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UNIVERSITY



Institute for Culture
and Society

Public Accounts Committee
Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory
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14 March 2016

Dear Committee

Re: Inquiry into Housing Repairs and Maintenance on Town Camps

Please find attached my submission to the above Inquiry. I recently led a team that conducted research into housing issues on the Alice Springs Town Camps, funded by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI). The full report can be found at <http://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/239>. Relevant material can be found in chapters 5, 6, and 7.

The research surveyed 150 households across the Camps, and found a number of issues that had emerged or intensified under the housing governance and management arrangements implemented under the NTNER/Stronger Futures, including the sub-leases to the Northern Territory Government, and alongside the changes to local shires and councils. These included: an overwhelming sense of loss of control over decision making; confusion about governance arrangements; upset and turmoil due to inappropriate housing allocation and tenancy management practices due to the implementation of the Residential Tenancies Act and other legislation; and, reported increases in response times for repairs and maintenance, alongside confusion as to where responsibility for these lay under the various sub-leasing and sub-contracting arrangements.

As part of the work, the team prepared diagrams documenting governance before and after the NTNER/Stronger Futures, which shows a vast increase in complexity, and erosion of community capacity for input into or control over processes. These would appear to confound attempts for appropriate delivery, efficient management, or community capacity development. Given the growth of the community housing sector in the broader affordable housing space, there is a strong case for housing on the Camps to be the remit of the purpose-built and regulated Central Australian Affordable Housing Company.

These issues are discussed and illustrated further in the attached submission. I am happy to speak to these issues.

Yours faithfully

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Attachment: submission to Public Accounts Committee 14 March 2016, 6 pages

1. Introduction

In 2012 Western Sydney University led research into housing issues on the Alice Springs Town Camps. The research was focused on the relevance for the Town Camps of tenure models based on community land trusts (CLTs), especially regarding the twin objectives of community benefit and perpetually affordable housing. It was apparent that as with all CLT work, any such consideration first had to determine community aspiration and benefit.

In the context of the Town Camps and the suite of changes implemented under the NTER/Stronger Futures and changes to local government, this mean capturing communities' sense of what had and had not worked previously and currently, alongside aspirations for the future. The full survey results can be found in the AHURI Final Report at <http://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/239> and in the report by Foster et al (2013); the most relevant issues to the Inquiry are highlighted here. The quantitative data is stark, and the residents' quotes in responding to survey questions illustrative of core concerns. This submission has responded to the following issues in its discussion:

- timeliness of completing repairs
- cost of repairs
- consistency, accessibility and efficiency of administrative arrangements.

While the Inquiry has focused on these three issues, the Committee needs to be aware and mindful of the interwoven nature of cultural protocol, community governance, and daily management processes. These are not readily separable, and changes to management directly impact community cohesion and the ability to enact culturally appropriate practice. Further, adverse community impacts such as increased confusion and decreased social stability will impact on residents' ability and willingness to report issues, and on the condition of housing.

2. Core housing issues relating to the Inquiry – governance and management

Overwhelmingly, surveyed Camp residents felt they had lost control over governance and management, with deleterious effects. The town Camps are complex political landscapes, with families from multiple Aboriginal nations having negotiated governance and management in the decades since the Camps' establishment. When surveyed about the importance of cultural obligations and of identifying as Campers, the responses emphatically highlighted the significance of these issues. Figure 1 shows residents' sense of the importance of being a Camper; Figure 2 shows the importance of living on a Town Camps; Figure 3 shows the importance of cultural obligations; and, Figure 4 shows where that sense of the Camps' importance comes from.

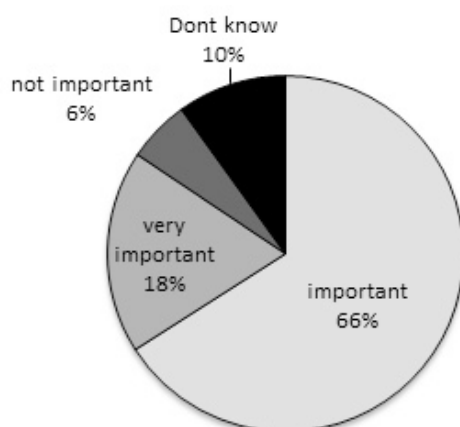


Figure 1. Importance of identifying as a Town Camper.

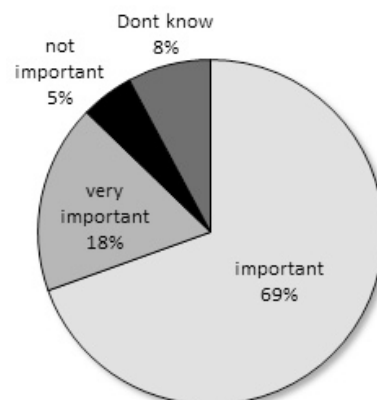


Figure 2. Importance of living on a Town Camp.

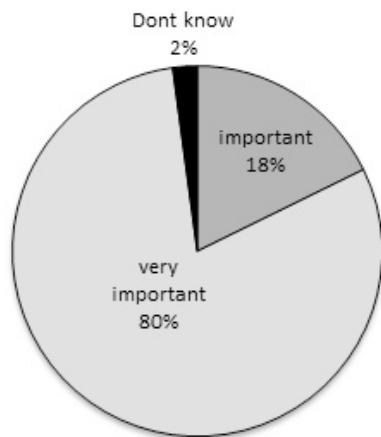


Figure 3. Importance of cultural obligations.

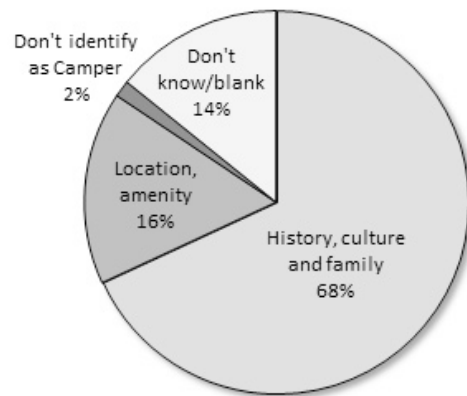


Figure 4. Source of importance of the Camps.

Those figures show that for the vast majority of surveyed residents, identifying as a Camper and living on a Camp are either important or very important, and this importance stems from history, the presence of kin and cultural obligations. Figure 5 shows residents’ responses when asked who was responsible for decisions on the Town Camps, before and after 2009, while Figure 6 shows the responses when asked who has household control and responsibility. Alongside a shift away from a sense of household and community control, to control resting with the Northern Territory Government, Figures 5 and 6 show roughly a doubling in the number of people who don’t know where control and responsibility rest. This is perhaps not surprising, as the governance and management landscape has become highly complex under the changes implemented under the NTNER/Stronger Futures.

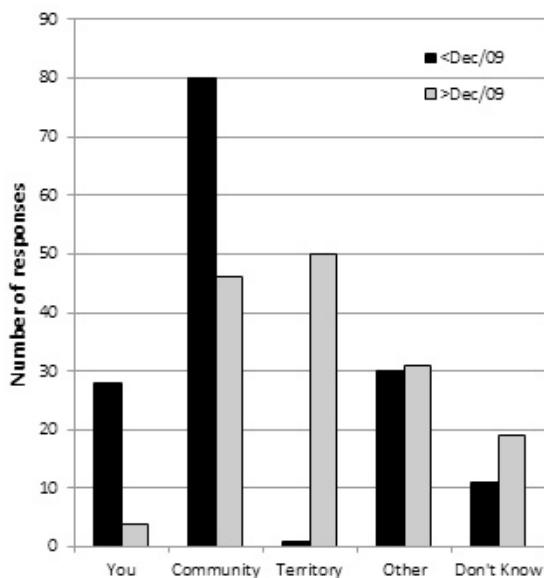


Figure 5. Decision making on the Town Camps.

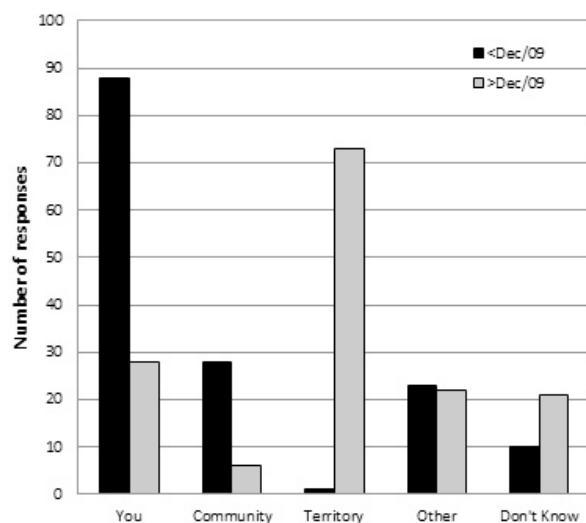


Figure 6. Household control and responsibility.

Figure 7 overleaf shows the governance arrangements on the Camps prior to 2009, while Figure 8 shows the arrangements from December 2009 to January 2016. The recent allocation of tenancy management to Zodiac Pty Ltd, and repairs and maintenance to Tangentyere Construction, changes the diagram again. Perhaps not surprisingly, the majority of the surveyed residents wish to see control for tenancies and head leases returned to the communities, as shown in Figure 9.

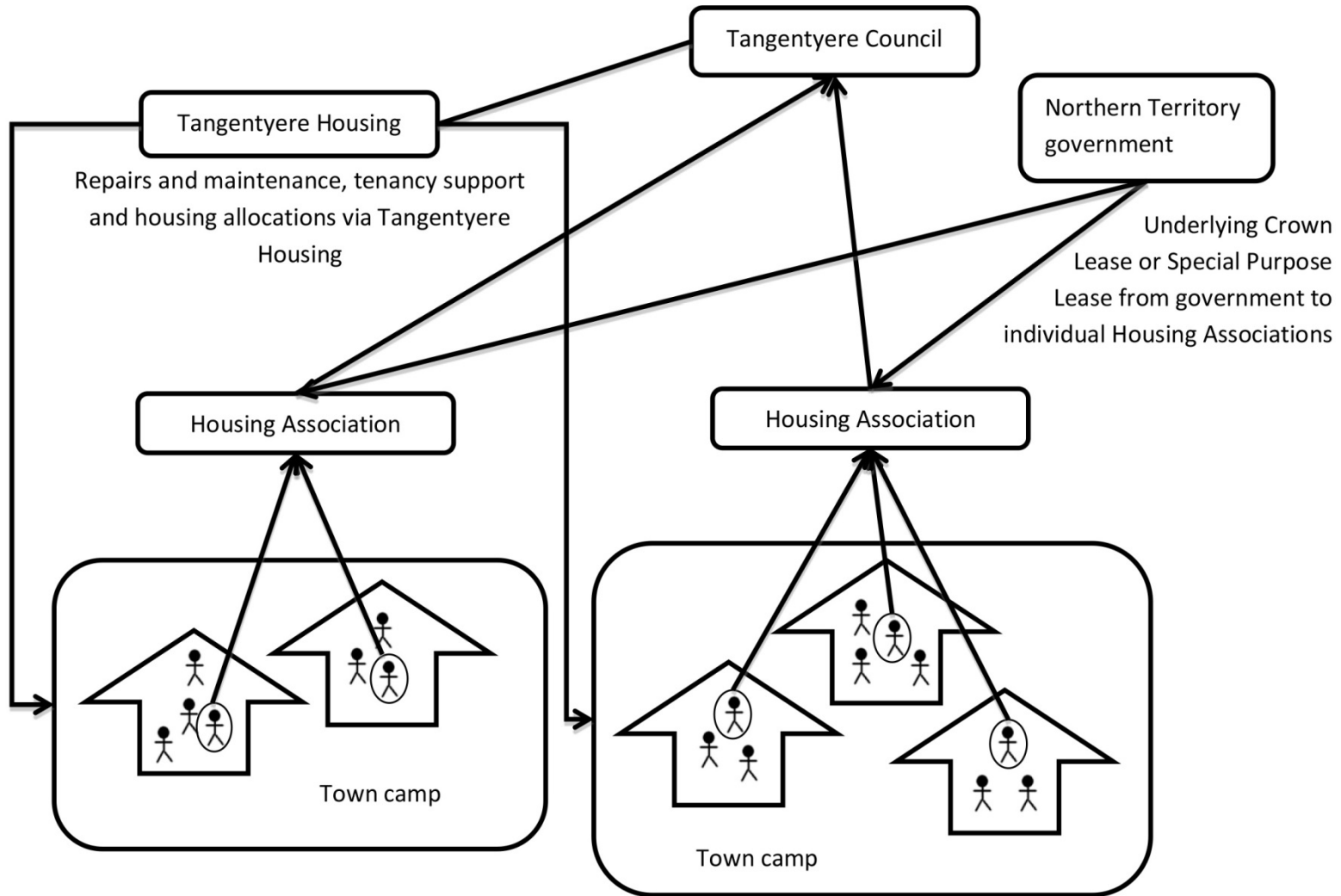


Figure 7. Housing governance on the Town Camps before NTNER/Stronger Futures.

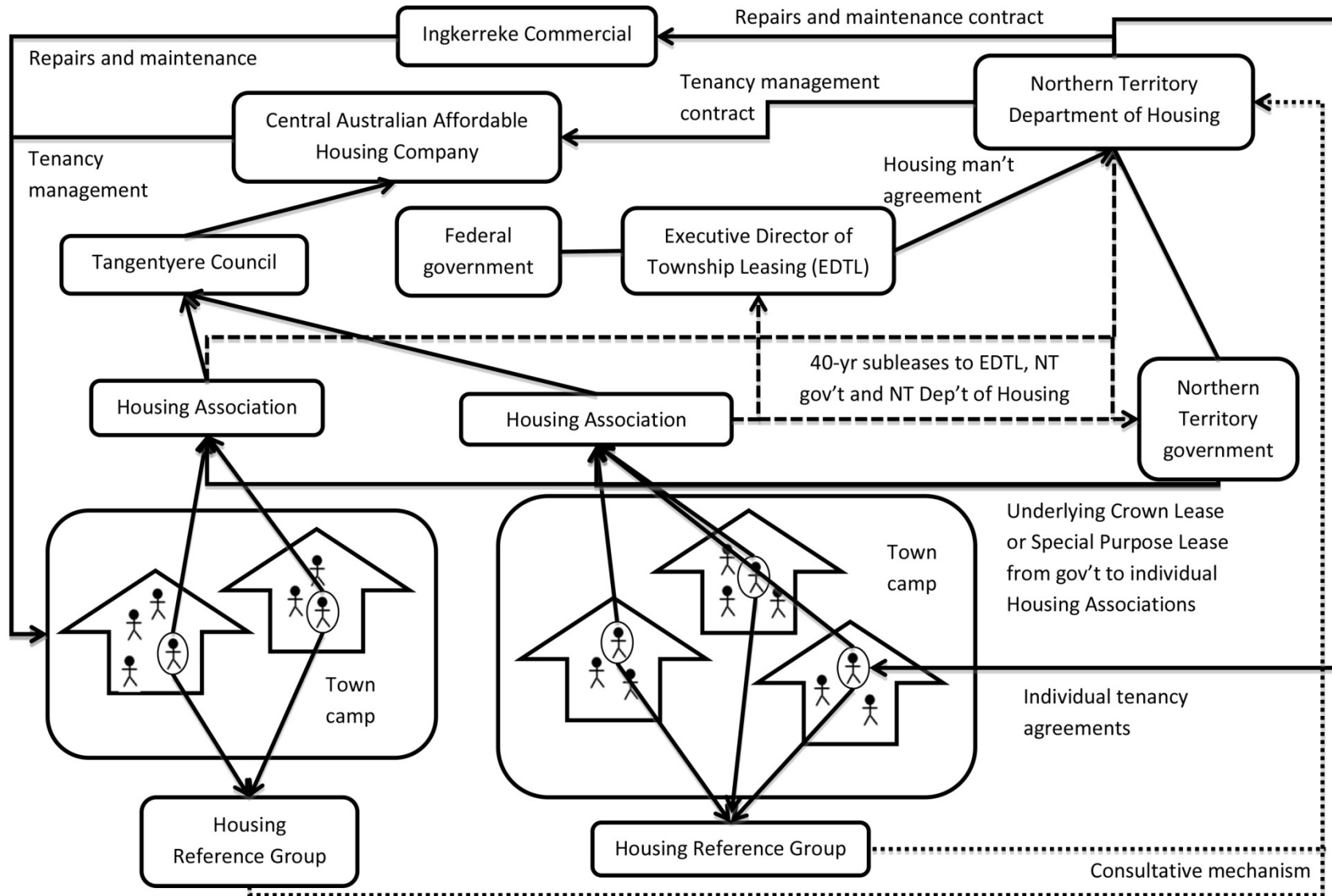


Figure 8. Housing governance on the Town Camps after NTNER/Stronger Futures

These changes represent not only an increase in complexity, but also dislocation of repairs and maintenance from tenancy management, and disruption to the history of community control. That control has been a strong part of Campers' sense of the importance of the Camps, and one of many interconnected governance and program structures through which Campers enact cultural and community obligations.

Residents were also asked to provide their estimate of repair and maintenance response times, and the results are shown in Figure 10. While this is not documenting actual responses times from the contractor, it shows a definite sense amongst Campers that response times worsened under the changes to governance and management.

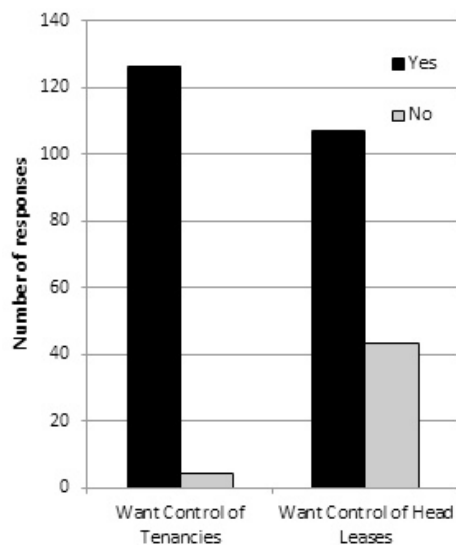


Figure 9. Preference for control of tenancies and head leases.

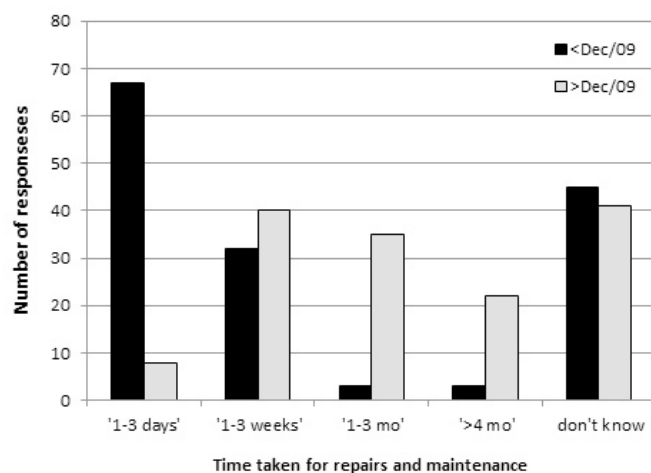


Figure 10. Average repairs and maintenance response times.

Residents were asked about improvements under the new arrangements, and answers focused on: new roads, drainage and street lights; refurbishments; new houses built; and improved security such as screens (Foster et al 2013). However, Foster et al (2013, p.19) state that:

The truth is however that the level of improvement is inconsistent between Town Camps. A small number of Town Camps have received significantly improved infrastructure (such as Yarrenyty Arltere, Ewyenper Atwatye and Nyewente) such as new roads, drainage, guttering and street lights whereas other camps have not received any improvements other than a small number of refurbished houses and new dwellings. In addition the number of new dwellings that have been built varies significantly between camps with some camps receiving no new houses (including Mount Nancy, Anthelk-Ewlpaye, and Mpwetyerre, etc.) and others receiving significant numbers such as Yarrenyty Arltere (12) and Ewyenper Atwatye (24). The quality of refurbishments has also varied with the earlier houses being rebuilt and the final houses (to be refurbished) receiving little more than a coat of paint.

None of this is to say however that more houses is necessarily an improvement when many houses have been allocated to families from elsewhere in Central Australia rather than Town Camp families who are residing in overcrowded houses. The net result of poor allocations has been that there are now in many cases more overcrowded houses rather than less overcrowding.

Crucially, this highlights the interwoven nature of the physical and social attributes of housing on the Town Camps, whereby physical improvements might in fact be eroded by the social outcomes that are resulting from misallocations and from policies that are felt to be driving migration to the Town

Camps. This includes impacts resulting from misallocations and new obligations under Residential Tenancies legislation that actually make it harder for residents to manage their visitors, and which can create social unrest and impacts on housing stock due to crowding and/or social tension. An example of this is the changes to visitor management under Residential Tenancies legislation, which Foster et al (2013, p.6) describe thus:

[Tangentyere Housing] was also responsible for organising Special Purpose/Crown Lease 'Trespass Notices' to be issued and served, and for all other general administration, correspondence, and member requests relating to Housing Association business. The issuing of 'Trespass Notices' was a major community-led strategy for dealing with issues related to visitor management, antisocial behaviour, problem drinking (by non-residents), violence and crime. Since the signing of the subleases such community-led initiatives have not been possible. Residents are now forced to operate at the level of individual householders as community 'Trespass Notices' aren't possible and effectively each household must take out a separate 'Trespass Notice'.

Clearly the inability to deal effectively with visitors will have impacts on social cohesion, household and community wellbeing, and the physical condition of stock – a situation that is then further compromised by confusion as to how to request repairs, and slower response times. This is highlighted as one example of adverse policy and governance impacts that speak to the Inquiry's concern with cost, efficiency and timeliness.

3. Implications and suggestions for policy

The above highlights the need for governance and management to work hand-in-hand. The arrangements prior to the subleases worked because they were based in community and so were aware of and responsive to the interactions between the social and the physical landscape on the Camps. Further, those arrangements had been established and developed over decades, so Campers knew who to turn to and where to go when issues arose; these matters were also handled in culturally appropriate ways. As the data above shows, an increased number of Campers do not know who to turn to, and many feel responses are now slower and that control has been lost.

There is much research into the need for culturally nuanced policy and service delivery in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander housing (e.g., Habibis et al 2015, Milligan et al 2011), and the affordable housing sector at large is seeing public policy favouring a growing role for community housing providers, through the transfer of stock and/or responsibility to providers, alongside their ability to apply for funding such as the previous NRAS monies. In that context and given the research findings above, there is a case to be made for allocating responsibility for housing services to the purpose-built and regulated Central Australian Affordable Housing Company, and for re-visiting the subleasing arrangements on the Camps with a view to their reorganisation, such that communities understand the landscape and feel their historical ownership is being respected and upheld.

References

- Foster, D., Davies, V. and McCormack, A. (2013) *Community Land Trusts and Indigenous Communities: from Strategies to Outcomes*. Tangentyere Council, Alice Springs.
- Habibis, D., Phillips, R., Phibbs, P. and Verdouw, J. (2015) *Identifying effective arrangements for tenancy management service delivery to remote Indigenous communities. Positioning Paper No. 165*. AHURI, Melbourne.
- Milligan, V., Phillips, R., Liu, E., & Memmott, P. (2011). Urban social housing for Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders: respecting culture and adapting services. *Final Report No. 172*. AHURI, Melbourne.