOMPSON:** It is a bit of hit and miss. The closer ones would have mobile service or a few of them have a little hotspot, but a few of them just do not have anything—especially the further ones. There is not any.

**Mr CHAIR:** What mode of communication do you generally use?

**Ms THOMPSON:** Usually it is their pay phone when it is working. Or it is actually doing a visit when we are on the ground. We regularly tell people where we are physically in Alice Springs, 'Pop in and see us'. We do a newsletter and the Facebook, but on the ground there is not a lot of mobile coverage, no.

**Mr CHAIR:** Is there something the government can do to help facilitate—not by putting in towers—that communication? This will progress and LDM will become, hopefully, more self-evident to your organisation. How do you then have those conversations and how can government help?

**Ms THOMPSON:** With a few of our homelands, they have been able to use the ABA applications to trial a mobile service. If you can get a mobile service out at Harts Range, I am hoping the government—I do not know how they do it—maybe the gaps in between will filter that. Our coverage is getting better to the north, I would say. There are areas where it is improving slightly but there will always be, I believe, that little gap.

**Ms McCONNELL:** Recently there has been \$150,000 per homeland invested through ABA. One of our main requests through that has been for mobile hotspot or WiFi—some sort of coverage on homelands which is actually quite expensive and in a lot of cases more than \$150,000 per homeland. That is very difficult to provide that, but that is obviously a top request from people to have that. It is believed to be a top way of preferably encouraging young people to live out on homelands; to have some WiFi coverage so they can use the things they use in town. Obviously, as of now, all the young people come to town to be able to use Facebook and various types of social media.

That is considered one of the ways to help encourage young people to live out on homelands; some sort of government—either Commonwealth or NT Government—negotiation with Telstra, the providers, to bring down the costs of that. It would be helpful because obviously, of the 50 outstations, some closer to town have that service but there are a large number of communities which cannot. We do not have the funding to do that.

**Mr GUYULA:** There used to be, on homelands in my younger days, two-way call-in radios as well. Another service was from VJY. That was around here in Alice Springs and reached up Arnhem Land and the Top End of the Northern Territory. They could be improved. The options that people had contact was the call-in two-way radios before Telstra came in. I know, we used to use it in Arnhem Land. That is just something that you might have.

**Mr CHAIR:** So I have it clear in my mind, you say that more people are moving back to homelands and want to be on homelands, but the infrastructure is not there? Infrastructure includes telecommunications infrastructure, not just housing and other services?

**Ms THOMPSON:** Yes.

**Mr CHAIR:** We will be preparing a report about this. I am trying to project forward. Are there any further questions from the committee? Any further comments?

**Ms THOMPSON:** I do not think so.

**Mr CHAIR:** Thank you for your attendance and the information; it is very helpful. We will have a short break. Please feel free to stay if you want.

**Ms THOMPSON:** Thank you.

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The committee suspended.

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#### CENTRAL DESERT REGIONAL COUNCIL

**Mr CHAIR:** Welcome to the Public Accounts Committee hearing on 4 October. I welcome Diane Hood to give evidence. Thank you for coming today. I remind everyone this is a formal proceeding of the committee and parliamentary privilege exists and the obligation not to mislead the committee. A transcript will be made available for our use. If, at any time, Ms Hood, you think the information you will provide should be made private and not public, we can go into a private hearing, *in-camera*.

Please state your name and the capacity in which you are appearing. We invite you to give an opening statement or make some brief remarks.'

**Ms HOOD:** Diane Hood, Chief Executive Officer, Central Desert Regional Council. I will be conveying council's plethora of views on this subject and a variety of submissions they have given over the years that impact this area.

**Mr CHAIR:** Thank you, Ms Hood. Would you like to make an opening statement or make some remarks about local decision making?

**Ms HOOD:** I will say up-front I will be highly critical. The biggest issue here is a disconnect between the political aspiration and the implementation of the policy. In my view, I will strongly say it is broken. Second, an example of that is the desire to control by Northern Territory staff, as opposed to the desire to partner. That is something we find in local government.

An example would be discussions we had on Friday about the new clause that has been sneaking into Northern Territory Government clauses, which is called, 'The power to dismiss', where basically the Northern Territory Government wants the right to tell me to dismiss staff from a service without any reason or consultation. Our view is pretty straightforward; that is unethical and probably unenforceable and it completely flies in the face of fair work and various other federal legislation.

In that discussion, the person said to me that I needed to understand that the Northern Territory Government has to manage the ABEs that do not know how to do things. The call was quite confrontational after that and I ended up hanging up.

The other point I make is the ongoing—what we feel—disregard of local government. Local government is, in essence, local decision making in action. It is the third tier of government; an independent tier. There are duly elected, democratic members who usually are bypassed and ignored, with comments and desires to set up another group or set of people.

The councillors in our last council were 100% Indigenous. There is one non-Indigenous member in the new council. These people are elders on community, traditional owners—a mix of various senior people. They are really not considered or rolled into a local decision making process at all. An example of that would be the homelands policy framework, which is still a failure and still has not been done since the 2018 request for input.

Our council made input in two ways, firstly, as a council advocating for our residents and, secondly, as a service provider, and our issues in terms of how the contract was managed. It appears to have been totally ignored. There was no closing of that feedback loop. The only thing we saw was the official information later which essentially did not acknowledge the input as a council and put the blame squarely on service providers for the failures of the homelands policy. Then we got pretty much disinvited from future discussions which are only between land councils, federal government and the Northern Territory Government, even though we are the people on the ground who have the most direct experience.

Part of that, also, is there is no recognition of the environment in Central Australia. This is not the Top End. We do not have robust and large Aboriginal business enterprises. Usually, the last point of control or the ability to provide services is the local government. People will not discuss with us in terms of partnership; it just becomes a 'tell and do'-type of scenario. That environmental recognition is completely lacking. An example of that would be the Willowra plan which was developed by the Northern Territory Government officers. There was no real consultation. Being a bit bolshy, I got myself involved and told them I wanted to consult and that what was in the plan did not reflect what we would or could do.

This has been going around in circles for over two years and I still have not seen the updates after I demanded certain information which referred to us saying we would do things to be removed. I have not seen a refresh of that. It seems to be all about image and not about substance. This is the way it is going at the moment.

**Mr CHAIR:** Thank you, Diane. I appreciate your candid remarks. I open it up to the committee.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** A few weeks ago, when we had our hearing in Darwin, we were addressed by the woman who heads up LGANT. She talked about the tension between local decision making and local government, which is pretty much what you alluded to. Can you see both coexisting? What would that look like from your perspective?

**Ms HOOD:** It is a good question. I can see them coexisting but not in the current way that it is implemented. The issue is—and I see this issue with lots of forms of legislation from the Northern Territory Government—there is a mix between the aspirations—there is an aspirational statement in terms of what people want as the overall outcomes, which pretty much everyone would agree with in its intent. But the implementation is prescriptive, controlled and separate from the people. What has to happen for things to coexist is real work that is open discussion across the parties involved, which includes people on communities, and is done to properly set up how this works and how it moves forward. At the moment, you get a lot of promises being made to people and then no-one knows how to implement them. You start getting the kind of cross-shooting going on.

To me, it is about the hard yards and true consultation not being done because it is too much about 'tell' and not about—it might take a long time and be quite difficult. You might never get everyone agreeing but those real discussions in terms of the interested parties and the groups are not happening.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** You are suggesting that government should have a facilitative role or a mediating role in trying to walk the path between the two?

**Ms HOOD:** Not really. This is a Northern Territory Government policy and usually—speaking from a council point of view—when you have a council policy, you should then have an accompanying set of internal procedures of policies which dictate how it should work, what the steps are and who the

interested parties are. That, as far as I know, is missing. If it exists it has never been communicated or agreed with local government.

If we have a council policy, it is my job as the CEO to then set up how that works in practice, to fulfil that policy. How it works in practice has not happened. You get people, probably trying very hard and with the best will in the world, to implement the policy, but they are all doing it in their own way and opinion—they are making it up as they go along. It might well be educated 'made up as they go along', but it is not something that has the power of a document, detail, steps, flow chart, process or anything like that.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** Bridgette Bellenger from the department ...

**Ms HOOD:** I know Bridgette.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** ... said that an LDM was like a work in progress and it is fluid. Other people used different word—it is organic and obtuse. What you are saying is consistent with how people are describing it.

**Ms HOOD:** Yes. Bridgette and I have discussed this matter in the past.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** But you need more clarification?

**Ms HOOD:** We would like to be part of the discussion and not 'tell'—actually part of the discussion. Right? I hate to say it; it is the same as how the local government 2030 strategy is going. Councils have been pushed back as inputters and it is being driven by the Office of Chief Minister and Cabinet through their Local Government arm and LGANT. I have to say I no longer feel it has anything to do with us; it is a government policy.

There is this reluctance to let go of control. We see it in many ways. If you do not have a procedure and policy, then no-one can hold you accountable for it. Right? I also see it in the regional coordination committee down here. The bulk of the sessions are 'tell' sessions. They are people telling the various parties things. On the rare occasion there needs to be a decision, it is Darwin's decision.

If you are to have local regional coordination groups, then empower them. If you cannot do that at the regional level, then local decision making also does not have the authority and the impact it should because that is another tier down again.

This 'power to dismiss' clause I mentioned earlier is just another example. The bureaucrats are putting more and more in place to control, drive and dictate, without the consultation and process being put in place.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** Can you explain the dismiss clause. What did you call it?

**Ms HOOD:** It is called 'power to dismiss'. It has come up in the latest Power and Water contract, tenancy contract and repairs and maintenance contract from DIPL. In Central Australia, precisely no-one responded to the tender. It is about to be reissued. I was one of the few people who said I wanted to have a discussion about what we need to see in order for us to reply to the tender. I basically was talked at. That was the call I hung up on when they made the comment about the ABEs.

I will not sign something that gives a third party the power to dismiss my staff. That is highly unethical. When the Northern Territory Government is hiring a business, then yes, you should vet that business. Yes, you should make that business as per the correct policies, procedures, capacity and capability in place, but you do not start trying to drive their decisions for them and own direct interactions with people. It is, in my view, completely and utterly ridiculous.

In Central Australia, you have a market failure. There are not the plethora of organisations available to do certain services. The NT Government actually needs to sit down and repair its relationship with local government and work out how we can partner to help local residents in the remote communities. It is not by sticking us in the same category with whoever else it wants to control. It would be a different model based on there being a market value in terms of local enterprise.

Another example, we replied to the power and water ESO contract and I said to the ‘power to dismiss’ clause, do not comply. We will not comply. We were completely disregarded after having to do a lot of work and the bottom line is if I use Atitjere as an example, our price to provide the service in the Atitjere was \$670,000 per annum. With a tenderer that would comply, you are paying \$1.5m. The price of this control is \$750,000-\$800,000. That is one practical example that is provable as all the numbers have been announced.

Not only do I feel the clause is unethical, I think it is unconscionable to pay that amount over what another provider quoted and all the local people in power and water were devastated as there was nothing we did wrong in delivering the contract previously. All of the people were skilled, all the conditions were met, I just would not comply with the ‘power to dismiss’ clause, that is written into the contract.

**Mr MONAGHAN:** Going back to the question of some of the constituents within your local government jurisdiction, is there an appetite to engage and participate in your LDM negotiations?

**Ms HOOD:** I do not think they know what it means. I do not think all of our community are at the level of developmental maturity that might be present further up north. Part of that is because of the infrastructure is not there, as Skye mentioned. Telecommunications in communities is abysmal. We recently managed to put in cell towers in three of our communities because we paid using drought resilience funding through the federal government for those communities to have cell communications. It is really bad.

There are no local services, there are minimum shops, hardly any ABEs, there are some, and the ones that do exist do not have easy access to support and help. The Southern Tanami Kurdiji Indigenous Corporation and council help to foster in Yuendumu—who do night patrol and mediation for those two communities—have been struggling a little. Council weighs that in council but there is no one in Yuendumu to support them. There are no qualified people who can help on the ground in terms of how to run that. It is a different environment.

**Mr MONAGHAN:** Is there a lack of empowerment with leadership development there to enable that?

**Ms HOOD:** Yes would be the short answer.

**Mr MONAGHAN:** Have some of those communities been able to access some of the various funding's that are allocated for doing just that precise bit of work?

**Ms HOOD:** I think some have but it has been minimal. Part of the problem is because of the dispersed population, most of it is tried to be completed remotely. If you look at Central Desert Regional Council we are bigger than Victoria and yet we only have about 4,200 to 4,500 people spread across that entire area. It is hard for anyone to go out, there is no synergy of scales is the short answer.

**Mr MONAGHAN:** There is none of that happening at the moment that you have seen?

**Ms HOOD:** Not that I have seen. There may be pockets here and there. We run the CDP on behalf of the federal government so we get people out to help but it is more basic requirements such driver's licenses, white cards and plant operations and things like that.

**Mr YAN:** In our last public hearings, as Robin has touched on, we heard from a representative from LGANT, part of the submission and what she spoke about was how local decision making is disempowering or fragmenting local government. Do you see this as the case or do you have any experience of that?

**Ms HOOD:** To a certain level. It goes back to whether you are talking the little ‘l’ for ‘local decision making’ which, as a concept, everybody supports, or the capital ‘L’ ‘Local Decision Making’, which is the policy. One of the things—we do not have the examples here like the Groote Eylandt example and that sort of thing ...

**Mr YAN:** That is primarily the example that we have spoken about, how Groote Eylandt is coming away from the Arnhem Regional Council and it has caused all sorts of issues for services.

**Ms HOOD:** Of course it will. All of that was documented in a report to the Northern Territory Government back in 2015 because I was with the Northern Territory Government then and I think everybody has lost that report. It was to the Adam Giles' government and that was when he wanted to split the councils more than just Groote Eylandt. The result was the West Daly implementation afterwards. I have a copy if anyone would like one.

Here, it is more about everybody calling everything local decision making. If anybody wants something done, it is a local decision making policy. The term is misused because it is used about anything the Northern Territory Government wants done. There might be resistance to it whether it is from consultation or not.

Our biggest bugbear is that our Councillors are always bypassed. It is always about 'we need to go and talk to the community'. I do not know who in the community is talked to. Some of the feedback we get is it will be one family group not the whole of community. Our Councillors are the elected members for all of these communities. They are never asked for their opinion as things come up. Sometimes—you will hear from Jeff MacLeod later—we both stick our noses in on behalf of council fairly frequently but do not really feel like we get any traction. There is no closing of the loop or feedback back to council. All of those things are not happening.

That said, because the policy is aspirational and the implementation is varied, there may not be the environment here yet for that being local decision making. Certainly, consulting the community is key; that should be standard operating procedure for all tiers of government when there is going to be change or new policies or anything like that. I do not think that is what is meant by the big 'L' local decision making policy. Here, we need more focus on building capacity, helping people start microbusinesses, giving them assistance to feel confident to start a business and run things, etcetera, and having further support. We need more services on the communities or at least in the larger centres so that people can access them without having to go to Alice Springs or to Darwin.

**Mr MONAGHAN:** What would be the council's response if one of those groups that you are talking about built and wanted to take over some of that community service, for instance, (inaudible) to do the rubbish?

**Ms HOOD:** Here is where there is a problem with the policy because they cannot. At the moment, they cannot. You have the *Local Government Act*. Northern Territory Government cannot award the rubbish collection to someone else unless you change the *Local Government Act*. We could if we so chose and we are on record as having supported STKIC, as an example, and we gave up a contract to enable them to have a larger income.

But this is where the whole thing is nonsense. If NT Government wants to take over local government functionality, change the law. It is perfectly possible for the Northern Territory Government, like the ACT Government, to directly deliver local government services. Then you would have the choice to outsource that or give it to someone else. Absolutely. But this kind of hybrid mismatch between the different legislation is just painful.

**Mr MONAGHAN:** You would see it as NTG taking over that service and not necessarily a local decision making group ...

**Ms HOOD:** You cannot take over a single service. The *Local Government Act* dictates and discusses the wards, the boundaries, who is local government and where, elections, third tier and people being appointed. The act describes the legislative role of local government, which includes rubbish collection.

**Mr MONAGHAN:** But the local government could provide that.

**Ms HOOD:** We could outsource it to someone.

**Mr MONAGHAN:** That is right. That is what I am getting at. What would council's response be to doing precisely that?

**Ms HOOD:** I do not know because no-one has said they want to. It would depend on—you cannot outsource the responsibility; you can only outsource the delivery. You have all kinds of procurement regulations and you have to make sure the group has the capacity that they can deliver under whatever

requirements are in the act. This is not a straightforward process. We have had nobody put their hand up to want to take over.

We did briefly in Lajamanu when there was a bit of a riot about the doors being closed to the tip because they were rifling through the rubbish and EPA regulations were not being properly met. We had a bunch of illegal dumping, so we locked the doors, put a skip outside for people to put excess rubbish in, and there was a bit of an uprising about land, access and 'we demand it'. Our answer was simple—if someone else wants to take over running the tip we have no issue. We have no bias whatsoever, but be aware you will also have to be responsible to the Environmental Protection Authority rules and regulations. No-one else wanted to do it.

Most of the things local governments do are not exciting. Most of it is fairly pragmatic. We have a commercial arm because there are insufficient businesses on our communities to do things.

**Mr MONAGHAN:** So was the Yuendumu decision—you talked about Night Patrol ...

**Ms HOOD:** Yes, the STKIC, yes.

**Mr MONAGHAN:** That was kept with council, or was that contracted out to a local ...

**Ms HOOD:** Council previously had the federal contract for Night Patrol and had an extension of that for some mediation services. We initially hired the mediators and the Night Patrol and ran that contract. Then, there was a local group, Southern Tanami Kurdiji, who put their hand up, incorporated themselves and wanted to take it over. We worked with them for a year and then we basically handed back our contract to the federal government on the premise that it would then go to this local independent group.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** You said earlier, Diane, that there are not many robust Aboriginal service providers, or something to that effect. Do you think local decision making might bolster or change that and enable more groups to form businesses and become successful? It is aspirational, I know, but could you see that happening?

**Ms HOOD:** My answer is no, because what will bolster that is already in place without local decision making. It is just not used and there is insufficient funding. You already have, in the department of Business, facilities which are there to help new business start-ups and that kind of thing. It just does not operate well in a very remote sense.

It is like we keep reinventing the wheel because we have a failure of service delivery to very remote places. We keep trying to put another title on it, rather than fixing the base problem, or acknowledging that the base problem will not go away. Sometimes people do not like the answer, but it does not help just having another aspirational thing on top of it.

It all comes down to implementation which needs the funding, the skills and the resources to deliver.

**Mr CHAIR:** Within that context?

**Ms HOOD:** Within whatever context it is, yes.

**Mr CHAIR:** And within that context of your answer being no, how do you see treaty?

**Ms HOOD:** Treaty is quite interesting. Again, it is aspirational. It is worrying that they are separated. It is very confusing for people whether they are related or not.

**Mr CHAIR:** Being that LDM and treaty separated?

**Ms HOOD:** Yes. We had a series of meetings where people went out to communities to talk about treaty. The feedback I had was that people were even more confused because the discussions apparently went on for hours and were mostly 'talking at' as opposed to a sit-down, shared discussion. It was quite rigorous but it was mostly one-directional discussion if I put it that way.

Are people interested in that? Yes, but it cannot just be one or two visits, and someone telling. There needs to be more thought put into an education process, perhaps independent facilitators, getting

people who are—facilitation is an art form; it is a rigorous kind of thing that people go to universities specifically for ages to do in a detailed way. In the Territory, we just assume that our people that we currently have will toddle off and facilitate or consult but not always have the training necessary to do that.

There is an interest in the treaty concept, probably higher than the local decision making, but there is still confusion as to what that means. What is the timeframe? What is the process? What is the possible end results or scenarios that might come out the back end of it?

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** We were told by the Deputy Treaty Commissioner at our last hearing that each treaty will take about 20 years. That is what I heard. It is going to be a long process.

**Ms HOOD:** If that is the case, tell people the process because I do not believe the assistant commissioner if the statement is merely, 'it will take about 20 years'. Of course it will if that is your starting point and nobody knows what the roadmap is because the roadmap is not published, public and is not consulted. It is really easy for someone to say it will take 20 years and then go, 'we did it in 19'. The point is that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. First, you need to consult properly on what the roadmap is. What are the steps? Let us give a target for whatever step one is, and then step two.

But if you just go, 'It is 20 years', and we are looking at something that is completely undefined, it is unlikely to happen even in 20 years. You need the stages or the steps.

**Mr CHAIR:** What steps could government put in place to further define LDM?

**Ms HOOD:** From my point of view, step one would be to better define it in terms of the vision, not just the aspiration. Step two would be to step down and have open discussions on an equal playing field, not a 'tell-listen', with Councillors, local government and on communities. Where there is no interest or there is not a current appetite, it does not mean that it is a 'no' forever. There needs to be some kind of program and process put in place in terms of revisiting and part of the initial steps has to be understanding what the barriers are today and then having active plans in place to address the barriers that are identified by the various interested parties, particularly, the people on communities.

**Mr CHAIR:** Those barriers will be different between communities?

**Ms HOOD:** Those barriers may well be different. They are certainly will be different than the Top End communities. To me, that would be one of the critical early steps: understand the barriers and then work out how they can be addressed, or if there is no intention to address them, let us tell the truth.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** It is interesting that the only local decision making agreement in Central Australia is with Tangentyere. I am not aware of any other others.

**Ms HOOD:** Neither am I.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** You alluded to that earlier. There is a difference between the Top End and Central Australia. What is the difference, do you think?

**Ms HOOD:** The Tangentyere agreement—and I am not an expert on it—is in Alice Springs, so it is in an area that has a larger population. It has multiple town camps; there is synergy of scale.

In Central Australia the remoteness is even bigger than the Top End, if you like. The infrastructure is less developed and the population is very sparse. They are all known environmental factors. They need to be thought about.

Whatever the prerequisites are for local decision making—and this goes back to my barrier comment—they need to be considered and put in place. One of them, I suggest, is robust telecommunications because if people wanted to start a business today, they do not have a sufficient audience or market in any one of our communities—possibly even Yuendumu which is our largest community—so they need access to a wider market to do that. The communications and housing need to be more robust.

It even goes back to things like law and order. A vast number more of our communities have no place on community. A lot of the issues we have about keeping staff on community—we can get local staff but getting the staff for qualified roles is the ...

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** Safety.

**Ms HOOD:** The safety and lack of law and order. Frankly, it does not work having the police being called out from Ti Tree or Yuendumu or wherever. They do their best. This is not something against the police. If someone is driving 400 kilometres to get to another community then, of course, whatever the issue is will be finished and no-one will know where the perpetrator is. That example and some of the others—do not get me started on this—is the difference between the Westminster system and our belief we have to impose the Westminster system in local government and local authorities against a cultural background and nuance.

This is also the control factor. I do not think local authorities are all that effective because they do not allow the cultural mores and disciplines. They are the Westminster system—you take the minutes, you tick people off for attendance et cetera.

Again, it is prescriptive. In every other council I have been in outside the Northern Territory—does local government have to consult with their residents? Of course they do. That is in every act in every state. Do other states prescribe how they do that? No, they do not because different things will suit different styles of community.

**Mr MONAGHAN:** Does the council work with people like APO NT to support that development of leadership and governance you are talking about?

**Ms HOOD:** Not on specific examples, but broadly yes. For example, we were very much endorsed and worked on them for the development of the initial policies about replacing CDP. We are now on take two of that.

**Mr MONAGHAN:** They came in and did the consultations with you?

**Ms HOOD:** Yes, there were pretty broad discussions over some time to develop that position. APO NT did the majority of work on that one, yes. Council basically decided our feedback was pretty much the same and they are listening to us. Our input was to endorse the APO NT position.

**Mr CHAIR:** Ms Hood, we do not have much time left. Can you briefly expand on the Willowra plan you spoke of?

**Ms HOOD:** About two-and-a-half years ago, due to the unrest at Willowra with the two family groups fighting, there was a lot of discussion about writing a Willowra plan. I had some discussions with the original author of that plan, which consequently was all disregarded. I never saw the plan until some months later when it was—let us call it ‘accidentally’—sent to me by someone else. It contained a lot of rhetoric in it about Central Desert Regional Council that was blatantly false.

I then tried to engage with various parties to get that fixed—I did not like the plan anyway as it had too many actions in it, a plan that had 100 actions in it is ridiculous for something like that. I finally got some engagement, twice I thought I had it fixed but it was not. About four months ago I had further discussions about the same issues—because the plans just sat there, it is a beautiful plan with lots of pretty pictures and is beautifully written—but it has not been actioned.

**Mr CHAIR:** Is it part of the LDM?

**Ms HOOD:** I do not know. The rhetoric is used but I would not say so.

I was then committed that the changes would be made that I had suggested but again I have not seen any updates again. With Willowra we have gone around in one big giant circle twice and are back to the position with a whole heap of people homeless and living in river beds with social services valiantly trying to house them but they believe they have been displaced, not in Wilora but other places.

We have gone right back in the same scenario where Housing will say that they will repair the houses as soon as the people come back and the people will say we will go back as soon as we know that the houses are fit to move into. It is a catch 22 where we are in the same place.

**Mr GUYULA:** Tangentyere Council is looking after camps here and then the Central Desert Regional Council is looking after the whole region area, Alice Springs and communities as well, like Yuendumu and other places?

**Ms HOOD:** Kind of. We do not have Alice Springs as part of our area, we start a bit to the north of Alice Springs. We have 12 communities. Under the Local Government Act we do those functions and services on all of our communities. We have handed back the homelands contract because of the failure to engage in terms of a very poor contract and lots of difficulties administering it. We did agree to extend that for another three months until the end of September while the Northern Territory Government found other providers.

**Mr GUYULA:** You are talking about local government, or LGANT running those resources like the garbo and stuff in the communities, trying to take the control of working on things. This Central Desert Regional Council body is made up of locals in the area. Is that what you are trying to say? And you are kind of running into a wall with these people—the shire and the government are taking over blocking you away. Is that what you are trying to say?

**Ms HOOD:** No. We are the local government. The community councils were legislated to change into, initially it was called a shire and then a regional council in 2008. We hire more local people than the combination of the community councils. We are about 69% Indigenous across the whole of our council area, but higher than on communities.

**Mr GUYULA:** But you want to run the local government, the local decision making within your own region not the individual shires running it?

**Mr GUYULA:** You spoke about the when you were talking about—this is not about assimilation or not from the Northern Territory Government or the shire, but this body needs to work on its own to improve resources for those communities.

**Ms HOOD:** Yes. The Central Desert Regional Council has its own ABN. It is a legislated company and operates under the *Local Government Act 2019*. It does not report to the Northern Territory Government. We are separate entities but we should work in collaboration and cooperation. Too often, it is a 'tell' process and not working in collaboration or a discussion.

With our local communities, we have introduced more than the local authorities to get local input. We now actively do a survey of the communities about twice a year to get input as to how they feel we are going. Part of that process has been trying to explain to communities what the role of local government is because, five years ago, it was very muddy and muddled. We are not all things to all people and do not run all services on communities. We put a lot of effort into some posters and communication to help people understand that difference.

**Mr GUYULA:** I mention it because I believe it is happening all over the Territory having run into the same situation. That is what we were trying to clarify with the government here to 'get off your back' kind of thing and that you work out all that business you want to run it over there.

**Ms HOOD:** Yes. I think that the control that is sneaking in worse than ever needs to go and there needs to be recognition that we are a separate tier of government. I hear the words all of the time but the way it is enacted on the ground does not reflect that. I absolutely agree with you there.

**Mr CHAIR:** Thank you, Ms Hood, for sharing with us today.

**Ms HOOD:** Thank you for the time and happy for any future discussion as needed.

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The committee suspended.

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### MACDONNELL REGIONAL COUNCIL

**Mr CHAIR:** We will now hear from the MacDonnell Regional Council. Welcome Jeff MacLeod and Roxanne Kenny. Thank you for coming today. This is a formal proceeding of the committee and the protection of parliamentary privilege and the obligation not to mislead the committee apply. A transcript will be made use of by the committee and may be put on the website. If at any time during the hearing you are concerned that what you say should not be made public, you may ask the committee to go into a closed session.

Please state your name and your capacity in which you appear today and then give an opening statement or some brief remarks.

**Mr MacLEOD:** Jeff MacLeod, Chief Executive Officer, MacDonnell Regional Council. I thank the committee for this opportunity. I introduce the President of MacDonnell Regional Council, as the principal member of council, just recently re-elected and a four-term member of MacDonnell Regional Council from the beginning.

**Ms KENNY:** Roxanne Kenny, President, MacDonnell Regional Council.

**Mr MacLEOD:** Thank you to the committee. The council made a submission to the committee. We intend to speak to that today. We ...

**Mr CHAIR:** The committee has a copy of your submission.

**Mr MacLEOD:** You have a copy? Good, we have too.

First, a quick background. MacDonnell Regional Council is 269,000 square kilometres of the Northern Territory—well and truly bigger than the size of the state of Victoria. We have 13 remote communities that form our council. We have 12 elected members, all of them Indigenous people from their communities, elected through the local government elections. We do our regional plan, which you have a copy in front of you. We have, since 2008, had some wonderful leadership.

Unfortunately, many of these people are no longer with us, but they have formed, from the very start of the MacDonnell Regional Council, the importance of engaging with community. I am sure local members will know these people. Some of you may well know them, even in the Top End. We had the likes of Mr Sid Anderson, Mr Lance Abbott, Mr Barry Abbott and Mr Phillip Maluka. These people are legends, I suppose, of Central Australia in their reputation and leadership for Indigenous people. We have been very lucky to have them as past presidents and members of council, who have very much driven how we engage with local communities.

Where we come from is a little similar to where Diane was. Local government is a separate sphere of government. It states quite clearly in the opening clause of the act in Part 1.2, section 4:

- (1) *The underlying principles of this Act are as follows:*
  - (a) *local government is a distinct and essential sphere of government;*
  - (b) *the system of local government:*
    - (i) *needs to be flexible and adaptable to the diverse interests and needs of the many communities within the Territory; and*
    - (ii) *needs to be comprehensive, democratic, responsive to community needs and accountable both to local communities and the public generally.*

That is at the very start of the *Local Government Act*. We have always abided by that principle. We have a very successful local authority organisation within each one of our communities. These people are appointed members by the community. They are people who are put on that local authority to represent the people.

One issue I will talk to—the principal member will talk to the gap in a minute—is that we all have always concentrated on what we are there for: to deliver local government services to our community. We have 531 employees on MacDonnell Regional Council. On community, 89% of those are local Indigenous people. We are by far the largest employer of Indigenous people in our regional council area by a long shot. No-one even comes close to us. Our percentages range, in our staff, from senior positions all the way through to entry level.

We do not contract services out. We do all the services ourselves because that creates local employment. That is one of the major principles of our council. It has always stood for getting as many local people into employment as possible, because there is simply not the economic development out there on communities. There are very few jobs. You might have one or two jobs at the store, maybe one or two at the school and one or two at the most at the clinic. That is it.

There is no other economic development in our region other than primary industry, which is very seasonal and some very small infancy in mining and development. There are no employment opportunities. That is why council does not contract out; we employ people to do the work on our communities. We are very proud that we are able to offer people real work, not CDP. We do not engage in CDP; we work with the CDP providers. There are four of them in our council area. Our principle is to employ local people.

Our local authorities inform council about what the local community wants. We have our own and infrastructure meetings where community members are invited to highlight what infrastructure, they believe, should be developed within their communities. Each community has an infrastructure plan that we budget against. Our local authorities have had the power delegated to them by the council to expend funds against their community projects.

At each LA meeting, all the projects are reported on, in progress and budget. It is the local authority that approves the budget and projects. That project is not deemed to be completed until such time as the local authority deems it completed.

We have seen a number of people come through the local authority process, then become elected members on the MacDonnell Regional Council under the local government elections.

We deliver in local government services. There is a huge gap on community, about which I will now let the principal member speak to you.

**Ms KENNY:** With the MRC and the local decision making it is our local authorities that are the decision-makers. They are the ones who sit around the table and make the decision. We talk about it when we come back to the council. There is no peace in our communities about making a complaint about NTG services like education, housing and police. That is what is so frustrating for our community members. There is no voice on NTG services.

We on MRC have to rely on our LAs to get people's answers. There is no representative from NTG in our communities to help our people for the local decision making. Also, treaty is making everybody very confused. Everybody asks me when I go to local authorities if we have to have treaty meetings. Nobody knows.

**Mr MacLEOD:** As the principal member says, the huge frustration for people on the ground is if they have a complaint about local government services we deliver—and we deliver many of them, not only normal local government services, but services on behalf of NTG and Power and Water and things like that and a large number of federal government services like aged care and childcare. If people want to make a complaint they have an avenue through our office, which is fully staffed and always open, Monday to Friday. They have somewhere they can go to complain.

They can also raise local government issues through the local authorities and their members can bring issues to our table. I did not want to bore you with bringing one of our agendas, but if you take the time to look at one of our LA agendas, you will see that they are quite comprehensive in allowing local issues to be raised.

The big frustration for people on community is that if they have an issue with health, education, police or any other Northern Territory Government service, where do they take their complaint? There is nowhere or no representative whatsoever out on communities for Northern Territory Government

services. There is no-one out there accountable for the services that the community members expect to be delivered by the Northern Territory Government. To say that you can ring a 1800 number or put a complaint in by email is just farcical. Community members do not do that.

The growing frustration that we have seen over the years is not with local government services. Our services and engagement with the community tell us that people are very happy with the services that local government, as per the Act as to what we are supposed to be delivering, not only in services but in job opportunities as well. They are happy with that. They are frustrated with how to make a complaint about an NT service. To make the statement, 'Well, you have the person on the community that you can go and talk to' who is the head of that service, quite often the complaint is about that person. Who do they go to?

There is a huge build-up of frustration about accountability for Northern Territory Government services. It got to the stage in our local authority meetings it became such an issue because we were constantly being side-tracked away from dealing with local government issues that we were forced to add a session to our LAs which allowed people to raise issues about the Northern Territory Government because they could not get an answer anywhere else.

We have had a great relationship for many years with the previous department of Local Government, now with DCM, with having an opportunity for people to raise these issues. The staff from those departments go off and, to the best of their ability, try and get some answers for people about Northern Territory Government services and bring that back. I know that, without putting words in people's mouths, they have been frustrated sometimes with getting answers from their colleagues in various other departments. They have not been getting the answers that people on communities want.

This is blurred and is the problem here. People are going out and saying, 'We hear that people are not happy'. They are not happy alright. They are not happy with some parts of it but some people are melding that all into one.

Council's position is that we support local decision making. We always have. We have our local decision making vehicle which is called our local authority. We see a great opportunity for local decision making on communities for accountability of Northern Territory Government services. That is where we see a great opportunity for a local decision making line. As part of the community and one of the local service providers within the community, we would be part of that. But where is the representation on behalf of the Northern Territory Government? That is what we have raised in our submission. We support local decision making but it needs to be the right local decision making and needs to be the right accountability.

**Mr MONAGHAN:** Are you saying that there have been no discussions or initiatives put in place relating to local decision making to roll it out to communities?

**Mr MacLEOD:** We had to make it part of our LA to get people answers. Where are the representatives of the Northern Territory Government on communities? Why is there no position on communities which is responsible for the services of Northern Territory Government?

**Mr YAN:** Jeff, thank you for your discussions so far. I note that when this committee put out the information about the review into local decision making—it has been a policy of government for quite some time—that for many of your executive members, this was the first time they had heard of the local decision making framework. Is there any explanation for that?

**Mr MacLEOD:** What is local decision making? I have asked that question countless times. Do you know the answer I get? It could be anything you want it to be. What sort of answer is that? What is local decision making? Local decision making, as far as we are concerned, is doing exactly what we are doing: holding community meetings.

If you go to page 15 of the booklet, this is our regional plan. These accountabilities and KPIs were not just something that was plucked out of the sky; these were issues and things like that that were raised at our meetings and community meetings in consultation with council and the staff. All of these were pulled together to develop our plan and our KPI. We had four goal areas council works to.

We can only be accountable for the services we deliver. I cannot be accountable to another two tiers of government. Those two tiers of government need to be accountable to themselves.

**Mr YAN:** I have attended a number of LA meetings within MacDonnell Regional Council and they are quite detailed and there is a lot of information in them. What contact from government, if any, has MacDonnell Regional Council had about developing a local decision making plan?

**Mr MacLEOD:** None.

**Mr YAN:** That is a concern.

**Ms KENNY:** Nobody comes to us.

**Mr MacLEOD:** I am aware of meetings going on around the place, but we are not invited to those meetings. The so-called LDM meetings are happening out on community. I am not invited to those or anything like that. These meetings are happening exterior to council.

**Mr YAN:** That was raised by the LGANT representative at our last hearing. You may have been in the room when I discussed this with Diane—so did Robyn. LGANT see it causing tension between government and the councils because there are local decision making meetings being held in communities, but the peak body for those communities, which is the local council, is not involved. Is that what you are saying is the case here?

**Mr MacLEOD:** Correct. For the committee members, we have our part. This is what the big problem is out there at the moment. We are blurring the lines. We have an act which says what local government does. I repeat what Diane said; there is a blurring of the lines between accountabilities of levels of government.

We are a local government. We have our act which dictates what we have to do, when we have to do it. It is very prescriptive. I have countless policies and procedures to ensure that I deliver on the things they want. We have our elected members who are elected by their community to represent their community—and they are excluded from local decision making meetings. Who are these bodies of people who local decision making discussions are happening with? Who decides the group of people? Is it TOs or whatever?

As I said, council has made it very clear in its submission what they support. When you have a look at the council's item about where they see themselves on the spectrum of the local decision making process, they see MRC at the level of collaborative already because we have been doing it for the last 13 years. They rated the NTG still back at the informed stage. That gives you an idea of where my council thinks we are at in delivering to the local people.

When you blur the lines between service delivery and whose responsibility is, this is why people become very confused about who does what, where and when. I am a community member. I really do not care which level of government. If I have an issue about the clinic or a problem with my kid at school and things like that, I just want someone to listen to my problem and fix it for me. That is where the level of frustration is coming from. We can only do so much to help alleviate that problem when it is another sphere of government.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** In terms of us giving feedback to the government on local decision making, what would be your main points that you would like us to deliver?

**Mr MacLEOD:** Council said, 'Why isn't there someone like in the federal sphere where you have the GECs?' There is someone out there who goes around, is based in the community and has responsibility over federal government services. We have local government. Why is there not someone who is allocated to communities for Northern Territory Government services? That's the gap. It is the missing piece to the puzzle here. Why is there not someone—they do not have to be in every community; it could be a hub and spoke model. You might have someone based in Papunya, for example, who would look after Mt Liebig and Haasts Bluff, or somebody in Hermannsburg who would look after Areyonga, and things like that. Where is this non-existent person?

The Northern Territory Government needs to be accountable to the people on communities for the services they are supposed to be delivering to, and they are not. Quite simply, they are not.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** Was there ever anyone from the Northern Territory Government based in your area?

**Mr MacLEOD:** No. There has never been anyone. There has been local government, even back in the community council days. There was the council clerk and the office there where someone could make a complaint. There were the GECs or the GBMs back in the early days of the Intervention, and things like that. There was someone you could go to and talk about healthcare, childcare or aged care. Education, health, policing, roads—all of those areas that are Northern Territory Government. Who is accountable?

To us, that is the gap. We fully support it and council wants to be part of the pie. The pie is the community. You have Northern Territory Government services, local government and NGOs all coming together to deliver services on community. Local government is only part of that pie. Certainly, we would hold accountability for our local government services but we need other people to take accountability. Sorry to harp on that but that is where council has been continuously frustrated about this whole issue.

**Mr CHAIR:** Jeff, do you want to be invited to the LDM meetings?

**Mr MacLEOD:** We can have a local representative there who can talk to it. That could be our local elected member. Why would it not be? You have someone who is elected under local government. I am sure councillors from Alice Springs get invited to various meetings. I am sure of it.

**Mr CHAIR:** There is an appetite to be involved.

**Mr MacLEOD:** Yes, there is. We have enough councillors. Even if there is not an elected member—we have some communities that do not have an elected member—we have an overlap where we have allocated one councillor to every community. Every community has at least one councillor to be their representative and to bring their voice to council. That is the idea of the LAs. We have actions; we write down the actions. We report back to our LAs; everything is minuted. An action cannot come off our LA agenda until the LA says it can come off.

There is delegation both through financial and decision making which the council has delegated down to the LAs. We have the LA project funds which they manage. We also have council-allocated budget to each of the LAs for discretionary funding for spending on local festivals or whatever they want, and the LA makes that decision. We have lots of examples of local decision making going on. We have infrastructure and all of those programs that council builds in that allows people to make local decisions.

**Ms KENNY:** When we have local authority meetings, I tell the people, 'You are the decision-makers. You make the decisions, we take it back and pass it on, always.'

**Mr CHAIR:** We are running over. Are there any further questions or comments?

**Mr MacLEOD:** No, except with what it rolling out at the moment; we have spoken about the treaty. At the moment there is the treaty, Voice, local decision making, empowered communities. All these things are going on at the same time. You have people parachuting into communities, holding a meeting. People are asking, 'Did we not talk about this two weeks ago?' You have this massive number of things all happening at the same time, which is adding to confusion in the local community as to what local decision making, Voice, treaty—there are a lot of things happening at the same time.

**Mr CHAIR:** Thank you for your feedback today. Hopefully, we have not contributed to that confusion by holding a public hearing into LDM. I am sure the Members for Araluen and Namatjira's doors are always open in Alice Springs to hear from MRC.

**Mr MacLEOD:** Yes, and we are always there to engage. Thank you to the committee for your time today.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** Thank you.

**Mr CHAIR:** Thank you very much.

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The committee suspended.

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## DEPARTMENT OF THE CHIEF MINISTER AND CABINET

**Mr CHAIR:** Welcome back everyone to this Public Accounts Committee hearing on 4 October in Alice Springs. I welcome Mr Brendan Blandford today. Thank you for appearing before the committee today.

This is a formal proceeding of the committee and the protection of parliamentary privilege and the obligation not to mislead the committee applies. A transcript will be made for use of the committee and may be put on the website. If, at any time during the hearing, you are concerned that what you will say should not be made public, you may ask that the committee go into a closed session and take your evidence in private.

Please state your name and the capacity in which you appear today.

**Mr BLANDFORD:** My name is Brendan Blandford. I am the Regional Executive Director of Chief Minister and Cabinet for the Central Australian region.

**Mr CHAIR:** Would you like to make a brief opening statement? We are running behind time.

**Mr BLANDFORD:** I will, thank you. I am part of the Territory Regional Growth Unit of the Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet in the Central Australian region. My role covers—if you use the Stuart Highway as your guide—the western side up to just underneath Lajamanu, and on the eastern side up to Engawalla, obviously encompassing the state borders of Western Australia, South Australia and Queensland.

I have been in the role of Regional Executive Director since mid-April this year, 2021. LDM has been a key priority of our office during that time. We have had engagements across all of our 26 communities. As has been mentioned by a number of speakers today, it is a significant area, just short of 550,000 square kilometres and takes in 26 communities and 180 outstations or homelands as well.

Obviously, from an LDM perspective, as you have heard this morning from Tangentyere Council, a significant body of work has gone into the heads of agreement and the wellness domains and framework in the meetings we have been having. Back to you.

**Mr CHAIR:** I open it for questions from the committee.

**Mr MONAGHAN:** Brendan, I have one that has probably been highlighted to the inquiry by a number of local government associations several times now; that is, the lack of engagement with some of them. We heard that same comment made this morning by MacDonnell Regional Council that they have not been engaged in processes. Is there a reason for that? What does that look like?

**Mr BLANDFORD:** Good question. In regard to MacDonnell Regional Council, we are talking about local authorities, their function and being the decision making bodies for their local communities. Wherever possible we will try to engage at local authority meetings and have discussions related to local decision making. We have held a couple of those in recent times as well at Areyonga and Mount Liebig.

Our first intent is to always engage with local authorities. We do, however, from time to time, get either invitations or requests from Aboriginal-based organisations within community to go out and do an LDM presentation to them and their Aboriginal board members as well.

**Mr MONAGHAN:** Another comment that was made—and it is probably one of the reasons we have started in Central Australia—has been that there has not been the pick-up or engagement with LDM as we have experienced in the north of the Territory. Can you give some explanation as to why that might be the case, or what is here that might be different?

**Mr BLANDFORD:** The key theme that has been running through both the previous session and the sessions today is about economies of scale—size—and the geography that sits within that Central Australian region. As I said before, with 550,000 square kilometres up to Lajamanu and Engawalla, and that broad-based community that sits outside the Alice Springs Town Council region as well.

From a governance point of view, there is probably a range of communities that have some quite good governance with structures in place with Aboriginal boards. Due to size, there is a range of communities that probably do not have that level of capability or capacity in the first instance. Economies of scale and size is probably some of the themes that flow through that.

**Mr MONAGHAN:** You were talking to the government's set ups. Has there been much take up in the three buckets of money that is available for communities to access relating to governance? Has there been much of that? I would see that as the first step of ...

**Mr BLANDFORD:** I do not have specific numbers in regard to what that might look like but acknowledging that, at this point—as was discussed by Bridgette in her interview—the money is there and is available if identified or we are asked specifically in relation to building some capability or capacity regarding governance. Or it could be in regards to a whole of range of things that would be a precursor potentially for local decision making. There are available funds there.

**Mr MONAGHAN:** Would you be able to provide that to the committee out of session?

**Mr BLANDFORD:** I would imagine so.

**Mr CHAIR:** We can take that on notice.

**Mr YAN:** Brendan, thanks for your time this morning. I think we have had a pretty clear message that there is a lack of understanding across a range of parts of our Central Australian communities of what local decision making is. I know from previous experience that it is raised in regional co-ord meetings but it seems that the message is not flowing out from there. Do you have any idea what you could do better to try and engage the community and the wider communities, and to raise that understanding?

**Mr BLANDFORD:** In regard to local decision making framework specifically or local decision making more broadly?

**Mr YAN:** I think it is people getting an understanding of what the framework is. I have heard from a number of people so far—not just today but previously—that they do not quite get or grasp exactly what local decision making is or what it means to them.

**Mr BLANDFORD:** Okay. The local decision making framework may cause some confusion and the potential in regard to the presentation. There are a lot of communities, as has been mentioned by some of the previous interviewees, where local decision making is part of what is going on in those particular communities. The local decision making framework, as Bridgette indicated, can be a myriad of things and it has infinite possibilities.

Part of that is working through what the aspirations of those communities are and working at the community pace, sitting down and having a discussion about what the aspirations are of that particular community, how we might explore those over subsequent meetings and look for where the opportunities might be from a local decision making point of view from the Northern Territory Government.

**Mr YAN:** It just came to me then while you were discussing that—it is what Bridgette also spoke about—is it that every government agency is responsible for local decision making within the various agencies, within the various regions? Without a clear driver or clear point of contact, do you think that may be some of the cause of that consternation that some agencies or departments are doing it better than others?

**Mr BLANDFORD:** Good question.

**Mr YAN:** As an example, it is possible that Housing may be doing it better, or Health, or someone else may be doing it better and some agencies may not be.

**Mr BLANDFORD:** You mentioned the regional co-ord earlier and that is the vehicle. That is the body that should be driving LDM within the communities. Across that, there are representatives of all of the Northern Territory Government agency heads, particularly in Alice Springs. In relation to where some of the opportunities are, I will go back and talk about the Tangentyere Council that gave evidence this morning. We have a project steering committee that meets every three months. There is the implementation working groups that meet on a four-weekly basis, ensuring that we have NTG agencies and other relevant agencies there—NIAA—in a number of instances to ensure that we are working collaboratively across portfolios. I am sure you are away of the complexity of the communities. Quite often, there is never one linear thing that needs to be worked on; we need to work across the NTG agencies to ...

**Mr CHAIR:** What we also heard earlier is—this may or may not be part of it—there are hundreds of people working on LDM, but in the LDM office there is only three people. That is the cross-department agency work that I imagine is difficult. How many staff are directly on LDM in Alice Springs for the 550,000 square kilometres?

**Mr BLANDFORD:** All the staff I have within the Central Australian region have LDM as part of their portfolios.

**Mr YAN:** Exactly. That is what I mean; whilst it is great to have everybody working on LDM, it leads to maybe a lack of consistency and delivery of the message.

**Mr BLANDFORD:** I will come back to that. I have two leads—one for town and one for bush.

**Mr YAN:** I am just throwing this out there, in some respects. Obviously, we have a model that has worked reasonably well with Tangentyere—which you have spoken about—having regular meetings with certain stakeholders.

We have heard now from the MacDonnell Regional Council and Central Desert Regional Council where the opposite is the case; that they probably are not getting the consultation they should. Would it be worth considering that model that is working with Tangentyere being rolled out for those two regional councils?

**Mr BLANDFORD:** I will unpick that. Tangentyere Council model, in regard to the work they have done with the town camps and surveys they have done ...

**Mr YAN:** More that higher level stuff, where they are meeting regularly with agencies or groups within government. They are obviously already getting that information coming from the ground up through them, but there is then that next tier between the council and government and those government agencies, where Tangentyere already seems to be doing things and it seems to be working.

**Mr BLANDFORD:** Yes. The short answer would be that if we engage with an LDM, whether it be with a particular community or with a council is that there would be some key governance structures that would need to be part of that LDM process.

**Mr MONAGHAN:** If you could clarify for my mind about Central Australia. Say, for instance, Areyonga wanted to do an LDM, would it be through the senior elders in the community coming—how does that happen?

**Mr BLANDFORD:** We have recently gone to an LA meeting at Areyonga and done an LDM presentation to the community. They spoke about community aspirations. One of the things they identified was in relation to health. That was as a broad concept.

From an LDM perspective, we will go back to that community—I do not have the detail of exactly when—and work with that community to flesh that out a little more for what that will look like, and move on from there.

**Mr MONAGHAN:** How does that then involve the other stakeholders who are involved in that community who would have some leadership in that area?

**Mr BLANDFORD:** At LA meetings, they have identified some community priorities. Once they have fleshed out the community priorities it goes through a broader community meeting to ensure we have it all. All the key stakeholders are involved.

As you would be aware, within communities this is a range of different stakeholders, including traditional owner and family groups. It is quite complex to pick through that. It is not based on each individual community. We are talking about the LA authority where it is appropriate, or if we are dealing directly with a specific organisation, then the broader consultation that goes on post that.

**Mr MONAGHAN:** Would there be certain pillars needed in place first to get you to a baseline of being able to—things like governance structures for instance?

**Mr BLANDFORD:** Yes, government structures, building capacity, building capability.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** My question is about capacity. Bridgette Bellenger from the department of Chief Minister told us a few weeks ago when we had the hearing with her that there were two dedicated positions to local decision making in the Northern Territory. She was not able to tell us what the budget was. She referred us to the annual report which only made it even more confusing because it is not clear what budget is. I am still unclear as to what her capacity is in the Top End. I know that she covers the whole of the Territory but, from what we have heard this morning, there is a lack of resources, ability by the Northern Territory Government to service communities to their satisfaction. It is a vast geographical area, as you said. The economies of scale are just not there.

Realistically, how much of your time and the time of your staff is allocated to local decision making? It must be quite a small part of what you do. I imagine your brief is enormous. This is just a small part of the role of your job working for the department of Chief Minister. What is your capacity to work in this area? I know you are a public servant and you have to be very careful of what you say.

**Mr BLANDFORD:** I would not characterise LDM as a small part of the portfolio that I have.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** It is not?

**Mr BLANDFORD:** No.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** You spend a lot of time doing this?

**Mr BLANDFORD:** I spend a significant amount of time with LDM. We spoke about the situation with Tangentyere this morning and the range of things that sit within that, as well. There would not be a single day where there is not a discussion in regard to LDM. The results more broadly across Central Australia, outside of Alice Springs Town Council, probably are not reflective of that at this particular point in time. There are a range of reasons and issues sitting behind that which we are working through at this point in time.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** Do you think you have enough time and resources to do the work that is being demanded of you? Doing this inquiry has probably opened a whole can of worms. It has put this piece of work in the spotlight and I have no doubt that the demands on your time since we started this inquiry has probably increased. In fact, I know that it has increased. I have heard this anecdotally. Ideally, how much more resources do you need to tackle this? You have a massive region and it has only just begun, has it not?

**Mr BLANDFORD:** Yes. I will go back to some of the earlier discussion in regard to more broadly across the Northern Territory Government and using regional co-ord as a vehicle for that, as well. It is not just solely a CMC framework or policy; it is across the Northern Territory Government. Utilising resources that are not just related to my office, but more broadly, allows for potentially greater engagement.

Recently, we had an engagement and we brought Health along with us because that was what was identified. This is an example of engaging the different Northern Territory Government agencies and working with them. Then they go off and do what they do. Another good example was given by Tangentyere this morning in regard to the Department of Education through one of the implementation working groups and where that has led to in regard to learning centres as part of the community knowledge wellness domain.

**Mr GUYULA:** How was LDM created or worked on? Was it brought out into the communities across the Territory and discussed with senior elders and people on Country before it could be created and worked on? Because it would fit the communities in different areas. Around Central here, up in the western Top End and across the Arnhem Land areas, how was LDM created?

**Mr BLANDFORD:** Are you talking specifically about the framework?

**Mr GUYULA:** The framework, yes. Where was the LDM created?

**Mr BLANDFORD:** I would need to take that on notice. That certainly pre-dates my time in the Northern Territory Government. I am happy to take that question on notice.

**Mr GUYULA:** What I know or understand is that local decision making is on country. It is community leaders on country and clan groups who are the people who give authority or any decision making. I am just a local member. I might be a leader out there on community, but here I am a local member, so I will not make the decision for the people out there. I will take this project of LDM and let the people have a good look at it, and whether they decide this is how it works for them in this area, and this is how it works over there. I get all input coming from the senior elders. Local decision making comes from the land and the people on the ground there.

**Mr BLANDFORD:** Absolutely, the principles of local decision making are about community control, self-determination and place-based solutions ...

**Mr GUYULA:** All that, yes.

**Mr BLANDFORD:** That is the fundamental principles that sit within the local decision making framework, as you have just described there.

**Mr GUYULA:** That is all.

**Mr CHAIR:** That is all we have for you, Mr Blandford. Thank you for your attendance and time today. We have a couple of questions on notice there that we will follow you up on.

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The committee suspended.

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### CENTRAL AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL CONGRESS

**Mr CHAIR:** We will move on to Congress. Sorry we are running late, Donna and Dr Boffa. We have a commitment at 2 pm at Tangentyere, so we might pull up stumps at 1.30 pm or a bit after, to get down there and move on.

We shall continue with the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress. Welcome to the committee hearing today. This is a formal proceeding of the committee and the protection of parliamentary privilege and the obligation not to mislead the committee applies. A transcript will be made for the use of the committee and may be put on the committee's website.

If, at any time during the hearing, you are concerned that what you will say should not be made public, you may ask the committee to go into a closed session and we will take your evidence in private.

Thank you again for attending. Please state your name and the capacity in which you are appearing today. Then I will invite you to make an opening statement.

**Ms AH CHEE:** Donna Ah Chee, Chief Executive Officer, Central Australian Aboriginal Congress.

**Dr BOFFA:** John Boffa, Chief Medical Officer, Public Health, Congress.

**Mr CHAIR:** Welcome, you have the floor.

**Ms AH CHEE:** Given the time constraints, in our opening statement, Congress has extensive experience in transitioning government services to Aboriginal community control, not only in our local experience, but being part of the Aboriginal Medical Service Alliance of the Northern Territory, which is a partner in the NT Aboriginal Health Forum that has a policy on pathways to community control of government clinics.

We obviously support any genuine process that will transition government services to Aboriginal community control. While we commend the Northern Territory Government for establishing the local decision making framework, there are a number of reforms that we have put forward in our submission. We are happy to talk to those today.

**Mr CHAIR:** Thank you. Everyone has the submission with them today. Are there any questions?

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** It seems like the LDM is connected to peak bodies, as you recommend. It seems to be a little more successful at this stage than others. Can you talk about that?

**Ms AH CHEE:** It is a combination of communities and community-controlled organisations in the health sector. I can only comment on this because of our own experience, as I said, in the transition to community control of NT Government clinics. That feeds through our community-controlled health services with Aboriginal community-elected boards to what is our peak body, the Aboriginal Medical Service Alliance of the NT, which sits at the table at the Northern Territory Aboriginal Health Forum with the Northern Territory Government and the Commonwealth. In the Commonwealth, there is Health and NIAA, the National Indigenous Australian Agency. We also have the NTPHN, a national federal program, which has a lot of resources going through it as a national framework for primary care.

This process has been developing over a number of years into a very robust process, in that we have a framework for pathways to community control. We did a number of planning studies a few years ago that looked at the current investment into primary healthcare across the Northern Territory, from the Commonwealth and Northern Territory Governments, including the current infrastructure in health clinics, the capacity to benefit, if money was to be invested or additional money paid we had to make sure there was the ability for the community to spend that money, and the current services and programs in the core services framework in primary healthcare that we also developed as part of this process. That culminated in what we called the NT key performance indicators, which informed the national key performance indicators for all Aboriginal community-controlled health services across the country.

After hearing what has been said this morning, one of the comments we made in our submission is that it may work better if you are identifying a couple of key strategic sites—in partnership with communities on the ground and any of their representative community-controlled organisations, and where a peak body exists—so they are included as part of that process for having a strategic partnership at an NT-wide level that is overseeing this important policy framework for the Northern Territory by the Northern Territory Government.

**Mr MONAGHAN:** Is that where you would see the LDM fitting within what you have just outlined as a fairly well-developed group of tiers through to indications where they were closing gaps and things like that.

**Ms AH CHEE:** Absolutely. Since this framework came into place, we have always advocated that it should not undermine those processes that have been developed over many years in Aboriginal health and the transition of NT Government clinics to community control.

What could be learned is what we have done in Aboriginal health could be applied more generally in other sectors and area; for example, housing.

**Mr YAN:** That was one of my questions for you, Donna. I know Congress has been leader in developing some of those partnerships in communities, particularly in our region. What are your learnings of local decision making? What would be the pitfalls and what are the positives?

**Ms AH CHEE:** If you look at the example that we are in as we speak, we have been about 18 months in the making of looking at transitioning Imanpa, Docker River and Yulara clinics to Aboriginal

community control through Congress. The initial process was to talk to relevant delegates and we liaised with the Regional Council about setting up that initial conversation. We also make the point in our submission that we do not think that it is appropriate to talk to communities and raise communities' expectations if there is not a genuine commitment of resourcing on the table. It is no good talking to people and then there is this whole lot of discussion that needs to occur about what will transition and how much money and resources is on the table. That should be sorted before you have these fairly genuine conversations with people in the community.

Those initial discussions that, thankfully, facilitated through the Regional Council indicated, yes, that there is preliminary support. On the basis of that advice, we also had support of the Mutitjulu Health board and talked to them about what they thought about this. They said, 'Yes. It is something that we should progress and pursue'. We then went through a process of going through the different steps within the Northern Territory

Aboriginal Health Forum. We have been successful in gaining federal transition funding for this transition to occur. At the moment, we are negotiating a contract for that. That is when we will have a detailed round of consultations with affected communities to now say, 'Look. This is for real. There is a genuine commitment to this. Do you still support it?' and have much broader consultations. We are really looking forward to that.

**Mr MONAGHAN:** What would be the grounds of the NT Aboriginal Health Forum rejecting what is coming from community? That is, like Mutitjulu, if they wanted to take ownership of health, what would the grounds or the criteria that would have to be ticked off by the Aboriginal Health Forum to enable that power?

**Ms AH CHEE:** There has to be demonstrated support—that is number one—by the local communities, that this is what they want, that there is good governance and if there needs to be support for improving that governance. There is a number of other criteria by which it is being supported by the forum.

**Dr BOFFA:** There has to be enough money in the system because, right now, the Commonwealth would not entertain funding a transition case unless there is enough money in the system to effectively fund primary health care services. You have to know what the funds pool is and that it is viable because you cannot start talking about transferring community control if there are no adequate resources.

In that area, there is about \$4,500 per person currently being spent by the NT Government. That is enough; that is plenty to do the job well. They might reject it on the basis that there is inadequate funding on the table and, right now, the Commonwealth's appetite for having to pick up under-funded services is limited. It was not historically. There was new Commonwealth money but there is no money now. The funding is a big issue. It is between both governments.

**Mr MONAGHAN:** I would assume that is not ongoing in regard to funding. What might be available today needs to be available in five or ten years for that growing capacity. You do not want to be devolving a health service and then taking it back in a few years' time because the criteria or the capability no longer exists or whatever.

How long would that process take, say, with local decision making, if the community wanted to take on their health service, has limited governance ability to the point of handover? Can you give examples of where it has happened?

**Ms AH CHEE:** We have extensive governance experience, and we cover a very large geographic boundary in Central Australia in Congress' services. It has been about 18 months to two years in negotiating with the Northern Territory Health Department about what was on the table in recurrent funding and what the current investment was in those three clinics.

There is a bit or argy-bargy that goes on in that respect, looking at staff accommodation and the status of the clinic buildings. One of the things we do not want is defined as transitioning busted-arse clinics. That means you are taking on responsibility of something that is just not up to standard. That is something we looked into very carefully. It is about 18 months of negotiation to be really clear about what resources are on the table. Then, to transfer three clinics, it will take two years. That transition happening from the time of the thought to the actual transition of three clinics would be four years.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** I read your submission. You are really proposing a framework for the government, in some ways, of what you think they should be approaching local decision making. This inquiry is about

trying to improve the government system, so your advice is really helpful, I think. What do you think of the current framework the government is using?

You have not been overly critical, have you? You have just stepped around it.

**Ms AH CHEE:** No, no, that is because we think if we suggest they make a couple of reforms, it definitely has considerable merit. We have always been an advocate for Aboriginal community control. Congress will support any framework or government policy that is genuinely about that.

The only other point is how we make sure that these policy frameworks feed into the national agenda on Closing the Gap. We are all part of this. If we can have it so there are these cascading relationships with what is happening at a federal level, an NT level and on the ground, then I am sure we will definitely make some inroads into closing those important targets or indicators that have now been negotiated at the national level.

**Mr CHAIR:** Talking about Closing the Gap, do you have specific data about Central Australia on Closing the Gap figures? They have been reported as seven out of 10 on track—I could be completely wrong on that.

**Ms AH CHEE:** I do not have them for Central Australia, it is for the NT as a whole.

**Mr CHAIR:** NT as a whole—is it not broken down on region?

**Dr BOFFA:** No, nowhere in the country. It is a big issue because the gap ...

**Mr CHAIR:** Answers my question.

**Dr BOFFA:** The gap in New South Wales is now under eight years, but that would not tell you what the gap is in western New South Wales compared to Sydney. Three-quarters of Aboriginal people live in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane out of the 750,000, so you do not get any sense of the differential rates of illness between different parts of the country and the way it is done. That has always been a big issue. It is the NT data. Some datasets could easily be broken down, like the AEDC scores. It would be very easy to break that down but even that is not readily available now at a community level or even a regional level. That is early childhood development scores which are really key. If you close the gap at age five, there will not be a gap at age 70. Regional data is a big issue.

**Mr CHAIR:** If we do not have the data, how do we go about getting it? Because the decisions we make at an LDM level need to feed into something that we can monitor.

**Ms AH CHEE:** I think the data is there. It is just about how it is broken down and analysed.

**Dr BOFFA:** And the commitment to it. No-one wants community-level data because it is inappropriate to make that public but regional data should be available. You can assess improvements at a service level. For instance, we argue that when you transfer a government clinic to community control, there are five immediate benefits: more episodes of care per dollar spent; greater health gain per dollar spent; greater workforce, better recruitment and retention of the workforce; more social and preventative programs, so you do not just get sick care; you get other programs (inaudible); and a much greater capacity to generate Medicare income. They are all easily measured and you can measure if you start with baseline.

We have baseline now with Docker River and Imanpa. It will be very easy to show whether there were more people seen, more Medicare and if there were more staff employed or less unfilled positions, and less turnover. They are all important measures. It depends which sector. You need to think about what sector you are working in. We have a strong evidence base that community control will give better outcomes along the lines of what I just rattled off.

With any other sectors, that might not be so strong. You need to build it and show that you are getting—you can do it at a service level. You can do it for Housing Association and see what the benefits are of moving from government housing provision to a community housing provider. You could have ways of measuring that. That is doable. The issue of regional data from the national KPIs has been something that has not been cracked for a long time. It is an important issue. Even in Western

Australia, the gaps in the health status in the Kimberley and the Pilbara compared to south Western Australia will be much worse.

**Mr CHAIR:** Is there an efficient data-sharing mechanism across agencies, such as health, education, or housing that you are aware of?

**Ms AH CHEE:** They have just introduced legislation for data-sharing amongst departments.

**Mr CHAIR:** Is it available to you and in an efficient manner?

**Ms AH CHEE:** Not apart from mandatory reporting, but it is not back to us if we wanted to have information that we should know about after we have reported, for example, a child protection matter. But that is a different issue.

**Dr BOFFA:** It is one of the benefits of the framework agreement in Health is that the forum does share data. The KPIs for all of the clinics—there are 84 or 87 of them—are shared through a quality improvement committee under the forum. They see everyone's data. Without that framework agreement that would not be happening. There is that level of sharing. We have a shared electronic record which has made a big difference in Health. Population-level data is shared through the forum in Health. If you look at other sectors, we are doing a review in Education at the moment. What data is there? There is a lack of data, let alone sharing of data. If you want to ask questions like 'What is the average length of stay for a teacher in a remote school? What is the turnover of teachers in a remote school? What is the per capita funding for schools?', it is not there, let alone sharing it.

There has been a lot of work done on building data and KPI—KPI started 20 years ago? A long time ago—and then you can share it. You have to have data in the first place though to share it.

**Ms AH CHEE:** We get regular reports at the Aboriginal Health Forum. As Boff said, there is a group that sits under the forum and can see identified data from individual clinics. But when it comes to the forum it is not identified. That is important because it is not about where, who or what, we just want to see the trends and where there are areas for improvement.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** I have a practical question I have been wanting to ask someone for a long time. Some clinics will function better than others and there will be problems in some clinics, no matter how good you manage them.

With clinics that are handed over from the Northern Territory Government to community control, does the Northern Territory Government continue to have any sort of monitoring role? If the community control of the clinic is not going well, what happens?

**Ms AH CHEE:** Once it is moved to community control, it is then the legislative framework that kicks in. If the governance is under ORIC, then it is their responsibility to monitor good governance practices. If it is with the other mob—who is the mainstream mob?

**Dr BOFFA:** ASIC.

**Ms AH CHEE:** ASIC. It is ASIC's legislative ...

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** The relationship between NTG and the transitioned clinic is forever severed?

**Ms AH CHEE:** Yes. Whether Aboriginal community-controlled organisations or even major corporations ...

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** Absolutely. I was wondering what happens because we are talking about the subject.

**Ms AH CHEE:** It is then with the regulatory body. Having said that, I do not think, for example AMSANT, would let a newly-transitioned clinic to community control not be in their radar, keeping an eye on it.

Various reporting would be provided to the Aboriginal Health Forum. But it is a good question.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** I was always curious.

**Dr BOFFA:** Ultimately, we have the concept built in of default providers. The Territory Government is still the default provider if the clinic was to—it has a responsibility to all citizens to make sure they have healthcare. It can exercise that responsibility by monitoring, which it does through the forum. It keeps an eye, in partnership with AMSANT, on what is happening all over the place.

If the clinic was to fall over and not have health staff, then ultimately the Territory Government cannot just say, 'Too bad, that is a Commonwealth responsibility.' There is that element in which there is maintenance of a responsibility in the background for the whole system, which has very rarely been used, which is a good thing. But it still is there. Ultimately, in this case, the Territory has the responsibility to make sure all citizens have access to healthcare.

There are ways in which that is exercised, even when community-controlled health services are there.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** Do you think we will ever get to a stage where the Northern Territory Government does not have responsibility for any remote communities in the Northern Territory? Do you think that ...

**Ms AH CHEE:** In primary healthcare?

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** Yes.

**Ms AH CHEE:** If you look at Central Australia, Congress is providing primary healthcare to 17,000 or 18,000 ...

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** It is possible?

**Ms AH CHEE:** It is possible, as long as you have those really good governance and backing support systems. You will have economies of scale, expecting smaller services or organisations to be able to be viable. Our experience over time has been that there has to be economies of scale. Our policy is that it is a minimum population of 2,500 in order to make a service viable.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** It was interesting that the Deputy Treaty Commissioner pretty much told us that in years to come treaties will cover and govern the whole of the Northern Territory, including all government services.

That is pretty much what I heard her say. This is where we are heading, is it not? But we have a lot of work to do in between now and then.

**Mr CHAIR:** LDM is a precursor to treaty, in that sense.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** Yes, as a part of that.

**Ms AH CHEE:** It is a pretty complex area.

**Dr BOFFA:** There is a difference between self-government and community control. You can argue there will be a need for a community-controlled primary healthcare service even if we have Aboriginal self-government. They are two different things.

There will be a need for framework agreements, I would have thought, even in a context of self-government, if the Commonwealth was to—in the Territory every time we talk about transferring services, you have to have the Commonwealth at the table because they are a major funder. Without them—you raised the question about funding before. One thing that is important is there are two issues to funding. There is the recurrent funding for ongoing service delivery and then there is the need for one-off investment for the transition.

In the health sector we are lucky because the Commonwealth is funding the one-off transition, but if the Territory Government was to fund the development of community control itself, it has to have enough resources to fund the transition, not just the recurrent service delivery. Without that, it will not happen properly.

The transition is not cheap. You have to do a lot of work to transit services properly and well, with the right systems in place. You have to be able to fund the transition, not just have money that you will hand over for the ongoing funding of the services.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** And the government has to want to relinquish that control, which is what she highlighted. That is an important component of all this.

**Mr CHAIR:** I have my favourite question. I reserve it. I have only used it once so far and it is my favourite question.

I have to write a report. We then compile a report and there are five recommendations. Congress gets to write one—putting you on the spot. I think you had four reforms. If you have one recommendation you are able to write and put into the report ...

**Ms AH CHEE:** Implement all four reforms.

**Mr CHAIR:** Implement the Congress report!

**Ms AH CHEE:** Yes, you have to have the emphasis on the structure and the way in which business gets done. That is a lesson we have learned in the negotiations that happened at the national level with Pat Turner. Forget the indicators and all of that at the moment, let us get how we work together right and what structures we need to put in place to make it work.

That is where we are coming from with our proposals is get the structure right. There needs to be an overarching strategic partnership to see the implementation of this policy. Dr Boffa.

**Dr BOFFA:** As well as that planning structure—collaborative planning that has to include the Commonwealth. The question then is should it be sector specific? Is a generic concept to developing community control just too difficult? Do you have to pick a sector that you will work on together to start with?

How it is done is just one sector. That is complicated enough, but if you are sitting down to plan transition to community control, whether it is an open book as to which sector you are working in might be to do with it too.

It is the planning structure and then deciding what the focus is. It might be the same focus for a period of a few years across the Territory in one sector, and then move to something else, rather than a little here and a little there. It takes a lot of planning and a lot of system development.

I agree that it is big. It will not happen without an appropriate structure and planning capacity and the system supports, then deciding in which sector. I do not know how that decision is made. People have tended to put up their hands and say, 'This is what we are interested in.' The complexity of that is there will be different work that has to be done at a system level depending on the sector you are trying to transition. Otherwise, you are setting people up to fail. They will take something over and it has not been well considered. I agree that the planning structure is the key.

**Mr CHAIR:** Thank you very much for joining us today and for your submission and contribution.

That concludes the Public Accounts Committee hearing today, 4 October. Thank you to all of the different groups, organisations and individuals who have presented today and to the many who attended which is great. We are very popular. We will adjourn.

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The committee concluded.

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