

Submission to the Select Committee on Youth Suicides in the NT

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The Department of Housing, Local Government and Regional Services (DHLGRS) delivers social housing programs and related infrastructure across the Territory, and builds stronger regions and communities through sustainable economic development and effective local government. The agency delivers services and programs in partnership with the Australian Government, Local Government, non-government community organisations and local communities.

DHLGRS recognises that community context is an important influence affecting the wellbeing of the Territory's youth. Listed below is the current situation and progress of major initiatives across key aspects of the agency's areas of responsibility.

1. Housing in remote areas

- The National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing (NPARIH) funding is supporting the Northern Territory Government (NTG) to deliver with the Commonwealth Government:
 - Stage 1 to 2013:
 - 934 new houses by 2013
 - 415 rebuilds of existing houses;
 - 2500 refurbishments by June 2013, and
 - Stage 2 to 2018:
 - 522 new houses by 2018;
- As at 23 December 2011:
 - 475 new houses were completed across the Tiwi Islands, Maningrida, Wadeye, Groote Eylandt, Gunbalanya, Galiwin'ku and the Alice Springs Town Camps with a further 186 underway;
 - 1926 refurbishments and rebuilds were also completed with a further 20 underway.

- The remote public housing reform will improve housing conditions for remote community residents across the Territory. This will have a lasting effect on living conditions for the youth of remote communities.

Overcrowding

- Overcrowding is a significant issue in many remote communities and is a long time issue in the NT.
- NPARIH is helping to address decades of underinvestment in community housing.
- The construction of new houses and housing refurbishments are happening at a faster rate than ever before.
- Before SIHIP and the new Remote Management Public Housing Framework for remote communities the 4500 existing houses were in a very poor state.
- Significant number of houses had bathrooms, kitchens and laundries that were functioning poorly or not at all. This meant tenants of those dwellings were migrating to functioning houses, exacerbating the already overcrowded conditions.
- New subdivisions in Wadeye, Maningrida, Wurrumiyanga (Nguju), Galiwin'ku, Gunbalanya, Angurugu and Umbakumba will directly address overcrowding in these communities.
- Nevertheless, overcrowding will remain an issue. Before SIHIP, average occupancy rates were 10.7 persons per remote dwelling. The target under the NPARIH Implementation Plan is 9.3 persons per remote dwelling.
- **Case study:** Wadeye had an increase in housing stock of 105, from **171 to 262**. This reduced average numbers of occupants from 5.2 to 3.7 people per bedroom or 16 per house to 10 per house, based on a total population of 2720.

Improving living practices

- Refurbishment works under the Program focus on making houses safe, such as repairing electrical and plumbing components and restoring functionality.
- The work will also focus on improving the 'critical healthy living practices' from the National Indigenous Housing Guidelines (tabled separately).
- This means making sure houses provide tenants with:
 - a place to wash and bathe
 - facilities to wash clothes and bedding
 - the ability to remove waste safely from the house
 - the ability to store, prepare and cook food.
- Tens of thousands of remote housing tenants will benefit from this increased functionality.

Government Employee Housing (GEH)

- DHLGRS coordinates the provision of dwellings for access as accommodation by eligible employees of the NTG who are appointed or transferred to a location in the NT for the purpose of providing a key government service and where a private rental market doesn't exist.
- The expansion of the TGT's and increased remote development and service delivery has raised the need for a more functionally streamlined GEH approach.
- DHLGRS has established a working group to deal with this issue and will set the framework for the establishment of relevant policies and procedures underpinning a streamlined and consistent GEH service delivery.

Arrangements with Department of Children and Families

- **Accommodation for youths**

- In **Gap Road Alice Springs** 8 dwellings have been modified for the Department of Children and Families (DCF) specifically for accommodating young women. DHLGRS has prepared the lease and once signed by DCF, accommodation will be allocated.
- In **Crerar Road Darwin** 6 units have been modified for DCF specifically for youth accommodation. DHLGRS has prepared the lease and once signed by DCF, accommodation will be allocated.

- **Child Protection and Wellbeing Teams**

- DHLGRS has been working with DCF to make available Government Employee Housing to support the establishment of child protection and wellbeing teams in remote areas.

- **Foster Carers**

- An interagency working group has been established with DCF to work through the issue of foster carers as a criterion in determining the allocation of housing in remote communities. The Working Group continues to work through the issues, including how best to ensure the allocation process takes foster carers into account.
- DHLGRS has allocated dwellings to DCF for accommodating foster carers as follows:
 - 3 at Maningrida;
 - 1 at Belyuen; and
 - 1 at Ntaria.

Employment opportunities

- **SIHIP**

- Indigenous employment and workforce development is also a key objective of SIHIP.
- As at December 2011, the department has been improving remote employment including:
 - over 200 Indigenous people are currently employed to help deliver SIHIP;
 - target of 20% Indigenous employment has been set across the Program; this target has been exceeded - over 1200 Indigenous people employed since the commencement of SIHIP;
 - property management agreements with shires include a minimum of 40% of labour employed in the delivery of works, either directly or indirectly to be carried out by local Indigenous employees; and
 - tenancy management agreements with shires include a minimum of 50% Indigenous employment rate for Community Housing Officers.

- **Agreements between DHLGRS and shires**

- In 2011 five shires commenced the Housing Management Program with the department to employ local Indigenous labour to deliver life skills programs, fencing, painting and yard maintenance.
 - The Housing Management Program will provide up to 250 positions for Indigenous people in the delivery of housing related activities.

- In 2010-2011, under the Service Level Agreements between the shires and the department, shires reported 85% of community housing officers were Indigenous and over 50% of all repairs and maintenance labour were carried out by Indigenous employees.

2. Homelessness

- During 2010-11, 36 non-government organisations were funded \$10.8 million under the National Affordable Housing Agreement to deliver 50 specialist homelessness services. In addition, 16 non-government organisations were funded \$19.37 million to deliver 22 initiatives under the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (NPAH).
- Initiatives to decrease homelessness, funded through the NPAH, include:
 - **Intervention and Case Management services**, delivered in Darwin, Katherine and Alice Springs, which assist rough sleepers to access accommodation and transport to Return to Country (lead: Department of Justice; providers: Larrakia Nation (Darwin), Mission Australia (Katherine) and Tangentyere (Alice Springs);
 - a **Darwin Supported Accommodation Program**, which provides transitional accommodation and case management to men who are homeless (lead: DHLGRS; providers: Mission Australia);
 - the **Alice Springs emergency accommodation and Youth Streetwork Outreach service** that provides emergency accommodation and support services to 160 at risk children and young people in 2010-11 (lead: DCF; provider: DCF Youth Streetwork Outreach Service);
 - a **Post Release Support Program** which assist clients exiting correctional services to re-engage with the community and transition into stable accommodation (lead: DoJ; providers: Mission Australia); and

- **Percy Court**, which provides an additional 75 beds in 28 accommodation units, and the South Terrace managed accommodation facility, which provides 66 beds for short-term accommodation in Alice Springs (lead:DCF; providers:Mission Australia).
- Other Northern Territory initiatives that address homelessness include:
 - the **Apmere Mwerre Accommodation Park**, which was constructed under the Alice Springs Transformation Plan and incorporates a mix of units, cabins, tents and open camping areas for short-term accommodation for up to 150 people per night visiting Alice Springs;
 - the **Rough Sleeper Study**, which was commissioned in late 2010 to better understand motivations for, and patterns of, rough sleeping in Darwin and Palmerston. The study has informed development of various programs to assist rough sleepers; and
 - the commenced development of **Regional Homelessness Action Plans (RHAPs)**, which aim to further support people experiencing homelessness and at risk of homelessness in Darwin, Katherine, Tennant Creek and Alice Springs. Regional homelessness forums in each of the RHAP sites are planned to take place in collaboration with DCF, NT Shelter and the community sector in March 2012. One of the aims of these forums is to finalise the RHAPs for completion by mid 2012.

A. Achievement of Local Government Reform

Overview of Local Government

- The current system of Local Government in the Northern Territory has been in place since 2008.
- The new councils are still comparatively young but are showing the benefits of increased capacity and scope in delivering local government services.
- The reforms established 8 larger shire councils from the previous arrangement of more than 60, much smaller, councils – many of which were “at risk” in terms of their compliance with the *Local Government Act* and other requirements.
- There are eight regional shire councils: East Arnhem Shire, Tiwi Islands Shire, West Arnhem Shire, Roper Gulf Shire, Victoria Daly Shire, Barkly Shire, Central Desert Shire, MacDonnell Shire, and three smaller shire councils: Belyuen Community Government Council, Wagait Shire Council and Coomalie Community Government Council.
- There are five municipal councils: City of Darwin, City of Palmerston, Litchfield Council, Katherine Town Council and Alice Springs Town Council.

Local Government funding

- In addition to raising revenue from rates and charges, Northern Territory shire councils receive Northern Territory Government funding support for delivery of core local government functions in the form of an annual Operational Subsidy.
- Shire rates and charges comprise about 3-5% of their total revenue.

- To see local government funding to shires from 2007–08 to 2011–12, refer to Attachment A.[check]
- Northern Territory regional shire councils are also able to apply for specific purpose Closing the Gap grants to support local initiatives and capacity development of shire Local Boards.
- Both municipal and shire councils can apply for specific purpose grants to support specific projects relating to core services.
- The Commonwealth provides funding assistance to all Australian local government councils through State and Territory Grants Commissions. The distribution methodology provides a weighting that ensures support for councils that are delivering services to disperse populations in remote regions with a high proportion of Indigenous constituents.
- In addition, councils also have access to the whole range of Commonwealth and Territory Grant Programs to assist with the delivery of core and non-core services.
- Since the 2008 reforms, shire councils have been able to access increased levels of Commonwealth and Territory funding for core and non-core services. The Commonwealth has taken action to fully-fund positions in such services as aged care, child care and community safety that were previously subsidised by use of CDEP-participants. Both the Commonwealth and the NTG have provided additional funding to transition former CDEP positions that were delivering local government core functions to fully funded employment with the shire councils.

- The NTG in conjunction with the Commonwealth is providing \$30 million over three years (\$25.2 million in NTG funding) for wage assistance for predominantly entry-level positions in shire councils delivering core local government services.

Capacity and Indigenous employment improvements in Local Government

- Since the 2008 reforms, the shire councils have significantly improved the capacity of local government to manage service delivery – particularly to remote communities. This increased capacity has also significantly improved the ability of councils to apply for and access a range of Commonwealth and Territory funding sources, including funding for youth-focused services.
- The local government reforms have also had a positive impact on levels of employment in local government.
- Prior to local government reform, the former constituent councils employed a total of 1657 persons – both Indigenous and non-Indigenous.
- A year after the local government reforms, the eight regional shire councils employed a total of 2269 persons of whom 1661 were Indigenous.
- In other words, the total Indigenous employment in local government shire councils in June 2009 exceeded the size of the total Indigenous and Non-Indigenous workforce in the former constituent councils 12 months prior.

- Reasons for the increased employment are attributed to the Commonwealth and NTG programs outlined earlier that were designed to convert former CDEP positions into fully paid positions in councils delivering core services and non-core services in aged care, child care and community patrol.
- The employment of Indigenous people by shire councils has continued in the years following the 2008 reform. At 30 June this year, shire councils employed over 1700 Indigenous persons – comprising about 72% of their total workforce.
- The \$8.4 million per year provided by the NT Government to support entry level positions is currently supporting some 440 Indigenous persons in full and part-time positions in regional shire councils.
- The Commonwealth has committed \$1.6 million per year for the three years ending June 2014 to employ about 20 workplace mentors in shire councils.

Services relating to youth delivered by Local Government

- Local Governments are required to deliver a range of core services which are outlined in their respective Regional Management Plans. Core Services that support youth include civic events, library and cultural heritage, and administration of local boards, which are the vital link between individual communities and councils.
- In addition to core services, most Local Governments provide a wide range of youth-focussed programs, in the areas of sport and recreation, youth leadership, and youth diversion. Below are some examples of programs delivered by Local Governments with Commonwealth and Territory funding:

- **Case studies:**

- The Tiwi Islands Shire Council has a successful Youth Diversion and Development Unit, funded by the Northern Territory Government and other partners. The program delivers innovative mediation and family conferencing for youth offenders, working closely with the police and other service providers such as the Red Cross and Catholic Care. This program has recently been reviewed by the Australian Institute for Family Studies.
- Youth is one of the four key focus areas in the Roper Gulf Shire 2011–12 Shire Plan (the Roper Gulf Shire Annual Report 2010-11 is tabled separately). Roper Gulf Shire has a new Youth Services Program which is establishing a dedicated youth centre/space in three targeted communities. The program is also assisting young people to complete Certificate II in Community Services as a pathway to employment. It also has a Youth Voice Committee to encourage a new generation of leaders.
- East Arnhem Shire Council has attracted Commonwealth and NTG funding for a range of youth-focused sport and recreation facilities including upgrading ovals at Galiwin'ku, Umbakumba and Ramingining, upgrading sport and recreation halls to support youth programs and upgrading the Milingimbi drop in centre with improved IT facilities. It has also established bi-annual East Arnhem Shire Council Youth, Sport and Recreation Workshops to link youth with employers and youth stakeholders including, Alcohol and Other Drugs, RRACSSU, DEEWA, NRETAS – Indigenous Sport Unit, Family and Children's Services.

4. Funding and Support for Shires and Shire Communities Funding

- Since the reforms, shire councils have been able to access a larger range of grant funding from both the Territory and Commonwealth Governments.
- As most government agencies (both Australian and Territory) have their own funding agreements with differing reporting and acquittal requirements, shire councils are dealing with the challenge of trying to coordinate the large number of grant agreements they are currently a party to.
- (Please also refer to Attachment A for details on funding support for shires)

Review of the Financial Sustainability of Shire Councils

- The department is currently undertaking a review of the financial sustainability of all shire councils. Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu has been engaged to conduct the review under terms of reference developed in consultation with the local government sector. A steering committee comprising representatives nominated by LGANT, the Local Government Managers Association (NT branch) and senior departmental officers is assisting Deloitte with the review. It is anticipated that the review will be completed by March of this year.
- This review will identify future risks for councils in terms of financial sustainability and identify mitigation strategies for council in order to strengthen their capacity to deliver core and non-core services.
- One major intended outcome of the review is to identify mechanisms that will ensure funding bodies and grant programs are better tailored to the service delivery needs and requirements of councils.

Grants commission funding

- The Northern Territory Grants Commission is established as an independent statutory authority under the Local Government Grants Commission Act 1986.
- Its primary role is to allocate financial assistance grants provided by the Australian Government to Northern Territory local governing bodies in the form of general purpose grants and local roads grants.
- It is a requirement under the Commonwealth's *Local Government (Financial Assistance) Act 1995* that there is a local government grants commission in each State and the Northern Territory to make recommendations on the allocation of funding to local governments made under the Act.
- The Commission makes recommendations to the Federal Minister in respect of the amounts of money to be allocated to local governing bodies from the money provided to the Territory by the Commonwealth under the *Local Government (Financial Assistance) Act 1995*.
- The Commission also makes recommendations on such other matters relating to the finances of local governing bodies as the Northern Territory Minister for Local Government, from time to time, refers to the Commission.

4. Remote service delivery and co-ordination of services

- The Service Delivery Coordination Unit (SDCU) is driving the implementation of the Northern Territory Government's *Working Future* policy which identifies 21 Territory Growth Towns.
- SDCU is part of the Regional Operations Centre, a joint Commonwealth and Northern Territory Government collaboration focused on Closing the Gap on Indigenous Disadvantage in the 15 priority sites identified in the Remote Service Delivery National Partnership Agreement (RSD NPA). These 15 sites are also identified as Territory Growth Towns as part of the *Working Future* policy.
- SDCU provides support to the Chief Executive with coordination of NTG commitments with respect to the Closing the Gap in the Northern Territory Partnership Agreement, and negotiation of the proposed Stronger Futures National Partnership Agreement.
- SDCU has part time Liaison Officers from other NTG agencies who provide support through various means to ensure the Working Future policy is being implemented (Department of Lands and Planning, Department of Health, NT Police, DCF, Power Water Corporation, DoJ, DHLGRS, Department of Construction and Infrastructure, Department of Business and Employment, NT Tourism, Department of Resources, NRETAS and the Department of Education).
- SDCU plays a central role in the coordinating government services in remote NT and is responsible for:
 - Coordinating the activities of NTG agencies related to Working Future through the Remote Service Delivery Sub Committee of the NTG Chief Executives Coordination Committee. The RSD Sub Committee is chaired by the Chief Executive of DHLGRS;

- Supporting Local Implementation Plan (LIP) development and delivery for the Remote Service Delivery priority towns (a LIP example is tabled separately);
 - Supporting the RSD NPA Board of Management which is jointly chaired by the Chief Executive of DHLGRS and the State Manager of FaHCSIA;
 - Managing LIP development and delivery for the Territory Growth Towns not included in the RSD NPA;
 - Coordinating reports on progress being made under Working Future and the RSD NPA; and
 - Coordinating and securing tenure for all Northern Territory Government infrastructure on Aboriginal Land.
- Issues related to the wellbeing of young people arise in the coordination activities of the SDCU. SDCU Area Managers manage the network of Government Business Managers in RSD sites, and therefore have direct linkages to the issues impacting upon young people in those places.
 - Successful pathways through the major transition points facing young people, including transition to employment, are key factors in reducing the risk of youth suicide.
 - The NTG is developing a place based job plan for each Territory Growth Town with measurable outcomes. This plan will be supported by a Remote Jobs Framework which focuses effort and funding streams to support that plan. DHLGRS is the coordinating body for this work.

Futures Forums

- Community ownership of economic development and service delivery is a key component of the Working Future initiative.

- A key driver of economic participation is a 'Futures Forum' (Forum) for each TGT. Supported by the community, the Forums enable Government to provide a full picture of employment and development opportunities within each TGT in the public and private sectors.
- The Forums are conducted in partnership with community champions, shire councils, the Commonwealth and the private sector, and have an employment and enterprise development focus. Best results have been delivered through breaking community members into groups – Women, Men and Youth and engaging the groups in conversations that are specifically focused to their needs and aspirations. Youth continues to be a key focus in Future Forums.

Outstations/Homelands

- Up to 10 000 people, or about one-seventh of the Territory's Indigenous population, identify as residents (part-time and full-time) and/or traditional owners of a homeland or outstation. This population is spread across more than 500 locations, ranging from single improvised dwellings with one family through to communities of more than 100 people.
- The NTG's policy on Outstations and Homelands is based on the premise that homelands/ outstations are private assets on private land and therefore the primary responsibility for maintenance and development lies with the residents and landowners. On this policy basis, the role of the Government is to supplement private responsibilities with grants and subsidies that recognise the special nature of homelands/outstations, but there is a clear delineation between land owners and government.
- Homelands/outstations receive funding from a variety of sources, both Territory and Commonwealth, including CDEP, health, education and ranger programs. An example of the diverse and significant range of

funding available to homelands/outstations can be found in the Lhaynaphuy Association, which has an estimated annual Budget in excess of \$20 million for service delivery to homelands/outstations in the north-east Arnhem Land region.

- In 2008, a Memorandum of Understanding for Indigenous Housing Accommodation and Related Services (the MOU) between the Commonwealth and the Northern Territory, among other things, transferred responsibility for administration of essential and municipal services funding (\$20 million per annum) to homelands/outstations from the Commonwealth to the Territory Government.
- The MOU provided funding of \$20 million per annum for supplementary municipal and essential services. A number of homelands and outstations receive mainstream essential service delivery outside of the \$20 million program (for example all the Utopia homelands are connected to the Territory's electricity grid).
- Over the past three and half years, the NTG has implemented the outstation/homelands municipal and essential services program previously administered by FaHSCIA (and before then by ATSIC). Funding for the program has been provided by the Commonwealth,.
- Together with the housing maintenance program and an outstation municipal services CDEP conversion program administered by the NTG, this has been the only recurrent source of funding for maintenance of outstation/homeland infrastructure.
- The Northern Territory and the Commonwealth are currently in discussion about the continuation of funding support for municipal and essential services to outstations/homelands. These discussions are informed, in part, by extensive consultations undertaken with outstation/homelands residents and service providers over the past three years.