



Supplementary Budget Estimates 2025-26

Office of Township Leasing

Opening Statement

In the spirit of well-being and coming together, I acknowledge the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people on whose land we meet today. I pay my respects to your families and elders and I thank you for allowing me to gather and speak on Kamberri, your traditional ancestral lands. I am a frequent visitor on your country and I am forever grateful for allowing me to visit, work on and experience your beautiful country.

I would also like to pay my respects to all other Aboriginal families who have walked this land before us, and all of us that are now responsible for our ancestral lands, stories, and families across this nation.

Furthermore, I acknowledge and pay my respects to my sisters and brothers and all First Nations people in the room community leaders, advocates, and change-makers and those who work alongside us with respect, humility and shared purpose.

The Township Leasing Model

The arrangements under Section 19A of the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act (Northern Territory) 1976* (ALRA) establish a structure for transferable rights that give certainty to investors and local businesses and support local capacity building and economic opportunity.

Section 19A Township Leases provide the mechanism to maintain the underlying Aboriginal land title while establishing secure, tradeable land tenure in Townships established on Aboriginal held land. This is the Township Leasing Model.

The Township Leasing Model offers certainty of tenure, the reliability of long-term rental income streams and an enabling foundation for Township development. This foundation results in Traditional Owners building capability within their organisations, applying sound cultural decision making and, articulating and implementing their vision and aspirations for their communities. The Model places Traditional Owners at the heart of the decision making for their traditional lands.

Residents of Townships in the Northern Territory established on land held in communal Aboriginal title have a right to experience the same opportunities, services and facilities that are available to residents in other Australian towns and cities. Secure land tenure supported through sound land administration is the foundation upon which this right can be realised.

Economic Empowerment Opportunity

Under section 19A of the ALRA, Township Leases establish secure land tenure structures that empower NT Aboriginal title holders. This flexible model enables Leases to be managed either by the Executive Director of Township Leasing (Executive Director or EDTL) who has a statutory function to administer Section 19A leases, or community-controlled organisations (which, if needed, can be supported by the EDTL).

Over the last 18 years, Township Leases have proven effective in creating secure land tenure arrangements in remote Aboriginal communities. These leases have a demonstrated record of success in ensuring economic and social benefits are shared within communities and promote collective prosperity. A critical advantage of the Township Leasing model is its establishment of transferable land titles, enabling the efficient commercial transfer of property without repetitive and resource-intensive consultations and negotiations. This streamlined approach significantly enhances investor confidence, reduces administrative burdens and creates stable and predictable market conditions while maintaining local decision-making authority for Traditional Owners.

There is rapidly growing momentum for Township Leases as the preferred model for communities to securely and reliably establish the preconditions to achieve their economic aspirations. We anticipate at least 3 communities will be taking proposals for new township leases to their respective Land Councils in 2026, and a further 8 communities are currently considering their land tenure options, namely:

- Wadeye, which has requested a Township Lease
- Yarralin and Blue Mud Bay, which are both currently developing proposals for their own Township Leases.
- A further 8 communities are undertaking a process of consultation and exploration to establish their own Township Leases: Numbulwar, Ngukurr, Gunbalanya, Marthakal Homelands, Santa Teresa, Yirrkala, Nhulunbuy and Maningrida.

A number of these Traditional Owner groups have been on their land tenure journey for many years. This is partially due to a lack of a policy framework that would enable a

clear pathway for Traditional Owners to focus on the development opportunities that secure tradable tenure can deliver.

Expanding this proven model across the Northern Territory aligns naturally with broader Commonwealth economic empowerment goals. Integrating the Township Leasing model explicitly with regional economic programs – like critical minerals extraction and processing, renewable energy projects, and regional infrastructure development – will ensure these activities equitably and transparently benefit remote Indigenous communities.

OTL works in close partnership with Traditional Owners to empower them to take control of their townships, articulate their vision for the future and implement it through targeted, planned and opportunistic development activities.

This has resulted in real outcomes on the ground for our partners. From micro enterprise development to the purchasing and ongoing management of substantial operating businesses such as a second supermarket in Wurrumiyanga, a successful tourism business in Milikapiti and most recently, the acquisition of Port Melville, a deep-water port of national significance, that will enable the long-term development of the Tiwi's industrial economy.

The very long-term nature of the model (leases are generally established for 99 years) creates the platform for these deep partnerships to extend across generations, and the ability to not just imagine, but implement an alternative future for First Nations families living in remote Northern Territory communities.

Cultural Integrity

The Office of the Executive Director, the Office of Township Leasing, supports the Executive Director to administer land in compliance with the Township Lease and planning and land use laws and regulations within the Northern Territory. The Executive Director currently holds 5 leases on behalf of the Commonwealth. 4 on the Tiwi Islands at Wurrumiyanga, Pirlangimpi, Milikapiti and Wurankuwu (Ranku) and 1 at Mutitjulu in Central Australia. In October 2022, we transferred the Groote Eylandt leases to a community-controlled entity, demonstrating the power of the Township Leasing model to build capability and meet the aspirations of our partners.

The OTL is a small statutory office (currently 14 FTE, 36% identify as First Nations) based in Darwin dedicated to establishing empowered partnerships with Traditional Owners to enable choice.

At the Office of Township Leasing, we've learned over 18 years that community engagement isn't a step in the process, it is the work itself. Our vision can only be realised when cultural integrity is deeply embedded in everything we do. In our context, cultural integrity and engagement are inseparable. More than a guiding principle, it's a way of working ensuring that decisions are shaped by cultural authority and local knowledge.

It means creating the conditions for Traditional Owners to lead. It means respecting governance systems, knowledge holders, and community protocols and not sidelining them for administrative convenience. At OTL, we know culture isn't separate from doing business, it is central to it. This has moved us beyond acknowledgement to accountability.

Cultural integrity becomes tangible when it informs recruitment, partnerships, governance frameworks, and decision-making on Country. It means slowing down when needed. Listening deeply. Elevating voices that matter; youth, Elders, lived experience.

The significant social and economic progress made in Township Lease communities is possible because OTL makes space for culture to lead.

Our approach begins with a simple but powerful commitment: listen before leading.

Whether visiting a new township or deepening a long-standing relationship, our staff spend time on Country. They ask what a good future looks like. They listen to what matters most. They interact, not transact.

Alongside Traditional Owners, we've developed a way of working that is relational, not transactional; built on respect, consent, and cultural authority.

Conclusion

Township Leases under Section 19A of the ALRA provide comprehensive, secure tenure arrangements covering entire remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory. Administered either by Community Entities or by the EDTL, these leases generate substantial, sustainable rental revenue explicitly designated for funding community-controlled and community-oriented infrastructure and programs.

The established Township Leasing model facilitates critical infrastructure investments, fosters community economic independence, and provides a strong and stable foundation for local community governance development.

With increasing interest from Traditional Owners, expanding this model is essential to enhance the economic benefits from the Commonwealth Government's ambitious development agenda and to meet emerging community demand. Doing so will ensure

economic benefits are comprehensively and equitably shared with Aboriginal communities and Traditional Owners, driving sustainable economic empowerment and prosperity.