

## Submission from Barkly Regional Council to the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly Inquiry into Local Decision Making

### Background

The Barkly Regional Council is a Regional Council providing infrastructure, services and programs to individuals, families, children's groups, schools, businesses and agencies across the Barkly. This Region covers 323,514km<sup>2</sup> and has a resident population of 8,563. Over 60% of the people in the Barkly Region identify themselves as Aboriginal and there is 16 different language groups within our area. Council respectfully recognises Torres Strait Islander people are First Nations people that live in the Northern Territory.

The Barkly Regional Council is comprised of 13 Elected Members, from four different electoral wards, based in seven different townships and communities. Within the seven different areas there is a further 40 members who make up seven Local Authorities.

Local Government is generally considered to be the tier of government closest to the people. Our staff and elected members communicate daily with residents and visitors on a range of local, state and national issues. In general, Barkly Regional Council has a strong commitment to consult with our community on issues that directly affect them.

Of Council's 13 elected members, 7 are indigenous, further to this approximately 70% of Council staff are Indigenous. This is a higher percentage than many indigenous corporations and a much higher percentage than NTG. Council does consider itself to be an Indigenous Organisation.

### Local Decision Making

To date the Northern Territory Government has achieved little in the realm of LDM within the Barkly. This is due to a number of factors including:

- Lack of established Aboriginal organisations outside of Tennant Creek
- Historically (not just the current Government) poor consultation with Indigenous people in Barkly communities
- Ineffectual utilisation of Council's long-standing good relationships with our remote community residents
- Limited action on previously identified issues, specifically housing
- No on-the-ground presence

LDM appears to be on a path to reduce the number of services councils deliver, in favour of handing these to other organisations. This has been done with little or no consultation with local government which until recently has not been included in the LDM process as a concept. The model of consultation as detailed in the latest iteration of the *Remote Engagement Coordination Strategy* (RECS) is a welcome record of the intent of NTG even if it is not actually being abided by.

Shire and Regional Councils were established to provide improved services to communities as the old Town Council model was expensive and inefficient. The Government's move to LDM looks

to be an effort to return to the defunct Town Council model with increased costs, compounded by less on-the-ground service delivery capacity and less financial capacity to improve infrastructure.

In our experience, in general, community members see LDM as just more strangers coming into the community talking about things that have no impact on their daily lives. One prominent elder commented 'here are more of these fellas coming in to tell us what we need, they never ask, they just talk talk talk and nothing happens'. Similar sentiments are shared in the RECS, and to prevent ongoing community experience of isolation from LDM processes. Collaboration with all tiers of government needs to be agreed as an essential component to develop community-identified, meaningful, practicable and lasting changes.

Local Government is LDM in its purest form, between elected members of Council and members of Local Authorities, who are nominated by their respective communities, we receive direct, regular feedback from over 50 of our residents. In addition Council employs over 200 people in our towns and communities. I would guess that LDM does not reach this level of engagement anywhere, even where it has been successfully established. The strength of the Local Authorities is their ability to bring the deficiencies of service providers to Council.

Technology has made Council even more accessible, as BRC has video conferencing facilities to most of our remote service delivery centres and also makes video conferencing available for Council meetings in the event members do not want to travel for meetings. In general these are the only video conferencing facilities in most communities. In spite of these being offered to support NTG initiatives, we are not aware of any NTG employee making use of our video conferencing facilities.

Treaty, truth telling and Voice are initiatives designed outside of Council operations, and as such, operate as more background noise that can distract from the vital services Local Government delivers to communities. We also do not see the connection between these initiatives and LDM - each seems to deliver confused messages to remote communities, which then see nothing lasting or meaningful come out of these initiatives. Council may be happy to assist with these initiatives if we are funded to do so.

Currently, Council's own experience with conducting Local Decision Making projects has been very well executed. Council has an internal community consultation policy that it follows with a focus on consultation in our remote communities. With local people who are based in the relevant community leading any community consultation, as well as receiving input from the Local Authorities, Councillors and major stakeholders, means that all people who wish to have a voice are given the opportunity to be involved in Council's local decision making.

It has been this Council's experience that local decision making and any community consultation conducted by various Northern Territory Government Departments has been less than desirable. Communication prior to any consultation has been minimal and in some cases that consultation has been by registration only, which then means those who are not aware, or do not have access to register, do not get a voice.

While Remote Engagement workshops will provide a 'same page' resource for public servants and others, Local Government representatives i.e. Area Managers of the respective community, should be the first port of call to get the community ready, in liaison with Barkly Regional Deal Team if applicable. For interpreter services, communities may opt to use community members (including Local Authority members) who are able to speak to those assembled.

## **Need to Review LDM Concept**

There is a growing trend of non-indigenous businesses being disadvantaged by LDM, in addition one large local indigenous corporation does not employ white people, this has caused a significant rift in the community and generated a great deal of ill will. That same organisation also will not service non indigenous clients, despite being tax-payer funded.

Areas of NTG responsibility such as housing, health, education, training and jobs, law and justice and economic development are all NTG responsibilities. How government addresses these matters is an NTG concern and apart from consultations as part of the Barkly Regional Deal, Council has not been included in discussions.

While Council are committed to optimal outcomes in all these areas and in support of economic development, we do not have the resources to effect change. Consultation with Council is lacking and directly links to deficiencies in planning and delivery, working relationships can suffer as a result of this.

Local Government is the lead agency for sporting and recreation facilities and local government core services. If NTG wants to discuss these areas of responsibility they should follow their own community consultation policy and talk to Local Government about it rather than exclude us from the conversation while engaging with other sectors.

Communities get bombarded by visitors passing through communities, talking about one initiative or another. This often results in confusion about who is speaking about what, Council's are perceived by community as a 'one stop shop' for service delivery – even for the services we are not involved in.

NTG appears to consult with local government when it wants to either take a project from us, or cost-shift to us. We do not seem to be considered as partners with many decisions that directly affect us, but rather these decisions are being made in isolation from us. In the Barkly Region this has already seen Canteen Creek being run independently from Council.

Council has been working with NTG to assist with the transition of the Urapuntja homeland to a similar model to Canteen Creek. While this is done under the guise of LDM, it's more a local problem- solving initiative rather than decision-making forum.

We are also witnessing the de-amalgamation of East Arnhem Council as Groote Island is split off from Council. This seems to be a decision that the Council and LGANT should have been engaged in and may ultimately result in higher administration costs and lower service levels for residents.

## **Process of weakening Local Government**

The LDM process historically and at present, seems to be indicative of the approach of other NTG initiatives, that further weaken the sustainability of Local Government - cost-shifting to the Local Government sector while potentially stripping funding to pass onto Indigenous corporations. It is making Local Government even more unsustainable and decreasing financial viability. Regional and Shire Councils appear to be at the greatest risk.

It is important to note that Regional councils are the only tier of government with staff on the ground, in the communities talking to the residents daily. We are also the only level of government providing ongoing employment and career opportunities in communities. This could all be lost if

services transition to indigenous corporations that succeed or fail based on the person at the wheel.

Over the years we have all seen numerous corporations fail time and time again. The biggest risk to LDM is that when these organisations fail, allocated funds are lost. The NTG then seeks to hand back broken assets to the local government sector. I would hope that the fiscal due diligence displayed by the NTG is robust to ensure this does not occur as there is no guarantee local government will agree to take back broken assets or programs.

Local Government delivers a number of key services in communities including Aged Care, NDIS, after school care, sports and recreation, community safety patrol and child care. Our Council only delivers these because no one else will and we have the infrastructure to support the programs. Without an effective Local Government sector these programs could cease in some remote communities.

### **How to improve LDM**

To improve LDM get Councils involved! We communicate with our residents well, we live in the communities and we suffer or thrive based on the decisions all tiers of Government make.

NTG also needs to stop weakening our sector, with the continued approach to reduce our income and increase our responsibilities – we could see the sector fail. If we are not properly resourced, we will find retaining staff even more difficult than it already is, (including CEO's) as the jobs will not be seen as secure and we will not be able to deliver the services we should be delivering.

As governments change, priorities change - LDM like many other initiatives will ultimately fade into the distance as government priorities change. Our key message is not to take down local government with you as you try to move services to dysfunctional providers. A model of community consultation was developed for the RECS with two regional councils. Consistent and universal consultation with local government, being introduced into established relationships, over time, with community members is an essential component to understanding and delivering to needs more effectively, both fiscally and with authenticity.

### **What is working**

Developed in 2018, the Barkly Regional Deal (BRD) is a great example of what can be achieved when everyone works together. The 28 initiatives that form the BRD were all put forward by our residents (both indigenous and non-indigenous), the various levels of government then worked together to find funding for the initiatives.

This is true local decision making with everyone working together towards a common goal. The people designing LDM need to learn from this very successful initiative and have another go at getting LDM right.