

SENATE FINANCE AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

LEGISLATION COMMITTEE

Public Hearing - Budget Estimates

Cross Portfolio Indigenous matters

25 May 2018

Pennie Weedon

A/Executive Director of Township Leasing

Opening statement

Since the last appearance in 2015 there has been some significant developments occur in the township leasing area.

Currently there are five township leases that I hold on behalf of the Commonwealth covering eight Aboriginal townships in the Northern Territory these include:

- Wurrumiyanga on the Tiwi Islands in August 2007;
- Angurugu, Umbakumba and Milyakburra on the Groote Eylandt Archipelago in December 2008;
- Milikapiti and Wurankuwu on the Tiwi Islands in November 2011;
- Mutitjulu in Central Australia in March 2017; and
- Pirlangimpi on the Tiwi Islands in June 2017.

Leases that were entered into prior to 2017 were executed under the original model and although under this model the Executive Director has the final decision-making authority it is important for me to highlight that I must seek the views and advice from the Consultative Forum established in each township which is comprised of the Traditional Owners, in making all land use decisions in their township.

The views of the Consultative Forum are integral to all aspects of this office, and all land use decisions reflect the views of the Consultative Forum. Since the first township lease was signed in 2007, no land use decision has ever been made in any community covered by a township lease against the advice of the Consultative Forum.

The Consultative Forums are the foundation for engaging with Traditional Owners and implementing their visions and decisions about development of their

communities. In my view, based on twelve years as the Director in the Office of Township Leasing, this has been fundamental to the success of township leasing.

The township lease model was introduced into the Land Rights Act to provide Traditional Owners in the Northern Territory with:

- An alternate option for a secure, transparent and efficient land administration system, and
- To provide an economic return to Traditional Owners through rental payments, this has been primarily achieved due to my position being required to act commercially when entering into all subleases agreements.

As I mentioned the first township lease, at Wurrumiyanga on Tiwi Islands, was signed in 2007. In 2016, the Aboriginals Benefit Account was fully reimbursed for the advance payment of rent made upon signing of the lease. I am pleased to inform this committee that last year the Mantiyupwi Traditional Owners received their first rent payment, six years ahead of the anticipated schedule.

To put some context around that, prior to the township lease approximately \$200 per annum was being collected for rent payments. Currently around \$700,000 in rent is being collected and will be paid to Mantiyupwi Traditional Owners per annum.

The Warnindilyakwa Traditional Owners of Groote Eylandt will also soon receive a rental return, five years ahead of the anticipated schedule.

The rent will provide a regular income stream to Traditional Owners to enable them to continue to invest and advance local economic and community development aspirations, and will contribute to their sustainable economic independence.

These are significant achievements that reward the long-term intergenerational thinking of both the Mantiyupwi and Warnindilyakwa Traditional Owners when they agreed to enter into a township lease.

Importantly it also confirms that Aboriginal land in the Northern Territory now has had a market value placed on it, this ultimately has had a positive impact on the increased focus on secure tenure through leasing on Aboriginal land more broadly.

The recent township leases signed in Mutitjulu and Pirlangimpi were amongst the first townships leases under the new community entity model, which will see a transition of the township lease from my position to a local Aboriginal Corporation after a period of administration by my office.

While the introduction of the community entity model of township leasing is a significant policy development, in many ways it formalises what has always been a key strength of township leasing – placing the Traditional Owners at the centre of all land-use decisions in their communities.

In the original township lease model, this was achieved by working with the Consultative Forums, the focus will now be on a more formal environment to build the capacity of Traditional Owners to ensure that they are supported during the transition of the lease management to a community entity Aboriginal corporation.

In addition to township leases, on behalf of the Commonwealth I also hold 26 housing leases over approximately 3000 remote public housing lots in the Northern Territory. Alongside this I also hold 15 leases covering 17 Alice Springs Community Living Areas or as commonly known “town camps”.

I am pleased with the recent long term funding commitments from both the Commonwealth and Northern Territory Governments; these commitments are significant to ensuring the continuity of housing services.

I note that the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet is in the process of finalising intricacies with the Northern Territory Government; during this process my office has provided technical advice in regards to the leases that I administer so that all stakeholders are in position to effect the leasing arrangements immediately when Governments reach a final position regarding the funding.

I believe that both governments agree that secure tenure provides a foundation for reliable housing services and provides the platform to implement ongoing housing investment.

Again I respect the Department's leading role in housing negotiations, I will however continue to advocate for housing services and continued support for the benefit of all residents where I administer a lease.

Aboriginal people have a strong vision for their townships, and my role is to support their individual aspirations by ensuring strong, effective and transparent land administration frameworks are in place.

Thank you.