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Public Accounts Committees

Inquiry into Housing Repairs and Maintenance on Town Camps

Public Hearing Transcript

8.30 am, Monday, 11 April 2016

Litchfield Room, Parliament House

Members: Mrs Robyn Lambley MLA, Chair, Member for Araluen
Ms Natasha Fyles MLA, Member for Nightcliff
Ms Nicole Manison MLA, Member for Wanguri
Mr Gerry Wood MLA, Member for Nelson

Witnesses: Yilli Rreung Aboriginal Housing Corporation
Mr Colin Tidswell, Chief Executive Officer
Mr Jeffrey Guilas, Accountant
Mr John Adams, Works Manager
Aboriginal Development Foundation Inc.
Mr Bernard Valadian, General Manager
Kalano Community Association Inc. (via videoconference)
Mr Graham Castine, Chief Executive Officer
Mr Alan Mole, Deputy Chief Executive Officer
Ms Adrianna Weetra, Housing Manager
Tangentyere Council
Mr Walter Shaw, Chief Executive Officer
Zodiac Business Services (via videoconference)
Ms Mellissa Young, Director
Ingkerreke Commercial (via videoconference)
Mr Callum Mathison, Chief Executive Officer

Central Australian Affordable Housing Company

Ms Sally Langton, Chief Executive Officer

Mr David Avery, Chairperson

Julalikari Council Aboriginal Corporation

Ms Pat Brahim, Chief Executive Officer

Central Austral Aboriginal Legal Service (via teleconference)

Ms Lauren Macaulay, Social Justice Legal Officer

Ms Katie Gordon, Welfare Rights Legal Officer

North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency

Ms Priscilla Collins, Chief Executive Officer

Ms Lauren Walker, Deputy Manager and Senior Solicitor – Civil Section

Department of Housing

Ms Leah Clifford, Chief Executive Officer

Mr Jim Bamber, Deputy Chief Executive Officer

Mr Phil Luck, Executive Director

Department of Local Government and Community Services

Mr Mike Chiodo, Chief Executive Officer

Mrs Noelene Swanson, Deputy Chief Executive Officer

YILLI RREUNG ABORIGINAL HOUSING CORPORATION

Madam CHAIR: On behalf of the committee I welcome everyone to this public hearing into housing repairs and maintenance on town camps in the Northern Territory. I welcome to the table to give evidence to the committee Mr Colin Tidswell, Chief Executive Officer of Yilli Rreung Aboriginal Housing Corporation, Mr Jeffrey Guilas, accountant, Mr John Adams, works manager from Yilli Rreung Aboriginal Housing Corporation. Thank you for coming before the Committee this morning. We appreciate you taking time and look forward to hearing from you today.

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

Before I ask you to begin speaking I might introduce our panel; the member for Nightcliff, Natasha Fyles; the member for Wanguri, Nicole Manison; Russell Keith from the Legislative Assembly who assists us with the PAC, and Mr Gerry Wood, the Independent member for Nelson. I am Robyn Lambley from Alice Springs, the member for Araluen.

Please state your name and the capacity in which you are appearing and if you would like to make an opening statement you are welcome to do so now.

Mr TIDSWELL: Colin Tidswell, Chief Executive Officer of Yilli Rreung Aboriginal Housing Corporation. I probably do not have any opening statement.

Madam CHAIR: That is ok.

Mr ADAMS: John Adams, works and project manager, Yilli Rreung Aboriginal Housing Corporation.

Mr GUILAS: Jeffrey Guilas. I am the accountant for Yilli Rreung Aboriginal Housing Corporation.

Madam CHAIR: Okay, thank you. In your submission we noted that the implementation of a preventative maintenance program over the last three years has produced significant savings in repairs and maintenance. Are you able to quantify those savings for us, and how made those savings?

Mr TIDSWELL: We would not be able to definitely quantify those savings, but we certainly see a vast reduction in the amount of emergency maintenance that is required. You will see from the submission that the emergency maintenance component at Yilli used to be quite high and over the last three to four years we have seen that drop back.

It also comes into costs of things as well. It is far more expensive to repair something in an emergency situation or something that has been let go to long. If you can get on top of problems early it saves a lot of money. I think on the submission I quote a tap washer; it costs a few dollars to change a tap washer, but if that tap is left running it runs into a job of hundreds of dollars.

Madam CHAIR: Have you changed the way you operate in order to get on top of things quicker?

Mr TIDSWELL: We have and certainly the way our response to maintenance is quite different from the department. We tell our guys when they are out in field that if it is something small that needs fixing, fix it, do not wait for a new purchase order, do not travel back to the office, just fix it. It is far quicker for us to amend the order, it takes a matter of seconds, than for somebody to drive back to get a new purchase order. I think that situation is exacerbated when you are out bush and people are flying backwards and forwards to get a new order.

I think that is one of the big secrets, for us, is that flexibility. Fix it if you are there. If it is a more major thing ring up John, he is always available, say hey listen I am here can I fix this while I am here. Also our reporting as well, with our tenancy managers, we have a quick and dirty checklist that everybody does every time they go into a house. They basically see what maintenance needs doing and we get on top of it quickly.

The other thing we have found over the last few years, and this is my experience from working in other communities as well, is that you have to fix things quickly. If you do not fix things quickly people stop reporting. They say, 'Well, why should I report that anyway? It will never get fixed or it will take six months to get fixed.' Our response times are in the submission and they are very quick. We have been working on keeping those response times down because the quicker we can fix things the better it is for the tenant and the more money it saves us.

Would you like to add anything on the preventative maintenance John? You have been driving all of that.

Mr ADAMS: I suppose at the end of the day, one example was we had a fair amount of problems with pest ants into electrical cabling and chewing out electrical cabling. The cost of doing callouts with the power going out over weekends was starting to cost us thousands of dollars. We put into place with one of our pest control people that he went through all of our houses and did a fairly good rate because he did all of our houses. He went through and poisoned for all the Singapore ants and then the rats.

We spent quite a lot of money on that and after that happened we have had one callout over the past four months for an electrical issue. That was not to do with ants but we were having some major issues with ants eating our cabling and rats chewing cabling. I think that has worked for us well and truly. In two fold we will save money in the long run with not having so many callouts on weekends. But we have spent it on the pest control.

Mr TIDSWELL: We tend to monitor those initiatives. Previously we were the same as Housing Commission. Housing Commission pest control is the tenant's responsibility. We were previously that but we thought hey this is starting to cost us too much money because to rewire a house is \$4000?

Mr ADAMS: In the lights of your switchboard, it is a bit more if you have got to do your switchboard as well.

Mr TIDSWELL: Yes. That is why we brought in that preventative program around that to see if we could save money – it is also better for our tenants, I must say – around those

electrical repairs. It cost us, I think about \$50 000 to do all of our housing. We will monitor that in the next 12 months, but we figure that will save us money.

Madam CHAIR: Is the Department of Housing quite prescriptive in what it wants you to do and how it wants you to do it?

Mr TIDSWELL: We do not really have much to do with the Department of Housing.

Madam CHAIR: Okay.

Mr TIDSWELL: We are independent. All our housing is on town camps. We have some peppercorn leases from the Department of Housing – seven I think ...

Mr GUILAS: Belyuen.

Mr TIDSWELL: Yes. We do Belyuen on contract as well, sorry. We do Belyuen and Acacia on contract to the Northern Territory government. In those cases, yes, they are very prescriptive.

Mr ADAMS: When we did the maintenance at Belyuen, it is like that: that is all you do and you do not do anymore. We could go back out to Belyuen three times in a week, a three-hour round trip and then whatever it takes to do the maintenance that we could have done the first time we were out there – and you cannot change.

Mr TIDSWELL: If there was flexibility about what can be done, instead of, ‘Sorry, love, no purchase order, cannot fix it. I have to travel back to town, get a purchase order and I will come back and fix your tap washer.’

Mr ADAMS: A lot of the times we just fix it and we cop that. But I cannot see the value in going back out two days later to do something we can do while we are there. But we have ended up copping that.

Mr TIDSWELL: And we would cop that too, because it is a bloody waste of taxpayers’ money. But we would not be paid because we would come back and say to the Department of Housing, ‘While we were there we also fixed these three tap washers’. ‘Sorry, it was not on the order; you will not be paid for it.’

Ms FYLES: If you did say to them, ‘We need to fix these three tap washers’, they would send you back out there?

Mr TIDSWELL: Yes. They would issue an order. It would probably take about a week or so for them to generate an order.

Mr ADAMS: They would have someone ...

Ms FYLES: Do you ever encounter where they say, ‘Oh, that is too minor and it is not worth a trip out there’?

Mr ADAMS: They would have someone go there to check it themselves. They would have their person go there, check what we have reported, then make the decision on whether we need to go back, or whether it was a major issue and they can handle it, or whether it was a tenant issue or the government’s issue to pay for it. They would do that then come back to us and say, ‘Here is a purchase order’, or nothing.

Ms MANISON: Would they have an amount – something under \$100 or over \$100 – where they would make those calls on whether or not they would go out and inspect or give you the benefit of trusting your professionalism of making those calls?

Mr TIDSWELL: They do now under the new system we have where there are the HMOs and the CMOs, is it? Whatever they call it. We hold the contracts for Belyuen and Acacia for the tenancy and housing support and the minor maintenance. That is less than \$100 jobs. We end up doing a lot more than that, but that is the way it is. If it is over \$100 they send a contractor out, even though we have got people on site that probably do the job anyway.

We are not on their panel contract for maintenance at the moment. We have asked if we can be on it but we are not.

Ms MANISON: Just to be really clear Mr Tidswell, the arrangement you have got at the moment is that Yilli go out and provide services for Belyuen, and you said about seven other houses.

Mr TIDSWELL: Belyuen and Acacia on contract. We have those contracts.

Ms MANISON: For housing and then the other houses you manage for other town camps around Darwin, which camps are those?

Mr TIDSWELL: All the formal Darwin town camps. For Aboriginal Development Foundation we manage Palmerston Indigenous Village, Knuckey Lagoon, One Mile Dam and also Amangal down at Adelaide River. For Gwalwa Daraniki we manage Minmarama and Kulaluk and then for Bagot Association we manage Bagot.

We have those town camps and we also have a suite of affordable housing as you know, and those seven houses we have peppercorn leased off. Housing in our affordable housing program and we have also got Berrimah estate as you know.

We do all the formal town camps and a lot on informal town camps as well.

Madam CHAIR: How long have you had that contract to provide the repairs and maintenance?

Mr TIDSWELL: At Belyuen and Acacia?

Madam CHAIR: All of them.

Mr TIDSWELL: Yilli has done it since it was first formed 10 years ago for all of those Darwin town camps. As far as Acacia and Belyuen, we have had that contract for two or three years now.

Mr ADAMS: Probably a bit longer; four years.

Madam CHAIR: What negative feedback do you get from residents in terms of repairs and maintenance? Do you get complaints? I guess we are trying to drill down here what is really going on. It is very encouraging to hear that you have become far more efficient than what you were a few years ago. You are getting on top of things and finding greater efficiencies but what are you hearing on the ground?

Mr TIDSWELL: Like any community housing variety you can never keep everybody happy. There is always going to be some level of complaint. We tend to find the tenants that do the most complaining are usually those who are behind in their rent or they have a grudge

to bear. You can certainly never keep everybody happy. One of the biggest complaints that we get from our Aboriginal town camps in Darwin is just the lack of housing.

We have not had a new house built in over ten years. During that time we have had a lot of urban drift into Darwin, driven by interventions and just natural urban drift. Urban drift is happening.

Even if you are unemployed, it is more fun to be unemployed in Darwin and wander around Casuarina in the air conditioning and your kids can go to a decent school and have a chance to get a job. So, urban drift is there, it is happening big time into Darwin.

Madam CHAIR: What about overcrowding? Are you still seeing that on the town camps?

Mr TIDSWELL: We are. Even in that time there has been a lot of this natural increase in population. So there is quite a bit of overcrowding in town camps.

Madam CHAIR: What is the average number of occupants in each house?

Mr TIDSWELL: I knew you would ask for that. It is really difficult to answer. It is a very fluid population and it is difficult. Probably places like Knuckey Lagoon and Palmerston Indigenous Village are our most crowded, Bagot not so much. We try as much as possible to limit numbers in houses as well and keep visitors away as much as possible. That is often at the request of the tenants as well.

It is very hard to give a definitive answer to that. Certainly there is overcrowding, particularly in Knuckey Lagoon. There are issues there.

Ms MANISON: Clearly you have different arrangements with town camps and housing at Belyuen and Acacia. Do you have a preferred model of how you go about delivering repairs and maintenance and service tenants to the best of your ability? Do you find that in the different town camps you service there is one model, one system that you feel works best, given that I imagine you have different types of arrangements because you have different communities and organisations you work with?

Mr TIDSWELL: We do. We deal with different leaseholders. The one that is closest to the most functional would be Bagot because there is some semblance of governance there. They have people who come together from the community we can consult with. We know they are broadly representative of the community and we can talk to them about housing issues and allocation. We lack that at our other town camps, quite frankly. There is no real leadership in any of the ADF communities. Certainly Gwalwa Daraniki community is pretty much dominated by one or two people who do not represent their communities. That is one of the issues we struggle with. Certainly, Bagot is the closest to the mark because there is some semblance of governance there.

Ms MANISON: Do you find you are at capacity of your ability to deliver the repairs and maintenance work to maintain the housing – the system to do it, having the right amount of flexibility. Is it easier dealing with an organisation or community like Bagot than it is to deal with the government department like Housing?

Mr TIDSWELL: Oh, yes, far easier. There is not the level of bureaucracy. Dealing with the Department of Housing you have all these layers that you have to work through to get a

job done. Whereas with our community housing, the housing stock that we directly manage, we do not have that.

We are very much also a one-stop shop. Everybody is there in the office from the tenancy officer who knows exactly who lives in that house to the works manager to the maintenance staff to the accountant who can say how much in arrears that person is or how much that is going to cost. If there is query it is as simple as somebody getting up from your desk and going to his desk and asking him. There is that one-stop shop, flexibility, there are no layers and we can respond very quickly.

Mr WOOD: Can I ask who checks on you? Do you have someone checking that you are doing your job?

Mr TIDSWELL: The department has a number of performance indicators in place. I would not say that they could probably be better, to be quite frank. But really our checks and balances really come through our performance. Being in Darwin, as your know, it is very political and it is very easy to get an ABC reporter out there. From our level of complaints, we monitor that as well.

I have said this before; I often think that Yilli has done too good a job. If we had of had the same appalling situation that has happened in Alice Spring town camps I think there would have been a lot more attention towards the Darwin town camps. The Darwin town camps have been totally left off the radar. I think in some respects that is because we have done too good a job. It is a squeaky wheel.

We do monitoring, we also did a customer satisfaction survey last year independently. We got a consultant in. That showed, I think it was 93% approval rating from our tenants and we will do that again this year at same stage as well. But there is always going to be some level of complaint.

Mr WOOD: You do housing maintenance, some of that can obviously be due to people misbehaving in a house.

Mr TIDSWELL: Yes.

Mr WOOD: You have an MOU with Aboriginal Development Foundation, but how much weight has that got in relation to removing a person from that house.

Mr TIDSWELL: It has got no weight. We, not being the lease holder, cannot evict people from the premises. We need the lease holder to do that, the owner of the property.

While we can make our views known to the lease holder and make recommendations, we cannot actually evict somebody from that property.

Mr WOOD: So you not only have Aboriginal Development Foundation as a leaseholder, you have Bagot ...

Mr TIDSWELL: That is Bagot Association.

Mr WOOD: And you have the Adelaide River ones?

Mr TIDSWELL: That is ADF.

Mr WOOD: ADF.

Mr TIDSWELL: Gwalwa Daraniki.

Mr WOOD: Acacia?

Mr TIDSWELL: No, that is part of the housing.

Mr WOOD: Those places have leaseholds, the same as ADF – a perpetual lease?

Mr TIDSWELL: Yes, or Crown lease, yes.

Mr WOOD: We will talk to Kalano soon, and it does the tenancy and is the leaseholder. Do you think that is the best model?

Mr TIDSWELL: Yes. It is very hard being a tenant and also the landlord. We have constant problems with Bagot, for example, with three households. They are very antisocial, their housing is a disgrace and they cause problems for the whole community. Sometimes they will keep the whole community awake all weekend – playing loud music, parties, alcohol. But they are all long-term Darwin residents.

We will go to the management committee at Bagot and say, 'We need to evict these people. They are \$8000 behind in their rent, their house has been smashed', and the management committee will, more than likely – and we only had this scenario two weeks ago – say, 'Oh, no, no, let us give them another chance. They are long-term Darwin residents.'

Also many people are afraid of the flow-on effects of doing that. Leaseholders like that management committee, at times have been threatened, 'You evict me, and I will come and beat you up. I will get my family.' They live in that community so it is really difficult for them. They face all that community pressure plus threats of violence if they start evicting people. It is very hard to be landowner and tenant at the same time. Also, when it comes to things like raising the rent, people are hesitant to make decisions that will affect their own wallet as well.

Mr WOOD: Do you have any programs where people take some responsibility for their house and surroundings? Do we encourage people to fix the tap, to go to Bunnings to get a washer and some paint to patch up something that might be damaged, or even buy a lawnmower? At Knuckey Lagoon people have a fence around their yards now. Is there any encouragement for people to do things and not rely on you for everything? I know the Housing Commission has the best garden competition. Do you have something similar to encourage people to do things for themselves?

Mr TIDSWELL: We do, through our tenancy officers. We have four tenancy officers at the moment. If somebody wants to paint their own house or wants to do something around the house we are in full support and will often even provide the paint to people.

As far as the programs, no we do not have anything in place. Unfortunately, Yilli lost the tenancy support program to Larrakia Nation a few years ago and we have been waiting for that to come up for tender but it just never seems to come up for tender. But it is crazy that we do not have a full-blown tenancy support program. We lost that to Larrakia Nation years ago and that was a tender decision by the Northern Territory government.

So no, formally we do not have anything in place, but our tenancy officers and our maintenance people work with people all the time.

Mr WOOD: Just on a slightly different question about response times. How do you go with, and you know that I have got relations at Bulgul but you have also got Woolaning and I

think there is another community on the Finnis River on the Litchfield Loop Road, Walangurminy, and you have got Adelaide River. So what are response times for those communities like? Obviously you have got limitations on going out there all the time.

Mr TIDSWELL: Climatic at times, of course, but otherwise our response times would not be too much different to what we achieve in Darwin. They would be slightly longer. I have not actually separated the outstations out. Barring seasonal conditions I would not think there would be much difference.

Mr ADAMS: Basically anything electrical or with water – as you know we have had some big issues at Wagait with the water – we would respond within a day. If we got a request that day we would try and get out there on the following day. On a few occasions it has not happened and that is just because our contractors are either already on a job or our blokes are already on a job. But we will try and respond within 48 hours to get out there and do it, sometimes quicker.

Mr WOOD: With outstations, they are on in your case Larrakia Land Trust, do you have a lease arrangement or MOU? How is the arrangement?

Mr TIDSWELL: Just MOUs, for example, at Bulgul – I think it is four different associations we have MOUs with. There are four different small associations so we have lots of MOUs.

Mr WOOD: I get worried that it is a bit of a dog's breakfast.

Mr TIDSWELL: It is a bit of a dog's breakfast, yes.

Madam CHAIR: Do you collect rent on behalf of housing associations?

Mr TIDSWELL: We collect rent ourselves and then that goes back into insurance, housing repairs and maintenance.

Madam CHAIR: Just going back to what you said about Larrakia Nation providing the support services. How do you work with them?

Mr TIDSWELL: We have been very dissatisfied with what we perceive as the services they provide and the tenancy support program across Darwin. It does not matter whether it has been housing commission or across the town camps it has not been very successful. Housing will even acknowledge that.

Our tenancy offices at times make contact with them over certain issues and tenancies where they perceive that a tenant may need support in a particular area. We have not found their program very responsive, I must say.

Mr ADAMS: On the work side of it, the process is very inadequate. I get a phone call or an e-mail from their manager saying a house has a leaking tap or a light or door is broken. Then we respond to that as we do in our time frames. That is all we get. There is no other communication.

Mr WOOD: How does that work? If a person has a broken tap, do they just ring you?

Mr ADAMS: Yes.

Mr TIDSWELL: Our housing managers can report it themselves.

Mr WOOD: What is Larrakia Nation's role then? Is there a duplication of roles? The householder rings you or do they go through Larrakia and they ring you?

Mr TIDSWELL: Often, when they are doing their program – whatever it is; I cannot tell you what it is – the tenant might say to them, 'I have a leaking tap', so they will ring that through on behalf of the tenant. That is all it is.

Mr WOOD: I did not realise. We do not even have them on our list to talk to.

Mr TIDSWELL: The vast majority of people phone through their requests. We also have a 24-hour emergency 1300 number, so it is free to ring. We also have contact info on our website. People can do it even on their smart phones; it is one of those tricky little things where you can put anything in. The vast majority of people ring their request through. Or the tenancy or maintenance people will pick it up on a general sweep through when they are doing maintenance or tenancy agreements. We get really cranky when people do not report things.

Mr WOOD: A general question. What do you see as the future of these places? The 15 Mile only has a certain area and that could be full of houses in the next 10 years, for argument's sake. Do you see how these places will fit in the future of the Darwin area? They are going to be just ghettos – I use the word ghetto not in a derogatory way – and there will just simply be a little isolated pocket of people living here and here and here. That is all the people who can live there because there is no more room. What do you see?

Mr TIDSWELL: I think there has got to be a transition in the town camps. I think most of you have been out to Berrimah Estate. That is a lovely little estate and I have said for years that there is no reason why Bagot, Knuckey Lagoon, any of those places could not be a Berrimah Estate.

I think there has to be a transition away from what we call our community housing, which is the sort of housing we have in our communities now, into affordable housing. There has to be that transition and I think over time those communities will become absorbed. If they can transition into proper nice little suburbs like the Berrimah Estate I think that absorption will be very easy.

Mr WOOD: What about home ownership?

Mr TIDSWELL: Home ownership is not as hard as everybody thinks. We have looked into this. We did a lot of planning work at Bagot; it is actually quite easy to sublease. It is easy; it is not complicated. It is a subdivision – subleases – and it happens that they are trying to get it going out bush now and it is exactly the same; it is a sublease.

With the affordable housing stuff – with a sublease you may pay a lease fee every year. So you do not have the cost to purchase your piece of land when you build; your only cost is to build your house. You can build a pretty nice house in Darwin for \$220 000 so that is your mortgage. The mortgage on that over 20 odd years is probably going to be cheaper than what you would be paying rent in Darwin.

We could get some affordable housing out there under home ownership quite quickly. We have also looked at this whole issue because there is hesitation about selling pieces of land out of the town camps. We have looked at various models of how we could work that so we could keep the housing for Indigenous people, but as affordable housing as home ownership.

There are some very good models out there already, things like the retirement home model, where there is eligibility to buy a block of land or buy a house – for example, over 50.

That model could be very simply adapted for, say, Bagot where you would have to be Indigenous or have to have a connection to purchase that property, as in retirement home style, off the body corporate. There would be an agreed appreciation value a year. If you got five years in and decided that you wanted to sell, you knew exactly what you were going to sell that property for, and of course you sell back to the body corporate and they on-sell it again. It is also a very safe model for banks as well, as far as defaults.

It is all basically there, it just needs the nuts and bolts put together. It is very achievable, it is not hard.

Madam CHAIR: We have run out of time unfortunately. Thank you so much Mr Guilas, Mr Tidswell and Mr Adams. We really appreciate your contribution today.

The committee suspended.

ABORIGINAL DEVELOPMENT FOUNDATION INCORPORATED

Madam CHAIR: On behalf of the committee I welcome everyone today to this public hearing looking into the housing repairs and maintenance on town camps in the Northern Territory.

I welcome Mr Bernard Valadian, General Manager of Aboriginal Development Foundation Incorporated. Thanks for your time in coming before this hearing today.

This is a formal proceeding of the committee and the protection of parliamentary privilege and the obligation not to mislead the committee apply. This is a public hearing and is being 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.

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

Please state your name and the capacity in which you are here and maybe give us some background to why you are here today and what your organisation's connection is to this inquiry, thank you.

Mr VALADIAN: I am Bernard Valadian from the Aboriginal Development Foundation, which most people would know as the local organisation that has been around for about 40-odd years. We first started the organisation in 1968-69 and I have worked with them since.

In the earlier days there was no such thing as real camping sites, so we started trying to locate areas of land where people can congregate or live, then try to do some servicing on those areas.

Back in the 1970s, scattered throughout Darwin were little blue tarps and wherever those tarps were we were trying to shelter people. There was no such thing as what you have got today, as in funded programs for housing.

Over time we did get some small amounts of money. No, first of all we applied for leases. It was very difficult in the 1970s because government was not quite sure what we were looking for. We were trying to stabilise people, get them into a particular area where we could service them and then work out what it was the future might have held. It worked out then that we applied for special purpose leases as anybody else could have done. They were very difficult in the beginning because I think the first one might have taken three, four or five years before they were accepted and the lease was issued.

The first one we got was the Railway Dam or One Mile Dam. There was a lot of talk from the Chief Minister at the time, Marshall Perron, saying that with this piece of land the future of our people was all settled. We knew that even then there was a lot of transient movement through it, mainly from Port Keats and Daly River residents. Whenever they wanted to come to town it was a place they went.

We then had a group out at Knuckey Lagoon. They were mainly station people who had worked on cattle properties. It seemed to be a situation from before the 1960s, that station owners would drop their workers off at Knuckey Lagoon for the Wet Season. Then they would pick them up after the wet and take them back out. We found that was challenging, because we had groups of people coming in for short periods of time, trying to service them and get them the things they needed for everyday life.

We went further out to where the new hospital is and there was a piece of land out there. People were camping and they were mainly the relatives of people sick in hospital. It was a thing then and still is today that if somebody from a remote area was transported to hospital relatives would come in to be nearby. Because they knew that if you went to hospital at that point, you would only go back in a coffin. It was not a good thing, but they were very concerned about that. But that camp did not last very long.

We had another community at 16 Mile, which is now Palmerston, and that was very difficult to organise. We eventually got that one up and running.

Then we went further out to Adelaide River. We got that one going because there were elderly people there who had a lease and they were not sure about the future of that property. They asked the foundation if we could take it on, so we took it on, transferred title to special purpose lease. We organised that then we went to Humpty Doo.

Humpty Doo is another cattle property. We worked with those people, got some housing done and eventually they go the lease in their own name.

We went to another place called Bulgul and worked out there in the 1960s and 1970s and even the 1980s and developed that to a certain extent. The people then applied and they go that back in their name.

The organisation was not out there to be the only organisation to have the land. We went out to establish certain areas, and if people wanted to take it on they could transfer, which is not a problem.

As years went by, we found that applications for funding from the department at the time were very difficult. We would be given, say, \$10 000 to build a house and all we could do was build a one-room house, with possibly an extension at a later date. At most of the communities, when we did get the money, we went into heavy structure because we knew the type of housing in the urban areas would not last for people in the communities because of the overcrowding and the type of living they had.

We went into that development and later, when ATSIC came on-stream, it was very difficult period because the local people who were on the ATSIC board did not like what the foundation was doing because we did not associate with other groups. We tried to develop what we thought was the right thing for the people, listening to what they wanted.

With the closure of ATSIC, then the department at that time set up the Yilli Rreung organisation to take on the management of the properties because Australia wide every funded Indigenous organisation was shut. So all the funding was redirected into mainstream funding programs. But, locally, ATSIC developed Yilli Rreung and that was in a rush situation but they were not quite sure what it was they were taking on. In the early days Yilli Rreung did have some problems in settling down and finding out what its responsibility was going to be, and the cost of that responsibility.

Over the years I think Yilli Rreung has not been funded at the level that it started with. They did not have the funds for new housing programs. I think in our communities in possibly 15 to 20 years we have not had one new house in any of the communities. The difficulty for people like Yilli was trying to understand what was required in the repairs and maintenance, what the program was and how to communicate with people.

We had a situation where when we got a water bill from Power and Water we would photocopy it many times and take it out to the households. We would read their little one off meter and say this is how much water you have used and this is what you have to save. It was rather a difficult thing to do, but we were just getting it up to scratch when Yilli walked in. The earlier manager from Yilli Rreung was a guy from Adelaide who had no idea of the local concept. He was trying to manage it like an Adelaide based organisation which did not really work because our people are very transient. As Yilli would find, you do not always speak with the same person that you negotiated with last – about payment of rent or water accounts.

What we found afterwards, when they gave the financial responsibility to Yilli, is that nobody ever spoke about the leases and what was going to happen in the future. The foundation retained the lease holds of all these properties but we are still waiting in the background as to what it is that government would like to do in the future. It is no good us putting up a program. If we put up a program that involves money, there is no money so nothing happens. There has been no discussion with those departments as to who is responsible for the communities or what we and the people would like to see in the future.

Over the years we have had half a dozen or more town plans of all the communities, but those town plans were put to one side. A few years later, another town plan would be

developed and people would not get their hopes up because they knew it was just a consultant coming in finding out what it was that people would like, then just shelve it. We have a situation where nothing has happened since Yilli Rreung has taken over. All it can do is maintain it as best it can with the money it gets; whether it is money from government or from the people for its commitments.

The foundation is still there. I do a lot of voluntary work and go and see the people quite regularly. Again, as Yilli Rreung might have said, if there is a problem in a house, I will ring the housing officer and say there is a problem in the house.

Our main concern at the moment is the water account. That got out of hand because the first two managers of Yilli Rreung would not accept the fact that they were also responsible to make sure the water account was paid. They expected the foundation to pay it, but the foundation was not receiving money or collecting any money, so there was nothing we could do about it. So the bill kept on piling up. It would be on record at Power and Water the number of meetings they have had to discuss how to reduce this account. There is currently an agreement between Yilli Rreung, Power and Water and the foundation about how we can reduce that water bill.

It is not easy, as people say. We are the leaseholders, but leaseholders with no money, no financial responsibility. We have a piece of land. Yilli Rreung acts as real estate agents and they have to carry out exactly what a real estate agent has to do. The difference is we do not always have people who are willing to pay their costs. We have difficulties with that.

Ms FYLES: Coming back to your point about accommodation and the lack of development over the years. You were talking about people coming into Darwin to support people in hospital – for the lack of a better word, urban drift. Traditionally, some of these were set up as visitors' camps and now they have moved into permanent accommodation. Do you feel there is a lack in visitor's accommodation?

Mr VALADIAN: There always has been that problem of people coming in for short periods. A place like Knuckey Lagoon had always been in the earlier days a visitors place and Railway Dam certainly was for people from Port Keats and Daly River. There are certain areas that people would come in and go to. We were originally funded to set up camp sites, public showers and toilets to act as a visitor's camp. Over time people wanted something a bit better than a piece of tarpaulin so we had some small houses built. Sometime ago the description of the houses out at Palmerston Village was chicken coups. They were very big houses with a lot arc mesh around the sides just for protection. Because of a lack of money for maintenance they certainly deteriorated, not strength wise, but the look of them - lack of paint work and that sort of thing.

That is what is missing at the moment. If the Bagot community had not been changed it would still have a lot of visitors coming in. Because it is just the trend that if they have a relative in Darwin they will go and stay there, even though the household is trying to live a different sort of life with a controlled situation in their homes. Visitors from out of town, we found in the past, mainly were not in the inner circle of the communities. They were in outer cycle and they were the ones who were drifting backwards and forwards.

I do not know what the future will be. The land is very limited anywhere now for a visitor's camp. I am not sure if that is what the government would like anyway.

Mr WOOD: Where do you get your funds from, and roughly what would you get annually?

Mr VALADIAN: Our foundation does not get funded.

Mr WOOD: So, how do you operate?

Mr VALADIAN: It is all voluntary.

Mr WOOD: You have your headquarters out at 11 Mile and you operate vehicles and you go around the communities.

Mr VALADIAN: Just one vehicle, yes. The vehicle I drive, and we pay for that ourselves. At the moment, what I am doing is just a voluntary thing. I am supposed to be retired but retirement does not come into it when you have responsibilities so you keep involved with the people.

Mr WOOD: So does ADF have a responsibility in regard to whether it is funded or not? Does it have a responsibility under its constitution to do certain things?

Mr VALADIAN: Not really. Under the terms of the lease, we were to carry out certain conditions. Those conditions were met, but they need to be upgraded now. They say we had to build so many shelters, showers and toilets and some roadworks and fencing. That was done in the earlier days of the lease in issue. But at the moment we are now being funded. When we have a request from somebody in the community, we go out and see what the problem is.

A lot of the time it is not something that Yilli Rreung can carry out; it is a social problem rather than a management problem. But when there are management problems, I get in touch with Yilli Rreung and let them know the concern.

Mr WOOD: Yilli Rreung mentioned governance. At the moment, governance on two of those communities – well, three; unfortunately one person died at the One Mile community. The others are only simply individuals. Yilli Rreung mentioned that Bagot has an association which has a governance structure which people can belong to. Do you think that is the way the 15 Mile and Knuckey Lagoon should be heading?

Mr VALADIAN: I am not quite sure that would be the way to go. The Bagot community has been around for quite some time and families have been there all their lives. With our communities, we have people who have come in; they do not claim it as their land, but their living rights because they have been there for so long. They would like to see a better housing situation, with better maintenance on housing.

People in these communities seem to be now trying to become family units, even though they have a lot of visitors coming. The main householder would like to be a small family unit so they can control the situation. But they would also like to have some say in how their piece of land is developed.

Mr WOOD: On those communities for which you have the lease arrangement, who is the decision-maker for those communities?

Mr VALADIAN: It seems to be a consensus at the moment. At Palmerston Village there was a need to have some street bumps, street lights and other things done. The women seem to be the main stay of most communities. The women out there got together and said that this is what they want done because they want to control the way visitors come in with their vehicles, and they want to see at night time. By them grouping together and being the spokespeople...

Mr WOOD: There is no formal structure, is there?

Mr VALADIAN: There is no formal structure.

Mr WOOD: Who do they talk to, to get some formal things done?

Mr VALADIAN: There are other organisations, service organisations that go out there. They talk to different organisations to get a consensus from them. Yilli, at some point, if they feel that they can help out they will certainly move in. I think at the moment they could be the ones doing the road upgrades or safety devices at Palmerston Village.

Mr WOOD: You just mentioned speed bumps. The community does not have a formal structure, who do they go to. Do they go to Yilli or yourselves, as lease holders?

Mr VALADIAN: They come back to me and I have to give it to other people. Because they know the length of time I have been with them. A lot of them were not born when we first started out with them and they look at me as a long term person who may be able to get something done. It is not financially that I can get things done. I can only do it through negotiations with other groups.

Mr WOOD: We are looking, at the moment, at housing and the maintenance of housing. You do not really have any role to play in that side of things?

Mr VALADIAN: Not physically.

Mr WOOD: Even things like making sure an area is slashed, because they are quite big areas like the Knuckey Lagoon area. There is the maintenance of cemeteries, fencing, roads and that is all Yilli Rreung's responsibility?

Mr VALADIAN: In the beginning, when there was an MOA between Yilli and the foundation, they were to take on all of the physical activities the foundation did. We do not interfere. We do not even tell them that the grass needs cutting, because that would be interfering with them.

If the people are complaining about something like that we ask them to go directly to Yilli.

Mr WOOD: What is your role when it comes to someone who is damaging a house and actually should be evicted? How does that process work?

Mr VALADIAN: Yilli has the right now to take an eviction notice. It might have been last year or the year before. We gave them the rights to do that in writing, rather than they have a notice on the house but cannot evict people from the property.

Mr WOOD: I got the impression today from talking to Yilli Rreung that they do not have the power of eviction.

Mr VALADIAN: Well, we have a letter to prove that they have got it. The notice of eviction was given them. If they terminate somebody in a house, the police can get them out of the house, but because it is common property they cannot get them off the property.

Mr WOOD: Basically, they can put them off the edge of the veranda – and that is it?

Mr VALADIAN: That is all that could happen. That was before. But a letter was written and given to Yilli Rreung that instead of coming back to us, in understanding they have a problem tenant, they can move those people – or if they have problem visitors – and evict them for trespassing as well.

Mr WOOD: From the house or from the whole property?

Mr VALADIAN: From the property. That has happened in the past. People have been trespassing 12 months later before they can get back in. But that seems to drop the problem. But Yilli Rreung does have the right to give an eviction or trespass notice. Eviction is not our problem. It is between Yilli Rreung and Housing. Trespassing is ours, and we can give them the right to remove anybody who has been evicted from the house and from the property.

Mr WOOD: We are running out of time, but do you believe people should have the ability to own their own house? Yilli Rreung mentioned they could have a lease over the land. Do you see that as an option for the future of these communities?

Mr VALADIAN: When we talk with families who are trying to be family groups, they would like to have a right to the house they are living in. Whether that is an existing house or a new house, it does not matter. But they would like to have some more stability in the community, and that would be the step to go down. If they are continually just a renter, then they do not have the security.

Mr WOOD: What do you see as the future? I understand the history. You have given us a good rundown of the history, which was that people, in many cases, came to town to drink and it was a secure place to go back to. That has all changed now, so what do you see as the future for the land you have leases over?

Mr VALADIAN: It depends on the overall development plan of the government for the properties. If it fits in that we can have a small housing unit – for particular groups of people, that is the way to go.

It would be very difficult at this stage to tell anybody up there that this land is going to be taken for some other development. The fear, which was always put on Railway Dam residents, was that Larrakia Nation or somebody else might take that lease on, build a hotel and redevelop. Then they would relocate the people to somewhere else. One of the thoughts from Larrakia or somebody was maybe Knuckey Lagoon. That would just be putting a cat among the pigeons. There is no way they would move into another property they do not associate with.

I think, as Yilli might have said, if we can find another method of housing people and redevelop the site they have got. We cannot expand the site, but we will still have a need for a visitor's area. I am not sure how we can broach that to government. The areas of land that we have now, we started in the 1970s to get. There is no vacant land anymore for these sites.

Mr WOOD: Has the government negotiated with you over the years about relinquishing your lease? If so, do you know where that has reached?

Mr VALADIAN: There have never been discussions with us on that. There was a town plan drawn up by a technical consultant who may have been working with government on the Palmerston Village. His recommendation was that no more money should be spent out there; we should be relocating the people to somewhere else.

When I saw that recommendation we asked him exactly where the land would be. He had no clue. You can write up something like that and it may be taken by government but you still have to find the next step. Do these people in our communities fit straight away into an urban situation? There has got to be a transitional period otherwise you build a better house and make family units but you will find visitors need to be somewhere else.

Madam CHAIR: Thank you Mr Valadian, that is fascinating. It is certainly new information for me, coming from Alice Springs. Thank you for time, we really appreciate it.

The committee suspended.

KALANO COMMUNITY ASSOCIATION INCORPORATED

Madam CHAIR: Good morning, on behalf of the committee I would like to welcome you to this public hearing via teleconference. I would like to welcome to the table to give evidence to the committee Mr Graham Castine, Chief Executive Officer of Kalano Community Association Incorporated; Mr Alan Mole, Deputy Chief Officer of Kalano; and Ms Adrianna Weetra, Housing Manager.

We appreciate you taking your time to beam into us today. This is a formal proceeding of the committee and the protection of parliamentary privilege and the obligation not to mislead the committee apply. This is a public hearing and is being webcast through the Assembly's website. A transcript will be made available for use of the committee and may be put on the committee's website.

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

Could we start with each of you stating your name and your position? If any of you would like to make an opening statement, perhaps a brief overview of what your role is in terms of the town camp repairs and maintenance.

Mr CASTINE: Good morning, Graham Castine is my name and I am CEO of Kalano Community Association and to my left is Adrianna Weetra who manages our housing program and Alan Mole the Deputy CEO.

Alan's role, he supervises the overall housing program with assistance of Adrianna who is the day to day manager. I am the one who signs off on things and takes the blame if it all goes wrong.

I just want to make an opening statement. You have our submission which we sent a few weeks ago. One of the things that I think is in our favour is that we can be seen as a single provider of all the housing matters in respect to the Kalano in that whilst we receive money from the government we are responsible for all repairs, maintenance, upgrades and the actual management of the program. It is our organisation that brings in contractors if needed, like specialist electricians and things like that.

None of our properties are classified as Aboriginal land, it is all special purpose lease or Crown leases in perpetuity, all in Kalano's name.

That is where the good part stops, I suppose. We are still faced with overcrowding. We have a terrible backlog in renovations and upgrades. The last new houses were constructed in the mid-2000s. We have no additional land on which to build new houses, let alone money with which to construct them. We have a small rental arrears problem, but not insurmountable and we are gaining in that as the years go by.

The matter of old housing stock is a problem for us, given the limited potential or ability to construct new units and even add to the ones that exist. The overcrowding, apart from wear and tear on houses and so forth, leads to a range of social and welfare-type programs. Unfortunately, now and again we have instances of suicide and so forth. Some of that should rightly be blamed on the overcrowding and the closeness of the people living together.

With all those sorts of things, we are persevering. We have a policy and rental procedure. We do not charge economic rental. Our rental is set at around \$200 a week. As I said before, our rental arrears sits at around 30% behind.

The effectiveness of our program of getting the job done, apart from being the main provider and the group that call in the experts as needed, is beneficial. We attend to all urgent repairs and maintenance such as electrical, plumbing and sewerage immediately. There is very little – I will not say waiting time – backlog in getting that work done.

We would dearly like to have a regular renovation or refurbishment upgrade program, but from a financial point of view, the arrears and what it costs Kalano to run its housing program the year before last was about \$85 000 in the red and it is about 35 on track for this year. We are making up the difference, all be it rather slowly.

I certainly read the press coming out of Alice Springs and I can only hope that things get better for them. Given our experience there are too many main players in the game. The other thing I will mention briefly here and we made a point in our submission is the reference to town camps as town camps, that might have been a term that was all in favour in the 1970s, but certainly it does not describe, and I do not think Aboriginal people would see it as describing, that they are living in the town camp.

Alan would you like to say any more?

Mr MOLE: No, I think you covered just about everything.

Mr CASTINE: I think we are open for questions.

Ms MANISON: Thank you for that opening statement. Certainly with Kalano, as you have pointed out, you are the lease holder as well as the place that also provides the repairs and maintenance to the people living in the housing. Can you go through what you feel the advantages are to being the organisation that does the property management and the tenancy management, and the disadvantages to that as well?

Because we have heard so far this morning some pretty complex arrangements between housing providers and the Department of Housing and different Indigenous organisations.

Mr CASTINE: Alan may comment on that in a minute. But I will say that being the sole provider does have its benefits. The only limiting factor in that manner is the level of finance. The other important factor given our range of community consultations and discussions is that we are able to address issues in a single sitting, excuse the pun. The advantages I see around Kalano running its own housing program is that we have local employment. We have our own repairs and maintenance building crew that is all Indigenous. Our tenancy management or operations is also provided by local Indigenous people from the communities. We can address matters a lot quicker, as they are reported and actioned in a timely manner.

We have a relationship with the community people because local community people are providing the work and consulting with the tenants. All those benefits outweigh going outside the organisation and provided a service from outside because our community people know who will be knocking on their doors to carry out repairs and maintenance and talk to them about issues in the community.

We conduct bi-monthly meetings with each member community and discuss all issues, but housing is one of the larger ones always raised. We are going from a community meeting straight to reporting back to our council so it has that information. It is across our whole tenancy program.

Ms MANISON: When it comes to setting the rents charged, does Kalano set it or is something you do in consultation with the community, or a governance-type structure within the community? How does that work?

Ms WEETRA: We have a consultation with the community. The last time in our AGM in 2011, we discussed it and the community passed it to raise the rents. Then our rent raise started in 2012.

Mr MOLE: It was the community that agreed to \$200 per house per week.

Ms WEETRA: Yes.

Mr MOLE: That is charged back to the prime tenant.

Ms MANISON: Do the rents collected go straight back into repairs and maintenance, upgrades or other works within the community? If so, how is it determined where that money is spent – on which house or what the priorities are?

Mr CASTINE: I will say something first. All that money goes back into the housing bucket, so it is not extracted from the housing system. The determination on new works or extension is negotiated with the community and determined by our council if it is house A or

house B, and so forth. Unfortunately, as I said before, our deficit in housing the year before last was about \$85 000. This year it looks like being about \$35 000. All that money goes into basically repairs and maintenance and urgent stuff. On top of the figures in the submission when they show salaries they are fairly high. But they are salaries, apart from administrative staff, that go to our own carpenters and our housing labour force.

Ms MANISON: Does Kalano receive any external funding for housing from the Northern Territory government or the Commonwealth?

Mr CASTINE: Nothing from the Commonwealth, all from the Northern Territory and its rental collections. Most of housing stock back in years past has been funded by the Commonwealth. The current program is Northern Territory funded.

Madam CHAIR: What proportion of your repairs and maintenance undertaken by Kalano are paid by government funding? Do you have a breakdown of that?

Mr CASTINE: Not with us, the figures on page three of the submission come from two different buckets of money. One is rental and the other is the housing program from the Northern Territory Government. Which basically works out just for the town camps is \$2 200 per house.

Madam CHAIR: Okay. Would the government pay approximately half of the repairs and maintenance, just off the top of your head, or a third?

Mr CASTINE: Yes, I think that would be fair enough.

Madam CHAIR: Thank you.

Mr WOOD: How did you get the job of the housing maintenance contract? Are you appointed by the government or did you have to apply, like a tender? To get the job of being the body that looks after these houses.

Mr CASTINE: No, we have not had to tender, it has been a recurrent ongoing program adjusted annually. We do not have a tender for it. It is a straight grant.

Mr WOOD: Straight grant. Yes. It seems that in one hand in Alice Springs we have a tender system; in the Top End we have bodies that are basically told that is their job. I am trying to work out why it is different in Alice Springs than it is in the Top End. Is it an historical thing? Who made that arrangement in the beginning? Do you have any idea?

Mr CASTINE: It is very much historical in that Kalano is a bit over 40 years old. Its beginnings were built around the provision of accommodation. That was in the end of the Commonwealth and beginning of the Territory government. It has gone on from there. Our records are generally good; hence we have stayed in the game. I fear unless it was a selective tender process we would end up in the alleged messes that are occurring in Tennant Creek, Alice Springs and other places. That would be to the detriment of our clientele.

Mr WOOD: Right. What I am getting at is I see all the advantages you gave us of what you do to do with timeliness, local employment etcetera. If I was an economic person who did not worry about those matters, I would ask how I would ensure you are giving the government, or whoever provides you the money, the best value for money you receive, if you are the only one who has this job? I hope that makes sense.

Mr CASTINE: It makes sense in a way.

Mr WOOD: From the Treasurer's point of view, you might say, how do we know we are getting the best value for money for the people who live at Kalano?

Mr CASTINE: You have to look past the status and standard of houses, the broader Aboriginal community involvement, the arrangements whereby the operation is in place to encourage and is successful in Aboriginal employment. I am not talking of just labourers and truck drivers, I am talking of people in the building industry who are tradespeople in their own right. The very nature of Aboriginal organisations doing their Aboriginal thing does not mean that everything is perfect. There is still a lot of – particularly in Katherine – overcrowding, availability of land and things like that.

The hundred year flood business does a fair bit to any new construction. If it is not broke then why fix it?

Mr WOOD: Do you get any feedback from the community? Do you have a way of independently seeing whether the community support what you do? When you get complaints, how do you handle those?

Mr MOLE: Consulting with community through the bimonthly meetings and our AGM every year. We have members from each community who sit on our council who also sit on the housing committee board. Between our bimonthly community meetings and the council meetings that information is shared around. Our tenancy staff and management staff are in the community on a regular basis, if not daily. Talking to tenants about any issues or problems they might have, following up on rental arrears and any other issues within the houses or the communities.

Mr CASTINE: Housing inspections.

Mr MOLE: Housing inspections are done on a quarterly basis.

Madam CHAIR: What is the most common problem people raise with you in terms of the housing?

Mr MOLE: Mostly minor repairs and maintenance, is there door working, are they safe, is the house secure, electrical problems, plumbing problems. Generally it is just repairs and maintenance. Rent is a bit of a concern at times; they cannot afford the rental amount and they struggle with that.

But the rent is set by the community, by the council, so everyone has to abide by that agreement. Those who are in arrears we work very hard to try and catch up on their rental payments. We also encourage other people living in the dwelling who have an income to contribute as well.

Madam CHAIR: You mentioned overcrowding being a huge problem. What would be the average number of people living in each house?

Mr MOLE: It works out at about 5.5 per house.

Madam CHAIR: That is for a three bedroom home?

Mr MOLE: We have a mix of bedroom rates, 10 four-bedroom houses, 56 three-bedroom houses – is that right and am I reading that right?

Ms WEETRA: Yes, that is right. Eleven two-bedroom houses.

Mr MOLE: Eleven two-bedroom houses ...

Ms WEETRA: And there are four one-bedroom units.

Mr MOLE: If you look at Tjwalpin town community, there are four houses there. There is a total of eight ...

Ms WEETRA: Nine.

Mr MOLE: Nine houses, sorry, but four of them are tin sheds. They are not a one-bedroom at all; it is just a tin shed.

Madam CHAIR: Have you had any new houses built in recent times?

Mr MOLE: Not for 20-odd years.

Madam CHAIR: Twenty years, no new homes.

Mr MOLE: Twenty years plus since I ...

Mr CASTINE: Since the end of the war – they had the Commonwealth ASHIP program – there has been nothing. Which was the turn of the century, so to speak.

A comment on the occupation rate of five-plus – there are some houses in a couple of communities where there is regularly upwards of 12 to 13 people in a house. That is only an average figure. Bear in mind that some of the housing basically has one sleeping room in it that would probably only have a couple of people in it.

Mr WOOD: Do you have eviction rights? One of the issues we have here is where the leaseholder is different than the person who is maintaining the houses. If a person is damaging a house, what process do you have in relation to whether that person should stay in that house?

Mr MOLE: We work with the person and try to fix the problem of the issue. It may be it is rental or damaged houses. If a tenant or someone living in the house damages the house and we determine that it is wilful damage, then that person will pay for that wilful damage. We will do that with a deduction form through the housing tenancy program.

If the tenant is behind rent and we go through our steps as per our tenancy agreement and follow the right process through and get to the point where the tenant is not complying with what we have asked, we will take that back to the housing committee meeting with our recommendation to evict and the committee makes the final decision on whether we move for eviction or not.

Mr CASTINE: Once there is a decision to evict, we then follow the Northern Territory legal requirements.

Mr WOOD: One other issue on housing ownership. Have you looked at the possibility of people owning their own houses on the lease?

Mr MOLE: We have discussed it. We have had that discussion in our community meetings. There are houses within our town area where we can look at tenants purchasing that house. But we cannot sell the houses that are on our town camps because we do not own the land as such.

Mr WOOD: Yilli were looking at subleasing, so you only lease the land but you own the house. I think that is what they were looking at.

Mr MOLE: I am not familiar with the rules around it sorry, I am not quite certain so I do not like to comment on that.

Mr CASTINE: On that, particularly at Miali Brumby, we were only able to under the terms of our Crown lease release for a maximum of 12 years so that is not attractive to anyone buying. There are probably a few people who are living in our accommodation in Katherine town lots who may be keen to buy. But they are certainly not falling over us with applications.

Madam CHAIR: In your submission you note that you are in discussions with the government about increasing their level of support for Kalano. I am just wondering how that is going? Whether you have come to any resolution or outcome?

Mr CASTINE: We have had some discussions with senior officers in the department. We are waiting on a letter which is supposed to come this week and will outline what the government sees as the future funding arrangements. We are looking at things like block of global grants, mixing of some of our other Northern Territory Government funding that is closely related to housing like municipal works and so forth and linking those programs together and getting some benefit there.

One of the points we make in the submission is that the level of funding we get for different houses, properties and circumstances varies from \$2 000 to \$5 000. Given that nothing is very far from Katherine it would be nice to have a single figure, particularly the higher one. That would overcome some of our upgrading of houses. It costs us just as much to send the plumber to a rock hole which is about 15 km out of town as it does to sending them half a kilometre in to Miali Brumby.

Madam CHAIR: I think we have run out of time, but thank you very much for your time, Mr Alan Mole, Mr Graham Castine and Ms Adrianna Weetra.

The committee suspended.

TANGENTYERE COUNCIL

Madam CHAIR: On behalf of the committee, I welcome everyone to this public hearing on the housing repairs and maintenance of town camps in the Northern Territory.

I welcome Mr Walter Shaw, the Chief Executive Officer of Tangentyere Council. Thank you for your time today.

Mr SHAW: Thank you, Madam Chair and committee members. I have an opening statement that I would like to read out.

Madam CHAIR: I have to go through a few points, Walter. This is a formal proceeding of the committee and the protection of parliamentary privilege and the obligation not to mislead the committee apply. This is a public hearing and is being 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.

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

By all means, if you could state your name and your position, please provide us with your opening statement.

Mr SHAW: My name is Walter Shaw, and I am both the Chief Executive Officer of Tangentyere Council and a resident of the Mount Nancy town camp. I am grateful for the opportunity to take part in the Public Accounts Committee inquiry into housing repairs and maintenance on the town camps.

Town camp housing has been under the management of the department since December 2009 when two levels of subleasing were implemented. The first sublease was the tripartite Alice Springs Living Areas sublease between each housing association and the Executive Director of Township Leasing on behalf of the Commonwealth and the CEO of Housing on behalf of the Northern Territory government.

The second sublease or under lease is the housing management agreement between the Executive Director of Township Leasing and the Northern Territory Government. The housing management agreement makes the department the housing authority to town camps, housing associations, the expenditure of \$100m inside money was conditional on the signing of the subleases. In addition the Commonwealth threatened compulsory acquisition of town camp land if the subleases were not finalised.

There is no denying that SIHIP has delivered new houses and the refurbishment of the majority of pre-existing dwellings. It is also clear that SIHIP delivered improvements to infrastructure of Larrapinta Valley, Hidden Valley and trucking yards. These three town camps were designated as being tier one. Whilst these town camps received a significant proportion of the SIHIP expenditure, it needs to be noted that none of these town camps obtained the standards outlined in the subdivision guidelines.

This admission is supported by the fact that the town council is unprepared to deliver municipal services on any town camp for the 12 town camps designated as tier two. The reality of infrastructure upgrades is very limited in scope. Our submission to PAC is primarily about housing repairs and maintenance but it is impossible to completely separate the issue from the subleases, the housing management agreement, SIHIP, tenancy management and municipal services.

The years since signing the subleases can be divided into distinct time periods according to the awarding of the tenancy management and property management contracts. These contracts and their incumbent contractors also reflect distinct models of service delivery. In addition these periods also reflect the changing attitude of the department toward contractors and tenants alike.

After the signing of the subleases Tangentyere in collaboration with the Central Land Council, MLSC and Health Habitat founded the Central Australian Affordable Housing Company in 2010. The department entered into a single contract with Affordable Housing for the delivery of tenancy and property management. Until 2012 Affordable Housing employed tenancy managers and housing maintenance officers. In the initial contract Affordable Housing had a greater role in the procurement and coordination of external trades, the work of property maintenance was informed by health habitat, and was based on safety and nine healthy living practices.

The methodology of this work was based on environmental changes that would lead to the maximum health gains, particularly in children aged zero to five. Health habitat was recognised with a UN World Health Award in 2011. So under a single contract, the Central Australian Affordable Housing Company was operating both tenancy management and best-practice property management.

In 2012, the department split tenancy management and property management into separate contracts, leading to two separate providers, being the affordable housing company and Ingkerreke. There was initially no one help desk funded. The property maintenance contractor was not funded to employ housing maintenance officers and the model required the department to generate work orders before the contractor could attend to any R&M issues. The role of Ingkerreke was similar to a panel contractor. This model was flawed and the department seemingly disinterested. Procurement and contract management were not a priority of the department.

These arrangements were in place for 37 months until January 2016. In February 2016 Zodiac became the tenancy manager and Tangentyere Construction became the property maintenance contractor. Tangentyere Construction employs a team of housing maintenance officers. This model is a structural improvement, but retains the structural limitations that for jobs costing in excess of \$100, the department needs to procure the services from the panel of contractors.

The Department of Housing, as the landlord, contract manager and procurement body, needs to accept responsibility for the decline of remote public housing stock, including the town camps.

To summarise, our concerns are:

1. The department has presided over the decline of town camp housing for 37 months.
2. The department has failed to properly manage the procurement of repairs and maintenance services from the previous contractor.
3. The department will continue to fail in the procurement of services for jobs over the \$100 threshold.
4. The department self-insurance of the existing housing stock.
5. The growing number of beyond economic repair houses on the town camps.

In concluding my comments, Tangentyere and the town camps believe the public housing management of town camps needs to end in favour of a community housing model that both empowers and cares for the welfare of residents.

The role held by the department relates to the housing management agreement which has been a month-to-month agreement since 2012. The fact that the housing management agreement is month by month provides an opportunity for a community housing provider to enter into a housing management agreement with the Executive Director of Township Leasing on behalf of the Commonwealth.

Tangentyere proposes that the Territory recommend to the Commonwealth that the Executive Director of Township Leasing enter into a new housing management agreement with Tangentyere. This would install Tangentyere as the housing authority for the town camps, paving the way for the engagement of the Central Australian Affordable Housing Company as tenancy manager and Tangentyere constructions as a property manager.

Ms FYLES: Can I ask you a question about the community housing plan? Could you reference how that fits in with the comments you have just made?

Mr SHAW: Yes, when we were in the negotiation process with Jenny Macklin who was then the Indigenous Affairs minister, minister Macklin conceded to provide Tangentyere Council with \$190 000. We then set up the organisational structure of the Central Australian Affordable Housing Company. Initially the Central Australian Affordable Housing Company was an alternative community housing model to move or shift away from the original housing management agreement that was signed in 2009.

That original sublease and housing management agreement that was signed in 2009 was up for review in December 2012. That was to review the whole housing management structure regarding all provisions under both the 40 year sublease and the under lease that was provided by the Executive Director of Township Leasing to the then Northern Territory government Department of Housing.

The aspiration of people in setting up the Central Australian Affordable Housing Company is that historically public housing has failed Aboriginal people. We were at a precipice of change regarding housing on town camps and it was subject to the leasing agreements. Upon signing the leases and setting up the housing company we were looking at ways to increase capacity in the community around community and social affordable housing sector apart from public housing models.

Madam CHAIR: So that was an agreement between Tangentyere and the Commonwealth – that would be a good model to pursue.

Mr SHAW: Yes, obviously the Northern Territory is some 30 years behind the rest of the states of Australian when it comes to the community and social affordable housing sector. We understood that our lives were going to change upon signing the leases. The minister supported the notion to set up a community housing company. Tangentyere Council and the other boards of directors that form the governance of the Central Australian Affordable Housing Company share the same view that there are alternative models of providing a community or social affordable housing need.

Madam CHAIR: Did the Northern Territory government ever come on board with this model? Were they ever supportive of this, prior to this government – the Labor Northern Territory government?

Mr SHAW: Yes. Initially when we set up the governance structure of the Central Australian Affordable Housing Company, we approached both the then federal and Northern Territory governments whether they wanted to be part of the governance structure. They declined that offer. When you are looking at the inception of the housing company, it was something new that was envisaged in Alice Springs and Territory-wide. We are dealing with a new way and model in tackling the housing issues regarding Aboriginal housing.

Ms FYLES: You may or may not be aware that the NT government has just announced another review into housing in town camps.

Mr SHAW: Yes.

Ms FYLES: It is saying that the Local Government and Community Services department will take administrative responsibility for all 43 town camps. How do you – is a review ...

Mr SHAW: A lot of Aboriginal people – and I am joined here by my board – are fed up and have had enough of reviews. They have taken a step forward in setting up an affordable housing company around the community sector. Reviews are not worth the paper they are written on, as far as they are and I am concerned.

When we were notified that Adam Giles provided the future tenancy management contract to Zodiac we were concerned because the Central Australian Affordable Housing Company was operating in the space for five-and-a-half years, working closely with the residents of town camps, and also public housing in Alice Springs.

I guess the next step is to question the validity of the leases – what roles and responsibilities both federal and Northern Territory governments have in the tripartite arrangement with the subleases. The housing management agreement was stipulated under that original housing management agreement contract that was signed by the then Labor government in 2009.

Ms MANISON: Mr Shaw, going to the property and tenancy management contract, you spoke about the first 37 months before that change occurred. What reasons was the Central Australian Affordable Housing Company given as to why they were not successful in winning that contract?

Mr SHAW: I guess the Central Australian Affordable Housing Company will present in front of your guys. I can only talk on behalf of Tangentyere Council. Our role as Tangentyere Council is to provide advocacy and rights protection of our membership of the housing associations. The housing associations have signed up to the 40-year lease agreement. Our job is to articulate the provisions under the original 40-year sublease agreement and also the housing management agreement, and how that looks in terms of implementation on the ground and every general meeting that we have the housing association and the town camp residents. There is one consistent theme since 2009 and it is issues around housing.

We understand the distinction between the housing management agreement and the repairs and maintenance contract that was awarded to Tangentyere Constructions and the housing management agreement that was awarded to Zodiac. Our concern is there were consolidated mechanisms set up under the sublease and the housing management agreement.

One area is the Housing Reference Group, which looked at a variety of policy matters, housing allocation and tenancy agreement. Zodiac is now the tenancy manager and now has that role and responsibility. It has really taken away from the right for our membership to have some form of agency in their lives. It has disempowered them as looking at the

housing needs on the town camps because of the myriad of government arrangements that have been put in place since 2009.

Ms MANISON: Certainly in a previous hearing we have sat down and spoken to the Department of Housing. One thing that was clear was that they have had to put a new system in place in dealing with repairs and maintenance. They showed us that they now have a one-stop phone number, so to speak, to tackle issues when people within the town camps have got issues that they need to report. They said it was an improvement in their system because clearly there have been a lot of issues.

Have you seen improvements on the ground with the new system so far?

Mr SHAW: One area of concern that people have raised is houses that are beyond economic repair on the town camp. There have been circumstances where there has been minor fire damage to a number of the houses on the town camps. The Territory government self-insures for their housing stock and they have taken over all of the housing stock on our town camps. There are close to 280 houses on our town camps. There are at least 37 houses that have been left vacant for quite some time. We are talking well over the 18-month period.

With the pre-existing structures, the housing associations retained a decision-making structure that informed Tangentyere Council of any housing matters and issues. Since 2009, Tangentyere Council had to transfer that housing function and office over to the Central Australian Affordable Housing Company. So since 2009, for the last five years, that housing function has been transferred over to the Central Housing Affordable Housing Company.

When we hold general meetings on the town camps, there are concerns that people were going without a functioning house – workable or functioning ovens – for well over the 12-month period. There were cases where air conditioners would break down during the summer period and would not be fixed for at least three months.

I guess the issue is when you are dealing with Aboriginal housing there is a hardware and software argument. Our town campers have never had any form of transitioning into these new management arrangements and are quite concerned the way in which Northern Territory Housing approaches housing issues. It does not meet their standards of providing that service to them.

If the government was serious about looking at the state of Aboriginal housing, the town camps of Alice Springs went forward to set up its own community and affordable social housing company. If the states transferred all existing public housing stock into a community housing model, I believe it is time the Territory seriously considers that shift in political paradigm in Aboriginal housing.

Madam CHAIR: Have you had a dialogue with the Northern Territory government about transitioning to a community housing model?

Mr SHAW: All of the ministers, from the Chief Minister down to the other ministers, have all been incognito since they have been elected. We have had no open dialogues with this current government of any issues we have raised publicly, and also through letters of correspondence through each government department.

Mr WOOD: What do you define as the difference between community housing and public housing?

Mr SHAW: Community housing looks at the communal construct of the community itself. Public housing has failed because the policies that are put in place work against the residents. The housing associations in Alice Springs, the town camps, we have a varying degree of different language groups. There are Aboriginal people who still live a semi-cultural existence in the urban backdrop of Alice Springs.

Community housing looks at the sensitivity around dealing with community housing on Aboriginal land. There are issues where people may have to remove themselves from their town camp for long periods of time – funerals, ceremony during the Christmas period. There are a number of factors when it comes to overcrowding. People still hold and maintain that cultural obligation of looking after family when they come in to Alice Springs. Alice Springs is a service hub for at least 260 Central Australian communities.

When it comes to the specifics of housing the Central Australian Affordable Housing Company will deal with that. I guess what we are concerned about as Tangentyere is the validity of the sublease and how that operates with both the Northern Territory and federal government. That does bring in the housing management agreement that the Central Australian Affordable Housing Company has to operate under.

Mr WOOD: Through the public housing model, which is run by the Territory government, does Alice Springs have a group that includes Aboriginal people from the town communities? Under the umbrella of the Housing Commission is there a body with Aboriginal people on it and also liaises with Aboriginal people?

Mr SHAW: No, public housing operates under the mantra of the public housing system and the government system. There is no formal membership or Aboriginal people who inform the public housing policy or structure.

Mr WOOD: But do they liaise with some group such as Tangentyere Council?

Mr SHAW: I let in to earlier around the Housing Reference Groups that is a consultative mechanism under the sublease. There are three consultative mechanisms under the 40-year sublease agreement. You have the Housing Reference Group, the consultative forum that brings in the Executive Director of Township Leasing, Tangentyere Council and town camp members, and then you have the advisory housing forum that has dropped off the radar since 2009. That brought in parties from Tangentyere Council, Central Australian Affordable Housing Company and members of the local public housing office. That consultative forum was to inform overarching policy when it comes to public housing on town camps.

Mr WOOD: If you have all those bodies – I find this very complex ...

Mr SHAW: It is, Gerry. I am a Jersey lawyer.

Mr WOOD: All I want is the door fixed and make sure people know how to look after the house.

Mr SHAW: Yes.

Mr WOOD: That is within circumstances relating to culture and where people live. You have all those groups and they must be theoretically working together to come up with some outcomes. Are you saying the outcomes that are satisfactory for the people living in Alice Springs town communities are not there?

Mr SHAW: Yes. There are programs that have been provided by Tangentyere Council with regard to housing. We operate a tenancy support program that deals with people who are at risk of their tenancy. There is a raft of programs that deal face-to-face and case-by-case with residents in the town camps.

When it comes to any overarching committee, there is no committee outside the sublease agreement. So if both the Northern Territory and federal governments usurp the responsibility and their legal obligation under the sublease agreement, there is no one form of consultation or any of those processes in regard to housing on the town camps, outside of what is provided under the tenancy management or the repairs and maintenance contract.

Madam CHAIR: This is a little controversial. Larapinta Valley town camp is talking about taking legal action against the Northern Territory government for not repairing and maintaining their properties adequately. That is correct?

Mr SHAW: I met with the member lawyers, the Central Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service and the ALRA group that are representing Santa Teresa and a number of other remote communities last week. My understanding is that the legal advice that has been provided by these two legal bodies is based around individual residents with regard to their tenancies, looking at applying some form of legal action against the Northern Territory government, being the landlord under the *Residential Tenancies Act*.

Tangentyere Council has sought its own legal advice. That legal advice is being provided to Tangentyere Council and the housing association is looking at the subleases as a holistic approach in whether or not the subleases and the validity of the subleases should remain. The housing associations entered into the sublease agreements in good faith in a very contentious period back in 2009. The sentiments that have been raised with me are that people think they are worse off post 2009.

Madam CHAIR: Just to clarify, prior to 2009 Tangentyere had full management of the town camps?

Mr SHAW: Yes, Tangentyere Council operated under the Indigenous Community Housing Organisation system and that whole housing function that upon signing the leases was transferred over to the Central Australian Affordable Housing Company.

Mr WOOD: Kalano runs the housing in Katherine. So they are the lease holders and they also do the tenancy management.

Mr SHAW: Yes.

Mr WOOD: Is that the same sort of agreement that you had before 2009? Where they are basically given the money and they run the community.

Mr SHAW: Prior to 2009 the town camps retained their special purpose lease, head lease. Tangentyere Council were provided funds to operate the ICHO system in the housing

office and provide the repairs and maintenance and tenancy management on the town camps prior to 2009.

Madam CHAIR: Similar to what Kalano is still doing?

Mr SHAW: Similar to what Kalano is doing, yes.

Madam CHAIR: So that answers our previous question around why some areas have a Kalano type model and how we in Central Australia now have a very different model.

Mr SHAW: All Aboriginal living areas, some are subject to 40 year lease agreements some are not. All of our housing management function was transferred over to the Central Australian Affordable Housing Company. But when it comes to having the distinct housing management system, it is all bottled into the sublease agreement and the housing management agreement. But when it comes to the state of public housing on the town camps it is clearly stipulated under the under lease and referred to the housing management agreement that the previous in 2009 signed up to.

Madam CHAIR: The sublease is with whom? Who are the parties?

Mr SHAW: The parties of the sublease are the federal government, the Northern Territory government and each of the 16 town camps housing associations.

Madam CHAIR: Just to clarify again, you are of the view that there could be a breach of the sublease with the current arrangements?

Mr SHAW: We have identified a number of breaches through to human rights breaches as well. I guess if we were to challenge the validity of the subleases, it would be between the Executive Director of Township Leasing, who is that statutory authority representing the Commonwealth.

Madam CHAIR: For the quite limited focus of this inquiry, that would include repairs and maintenance of town camp housing?

Mr SHAW: That would include housing management and repairs and maintenance. It is absurd to separate those contracts and give one contract to one company and provide the repairs and maintenance to a separate company.

Mr WOOD: We checked and we found out today that in Darwin Larrakia Nation has the management and Yilli Rreung ...

Madam CHAIR: Is the tenancy support ...

Mr WOOD: Sorry, tenancy support, yes.

Madam CHAIR: Yilli Rreung has the tenancy management and repairs and maintenance?

Mr WOOD: A devil's advocate question again. Zodiac has taken over the management. If you were in government and basically having to manage public funds, do you see the government, to some extent, has the right to put something out for contract to see whether it could get better value for money? If so, what do you see as the problem with a company like that coming in that could do the job cheaper? Do you see advantages and disadvantages of that type of approach?

Mr SHAW: Okay. I do not deny there is a process of government with regard to procurement. Our concern – and the Chief Minister has made public that his decision was a monetary decision – is that Zodiac came under at least half of what the Central Australian Affordable Housing Company put forward in its submission and tender.

If I was in government I would do an overall review of housing in the whole of the Northern Territory. I would reconsider the decision that was made to award Zodiac the contract, based on all selection criteria with the tender and procurement process.

It has left people disenfranchised and disenchanting that it has undertaken to set up a housing company with losing a function of housing and property maintenance since inception of its organisation prior to 2009. The concern that a lot of people have gotten is that they really want a generational socioeconomic framework so there are social outcomes affixed to housing on the town camps. You have a current contractor that is a for-profit company, that is not a community housing limited organisation, it is a bookkeeping company and that is what our concern is. Given the bad track record of this particular company operating in the space of housing management in remote localities in Australia, people are concerned.

People have stated to me that possibly Zodiac could be a gun for hire by this current government, mass evictions. They are concerned around the fact that they have entered into these agreements and both governments have usurped their role and responsibility in terms of dealing with the housing issues since 2009.

Ms FYLES: Just on that, does the department dispute-in your submission you claimed that the Territory is required to repair and replace certain houses. Does the department dispute that?

Mr SHAW: Considering that there are 37 vacant dwellings on the town camps that would never have existed prior to these subleases. When you consider that there are 219 existing housing stock and dwellings on the town camp that is a large proportion of vacant house and a large proportion of displaced people who no longer have a roof over their head.

The other concern is the beyond economic repair houses. There was only one ever civil matter that was raised legally and challenged by Tangentyere Council on behalf of one particular resident. This old lady passed away in the last two years. Her house had fire damage and she had to remove and relocate out of her house. She was an invalid, disabled woman and we were providing aged care services to this lady. We were providing sponge baths to this lady 100m from her house under a veranda in the same town camp.

That was the only civil matter that was raised regarding recourse of accountability regarding a beyond economic repair house. We actually won in terms of providing the old lady a house in that particular town camp. She was housed there for at least 12 months before her passing.

There is a human cost when you have a system that does not bring in the welfare and care of the resident.

Madam CHAIR: I am sorry; we have run out of time, Walter. Thank you very much for your time. It has been great to have your contribution. Thank you very much, Mr Walter Shaw.

The committee suspended

ZODIAC BUSINESS SERVICES

Madam CHAIR: Welcome this morning to this public hearing on the housing repairs and maintenance of town camps in the Northern Territory.

I welcome Mellissa Young, the Director of Zodiac Business Services. Thank you for taking time out in your day to be with us today.

This is a formal proceeding of the committee and the protection of parliamentary privilege and the obligation not to mislead the committee apply. This is a public hearing which is being 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.

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

If you could state your name and your position and if you would like to make an opening statement of why you are here today, thank you.

Ms YOUNG: Thank you, Robyn. My name is Mellissa Young, known as Molly, Director of Zodiac Business Services. I am a long-term local, having lived here for 40 years this month.

Zodiac was the successful tenderer of the provision of tenancy management of Central Australia town camps, which involved managing 270 dwellings across 16 town camps. Zodiac commenced on 1 February 2016. We are now 71 days into the contract. During this time, we have visited every household at least once.

The first week prior to the commencement of our contract Zodiac, along with HMOs – housing maintenance officers – of Tangentyere Construction - they have the HMO contract of the town camps – we met with the residents of every camp and explained our role and what they would expect from us.

Since commencement of our contract, Tangentyere Construction has conducted – the reason I mention that is we work very closely together in this contract – and attended to 297 maintenance issues for the month of February, 114 of which were reported by Zodiac. There were 304 maintenance issues for the month of March, 225 of those were not reported by Zodiac.

During February, Tangentyere Construction sent teams out to town camps and identified maintenance issues in every home they can access. Many they were able to repair on the spot. They have a \$100 limit per trade that they can repair on the spot.

Anything over \$100 they seek approval from the Department of Housing. If the repair requires attention of a trades person this is reported to the Department of Housing with photos and they will issue a purchase order to their panel of contractors.

During March, Zodiac conducted 186 inspections with a further 42 inspections to be completed by 22 April. During inspections major issues are identified and reported to the HMO which is Tangentyere Constructions. During the past couple of months, in collaboration with our HMO, we have encouraged tenants to phone through maintenance issues as they occur to Zodiac and should they see either Zodiac or Tangentyere Constructions working within the camp to feel free to approach them with their concerns. I believe this is working, as the numbers indicate.

When tenants call we ask for as much information as possible so that we can assess if the maintenance issue requires the following three things: immediate attention, usually related to safety or health issues and in which the HMO person is to attend within four hours of the report; there is urgent attention, when HMO will attend within four days and then there is routine, in which HMO will attend within ten days. Once a maintenance issue is reported a scanned copy of the maintenance request form is emailed to Tangentyere Constructions who will attend the property based on its category, whether it is immediate, urgent or routine.

They assess if it is necessary to repair and if they can within their \$100 limit or must refer it onto the Department of Housing. They either to get approval to fix it themselves at higher than \$100 or it has to be done by a tradesperson and from that housing will issue a purchase order to their panel of contractors.

We receive a report back from Tangentyere Constructions once a week outlining the completed work plus any additional work that comes to their attention. For instance if a tenant has reported a blocked toilet but note there is a leaking tap they will repair that as well and include it in their report.

All this information is loaded on to TMS which is the tenancy maintenance system.

I gave you a pretty good overview of what we have been doing since we started. If you have any questions – I hope I have covered a couple of questions you may have had – I am happy to answer.

Madam CHAIR: Thanks, Mellissa. I will start by saying you are not on trial here ...

Ms YOUNG: I know that, yes.

Madam CHAIR: I realise that this contract is new for you. Has the way in which you are operating been set out for you by the Department of Housing? Is that how they prescribed you operate?

Ms YOUNG: Yes. Our role is to work closely with the housing maintenance officers. That is part of the contract. For your information, I have worked with Tangentyere Construction for the last two years on another contract, so we work very well together. I was able to demonstrate that.

Ms MANISON: I appreciate it is a new contract you have working with the town camps. I am keen to find out, in attending to repairs and maintenance issues so far, how has it been going? Do you feel that the system is efficient enough? I appreciate it is a difficult question to answer at the start.

Ms YOUNG: Personally, it has. As I mentioned, the HMOs report back to us once a week and it highlights anything that may have not been addressed yet. For those that have

been referred to Housing for panel contracts, Housing also reports back to us advising the purchase order has been raised for whatever it could be. I believe it works very well. The numbers show it, plus I have had some good feedback from tenants that we have been so quick to respond. They can phone in and we have the HMO out.

Even though we have urgent, immediate and routine – they will be about four to 10 days – in some instances they can get out there – if they happen to be in that camp, they will address it straightaway. I believe it is working.

Ms MANISON: When it comes to repairs and maintenance jobs, do you have much oversight, on the property and tenancy management side, to how many of those jobs are at the \$100 and under level?

Ms YOUNG: It is not for us to assess. It is for the HMO to assess. We do not have any involvement in the dollar value. We simply report it. We have identified a problem with the tenant or the tenant has brought it to our attention. We then give it to HMO. They are the ones that know how much something costs. They know that they can fix something within the \$100 mark per trade so that is different areas.

That is quite clear and anything over they get approval from housing, they send an email or call them and get approval. It might only cost \$150 and housing will probably say yes, to proceed, and then they do that.

Madam CHAIR: Are they HMOs employed by you, Zodiac?

Ms YOUNG: No, they are Tangentyere Construction, a completely different contractor.

Madam CHAIR: Sorry, who is that?

Ms YOUNG: We are tenancy management and they are property managers.

Madam CHAIR: Tangentyere Construction, okay.

Ms FYLES: On the database system, do you have a database that you use and how do you monitor the progress of repairs and maintenance being reported?

Ms YOUNG: First thing that we have is a maintenance request form, which is a book, the hard copy. We write them out when we get them off the phone or from the inspections or out on the job because we encourage people to come and see us.

We fill that out and then if it is urgent we may phone up straight away and then follow it up with an email with a copy of that maintenance request form. That is sent through and identified with the MRF number plus the address in the town camp. Then that goes to them and when they report back to us we match that to our report to make sure everything is being done. Or they have gone to housing for the panel contractor. So we match it up and then follow up that way. We also update the Tenancy Management System as well.

Ms FYLES: Is it a database or a paper system used?

Ms YOUNG: Yes, well it is just an email. Maintenance request form, email and TMS which is the Tenancy Management System belonging to the Department of Housing.

Ms FYLES: But you use that within your office?

Ms YOUNG: Yes. Absolutely, we have access to the Tenancy Management System.

Ms FYLES: So you would be able to pull out a report for example this property number has had three maintenance reports or it has had seven. You are able to access that data or Department of Housing?

Ms YOUNG: I do not have access to do that. I believe Housing may have, but that is a question for the Department of Housing.

Ms FYLES: Okay, thank you.

Mr WOOD: Mellissa, Gerry Wood here. We had Tangentyere Council here just prior to you coming on. They were some extent critical of Zodiac in the sense that they do not believe a bookkeeping company can do the job. They said, and I hope I do not misquote them, but they talk about mass evictions, etcetera. How do you see yourself operating in this new role? Do you think some of the criticism of you has been fair in relation to employing and being inclusive of Aboriginal people?

Ms YOUNG: Well, I am sure you read all the papers and media reports. My simple answer to that is I was competitive when I went for the contract and I won it based on my merits. I have lots of experience. I am very comfortable with my role here. I have been doing tenancy management since 2011. My experience goes all the way up to east and west Arnhem area as well. I also deal with contracting in remote areas well. Basically, I am comfortable with doing what I have to do. I have no comments about what they had to say. My view is actions will speak louder than words. That is all I can say about that.

Mr WOOD: What feedback have you had back from the community in relation to what you do? Is it positive?

Ms YOUNG: Yes, absolutely. We have not had any problems.

Madam CHAIR: One of the criticisms made, as you know, has been that, particularly for town camp housing, because of the strong cultural links residents have, only an Aboriginal organisation or a very strong presence of Aboriginal people in a business or organisation can properly understand the nuances of life on a town camp. What do you think about that?

Ms YOUNG: As outlined in the tender, we have to employ 50% Indigenous – it is across everywhere. I am meeting that. I have up to 23 Indigenous people on my books. Obviously, I deal with remote areas as well.

Madam CHAIR: Those 23 are working on the town camps?

Ms YOUNG: No, no. I have two Indigenous people working on the town camps. I have four; I have two of these.

Madam CHAIR: Right, thanks.

Ms YOUNG: It is working really well.

Ms MANISON: Are the Housing Reference Groups in the town camps still up and operating? Is that a relationship Zodiac will have?

Ms YOUNG: Yes. They are brilliant. I love Housing Reference Groups because they are the best people to speak to because the last thing you want is to have two families who are feuding living next door to each other.

We have already held about four, one was cancelled last week because we did not have a quorum. So far it has been really positive, really good, they obviously worry that we are just going to throw anyone into houses. But I have explained to them that that is not what we are about.

That is why we use Housing Reference Groups to advise us, to put recommendations through. That has been working really well, in fact we have a few booked out for the next few weeks too. I think they have been good so far.

Ms MANISON: How often would you aim to be meeting with the Housing Reference Groups?

Ms YOUNG: We have been giving different options; those at Little Sisters want to do it every month and we gave an option to Abbots Camp last week. They want to do it every month too, even though it is very tiny because they have some issues they want to sort out. Then we have Basso's, and they want to do it once a quarter so we give them that option.

If something comes up or housing wants us to address something then we arrange it and just do that.

Madam CHAIR: Do you think that tenants or residents of town camps in Alice Springs are aware of their rights as tenants, and their obligations?

Ms YOUNG: If they are not aware they certainly can ask the question because I will go through the whole process with them.

Madam CHAIR: That is a part of a role, Mellissa, is it?

Ms YOUNG: It is really important. I have done this for a long time and my main concern is that if we need to bring in an interpreter we do, and explain the whole process of the tenancy and their responsibility.

Sometimes I might use a younger person from a family to speak, I often get told off by older people who say they understand me. But I do care, and I demonstrate that to my staff to ensure that people understand what their responsibilities are.

Ms FYLES: In terms of your engagement with town camp residents, you mentioned earlier that you have engaged with each resident. Is that face to face or is that letters?

Ms YOUNG: That is face to face. That was a week before we started our contract. It was Shaun Brown and Gavin; sorry I have forgotten his surname. Gavin is from Tangentyere constructions and Shaun Brown is with us. They went and knocked on every door and spoke to everyone about us starting our new contract from the 1 February and told them what to expect. We spoke about Zodiac being purely tenancy, about the people in the house, and to report maintenance issues.

Obviously Tangentyere Construction explained that they will be the one to come out to assess the maintenance issues, fix it if they can. Obviously, we are not being inflexible so they do not have to always come to us for a maintenance request, they can ask them on the spot as well. If they see them in the camp, we encourage them to wave them down so they can get their problem fixed or assessed – whatever has to happen – and then Tangentyere Construction report that back to us.

Ms MANISON: Okay, thank you.

Madam CHAIR: Mellissa, I know you have only been operating for 71 days, but what do you see as the main problems on the town camps? What are you hearing? What are people identifying as their problems?

Ms YOUNG: Uncertainty. Obviously, as you mentioned, there is a lot of negative media about us coming in. One of the first things people worried about was they would be evicted. We did a lot of meet and greet and I said that is not what we are about; we are about keeping them in their homes. We talked about everyone's responsibilities, including theirs. So that is the only thing. I do not know.

I recently had some feedback where people came to us and you could see the relief, 'Thank God you are not here to throw us out', or whatever. I am sure there will be things coming up all the time. There was an instance last week and she specifically asked for me. So I went out there and spoke to them. They felt quite good. They were fine.

Madam CHAIR: In repairs and maintenance – I know it is not your area of responsibility – what do you see as the main problems?

Ms YOUNG: This is the good problem. I had a conversation with Brad, the assistant manager. I spoke to him this morning. He is on leave at the moment. I was saying that the good problem is that what they have done in the last two months is amazing so he has set the standards very high, so the expectations are up there. It is a good problem because it means we will get out there and get it fixed. I do not see any negatives with them; they are very good. They are very proactive people. We work well together.

Mr WOOD: Mellissa, does tenancy management also include the yard around the house? On my visits, most houses now have a fence around the house. Does the tenancy management include outside the house as well?

Ms YOUNG: Sorry what was your question?

Mr WOOD: Most of the houses in the town camps in Alice Springs now have fencing around them, so they have a yard. Do you also work with the tenants to help manage that yard, or do you have programs people to self-help? For instance mow: their own lawns put in gardens; do you have any competitions that might encourage people to beautify their area et cetera?

Ms YOUNG: Not at this point, but it certainly is something I would look at because I have been involved in that with the remote side of it. I have been in remote for two years now so that is certainly not out of question. I would be right into that.

Mr WOOD: Even repairs and maintenance of their own house, do you encourage people where possible? I am not saying that they would fix the electrical, but if it was a leaking tap or something that could be fixed by someone just going down to Bunnings to get some glue to fix a tile or something. Do you encourage people to try and take some responsibility and not always rely on others, like yourself, to fix it up? I am not saying that is not your role, but so that people do help themselves where possible.

Ms YOUNG: All I can do is report and then if I do not get anything back I ask the question why. In this role they do ring frequently to see what is happening and our role is to respond back.

I cannot really comment about the time frames or why something does not get fixed. There are always reasons behind it, what they are I do not know, that is the Department of Housing's responsibility – they need to respond to that. All I can do is report it.

Mr WOOD: If things get behind do you find that you get the blame for that?

Ms YOUNG: Well yes, but I think it is how you manage it. One of the things that I do, and I am quite strong on this, is if something has been reported and I know that it has been reported for a while I will make a lot of effort to find out the background of why and what for. Then I will actually go out and see them and explain to them. I have not had to do that yet, so far so good.

People are frustrated, they might want something fixed quickly. That is okay, our job is to get it resolved and communication. Communicate back to the people, let them know.

Madam CHAIR: Mellissa, thank you very much for your time we really appreciate your contribution to this process. Mellissa Young, Director of Zodiac Business Services, thank you.

The committee suspended.

INGKERREKE COMMERCIAL

Madam CHAIR: Good morning and welcome to the hearing for the housing repairs and maintenance on town camps in the Northern Territory. Welcome to Mr Callum Mathison, CEO of Ingkerreke Commercial, and who is with you Callum?

Mr MATHISON: I have Louise Wellington, Louise is our Marketing Manager and assisting me today in the response.

Madam CHAIR: Okay, welcome Louise, thank you.

This is a formal proceeding of the committee and the protection of parliamentary privilege and the obligation not to mislead the committee apply. This is a public hearing and is being 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.

If at any time during the hearing you are concerned that what you will say should not be made public you may ask the committee to go into a closed session and take your evidence in private. Would you like to introduce yourselves and make an opening statement? Maybe a brief statement about why you are here and what your interest is in this inquiry.

Mr MATHISON: Thank you. Firstly my name is Callum Mathison and I am the CEO of Ingkerreke Commercial Proprietary Limited, a building and construction company in Alice Springs. Just a little bit of background to put Ingkerreke into context, our parent company Ingkerreke Outstations Resource Services formed over 30 years ago. 11 years ago they decided that there was a need for a commercial building contractor or aboriginally owned building contractor company in Alice Springs, hence how we came to be around.

In July 2015 we commenced trading as a proprietary limited company which has led us to where we are today of course. Context of how we have come to be here today is that we provided the responsive repairs and maintenance to town camps for a period of, I think, three years and two months starting in December 2012 and that contract ceased on 31 January 2016.

I am not sure what else I can tell you at this stage. Louse, do you have anything you want to add?

Ms WELLINGTON: Just that we thank you for the opportunity to speak on this. We are here to cooperate and we hope we can help with our experience with this contract. Thank you.

Madam CHAIR: For three years and two months you were providing repairs and maintenance to the town camps. What time frames did you have in responding to demands for repairs and maintenance during your time?

Mr MATHISON: Specifically, we worked under the terms of the contract with the response times. I am looking for the exact wording now. I think there was immediate scrutiny and maintenance orders and they had varying times they were to be dealt with.

I am sorry; off the top of my head I cannot tell you the exact nature of those response times. But I know the immediates were within four hours. I think the routines were within 25 days.

Madam CHAIR: One of the consistent themes of the submissions was that there had been delays in repairs and maintenance to housing on town camps. I wondered if, for whatever reason as the provider of this contract for three years, that was your experience - that it was difficult to provide the service at times?

Mr MATHISON: There are always difficulties. From our perspective, generally we attempted to complete works or respond to works in the time frame that was given to us. As you would be aware, that is not always possible to achieve – whether it is supply of material or sometimes tenants are not home so we have repeat calls to the house to finalise and service the work.

I imagine that throughout our contract, there were times when we did not meet those time frames. I would be open to that. But it was not through lack of trying from our perspective. Part of the issues is potentially the process that happens between the reporting of the maintenance issue to when it gets to the contractor to be able to deliver it.

Notwithstanding that, as I said to you, I think that there were probably times when we did not meet those time frames. But always in most cases I think in extenuating circumstances.

Madam CHAIR: One of the other themes that we have picked up through submissions is the onerous administrative processes involved in getting repairs and maintenance done. You have just alluded to that ten, can you tell me a bit more about that from your perspective.

Mr MATHISON: From our perspective it was very simple. Because in our part of it we would receive a purchase order from our client, the Department of Housing, and we reacted to that purchase order. We did not physically see the other side to this. However, our experience tells us that yes there were a number of cases we saw where we knew that issues were reported and there was a time delay between them being reported to CAAH, who was the tenancy manager, then to Housing. Then whether they were issued into a work order or not is another question.

Ms WELLINGTON: Yes, we had no involvement in that process until we received the purchase order.

Madam CHAIR: Someone provided information, I cannot think who it was, that there is often a bottleneck. Repairs and maintenance issues are reported and often they would hit this bottleneck. But you are not really aware of that I take it.

Mr MATHISON: We saw that from a very different perspective. We would quite often see late of an afternoon at 4 o'clock in the afternoon we may receive 20 or 30 orders in that 10 to 15 minute period. They seemed like they had potentially been bottlenecked through the day or perhaps a couple of days.

Ms WELLINGTON: Monday morning or Friday afternoon.

Mr MATHISON: Friday afternoon, Monday morning, those sorts of things. So we saw that from a very different perspective.

Madam CHAIR: They would come from housing, is that correct?

Mr MATHISON: Yes. But all the orders we received came from housing. I think some of what needs to be elaborated on here, and we understand this from our perspective and I cannot speak for anyone else on this. But with what was reported to CAAH and then what was sent to us as work order was sometimes not all the items that had been reported to CAAH. Housing had a policy I suppose, for lack of better words, where tenant damage was not being responded to.

If somebody rang up CAAH and reported an incident and said look there is a broken door, broken tap and a broken light switch. By the time it gets to us we might have gone out and fixed the broken light switch and tap, but maybe not the door because it was assumed that it was deemed tenant damage. So there is a perception issue between what was being reported by the residents and being received by the contractor, us in this instance.

Ms WELLINGTON: We would often find that out by accident; we did not have that information at hand. We would only know when CAAH would call us and ask why it was not responded to. We would have to go back to our records to know that it was not on the purchase order to begin with.

Madam CHAIR: So does that mean that there – we probably are not asking the right people – is a different system of processing damage caused intentionally and general wear and tear? Is there two different processes used?

Mr MATHISON: I do not think there are two different processes. As part of the process if it was deemed tenant damage then it was not being repaired until such time as they had a ...

Madam CHAIR: An arrangement to pay?

Mr MATHISON: An arrangement with the tenant to pay for it, yes.

Ms WELLINGTON: That is our observation. We really do not know what the process is.

Mr MATHISON: Yes, as Louise has pointed out, that is what we observed during that time. We are fundamentally not responsible for that process, of course.

Madam CHAIR: Thank you.

Ms MANISON: To clarify, Ingkerreke was doing the repairs and maintenance, and the Central Australian Affordable Housing Company was doing the tenancy management side of things. Did you have any direct relationship with them, day to day, or was it literally they did their side of the job, put the repairs and maintenance orders through Housing for consideration and then send the job out to you? Were you able to directly communicate with the Central Australian Affordable Housing Company which was dealing with the tenants face-to-face on a daily basis?

Mr MATHISON: There are two answers to that. What you have just described was our contractual relationship. Everything from us went through to our client, Housing, which dealt with that. If it needed to go back CAAH or something from CAAH needed to come to us, that information was disseminated through Housing.

On a day-to-day basis, yes, we had contact with CAAH – absolutely. Whether it was that we were picking up keys from them or organising getting them to help us organise tenants to move out of some of the vacates or some other thing, we had day-to-day contact with CAAH on different subjects, yes.

Ms MANISON: Looking back on the time you spent working on the Alice Springs town camps and delivering those important repairs and maintenance jobs. Reflecting upon that experience, can you see any ways in which the system was working really well that you were involved in? Could you see any areas you feel could have been improved to assure a better delivery of repairs and maintenance services to the town campers?

Mr MATHISON: Hindsight is a really great thing. From our perspective and from a business perspective and this is specifically from me. I would have brought forward the integration of an automated work system into this. In the last nine months of the delivery of the contract we used what I call an automated work management system. It is basically an app on your phone that schedules work for us.

That was a very invaluable tool. Had that process been used or something similar been used across the board that would have somewhat streamlined the system that we had. That maybe would have streamlined that delay with the processing of the work orders, from the time of reporting to the physical time that they actually got to us.

I think that there are two separate issues here. There is one issue which is how long did it take us to deal with the work once we actually had it, and how long it took the work order to get from the report of the maintenance through to when we received it. I think having that process and relying upon particular people or particular parts of the department to process

that, and that delay between report processing and reissuing the work order out. That is probably one area that would benefit from some level of....

Ms WELLINGTON: Transparency between the tenancy managers, housing and the contractor. Nobody had the live update to be able to tell the tenant and I guess that is something that is being felt across the board for all of us is not having that communication between the three.

Mr MATHISON: Just to try and clarify that a bit, what we are suggesting is that had we all been working in the one system and could see where everything was up to then it would have made it somewhat easier. At different times all parties would have been able to respond to tenants. With a well it is at this stage here so we expecting someone to be out there to do the work then. That is probably where we see the biggest issue here is that transparency of being able to tell exactly where that report is in the system.

Ms MANISON: Thank you.

Mr WOOD: Callum, in relation to one of the other people who came here today and spoke about going out to a site, they were probably further than you did. But they would go out on a work order to fix something on a house and when they were there they found there was another fault that had not been reported. Technically they had to go back and pick up another work order and go back again, which wasted a lot of time. They would, in some cases, simply fix the issue on site and not even worry about the work order. Are you able to do work orders over the phone? Today's technology means there is an app to get in touch with the department to say, 'I am at a house and I need to get another work order because we might as well do it while we are here'. Can they respond that way at all?

Mr MATHISON: Yes. We have experienced that in the early stages of the contract and later. Initially the contract allowed us to be able to pick up any additional works and carry them out. I stand to be corrected on the number, but I think it was up to \$500 extra. Typically we would ring Territory Housing and the concerned manager to say, 'We found this. We expect it will cost X amount. Do you want us to do this?' 'Yes, that is okay, please go ahead with it.' The work order would then be backed up or reissued or whatever they would need to do. We have experienced that, yes.

Mr WOOD: You said it was done. You do not have the contract now, but was there a change to that, or was that ...

Mr MATHISON: There was a change to it, which occurred – not so much because we could not do it anymore but we became so restricted in what was being delivered in the town camps, from a wear-and-tear or tenant damage perspective. The scope of works became somewhat less throughout the period of the contract, based around what was perceived as wear and tear and tenant damage.

Mr WOOD: So who made the decision about what you can and cannot do? If it is vandalism as against wear and tear, who decides whether one will be ...

Mr MATHISON: I could not tell you exactly how that works inside the department. I assume that somewhere along the lines, they would be asking the tenancy manager, being CAAH in this instance, whether it was tenant damage or fair wear and tear. Who makes the decision I could not tell you.

Mr WOOD: All right. Thank you.

Madam CHAIR: Tangentyere mentioned earlier that at the moment in Alice Springs there are 37 vacant houses on town camps out of 219. Was that a fairly common figure from your experience? It seems like a lot.

Mr MATHISON: I think in the last couple of years there have been a number of different reports through the media, speculating how many vacant houses there are in not only through the town camps but in the urban housing as well. We were never really particularly aware of how many houses were or were not vacant at the time. Yes, we certainly carried out works for the vacancies over the last 12 or 18 months. I was never really overly aware of how many houses there were vacant. I was focussed on other things.

Madam CHAIR: For the houses that were deemed to be beyond economic repair, did you have any involvement with that through Ingkerreke?

Mr MATHISON: I am not aware of any post the SIHIP program that were deemed to be beyond economic repair.

Madam CHAIR: Okay. The other question I have is that in some parts of the Northern Territory town camp housing, the tenancy management and the repairs and maintenance contract are held by the same provider. Do you see any benefit in that, now that you have the wonderful benefit of hindsight?

Ms WELLINGTON: Communication wise probably or if they had a work order management system they were working off.

Mr MATHISON: Obviously there are benefits to economies of scale from a business perspective. From a transparency perspective, if that was the case then it would need to be very transparent to ensure that you are getting value for money in what is being delivered.

That would be my feelings on it at least.

Madam CHAIR: Thank you very much. That is great of you to have joined us for the hearing today. Mr Callum Mathison, CEO of Ingkerreke Commercial, and Louise Wellington. Thank you very much for your time.

The committee suspended.

CENTRAL AUSTRALIAN AFFORDABLE HOUSING COMPANY

Madam CHAIR: On behalf of the committee, I welcome you to this public hearing for the housing repairs and maintenance on town camps in the Northern Territory.

I welcome Sally Langton, the CEO, and Mr David Avery, the Chairperson of the Central Australian Affordable Housing Company. Thank you for taking time out of your day to join us in this inquiry.

This is a formal proceeding of the committee and the protection of parliamentary privilege and the obligation not to mislead the committee apply. This is a public hearing and is being 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.

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

Could you start by introducing yourself, stating your position and if you would like to make an opening statement to give us a bit of background, thank you.

Ms LANGTON: I am Sally Langton, the CEO of the Central Australian Affordable Housing Company. As an organisation we welcome the opportunity to present at this hearing today. In our submission we present some criticisms of NT Housing. We do not hold back from that because today we hope to be representatives of the truth about our experience and how it has affected the people who we serve. Our critique is not aimed at any one personally rather we are raising issues we view as fundamentally systemic in nature.

Our basic tenet is that a government-run public housing provider is not the best organisation to serve the tenants and manage the assets for remote and town camp communities in the Northern Territory.

In our time working with housing on the town camps we often question policies and decision making relating to town campers, especially when it would unfairly disadvantage the individual.

The mantra for making policy inflexibility was 'we are trying to normalise the town camps.' This was a phrase we heard often. I will now quote from the National Partnership Agreement for Remote and Indigenous Housing, to which all states and territories are bound:

Normalised service arrangements mean that a remote Indigenous community is serviced by municipal and essential services delivery arrangements that are accountable through an agreed framework and reflect a standard of service delivered to non Indigenous people in communities of similar size and location

The NPARIH does not state that the policy for service delivery is to be normalised, rather the standard. That is that Aboriginal people should expect to receive the same standard of service as non-Indigenous people.

To achieve this standard and the objectives of the NPARIH a tailored and appropriate housing policy framework needs to be developed. In reference to our submission, we promote well regulated and accredited community housing organisations with local representation as a new way forward for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

As experienced practitioners with many years interstate in other community housing companies, we know that community housing achieves compliance through mutual respect, significant savings for government and the growth of healthy and sustainable communities.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been done to for too long. The time to consider positive engagement, creative and flexible solutions and community buy in and responsibility is the new way forward.

Ms MANISON: Thank you for that opening statement, I thought it was really great that you put in a video submission. It was certainly interesting to watch. We have just had the opportunity to speak to Ingkerreke, which like you, has now finished its contracts delivering work in the Alice Springs town camps.

With the benefit of hindsight, looking back on the period of 37 months of the contract delivery for the tenancy management of the Alice Springs town camps, what would you say were the biggest challenges there in delivering those very important services?

Ms LANGTON: I came to Alice Springs from South Australia 12 months ago, as did my colleague, John, to work for the affordable housing company. We were told that part of the deal was managing the town camps. We came here and had a very different expectation of what providing tenancy management on the town camps would mean. After a while we thought, 'Oh, no, we do not manage it at all; we are a subcontractor for Housing.' Once we got that in our heads, it was like, 'How does this work?'

We were confronted with a very clunky bureaucratic system where there was a lot of double handling involved. That was both in relation to the repairs and maintenance which we used to help the tenants order, and the tenancy management. We were used to a way of delivering services where the organisation would have complete responsibility for everything from having the leases with the individuals, collecting the rent and doing the rebates. But every task we did was flicked back to Housing, then back to us again, then back to Housing. It was a process that was not streamlined at all. To my view, it was incredibly resource intensive and expensive for government because, really, two organisations were doing the same work. One was doing the face-to-face and the other was doing the red tape but it was being flicked to each other all the time. It was not a smooth and simple system to work in.

Ms MANISON: Did you have much opportunity to provide that feedback to Housing in that time in the contract?

Ms LANGTON: Yes. A number of things jumped up at us straightaway as being a little illogical. One of the biggest things was the rebates. The rebates are usually done interstate twice a year for everybody at the same time. There is a lot of streamlining involved in collection that information to adjust people's rent. We talked about our experience on managing that process.

John, who is on our team, came from New South Wales where his organisation worked with 4 000 properties. They use that system. It was just once a year and they benefited from the use of the Centrelink systems. So really tenants would not be obliged to provide anything because they would access Centrelink with the tenant's permission to make those adjustments, a much more simple system.

Ms MANISON: From your perspective as the property and tenancy manager, clearly repairs and maintenance is a huge issue for people in the town camps and often you would report them. From reporting the repairs and maintenance issues, how did the system work? Do you think that by the time they reached Ingkerreke that it was delivered in a timely fashion?

Ms LANGTON: I really could not say for sure. But, our impression was that: the tenant would ring and say this is broken, we would ask a lot of questions about what the nature of the repair was. We would send an email to housing outlining the nature of the repair and

then it would kind of just disappear. Maybe two or three weeks later the tenant would ring up and say that they had not been out to fix my door. We would contact housing again and then maybe two or three weeks later the tenant would come back again and say they still have not been out to fix my door.

There was this kind of system where everything was just lost. We could advocate on behalf of the tenant, sometimes we were not really given a reasonable explanation as to what had happened with that particular order. But we were often told it has been sent to Ingkerreke or Ingkerreke has done it, but we did not really know for sure because there were no feedback mechanisms.

Once that maintenance order was lodged we had no way of reassuring the tenant that their requirements would be attended to because we just did not know where it was.

Madam CHAIR: Do you think that by housing minimising the number of items on the repair list was that just a means of saving money? What was that about? How did you interpret that? If it went from ten items to three or four, what was your interpretation of that?

Ms LANGTON: I am not really clear. Was there a schedule? I am not familiar with that.

Madam CHAIR: We have just heard from Ingkerreke which said there was a different treatment of tenant damaged repairs and maintenance and wear and tear repairs and maintenance. Often, the tenant damage would be left off their list of things to repair ...

Ms LANGTON: That is interesting to know ...

Madam CHAIR: That is interesting that you think it is interesting.

Ms LANGTON: One of the things we found was that quite often there would be an assumption made that the damage had been done by the tenant without any investigation. So in the DVD you might have noticed the story about the screen door that kept slamming day in, day out. Often if we put an order through to repair a screen door, we would be asked if it was tenant damage. We would say, 'No, it is just worn out'. Sometimes what might have happened is that application of tenant damage might have been given to stuff we reported as general fair wear and tear. That could answer that question, but it is just a supposition.

Madam CHAIR: So to clarify, it was never explained to you that there was a different process for dealing with tenancy damage and wear and tear?

Ms LANGTON: We would have assumed that which was tenant damage would be fixed as much as other ...

Madam CHAIR: Wear and tear.

Ms LANGTON: ... wear and tear. We would then assume that an invoice would have been sent to the tenants if it was a tenants' damage repair.

Madam CHAIR: Did Housing ever make it known that the cost of repairs and maintenance was too much, they were coming to the end of their budget or there were limitations on what you could be asking for?

Ms LANGTON: No, we did not receive any feedback.

Madam CHAIR: Okay.

Ms MANISON: With regard to the management of the individual tenancies, for example, if it was allocation of a vacant property or if you had to look at evicting a problematic tenancy, is that something that the Central Australian Affordable Housing Company would have the power to do, or was it something the Department of Housing ultimately made the call on? Were Housing Reference Groups involved in those types of decisions?

Ms LANGTON: When it came to a house being vacant, the Housing Reference Group would meet and we would discuss with them the applications we had received and they would make a decision about who would move into that property.

Housing Reference Groups were not always easy to organise, sometimes you would have to do two or three before you finally had everybody together. But, generally there was very good consensus over who should move in. Once that happened we would notify housing and send that application to them and say this is the person who has been selected for that property.

Then housing would have to approve that, and they would use their own internal checking mechanisms or whatever to approve that. Once it had been approved we could contact the tenant and say you have been approved for the house, housing says it is okay. But, what you have to do now is save up a bond and two weeks advance rent, you have three months to do that. The person would come into our office and would deposit money as they had it, so that they could put towards this moving in money. As soon as we had the moving in money we contacted housing and said right they have paid their bond and their rent, please fix the house. They would then go in and fix the house, once we had received the bond and advance rent.

Often that could take a really long time, so you perhaps had a homeless person or living in an overcrowded house who really wanted that particular property. It might take up to three months for them to save up the rent and then it might take another three months for the house to be fixed. You could have someone who is potentially homeless waiting for up to six months before they could move into their property. During that time we had to keep an eye on that property to make sure that it was not vandalised or people who were homeless would often move in there and seek shelter. Quite often by the time housing came to fix it, it was even more damaged than when the original people had vacated.

It was quite telling when I first came up here in March last year, within a few weeks there was a woman signed up who was so excited to be going into a house. But she had been waiting eight months for that house to be ready. That is a very long time. If you are homeless and under stress it is a long time to wait for your home.

Ms MANISON: With regards to if it was a problematic tenancy and it was not working out. Or, if you were having issues with tenants and had to move into managing them and potentially looking at eviction or strikes, that type of thing. Is that something that the Central Australian Affordable Housing Company would do or is it something that sat within the domain of Territory Housing?

Ms LANGTON: That was in Territory Housing. Territory Housing would issue the strikes and we would have to go out and talk to the tenants about what had happened and why they had been given a strike and encourage them to have another look at what was going on in

their household. But it would be Territory Housing that would initiate evictions, either due to failure to pay rent, property damage or disruption.

Ms MANISON: In your day-to-day dealings with Territory Housing – clearly, there was a lot of dealing with them to be able to fulfil the obligations of the contract and deliver these important services to the people in the town camps – was it quick to respond to you, or did you find that it had enough resources to deal with the tenancy and property management requirements of town camps?

Ms LANGTON: Sometimes their approval system was really quite clunky internally so it took a long time for us to get approvals back. Often, it took a long time, say if someone had been away and they had come back and found a letter saying they needed to apply for their rebate and it was 12 weeks late or something like that. Then we would be waiting weeks to find out whether that rebate was to be backdated or applied or whatever. So those things were often quite slow.

Some of the staff at Housing were a pleasure to deal with; others were quite rigid and inflexible. My general sense was that they did not really understand the needs of the community they were responsible for. There seemed to be that unflinching line about the importance the tenant had in being compliant. That was often spoke of; that they had to be compliant. That distressed me because I often thought, 'But what do the tenants get back in return?' Surely, as the landlord, Territory Housing has to be compliant in fixing their houses and providing all those other services. It is a two-way street. I felt that the tenants were the ones who were having to prove themselves to be worthy of receiving the service all the time. That was a fairly big stretch.

Ms FYLES: How often were the Housing Reference Groups consulted in regard to tenancy management and repairs and maintenance policies?

Ms LANGTON: Whenever we attended a Housing Reference Group meeting to do an allocation, they would often talk about other issues on the camps at the same time. They might be talking about problems on the camps, repairs and maintenance, that type of thing. The housing association meetings were the ones where the really big issues used to be brought up. Often we would go to them and then after the meeting we would go around to various people's houses and write down the repairs that they were concerned about. Often they were repairs that we had already reported.

Ms FYLES: Talking about Territory Housing, what was the formal communication with the staff or was it just daily interactions? Were there formal meetings? Was there opportunity to review and provide feedback?

Ms LANGTON: We were supposed to have monthly operational meetings to talk about the sort of things we were encountering. They tended to drop off towards the end of our contract. I think probably our last meeting would have been July or August last year and we did not have any meetings until the end of our contract at the end of January.

There would be some sort of ad hoc interaction but no contract management meetings, which we were asking for ...

[**Editor's note:** No audio from approximately 11.58 am to approximately 12.03 pm.]

Ms LANGTON: ... if we can go to what we were being paid – we were being contracted to provide a specific amount of services. The new contract actually had 50% more services in it. We were quite relieved about that because we have been doing those services for no payment for several years. There were additional services that the organisation had taken on in response to housing to manage the Housing Reference Group, waiting lists, and do a range of activities that were not in the original contract. These services were put into the new contract.

Zodiac's tender came in at \$10 000 a month less than what we were getting for the original contract. I have been involved in community and social housing management for a very long time, so I know what things cost. A good service is value for money. Regarding the procurement process, when you are tendering for a community service for people who are probably the most disadvantaged in our country, a service that is out of the scope of providing a real estate service, it will cost more. If you make that social investment into that community you will get a higher result.

Currently the number of tenants in arrears on town camps sits at 85%. If you have more investment in that community, a highly relational community service and community engagement – if people are getting back what they think they are paying for in their rent – what will happen is the income will rise, property damage will decrease and there will be a range of social input that results because of that initial investment.

Yes, we did tender higher, but we tendered in relation to what we had been receiving for several years. What we tendered for in our new service model was a very holistic service that included things like community engagement, support coordination, specialist debt collection, getting money through the door, and a range of other things that would have been pleasing for housing.

Mr WOOD: Nicole mentioned that you said the weighting was 10% of the price, and that did not relate to the final contract. Were you able to ask them why their initial guidelines were not the same as what actually happened when the contract was given?

Ms LANGTON: We did, but we did not get a satisfactory response, at least not one we could clearly understand. We were told the costing was put through a value for money calculator, or something like that. We were not satisfied with the response. I have been involved in procurement for years and years, and I have never been in a situation where the price has ended up being 100% of the tender when it is clearly stated in the tender documents that the weighting price is only 10%. I am still at a loss as to how that came about and I cannot quite (inaudible).

Mr WOOD: Those matters you related it to – and I think we have heard from Kalano is that one of the advantages of (inaudible) had the lease, and also runs the tenancy and property management, and that there are better outcomes from Aboriginal employment, health outcomes and ownership of the program. Were any of those un-financial matters taken into account?

Ms LANGTON: No, they were not. There was nothing in the tender that related to innovation or community and social benefit.

Mr WOOD: So this was your first contract. Were you contracted before 2012?

Ms LANGTON: Yes.

Mr WOOD: So you had it for two terms. When Tangentyere lost the original data roll – its responsibility was to look after town camps?

Ms LANGTON: Yes.

Mr WOOD: My understanding was that it was not doing a great job, and that is why the federal government stepped in, and you were the first people to then run a program to look after these communities.

Ms LANGTON: Yes.

Mr WOOD: What was the sort of feedback you received from the way you were operating in the community? Were there negatives or positives about what you were doing?

Ms LANGTON: I was not around then obviously, but in the first few years when the organisation had the property management and the tenancy management. They were picking up momentum and doing quite well.

When the two things were split it became rather patchy and very awkward to manage. By the time I arrived I guess casting my eye over it from an outsider's point of view, I thought it was pretty bad. I just could not understand how a system like that could possibly deliver good outcomes. I really do not think there were high levels of satisfaction from the tenants. There was a part of me that felt quite embarrassed about that because our organisation had no control over it.

We were subcontracted to do the work of Northern Territory Housing; it was not a community housing model at all. We had to apply all those policies that had been developed in an urban context that bore no relation to the needs of the people living on the town camps.

Yes, it did feel wanting to a significant degree and I think that is the experience of the people on the town camps.

Mr AVERY: I have been involved with the company since its inception. During the period when the company held the maintenance and tenancy management jointly, it did not have problems with feedback and it was able to assemble a database of what was going on with each house. It was laying the ground work for a really good management system but then they changed the system and split those two operations up. That is the period that Sally is talking about.

The initial thing I thought was quite successful after we developed the systems.

Mr WOOD: I am probably repeating a question you may have answered before. Could you do without the housing commission running the show? I am not saying that they should not have an overall eye on what is going on. But would you prefer that you did not have those levels of bureaucracy? That you would have responsibility if you were running it now and you did not have to go to them every moment of the day. As long as you provided a service and that service was reviewed every now and then to see if it was satisfactory.

Ms LANGTON: That would be very acceptable and I think very acceptable to Tangentyere as well. The way that community housing works in other states is that they are regulated. Most governments have a directorate for community housing that does the regulation, keeps an eye on organisations, makes sure the funding is being complied with

and do all of those checks and balances. Then the community organisations are free to deliver those services in the way that is most appropriate for their group of interest.

The other thing about community housing associations is that they can attract Commonwealth rent assistance, so their income can be much higher than the Territory government can generate. The Territory government and other governments can only generate up to 25% of people's income for rent, whereas community housing organisations can capture Commonwealth rent assistance so their income stream is much higher. That enables community housing organisations to have more income to play with for things like repairs and maintenance, oncosts, community service delivery in communities.

Communities I have worked for have done a lot of place making, community engagement, coordination of community services so tenants get the best possible response and there is a lot of emphasis on sustaining tenancies. That is where community housing can really enrich a community and create the idea that the house is the most important thing because that is where health happens and people have cohesion and develop the confidence to seek work and reconnect with education and those type of things.

Mr WOOD: A last question. Do you have an example of a housing company in Australia similar to what is happening in Alice Springs?

Ms LANGTON: There are so many. I guess I would have to dig around a bit to find something similar. I know that the organisation I worked for in South Australia only had 35 houses in Port Augusta that were targeted towards homeless people. That model, which was a housing first model where we put people in, provided support and good tenancy management, has had the most astounding outcomes, particularly with young people who have come from overcrowded housing, in helping to develop their independence, get jobs or traineeships, fantastic jobs in the mines and move into a position where they have been able to move out and buy their own house. There are so many stories across Australia of the success of the community housing model, particularly in working with challenging communities.

Community housing on the town camps would not be a quick fix. It would be something that would make a difference front up, but then the real signs of progress and improvement would, over the years, become very evident. If a really well-resourced community housing model were run on the town camps starting next year, within three years I reckon you could walk into those places and you would see something that is entirely different to what we have now.

Madam CHAIR: Thank you very much Sally Langton, CEO of the Central Australian Affordable Housing Company, and Mr David Avery the Chairperson. Thank you very much for your time and contribution.

The committee suspended.

JULALIKARI COUNCIL ABORIGINAL CORPORATION

Madam CHAIR: On behalf of the committee I would like to welcome everyone to this public hearing this afternoon, on the repairs and maintenance of houses on town camps in the Northern Territory. I would like to welcome to the table to give evidence to this committee Ms Pat Brahim, CEO of Julalikari Council Aboriginal Corporation.

Thank you for coming before the committee Pat and we appreciate you taking this time out of your busy schedule to contribute to this inquiry.

This is a formal proceeding of the committee and the protection of parliamentary privilege and the obligation not to mislead the committee apply.

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

Ms Brahim, please introduce yourself, state your position and make an opening statement or overview of your reason for being here today, thank you.

Ms BRAHIM: My name is Pat Brahim. I am the CEO of Julalikari Council Aboriginal Corporation in Tennant Creek. I have an opening statement which will lead into the letter that I have sent through on behalf of the board.

Julalikari Council signed an MOU around the housing agreement with both the NT and federal governments going back to 2007. It was officially signed in 2010. We had an agency agreement signed, I think in 2012, for a five-year housing agreement.

Through the process – and it is only probably in the last 12 months – we were advised that the contract would be given to somebody else. It went through the tender process and handed through.

Julalikari has been providing housing support, R&M, tenancy management and all those types of things for nearly 25 years. Last year, it seemed like there was a handover to somebody else.

You have put in place the terms of reference. I put the answer in the letter where we have been over the last nine years in this space. The goodwill of the Julalikari Council in maintaining the housing arrangements, both the R&M and housing management, has been ignored, more than anything else, by the NT government. I will respond to your questions based on that.

Madam CHAIR: Okay. Pat, can you outline the land tenure arrangements that are in place in Tennant Creek between Julalikari and the Northern Territory government?

Ms BRAHIM: All the CLAs, the community living areas, are being subleased to the NT government. In the areas where there are community centres, they are under leases held by Julalikari Council.

Madam CHAIR: Okay.

Ms BRAHIM: Then we have 29 houses within the town area of Tennant Creek. Those lease arrangements were signed over to the NT government in 2013, with the understanding that Julalikari will take on doing the upgrades to those 29 houses to the same level as the houses in the CLAs. This is only just in the process of commencing; it has been sitting on the back burner since 2013.

Madam CHAIR: You have had problems maintaining your houses in Tennant Creek, is that correct? It has been a struggle with the finances allocated to maintain the houses to an acceptable degree?

Ms BRAHIM: I would agree to that. The houses in the CLAs previous to the signing of the agreement was \$2 400 and each of the 29 houses which was all based on the remote housing allowance. You look at how much is allocated to public housing which is about \$5 000 odd dollars. Then you are looking at the remote housing dollars which is \$2400. So there are 78 houses in the CLAs and then you have 29 in the town area.

Madam CHAIR: That is a lot of houses to maintain, you employ a lot of people and it is a big operation.

Ms BRAHIM: We did have a team of trainees as well as Aboriginal carpenters, so we have lost about 18 Aboriginal staff in this process.

Mr WOOD: Did any of the staff go over to the new contractors?

Ms BRAHIM: We had the discussions with NT government as well as the new contractors and no, they did not.

Mr WOOD: The 29 houses are they on the north side of town?

Ms BRAHIM: No, that is the community living area and is classified as the town camps as such, so there were six of those. The 29 houses that I am talking about were within the town area of Tennant Creek itself, all on lots.

Mr WOOD: So the 78 are out...

Ms BRAHIM: In the CLAs, yes.

Mr WOOD: The contract that you had was for both the tenancy and the property management. They totalled up at around about \$2m of actual contract expenditure between 1 July 2011 and 30 September 2015.

Ms BRAHIM: That would be about correct, I do not know.

Mr WOOD: The two tenders that won the contract added up to about \$850 000 for two years. Are you able to say why there is such a large difference between your contract price and what they put in as a bid? It is a fairly substantial difference.

Ms BRAHIM: In the tender process it was very clear that there would be less money attached to the property management. I think it was about \$107 000 in that space. When you are looking at the amount that goes into the housing, then it is based on ...

[**Editor's note:** No audio from 1.24.54 pm to 1.25.13 pm.]

Mr WOOD: ... government as to why you did not win the contract?

Ms BRAHIM: We did. They had given it based on the new contractor having 30% Aboriginal employment. But I pointed out at the time that those individuals are actually trainees in the electrical, air conditioning area, they were not in the housing side.

It was, 'We are changing to give smaller businesses the opportunity to develop Aboriginal people and those sorts of things.'

The impact to an organisation like ours, when you lose 18 staff, was there was 115 years' experience between the 18 and you cannot rebuild something like that.

Mr WOOD: Was the price the difference?

Ms BRAHIM: The tender was very clear in the way they did it; there would be less money involved.

Mr WOOD: Do you think you get a better outcome if the people who do the property and tenancy management also have the lease?

Ms BRAHIM: Yes, I do think so.

Mr WOOD: Why would you say that?

Ms BRAHIM: Because it is around the people you are providing a service to. It is about making sure those individuals take ownership of their responsibilities in maintaining their houses.

Mr WOOD: Do you see any other outcomes from ownership?

Ms BRAHIM: From an ownership point of view that is probably one of the key things that the board of Julalikari were exploring and working with the NT government at the time, or Department of Housing. To increase or work with tenants to purchase their houses and to enable individuals to see that there are other opportunities.

Mr WOOD: In relation to buying their own house were they looking at leasing the land and buying the house?

Ms BRAHIM: That was the discussions and when you start to look at how the leases were done. That was the intent right at the beginning, it was to allow that to happen.

Mr WOOD: Has anyone taken that up?

Ms BRAHIM: Not at the moment in the CLAs.

Mr WOOD: What about in the town itself?

Ms BRAHIM: We have four people who are prepared to do that as part of the upgrades of their houses at the moment.

Madam CHAIR: The companies that won the contracts, are they Tennant Creek companies?

Ms BRAHIM: They are Tennant Creek mainstream businesses.

Madam CHAIR: Right, okay, and they have just employed other staff as opposed to your 18 that lost their jobs?

Ms BRAHIM: Other staff and those other staff came from New Zealand not locals.

Madam CHAIR: But they are meeting the Aboriginal employment requirements?

Ms BRAHIM: So they say. What they say and what you see are two different things.

Madam CHAIR: In Tennant Creek in the CLAs and the ULAs, in terms of repairs and maintenance, what were the main problems that residents identified? What did they see as the main issues with repairs and maintenance?

Ms BRAHIM: In the current state? As it is now?

Madam CHAIR: Yes, I think so.

Ms BRAHIM: I think it is the timing to do the works, the reporting and the lag to actually get the work done. In some cases tenants have been coming back and saying that people have come and then have to recall housing to come back and check the work. Sometimes an individual or the company is called back two or three times.

Madam CHAIR: Does the Department of Housing operate out of Tennant Creek to service the ULAs and the CLAs?

Ms BRAHIM: We raised that with senior management in Tennant Creek because that is the feedback that is coming from the Aboriginal tenants. That information is not getting through to senior management.

Madam CHAIR: Their Department of Housing office to operate out of Tennant Creek?

Ms BRAHIM: They have their office in Tennant Creek, the Department of Housing have their office. What I am saying is that the information, what the tenants are saying, is not actually being relayed to them. So they are coming to us, us as in Julalikari, to talk about the process that is occurring right now.

That information is not being fed back to the Department of Housing. We have been feeding that through because we work closely with the senior management team there.

Madam CHAIR: So despite the fact you have lost the contract, people are still coming to you?

Ms BRAHIM: Definitely.

Mr WOOD: In relation to your relationship with Housing, was that a good relationship or were there problems over the period you had the contract.

Ms BRAHIM: We have had a fairly good, open, robust discussion relationship. Probably from the amount of work we did in the lead-up after the signing of the MOU, working on the policy and procedure documents to enable Housing to start to work with the Aboriginal tenants in Tennant Creek. We spent many hours working with Housing in that space. More than anything else, the relationship changed when there was a change of government. Even though we have the same group of staff working with them, they had a different mind perception or agenda to work to. You did not get the same robust discussions we had prior to the change of government.

Mr WOOD: Tell me if I am wrong, but last year there was some debate in Tennant Creek – only what I read in the newspaper – as there were some issues about Julalikari. Did this have any relationship with this issue?

Ms BRAHIM: The perceptions were that Aboriginal people were driving the process, that non-Indigenous people were the individuals who got the contract - the co-chair of that. There were other people we were supposed to work in partnership with. So there were non-Indigenous people who were driving it. They got an Aboriginal person to sign the petition with 104 signatures. From an organisational point of view, we have been working with the people who signed the petition and dealing with the individuals who co-chaired the meeting.

You asked a question about whether it was Julalikari. Well, the issues have been raised to smear the organisation and probably me in that.

Madam CHAIR: Did that happen at the same time this contract was to be awarded?

Ms BRAHIM: Yes.

Madam CHAIR: Do you suspect that may have had an impact on the decision?

Ms BRAHIM: The discussions I had, going back to probably January, February, March last year with the ministers. The writing was on the wall at the time. You could see how things were progressing. The smear campaign is what we call it. That came in about June, July. There were a whole lot of things adding to the fuel on the fire.

Madam CHAIR: Is overcrowding a big issue in public housing?

Ms BRAHIM: You have about three generations living in one house. You have the grandparents then their kids and then their kids on top of that. It definitely is.

That was always one of the purposes around the MOU, to allow the infrastructure to be done in the CLAs, to allow for the new houses to be built, to bring the houses up to the same standard as public housing so that there would be opportunity to build houses for the future.

At the moment you probably need 200 or 300 houses right now, to cater for the overcrowding.

Mr WOOD: I was involved with SIHIP through the committees, not directly. One of the issues we had when we were in Tennant Creek was that there was I think either no new houses or only two new houses to be built. There was money set aside for sewerage, water and infrastructure, but my understanding is that Julalikari could have converted that money to housing. Because the government at the time decided it would get a different bucket of money for infrastructure and use money for housing, but that was rejected at the time.

Ms BRAHIM: It was never a rejection. It was only \$30m or \$36.5m on the table. If you look at it from an organisational point of view Julalikari gave up this land to enable this to happen. You do not build new houses when you already have crap houses. That was a lesson learnt in Alice Springs. It was about bringing the infrastructure, lighting, power, water, sewerage, all those types of things so that the CLAs at the time become suburbs of Tennant Creek.

So you build new houses, and it was never the intent of Julalikari Council to build new houses. That was very clear. The MOU was very clear in that space: if there was money left over then, yes, build new houses. That was the discussion we had at the time with minister Macklin and Elliott McAdam, as the Minister for Housing, as part of the SIHIP project.

From an organisational point of view, Julalikari gave up its land to enable the development to happen, not to build new houses. That is not something the organisation is responsible for. It is a service ...

Mr WOOD: But it was mainly that. Now you say you are short 200 houses.

Ms BRAHIM: Look at it from an organisational point of view. If you look at Tangentyere, Tiwi Islands and all of those, they leased their land. They got \$5m for that lease. Julalikari did not get that. So on top of building new houses in those other places, their organisations got money. For Julalikari to give up its land to enable development, which is like any new suburb – you do all of that first, you do not build new houses.

Mr WOOD: I do not think that was ever the intention. The intention was that there would be two buckets of money. At the time ...

Ms BRAHIM: That was not in discussions with us.

Mr WOOD: That was certainly a discussion that the committee had and that is why we could not understand why it was rejected. I was surprised ...

Ms BRAHIM: Julalikari did not know. Julalikari never rejected the amount of money. There was \$36m. That was in the MOU. That is all we were ever involved with.

Mr WOOD: Yes, all right.

Madam CHAIR: So, Pat, no new houses were built through SIHIP in Tennant Creek?

Ms BRAHIM: No, none whatsoever.

Madam CHAIR: When was the last public house built in Tennant Creek?

Ms BRAHIM: Probably about 35 years ago.

Madam CHAIR: In the whole of Tennant Creek?

Ms BRAHIM: In the whole of Tennant Creek.

Madam CHAIR: The CLAs and the ULAs – nothing?

Ms BRAHIM: No, I will correct myself there. Julalikari built two houses with IHANT funds that are within the town area. There were no new houses in the CLAs, most of them were upgrades. That is going back to about 1991, the end of the 1990s through to 2003.

Madam CHAIR: So the two houses were built?

Ms BRAHIM: In my time, two houses were built. Say about 2004, 2005.

Madam CHAIR: Has the population of Tennant Creek increased at all?

Ms BRAHIM: It fluctuates when you look at it overall. But when you look at the Aboriginal community, we have increased from when I first moved there in 2014 from 55% to nearly 63%.

Madam CHAIR: So more people coming into town or just broken families?

Ms BRAHIM: Broken families plus the movement from the homelands.

Madam CHAIR: Would you know the average number of people living in houses in town, the ULAs?

Ms BRAHIM: Probably a minimum of about 15.

Madam CHAIR: Fifteen people in each house?

Ms BRAHIM: Correct me, no so there would be some that have the small family unit which is mum, dad, three kids and that sort of thing. That is mums and dads who are employed and have a fairly good control over who comes into their houses.

But when you have the more elderly, they cannot say no so there is more pressure on them. I would say probably about 70% of the houses in the CLAs are overcrowded including the 29 in town.

Madam CHAIR: With old housing stock requiring more expensive maintenance?

Ms BRAHIM: All the work that was done in the CLAs as part of the SIHIP project was to bring the houses up to standard. There were a lot of internal works that went on, all the wet areas, the kitchens and redid the houses so that they looked and felt new. Families were moving back into the three bedroom houses. The whole focus of it I think for a long time has just been building three room houses for families. We have a lot of single males and females, so they really do not get the opportunity of applying for a unit in their own right or to share.

Mr WOOD: I am just as concerned about the overcrowding as much as anyone. But I just need to get it clear, the reason you rejected the money for new houses was it because you did not get a lease payment?

Ms BRAHIM: No I did not say that. What I said was that the MOU was quite clear. It was to bring the infrastructure and the houses up to standard. That was the investment that the board had asked for. There was never the discussion around dollars to build new houses. That never came to the Julalikari.

Mr WOOD: I might explain where I am coming from. There was money set aside, as you just said, to upgrade all the houses and that happened. I was there seeing the houses getting upgraded. There was money for improvement on infrastructure it was \$20m or somewhere in that figure.

At that time the government said, 'We will not take the money for infrastructure out of the housing bucket. We will have a new bucket for infrastructure.' In some of the communities the infrastructure meant very houses would be built because of sewerage.

We were trying to find out why – I understand you have a MOU – the government was basically changing policy saying, 'You can use that \$20m for new housing and we will give you money for infrastructure out of a different bucket', and that did not occur.

Ms BRAHIM: It was never a discussion, Gerry. It never came to Julalikari board. It was never a discussion.

Mr WOOD: It might have been in the circles we are in. It was certainly a change because of the money. There would not have been enough money to build the houses.

Ms BRAHIM: No. We knew that. When all of the costings were done to do the upgrades for the housing and infrastructure, it was well over the \$36m. We knew that. That was all the discussions we had. There was never any discussion around money to build houses. That was not something that came back to Julalikari Council.

Mr WOOD: Okay.

Madam CHAIR: Have you been in negotiation with the Northern Territory or Commonwealth governments to try to get funding for more houses? Is that something Julalikari has been active in?

Ms BRAHIM: Not of late. Julalikari is a service provider, it is not a real estate developer. You can always look at ways of doing that in some other place. We spend a lot of time in working to develop the individual to enable them to get the skills, whether they want to be carpenters or whatever it is. We spend a lot of time developing people and not the infrastructure because that is something other people have skills to do.

Madam CHAIR: Walter Shaw from Tangentyere told us earlier today that at the moment in Alice Springs there are 37 vacant dwellings out of 219. Are there many in Tennant Creek? Is that a common problem?

Ms BRAHIM: I would have to get back to you. I know there are some, but I could not give you numbers.

Madam CHAIR: Okay. During your time when you were managing the living areas?

Ms BRAHIM: Oh, definitely there were. A lot of the houses were leased to government. People would purchase them, do them up and lease them to government. They would be sitting vacant for months, years on end. But the lease agreement was with the NT government.

Madam CHAIR: So not in disrepair, just sitting vacant.

Ms BRAHIM: Just sitting vacant. I do not know whether what you are saying is from the CLA side of things. The 78 that were already maintained and built, and the 29 houses in town, they were always full from an organisational point of view.

Madam CHAIR: The turnaround would take how long, generally, after a family had moved out? I suppose that it depends.

Ms BRAHIM: We were fairly quick with that, there was probably a three to four week to turnaround for our teams to get them repaired to standard. Probably one of the other really key things in this space is the homelands as well, the lack of support and those sorts of things in the homelands. As they are getting older they are moving into town because of their illness and those sorts of things. With the elderly moving in you get the younger groups moving in as well.

There is a bit of a mismatch between the numbers of vacant houses that are in the homelands to come into overcrowded conditions in town.

Madam CHAIR: We were just told by the Central Australian Affordable Housing Company that in their experience it took between six to eight months to fill a house. Because it would take potential tenants three months to gather together a bond, two weeks rent and then they would go in and fix the house up. So it took literally months. That was not your experience?

Ms BRAHIM: Not from Tennant Creek's point of view. I think more than anything else it was the local party actually being part and parcel of the solution. If you run it as a business naturally it is going to be that you are out there and you want to make money and those sorts

of things. Whereas from where we sat it was okay let us get it done. How much work, training and development that can get into this space.

Move people in otherwise you just keep creating more work at the end of the day.

Madam CHAIR: Tennant Creek has gone from a situation of having one provider of tenancy and property management to two. How are people, residents dealing with that new system?

Ms BRAHIM: They are probably not. They are spending more time asking more questions or just ignoring like it will go away.

Madam CHAIR: Until something happens. Has there been much education, to your knowledge, around the new system information?

Ms BRAHIM: This is something that we have been trying to work with NT Housing on. To get out to all the CLAs, talk to everyone as a group. Probably the biggest mistake people make is that they will go and talk to individuals with the expectation that the individual will understand the information. But it is around talking to groups so that different people hear different things and then talk about it when it becomes more real. Then you can go back and talk to individuals. So the process of how they do it is wrong. They have not gone out because the board and I worked with them to do PowerPoint presentations so they could talk to the people in the CLAs and the 29 houses – those types of things. But that has not been presented to anyone yet.

Madam CHAIR: When did your contracts finish?

Ms BRAHIM: It was last year.

Madam CHAIR: So it has been quite some time?

Ms BRAHIM: Yes.

Madam CHAIR: Thank you very much, Ms Pat Brahim, CEO of Julalikari Council Aboriginal Corporation, for your time and your contribution.

Ms BRAHIM: Thank you.

The committee suspended.

CENTRAL AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL LEGAL AID SERVICE

NORTH AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL JUSTICE AGENCY

Madam CHAIR: On behalf of the committee I would like to welcome everyone to this hearing on housing repairs and maintenance on town camps in the Northern Territory. I would like to welcome today to give evidence to the committee Ms Lauren Macaulay, the Social Justice Legal Officer from the Central Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service, and Ms Katie Gordon, the Welfare Rights Legal Officer from CAALAS.

We also have Priscilla Collins of the North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency and Ms Lauren Walker, Deputy Manager and Senior Solicitor. Welcome.

Before we go into our discussion, I inform you that this is a formal proceeding of the committee and the protection of parliamentary privilege and the obligation not to mislead the committee apply. This is a public hearing and is being 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.

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

I will get you each to state your name and position, and if you would like to make an opening statement or provide a bit of background as to why you are here today. Would you like to go first, Katie or Lauren from Alice Springs?

Ms MACAULAY: Yes, we would be happy to. On behalf of the Central Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service, I am Lauren Macaulay, and my position is the Social Justice Legal Officer. There is also Katie Gordon who is our Welfare Rights lawyer.

Madam CHAIR: Thank you.

Ms MACAULAY: The Central Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service thanks the Public Accounts Committee for the opportunity to attend this hearing and also for considering our written submission on the terms of reference for the inquiry.

The Central Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service, or CAALAS, provides legal advice and representation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Central Australia across a range of legal areas including criminal, civil, family and welfare rights. Alongside this legal case work, we also provide community legal education, support for youth interacting with the criminal justice system and assistance to prisoners and detainees to support reintegration into the community.

CAALAS is a community-controlled organisation led by a board of elected representatives from the Aboriginal community. We deal with tenancy matters primarily through our civil and welfare rights sections. Our geographical service area is extremely broad and stretches north up to Elliott and outwards to remote communities near the Western Australian, South Australian and Queensland borders.

Our catchment area includes town camps in both Alice Springs and Tennant Creek and our responses to this inquiry have been informed by legal case work we conducted on behalf of clients who reside in these town camps.

In our view, the public housing situation in the Northern Territory is at crisis point. This applies to both town camps and remote communities. We believe there is the need for a thorough review of remote housing arrangements in addition to this inquiry into town camps.

In the written submission that we provided to the Public Accounts Committee on 16 March 2016 we shared some observations regarding the three terms of reference for the inquiry and also provided some de-identified case studies to further illustrate the points raised.

We raised some serious concerns regarding the time limits for completing repairs. CAALAS is frequently contacted by Department of Housing tenants who advise that they requested repairs and maintenance to be undertaken, to no avail. These maintenance issues have included serious defects that can render a living environment unsafe and unhealthy. Often the delays in actioning these requests in our view will constitute a breach of the timeline set out in the *Residential Tenancies Act* for repairs and maintenance to be conducted by the landlords.

Whilst discussing these terms of reference we provided a case study that related to a client living in an Alice Springs town camp whose ceiling caved in. In some instances it is not easy to establish who is responsible for the delay in repairs and maintenance issues being attended to. Subcontracting arrangements relating to the management of town camps in Central Australia mean that there can be several steps between a tenant notifying the department of the maintenance issue and the repairs actually being conducted.

We have observed much frustration and disillusionment amongst our clients and the broader Aboriginal community about the repairs and maintenance process. The lack of action has caused the clients to seek legal assistance to effect basic repairs and maintenance, which is not ideal or sustainable.

The obvious preference would obviously be for tenants to receive prompt action in a response to notifications made by them. Given our role as a legal assistance provider we are limited in our ability to comment on the second term of reference relating to cost of repairs. However, in our submission we raised some concerns about debt that has been alleged by the Department of Housing against our clients on the basis of tenant responsible damage.

We have observed these to occur in cases where there has been no proof provided as to the tenant's responsibility and where the proper channels to recover a debt have not been followed. In our view, unfortunately many tenants are not aware that they can question the maintenance debt allocated to them or request to have reviewed.

CAALAS generally only becomes aware of the alleged debts when they form the basis of a public housing application being denied.

The scope for maintenance debt to render someone ineligible for public housing makes this a very serious issue and it is imperative that the appropriate checks and balances are in place.

In relation to the final term of reference regarding the consistency, accessibility and efficiency of the administrative arrangements, CAALAS can say that in our observations these arrangements are confusing and fragmented. On occasion, CAALAS has followed up clients' queries regarding repairs and maintenance only to be told by the Department of Housing to speak with the subcontracted maintenance provider, who in turn directed us back to the department.

It can be difficult for a lawyer to navigate this system, let alone a client who may be experiencing a number of life stresses in addition to both language and cultural barriers.

Ms Gordon and I will be happy to respond to questions from the Public Accounts Committee about our written submission. We will answer the questions in accordance with who is best placed, given our different roles. Ms Gordon has extensive frontline experience providing legal advice and representation to tenants in Central Australia, whereas my experience is primarily from a policy perspective. Thank you.

Madam CHAIR: Thank you. To begin with, what would be the most common tenancy-related problem you have to deal with at CAALAS in relation to residents of town camps? What do you see most?

Ms GORDON: I will try to answer that. It is Katie Gordon here.

Commonly we have eviction from town camps because of presumed tenant responsible damage to repair. Commonly we have people saying they have reported an issue but it has not been fixed. It can be a health hazard problem such as a flooding issue where the yard or the laundry has flooded. Constantly when the toilet flushes, the laundry might flood. Things like that come up all the time.

Town camp people are very confused about whom they report these issues to, it seems. There have been a lot of changes over the last few years. When we visit the town camps we ask people what is happening and they often come to us in frustration with these maintenance requests. If we do not visit often we are not notified. I am sure that on occasion there are probably a lot more issues there than those brought to our attention.

Madam CHAIR: Katie, when you are involved generally speaking do you get a reasonable response from the Department of Housing?

Ms GORDON: Historically it has been touch and go, sometimes not very timely at all and quite frustrating. Sometimes, as Lauren said, we refer back to the housing case management contractor and then other times they refer us back to housing and these things go around in circles.

Down here in Central Australia there is a lot of confusion over who is doing what. That is why lately we have actually just been going straight to the NTCAT and then we seem to be able to get some consistency in responses and actions happening in the required time frame according to the RTA.

Madam CHAIR: Could you just clarify for us what the NTCAT role is there, why they are more responsive?

Ms GORDON: The NTCAT is the civil administrative tribunal for the NT and basically they look after all the tenancy disputes. To try and get something done by liaising with the Department of Housing which is the landlord and the tenant sometimes can be frustrating. We are bringing a legal avenue into it by saying well I am afraid this did not happen in the required time frame so we are going to notify the tribunal and they will look at it.

Once that happens, the tribunal will step in and say well housing according to the *Residential Tenancies Act* you do have 14 days to fix these emergency repairs and they will be held accountable for it. Then we have found in previous cases that it does get done in the required time. They look at all tenancy disputes in public housing and private housing.

Our first port of call as lawyers, well mine anyway, is generally to go to negotiations first and not have to look at a legal avenue. But we have found with the inconsistency in responses and the confusion in the way town camps have been set up and changed who they report to that the tenants are upset and confused. We have had people take this avenue basically to get the required results for the people who live in the town camps.

Madam CHAIR: One issue that has been raised several times today is the difference between tenant related damage and wear and tear. Could you explain how that presents to you? I think it was in your and the NAAJA submissions.

Ms GORDON: It is a very big issue for tenant services because historically the landlord, the Department of Housing, will charge the tenants for what they deem tenant-responsible damage. In some cases it is obviously tenant-responsible damage. There might be a report saying Fred came onto the premises, he was inebriated and he broke a window. That was reported to the police so you have the evidence there that they invited that person onto the premises, therefore it is your responsibility; an tenant liability - a vicarious liability for letting that person on the property.

Often, kids might go past and throw rocks at a property and break a window. I have had incidents where that happened and the PHSO, the Public Housing Safety Officer, saw it happen. But there was no person at home; the tenant was out of town, so there was no report made to the police. The housing officer did not report it to the police. When it comes down to evidence for who pays for that, it will be the tenant because Housing will deem it tenant-responsible damage before they look into the matter. I presume that. I say that because it seems that way.

According to the RDA, you have to prove it was tenant-responsible damage. If someone has done it themselves – a kid on a skateboard put a hole in the wall that is deemed tenant-responsible damage. But if someone does not invite someone onto their property and it is trashed, which often happens in the case of properties of people who go out bush for a couple of weeks, for example, or leave the property for 30 days. In any case, the tenant generally gets lumped with a large debt.

This can affect them in a couple of ways. They think they are charged more and Housing takes more money out of their Centrelink payment, if they are on Centrelink each fortnight. In some cases, they have left the property, they are homeless, and they come back five years later and say, 'I would like to live here now, I want to move back into a house'. Housing will say, 'Sorry, in your previous property you racked up \$25 000 worth of debt and you have to pay that before you will get another house'. That happens a lot. That is most of our matters, actually. The debts are not proven and sometimes the damage has occurred in an intervening period when the tenant has not been living the house. By the time someone has fixed the house up and the contractors have been paid the money goes up and up.

It just seems like it is carte blanche and what tenants to pay for is not set adequately. That should be done in tribunal where you can look at things fairly and say well that is fair enough, that should be tenant responsible damage. But you know the house is old and take into account that the walls are plasterboard. There are a lot of factors that need to come into play before you just simply charge the tenants a large amount of money for repairs and maintenance.

That is where we see that issue coming into play. We feel it should be systematic in a completely different manner. Rather than the tenant being charged the amount and then they just have to pay it. That amount of compensation, which is what it is from the landlord, should be passed through the correct channels which is the NTCAT and then give that person the opportunity to be legally represented. Then a fairer outcome would occur in that instance.

That is how we see that according to the act it should occur however it is not. I hope that makes sense.

Madam CHAIR: We are just going to be pushed for time in this session so I am sorry we are going to have to pedal it along a bit.

Mr WOOD: Just quickly then, how does this compare with issues in relation to vandalism in public housing in the township or say even in other community centres in the Territory? The number of cases you are getting in relation to this, is it only a relatively small number of cases or is this something that you think is quite widespread? If there have been changes in the number of cases in relation to what you were just talking about, has that occurred since change of contracts?

Ms GORDON: I cannot really comment on whether that has occurred since changing of contracts. Do you mean instances of vandalism?

Mr WOOD: Yes, you were referring to the number of cases where people have been charged for what you think was deliberate vandalism.

Ms GORDON: That has been happening since I have worked in this role, since 2010.

Mr WOOD: So what is the process in public housing in Alice Springs town itself in relation to this type of decision making by Housing? Is it the same?

Ms GORDON: Yes, it is the same. As far as I am aware, Housing has used the same system in urban housing in Alice Springs, town camps and remote communities. There was talk a few years ago about perhaps having a separate system for remote and town camps. But Housing policy now is to use the same system across the board.

Mr WOOD: I am not sure what the other legal aid agency is in Alice Springs, but are you dealing with the same issues in town public housing?

Ms GORDON: Yes, CAALAS deals with all of that, basically, in Alice Springs. Cawls does some work in tenancy but we do the majority of it here. The majority of our matters are urban housing matters – evictions, etcetera. But since Housing has changed its policy to be the same across the board, we get more and more matters to do with town camps and remote. The policy is affecting our case work more than anything to do with who the contractor is to fix the problems.

Mr WOOD: What is your reason for saying that it is not right, it should apply regardless of who lives in a house?

Ms GORDON: Sorry, regardless of what?

Mr WOOD: Where the public house is sited. Are you saying there should be a different policy for town communities rather than houses within the township itself?

Ms GORDON: I do not know the answer, but there are definitely factors at play that affect town camps more so than they might affect urban houses. The fact is there are all Aboriginal people living in town camps and there are certain Aboriginal groups living there who come from certain areas around Central Australia.

By spreading the policy across the board that says they will put any group they want into that group can cause tension. It is about the cultural side of it with Aboriginal people and getting to know the priorities that that culture and town camp working with that to make the system that works for all people. There is a lot of cultural practice that is now not taken into account because that policy has been spread across the board. For example, transferring houses is a difficult one. Often we have people having difficulty transferring houses because someone has passed away. It is a very common cultural practice here that if someone passes away, particularly a spouse, the family has to leave that house.

That does not work very well with the policy of the Department of Housing or the RTA really. But it is a very common consequence of what happens here and causes all sorts of problems. Overcrowding is a massive issue because people have to move out straight away if someone passes away so they might go and live with a relative. So you have a few family groups living in one house, so of course that is going to cause more problems with maintenance, the overuse of some of the facilities. All of the social problems do compound from the (inaudible).

I think perhaps in some instances that the policies spreading across from urban to town camps to remote do have to be looked at in an individual light. Sometimes even remote communities have different cultural practices from others as well. It makes it more difficult but in the long run if they were looked at individually, and liaised with the people who live there on how they would like to run things, it could work more smoothly.

Madam CHAIR: Thanks Kate, we have one last question for CAALAS.

Ms FYLES: Just quickly, in your submission you talk about where clients have experienced lengthy delays in repairs and maintenance was generally due to the department not actioning the request. Have you sought explanation as to why from the department?

Ms GORDON: As to why the department has these delays?

Ms FYLES: Yes.

Ms GORDON: We have never really had a good answer except what we have heard from other people, which they have been told there is not enough money and that has been coming from our clients¹.

¹ On reviewing the transcript, the Central Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service provided the following comment:

“In relation to one response provided, we would like to provide some brief additional clarifying information. This would purely be to clarify that a common response by the Department to queries about repairs and maintenance delays, is that the Department was unaware that the repairs were needed and had not been notified by the tenant.”

We have sought to ask why there were delays but we have taken that to the NTCAT to ask that question. I think that I mentioned at the beginning that we often get pushed around to different people and do not get an adequate response. We do have at the moment at NTCAT some matters to do with compensation for people who obviously reported in February 2015, but nothing happened until November 2015 when we notified the Department of Housing. Some of these could definitely be considered emergency repairs. It is now going through NTCAT so we will get some response as to why that has happened.

Once again, I need to go through the legal avenues to get a clear understanding of why things do not work or have not been working for our clients.

Madam CHAIR: Okay, thanks Katie. We will put some questions to our NAAJA representatives.

Ms FYLES: Both submissions make reference to town camp tenants incurring debts with the Department of Housing. In your experience, does having a repairs and maintenance debt with the department prevent future repairs and maintenance from taking place in properties?

Ms WALKER: The situation in Darwin town camps is a little different. The town camps around Darwin are not managed by the Department of Housing. But tenants with existing debts in remote communities and urban public housing will create a barrier for a person applying for a house or a transfer to another house. I do not know what the relationship is between an existing debt and repairs and maintenance.

Ms FYLES: Perhaps we can ask the department. Thank you.

Ms MANISON: That was an interesting point you made that, as we have been discussing, there are different relationships around leasing, management, property management, tenancy management and repairs and maintenance management in town camps across the Territory. In your experience, have you found clients you represent are from the Darwin and Palmerston town camp area? What would be the typical issues they would come to NAAJA with when they are seeking legal representation about their housing issues on town camps?

Ms WALKER: NAAJA's client base is primarily from urban and remote public housing tenants. We do not see many urban town camp or community residents come into us. But there are a few reasons for that. We think there is a lack of support services that are available to town camp residents. We do not have the capacity to do outreach work to town camps.

We do about 100 remote trips each year and cover adult guardianship, alcohol mandatory treatment tribunal, and child in need of protection and care. We do the majority of the urban and remote public housing tenancy work across the Top End of the Northern Territory. So we do not have additional resources to go out to town camps.

Mr WOOD: But people catch the bus.

Ms WALKER: That is true.

Mr WOOD: They are right outside their place.

Ms WALKER: Absolutely.

Mr WOOD: It should not be necessary for you to go there.

Ms WALKER: But the legal relationship and the legal protections that are available to residents of town camps are also unclear in the Top End because of the nature of the leasing arrangements. The majority of the town camps, certainly in the Darwin area, the lease is to the Aboriginal Development Foundation and Yilli Rreung acts as a service provider. It does not consider itself to need to comply with the *Residential Tenancies Act* and that obviously creates uncertainty for town camp tenants or residents about whether or not they can actually seek legal advice and assistance.

There are also further issues around rental arrears and there may be other factors which will prevent a town camp tenant from seeking legal assistance.

Mr WOOD: Would Yilli Rreung already have an agreement when it receives the money? As it was setup for the purpose that it operates under now?

Ms WALKER: My understanding of that what happens is that there is a direct tenancy agreement between Yilli Rreung and the tenant themselves. Then there is a Memorandum of Understanding between Yilli Rreung and the Aboriginal Development Foundation. But as there is no underlying lease that Yilli Rreung holds over the land they do not consider themselves to be the landlord.

Mr WOOD: But when they accept money for their job, obviously they are paid by the Commonwealth I think through the NT government. Am I correct there? There must be an agreement for that money to be spent in a certain manner.

Ms WALKER: My understanding is that, and Yilli Rreung I assume are giving evidence before the committee?

Madam CHAIR: They have, earlier today, and this lack of clarity around who can evict people came out through our hearings with the ADF too.

Ms WALKER: My understanding is that town camps receive outstation funding from the Northern Territory government. But I obviously do not have a lot of visibility around where the funding streams come from.

Ms COLLINS: Maybe I could just give you an example? In Katherine we have a number of issues with residents who are leasing houses in the Kalano area. So our Katherine office was trying to represent the clients. There were a number of issues like evictions, rental going up significantly without notifying the tenants, there were a lot of repairs that were not being going. Our office was having a lot of difficulty communicating with the Kalano organisation so I had organised a teleconference.

It was very confusing because there is no structure in place of what the lease arrangements are, what the tenancy agreements are, and how they determine what rent is paid, what repairs are done and what the budget is. This might relate to just one town camp. That happens across almost all town camps. Where a tenant has an issue, who do they go to? Are they funded by the Territory government or the Commonwealth? Where can they go for their legal advice?

It became so confusing, even after we had the teleconference with Kalano. Even I was confused. How is a tenant supposed to know where to go? In some cases tenants' rent was

going up by \$100 a week. They were asking where they fit. They are apparently not funded by the Territory government so they do not come under the *Residential Tenancies Act*. What are the tenants' rights? This is right across the board in Darwin and Alice Springs. It is a mess, really.

Ms WALKER: Service providers' understanding of their legal obligation goes directly to how they are communicating with their tenants about their legal obligations and responsibilities. If a service provider understands that they are not covered under the *Residential Tenancies Act*, it will come out in communications with their tenant. It will come out in how they respond to requests for repairs and maintenance. Whether or not you consider yourself subject to the time frames set out in the act and the responsibility to provide safe and habitable premises at the time of entry into the tenancy agreement.

Kalano is in a different position again, because it owns the land. They have the ability to be taken to NTCAT for breaches of the *Residential Tenancies Act*. It is a different situation to the situation in Alice Springs and Tennant Creek, as well as Darwin. Without there being clear avenues for tenants to seek redress, either through NTCAT or another mechanism, tenants, who are already vulnerable, in town camps are left confused.

Mr WOOD: People living in, say, Knuckey Lagoon – there is no lease over those houses. The Aboriginal Development Foundation owns the house.

Ms WALKER: That is correct, but I understand ...

Mr WOOD: If there was some issue regarding residency – even though Yilli Rreung was supposed to have an MOU – would the final people to be taken to task not be the Aboriginal Development Foundation because it owns the house?

Ms WALKER: I would imagine so. That is the uncertainty. At the moment, Yilli Rreung enters into tenancy agreements directly with the tenant. There is no tenancy agreement between ADF and the tenant. My understanding is that ADF does not have any resources. Pursuing action against ADF for orders for repairs and maintenance or compensation for failure to make repairs will lead you nowhere.

These are situations that unfortunately are about the delays in repairs and maintenance that Katie and Lauren were speaking about in town camps in Alice Springs and certainly in remote communities. We consider that a similar inquiry should be made into the circumstances around repairs and maintenance in remote communities.

Our submission focused on issues in remote communities in public housing. I think the issues and complexities around organising repairs and maintenance that were outlined in the submissions of the Central Australian Affordable Housing Company are replicated and exacerbated in remote communities, where there is further distance and costs involved. In larger communities there are more people affected, so there are similar numbers of people living in overcrowded dwellings. Whatever impacts around repairs and maintenance – if, say, a toilet is not fixed or the tap does not work that has a multiplying effect. Instead of five people living in the three-bedroom home, as you would expect in suburban Darwin, if there are 15 people living in a home in Maningrida or Knuckey Lagoon it is 15 people who are inconvenienced, not just five.

Ms COLLINS: The roll-on effect you have from this is that Aboriginal people come into contact with the justice system. Children are being taken off their families, through the Department of Children and Families, from the overcrowded house. The house is not really liveable, and when the child is taken off the family, how do they get the child back if they cannot provide a stable, safe home environment?

Ms WALKER: It goes back to the shortage of housing in the Northern Territory. There are some statistics we referenced in the submission around how many houses are needed to meet demand in 2008. But I do not think at the moment there is any real knowledge of the need for housing in the Northern Territory.

These are things that directly impact on town camps. There is a cycle people enter into. If your house in a remote community is overcrowded it is difficult for you to maintain a good relationship with the people you are living with. You might have to cycle between a number of different houses in the community you live in, then you might try to get some reprieve by going into town. All of the people you know in town live in either town camps or public housing which places pressure on those households. That might lead to rent arrears and complaints of antisocial behaviour. Then that urban or town camp tenancy becomes threatened and the cycle begins again unless this is seen as a whole-of-government approach; that this is not an isolated issue.

Obviously if there are more people in a town camp which impacts on the hardware of the house, things break down more quickly. Unless it is seen as a complete response, just targeting town camps is looking at the thin end of the wedge.

Madam CHAIR: I thought your submission to this inquiry was excellent. Thirty recommendations was so comprehensive I do not have any questions. It was very thorough and will be useful to the inquiry announced by the government this morning.

Ms WALKER: Thank you very much.

Madam CHAIR: Hopefully, they embrace the work you have already done in this space. Thank you so much for coming in, Ms Lauren Macaulay and Katie Gordon from the Central Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service and Ms Priscilla Collins and Ms Lauren Walker from the North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency. Thank you for your time.

Ms COLLINS: Thank you.

Ms MACAULAY: Thank you.

The committee suspended.

DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING
DEPARTMENT OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITY SERVICES

Madam CHAIR: On behalf of the committee I would like to welcome everyone who has come along to provide information to the Public Accounts Committee inquiry into housing repairs and maintenance on town camps in the Northern Territory.

I welcome to the table to give evidence to the committee Ms Leah Clifford, the CEO of the Department of Housing; Mr Jim Bamber, the Deputy Chief Executive Officer of the Department of Housing; Mr Mike Chiodo, Chief Executive Office of the Department of Local Government and Community Services; and Ms Noelene Swanson, Deputy CE of the Department of Local Government and Community Services.

Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to come again to talk to us. This is a formal proceeding of the committee and the protection of parliamentary privilege and the obligation not to mislead the committee apply. This is a public hearing and is being webcast through the Assembly's website. The transcript will be made for use of the committee and may be put on the committee's website.

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

Please state your names and positions and provide an opening statement if you would.

Ms CLIFFORD: Thank you to the Chair and the committee members of the Public Accounts Committee for allowing me, the Chief Executive of the Department of Housing, and Jim Bamber, the Deputy CEO of the department to have an opportunity to appear today and discuss this important matter.

Madam CHAIR: Excuse me Leah, sorry, I have not acknowledged Mr Phil Luck, Executive Director of the Department of Housing. I did not have him on my list. I apologise for that.

Ms CLIFFORD: My next sentence would have been to introduce Phil. He is the Executive Director for Contract Implementation and has a long history in Housing. He is here today in case I need to call upon him.

I respectfully take the opportunity to provide some overall important context of the arrangements for town camps in Alice Springs and the community living areas in Tennant Creek. As outlined in the previous committee hearing, these are the town camps and community living areas in the Northern Territory where the department has a role in service delivery.

We heard this morning that land tenure in Alice Springs and Tennant Creek are Crown leases in perpetuity and special purpose leases held by the respective housing associations. In December 2009 a 40-year sublease was entered into with a number of housing associations, with the Executive Director Township Leasing, which is the Commonwealth entity, to provide for a sublease of land over the 17 town camps in Alice Springs.

The Northern Territory of Australia and the Department of Housing, through the CEO of Housing, are included in the sublease arrangement due to the roles and responsibilities that follow from this sublease. The sublease details the level of SIHIP investment to be undertaken - \$100m as an up-front investment – and references the housing management agreements and tendering arrangements that follow from there.

The Department of Housing responsibilities arising from that agreement relate, outside of the initial up-front investment, to property and tenancy management, which were outlined in the previous committee hearing.

These 2009 subleasing arrangements continue today on a month-by-month basis. The 40-year lease arrangement is explicit on how the Territory must call for the tender of provision of housing management services which provides property and tenancy management to town camps in Alice Springs. The department has, and continues to, deliver in accordance with its commitments in the lease arrangement including, but not limited to, paying rates and charges, providing the tenancy management and undertaking the repairs and maintenance.

The department takes its obligations seriously and as required in the lease meets with Commonwealth officials to inform them of service delivery through contract and tender arrangements.

As mentioned in the first committee hearing, our focus as a department has and continues to be on service delivery. The department continues to deliver based on this model, arising from these agreements to deliver in accordance with the *Residential Tenancies Act* to provide safe secure inhabitable housing for our tenants. That has been our aim and continues to be our focus.

This financial year to date we have expended about \$1.35m on repairs and maintenance, tenancy management and charges. I have spoken about the arrangements in Alice Springs and acknowledged that Tennant Creek has a different lease arrangement for its Community Living Areas. The Department of Housing's jurisdiction and I think I covered this in the first committee meeting, resonates from a sublease directly with the housing association on a 20 plus 20 plus 20 lease arrangement.

While the subleasing models differ between Alice Springs and Tennant Creek the department applies the same principle in undertaking its role as the tenancy and property manager. To date this year approximately \$400 000 has been spent on repairs and maintenance in Tennant Creek. Over the past 12 months we have listened to our stakeholders and tenants and focussed on improving our service delivery right across the Territory, including in Alice Springs town camps and Tennant Creek community living areas.

With the support and commitment of our staff in the department we have sharpened our focus and attention on contract and program management. We have undertaken audits in partnership with our contractors. We have looked at and improved our internal business process. We have enhanced our communication with our tenants through communications campaigns, which we touched on at the last committee hearing. We are working more closely with our contractors generally to deliver a higher standard of service.

By way of an example in the last month, and Molly touched on this this morning, all repairs and maintenance requests in Alice Springs were delivered by property maintenance contractors on the same day they were requested with some within one to two days for the non-urgent repairs. I acknowledge the submissions provided to the community by Tangentyere which highlight that improvements in service delivery in Alice Springs has improved since January 2016.

We certainly acknowledge that there have been instances where our tenants are not satisfied with aspects of our service delivery, which is why we have moved to the current arrangements on the service delivery based contract model.

We see our delivery as one of continuous improvement and recognise that there is still a great deal of work to be done internally and with our contractors.

We look forward to participating in the review today with the committee and the one that has been announced. In the meantime, we will continue to strive to deliver the best quality service we can for our tenants. We would be pleased to answer any questions.

Ms MANISON: Will Mr Chiodo make an opening address as well?

Madam CHAIR: Would you like to make it together or separately? Mr Chiodo, you make your opening statement then we will have a free-for-all.

Mr CHIODO: Thank you, Madam Chair. I will keep it as brief as I possibly can. That is the complexity of having two departments here at once.

Good afternoon. I am Mike Chiodo, Chief Executive Officer of the Department of Local Government and Community Services and the Office of Aboriginal Affairs. In attendance with me today is Ms Noelene Swanson, Deputy Chief Executive of the department. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to provide this opening statement.

Since the 2007 Northern Territory National Emergency Response, there has been a lack of consistency in the approach to town camps, particularly in relation to leasing and infrastructure funding. This has resulted in the complexities that this Public Accounts Committee hearing has been presented with, and left many residents feeling disempowered and without a voice when it comes to the decision making in town camps.

Since I became Chief Executive Officer of the Department of Local Government and Community Services, the department has been working towards gaining a better understanding of the issues and opportunities which may exist within town camps. This includes the instigation of an Alice Springs Town Camp Working Group, previously known as the task force, to look at providing more effective Northern Territory government services to these town camps. I chair that committee.

I believe it is a lack of understanding of the town camp complexities that are constraining progress, despite significant efforts being put into supporting town camps. In light of this, my department has now been given the lead from an administrative and management point of view for town camps across the Northern Territory. This has been some time in the making, and we are genuinely excited about this because we can now work with all the stakeholders to develop and implement a strategic approach to administering town camps in the Northern Territory.

We did not take the responsibility lightly. The first steps we are taking towards achieving a more effective town camps approach is the immediate commencement of a comprehensive independent review of town camps, which has never been done before.

The independent town camp review will be undertaken by a third party and will assess each of the 43 funded town camps located in Darwin, Alice Springs, Tenant Creek, Katherine, Elliott, Borroloola, Jabiru, Pine Creek and Mataranka. The review will assess

these town camps with reference to land tenure status, housing asset condition, existing infrastructure condition, economic opportunities, home ownership and capacity of lease holders to take responsibility for obligations under the relevant legislation and funding agreements.

As I mentioned earlier the complexities of town camps are many; for example: town camps are held under various tenure types and governed by various legislations, including Commonwealth legislation; the organisations holding the leases have faced various challenges, including the fact that many of these organisations have over the years been placed under administration at various times within their lives; town camps are essentially private lease holdings and generally have very poor infrastructure and housing; town camps are considered as privately owned under the lease arrangements; however, there appears to be little understanding of the rights, entitlements, responsibilities and ownership by the lease holders and the residents; and residents are responsible for meeting the cost and upkeep of their houses. I am speaking about the non-public housing town camps now, and shared facilities with a contribution provided by the Northern Territory government, as I said in my previous opening statement.

The review of the town camps will provide a place based approach that will help unravel – we hope – some of these complexities and to realise the Northern Territory government review obligations under the existing Alice Springs and town camp leases recommendations for local economic development opportunities, including: consideration of the lease holder and residents aspirations for engagement in the NT economy; recommendations for sustainable services through the sharing of workforce information and resources; an understanding of all current relevant legislation leading to recommendations for legislative amendments as required; an understanding of the current lease arrangements leading to recommendations for improved governance and compliance; a complete audit of the essential services infrastructure requirements and potential funding sources, whether it be public, private or any alternative investment leading to recommendation for alternative management structures; a complete audit of the condition of current housing stock leading to recommendations for alternative housing models; recommendations on the housing need and potential funding sources, as stated earlier; and document the past policies and the impact on the current town camp policies, including the establishment of town camps in the Northern Territory.

I expect the independent review will be completed and presented to the relevant minister by December 2016. Thanks again for the opportunity to make the opening statement.

Ms MANISON: Thank you, Mr Chiodo and Ms Clifford for the opening statements. It is interesting timing today that we heard the government announce it is doing a comprehensive review of the Northern Territory town camp system. It is something that will be welcomed. I have no doubt that this committee work will help that process.

I was interested to hear you say that the department of Local Government will be looking to take over the administrative arrangements for all town camps in the Northern Territory. When there is an arrangement such as the one in the Alice Springs town camps where Territory Housing has oversight management of the housing arrangements – we heard Ms Clifford outline some of the obligations which have been signed up to of the expectations of Territory Housing in the delivery of contracts and management of housing there.

How does this now impact that? Is it literally that the department of Local Government will now take over management in those town camps where there is Territory Housing management of housing?

Mr CHIODO: There will be no alteration in the existing lease arrangements that the Department of Housing has in place. That will continue. However, from an administrative and management point of view, in particular when we look at Alice Springs town camps where a substantial amount of funding was made available through SIHIP and the NPARIH program.

The issue has often been that the leasing structure is such that through the EDTL – sorry, Executive Director of Township Leasing which is the Commonwealth government – those leases have been deeded through to the NT of A, the Northern Territory of Australia. Through the NT of A the housing subleases go to the Department of Housing as a rule. There is also a further lease under the NT of A that subleases for what we call the common area.

So it will not alter the obligations of Housing, but it gives the overall administration and management of all the town camps to my department that has not previously existed.

Ms MANISON: But effectively, if you are in the Alice Springs town camps at the moment, you will not see a change in the management from Territory Housing.

Mr CHIODO: Not a change in the management of the day-to-day activities of public housing, no. But the Department of Housing will work with my department to ensure that we capture all the necessary information within Alice Springs and Tennant Creek to fulfil the obligations of this review across all 43.

Ms MANISON: Is the conduct of the review something that will be tendered out, or will there be somebody selected to do that?

Mr CHIODO: No, we are finalising the terms of reference for that now. We will make those terms of reference public of course and we will go out to tender for an independent organisation.

Ms MANISON: I do recall, I think it was around late 2012 or 2013 that there had been a task force established at that time to look at Darwin and Palmerston town camps. What eventuated out of that work?

Mr CHIODO: You have identified one of the issues that have led to the piece of work that we have now put forward. The fact is that it was given to the Department of Local Government and Community Services who in fact did not have administrative or management responsibilities for the town camps.

It caused a number of issues in particular when we have to deal with the various stakeholders involved, so it dissipated. However, on this occasion an instrument has been prepared by the Attorney-General's department to ensure that appropriate authority now sits with my department. They will form a part of the review as will the remaining town camps in the Northern Territory.

Madam CHAIR: Is this just a temporary arrangement to expire after the review has finished, or is this a permanent setup?

Mr CHIODO: I cannot pre-empt the results of the review.

Madam CHAIR: Okay, but it is permanent.

Mr CHIODO: Part of the recommendations that will come out of the review may more appropriately identify where that type of responsibility sits. But at the moment, it is permanent with the Department of Local Government and Community Services.

Madam CHAIR: Just to clarify again, all the town camps will be managed now by Local Government and Community Services?

Mr CHIODO: That is correct.

Mr WOOD: All of the town camps, in Darwin as well?

Mr CHIODO: All 43 town camps.

Mr WOOD: But you have not had the review yet?

Madam CHAIR: We are trying to catch up.

Mr CHIODO: The instrument that was recently prepared deeds over the responsibility for administration and management to my department. The review is the first step that we are taking as the department that now carries that responsibility. I read out a number of different components the review will need to look at. One of them will also be the most appropriate location for that ongoing administrative and management responsibility to sit.

Madam CHAIR: Mike, you said that the instrument has already gone to the Administrator. Has it, or it is being written?

Mr CHIODO: No, it is an internal instrument. As I said, the original document was a lease to the NT of A. The Department of Local Government and Community Services was not recognised within that. It is now being changed to recognise my department.

Madam CHAIR: To clarify, you will now be in charge of town camps which have the Department of Housing providing services also.

Mr CHIODO: That is correct – in Alice Springs and Tennant Creek.

Madam CHAIR: Okay.

Mr WOOD: That is better.

Madam CHAIR: Who will be boss? Who will be the most senior person in charge?

Mr CHIODO: In the spirit of the cooperative way the departments work together, there would be no boss. There would be a steering committee that would include the Department of Housing, Department of Chief Minister and Department of Treasury to make sure we are taking a whole-of-government approach ...

Mr WOOD: And Lands.

Mr CHIODO: And the Department of Lands and Planning in particular ...

Mr WOOD: Which is where the other review went. It did not go anywhere either. If you have this review – we are slightly off the subject, but it was only announced today – you will ask whoever is conducting this review to sit down with the people first? I see nothing worse than a top-down approach to this review. You would have seen a letter written to the paper

by the women of Knuckeyes Lagoon pleading for a change in governance and their conditions. If there will be a guarantee that whoever runs this gets out there and talks to the people it will be effective.

Mr CHIODO: On the release of the terms of reference, member for Nelson, you will see that in fact the consultative process is the very first component that is mentioned in them. Also, with the permission of the PAC, we intend as part of this to write to everyone who has made a submission to this committee to see whether they would be willing to allow us to make those submissions available to the independent body which will conduct the review. Having read a number of them, the quality of the submissions has impressed me and it has managed to raise a number of issues that I feel need to be looked at as a matter of urgency by this review.

Madam CHAIR: What has precipitated this review by government, do you think or know?

Mr CHIODO: I can only speak about my part of it, member for Araluen. As I said earlier, since I have become Chief Executive of the Department of Local Government and Community Services – which were two disparate departments and had originally belonged in a much larger department known as the Department of Housing, Local Government and Regional Services – one of my frustrations has been the inability for the department to do anything other than provide some funding to service delivery groups to provide very basic municipally essential services in a number of the homelands and outstations.

I have been speaking to ministers and others for a considerable period of time feeling that it was necessary to have at least one organisation within government that had the opportunity to oversight this type of exercise.

Madam CHAIR: The Public Accounts Committee of the Northern Territory parliament is conducting an inquiry to the repairs and maintenance of houses on town camps. The government has two seats on this panel we will be deliberating after this meeting. We may have a further hearing into this particular issue that we have deemed important to the people of the Northern Territory. At some point in the future we will be writing a report with recommendations to government.

This will fit in to your review to some extent. Is that a likely outcome? I mean, there is some duplication here. The point I am making is there will be duplication. We will have a report with recommendations. I know that you are not a political figure, you are a CE, but I am just asking you: Will you be considering our deliberations and recommendations as a part of your review?

Mr CHIODO: I would feel that it would be incumbent on us to look at all recommendations that are made from anybody. Obviously as I said earlier I am keen to ensure that the submissions that are made available that were made to the PAC would form a part of the review. As far as the obligation to accept the recommendations that come out of the PAC I would need to understand what they would take, member for Araluen, or how that fits in to any review. But, I would be keen to ensure that all the stakeholders play a part in this review.

Madam CHAIR: I have to say that to not take into consideration the product that we provide at the end of this process would make a mockery of the whole parliamentary system of the Northern Territory and the Westminster system. But that is probably a personal

opinion and comment rather than a question. I speak for myself again. I find this quite bewildering. Anyway it is great that the government is looking into this. Problems in town camps are an issue we have identified and I understand the position you are in as public servants being directed by the government to undertake this. I respect your position.

Ms FYLES: A practical question regarding repairs and maintenance. Is there a shared database that is used by the tenancy contractor, the property contractor and the department to ensure there is timely reporting on repairs and maintenance, but the work is also carried out in a timely manner? Further to that, what processes does the department have if a contractor does not meet the requirements in a timely manner?

Ms CLIFFORD: Member for Nightcliff, we currently have the tenancy management system, which is our main database. We have been using our database and platform as a tool for our contractors now. We have been out training – you would have heard from Zodiac this morning – them in the use of the system.

Ms FYLES: That is where the question came from because I felt that their responses were a little unclear. She kept referring to paperwork being filled in, so just to clarify that ...

Ms CLIFFORD: That is correct. She does use the manual request forms and the books that she mentioned to keep track of the logging she does across to the housing maintenance officer who does the repairs and maintenance.

We meet with our contractors informally now on a weekly basis and formally on a monthly basis to look at what is being done. The reporting we have seen from the repairs and maintenance contractor has been thorough. It was very pleasing to see that most of the repairs and maintenance they do on that day, so the reporting has definitely enhanced. Part of that is about our refocus, which I mentioned, to work closely with our contractors on the delivery of their services. It seems to be working well.

Ms FYLES: One of the continuing themes was that people go on site to repair something and there might be another issue they come across. There was some frustration expressed about policies in that they cannot just do that on the spot. We are talking about fairly minor issues. Is the department reviewing those aspects in trying to come up with a more seamless ...

Ms CLIFFORD: I can definitely understand how those issues were brought to light this morning and some of the frustrations. Some of that had to do with the previous model within which we operated when the department was the central point for issuing work orders to contractors. Our current model has shifted, where Zodiac issues them to Tangetyere. We are there with them in terms of monitoring performance and auditing their work.

Sorry, I have forgotten the rest of the question.

Ms FYLES: I guess you have answered that. There is a shift with the contractor ...

Ms CLIFFORD: With the repairs and maintenance, if the contractor is on site the current arrangements are such that – unlike the previous model we had – if they see something other than the works order they have been requested to do, they can ring through and get approvals for that and proceed to do it.

We see that as one of the benefits of the current model we work under. They can do more than the one job they went out to do.

Ms FYLES: Thank you.

Ms MANISON: This morning it was interesting to hear the perspective of the current companies engaged in the service delivery in Alice Springs town camps, and some of the previous contractors as well. Do you feel it is the right model in the town camps, with the housing, property and tenancy management, and the repairs and maintenance management? Having them as separate contractors and companies doing the work, is there any specific reason why it is delivered that way, with two separate companies delivering those works?

Ms CLIFFORD: Since 2012 the contract arrangements have always been separated into property repairs and maintenance and tenancy management. That arrangement continues today. I guess it largely flows from the 2009 subleases that were entered into in terms of what the department must provide under the housing management agreements, so that is what we have operated.

Our focus has been to look at how those models, as I have explained, could be better delivered. I think we still have improvements to make, but we have made some and we are seeing a difference. In terms of whether it should be one model or two, or how it should operate – Mike mentioned the review being undertaken. We will be party to the steering group and look forward to providing our information into that review. But our focus is on making the existing model continue to work and deliver for our clients, based on the historical setup.

Ms MANISON: It seems that since we first saw you at the committee hearing, when we had the new contractors in place, that Housing had made significant changes. One thing came through today that the contractors work far more efficiently when they have a good line of sight to one another from the start of reporting an issue to the completion or finalisation of a maintenance or repairs issue.

Do they have that transparent line of sight to one another now in doing the work in Alice Springs town camps in particular?

Ms CLIFFORD: Under the previous arrangement where the department issued the contract and works it was very disjointed. The department was the go-between between the two contractors. The current arrangements allow them to work a lot closer together. We are seeing that that integration and working together with the department is having some benefits in that area.

Ms MANISON: How long have the current contracts been in place of the most recent ones that have been awarded for the Alice Springs town camps?

Ms CLIFFORD: Jim can answer.

Mr BAMBER: Jim Bamber, Deputy CE, Housing. The current contract will be in place for 16 months. It was a question you raised at the last hearing, because there were 32 months left until the end of June 2018, which was given also.

Ms MANISON: Yes,

Mr BAMBER: The current contract will be in place for 16 months. There is an option to extend to June 2018.

Ms MANISON: Will there be a review of how the model is working because it seems that the last model went for 37 months. It seems to be at the end of this period when you have had to undertake some significant changes because the service delivery was not reaching the standard that the resident expected. There were clearly some issues given the changes you have made. Will there be a significant review period at the end of this tender?

Mr BAMBER: Yes, definitely. There will be a review before the end of the 16 months. That is occurring with all of our contracts. Especially in the last 12 months, we have been constantly making improvements across the board. We can definitely see improvement in our contracts and service levels.

Madam CHAIR: Speaking of reviews, there was a review announced in June of last year into government housing program initiatives. The reason I am asking about this, apart from being very interested in the whole package, was it included how we can better work in partnership with community housing providers.

I do not know if you have been following the discussion today online, but there has been quite a bit of reference to the community housing association model, particularly in relation to Alice Springs. Where is this review up to? It should be concluded soon, I imagine. We are heading for 10 months down the track.

Ms CLIFFORD: Madam Chair, would the review that you have been referring to would that be the housing strategy work?

Madam CHAIR: Review into government housing program initiatives, 17 June 2015, I am looking at the affordable housing initiatives, real housing for growth, the whole package, the whole gamut of options.

Ms CLIFFORD: Yes, that is the housing strategy work that we have been undertaking. That work has been ongoing, the submissions for that have now closed. You are absolutely right, the housing strategy looked at housing across the whole continuum from homelessness through to supported accommodation, into public housing, private rental and ultimately into home ownership.

Out of that process we undertook extensive consultations and I think we spoke with over 250 people across the Territory. Hearing feedback not only repairs and maintenance issues but types of models for housing and community housing models was one that was referenced as part of that process.

We are currently going through all the submissions now, looking at some of the strategies and the feedback that we had throughout the consultation process to inform our strategy.

Madam CHAIR: Two of the delegations who have spoken to us today mentioned that they have tried to have a discussion with housing about community housing programs associations and have not been able to get past the first post. They have not been able to get a meeting to discuss that.

I am just wondering, what is your perspective on that? Is that something that the Department of Housing has not been particularly receptive to?

Ms CLIFFORD: Thank you for raising that. I did not hear that, but thank you. In relation to community housing there is national legislation around community housing providers and we are currently working with one towards getting their accreditation through that national regulation scheme. We have also had other people approach us about community housing.

Because of the way that Mike and I work together quite closely, it is an ongoing discussion that we have had with people talking to us about alternative models. Which is why in the review Mike mentioned today that was also raised. But there have been discussions in relation to that, yes.

Mr CHIODO: Just to support what Ms Clifford was saying. Just historically, member for Araluen, it is worthy of mention that in the submissions I have seen the suggestions in relation to community housing. One of the risks that exist – and that is why we need to look at it closely; Leah is right there is legislation that supports the establishment of these organisations – is I mentioned earlier 2007. Prior to 2007 the majority of the town camp houses, particularly in Alice Springs, were in fact under exactly that type of model under IHANT.

The purpose of the exercise in the housing strategy the Department of Housing is carrying out, and what we intend to look at, is lessons learned from that model that ended up leading to the NPARIH model that was put in place in 2007. It is an imperative that we learn from whatever caused that change in 2007 before we make a decision moving forward.

Having spoken to organisations like NAAJA and others, we need to take into consideration the level of understanding of the obligations that go with the community housing model at the stakeholder level, in particular in town camps.

Ms CLIFFORD: Madam Chair, I will add to that and apologies that I have overlooked it. We have some community housing models that are operating in Alice Springs urban areas. Wachoupe Flats, which you would be familiar with, has 17 units. Also, Elliott Street has another 10 units. We have had those ongoing discussions with people who are delivering those services, and of course, awarded those projects.

We also have a renal project under way for somebody to provide community services around the renal project.

It is something we have been in discussions with.

Madam CHAIR: The delegates who spoke to us earlier said they had not been able to secure a meeting with anyone to talk about community housing associations – a model for town camps specifically. You might like to check *Hansard*. That is how I recall it, anyway.

Mr CHIODO: We are happy to follow that up, member for Araluen. If we identify the organisations then I am more than happy ...

Madam CHAIR: The Central Australian Affordable Housing Company and Tangentyere are the two delegations.

You mentioned when you developed the new contracts for tenancy management and repairs and maintenance, they have been built around a service delivery contract model. What did you have in place before?

Ms CLIFFORD: The model that we had, that existed before, was really one where the department was issuing the works order. I guess largely the two organisations were left to deliver what they had under their contract arrangements. I think that was explained this morning.

With the current model that we are operating, we do not issue the works order. The contractors have that ongoing service delivery relationship and as part of that we are working closely with them.

Mr WOOD: The Central Australian Affordable Housing Association mentioned the contracts. The lady who gave us that, I think it was Sally Langton, she said that when they went in to do the contract they said the waiting was 10% from the financial point of view and the rest was Aboriginal employment, etcetera.

She said that when the contracts were awarded it looked like the main focus was the finance.

Was either of your departments in charge of awarding of the contracts? If so, was Ms Langton correct when she said that the impression she had, when she first went for the contract, was 10% finance? But that when she came out of it I think she said that it was closer to 100%.

Ms CLIFFORD: Thank you member for Nelson. Yes, the contracts were awarded in January this year. Jim Bamber and Phil Luck attended the tender debriefing with Sally Langton and provided her that feedback. I might ask Phil, the head of contract implementation. Sorry, Jim Bamber, he attended the meeting in my absence and provided that information to Sally Langton. Jim is best placed to respond to that.

Mr BAMBER: I think that what we said was the distinguishing element was pricing. We definitely assessed against all elements, such as (inaudible), innovation, past performance capacity and price. But the distinguishing feature in the end was price. There was a significant price difference which resulted in the outcome.

Mr WOOD: Are you saying that both contracts were relatively equal then in all other matters?

Mr BAMBER: Correct. That is correct, until it came to price. The price was of a magnitude that had that affect.

Mr WOOD: I know we have a stack of other questions but I am not sure if we are going to get to them. I have just one minor question. It was mentioned by Yilli Rreung today about the role of Larrakia Nation. Do they have the contract with the department for the provision of some maintenance type activity.

Ms CLIFFORD: Yes, member for Nelson, we have a tenancy support program that operates across the Territory. Through that tenancy support program there is about \$18m in grants that are distributed to providers such as Larrakia Nation and others in Alice Springs

who support the Alice Springs and Tennant Creek town camps as well. They are administered through the Department of Housing.

Mr WOOD: Have the issues related to Larrakia Nation at the moment caused any drop-off in that program?

Ms CLIFFORD: As with all our tenancy support providers, part of the grant process is that we have ongoing dialogue, reporting and monitoring against those grant programs. The last update on performance was in March. Jim Bamber and the team continue to work with all the service providers.

Mr BAMBER: The tenancy support program is different from the tenancy management. Zodiac is doing the tenancy management, whereas the tenancy support programs are assisting the tenants with education with living. It is a broader support program; it is not a tenancy management program.

Mr WOOD: Do you think we get too much bureaucracy? I am not saying that they are not all happy. If you have a tenancy support management, do you need another body doing something fairly similar? Should they be one?

Mr BAMBER: The point I make is that they are not similar. One is organisations. There are 55 products across 18 service providers – Anglicare, Red Cross, Mission, Tangentyere – providing tenancy support, living skills, budgeting, financing etcetera. That is a separate product from the tenancy management contracts, which is working with the residents as tenancy managers.

In the urban areas, we are the tenancy managers and we provide those services. But then we bring in tenancy support providers from the NGOs to drive the support.

Madam CHAIR: Okay. Thank you very much for your time this afternoon Noelene Swanson and Mike Chiodo from the Department of Local Government and Community Services, and Ms Leah Clifford, Mr Jim Bamber and Mr Phil Luck from the Department of Housing.

Mr WOOD: Before we go, Madam Chair, we had a good number of questions here but we were sidetracked by the announcement of the review. I am wondering whether the departments would allow us to send you those questions on notice and have a response. Because there are quite a lot of questions and we simply do not have enough time to do it today.

Ms FYLES: We can follow up with you.

Mr WOOD: We have some interesting questions about relationship for instance between the Executive Director of Township Leasing and that person's role in what is happening as well.

Mr CHIODO: Member for Nelson I would be happy to take those on notice and respond.

Mr WOOD: That would be good, yes.

Madam CHAIR: Okay, thank you.

The committee suspended.
