

Local Decision Making Committee Submission

Pintupi Homelands Health Service

KINTORE COMMUNITY

Kintore, or Walungurru, is on Pintupi country about 530km west of Alice Springs and 40km from the Northern Territory-Western Australian border.

Located near the Kintore Range (Perentie or Ngintaka) and close to the base of the culturally important Pulikatjarra (Two Hills), Kintore is a major population centre for the Pintupi people who lived for 45,000 years as nomadic hunter-gatherers in the Western Desert.

The Kintore community is a testament to the resilience of the Pintupi people and their culture because despite government policy, including forced relocation, they have managed to preserve much of their traditional way of life.

Traditionally the Pintupi ranged over some 21,000 square kilometres around what is now the NT-WA border region, including places like Lake Mackay, Lake Macdonald, Mount Russell, the Kintore and Ehrenberg ranges and Warman Rocks.

Seemingly inhospitable, Pintupi country is a desert of undulating red sand plains, dune-fields, gibber-covered terrain, a few shallow salt lakes and unrelenting summer temperatures of more than 40 degrees.

But the Pintupi knew how to make the most of an environment with few watercourses and variable and unpredictable rainfall averaging just 160mm a year. It was, however, this environment and this isolation which helped preserve traditional Pintupi life for some 150 years after Europeans arrived in Australia.

It wasn't until the 1920 and 30s that the Pintupi had any level of contact with Europeans. This came mainly in the form of Lutherans seeking to convince Pintupi to swap their traditional ways for an existence at Finke River Mission (Hermannsburg).

With the establishment of Haasts Bluff in 1941, first as a government food depot and then a "native settlement", the drift of Pintupi away from the Western Desert began.

In the 60s Pintupi life changed irrevocably when the Menzies government decided on a policy of assimilation for all Aboriginal Australians. Along with other Aboriginal people Pintupi were forced off their traditional lands and relocated.

The government believed that if they surrendered their language, culture and identity and accepted some re-education, Aborigines would be absorbed into mainstream Australian society.

Papunya Native Settlement 240km north-west of Alice Springs was opened and the Pintupi and other Aboriginal groups found themselves forced into an unfamiliar new environment.

Life at Papunya was tough. As some of the last people to leave a fully-traditional existence the Pintupi were treated as unsophisticated outsiders by other groups at Papunya. The Pintupi also suffered badly from European diseases, with numerous deaths.

By the 1970s there were more than 1000 people crowded into Papunya. Along with the health problems there was poor and crowded housing and tensions between the different groups.

Unwilling to accept this environment, Pintupi people began leaving Papunya for outstations nearer their traditional lands in the west. In 1980 four working bores were sunk near Kintore Range, leading to the establishment of a Pintupi outstation, which in 1981 became Kintore community. During these decades of upheaval some Pintupi still clung to their ancestral lands.

The last link with traditional Pintupi ways was broken in 1984 when severe drought forced the so-called "Pintupi Nine" out of the desert and into the Pintupi community of Kiwirrkurra, 180 km from Kintore in Western Australia.

Pintupi-Luritja is Kintore's main language but Warlpiri, Arrente and Pitjantjatjara are also spoken meaning English is often a second or third language in the community.

Kintore's population can vary from 400 to 600, depending on climatic and cultural circumstances. On average there are about 450 people in the close-knit community. There are about 50 non-Indigenous residents who work either in the health centre, renal dialysis facility, council, store, police station, school, college or art centre.

Kintore is a major centre for the influential Western Desert art movement which began in the days at Papunya and helped give voice to the Pintupi identity as they struggled with the harsh realities of assimilation.

Papunya Tula art co-op, a wholly Aboriginal-owned company opened a studio at Kintore in 2007. When Papunya Tula painting began in the 70s it was an exclusively male practice but since the 1980s women are now involved adding a new dimension to Western Desert Art. A work by Ngingurra Gibbs featuring on the ceiling of the Quai Bramly gallery in Paris.

Despite its remoteness, Kintore has a well-equipped primary health care centre. Established in 1985, the Pintupi Homelands Health Service (PHHS) is an Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation operated by the Pintupi Homelands Health Council. It provides professional clinical services and programs through a dedicated team of nurses, Aboriginal health workers, health promotion officers, a doctor and support staff.

An Aboriginal board oversees the PHHS and is integral to the successful provision of holistic and culturally appropriate health services for the community.

The burden of disease at Kintore is high, largely because the Pintupi have only relatively recently exchanged their nomadic hunter-gatherer existence for a sedentary life and Western foods.

Kintore clinic is busy six days a week with an average of 10 percent of the population seeking medical attention every day.

Like many Aboriginal communities, Kintore has high levels of kidney disease. End Stage Renal Failure in the community is 40 times the Australian average.

Kintore, a kidney centre, has two dialysis machines and three full-time renal nurses. However, people are still forced to move to Alice Springs for dialysis treatment. Given the importance of family in helping people endure haemodialysis this sort of dislocation from the community presents major challenges.

To help Pintupi better cope with a western lifestyle the PHHS established the Healthy House program. It operates from a renovated property with a functioning kitchen, laundry and bathroom to teach people the skills for healthy township living.

The program was established after the sale of four significant works from Papunya Tula through an auction at the Art Gallery of NSW in 2000. The auction raised \$1 million and led to the foundation of the Western Desert Nganampa Walytja Palyantjaku Aboriginal Corporation, now known as the Purple House.

Since establishing its first dialysis clinic at Kintore in 2004 the Purple House now offers mobile services in 18 remote communities.

If the PHHS is the most remote medical clinic in Australia, Kintore Police station is probably the most remote police station in the country.

Kintore Police Station is a multi-jurisdictional facility operated jointly between the NT and WA Police from Kiwirrkurra. The station has an establishment of two NT officers, a WA officer and an Aboriginal Liaison Officer. But demands like prisoner transfers and other necessary trips to Alice Springs along with leave and study absences often result in the station being under-staffed.

This results in officers at times being unavailable to attend incidents which in other NT towns would result in a prompt police response.

With the advent of the shire system of local government in 2008 Kintore became part of the MacDonnell Regional Council whose responsibilities include aged care, youth and children's services, rubbish collection, maintenance of internal roads, open spaces and sporting grounds. But there are still plenty of people at Kintore who compare the previous model of a local community-based council favourably over the shire system.

The local football side is the Walungurru Hawks which play in the yellow and brown jersey of AFL side Hawthorn. Kintore's pride in their football team is reflected around the community with numerous buildings painted in yellow and brown.

The community is serviced by road and air. There is a regular mail-plane on Wednesdays and a fortnightly road-freight service along with a twice-weekly Bush Bus to and from Alice Springs.

It also has access to free-to-air television through Imparja, ABC, Channel Seven, NITV and SBS along with ABC and CAAMA FM radio plus mobile and broadband services.

EDUCATION

We have grave concerns about Kintore School. The Northern Territory Government's Kintore school is failing the Pintupi people, the Kintore community and most of all, our children.

The failure is absolute. You have only to look at the distressingly low attendance rates to understand just how great that failure is. The most recent stats are 54.8% attendance in term 1, 2021.

Given the long-term nature of the problem, we feel it is time for a total reset of the NT Government schooling model at Kintore. If the Government continues down this same path it will be a waste of time, money and human capital.

Our children are our future, the future of this community and the future of the Pintupi people. We want our children to be properly prepared to drive Kintore forward when it comes their turn to take charge and kids "need to walk in two worlds" as one community member mentioned.

We want them to be the medical staff at our clinic, the tradesmen, the police officers and the teachers for future generations of students.

Right now, there is absolutely no prospect of that happening. Would you want your children, or the children of those closest to you knowing their prospects are limited because the education system failed them?

We believe the key to unlocking the potential of our children is a Pintupi-Luritja language-led school. In many Kintore families English is a third or fourth language and one person said "Need to have language to work together and for young people to have more opportunities".

Learning in their own language is best for Pintupi children. We are not proposing a bi-lingual approach here. We want a pure Pintupi approach. One community member said that "this is the centre. Language led school is important. Everything should be about Pintupi to start".

During consultations, the groups discussed the 'forever future' of Kintore and the importance of school in the community's future. People walked back to Kintore to live here, that shows the importance both of this place and the language of this place.

In the past there has been a school committee where community members can have input and support teachers. During consultations, it was discussed and agreed that "community members used to make more choices about school trips, day trips for kids to go out on country" and this is not happening anymore. Integrating cultural activities throughout the

school year is of importance to families in Kintore and for students to succeed at school and enjoy their educational journeys they must feel they belong, and they must be able to identify with their school and what it offers them.

Currently this is not the general experience at Kintore School. Sadly, Kintore school remains irrelevant to Pintupi people, as the current attendance rates attest.

The current educational framework is ensuring Kintore school continues to woefully under-perform that will continue for as long as the existing approach remains.

The children of Kintore need to be connected to their Pintupi identity to ensure they go to school and to be positive and engaged when they get there.

We have been encouraged by some of the statements you have made about schooling in remote areas. You appear genuine in your desire to improve educational outcomes in the bush.

But the Territory is as diverse as it is dispersed and a one-size fits all approach to education in our remote regions, no matter well intentioned, will not work everywhere.

Kintore is not Yirrkala, Galiwinku or Ngukurr. It is a very different community with very different culture, language and law. We want a Kintore-specific education model to ensure a true community school and a place our children are proud of and eager to attend.

This will take courage and perseverance. But what has been tried so far has demonstrably failed.

What we are proposing is more than an attempt to preserve the Pintupi language. Although, that is vitally important. Our language represents a window into a uniquely Pintupi world-view.

Pintupi words, concepts and ways of phrasing are rooted in relationships between people, our land and our culture, further, “to protect sacred sites and culture, what’s more important than protecting the language”.

It is time for the Government and the Pintupi people to walk side-by-side to improve the educational outcomes and the future of Kintore.

During consultations, community members discussed the importance of the school having the elders involved, senior men and women. Discussed the importance of the school being the centre of the community and said that “there should be a meeting place, a community place, at the school”.

In regard to senior schooling, feedback around Yirara was generally positive and community members are grateful to have it on country as one person said that “kids shouldn’t have to travel a long way for studies. They should study here on country but Yirara College at Kintore should be as good as the one in town and offer opportunities to attend boarding school on country.

POLICING

As you would know, Kintore is more than 500km west of Alice Springs and about 40km from the Northern Territory-West Australian border. Kintore's population is generally about 450 people.

The Kintore region is policed through a multi-jurisdictional agreement between the NT and WA. Local Police have responsibility for a patrol region ranging 130km north of Kintore, 100km south, 100km east and 250km into WA. The station has an establishment of a sergeant, two constables and an Aboriginal Liaison Officer.

Effective policing continues to be a problem in our community. Like so many remote locations Kintore Station is affected by absences of Police from the community and delayed response times when calls for assistance are made. We imagine this may well be a story you have heard from other remote locations. But that does not mean we should have to put up with these deficiencies.

There are people, most notably young women, considering their futures here because of concerns for their personal safety. This is not a reflection on the members themselves, who generally do a professional job under sometimes difficult circumstances. The problem is the system cannot guarantee a consistent and effective Police presence in the community.

We appreciate Police absences from the community are generally for legitimate reasons. These include patrols, trips to Alice Springs, including prisoner transfers, plus professional development courses and leave entitlements. The long hours members at times work can also affect their capacity to respond adequately when calls for assistance are made.

Additionally, there are challenges finding officers to back-fill positions when Kintore officers are away for prolonged periods.

Kintore people want to work with Police to enhance community safety. But the current gaps in service make that difficult. So too does the fact that few officers stay long enough to get a proper understanding of Kintore, its families and culture. Kintore residents have responded positively in the past to officers who have stayed and made the effort to get to know this community.

A further issue of serious concern is the Darwin-based call centre. Community members discussed the cross border police station being hard to contact in an emergency and the difficulties of explaining things to someone on the phone (call centre) who doesn't know the community.

People want to be able to contact the local police, not ring the Darwin police reporting system. One member said this is a big headache and talked about some people not bothering to ring up because it is too hard.

During the community consultations, community members discussed how the police call centre can work better and serve the local community. One member said this is important “for their own safety” too. Clear communication with police is important.

Pintupi-Luritja is Kintore’s main language but we also have Warlpiri, Arrernte and Pitjantjatjara speakers. English is often the third or fourth language in the community. This results in incidents warranting Police intervention going unreported because people are unwilling to call 131444 because they worry it will be too difficult and potentially embarrassing for them. There has also been an incident reported by community members that pepper spray was used at the football final and it went on old people and children, resulting in a further erosion of trust in the community.

Residents understand they cannot directly call on local officers 24 hours a day. But changes must be made at the call-centre to encourage Kintore people to use the service in times of need.

We fear the absence of officers from the community and concerns about the call-centre could one day lead to an avoidable tragedy. Currently four policemen are needed at the Kintore cross-border police station. Currently all three go to Kiwirrkurra and then there are no police for the day. While they are away, there have been serious community incidents. In one serious incident, petrol was poured over child by a community member also threatening suicide. Lack of police puts other community members and staff at risk because they have to deal with these incidents.

While Kintore is remote, we hope we are not so remote as to be out of mind with the decision-makers in Darwin. But that is how Kintore people frequently feel when it comes to policing. The current situation leads us to believe neither politicians nor the Commissioner are getting the full picture of policing at Kintore.

LAW AND JUSTICE AND CULTURAL OBLIGATIONS FOR INCARCERATED PEOPLE

There are so many complex issues around incarceration in the NT which we recognise and we would like to address just one issue that affects community members, which is attending funerals. Pintupi people would like to remind the committee that sorry business and paying respects at a funeral is a very important family and cultural obligation. Attending funerals as a cultural obligation plays an integral role in both the rehabilitation of incarcerated people and the successful reintegration back into the community.

“Families in jail are missing out on funerals. It used to be easier to get people in jail out to funerals” and “they should be there with family” and it’s cruel and unusual punishment for them not being able to go.

While we know there are significant costs associated with getting incarcerated people to funerals on compassionate grounds, Communities are willing to work together to find solutions to the barriers.

Community members have set up a community fund through Yuntju Corporation. It has split off functions from the store (Pulikitjarra Corp) where funds get transferred from the store to the corporation and this goes into a community fund for sorry business, community need, supporting old people, cultural business. Yuntju is filling gaps in current services and is Aboriginal controlled. We ask that the committee consider the ongoing work that we can do together towards solutions on this matter.

OUTSTATIONS

In the past year and a half there has been an increase in people living on outstations. Besides the core needs to live and practice culture on country, one contributing factor to the increase is COVID-19 and the need to isolate and stay safe in uncertain times. During consultations, community members said “outstations are a safe place and a good place for young people to learn culture” and “outstations are a good place for young people. Kids can go back there and grandparents can teach them culture”.

This has led to ongoing conversations in the community for an outstations resource centre, as people don't think there is currently enough support to develop and support sustainable living on homelands. Community led decision making in regard to homelands services can go a long way to reducing overcrowding in community centres, land management, culture and wellbeing of pintupi people. We know there are excellent outcomes to supporting outstations and the need has become ever more important in COVID times in regard to health and cultural safety.

SAFETY

As described earlier, Kintore is accessible by corrugated dirt road. The recent bitumen from the edge of Kintore to the turn-off is good, but there are hundreds more kms of rough road into town. As it is, the road doesn't get graded enough and is unsafe for travelling and prior to COVID border closures, the road is used often by tourists, community members, public servants, bush bus, service staff and mining companies.

The community and visitors deserve to travel safely and consider bitumised the road, allowing for designated rest stops with drinking water and mobile coverage will go a long way in saving lives and greatly increasing sustainable living on homelands.

SUMMARY

Kintore is small and isolated. But the outstanding success of the Pintupi Homelands Health Service clinic and aged care, both under the control of Pintupi elders, shows what this community is capable of when it is given a voice.

The community recognises one way to maintain and build on vital gains in areas like health and art is to ensure their children are properly prepared to carry the community forward. Education is the key to that future. But Pintupi people want the same control over the education of their children as they have over their health services and art centre.

Pintupi people believe the education of their children must be connected to a language, culture and identity 45,000 years in the making. Pintupi people believe their past is vital to their future.

We see the local decision making framework as flexible which is a good thing however there is a level of confusion around the framework that does need to be addressed.

If you talk about local decision making in the Kintore community, there are three other key areas that will need to be addressed along with Education, Law and Justice, safety and outstations that were addressed in this document.

1. An apology in parliament for the NT intervention
2. Localised community councils
3. A new community housing model

Numerous people have been speaking about these key areas and there is a clear indication that new, localised models of service delivery and governance are key in the success of local decision making outcomes.

Subject to the availability of community members and the committee, we would like to send two community delegates to give evidence on the matters discussed in this submission.

We are proud of our past and focussed on our future. For that reason, we would also like to invite members of the committee here to allow them to get a better appreciation of our challenges and opportunities on Pintupi homelands, Kintore.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission and we look forward to continued conversations on these matters.