

Appendix 6

FaHCSIA answers to Question on Notice regarding Stronger Futures Consultations

Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee

Inquiry into Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Bill 2011 and two related bills

Canberra Hearing, Thursday 1 March 2012

Question No: FaHCSIA 1

Topic: Stronger Futures consultations

Hansard Page: 29-30

Senator Siewert asked:

Whose decision was it to immediately go to separate men's and women's meetings in Maningrida?

...

I asked both the men and women if they were consulted about splitting the meeting and they said no. I ask again: whose decision was it when the community just last week said they were not consulted, they did not want to be split into men and women and they made that point really strongly, I understand, during the consultation. So who made that decision?

...

I think perhaps the best thing to do would be for you to look at the Hansard and respond. What we heard last week was very different from what you have just said—polar opposites, in fact. Instead of pursuing it, I think the best thing is if you could look at it and take it on record and get back to us.

Answer:

The Department has reviewed the transcript of the Committee's hearings in Maningrida and consulted with the senior departmental facilitator for the Tier 2 meeting at Maningrida on 12 July 2011. Early in the meeting the facilitator formed the view, having regard to the size of the meeting, that the large meeting format was unlikely to allow for open dialogue by all, and suggested that the meeting be separated into men's and women's sessions. This was supported by Minister Macklin who indicated this to the meeting.

It should be noted that following the separate meetings, Minister Macklin joined the men's meeting and this enabled the men to discuss with her a range of issues they had

canvassed in their meeting, in which Minister Snowdon participated.

It should be noted also that the senior facilitator who handled the initial consultation on 12 July returned to Maningrida on 22-23 August 2011 for two days of intensive follow-up discussions, as agreed at the 12 July meeting. He was joined by a senior female colleague and the Indigenous Engagement Officer from Maningrida. They met with key organisations including the Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation, two health services, the school, the Shire and Women's Centre, and had full day of discussions with people in a number of outstations.

The Department also wishes to place on record the following comments about the practice of having separate gender-based consultation meetings.

Understanding gender perspectives is fundamental to effectively addressing many complex policy issues.

Aboriginal women are a vulnerable group in the Northern Territory and good consultation practice is to provide an opportunity for women to safely make their input into the process.

Experience has shown that Indigenous women are more likely to express their views openly in discussions involving other women than they would in open public forums.

Experience has also shown that on some issues, people are unwilling to discuss their views openly in the company of the opposite sex. For example, the 2009 NTER Redesign consultations highlighted that people frequently felt uncomfortable about discussing issues around pornography and the pornography restrictions in open meetings.

One of the observations made by the Cultural and Indigenous Research Centre Australia (CIRCA) in their report of the 2009 NTER Redesign consultations was that smaller, separate gender groups were most effective and that it was "important, where possible, to separate into smaller male and female groups, to limit the dominance of men in the discussion". The 2011 Stronger Futures consultations sought to improve on the 2009 consultations.

Despite the objections of some men to this approach, separate men's and women's meetings are a critical and legitimate component of the consultation process given community protocols that often determine who has the authority to speak at larger, public meetings on behalf of the community, and the Australian Government's aim of gathering feedback from a wide cross-section of the community in order to understand the diversity of views.

The CIRCA report on the 2011 Stronger Futures consultations continued to express concern that the large community meetings, while providing a forum for senior community members to speak on behalf of the community, "limit the participation of young people and (in some cases) women".

Given that the intention with the Stronger Futures consultations was to provide maximum opportunity for all interested people to express their views frankly and openly, FaHCSIA made every effort to ensure that people could still provide their views to the Government if they might otherwise feel constrained from, or hesitant about, speaking up in public meetings.

For this reason, people were offered the chance to provide their views, either as individuals or in small groups, to Government Business Managers or Indigenous Engagement Officers in communities. A total of 378 of these small (Tier 1) consultation meetings were undertaken. In addition, the option to conduct separate men's and women's meetings was adopted for a number of whole-of-community (Tier 2) meetings; this occurred in thirteen communities.

In practical terms, the normal FaHCSIA practice in determining whether separate meetings should be conducted is to gauge the views of members of the community beforehand. This could involve the Government Business Manager and Indigenous Engagement Officers having preliminary discussions prior to the date of the community meeting. It could also involve the facilitator for the Tier 2 meeting discussing this option prior to the commencement of the meeting.

In instances where it is clear that men and women in a community have quite different perspectives on a range of issues, a decision may be made – on the basis of best practice indicated above, and possibly contrary to opinion from some parts of the community – that the consultation should be conducted through separate meetings.

It is also possible that during a Tier 2 meeting, the facilitator, having regard to the mood and the progress of the meeting, could suggest that it would be beneficial for the meeting to split into separate (and smaller) groups in order to enable a wider range of views to be put forward.

In order to facilitate the conduct of separate meetings, or to be prepared for the possibility that the meeting may decide to split into separate sessions, FaHCSIA sought to make bookings for both female and male interpreters for Tier 2 meetings wherever possible.

In relation to Maningrida, background and community profile work done by the Department over the past few years indicated that men and women in the community had different perspectives on a range of issues. An example of a gendered response to local issues in Maningrida is the Strong Women's Night Patrol Service, which has been established to address the level of violence experienced by women and children.

The approach adopted at the 12 July 2011 Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory consultations followed the approach adopted in the 2009 NTER Redesign consultations at Maningrida. This involved a large community meeting breaking into separate men's and women's meetings to discuss specific issues.

Question No: FaHCSIA 2**Topic:** Stronger Futures consultations**Hansard Page:** 31**Senator Siewert asked:**

You took a question on notice from me earlier about whether there were any materials produced in language. One of your answers was:

... research indicates that if people are literate in their own languages they are likely to be literate in English.

Could you take on notice the research behind that statement please?

Answer:

The Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs does not usually translate written materials into Indigenous languages. Evidence to support this approach comes from both formal research and other more anecdotal feedback, including advice from the Northern Territory Aboriginal Interpreter Service and feedback from Government Business Managers.

The Department does, however, make every attempt to translate audio presentations into Indigenous languages. During the Stronger Futures consultations this included the use of interpreters at community meetings and the translation of radio advertisements notifying residents of consultations in their community (13 languages as well as English).

More recently the Department has produced a DVD outlining the main points of the Stronger Futures legislation in simple English, and voiced also in 15 Indigenous languages. This resource is available online and has been provided in disc form to Government Business Managers and Indigenous Engagement Officers to pass on to individuals or groups or for use in information sessions.

In 2008, the Department and Centrelink commissioned a communications research project on the first phase of communications for the Northern Territory Emergency Response. Some of the key findings from this research were:

- “Due to cultural preferences for oral information, reinforced by variable rates of literacy, verbal communication is the clear preference for the way people in communities want to obtain government information.
- Literacy levels in remote Indigenous communities are much lower than in the general community.
 - In general, if people can read local language material they are usually able to read English as well.

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- Written English material should be kept to a ‘single message’ and kept simple.
 - Local language material is not a key solution — literacy problems are often in both English and local languages”.

The researchers commented generally on the ‘limitations inherent in written communications products’ and reiterated in the more detailed discussion that ‘written local language material is unlikely to be particularly effective at raising or reinforcing awareness’.

These research findings are consistent with other research including recent developmental research undertaken by the Department of Health and Ageing to inform the social marketing campaigns arising from the National Partnership Agreement on Closing the Gap in Indigenous Health Outcomes. The ear health research report undertaken by CIRCA in June 2010 found that:

- “... the overwhelming majority noted that face-to-face information delivery was the most appropriate, as sharing information in this way is considered culturally relevant and overcomes potential literacy issues associated with written material.
- “...the resources that generated the most positive comment were those that were highly visual, such as graphic posters, flipcharts and a DVD. Participants were less engaged with resources that were ‘text heavy’ or featured complicated pictures and language.”

Question No: FaHCSIA 3

Topic: Stronger Futures consultations

Hansard Page: 31

Senator Siewert asked:

Did you do any discussion papers in more easily understandable English or provide any materials or an overhead or something?

Could you provide us with a copy of that?

Answer:

Hard copy versions of the following materials have been provided separately to the Committee Secretariat:

1. A simpler English version of the discussion paper, which was produced for use in communities. This became known colloquially as the ‘consultation paper’.
2. Four A3 size colour posters used to notify the time and place of the Tier 2 community meetings;
3. Two double-sided A4 flyers that were used in communities to provide general information about the Stronger Futures consultation process.
4. A flip-chart that was provided to assist in the conduct of local meetings;
5. A double-sided flyer that was circulated after the consultations were completed, thanking people for their input to the consultations, summarizing the feedback and briefly explaining the next steps;
6. A double-sided flyer that was released in communities in November 2011 to provide a summary of the measures in the Stronger Futures legislation, and explain the opportunities for input to the Senate Committee inquiry; and
7. A DVD that was provided to communities in early 2012, outlining the measures in the legislation; the voice-over text is translated into 15 Indigenous languages.

In its independent review of the Stronger Futures consultations, the Cultural and Indigenous Research Centre Australia (CIRCA) had generally positive comments about the communication products, in particular the ‘consultation paper’ (item 1 above).

The ‘consultation paper’ was the most commonly used product and was made available at the majority of consultations attended by CIRCA. Many community members picked up the consultation paper and appeared interested in the content; the illustrative photographs appeared to assist understanding and encourage discussion of the specific issues.

The ‘consultation paper’ was used consistently by facilitators throughout the Tier 2 consultations. The benefits of this communication tool were:

- It provided details on the purpose of the consultation, the three key areas for future work and prompts for discussion on each of the eight themes;
- The photographs clearly illustrated the themes to be discussed and were useful for people with low literacy or who had difficulty reading; and

- It provided sufficiently detailed information that could be accessed easily by those with good English literacy skills.

Question No: FaHCSIA 4**Topic:** Stronger Futures consultations**Hansard Page:** 31**Senator Boyce asked:**

Mr Dillon: I am advised that we do have some materials on engagement and the engagement framework that we do apply—they are principles.

Senator BOYCE: Could we have a copy of that please?

Mr Dillon: Yes. It is a public document. I am happy to give you a copy.

Senator BOYCE: Thank you.

Answer:

A copy of the Government's Engagement Framework "*Engaging Today, Building Tomorrow*" has been provided separately to the Committee Secretariat.

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Senator BOYCE: Thank you.

Answer:

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Question No: FaHCSIA 5**Topic:** Stronger Futures consultations**Hansard Page:** 32**Senator Siewert** asked:

Can I ask a supplementary question? How many of those eight [meetings] that the Minister attended did the audit people attend?

Answer:

During the Stronger Futures consultation period, Minister Macklin led community consultation meetings at Tennant Creek, Lajamanu, Maningrida, Ngukurr, Angurugu, Kaltukatjara (Docker River) and Engawala.

None of these meetings was observed by Cultural and Indigenous Research Centre Australia (CIRCA) as part of its quality assurance of the consultations. The communities where CIRCA observed the consultation meetings are listed in the CIRCA report.

CIRCA was required to observe a representative sample of meetings and made its own decision as to which meetings it would attend.

It should be noted that at most, if not all, of the meetings attended by the Minister, members of stakeholder organisations, community leaders and the media were present.

Question No: FaHCSIA 9**Topic:** Stronger Futures consultations**Hansard Page:** 35**Senator Boyce** asked:

On notice, could you tell me why the period of six weeks was chosen? What is the research behind picking six weeks for doing it? I am happy to put that on notice, but I would like a fairly full answer to that question.

Answer:

It is important to note that the Government has been engaging actively with Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory for a number of years, including through the 2008 consultations conducted by the NTER Review Board and the comprehensive

2009 NTER Redesign consultations. In addition Government Business Managers and Indigenous Engagement Officers have been working on the ground in communities for the last four years. These have helped create a more effective mechanism for engagement between communities and government.

The Stronger Futures consultation process was an intensive period of consultation but needs to be seen in the context of this ongoing engagement activity. A primary purpose of the Stronger Futures consultations was to hear what people had to say - about what works, what needs to be improved, and what more needs to be done – before the Government made any decisions about proposed legislative and funding measures.

The timing of the Stronger Futures consultations was determined by practical considerations relating to the lead time required for preparation of legislation and its consideration by the Parliament well ahead of the cessation of the Northern Territory Emergency Response legislation.

To provide optimum opportunity for Parliamentary consideration of the legislation, including the potential for referral to a Senate Committee, it was felt necessary to have the legislation tabled in the Parliament before the end of the 2011 sittings.

To meet this timeline, it was necessary to complete the consultations by mid-August 2011 so that the feedback from consultations could be considered in the development of policy and preparation of detailed legislation.

The commencement date of the consultation period was determined largely on the basis of the lead time required to prepare the discussion paper.