



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

14th Assembly

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE

Public Hearing Transcript

9:00 am, Friday 27 February 2023

Litchfield Room, Parliament House, Darwin

Members:

Mr Joel Bowden MLA, Chair, Member for Johnston
Mr Brent Potter MLA, Deputy Chair, Member for Fannie Bay
Mr Steve Edgington MLA, Member for Barky
Mr Yingiya (Mark) Guyula MLA, Member for Mulka
Mrs Robyn Lambley MLA, Member for Araluen
Mr Bill Yan MLA, Member for Namatjira
Mr Dheran Young MLA, Member for Daly

Witnesses:

Local Government Association of the Northern Territory

Sean Holden: Chief Executive Officer

Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory

Dr John Paterson: Acting Chief Executive Officer, North Australian
Aboriginal Justice Agency

David Cooper: Manager Research Advocacy Policy, Aboriginal Medical
Services Alliance Northern Territory

Seranie Gamble: Manager, Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern
Territory

Djalkiripuyngu Aboriginal Corporation

Waka Mununggurr: Chairperson

Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet

Bridgette Bellenger: General Manager, Territory Regional Growth

Mischa Cartwright: Executive Director, Office of Aboriginal Affairs
Strategic Partnerships

The committee convened at 9 am.

LOCAL DECISION MAKING
Local Government Association of the Northern Territory

Mr CHAIR: Welcome, everyone. We'll open up this Public Accounts Committee hearing this morning, being Friday 17 February. On behalf of the committee I welcome to the public hearing into Local Decision Making, LGANT, or the Local Government Association of the Northern Territory. Thank you for coming, Mr Sean Holden.

This hearing will be webcast through the Assembly's website. A transcript will be made for use of the committee and may be put on the committee's website. It is a formal proceeding, and parliamentary privilege exists—so that means go for it, but don't get in trouble.

Mr HOLDEN: First time in my life.

Mr CHAIR: Well you don't get in trouble from us. You might get in trouble from some other people.

There is an obligation not to mislead the committee. If at any time you think something you are going to say might be commercial we can go *in camera*, or we can ask anyone who is here to leave and shut the doors. Sorry if that happens.

Sean, can you state your name and position? And you have something prepared?

Mr HOLDEN: I do. My name is Sean Holden, and I am the Chief Executive Officer of the Local Government Association of the Northern Territory. On behalf of the Local Government Association of the Northern Territory I welcome the opportunity to appear before the public hearings on local decision-making—LDM. I acknowledge the Larrakia people as the traditional owners of the Darwin region and pay my respects to Larrakia elders, past, present and emerging. We are committed to working together with Larrakia, and all other Aboriginal people, to care for this land and seas for a shared future across the NT.

I hope that members of the Public Accounts Committee will pick up on seven takeaway messages from my participation on behalf of LGANT:

1. that LDM does not, and cannot, exist in isolation. Its very existence asks more questions than it perhaps answers.
2. that local government in Northern Territory enjoys a very good relationship with the Northern Territory Government.
3. that LGANT and the local government sector supports the key principles on which LDM is based, including empowering Aboriginal people in decision-making that impacts them, supporting decision-making by Aboriginal communities to have greater say in how government services are delivered and applying service-delivery models that work best for their community and region
4. that LGANT and the local government sector, as a legislative third sphere of government, largely Aboriginal-controlled in regional and remote areas, wants to continue to be part of the answer and not sidelined or gone around
5. that LGANT will work with all players to ensure that all Territorians have a better ability to be heard, particularly in regional and remote communities
6. that local decision-making is better resourced—if it is to continue—better managed and deliver better outcomes for Aboriginal people with local government
7. that LGANT will do a better job of telling the local government and local authority story.

Local government councils and, by extension, local authorities exist for two key reasons. One is that it is a vehicle for local people to make local decisions across all policy areas and to provide services at a local level. It is also to address the terms of reference into the implementation of the future of LDM framework I submit.

The progress achievements, challenges and future potential LDM implementation across the Northern Territory very much depends upon to whom you speak, when, where and why. LDMs progress and achievements are difficult to assess as consistent benchmark and program management control and evaluation mechanisms appear not to be a strong point. I would argue against that, even if the appropriate level of rigor had been applied, it is too early in its lifecycle to properly assess. Its challenges lie in its apparent under resourcing and a rapidly changing national narrative on how Aboriginal people can be heard and that influence on the modes of service delivery yet to be communicated.

It is clear from reading the various submissions to this inquiry that there is a belief by most that LDMs are a pathway to full self-determination. It is our belief this could invariably lead back to community councils pre-2008. If this is the aim of LDM and the NT Government then it should say so. It is clear from reading the submissions that local government and local authorities are not seen as part of the answer moving forward. In fact, local government councils are rarely

mentioned, except by local government councils and some local authorities. Its real strength lies with the empowerment and capacity-building of homelands and town camps and in other areas perhaps most remote from more formal representation and service delivery. But there must be a real connection back to local government council and local authorities.

To foster community and leadership interest in and commitment to new LDM agreements, local government councils and local authorities need to be a major part of the answer. This needs to include clear recognition that local authorities have a legislative role and responsibility in local decision-making. A fresh look at LDM, if it is to survive and thrive, needs not to be a way around local government councils and local authorities, rather true partnerships with the third sphere of government will give LDMs the gravitas and resourcing it needs.

The impact of technology treaty, truth-telling and Voice on LDM development—technology will assist in information flow in real time but it depends on who or what is supplying the information and why. The Aboriginal advancement policy space is crowded with everyone trying to do the right thing but more often than not tripping over each other and positive outcomes not being realised. This leads to mistrust, despair and apathy.

It is my observation there exists a degree of confusion in the public service delivery sector in our communities over the role of local government; its structure and its role in providing a pathway for local voices to be heard. Whilst this is not peculiar to the NT, it remains that this is causing duplication of the effort of scarce resources, pain points, competition for power and division where there ought not to be.

Indeed, there is great confusion in anyone clearly understanding how Closing the Gap, local decision-making, Treaty and the Voice to Parliament work together. Further, where does the NT Government, local government and even at times land councils start and stop in policy making and service delivery. For example, there has been a myth circulated for many years that local government amalgamations in 2008 were a product of the intervention. This is not true. The amalgamations were not part of the intervention.

There were many reasons for the local government amalgamations in 2008 and the main being governance and accountability. We will not go into that today, but suffice to say that myth provides an avenue for LDM. Unfortunately, the rhetoric about the amalgamations have never appeared to be corrected as has perpetuated over time to a point where the local government sector feels under threat. With the myth comes a perpetuation that people, particularly Aboriginal people in remote communities, have lost their voice or the ability to make local decisions. In response to these concerns, local authorities were established in 2014 under section 53B of the then *Local Government Act* and they have been an effective mechanism since—more on that later.

It appears though that there are still some angst about the transition, particularly in the regions, which has been further perpetuated and unchallenged largely by the NT Government. Examples can be found in a number of reports and strategies, including the NT Aboriginal Justice Agreement Implementation Plan, released last year; the NT Government Local Decision Making Strategy Ground Up Monitoring and Evaluation report draft circulated in September last year and the NT Treaty Commissioner final report released in June 2022.

The NT Aboriginal Justice Agreement Implementation Plan states that many past policies and practices have actively undermined Aboriginal Territorians' capacity to lead and make decisions, including replacing of community councils with shires. LDM is referenced in the agreement in the context of place-based engagement with Aboriginal Territorians in decision-making. The agreement does not reference local authorities.

The NT Government's Local Decision Making policy is another example. LGANT reads the policy as disregarding and even conflicting with the legislative role and function of local government. There is a line in the LDM policy that reads:

Instead of government telling communities how it will be, communities will tell government.

Chapter 5 of the NT *Local Government Act 2019* is dedicated to local decision-making, with the object being to achieve effective integration and involvement of local communities in the system of local government as it relates to regions.

The NT Government Local Decision Making Policy also states:

We will partner with Aboriginal communities and organisations to determine and shape control of local healthcare, schools, justice systems, local governments, housing and how to grow happy and healthy kids.

LGANT interprets the line as the NT Government ignoring the existing structures such as elected members and local authorities and functions of local government and using Local Decision Making policy to take on the role of local government.

Local government is barely mentioned in the Local Decision Making policy, and the Northern Territory Government's seeming disregard for the sector is further highlighted when it is not mentioned as a key partner in the stakeholders and partnership section on page 25, whereas APO NT and the Commonwealth Government are.

LGANT acknowledges that local authorities differ from council to council and there is room for improvement, hence we have been working strongly with Chief Minister and the Local Government unit on a review of local authorities.

During my tenure as CEO, it has come to my attention that the local government sector probably does not tell the story of local authorities and their important role in communities as well as we could. This is a key plank of the review project and our communications strategy into the future.

The NT Treaty Commission report calls for municipal councils to remain under the *Local Government Act 2019*, and as new representative arrangement be decided by communities under a new First Nations local government act—presumably, at the devolvement of the current structure of region and local government councils or shires. This would create yet another layer of government and further confuse an already confused space.

The LDM principles are consistent with the objectives set forth in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. The local government sector, including LGANT, is a signatory to the agreement through its national peak body, the Australian Local Government Association.

What is inconsistent is the NT Government's definition of an Aboriginal community-controlled organisation or ACCO, which differs from the definition in the national agreement and precludes local government councils, and by extension local authorities, from participating in the Aboriginal and economic participation framework and the proposed Aboriginal grants policies. These policy positions, though well-meaning, are a further threat to local government sustainability, relevancy and role as a democratically elected third sphere of government.

This is odd, as we are 3,000 employees strong, the largest employer of regional people in most areas, and the biggest spenders in local economies—in fact, over \$505m a year. LGANT collaborates with the NT Government and APO NT in the preparation of the first and second NT Closing the Gap implementation plans. LGANT's commitment to the objectives of Closing the Gap is reflected in our strategic priorities.

Assisting Aboriginal people to have greater voice to achieve better social, cultural and economic outcomes is priority number one of our seven priorities.

Local government is the sphere of government closest to the community. Local government councils look after matters close to our homes including local roads; parks and playgrounds; sporting fields and swimming pools; pet control; land and coast care programs; libraries; waste management; community programs, such as child and aged care; and at some places, act as Centrelink and Australia Post—way more than roads, rates and rubbish.

LGANT is the voice of local government in the Territory, representing 16 municipal shire and regional councils and 67 local authorities. Eighty-nine percent of regional, local government elected members in the NT are Aboriginal. This represents Aboriginal self-determination and decision-making, in our view. LGANT provides leadership support and representation advocacy on behalf of our member councils for the benefit of their communities.

In closing, LGANT feels that local government councils are the epitome of local decision-making by their very existence, but they are being side-stepped by the NT Government's Local Decision Making policy when it need not. The answer is clearer delineation and communication of who does what, when, how and why.

LGANT will play its role in better telling the local government and local authority story, but communication is a two-way thing and we need to be listened to. Listening will result in better representation, service provision and local decision-making.

Mr CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Holden. The way we have done it in the past is to open it up to the floor and call for any questions or conversation. Is everyone comfortable with that? Thank you; that was quite extensive. I appreciate the effort that, clearly, has gone into preparing for this public hearing. Are there any questions?

Mr POTTER: Thanks, Sean. There has been a significant amount of time since the original submission. Do you feel anything has changed in that space since then? Obviously you have done your opening statement—is there anything from the submission that has changed that you would like us to be aware of?

Mr HOLDEN: It is a great question. To be fair to the NT Government, who we have a very respectful relationship with, it has been a little staccato and not for their fault. COVID-19 has got in the way and has made this a little bit difficult to assess. I think largely what I have spoken about is probably 12 months old. What I did do though was read all the submissions, which are already online, last night to get a better feel and hopefully a more current feel.

I think what I said there still holds. I will reiterate that we actually believe in local decision-making, we just want to be better involved in it. We think if you involve a structure that already has 3,000 employees, 159 elected members and pumps \$505m into the local economy that we should be partnering with LDM. That is not the feeling of our members.

Mr CHAIR: I'm sure there are lots of people logging in to watch this today. Just to clarify, we started this a long time ago, the LDM inquiry, so there has been a long period of time between; I think it was September 2021 when we had our first public hearings and here we are back in 2023, which will probably be the last time we meet as a Public Accounts

Committee. We are sort of trying to bookend it a bit, so it is a good question and appreciate there has been a long time between when we have started this and we are going to finish courtesy of a pandemic and other factors.

Further questions?

Mr POTTER: What part does LGANT play in LDM agreement negotiations? I would like to understand that.

Mr HOLDEN: LGANT itself plays no part.

Mr POTTER: Okay. Then, from the local council point of view, do they come to you guys for advice and how to navigate that. Obviously you are not at the table, but obviously they are involved in some areas and some they are not. How do you guide your members through that?

Mr HOLDEN: I will start by saying for me to sit here and purport to represent every view of the 17 councils and 16 member councils would be churlish. I don't. In many cases it's a line of best fit, but also I would say that LDM depends on, as I said in my opening remarks, who you talk to.

For some of our councils, it is a good experience; for some others not so much. We all know in the Territory that can depend on personalities and the hats they wear. In the Territory it's a double-edged sword that so many people get involved in local politics. I don't mean Liberal or Labor, I mean local politics in many shapes and forms and you are wearing many caps at once. It does make it difficult at times. I think it's fair to say that our councils, I think three of our councils at least have put in submissions, and they vary in their experience.

Mr EDGINGTON: Sean, thanks for coming in this morning. I have a little bit of experience in local government. I was interested to hear some of the things you said; you used some words like sidelined and sidestepped. Have you raised these issues directly with the government, and if so what has been their response to that?

Mr HOLDEN: Yeah, good question, and you picked up on it. All that I have said is not new to the NT Government, whether it be the public service or the Local Government minister. I made sure of that; this is nothing new. The words I have used could be possibly a little inflammatory, but I did want them to stick out. Hopefully I gave some examples of what I meant by sidestepping. If you look in the LDM original strategy and plan, local government and local authorities are very rarely mentioned. So you can only draw one conclusion there, that they weren't consulted to the level that we think they should have been, given the place of our local government as a third sphere of government.

We do feel as though we are on the outer looking in, in most cases. We think for the success of LDM we need to have a much closer relationship. Given the resources we have got and the lack of resources the NT has by virtue of its size, it makes sense that we work closer together to achieve the aims of LDM.

Mr EDGINGTON: What has been the government's response to these issues—being sidelined, sidestepped and not included? Local decision-making was highlighted by the government back in 2016. What has been LGANT's role to advocate for inclusion in the Local Decision Making agreements and what has been the government's response to that?

Mr HOLDEN: You probably don't see LGANT much on TV, in the radio or newspaper and that is a deliberate policy. It is for a couple of reasons. We don't need to be militant. We are the third sphere of government and we do things a little differently. We work behind the scenes largely with the public service to avoid things before they occur. We have been very fortunate that we were permitted to be part of public policy making right at the start so that we can influence right at the beginning and not have to advocate so much at the end. You don't see out in the public so much because there is not as much to advocate on, because we are involved in the policy in the first place.

This is one of the ones where we haven't been. We have spoken to the public service about this and raised these issues to be fair to the NT Government. We only amped this up possibly in the last six months. I can say there appears to be so far good will in addressing some of the issues we have here. You could easily level at me why are you bringing it up if it's in-train, because it is in-train. This is really important to our members.

Mr EDGINGTON: Earlier on you also said that LDM needs to be better managed and resourced. What do you mean by that?

Mr HOLDEN: As you can imagine I'm not physically out there and particularly these more remote areas. Again, after reading the submissions and speaking to our councils, it is fair to say—and it might be expectation management—that a lot of areas were expecting more than they are currently getting. Again, that might come back to expectations that might have been unrealistic in the first place. There is certainly a feeling that LDM drifted. As I said before, to be fair there was a pandemic, and it is starting to ramp up a little more. It is difficult to work out whether that was because of expectations not met or it was that the things that were promised weren't delivered to the standard or level they perhaps thought it would be.

Mr EDGINGTON: With local authorities you mentioned they were established back in 2014. What role do you see that local authorities could have in the local decision-making process in communities?

Mr HOLDEN: I have to be careful with the words I use here. I think the common vernacular is we'd like to see local authorities dialled up. At the moment they are considered a sub-committee of local government councils. The very use of the word sub-committee is not appropriate. We need to tell the story of local authorities. Although technically they are a sub-committee they are way more than that. These are in many cases the old community councils by another name. They probably don't feel like that because they don't have the same autonomy, decision-making et cetera they had prior to 2008, but there is a structure in place.

When have spoken to federal ministers about the representation system in the Northern Territory—we think it's actually pretty good, particularly compared to other states in Australia. Could it be better? Absolutely, and we think local authorities need to have a bit more power. I am not quite sure what that looks like and it varies. The experience of local authorities and their effectiveness does vary from place to place. The Northern Territory is awfully large, 17% of Australia is the Northern Territory with only 245,000 people. The experiences do vary widely between councils. Local authorities, particularly with what's occurring with the Voice, may potentially play a massive role—particularly because we will be going through to a referendum.

Mr EDGINGTON: How can they? They are called local authorities but they don't have any authority. What involvement and what can they deliver in a community?

Mr HOLDEN: They are involved in the strategic planning of the council they are with. They have some funds at their discretion to be able to make infrastructure decisions. What I'm hearing from our councils is, for example, that the amount of money that local authorities get discretionary decisions on have kind of exhausted on ideas. There are only so many times you can get shade cloths and paint the town hall.

They are at a point now where they need more money to do meatier projects, if you like. One of the things we have raised with the new federal government is that this whole—hopefully going back to 1% of Commonwealth Government turnover going to local governments at 0.57% at the moment—that 1% untied grants could flow back to councils. That is effectively doubling the amount of money they get through the Financial Assistance Grants.

It is not about the money but it is about the money. If you get on local government councils, particularly in more regional and remote areas where 90% of your budget is already decided because they are tied grants—you get on a representative body you really have 10% of the budget to play with. That is hardly representative. That is hardly making local decisions.

What we all need to do is give them more money to make greater decisions for themselves. They need access to greater funding. If you are our local authority and part of a local government council, you have access to the federal government Financial Assistance Grants. If you are not, you do not. There is a direct correlation between how effective local authorities can be and Financial Assistance Grants.

Mr CHAIR: Mr Holden, could you give us an example—if you have one—of what a budget looks like—a quantum. I take your point—shade cloths and painting the town halls, schools halls—you need a bigger bucket of money to, for instance, let us say build a new amenity at a sporting ground or education. Could you think of an example?

Mr HOLDEN: My understanding—and I will not name them—is that the local authorities have about \$300,000 at their discretion, if you like. That sounds a lot, but not when you look at what needs to be done and the cost of things.

Mr CHAIR: Service delivery or building in remote is much more expensive than local?

Mr HOLDEN: Yes.

Mr EDGINGTON: Mr Holden, can I clarify that local authorities do not actually have any authority? Is it true the funding that is available to local authorities has to be endorsed by the council? The local authority does not have the autonomy to use that money? Is that true?

Mr HOLDEN: The local authorities have somebody on the council as well, so they have a direct conduit into the final decision-making on that. It depends on what you want. We can harp on the authority part of local authority if you like, but the authorities more, in the fact that they represent local communities—that is the authority they carry into there.

The authority to make big decisions on budget spend? No, they do not; they do not have any more than the other representatives on that council.

Mr EDGINGTON: That is right. They make recommendations to council about how that money should be spent. Not every local authority has a councillor representing that particular community. Many local authorities are based in the community without a councillor sitting alongside them at a meeting. The final decision is actually made by the council rather than the local authority? Is that true?

Mr HOLDEN: Yes.

Mr EDGINGTON: Thanks.

Mr POTTER: I will jump on the back of that question. There are probably two. Why do you think LDM arrangements, or the direction LDM is going in some communities, is taking a look at some of the functions of local council? I will jump on the local authority piece. If local authority still needs the approval of local council, is that not the whole intent of LDM in its purest—that they do not then have to necessarily go to the council to get the approval to get what they need done?

Bringing it all back, why do you think LDM arrangements have started to look at local government functions? Do you think that is because of the disconnect, to a degree, between local authority, the local council, or the aldermen or councillors have been elected and they may not represent the people or the local authority appropriately?

Mr HOLDEN: It comes back to the funding for local government. It does not have the funding to do what homelands, town camps and communities expect their local government council to do. It is different for our five municipal councils; they can charge rates, collect fees on things. Our 12 non-municipal or regional and remote and shire communities do not.

At best, in one of our councils 84% of its budget is funds that comes through grants and funding. For the rest, it is just about 90% to 100%. They have no own-source revenue or slush fund to do the—provide the services that they would like to, and yet there's money for local decision-making to do the things that if you gave it to the council they could do. So, you're causing a rift where there doesn't need to be one.

If that funding was with the councils who are the biggest employers in regions, are the biggest spenders have got people working there full time around governance and accounting and those types of things. We think you get a better service delivery.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Has the government given you any instructions or guidance as to how local government is meant to work with local decision-making?

Mr HOLDEN: It's in the act. The new *Local Government Act 2019*—there's a whole section on it.

Mrs LAMBLEY: And what does that mean in practice, like how does that play out?

Mr HOLDEN: Yeah, as I said, it's hard to explain that I think we're feeling as though LDM is—we've just had a review and what's part of the review right now, so it would be interesting to see at the end of this what LDM will look like into the future and that's when I'll better be able to answer that question. At the moment we're feeling as though even though—I must say, that the *Local Government Act 2019* didn't come in 2019 it came in 2021, so we're only in the first year or so of that act to see how that actually works on the ground. I think it's too early for us to answer that question properly.

Mrs LAMBLEY: So, it's quite ambiguous?

Mr HOLDEN: I think it could be—it could say more, I think it could give better direction. I'll go the other way. I think what is the confusion is in whose lane is it anyway? Who's supposed to be doing what? Why, when and how? And I think there is a—as I said before, there's a lot players, key players in the NT looking to do the right thing but in many ways we're tripping over each other, and that also includes the federal government in this.

It is about money but it's not about money, it's really about the co-ordination and the effort. And what we want to see, I think it is fair to say with local decision-making, is a more clear direction. Where is this going? Is this really underpinning what is proposed in the NT Treaty Commissioner's final report that there'll be self-determination in regional areas, and if so that could look like what it looked like prior to 2008, and is that what you want? Because that is potentially what exactly will occur.

Mrs LAMBLEY: My next question was going to be, if you could ask the government a range of questions about LDM and local government, what would that be? What would those questions be?

Mr HOLDEN: I think the first question—certainly a statement would be we want to be part of local decision-making if it is to exist into the future for all the right reasons because what it's purporting to—it's outcomes are aligned with us, it aligns with the Closing the Gap. That funding and that effort put into it, why can't it be through local government and local authorities?

Mr CHAIR: Is that one of the issues with LDM in this, I think you termed it a confused space, it gets cluttered, because we hear about a whole wide range of different initiatives being federal, state, being local. Is there a way to clean up that clutter in your view?

Mr HOLDEN: Yeah, and probably to pick up on Mr Edgington's—not Steve anymore—is perhaps, and look, we haven't run this past my members but I'm trying to answer your question without taking on notice—is that perhaps local decision-making then could be certainly something that local authorities could be greater involved with, and that would

give them a greater sense of having local decision-making, because apart from the obvious, it brings some funds with it as well.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Could they be the same thing?

Mr HOLDEN: Yeah. I think so. And again, that's not the view of sectors; I haven't asked them. But you've asked me, hopefully as an individual, and that's what I would think.

Mr EDGINGTON: I just want to clarify this point. It seems to me from what I'm hearing today, the reason that local government councils have been sidelined or sidestepped from the Local Decision Making framework is because you're not an Aboriginal corporation. Is that true?

Mr HOLDEN: In some areas that is true. I do not want to speak for them, but that would be the view of East Arnhem Regional Council. If you read their submission, which is very good, that is one of the takeaways you could get from that.

To be fair, LDM came in before I started in November 2019, so I have inherited this. The original reason and rationale for LDM has probably been missed by me, even though I have read extensively on it.

Usually, there is a reason. Perhaps the NT Government felt as though there was something that was not working, and so you have local decision-making to do that. Great! Well, let us identify what is not working and let us work together on making that better.

Getting closer to a way forward is: how do we make local decision-making with local authorities, and by extension, local government councils?

Mr CHAIR: Thanks. Further questions?

Mr YOUNG: I have one. In regard to, obviously, Aboriginal community-controlled organisations and the local authority and how the cultural governance works around that. With local authorities they are elected members, I believe, everyone on there. How does that fit in with being a cultural authority group?

You were saying before with the funding for homelands you may necessarily have representatives who are not from that country. How would you see that working in with LDM?

Mr HOLDEN: It is the right question to ask. I am not the right person to answer that. I do not pretend to understand that structure, particularly in all areas, but I get your gist. One of the strengths of LDM is it purports to account for exactly what you were talking about. That is why I think that if LDM was closer aligned with local authorities and local government that could be better addressed.

It is really hard to hear from, properly, all those who need to be heard. That is the crux is this; there is confused public policy marketplace. There is more confusion, perhaps, coming—again, well-meaning.

To pick up on our point, Mr Bowden, we need to explore exactly that. Let us get all of us in a room and ask, 'What is the problem we are trying to solve?' It is addressing Aboriginal disadvantage? Okay, what are the mechanisms to do that?' That is the bit I would love to see. The old saying for anybody who has worked in education, it takes a village to teach the child. Well, it will take the village to solve this issue, but everybody working in isolation.

Mr YOUNG: Yes. Picking up on solving Aboriginal disadvantage. I suppose from your or local government's view, how would you see Closing the Gap, treaty, Indigenous Voice to Parliament and LDM working together to address Aboriginal disadvantage which you spoke of?

Mr HOLDEN: Yes, it is everybody coming in the room and leaving titles and egos at the door and saying, 'Okay, so what are we trying to solve?' It is back to basics with that—consult. That will be confronting for some people, probably including our sector, but we want to be part of that answer. We want to be better armed to work in that area and help to improve Aboriginal disadvantage.

Money is not everything. It is a big part of it, but it is the coordination and effort. Roper Gulf Council has raised this before, as have MacDonnell Regional Council and others. These are very much about the coordination of the effort, particularly in the social place. They are seeing an awful lot of resources put into very similar cohorts by three levels of government at least and NGOs.

They are actually working against each other, because they put on a basketball tournament at the same time as some other consultation is on and wondering why there is no-one there, and then giving them a hard time because they did not turn up. Well, it is because they have not been talking to each other.

I know—again to be fair to the NT Government—they have put in various mechanisms to ensure that all those players are talking with each other, but it still happens.

Mr POTTER: I add to that. That is probably a fair observation from some of the discussions we have had in LDM—that you will have people representing multiple organisations from the community who do have competing priorities. I agree with your statement; there is a place for greater coordination across all tiers of government through the LDM process.

There is one I would go back to. In an ideal world—I am asking you as head of LGANT—from a policy point of view, where would you see that delineation between local councils, local authority and where the point of public policy on the LDM should stop? So where do you think the parameters or the left and right of LDM so that local government and local authority could work in unison? The whole premise of LDM is that everything is on the table, that we can talk through everything that is relevant to that community or that group of people. I think that is why we see Groote ALC getting up in such a successful progression to where they are and some of the others. But in some of the other ones, stalling and not progressing as fast as they would like. A bit of a lighter question but I'd love to hear it.

Mr HOLDEN: I'm not sure I can answer it because it hasn't been to our board. As a CEO, I can only really comment on policy that has been set by our board. As you were talking I'm racking my brain going through the policy statements to see if we have any. We don't have a policy statement on this. I am certainly happy to take it on notice. For example we have our board meeting on Tuesday coming up, then a strategic planning review after that. I'm more than happy to put this up as a discussion point.

Mr POTTER: I understand that it is broad and everyone might differ, but there's got to be at some point some parameters at the very least if where we think local council, local authority really needs to own and that should be excluded, not excluded from LDM but an understanding that when you start to go in that space it makes it difficult to deliver services or continue to operate as the council currently does?

Mr HOLDEN: I would say that in an environment where resources are scarce—for example, money—at every level it has to be about better alignment; it has to be about not competing. It does mean though—because there are different agendas from different organisations that they have to meet. There will be some crossovers, I get that, but I think we can go a long way to doing things better in the NT probably because the very reason we do struggle is because we are so small and we know each other; that is a beautiful thing.

One of the reasons we stay in the Territory and choose to live in the Territory is that we do know each, we trust each other and we can have those real conversations in a safe manner, where you can't necessarily in other places. I think we have got a real opportunity to say, 'Right, what's happened, happened', particularly in terms of lack of coordination or coordination that could be better and sit down and say what are we trying to achieve. Just keeping asking that question until we get something right.

I have already primed our board that it could mean we need to give a bit to get a lot. I'm not sure what giving a bit means but certainly we are primed to be part of the answer. We have already started to think about local government reforms rather than wait for things to happen to us. That could be giving a little to get a lot.

Mr GUYULA: It's kind of a wide comment or question I am going to ask to make clear, going back to that time of before shire stepped into the communities. When I heard the name LGANT—who was looking after the old community councils or the communities before the shire stepped in? We are under the impression, or the people out there are under the impression, that shire is the one that is looking after or in control of local decision-making or have them working together.

The funding and resourcing and stuff where does it come from, or is shire given funding to the local decision-making or rather to the LDM. Does LGANT have any authority or the local authority can look upon or are we talking about local authority where there is now a body working as a council.

That was actually local authority after the shire stepped in and the community council was taken away; those people in the local authority was the control as a community council. It was made up of elders, and now they are in the local authority. They were working directly with LGANT or the local community governments. I get confused with that, and I'm sure my people are confused too. Somehow the local authority feels they don't have as much authority, like when they were communicating and working with LGANT in the first place—like running the community.

Sorry if I might have confused you with the local authority and the local decision-making. Where does that fit in? Where does the local authority become the people who run and look after the LDM like they would if it was back in the time of community council days? My question is about just clearing it up.

Mrs LAMBLEY: It's confusing.

Mr HOLDEN: It is confusing and probably ...

Mr GUYULA: I feel it is confusing to us, the community. Don't worry too much about it but I just wanted to clear it. People always ask who our boss is. Is the local authority in control of the community, and who has control over the LDM or is there another body out there?

Mr HOLDEN: There are at least two things there and one is LGANT is the peak body for local government councils in the Northern Territory but we can't tell them what to do. They are in many ways islands, businesses and a level of local government. In terms of the confusion, yeah, we agree. I have said, and we are more than happy to put our hand up and say, we have not done our job good enough to tell the local government story and certainly the local authority story. That is something we are looking address to hopefully make what happens there more obvious.

My understanding is that underneath local authorities there's an opportunity for what probably used to be community councils to feed into those local authorities, who feed into their local government council. Ultimately, who's the boss? In this situation it is that council, which has representatives from the old from the old community governments, the local authorities and the greater region.

Mr GUYULA: I just thought I would point that out and we can work on it and sort things out.

Mr CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Guyula. We will finish unless there are any pressing matters?

Mr EDGINGTON: I have one quick question. Sean, I'm glad you clarified the amalgamations were not part of the intervention. My final question is, and I'm not sure if you have the information before you, but how many Aboriginal people are employed as part of that? You mentioned there were about 3,000 employees in local government. Do you know what the percentage of Aboriginal employees is in local government at the moment?

Mr HOLDEN: In regional and remote communities, so not the municipals, two years ago it was 63%. I can get updated figures for you because they have just been released as of two months ago. I know it used to be 63%.

Mr EDGINGTON: Thank you.

Mr HOLDEN: That is way, way above the national average.

Mr CHAIR: No further questions?

Thank you Mr Holden for coming today and presenting to us with candour and honesty. That is what we are here for, so hopefully you feel like you have given us something. I certainly think the committee is appreciative of your time this morning.

The committee suspended.

Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory

Mr CHAIR: I welcome Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory, APO NT. On behalf of the committee, I welcome everyone to this hearing—Dr John Paterson, Mr David Cooper and Ms Seranie Gamble. Thank you for coming.

This is a proceeding of the committee and you have the protection of parliamentary privilege. There is also an obligation not to mislead the committee. This is a hearing which is being webcast through the Assembly's website, and a transcript will be made for use of the committee and it may be put on the committee's website.

Correct me if I am wrong—we will send you a copy of the transcript to check it and if there is anything in it that is clearly wrong, let us know. If, at any time during the hearing, you are concerned that what you say should not be made public then we can go into a closed session *in camera* so everyone else has to leave except the committee.

Do you have an opening statement?

Dr PATERSON: Yes.

Mr CHAIR: That will do. Thank you, Dr Paterson.

Dr PATERSON: I am Dr John Paterson, Acting Chief Executive Officer of the North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency.

Ms GAMBLE: I am Seranie Gamble, the Manager of the Aboriginal Peak Organisation of the NT.

Mr COOPER: I am David Cooper, Manager of Research Advocacy Policy with AMSANT, Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance NT.

Mr CHAIR: Welcome.

Dr PATERSON: Mr Chair, before we get started, as per our tradition and custom, I acknowledge traditional owners, the Larrakia people on whose country we are meeting today. I thank elders, past, present and those emerging.

Mr Chair and members of the committee—is it a committee? Is that right?

Mr CHAIR: Yes.

Dr PATERSON: Okay. I keep being confused—federal stuff has different terminologies. If you accept committee, that is fine—parliamentary members of the committee.

APO NT thank you all for the opportunity to discuss the strengths and opportunities for improvement of local decision-making today.

I have introduced myself. I am here today representing the Aboriginal Peak Organisations of the Northern Territory. I am supported by Seranie Gamble on my right, APO NT Manager and Dr David Cooper on my left, Manager Research and Advocacy Policy at the Aboriginal Medical Services

In my opening statement today I'll speak about who APO NT is, for those that may not be aware of our structure; what APO NT stands for; its composition of members; how APO NT has been involved in the local decision-making in the past; the benefits and limitations of local decision-making and our commitment to working with the Northern Territory Government to enable Aboriginal self-determination and meaningful local decision-making.

APO NT has operated as an alliance for over 13 years now, and has a wealth of knowledge and expertise drawn from our member organisations being the Northern Land Council, Central Land Council, NAAJA, Aboriginal Housing Northern Territory, AMSANT—the Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance Northern Territory—and more recently the Northern Territory Indigenous Business Network, Anindilyakwa Land Council and the Tiwi Land Council.

APO NT was created 13 years ago as an act of self-determination and to provide a co-ordinated and effective voice on key issues of joint interest and concern affecting Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory, including providing practical policy solutions and advice to governments.

In 2013 APO NT initiated the Aboriginal Governance & Management Program—AGMP—to build strength and effectiveness of Northern Territory Aboriginal organisations in remote communities. The AGMP aims to strengthen governance and management in the Northern Territory Aboriginal organisations so they can operate effectively to deliver positive, social and economic outcomes for their respective communities. Strong governance of Aboriginal organisations is crucial to their success of local decision-making in the Territory, because it provides us for inclusive and participatory in realisation of Aboriginal self-determination at the local region and Territory level.

Between 2017 and 2019, APO NT played a key role in the early stages of design and development of local decision-making as a member of the Local Decision Making reference group, and through numerous consultations to review the Local Decision Making framework and guidelines. As a result of this involvement APO NT partnership principles were used as a core concept of the local decision-making model.

In addition, AGMP received funding from the Northern Territory Government over two years, 2016 to 2018, for the purpose of 'strengthening Aboriginal governance and management in Northern Territory Aboriginal organisations in order to increase positive engagement in the local decision-making process'.

APO NT invested significant time and resources and made a genuine commitment to engage and strengthen the Local Decision Making framework. However, APO NT experienced a lack of responsiveness to our contributions from the Northern Territory Government and felt the principles of co-design, communication and collaboration were not being upheld.

APO NT withdrew our engagement with local decision-making in July 2019 due to fatigue, from policies that don't live up to the promise of real change or reform, and loss of confidence and trust in the process. The Northern Territory Government subsequently withdrew its commitment of funding for the AGMP.

Since this time APO NT has received feedback from Aboriginal communities and organisations across the Northern Territory about local decision-making. APO NT made a written submission to this inquiry in 2021 to share our observations, including the strengths and limitations of the local decision-making model, and make recommendations for how to improve the model moving forward. We note and support the many other Aboriginal organisations and community representatives from across the Northern Territory that have also made submissions to this inquiry.

In summary, our submission is clear in its frustrations but also in a path moving forward. APO NT acknowledges and supports the intent of the local decision-making model to enable the involvement of Aboriginal people in the design and implementation of policies, services and programs that affect us. It also recognises the Northern Territory Government's commitment to supporting Aboriginal self-determination and changing the way it works with Aboriginal people. Our concerns about the limitations of local decision-making as detailed in our 2021 submission are consistent with submissions made by other Aboriginal community controlled organisations and community members who have

appeared in the inquiry. These issues include lack of overarching governance, poor community education and buy-in and insufficient resourcing. I can provide more detail about this from the Aboriginal housing sector in the Northern Territory, if the committee is interested.

As the inquiry already has a submission APO NT will not use any more of our collective time here today to delve into the strengths and limitations of the current LDM model. We will instead focus on how we will work with the Northern Territory Government moving forward to deliver a refreshed local decision-making model that will achieve a true and meaningful shift in decision-making power in the Northern Territory, putting Aboriginal people and communities in the driver seat.

The first implementation plan for Closing the Gap include an action for APO NT to work with the Northern Territory Government following this inquiry to review the local decision-making policy in line with the strong partnership elements of Closing the Gap Priority Reform One. As this action remains uncompleted, it will carry over to the coming implementation plan. We will look forward to seeing the final version of the ground-up evaluation done by Charles Darwin University on LDM and hope that any relevant findings are implemented are part of this refresh and review process.

APO NT is ready to work in partnership with the Northern Territory Government to revise the LDM policy in line with the recommendations from this inquiry and the evaluation that has been undertaken by CDU. It is our firm belief that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are the key agents of change and must be granted agency in the development and implementation of policies and programs that impact on our lives. It is to this end that APO NT seek a commitment from the Northern Territory Government to revise the LDM model in genuine partnership with APO NT.

I will now touch on the process currently under way to redesign the Northern Territory Remote Aboriginal Investment package. APO NT has been in discussions with the Northern Territory and Australian Governments to design a new package for investment to replace the National Partnership Agreement on Northern Territory Remote Aboriginal Investment, which will cease in July 2024. Those discussions resulted from a partnership agreement signed between APO NT and the Northern Territory and Australian Governments. The partnership has not lived up to our expectations and we have experienced the same lack of responsiveness to our contributions and the same unruly mess to negotiate that was evident in the LDM partnership.

Nonetheless APO NT has remained engaged and as part of this process APO NT is drafting a new tripartite agreement to guide implementation of the future investment package. As part of this agreement, we are seeking to build local and regional decision-making into the investment governance arrangements. This would enable community to make decisions at the local level on the design, implementation and monitoring of the new investment package. Again, we can provide more details if the community is interested.

We believe this remote Aboriginal investment package and the proposed governance arrangements has the very strong potential to complement a refreshed LDM policy structure. One that recognises place-based authority, uses existing Aboriginal community governance and decision-making structures and enacts local solutions to local issues. This will inevitably necessitate commitments to transition a broader range of services to Aboriginal community control.

Members of the committee, I hope you can see APO NT's commitment to establishing strong and supportive mechanisms for Aboriginal self-determination and decision-making across everything that we do. I am happy to take questions.

Mr CHAIR: Thank you. What we will do is open it up to questions and a reasonably informal, formal way of dealing with it. Any questions from the committee?

Mr EDGINGTON: Thank you, Dr Paterson. I'm interested to hear more about the remote investment package and how that relates to local and regional governance. Can you just elaborate a bit more on that?

Dr PATERSON: Yes. Mr Edgington, from APO NT's perspective we have already, via the National Agreement on Closing the Gap framework, agreements from the highest level of government, the former Prime Minister, every state and territory Premier and Chief Minister including the President of ALGA at the national level.

What we are wanting to do is reflect or mirror that similar sort of structure and arrangement here in the Northern Territory. We have already started at the jurisdictional level with the establishment and agreement of the Northern Territory Executive Council which I, as the APO NT convener and lead, co-chair with Ms Uibo.

We have had a few meetings in the last year and a bit. We had one the other week to talk about how we can implement at a Territory level some of those Closing the Gap targets and particularly build on those four priority areas that are reflected as a priority in the national agreement.

I see that—and I have said this quite publically and openly to whoever wants to listen to me—we need to not only reflect that sort of structure and framework at a jurisdictional level, but how do we drill that down to the regional and get the community buy-in. Our Aboriginal community leaders buying into that process and having a sense of self-

determination and bringing to the attention of all levels of governments the priorities and the issues that they see needs to be addressed in their respective communities throughout the Northern Territory.

We are in the process of those negotiations. Unfortunately it has taken a bit more time than I would have anticipated and wanted, but that is government processes and bureaucracy. In answer to your question I am very much about and conscious that we have to get in place those regional structures. I heard Mr Holden from LGANT talk just a minute ago and I'll say that Mr Holden is also part of the executive council. Its important local government are a part of that structure and process. Again, there is no pushback from APO NT at all. We encourage everybody and all levels of government to be part of this process. I believe, and this is only a personal view, it was an error of dismantling those Aboriginal community-controlled councils back in the day that I understood and experienced working with for the many years I have lived and worked in the Territory.

I think that shires disempowered and took away those employment opportunities, local decision-making at the community level and just the sense of Aboriginal community leaders making local decisions that are impacting on their communities. I would like to see us collectively to review that structure and look at how we mesh and bring that all together under this new close the gap framework where you have the buy-in of the levels of government—Commonwealth, the Territory, local government here in the Northern Territory and obviously the Aboriginal peak organisations. At the regional community level, for example let's look at the Barkly Mr Edgington, I see the governance structure there mirroring the close the gap stuff and empowering and getting local Aboriginal communities involved in that process to establish a partnership with the Commonwealth, Territory, Barkly Regional Council and our representatives—Anyinginyi, Julalikari and those other peak services within the Barkly region—to come together collectively and form some sort of governance structure that is lean, mean and most importantly supported and have a small secretariat to help them with all these issues.

One thing we hear about local decision-making, and I'm not saying they're all dysfunctional or not working, there are pockets throughout the Northern Territory that I understand are pretty well effective. I believe a lot of that has to do with personal relationships and people who manage and lead those processes. Elsewhere, I hear stories where plane or car loads of bureaucrats go into these communities and they meet—I don't know how many local community members attend those meetings. Local community mob keep saying me that they don't have a sense of decision-making.

Bureaucrats are coming in and telling them this thing and that thing, explaining it and having a bit of a yarn, and then jump on their planes and motorcar and leave and that's it you know—depending if they get some funding for little projects and those sorts of things. I think the whole regional governance, community decision-making needs to happen fairly quickly and let's see how we can marry that all in and intertwine it with what's happening at the Commonwealth level, the jurisdictional level and most importantly, at the local community level because people are feeling so disempowered. They do not have a sense of being valued by anybody at the best of times—no jobs, lack of kids going to school. I could rabbit on. We have to change that. We cannot sit on our hands and continue to allow the same old, same old because it has not worked. We need to do something differently.

Mr EDGINGTON: Dr Paterson, you briefly touched on the Barkly. The current regional structure there sits with the Barkly Regional Deal. It is a partnership between the Australian Government, the Northern Territory Government and the Barkly Regional Council. That is being delivered by a governance table, which consists of all levels of government, opportunities for those Aboriginal corporations to sit on that governance table to drive the delivery of the Barkly Regional Deal, but also to be involved in service delivery across the Barkly. Do you see that as a potential model that could be replicated?

Dr PATERSON: I think so. I do not know the specific details but I understand that is a governance framework that has been agreed by the local leadership and organisations in the Barkly. I would like to see more Aboriginal representation. It does not sound like too many—how many Aboriginal people sit on that group? Do we know the numbers of representation of the local mob?

Mr EDGINGTON: I am not sure of the numbers, but the corporations themselves ...

Dr PATERSON: You have to have that ...

Mr EDGINGTON: When it comes to things like—I do not know—funding for local decision-making, you talked about the remote investment package. Funding that goes into those regions, given I have touched on a governance table in the Barkly, I am interested in your ideas. Would there be potential for that governance table to oversee that funding coming into a region through that remote investment package to ensure that that money is going to where it is needed the most?

Dr PATERSON: Yes.

Mr EDGINGTON: Do you have any thoughts about that?

Dr PATERSON: Absolutely. That is the sort of encouragement and future vision I want to support and advocate for. I, here in Darwin, am not making financial decisions or decisions on priorities of projects or what programs are funded at that regional level. I see my job as advocating, opening up doors and doing the utmost I possibly can to get as much

funding in here for our mob to start addressing all those underlying disadvantage issues that we continually here of, day in and day out.

We have to make sure we then have those good fiscal policies and governance structures at that regional level where we have the buy-in of as many—I know it is difficult to get every community representative, but there are individuals around the Territory who have the experience, contacts and networks. You have peak organisations, regional organisations that also have those links and contacts with communities. Bring them in and have the genuine discussion with them—not somebody else making a decision somewhere else and coming down and slapping it on the table and saying, 'Have we got a deal for you! Sign up or we are taking it elsewhere.'

It has to be this bottom-up approach. Gone are the top-down approaches of delivering even policy development. I want to see some sort of governance involvement, community involvement and policy development and design. Our members of APO NT are well represented. We have the entire Northern Territory as our footprint or our membership. I believe we have a good leadership that can advocate and bring to the attention of governments and others those issues that impact on our communities.

Mr EDGINGTON: Quickly, you touched on insufficient resourcing for LDM. Could you elaborate more on that? Also I want to talk about that in the context of you mentioning Closing the Gap, LDM and lack of resourcing. Is there sufficient connection with local decision-making delivering on Closing the Gap targets, and is there sufficient resources on the ground to be able to deliver around those key targets?

Dr PATTERSON: Good question; I'm not sure. I might hand to our program manager, Seranie, because she's been having some of those discussions with governments. I must put a right on this—no decisions have been made. These are ideas being, you know, thrown around to hopefully get out to communities, seek their input, seek their advice and how they want to see those structures work in their respective communities and regions. Seranie, do you have anything?

Ms GAMBLE: Thank you, Patto. Just a couple of quick comments on—with regards to resourcing and also then LDM and connecting to Closing the Gap. Our submission talks about some of the challenges of resourcing LDM historically that was put forward back in 2021. The situation now with Closing the Gap is changing. Just this week there's been some recent announcements from the federal government which we're still trying to understand how that relates to the Northern Territory. It's obviously not on the ground right now.

What we do know is Closing the Gap has not had major funding commitments federally since it was agreed, and that's been a challenge, because APO NTs position is really about putting the priority reforms under Closing the Gap into practice through partnerships with government and effective decision-making so that policy advice or, you know, funding can be in the places it needs to be.

We have structures now that are new through the NT exec council for Aboriginal Affairs that provides that overarching governance to oversee how the actual targets can be realised because they've not been. There's definitely a lot of work ahead on with how the Closing the Gap targets can be achieved.

The resourcing that's been provided from the government so far has come through the federal government, so it's quite limited. We've been talking about a whole reshape on how we work to achieve those targets through those mechanisms like an implementation plan which has been worked on through APO NT members, with government, with LGANT at the table as well and there's no resourcing committed to that, which is a challenge. And we referenced in our statement that there are commitments around LDM to improve and build on the strengths of LDM, but again, there's no resourcing components to that to see those improvements realised.

Mr EDGINGTON: So what's the connection between Local Decision Making and Closing the Gap? What's the formal connection there?

Ms GAMBLE: The formal—sorry, Patto.

Dr PATTERSON: I was just going to say that's why I referenced earlier that I believe we need a major review of all those structures. I mean, I don't have the answers or the solutions here. I believe we need to get the relevant stakeholders around the table to see what all these national frameworks, jurisdictional frameworks, local frameworks are all doing and what they're delivering and their responsibilities and see where we can hopefully come up—what really gets under my goat is this competitive—I don't know whether it's real or factual or what, but from my experience working with our mob and experiencing—I don't know, there seems to be this competition between the feds and state Territory governments about wanting to outdo one another and delivering this and that.

We've got duplication happening all over the place. No wonder we haven't closed any gaps to date. So it's about time to sit down with all the relevant key stakeholders to work out what is our relationship, where are the duplication of services, what are peak organisations delivering, how can we add value, how can we complement to hopefully address those pressing issues in communities. I think that's a real priority, Mr Edgington.

Mr EDGINGTON: Sounds like there needs to be a full audit and review of all of these things going on.

Mr CHAIR: And Patto, is that—sorry, Dr Patterson—part of the tri-party agreement? Is that what you're talking about as well?

Dr PATTERSON: Look, we do have some really good well-established tripartite forums out. The Northern Territory Aboriginal Health Forum, for example, and we've had the Commonwealth, AMSANT and NT Health sign off on that. And over the years we've brought in other key service providers—NTPHN, NIAA. Why? Because they have funding for Aboriginal health and wellbeing leaderships and programs. No good them sitting out there in the wilderness and we don't have an understanding of what they're doing in the Territory. So strategically we brought them into the Aboriginal health forum so that we know that every quarterly meetings we get an update from them, what they're delivering, how much money they're pouring into the Territory, what regions—without know the specifics—and hopefully designing a good effective health and wellbeing program for the Northern Territory.

With the children's forum with Territory Families—the Tripartite Forum, which comprises of NAAJA, NTCOSS, APO NT, Commonwealth DSS and Chief Minister and Cabinet. Well, it's more than three partners; there are a few of them—having the opportunity on a quarterly basis or half-yearly basis, sitting down and working through the issues around children and families.

We want to set up a peak education body with representation from communities to advise and inform governments of why we aren't getting kids coming to school, enrolling and attending on a regular basis.

Mr POTTER: Dr Paterson, I would like to jump on that point. You say representation of each community—that is the problem that we have here. You can't physically represent every community in those peak organisations, would you agree with that? I think bringing it back to LDM; the whole point of LDM is to go directly to the local people in that area and work with them on agreements.

I want to get to this question, because I have waited for Mr Edgington to stop so I could jump in and I'm going to jump in now. LDM hands back services to local Aboriginal corporations. That comes with dollars. Here is my very simple question, do you support that model of decentralising and getting back onto the grassroots for every individual community for a local decision-making agreement?

Dr PATERSON: Absolutely.

Mr POTTER: Okay.

Dr PATERSON: Back to Aboriginal community-controlled councils—that former structure that I talked about ...

Mr POTTER: You want to see the former structure that it was, not the current?

Dr PATERSON: Well, with a bit of reform. Modernise it. I mean I'm just using that as a previous effective service delivering, a place where local Aboriginal community people throughout the Territory had a sense of making local decisions. Municipal services, roads, repairs and maintenance—all the things that we take for granted that Aboriginal people at community level could do themselves. Instead of flying in contractors for \$3,000 to \$5,000 or whatever it costs to change a washer in a tap. Little maintenance jobs that can be done at local community level if the appropriate structures, empowerment, resourcing, finance and training is provided to them. We have a lot of work in that space.

Mr POTTER: I absolutely agree with you. Could I ask what involvement you guys have had in the Groote Eylandt Archipelago LDM? To me that is a stellar example of where you can get to. I understand you are representing your peak body, but individually with NAAJA, what part you guys planned in that around justice et cetera. I think that is a demonstration of how LDM works. From my point of view, it may not be the issue of the policy and the policy of the day, it's that everyone will go at a different pace to get to an LDM agreement.

One of the things I took away from that last public hearing was that they felt there was too many people, too many interested bodies that were involved especially in the justice agreement they've got up; an 85% reduction in youth offending is a fantastic outcome. I know they weren't necessarily happy with certain organisations telling them how it was going to be and that they had to fall into line. If you could give me an understanding of your involvement in that and why you think that was successful?

Dr PATERSON: I don't know the particular strategies or negotiations that were had. I understand that the leadership at Anindilyakwa was very strong and I know the chairman is strong about community leading, making decisions at that regional level. I think the uniqueness of the Anindilyakwa stuff is it's on its own, it's got its own island—a bit similar to Tiwi and other communities where there is no other key major stakeholder influencing the processes and decisions. That's a positive. From what I hear, and I can't tell you the NAAJA stuff, we obviously provide the appropriate legal support there—I've only been there with my final completion of two weeks. I understand that teams go out there to provide the appropriate legal support to the population and the communities.

I think it's all about, and this is what I said earlier, relationships and strong local leadership on the ground that have the appropriate support and community investments. Let's not beat around the bush; Groote Eylandt with the mine and its

activities have more resources. I think they have another financial situation but I imagine they would have some additional support that other communities do not have.

These are the challenges. That is why we need to look at these as not one size will fit all. We must remember that as well. We cannot dream up something either in Canberra or Darwin and expect that to work in communities, particularly remote communities.

This is why we need to go back at that regional—allow our mob, our community members, to decide what that footprint might look like. Member for Mulka might say no, this mob here want this sort of model of approach to community decision-making or whatever decision-making process. Others through the Northern Territory will have different ideas.

It is not about me making the decision. We have to put in place good frameworks, processes and structures to get out there and find out. The message I want to send to everybody today is we cannot continue the same old, same old. Those days are gone. People are still suffering. We will not have kids graduating from primary school, to say the least, let alone high school or university, for the next couple of generations, I believe.

What will we do? Where is the leadership? Where is the political leadership and the funding commitment from governments? I have been banging on publicly that we need at least a minimum of a 10-year investment in the Northern Territory. We all need to be doing and working collectively to make it happen.

Mr GUYULA: I am bursting to say something.

Mr CHAIR: The floor is yours.

Mr GUYULA: Yes, people are confused with a lot of names of organisations and LDM and powers of authority—everything the government has worked towards. Where does the authority—a position? I am exactly how you say. What you are talking about I agree. The old community local councils is where it should be fitted so that local decision-making is the decision from the grassroots of the people in the communities, as a space with the shire or within the community to speak freely about resourcing, infrastructure, doing the jobs people used to get. They need to be there.

It cannot go around in circles, but I want to say that in Closing the Gap, I believe, right now one group is going this way and one group is going that way. We want to close the gap together and let us walk together. That is where we can work together.

Local decision-making, self-determination and—what was the other one? Well, LDM needs to be in a position in local authority. Local authority needs to be made up of our representatives from the grassroots level working with shire or LGANT and any other people who are the government—to try to work with people. We want to see authority, power for the Indigenous communities' people. How do we work on that to try to close that gap?

I have just been listening and waiting for the conversation. My words, my story might not be perfectly clear to people, but I am trying to explain something here—that our people are really disempowered. We need to have authority over our communities.

Mr CHAIR: I will add something that became apparent when we travelled out to Yirrkala. We have contributed to that, unfortunately. We sat there as a group of seven, and the community did not know what we were doing.

Mr GUYULA: Exactly.

Mr CHAIR: They were like, 'Who is this mob that has flown into town again?' Sitting there was us mob of white fellas.

At the end of today, effectively that will be the end of our inquiry and we will write a report to try to put a stop to this, in the sense it has been a long time. I do not want us to contribute to the ambiguity in this space.

Unless there are further questions, I will ask a final question ...

Mrs LAMBLEY: I would like to ask a question too.

Mr CHAIR: Sorry, Robyn.

Mrs LAMBLEY: After you, if you want to go.

Mr CHAIR: We will try to tie this up. The answer will take us through to about midday. Dr Paterson, Mr Cooper, Ms Gamble, we are writing the report, but if you were writing it for us, what is the one recommendation that you would write at the end of this inquiry we have held?

Dr PATERSON: I have alluded to it already. There needs to be an urgent review of these structures. We have made recommendations. I will get Seranie to highlight some of the recommendations made in our submission. I am a big picture ...

Mr CHAIR: You only get to choose one, sorry.

Dr PATERSON: Oh.

Mr CHAIR: I am being very specific; you have one recommendation.

Dr PATERSON: One recommendation—well, an urgent review of our regional structures and processes and all that sort of stuff to ensure that we get community buy-in and empowering our local community members to be involved in those critical decision-making.

Mr CHAIR: Thank you. There are a few more questions.

Mrs LAMBLEY: A point of clarification, Dr Paterson—you said that APO NT withdrew from the LDM process in 2019 because you were feeling a sense of not being heard and disillusioned. What is happening now? Are you back at the table with the Northern Territory Government talking about LDM? Are you negotiating with them?

Dr PATERSON: I might pin that to either Mr Cooper or Ms Gamble.

Mr COOPER: At that point when APO NT stepped back from its direct relationship and engagement in LDM—that was some time ago now and there has been this whole process of reviewing LDM that has been happening. The Closing the Gap agreement and partnership has been developed. There are a number of things that have been happening over that time.

Essentially, there has been an agreement underneath the Closing the Gap implementation plan—the first implementation plan—that the government would sit down with APO NT to review LDM following the completion of this inquiry. That is a process that is still to occur. It is one of a number of processes of review that have been happening—and taking quite a long time. The whole Closing the Gap process is like that; it takes a long time to negotiate all these things. It also includes the Aboriginal Affairs strategy of the NT.

The critical next step is the engagement about LDM that will follow this process. That is where we are at the moment.

Mrs LAMBLEY: I advise you—for want of a better word—this is not a government review; this is a parliamentary inquiry. I have been around long enough to know that the recommendations from these parliamentary inquiries usually do not go far at all. Although it is good to remain optimistic, I would also be realistic; these parliamentary inquiries are often completely ignored by government.

Mr COOPER: This was a request of government, that we wait until the conclusion of this review ...

Mrs LAMBLEY: Okay, that is interesting.

Mr COOPER: ... before we do that joint review.

Ms GAMBLE: I have one point. In what is really happening now and where APO NT is working in relation to some of the points that have been made, Closing the Gap is a key frame for all of our work, and using the nationally agreed, locally agreed priority reforms and targets is a lens we apply across everything. Using the exec council in Aboriginal Affairs is a key point of governance, reference and oversight to that implementation.

In practice, we have the opportunity working in partnership with the Northern Territory and Commonwealth Governments right now on the future of the Northern Territory remote Aboriginal investment, which expires in July 2024.

We are exploring how we can use the intent of local decision-making, which APO NT supports the intent of but it's some elements of the policy and practice that have caused problems. That is what we explain in our submission. It is looking at the way we can work with Aboriginal people and organisations on the ground, using the reference points of Closing the Gap—the priority reforms and targets—and transforming the way we work with government. It is a partnership-based approach; there is decision-making agreed through the elements of strong partnerships. Government at the same time transforms the way it works and builds the capacity of the Aboriginal community-controlled sector. It needs to happen on the local level, and APO NT is in the space of the NT-wide level. That's a way we have to frame ourselves and through our membership.

We are trying to draft a mechanism for that high-level governance that would connect in with the intent and principles of local decision-making, with the input on the ground. We are proposing ways to move forward in partnership with government to achieve what I think everyone wants, which is complex, but needs to be done through the agreed upon processes and governance frameworks we have in place.

Mrs LAMBLEY: I support your position. Good luck.

Mr POTTER: I have one half question. I don't want to take too much time up from the Member for Araluen's. Are there any APO NT members that have signed up to LDM agreements since you walked away from the table?

Ms GAMBLE: I can respond to that. Anindilyakwa Land Council has been involved on Groote Eylandt.

Mr POTTER: So no NLC or CLC progressing or engaged?

Ms GAMBLE: Not to my knowledge¹.

Dr PATERSON: I understand that they have mixed views. Again, pockets where you have good strong government leadership, relationships are good and effective but there are others that people keep telling me there are big planeloads of bureaucrats and others coming in for meetings, and they felt disempowered.

Ms GAMBLE: If I could make one further comment on that, APO NT's membership is based on jurisdictional peak bodies and the four statutory land councils. Our very nature of membership is that we have a broader scope than some of the local decision-making entities or arrangements that have been signed off through this process. It's not by nature that APO NT or its members would be signatories at the local level because our members comprise broader jurisdictional scope than what the local decision-making framework embeds.

Mr CHAIR: Such as Northern Land Council?

Ms GAMBLE: Yes, but Anindilyakwa is unique.

Dr PATERSON: That's a local Aboriginal community-controlled health service making decisions in that community for the health and wellbeing of their mob. Nobody else makes those decisions.

Mr EDGINGTON: Dr Paterson, you touched on the executive council of Aboriginal affairs. It sounds like it oversees Closing the Gap, LDM and a whole range of issues. The issues we are talking obviously affect all of the Northern Territory. Is there an opportunity through bodies like the executive council to build genuine, bipartisan support for these issues across the Territory? From what I see quite often politics gets in the way of some of these issues. How would you see a bipartisan approach to these issues, and could it work when dealing with these issues?

Dr PATERSON: The model I talked about—and this is the stuff that needs to be built. The executive council is an overseeing governance structure that can monitor the implementation of the NT Government's Aboriginal Affairs Strategy and strategic plan. Also how we are progressing on Closing the Gap targets, with very little funding committed at this point in time I might add. I'm conscious about us not making some of those decisions that will impact on communities at the local and regional levels. That is why we have asked in the NTRAI for upfront establishment of a bucket of funds so that we can start to build those structures.

Unfortunately, we are probably going to need to—and we've agreed. APO NT has agreed to work and align our service delivery frameworks and approaches to the Northern Territory. How many administrative regions are there? Six? You have Big Rivers, Barkly, Central Australia and there's a huge footprint that goes right around Darwin I think and picks up Port Keats, Daly River and goes way over West Arnhem I think. Gee whiz—get a few locals around the table and talk about this mapping as well and boundaries sort of stuff. Anyway that discussion is for another day.

We are prepared to work within those (inaudible) reporting, data collection and all the other foundation and underlying ...

Mr EDGINGTON: But at the highest level, should there be bipartisan support across the Territory when it comes to delivering on Closing the Gap, local decision-making and issues that affect Aboriginal Territorians? Is there bipartisan support at the moment, and what are the opportunities to strengthen the bipartisan support politically across the Territory?

Dr PATERSON: I think it is reflected by the national partnership agreement that has been signed by former Prime Minister Morrison and the former Chief Minister.

Mr EDGINGTON: I am talking about the Northern Territory.

Dr PATERSON: I would certainly encourage bipartisan support because we can't afford to have politics and Aboriginal affairs being used as a political bloody football again. We want to see bipartisanship, governments working in effective relationships and partnerships. We are all advocating for the amount of resourcing that the Territory requires to address all those disadvantaged Indigenous population in the Territory. Maybe that is part of the review that we look. I don't know; it is up to you politicians to get some sort of agreement in the House.

¹ APO NT has since been informed that NLC and CLC have some involvement in local decision making agreements in their respective regions.

Mr YOUNG: Dr Paterson, do you see the Voice playing a role in that?

Dr PATERSON: What I have been saying in APO NT's position is that we can't wait for the Voice to be established and the nitty gritty details negotiated et cetera. We have a process and a framework right now with the Closing the Gap national agreement and that is what we are focused on, the Aboriginal peak organisation. I believe they can exist together.

I gave this some thought the other night thinking, 'How would The Voice be effective for us in the Northern Territory?' APO NT has only got a certain amount of leverage and influence. When it goes to that federal level—let's not forget that most of the Indigenous affairs stuff is the responsibility of the Commonwealth—predominantly the majority of our funding for Indigenous programs et cetera comes from the Commonwealth. We see the Voice playing that role to have a say, hopefully with our Territory representatives—I don't know the number—with our Aboriginal representation on the Voice and structure in the parliament to have a look at draft legislation and other significant policies that are going to impact on our Northern Territory communities and hopefully have a discussion with APO NT as we have the links and local contacts at community level through our representative bodies and members.

We see ourselves as the jurisdictional experts. The Voice—I don't know the details—we would see as working in tandem with one another, and they can co-exist. I do not see it as being one or the other.

Mr YOUNG: Yep. I was just picking up on Mr Edgington's point about the politics getting in the way—that being a framework with the Voice where Aboriginal people would get a say, which would have a direct impact on Closing the Gap.

Dr PATERSON: Gee, if someone can come up with a model or a framework where we've got buy-in from all sides of politics, including Member for Araluen—you are still an Independent I believe?

Mrs LAMBLEY: I am.

Dr PATERSON: Independents can have a say and input into those structures. We're a small jurisdiction.

Mr EDGINGTON: At the moment we don't have input into that. We have been excluded.

Ms GAMBLE: If I could make a point on that. APO NT has publicly supported the Voice—we have that position.

Mr POTTER: It's great to have bipartisanship on that.

Mr CHAIR: Unless there are any further pressing questions or comments? Thank you, Dr Paterson, Mr Cooper and Ms Gamble. It is much appreciated you coming in today and being so frank and honest with us.

We will hopefully tie this off and finish up our inquiry, which is probably taking too long to be honest. Unfortunately we did want to go to the Tiwis and that got cancelled a couple of times. With the Member for Arafura having now left us and passed on, it has been a point where we won't get to the Tiwis to do that, unfortunately. We will endeavour to have this done in the next little while.

Dr PATERSON: There was one final question I wanted to ask. When was that review done of that shire—particularly the shire structures—and local government?

Mr CHAIR: Dr Paterson, I am unsure. As you ...

Dr PATERSON: Another question—when was the last major review done of local government and service—all that sort of thing?

Mr CHAIR: We have the Chief Minister's department coming in this afternoon, so it is probably a question we can ask them. I am unsure. We started this almost two years ago and it has been delayed, as you know with everything over the last little while.

Dr PATERSON: Well, the shires came in when?

Mr EDGINGTON: 2008.

Dr PATERSON: 2008? What are we now? 2023. A long time, hey, Member for Araluen?

Mr CHAIR: Thank you, everybody.

Dr PATERSON: Thank you, Chairman and committee members.

Mr CHAIR: We will have a short break. We have a teleconference with witnesses ready to go so we will take a short break.

The committee suspended.

Djalkiripuyngu Aboriginal Corporation

Mr CHAIR: Welcome back, everyone. Welcome, Mr Yan, who is now here with us—the Member for Namatjira.

This is the Public Accounts Committee. We have the DAC, which is the Djalkiripuyngu Aboriginal Corporation, and we welcome the Chairperson, Waka Mununggurr.

This is a formal proceeding of the committee. The protection of parliamentary privilege and the obligation not to mislead the committee apply. Obviously you are online, but this is also being webcast through our system. A transcript will be made for use for the committee but also may be put on the committee's website.

If at any time you are going to say something that you think should not be made public we can go into a closed session and ask everyone else to leave except the committee.

Waka, can you please state your name and the capacity you're appearing. Would you like to make an opening statement or comment?

Mr MUNUNNGURR: No.

Mr CHAIR: Waka, you have the floor to talk.

Mr MUNUNNGURR: Yep. Can we start?

Mr CHAIR: Yes, let's start.

Mr MUNUNNGURR: Good morning, everyone. Thank you for having me. I really appreciate all this time. I would like to introduce myself first. I am Waka Mununggurr. I am a senior Yolngu leader of Djapu clan. I am also a government employee and Chairperson of Djalkiripuyngu Aboriginal Corporation. But today I want to speak as a senior homeland leader supportive of LDM.

Mr CHAIR: Waka, can I interrupt? Sorry, we can't quite see you on the video. Can you sit back a little bit or move the camera down?

Mr GUYULA: [Yolngu spoken.]

Mr MUNUNNGURR: [Yolngu spoken.]

Mr GUYULA: [Yolngu spoken.]

Mr MUNUNNGURR: [Yolngu spoken.]

Sorry about that. I will start.

I am Waka Mununggurr. I am the senior Yolngu leader of the Djapu clan. I am also a government employee and a Chairperson of Djalkiripuyngu Aboriginal Corporation. But today I want to speak as a senior homeland leader supportive of LDM.

Local decision-making is our past and our future. Our ancestors governed our land and sea for many years through our *ngarra* using local decision-making in our sacred law and culture. The *ngarra* is our parliament, it holds authority through the *ngarra* for our *Dilak*. Our leaders for the clan leadership (spoke and made local decisions for our country and people. Djalkiripuyngu *ngarra* and *Dilak* exists today. Words like *ngarra* and *Dilak* are powerful in our language. They are not used without respect. I am sharing them with you today in English to help you understand the importance we place on LDM.

The Djalkiripuyngu *Dilak* is represented by Djalkiripuyngu Aboriginal Corporation. In this way our *ngarra* and *Dilak* are both recognised and empowered by the Djalkiripuyngu Local Decision Making Agreement through our Djalkiripuyngu Aboriginal Corporation to represent and create a strong future in our homelands. It is very dangerous for Yolngu as individuals or through organisations that can't lead to try and undermine our *Dilak* or disregard decisions made through our *ngarra* in our history. This would lead to conflict and retribution upon *makarrata*. Our vision for our homeland is that it be a place of strength and opportunity. Through the agreement the Djalkiripuyngu Aboriginal Corporation will guide improvement to education, health, infrastructure, housing, essential services, community safety, culture and heritage

in Blue Mud Bay homelands. Djalkiripuyngu are generous and want to share our successes with our Yolngu groups looking to strengthen homelands.

Through accepting our partnership with Laynhapuy Homelands Aboriginal Corporation in the agreement, the Djalkiripuyngu wants to help improve regional homeland service provision. Djalkiripuyngu also welcomes partnerships with other organisations such as NIAA and NLC to streamline their engagement with our regions. Djalkiripuyngu and the NT Government have worked closely and with respect to create a powerful agreement. The agreement and the long and careful process to this realised there is more than just a program and service.

The LDM changes with our original organisations or service providers is seen by the *Dilak* as a pathway towards a treaty or contract.

Following four years of negotiations from Djambawa Marawili AM, discussing the opportunity at Gan Gan with the Chief Minister in 2018, with Minister Selena Uiibo and Attorney-General Chansey Paech, signing the agreement at our important anniversary of civil rights at Banyala in 2022.

In September 2022, the Northern Territory Chief Minister, Natasha Fyles, signed the Djalkiripuyngu LDM agreement at Banyala and was presented with a powerful letter stick that she took to the parliament to share the fire and vision and voice of Blue Mud Bay homelands.

The tongue of the fire, which we call Lirtji, burns strongly through the patterns and designs on the letter stick to represent the voice of the Djalkiripuyngu clan use to speak with authority in the homeland around Blue Mud Bay.

Djalkiripuyngu leaders again want to thank the Northern Territory Government for their professionalism and care in coordinating the complex and sensitive local decision-making process. The discussions required great skill and understanding, not just of government but of the Yolngu system and stakeholders.

All leaders are committed to the success of the agreement and look forward to bringing new opportunities to homelands in partnership with the Northern Territory Government and other organisations. We want to see strong homelands. Challenges to local decision-making—our collective Yolngu voice is threatened through recognising a society of (inaudible) *Dilak* (inaudible) listen and manage our people on country.

Some other voices are speaking about LDM for Yolngu but these are not the real voices. They are the voices from corporations and towns, not from the *Dilak* and the *ngarra*. It is not in the spirit of partnership with Djalkiripuyngu people, and their actions and words seek to undermine our *Dilak* to make decisions to (inaudible) Blue Mud Bay from that.

As Yolngu we can accommodate these voices every day as they run our businesses, services and local governments, but the NT Government must be careful to listen to the real voices from homelands when considering local decision-making.

Mr CHAIR: Thank you. I might just hand to Member for Mulka to start.

Mr GUYULA: [Yolngu spoken.]

Mr MUNUNNGURR: [Yolngu spoken.]

Mr GUYULA: [Yolngu spoken.]

Mr CHAIR: Mr Guyula, have you got a question?

Mr GUYULA: I have already asked all that. No, no. I heard all of that. I just wanted to—everything he said, I support. It is exactly what (inaudible) we're talking about and what we want to hear.

[Yolngu spoken.]

Mr MUNUNNGURR: Yes.

Mr GUYULA: [Yolngu spoken.]

Mr MUNUNNGURR: Absolutely, yes.

Mrs LAMBLEY: What has changed since LDM in his community?

Mr GUYULA: [Yolngu spoken.]

How did LDM change things there? Is it okay now or needs to be improved for (inaudible)?

Mr MUNUNNGURR: (inaudible) in some parts of north-east Arnhem Land [Yolngu spoken.] From what I know sometimes I find it hard with other communities because of misunderstanding, but the other parts of community—for example, western side people understand and want to help, which is good. That shows that they want to (inaudible), but it's a—I mean, better off (inaudible) and talking, meeting and engaging with the senior elders of the clan groups or other communities. Sit with them, talk with them and explain to them what LDM is. But some other community people understand, especially the leaders, what LDM means because LDM, as I said, is their past and our future.

Mr GUYULA: Yow. If I could add to that—what he is saying is when you talk about LDM, they understand what it is. But what is being processed and what they want to see is how LDM can work; that's what they want to know. Waka, like myself, know what LDM is from our cultural background from the grassroots.

[Yolngu spoken.]

Mr MUNUNNGURR: I am asking how you will help us make this process happen.

Mr GUYULA: Was that clear?

Mr CHAIR: Which is again the problem we had when we went out there—it is the understanding. It is hard to articulate it clearly and explain it. We are doing an inquiry and we will write a report rather than what we can do, if that makes any sense? Trying to get your experience and other experiences to then find where it can better, areas for improvement rather than specifically help. We will open it up to the rest of the committee for some questions.

Mr GUYULA: I will make that clear for him.

[Yolngu spoken.]

Mr MUNUNNGURR: [Yolngu spoken.]

Mr GUYULA: Yow.

Mr CHAIR: We will have some questions from the committee, if that is okay?

Mr POTTER: Hello, how are you going? I have two questions about your opening statement when you said, 'Listen to the real voices from homelands'. You signed your LDM last year in September. Do you feel like the LDM agreement and the process that we did with you and the people on homelands listened to them effectively? Did you feel that it was a direct conversation, as in the needs that you had were being heard and are now reflected in the LDM, or are now in the LDM?

Mr MUNUNNGURR: I didn't quite get that clearly. Can you repeat that again please?

Mr POTTER: I probably confused that, and I apologise. You said, 'Listen to the real voices from homelands' in your opening address. I think it is a great point, and I want to draw that out a bit more to understand what that means. In the LDM, was that done effectively, did we do that well?

Mr GUYULA: [Yolngu spoken.]

Mr MUNUNNGURR: The voice—[Yolngu spoken.] When I said there are other families, because there are some people who live in communities and they want to—they talk on behalf of their homelands but really they don't see that there. So when I said the voice and you have to come listen to people who are out there, because that is from my understanding the voice has to come out from the grassroots people community. The people who are out there who are a senior and communities. People talk, talk, talk but they don't really mean it, you know. Does that make sense?

Mr GUYULA: Yow. I'm just trying instead of confusing—the voice it means it's the group that went over on local decision-making and you made an agreement with them, and it needs to be heard from both sides. From the people out there in the community on homelands and what you are offering, what the LDM is offering—that is the voice. The voice that they heard, the community heard, what LDM is saying and that is what needed to be clear.

Mr POTTER: Can I ask a follow-on?

Mr MUNUNNGURR: Yes. Thank you.

Mr POTTER: Having gone through it so recently, how would you improve or do better next time? How could we do better next time?

Mr GUYULA: [Yolngu spoken.]

Mr MUNUNNGURR: I think it would be really good and helpful, as I said, to work with Djalkiripuyngu as a partnership. That's making a pathway (inaudible) if you can do that. That's the better way. So we can do this together. Stand up

and make a pathway. I'm not talking about (inaudible) itself and the people out there and the young ones. We have to look at other communities and homelands because we are making a pathway for our young ones for their future.

Mr YOUNG: It is Dheran Young; I am the Member for Daly. Thank you for coming on. I have a question with your LDM agreement and in it has housing for independence, leadership and governance, infrastructure, economic development, education, health, community safety and transitioning that over from government to community control. Are you able to talk about the experience you're having with that and how you are finding being transitioned over to community control?

Mr MUNUNNGURR: Can you speak up a bit louder please? Sorry.

Mr YOUNG: Sorry about that, can you hear me now?

Mr MUNUNNGURR: Yes.

Mr YOUNG: I talked about in the LDM agreement it has some areas you have identified as housing, leadership and governance, economic development, education, health and that transitioning over to community control with your homeland or the Aboriginal corporation. I was wondering how the experience you're seeing with that transitioning over to community control with those local voices on the ground?

Mr MUNUNNGURR: I think my suggestion, or my feelings are that Yolngu people especially should stand up and go forward alongside with other organisations or departments walking together forward. When I mentioned about infrastructure, housing and all that in the community, we are making a pathway and also its creating jobs for our young people for their future.

Mr GUYULA: [Yolngu spoken.]

Mr MUNUNNGURR: Of course, absolutely. We would very much like to see help from the Public Accounts Committee to support through this process.

Mr GUYULA: [Yolngu spoken.]

Mr MUNUNNGURR: That's all from me, but we need more from you

Mr GUYULA: He said we need more improvement. Was that enough or do we need to see more? That is what he is saying.

Mr MUNUNNGURR: Yes.

Mr YAN: Good morning, Waka. When we were at Yirrkala last year for that public meeting, many people in the community spoke about how government has not been speaking to the right people on communities or homelands. For you and your homeland, did government come and talk to the right people when talking about local decision-making?

Mr MUNUNNGURR: We got mixed up at that last meeting in Yirrkala when we had that meeting. We did not have a say at the Yirrkala sea rights room, so we were left out. Anyway, you are getting some of the information now.

Going back to another question ...

Mr GUYULA: [Yolngu spoken.]

What he is saying is we were meant to go to Banyala after Yirrkala and he is saying we missed out on that opportunity. Our panel never made it to Banyala. That is what he was saying.

Mr CHAIR: Waka, at the Yirrkala meeting, lots of people in community spoke about government talking to the right people when they were doing local decision-making. For you and the community at Banyala, who we did not get to, do you have any idea or information that government came and spoke to the right people in the community when doing local decision-making, or did they miss out on speaking to some people?

Mr MUNUNNGURR: Well, we have our own *Dilak* that represents the Djalkiripuyngu Aboriginal Corporation. Those people are the right people. It would be the same if the other homelands, if they need help—we are happy to help them for local decision-making. It would be good if, as soon as you can, you visit Banyala. I reckon it would be really good to have you out there. That way, you can see for yourselves the difference between main community and homeland.

Mr CHAIR: Thanks, Waka. Are there any further questions or comments?

Mr GUYULA: [Yolngu spoken.]

Mr MUNUNNGURR: [Yolngu spoken.]

As I said a Yolngu organisation can't struggle for themselves. We have to have someone alongside, and that is you. As I said, let's walk together, hand in hand. If you want to reach our goals, okay. That's our way. Let's walk together.

Mr CHAIR: Okay, I think that might be a really appropriate point to finish on. Thank you, Waka, on behalf of the committee for joining us today and giving us your perspective and your view on the LDM. Thank you.

Mr MUNUNNGURR: Thank you very much for this time.

Mr CHAIR: No problem. We will now move on to our final organisation, which is the Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet. We will have a quick change over for a few minutes, if that is all right with everyone. We will come back in a couple of minutes.

Mr MUNUNNGURR: The last thing I want say is—excuse me, I forgot— The last thing I want to say, Im not talking as the government, but who I am as a Yolngu. because I'm not wearing a government hat. I am giving you all this information with my Yolngu hat on.

Mr CHAIR: Yes. Thank you.

Mr MUNUNNGURR: Yow. Thank you.

Mr CHAIR: Okay. Yingiya, you're able to do that as well, right?

Mr GUYULA: I am. [Yolngu spoken.]

Mr MUNUNNGURR: Yow. [Yolngu spoken.]

Mr GUYULA: [Yolngu spoken.]

Mr MUNUNNGURR: [Yolngu spoken.]

Thank you very much.

Mr CHAIR: No problem.

The committee suspended.

Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet

Mr CHAIR: Welcome back everyone to the Public Accounts Committee, Friday 17 February. We have the Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet. On behalf of the committee, I welcome everyone to this hearing.

Bridgette Bellenger and Mischa Cartwright, thank you for coming. As you know, this a formal proceeding in parliamentary privilege and the obligation not to mislead the committee apply. It has been webcast, and a transcript will be made which we will put it on the committee's website. If at any time in the hearing you think you will say something that shouldn't be public, we can go to a closed hearing or *in camera*.

I open it up to you, Ms Bellenger, to state your name for the record and, if you want to, make an opening statement?

Ms BELLENGER: Good morning, I'm Bridgette Bellenger, General Manager, Territory Regional Growth in the Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet. I think you know the broadness of my role. I have met with many of you separately. I would like to introduce Mischa Cartwright.

Ms CARTWRIGHT: Good morning everyone, Mischa Cartwright, Executive Director within the Office of Aboriginal Affairs. I am also a Kaytetye/Arrernte woman from Central Australia so I'd like to acknowledge this wonderful country that we are meeting on today.

Ms BELLENGER: I would like to acknowledge we are meeting on Larrakia land and also thank the committee for the invitation to appear today.

With sadness, on behalf of my team, I would also like to acknowledge the passing of the Member for Arafura and the fact that you were committee members with him on this journey. He was present at the previous time. I pay my respects to his family but also acknowledge your loss with that as well.

Since the department appeared at the first hearing on 16 September 2021, certainly COVID has made a bit of an impact on us all and our business, and certainly we're in a much better position moving forward now and quickly.

I would like to acknowledge that the public hearing's recommenced in late 2022, particularly out it some of the remote communities. We went out to Alyangula and Yirrkala and also met with our department's East Arnhem Regional office and hearing from Waka today.

I will talk about some of the questions that have come up through some of the deliberations today, and probably flesh that out a bit more for you probably in the questions that you have for me and would like to reserve to make a statement at the end if those things don't come up.

Acknowledge we've got 11 signed agreements under way in various stages of implementation. We've got a further 20 agreements in the pipeline working with remote communities all over the Northern Territory.

Local decision-making—just liking to reaffirm it was developed in response to consistent messaging from Aboriginal communities that they were being disempowered, particularly through some of the reforms that we saw both at the Commonwealth and the Northern Territory level.

Whilst the LDM agreement is led by the Chief Minister in Cabinet it is definitely a whole-of-government policy and all the different agencies participating in that. And we see in that as we work through the Closing the Gap priorities, particularly transforming government agencies, certainly we see LDM playing a key role in not just communities being ready to engage but government's doing things different—engaging a different levels as well.

I'd like to acknowledge the speakers before me today. Sean Holden, Dr John Paterson and our own Waka. There wasn't a lot there that we don't agree with and are working through—everything that was probably represented there. There might be a slight different policy position from ourselves but the principles of what was said is completely agreed, through the LDM policy and us holding both the portfolios of local government and the Office of Aboriginal Affairs. I might leave it there.

Mr CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Bellenger. Yes, Mr Guyula, thank you for your attendance today.

Mr GUYULA: Yes, sorry, I've got to go.

Ms BELLENGER: Okay.

Mr CHAIR: On behalf of the committee, Mr Guyula, thank you for your attendance and participation. I think it's genuinely been appreciated, not just by us as a committee but the communities that we've engaged with when we went to Kintore and when we were in Yirrkala and otherwise. Thank you very much.

Mr POTTER: Have a safe flight.

Mr CHAIR: We will open up to questions.

Mr YOUNG: One of the key principles around LDM is transitioning from government services to community control, so I was just wondering the position that local government play in that role—obviously not being an Aboriginal organisation or a community-controlled organisation.

Ms BELLENGER: Thank you for the question, Member for Daly. As you know, we're doing a review. You would have heard about that today, and that's really to clearly define the role of local government in LDM. You've heard some of the members today—and you've heard it previously and in your submissions about, you know, the role of local government and how that works.

The services that are being transformed and are open are around education, health. Northern Territory Government key services are all open for discussion on the table.

The local government is a legislated authority that has its own core responsibilities that don't get caught up in an LDM agreement. Where LDM agreements work really well is where they all come together and each person understands their role. One of the issues we've had, and I think Waka talked about it in his last presentation, is around who is the voice for community, and there is some tension between different entities in communities about who that is, and so being really clear about the different roles that people play and then how that may come together in a local decision-making agreement, is something we have been working towards. You'll see that reflected in some, particularly around the Big Rivers region.

It is something we will keep working through and provide—a lot of the criticism we hear of this policy is just a lack of understanding.

Mr YOUNG: Coming back to the Groote Eylandt's LDM agreement—obviously local decisions being made through the Anindilyakwa Land Council and the push back from each regional council. We have transitioned in that. How does that fit into it when you have local voices clearly wanting those services or their own local government?

Ms BELLENGER: East Arnhem council has moved in time with their position. Through our transition arrangements they are supporting in-principle the ALC/LDM agreement, noting that there are some viability issues that need to be worked through. That is the work that is under way now.

We get a call across the Territory from many communities about moving back to a community council structure. You heard that loudly today. I guess there is a fair bit of work to be unpacking what that means and what government's position might be on that. We do not have that for you here today.

When we talk through in different communities—sometimes the issues raised are not actually local government issues as well. A lot of it comes back to the loss of CDEP, the workforces, people having purpose in communities and how we can bring back that really empowered jobs, people feeling they are contributing at that local level. We hear a lot of that and we are working very hard with our partners in the Commonwealth to get a system in place that supports that.

When you hear about the old community councils—and a lot of people call for that; I acknowledge that—it goes back to an era with a lot of other, particularly Commonwealth, support in those communities that really made that work. You have to consider the whole framework in what we do.

Mr POTTER: You heard we had LGANT and the corporations we had from APO NT. You hit the nail on the head where the LDM is related to Territory government services and decentralising those and empowering people to operate it themselves, whether it is on homeland or in community—whatever that geographical barrier/people ends up being. I acknowledge that when we went to Yirrkala the Yolngu had very different views—just in the room depending on what hat they were wearing at the time. That is more complicated that, say, on Groote.

Does it truly come down to, in some instances—I will go back to LGANT. I am aware of East Arnhem's position slowly moving—purely financial. They are happy to give up some of the control they have through LDM. Did they see that as being a loss of funding and a divestment of the control that they have in those areas? Ultimately, they see it as a competition in what they do? I could not ask them that because he, obviously, was not talking on behalf—or did not have his board there at the time. That is what I picked up because it kept coming back to dollars.

Ms BELLENGER: Yes, working closely with East Arnhem—I note that I am out there meeting with their leadership next Friday in Nhulunbuy. It was clarifying their viability. In the last transition meeting—we have a working group that contains members of all the different partners, separating out councils. That is not finalised at this point as well.

It really is about how they keep their viability as a council rather than wanting to control. The ALC has a very firm position that it is local services, local people and they should determine those. That is their purpose in doing it. East Arnhem is perhaps accepting of that. It is probably a question for them rather than me, to be completely honest.

Mr POTTER: I do not mean East Arnhem individually, but that idea of the local councils. ALC is the reason I raised it because it demonstrated that a really successful LDM and taking on justice, education, housing—all of it. If that is not the gold standard of where we want to get to—obviously, see if you can have funding behind them on that.

I asked LGANT that if you had an ideal world would you be able to define where local council and local decision-making, where the boundaries were; what was local decision-making and what would the regional councils deal with. That wasn't a clear position.

Ms BELLENGER: I don't think they have a clear position and I don't think they would be able to have one. That is the complexity of the work that we do, it is different all around the Territory. You will find different regional council will have a different position on that. Even in the discussion with APO NT today, some of their members have signed up to LDM agreements. It is really the intent and making sure that this is actually making change on the ground; transformative change with local people being involved in decision-making. Some of our councils have got really clear leadership, in other areas they don't. That is probably our observation.

Nowhere I go says we don't want local government. I think that is really important to note, that local government is a respected, important tier of government and the conversations about how they would like it to work a little bit differently. That differs across the Territory. You have to spend quite a bit of time working through it.

If you come back to the principles of LDM, it is about self-determination, Aboriginal people taking leadership in their own communities. Certainly, that is something we are really committed to, not only through this process but through NTRAI, Closing the Gap—those things. We would like to refer to the CDU report and actually highlight some of the changes. Mischa are you able to do that?

Ms CARTWRIGHT: I just wanted to add to that conversation around regional councils. They are very diverse and I think they have grown into areas that they are not fully responsible for as well and they have got into grants, whether through the Commonwealth or NT government, and taken on youth activities or women's' stuff. It is broad. It is getting back to having a look and, as Bridgette said, no-one doesn't want local government but it is around building up the capabilities on community if they want to actually maybe take on the youth program instead of the regional council and things like that as well. It is varied and some regional councils want to keep being in that space as well.

It is important for us to be partners with them and that is the beauty of the Closing the Gap National Agreement. It is around formal partnerships, three levels of partnership as well. We have a really strong working relationship and partnership with LGANT around the table with us, the NT Executive Council on Aboriginal Affairs. Also we have got an established NT Partnership Working Group which I Co-Chair with Seranie Gamble from APO NT and we also have a LGANT person. We are the work ants. We are mobilising what the actions are and making sure that they are happening and looking at how they're tracking as well. They will be more involved and that is the setting at the national level and also the Territory, we have been working in that space.

Referring to the CDU Northern Institute Ground Up Monitoring and Evaluation report. This is a valuable report. Whilst we have shared it with our partners in different forums and have also been doing briefings, this is the first time we are actually publicly putting it out there and it will be made available. Our minister will definitely sending it out to key stakeholders.

CDU were engaged to do this piece of work from a community's perspective on how LDM is working for you through this process. It is giving us—what does that look like, are we working well, is the process through partnerships working well, are people being giving a voice?

CDU were engaged because they are using their own methodology which is from the ground up, as it is reported which means they are engaging with local researchers and experts to do this research on how the community want to approach it. It is varied as well. The different research sites were five of our early Local Decision Making agreements for Gurindji Aboriginal Corporation, Jawoyn Association, town camps through Tangentyere, Ngukurr and Groote Archipelago.

This is about three years into LDM, and the policy starting to be implemented. What we found—and it was raised here—the Member for Mulka said, 'On the ground local decision-making is not a new phenomenon; Aboriginal people have been doing it for a long time.' It is not new. What is new is government changing the way we do business.

This initiative really sparked that the community felt that it showed that government was taking this on seriously and working with the traditional local decision-making existing practices and governance that is already out there. We had lost our way. I have my government hat on, obviously.

These agreements—particularly sites that are wanting to get involved—are helping resurface and ensuring that the bureaucrats are taking on those existing practices that have happened there, and making that work for the community and what they want to do in the community.

I will leave it at that for now.

Mr POTTER: One more and I am done. Just a follow-on, I swear.

Mr YOUNG: Do not swear.

Mr POTTER: Going back, there will be give and take ultimately. LGANT acknowledged that they will have to give some and the communities and homelands will have to give some, and every LDM will be different. What I am taking away from what you said and the meetings we have had thus far, it is about the 80% solution on time. It is very difficult to get to the 100%.

That was evident when we were talking to the vast Yolngu nation that came. Their homelands were different to the town centres. It sounds like it is not a perfect solution but it gets close enough if everyone comes to the table. It was good to hear from Sean that they will have to give some to be relevant still, or to make sure they have a part of this. Obviously, I will read this for more detail, but it seems like ATSIC was acknowledging it as well, so that is good.

Mr CHAIR: I will take that as a comment.

Mr POTTER: It was, yes.

Mr EDGINGTON: Ms Cartwright, you said that the LDM has changed the way government does business. In what way?

Ms CARTWRIGHT: We are embedding the strategies and principles that we have agreed to in the local decision-making.

Mr Edgington: In what way?

Ms Cartwright: It connects. There was a lot of conversation about confusion of all the different policy layers, but they are aligning with Closing the Gap as well. It is about formalising our partnerships and ensuring that they are shared decision-making. Hence why all this work goes into formalising agreement in partnership with Aboriginal people. They decide who will be signatory to the LDM agreements and what is in them.

For many years we have not been doing that. We have had partnerships; they have all been verbal. Maybe there have been some MOUs, but this is a formal way of recognising those partnerships and agreements. That is one element of it.

Other areas include going about local decision-making at the pace of the community as well. Government loves to do a 'you-beaut' strategy and make very tight time frames and commitments. We think we know—government hat on again—what is best. This process takes you back to the community and ensuring it is at their pace. Communities may not want to be involved—that is okay, no pressure. For communities that do want to be involved, it is taking on board how they want to go about it, the approach and their time frames.

The evaluation is also really important. This has been picked up in this report here that community Aboriginal people want to be part of the evaluation process and development of what that evaluation looks like. That is really important.

Mr EDGINGTON: I do not know. I have been to lots of communities in my career. Is LDM not just another fancy word for what is really community development?

Ms BELLENGER: It is very much a community development capacity process, but the defined policy of government is very different ...

Mr EDGINGTON: In what way?

Ms BELLENGER: I am happy to talk to that. If you think about it, it is actually the community defining the areas that they want to do community development in. The priority setting at the front is really important.

The other thing we do differently—I have also had a long career in both the Commonwealth and the Northern Territory Public Service—is we actually let the community do that work themselves before it comes to government. With local decision-making we will employ a consultant and the community will choose who they work with and then they will work out the list of priorities, doing that consultation across their area and their leadership as they define it.

Then when they're ready they come back and we meet back with government at that point, and that's a really different process than us leading the conversation. Or actually coming out and having a conversation about the things government wants to talk to community about.

What we've said is that this is open to the priorities of the community—anything that the NT Government owns is on the table for discussion. It is a negotiation at that point, like if it's something that's not viable or possible—some of the examples there, people are wanting to have customary law included in a law and justice agreement, for instance, which is just something that we acknowledge their aspiration but don't sign up to in our current legislative system.

Member for Barkly, it is very different in terms of us supporting the community and providing independent council for them to actually work through that without government in the room. That's the first start. The second start when we're actually in agreements, and if I can use housing as an example—when community organisations are struggling with capacity or when things are sort of slowing down, I think we're more ready than we've ever been, in my experience, to actually help support that capacity. Whether it's a DIPL project officer on the ground or a Housing person on the ground actually sitting helping them, rather than saying, okay, you're not delivering and we're going to do something else, which is what we have done in the past.

I think they are two key examples. I think more broadly for LDM, and you heard Dr John Paterson talking about it—the Department of Education's setting up a peak body with APO NT to actually get that broad understanding across the ground that will then feed back locally in local decision-making places as well. That's quite new.

We've also got the joint steering committee for Housing where land councils actually sit at that table with the Aboriginal Housing sector, which again, NT Government has recently supported to set up. So they're actually making decisions together and it's not government bureaucrats in a room deciding what the Housing program looks like it's actually a joint partnership.

Those things are really new for me in my time in government.

Mr EDGINGTON: I would have thought, you know, basics things like education—school councils have been around forever and a day. Community government councils, we now have local authorities, community safety committees there's a whole range of things happening in communities, but isn't local decision-making about locals being involved in those decisions rather than these high level committees that you're talking about?

Ms BELLENGER: Yep. In those areas where people are choosing to talk about those things, for example, education's a good one, having a real discussion about bi-lingual. I think over time you would have seen government structures put in place. All of those things that you refer to have been set up and are run and managed by government. What LDM allows in those places is that can be handed over, or at the very least co-shared in a way that the community want to do it, and that's the difference.

Mr EDGINGTON: In what way though? There's lots of communities I know that don't have any Aboriginal corporations. I'm not sure what you're getting at there because I'm hearing the use of Aboriginal corporations, I'm hearing that local government has been side stepped and side lined in regard to local decision-making and yet we have communities where there is no Aboriginal corporations apart from local government, and they're being side stepped and side lined. I'm not sure really what's going on here when it comes to local decision-making in these smaller communities.

Ms BELLENGER: Yeah, look, it's an interesting point, Member for Barkly, thank you for raising it. It is more complex when there's not a clear cultural structure in place. That doesn't mean we walk away from it, it just means that we spend more time working through that and how we support that. When I referred to the 20 agreements in development that is absolutely that issue where they're looking at how they set up the right structures in community to support local decision-making.

You will note in the ground up report also in the presentation, we saw our own feedback from our own regional executive directors on the ground. Also some of the challenges of local decision-making is actually building that community capacity. It is our view under NTRAI and negotiations with the Commonwealth in that forum, that we have got to have direct funding streams to build capacity at that local level. Whether APO NT rolls that out or someone else independent or government, I think we can't escape that we need that. It has been lost in many areas.

Mr EDGINGTON: The grassroots level in some of these communities—I heard comment about sports and rec—that there are communities across the Territory that the only corporation in the communities is a local government council being the regional council that can deliver these services. But they are being sidestepped, sidelined according to local government. What is going to happen in those situations?

Ms BELLENGER: Certainly I wouldn't agree with that position.

Mr EDGINGTON: That is what we heard this morning.

Ms BELLENGER: You did and I heard it too.

Mr EDGINGTON: Certainly from my experience I've actually worked in that sector and seen it directly. I am wondering how we are going to overcome that?

Ms BELLENGER: But you have also seen the regional deal being set up which, just for the record, has got half Aboriginal membership on that governance table.

Mr EDGINGTON: I am talking about service delivery in communities.

Ms BELLENGER: If it's a council service delivery, then council deliver that service. There is no change to that. The core business of council is legislated within the *Local Government Act* and none of our local decision-making agreements. Our Archipelago one goes to a whole council but it never says we don't need council.

I think where you are talking about smaller communities and homelands and you have heard from Waka Mununggurr this morning about being one of those, it is actually partnering about what are the key issues for those areas. Often they are not in the local government space. There are things around education and housing particularly. We can work together to actually come up with a better way of getting that grassroots voice. Whether they will be able to deliver those services, that is the negotiation. You will need scale to make that viable and that is the reality. But is it working with whoever the service providers are to have a better partnership with the local people to get a better outcome for those services, that is where we are focusing our efforts.

Mr EDGINGTON: Do you think this has created some competition amongst Aboriginal corporations when they see that there is money available to deliver certain circumstances. From what I'm seeing, is that it is creating some competition and sometimes conflict between Aboriginal corporations when it comes to looking at what the options are for local decision-making service delivery and, of course, the funding that goes with that. What are you seeing and how can that be overcome?

Ms BELLENGER: It's a good point, thank you. I think in isolated incidents we have seen a bit of that, but because we are working with the local people in all the ones we are negotiated or have signed, they have a clear view of who the service provider will be and it is making sure the service provider has the capability and the viability to do that. I am not seeing that conflict in any of the signed agreements that we have to date.

There is some discussion about organisations driving LDMs rather than local people and we are aware of that and having our own internal discussions about how we best manage that. I think for all the criticism that we have heard through some of the submissions, and in other rooms, people are moving to sign up because they see the advantages of it. It will be tricky at times, there is no doubt about that. I think the best thing for us is to keep engaged. We work closely with the land councils about who are the right people in the region and I think we do our best to get that right.

The other thing we do is provide data and information back at the direct level. Often when a community says to us, we are interested in the local decision-making agreement and we want to talk to you, particularly around housing and

education; we want to do those things a bit differently. We look at the continuum that we have about how differently they want to do it; do they just want to be better involved or do they want to deliver services. That is a whole piece of the negotiating process that takes a lot of time. We then bring a whole range of data and information—by information I mean we then go back to the community and say if you were to run this service this is the regulation and obligation that is put on you to do it.' In many instances, they say, 'Okay, so maybe we do not want to own that, but we want to be better involved in that.'

Then it is working back with the particular group—whatever the outcome is—to work out how we do that. That is why these take so much time.

Mr EDGINGTON: Local decision-making has been around since 2016; there was an election commitment in 2016?

Ms BELLENGER: Yes. There was an election in 2016. We did broad community consultation across the Territory, working back in every region about what it might look like. It was not actually ...

Mr EDGINGTON: Prior to that?

Ms BELLENGER: After the election commitment.

Mr EDGINGTON: What I have recently seen is chaos and confusion about alcohol in communities. We have seen restrictions taken away and this week restrictions brought back. It is chaos for these communities. What role does local decision-making have in regard to alcohol management in communities?

Ms BELLENGER: You have seen the statements about how that will be managed next. The next steps for the alcohol—it does not sit in my portfolio so I probably will not be ...

Mr EDGINGTON: Why does it not? Why does local decision-making include alcohol management in communities?

Ms BELLENGER: Perhaps it will ...

Mr EDGINGTON: Why does it not?

Ms BELLENGER: That is a question we can take on notice.

What we will work through is the alcohol management plans. That will give each community a set of data and get them to work through what are the measures for the impacts of alcohol; ensure that all voices are heard in the decision to—whatever the agreement is in the plan—and work through that. That is a local voice and people coming through saying how that should work in that area.

I will say that some local decision-making has alcohol as a feature, or will do, so it is certainly involved. Where we can, we will get separate consultancies in. If you think of the Wugularr agreement, Barunga and Beswick, where we funded an independent body to work back with the communities and work up a really clear plan—consulted across not only every part of the community—and that clearly has been demonstrated—but also the service providers that provide services to that community. Then you have come up with a process there.

I see that process being replicated ...

Mr EDGINGTON: I suppose what I am getting at is that when it comes to local decision-making, we have seen the impact of alcohol management on service delivery, employment and delivery of programs in communities. Local decision-making has been going for six years, but it does not include alcohol management.

Mr POTTER: The Chief has been very clear on that in her comments publicly, Member for Barkly ...

Mr EDGINGTON: You are not the Chair, so you should keep your thoughts to yourself, thanks.

Mr POTTER: Well, through the Chair.

Mr CHAIR: Honourable members, let us not go there. This is a good committee. Ms Bellenger, would you like to respond.

Ms BELLENGER: Would you like me to respond?

Mr CHAIR: If you wish.

Ms BELLENGER: Okay. The local decision-making policy allows Aboriginal people—the communities and organisations—to come forward with their priorities. We will definitely work through the next steps of alcohol. I expect

that will be done using a local decision-making framework—no doubt about that. We are just working through those processes at the moment.

There might have been more progress made on that. I have been off work with COVID for a while—my apologies—so I may not be up to date with the latest.

Mr CHAIR: Ms Bellenger, thanks for offering to take it on notice as well. We can do that as a committee. Thank you.

Mr YAN: Ms Bellenger, in 2016 the commitment was made to move down the local decision-making path. I will speak specifically for my area—I think we have discussed this before. It seems you have a very large disparity in local decision-making agreements and the progression of local decision-making in the Top End versus Central Australia.

Do we have any idea as to why that has happened and what progress we are now starting to see?

Ms BELLENGER: Yes. We really appreciate that you have asked that question and have that interest. We have one signed for town camps with the Tangentyere Council that we are working through. There are a further five under way and almost ready to be signed.

It goes back to the Member for Barkly's comments earlier. In smaller communities and ones very geographically isolated, it has been a little harder defining the transformation change and who might do that change. We have spent more time in those communities really understanding that to get that right.

In two of those—I do not wish to name them because it is under—unless we go *in-camera* if you like

Mr YAN: That is all right.

Ms BELLENGER: It is about scale and how we respond to that. I think we have that model right now. We are deep in conversations. We get pressure from organisations like land councils to get that done in Central Australia as well because they are seeing some of the change in the Northern Land Council. The local member, Minister Paech, has a keen interest is often looking for updates to make sure that they are getting the same opportunity and benefits. It is a priority for us.

Mr YAN: Would you say it has possibly been a resourcing issue? With resourcing we then get out and engage with those communities. In recent 12 or 18 months there has finally been a resource in Central Australia for someone to go out and start engaging with those communities. Would you say that may have been an issue earlier on in this process?

Ms BELLENGER: Yes, definitely earlier on. Some of the machinery government changes just recently—a couple of years ago now—has assisted and almost doubled the size of our remote footprint. That has made an enormous difference to getting out in communities. You will see again the Central Australian office with some new resources in there to really work with remote, alongside the new office of the Central Australian Regional Controller.

That is true, but I will also come back to my earlier statement or comment that there needs to be—through the NTRAI investment with the Commonwealth there needs to be a focus on building community capacity, particularly in those smaller communities. I will stand by that statement as well.

Mr CHAIR: Ms Bellenger, can I clarify? Some people call it 'NT-ray', and you call it 'NT-rye', which is the same thing ...

Ms BELLENGER: Tomato, tomato.

Mr CHAIR: Yes, just to make sure.

Ms BELLENGER: Yes, the Northern Territory Remote Aboriginal Investment. We are working very closely with our federal government counterparts. To me, that has been missing from government previously. We have a lot of programs and policies that allow the engagement, but what is really important is building that capacity that people can come to the table equally.

We have been doing a lot of work on that. That is what we spend our LDM resources on. If it was really well-resourced by the Commonwealth, then I think the strides and difference we could make would be really effective.

Mr CHAIR: Thank you.

Mr EDGINGTON: I have one further question. I raised this with APO NT this morning. I think we are talking about the remote investment package. Is that what it is? I am not sure of these acronyms that government uses these days.

He touched on the executive council of Aboriginal Affairs, the remote investment package. Is there an opportunity to have in that framework a bipartisan approach to dealing with these issues across the Territory, given that they affect everyone across the Northern Territory?

Ms BELLENGER: I guess bipartisan support is important. The mechanisms and structure of that is probably not in my remit today.

Mr EDGINGTON: At the moment, then, it sounds like there is no mechanism for a bipartisan support at this stage? Is that the way it is structured at the moment?

Ms BELLENGER: We have a committee—Minister Uibo and Dr Paterson are the co-chairs. I sit on that committee. You have Chief Executives and me from government, along with the APO NT CEs, and LGANT as an important partner ...

Mr EDGINGTON: Is there bipartisan representation on that committee?

Ms BELLENGER: I think you are aware that you do not have a member from your party, if that is what you are driving towards?

Mr EDGINGTON: That is what I am asking.

Ms BELLENGER: Yes, that is not a question for me today.

Mr EDGINGTON: Can you confirm that there is no bipartisan?

Ms BELLENGER: No, I can't confirm there is no bipartisan. I think that is a political question and strays outside of my public service.

Mr CHAIR: Mr Edgington, if I could draw it out a little bit. I think the government provides the representatives and generally chairs it; I am of this committee and generally on other representative bodies. We can have bipartisan support in this room about LDM and we will have difference of opinion on certain areas of it. I think Mr Yan, Ms Lambley, the Member for Mulka, Yingiya Guyula—I might term this incorrectly, Mr Yan you can correct me if I'm wrong—we've had bipartisan support about doing this inquiry.

Mr EDGINGTON: Thank you Mr Chair, I think we're talking about two separate issues.

Mr CHAIR: I'll talk as long as I want, Mr Edgington, being the Chair, thanks for that. I appreciate your input. As an invited guest, when I've got the call I'll keep the call, as long as I, as Chair, decide it is appropriate.

Mr Edgington interjecting.

If you can be quiet now that would be appreciated.

We work through some difficulties, a pandemic and then changing travel arrangements unfortunately due to funeral happenings—two of them—and now we are moving towards the conclusion of this and I appreciate Ms Bellenger and Ms Cartwright coming because it has almost come full circle. We met, it seems like a long long time ago and we started with that work plan. I've certainly learnt a lot through this, as I know other committee members have who only joined us recently.

It has been something that as a Territorian who has come back to the Territory, and I've then be exposed to a wide range of different things, having not stayed here Mr Edgington when I finished school and went away for a while. I've come back to the Territory and enjoying my time being part of this committee.

Mr Yan, would that be inaccurate?

Mr YAN: No, it is not.

Mr POTTER: Ms Cartwright, we've asked everyone this. How do you see the Voice to Parliament playing to LDM and how we work through that? We have heard everyone we have spoken to, both on country and today they have all said bipartisanship is key to that. I'm curious to hear your thoughts from the position that you hold on how The Voice will play into this. Or, how important that is for something and the contributions to LDM?

Ms CARTWRIGHT: All these policy matters have a part to play in really improving Aboriginal disadvantage out there and their voice, making sure the voices of Aboriginal people are being heard. LDM is a mechanism to really get the foundational bricks happening by building up the capability of Aboriginal people but also government as well to enable that to happen. Having that voice and sharing in the decision-making so locally and place-based. It is really important.

The next step is that connection, parallel to that is having a Voice at the national level to be able to really provide advice and input into legislation and policies that impact Aboriginal people. It is important to connect it up from a local level, Territory level and national level as well.

Mr POTTER: Thanks,

Mr CHAIR: Any further questions? Any further comments Ms Bellenger and Ms Cartwright.

Ms CARTWRIGHT: We are really looking forward to the final report. We have made as APO NT also highlighted—we have an action in our Closing the Gap implementation for the Northern Territory to use your report but also other mechanisms to really help review the policy and strengthen it for Aboriginal people. We are looking forward to receiving your final report.

Ms BELLENGER: Mischa stole the words out of my mouth, which I was delighted about. I am really proud of this policy and I have seen the change. I come under pressure in this portfolio often in various forums, but when I get back on the ground and sit with the people who are implementing and talking about some of these things, I hear, I see and I feel their involvement. The change that they think it will be. I will caution that it often comes slowly and not at the pace some people would like. It is important that it is at the pace of the community, and that we really take it seriously and do it well. That takes time. It take commitment as well.

I am at Groote regularly and I travel to many of the remote communities when I can. Even the recent signing in Katherine for the Werenbun Local Decision Making. People were crying at the table, feeling that they had some ownership back of some of the key issues they felt they had lost a voice on.

Professionally, it has been a privilege to work on this and I hope this policy continues for many years, but in a changed form. I appreciate, as times change and different policies come in—as we have the Voice and treaty and of those things—LDM may and should look a bit different. We are really looking forward to working with our APO NT partners, LGANT and others and bringing that change about. Thank you.

Mr CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Bellenger. I think there is a 10-year plan and we are about halfway through now. On behalf of the committee, thank you for your frank and candid responses today. I appreciate you giving up your time and being part of this.

We will, hopefully, conclude our report in the near future, so watch out for that.

Ms BELLENGER: Thank you.

Ms CARTWRIGHT: Thank you.

The committee concluded.
