Australian Government
Aboriginal Hostels Limited

The Hon Sharman Stone MP
Committee Chair
House of Representatives Standing Committee
on Indigenous Affairs
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Committee Chair,

Thursday Island Committee Hearing, 9 March 2016

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Committee at its recent Hearing on Thursday Island.

I would also like to take the opportunity to thank the Committee members who were able to visit our Canon Boggo Pilot Hostel for secondary students during their visit. AHL is particularly proud of our students in residence and the opportunities we are able to provide to support their education journey during the course of their stay.

As you will recall, a rescheduling on the morning of AHL's appearance before the Committee meant that I was unable to deliver my opening address in full. As agreed, I have attached a copy of that address in full for the record.

There were a number of additional questions asked by members during the Hearing and I have attached a set of responses against those questions.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the Committee's work. I look forward to reading the final report of the Inquiry. Please feel free to contact me or Peter Perfrement from my office on 02 6212 2006 if you require any further assistance.

Yours sincerely,

Joy Savage
Chief Executive Officer

18 April 2016

Committee Hearing Follow-up Items
Thursday Island, 9 March 2016

Action	AHL Response
1. AHL to submit CEO's opening statement for the Committee record	Enclosed
2. AHL to check Hansard record of Hearing and amend if necessary	AHL's testimony was not included in Hansard, currently following up.
3. AHL to provide information on quantum/nature of students with disabilities in secondary hostels	AHL currently has four students in secondary accommodation facilities that have a known disability that affects their mobility. This represents approximately 2% of students currently residing in AHL's secondary education facilities. Every effort is made to accommodate the specific requirements of students with a disability.
4. AHL to provide indicative costings of current base secondary model, plus 'better' and 'best' options	AHL currently operates nine secondary education hostels in NSW, Western Australia, Northern Territory and Far North Queensland. AHL's standard hostel model operates within a modest envelope of around $950,000 per annum per site. These hostels are staffed by two Houseparents, as well as the standard complement of cook, cleaner and night staff to cater to student needs and AHL's duty of care obligations. AHL is moving towards upgrading its secondary accommodation model, albeit within limited resources, by moving to a youth worker model with improved levels of student amenity. This model typically requires an additional investment of $500,000 per annum to provide Senior Residential Youth Workers, Operations Manager and relevant relief staff. At present this approach is only in place in AHL's Kununurra and Wangkana Kari facilities (and in Wadeye, which is funded separately by the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet). The Wadeye model, acknowledged as AHL's flagship education facility, would represent the ideal model given its full contingent of youth workers and corresponding suite of extracurricular activity. This model only operates fully in Wadeye, funded under contract with Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. The additional cost beyond AHL's standard model is in the order of $1 million per annum. It should be noted that these costs support families in very remote locations. A modest approach to upgrading AHL's seven 'standard model' secondary facilities (excluding Kununurra and Wadeye) to provide basic youth worker services would cost in the order of $190,000 per annum per site ($1.34 million in total). Additionally, AHL has identified core facility upgrades at these seven sites in the order of $1.2 million.
5. AHL to provide any other data e.g. year 10-12 completion rates (if available)	AHL operates accommodation services that support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to access education that they would not normally receive. AHL does have access to student data collected by schools – including data about completion rates. AHL is currently developing a 'theory of change' model which will allow the organisation to independently track educational outcomes and student achievement in collaboration with a number of schools attended by our students in residence. This is being implemented over the 2016 calendar year and will strengthen the AHL's ability to demonstrate the impact of its accommodation services on educational outcomes.

AHL CEO Address

Acknowledgements

I would like to start by paying my respects to elders past and present of the Kaurareg people of Waiben (Thursday Island) on whose land we meet today and whose seas surround us.

I thank the Committee for the invitation to speak at today's hearing.

Opening remarks

I'm proud of the role AHL plays in the lives of many young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Since our first secondary education hostel opened in 1975, we've seen almost 3,000 students from remote and regional communities stay at one of our nine secondary education hostels.

For many of us, we made our school journey supported by our families, living at home, attending school nearby.

For others, it may have been through boarding school, and home in the holidays.

For AHL students, it's a journey away from home to live with us.

For some students they're already behind in their schooling, they miss their families and country, and the transition to larger schools with large non-Indigenous student populations can be disorienting… compounded by the fact that for some, English is not their first, or even second language.

And that's where AHL comes into its own.

AHL is part of a spectrum of options, and our focus is undeniably one where education and culture can and should co-exist.

We're not in competition with other providers – but for the 260 or so high school students who live with us each year, we take our pastoral and cultural care seriously.

We want our students to be equipped to walk in two worlds – to take up whatever opportunities they choose: further study, employment or returning to country with values and experiences which put them in good stead to take their place in the business affairs of their communities.

For some of that readiness we rely solely on schools to provide. But so much also comes from our Indigenous staff, Indigenous peers and the many volunteers and partners who put in a great deal of work to maintain a safe, stable, home-like environment with as many opportunities to learn and thrive as first nation families would hope to provide for their children.

We've had students go on to be doctors, teachers, artists, sportsmen and women…there are many stories of achievement over the years.

Success can take many forms.

For Bethana Blanket from Badu Island, who attended the very hostel you visited this morning, life has been a fulfilling journey since graduating from high school, raising three children, working part time and importantly to Bethana – living here on country.

Bethana's story, and so many more – was published in 2007 as part of a joint project between AHL and AIATSIS called *100 Success Stories* – which celebrated more than 30 years of AHL's student hostels. I am happy to leave a copy for the Committee today.

AHL's role in the education landscape

We are a provider of short term accommodation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians – we have been since 1973.

The network is made up of 47 hostels nationwide. We operate nine secondary education hostels which provide accommodation for around 260 Indigenous students.

An additional three tertiary education and training hostels provide accommodation for students accessing vocational and higher education, including industry and trades training.

Our work in the secondary education is a particularly high priority for AHL, which we believe makes a valuable contribution to the lives of students in our care.

Having said that, we are not a boarding school, or an education provider. We are not part of the school system as such and we are not resourced directly, except through Abstudy.

AHL's secondary education facilities occupy a unique place in the continuum of Indigenous students' learning journeys – working "Beyond the School Gates" to provide educational and cultural opportunity for our students.

This morning I was proud to show Committee members through our Canon Boggo Pilot hostel here on Thursday Island.

Here, as we do in Kununurra in the East Kimberly, in Tennant Creek, Katherine, Wadeye, Dubbo and Sydney - we aim to provide safe, culturally relevant accommodation together with a level of support and care to ensure that students staying with us are well equipped to make the most of choices and opportunities in their lives.

Our stake in the future

We are driven to help students achieve the best they can – culturally driven, driven by the Government's agenda for Indigenous educational attainment, and driven by our own values about the importance of our people getting ahead and assuming their rightful place in the nation's future, and sharing in its prosperity.

We know what's worked for us in the past, and what we'd like to do more of.

We know that preserving cultural identity must be as much a part of our students' journey as gaining an education, or a job a traineeship.

We know that one size fits all approaches might be easier in terms of planning, but they cannot possibly meet multiple and diverse needs – and that there are many pathways into and out of the education system which should be supported.

From our experience we also know that:

- Parents and students value education and the opportunities provided by AHL's secondary hostels
- Students' community involvement outside the school and hostel context are essential in maintaining engagement and school retention
- Ongoing communication with parents and engagement with family members is a primary driver of student commitment to remain at school, and in an AHL hostel.

The key to what works with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in boarding facilities is the quality of relationships which can be established – warm, caring but also direct, clear and firm about rules and responsibilities.

Studies show these factors play a crucial role, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth, in remaining motivated to engage and stay engaged in education.

To support these outcomes, AHL partners with schools, communities, parents and a range of service providers and organisations who can assist us to deliver enhanced extra-curricular activities which contribute to building students' skills and motivation to achieve at school.

To the extent we can, we divert resources internally to support these objectives in our secondary hostels. More than this, we rely on the partnerships and relationships we maintain with like-minded organisations who can help us expand the range of supports we're able to offer our students.

Ways forward

AHL would like to make an even greater contribution to educational and life outcomes for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

But we can't do more if our role, and the role of other organisations like us who operate outside the school gates, is not recognised in policy and funding settings.

In our submission we stated that we would like to grow our capability for increasing engagement within and outside government to contribute to policy priorities and work with key stakeholders with a common purpose.

We also believe that through this Inquiry, the Committee might encourage more flexibility in responding to emerging needs.

Our submission suggests that proactive approaches across all levels of government and with the third sector are necessary to increase educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.

Policy and planning approaches are not well aligned across our layers of government, and are not allowing flexibility or driving enough innovation.

We made two recommendations in our submission:

1. That policy at the national and state/territory levels must be more closely aligned in order to ensure future demand for student accommodation and support is met.

2. That legislative enablers and allied incentives are required to encourage innovation and attract social investment partners to the Indigenous education domain.

We would like to see policy settings and strategies which would enable greater flexibility and more effective responses to demand trends and supply challenges as they arise.

We would also like to see an expansion of the supply of home-like accommodation and related services to enhance education outcomes for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students as part of an overall approach.

These aren't difficult policy settings to achieve, and they have been proven in other sectors, like employment.

Funding is not enough.

There is a strong case to create a direct link between funding to outcomes and impact – particularly in relation to Indigenous education outcomes where sadly they still fall behind their non-Indigenous student counterparts.

Education financing may need to be looked at further.

Governments could look at payment incentives to drive outcomes. There are other ways to ensure individualised, tailored approaches can be achieved within large funding programs.

While social impact bonds are untested in the education context, it might be time to put them to the test.

If we know we can get better outcomes, we should try.

Concluding remarks

Few organisations can claim a track record which has proven to be successful in building trust with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and communities, and can provide a practical educational pathway for remote students through a mix of regional and urban based hostel facilities at a modest cost.

We want to remain an option for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in rural and remote areas, regardless of their academic proficiency.

Our organisation is not saying the system is broken, nor are we using our appearance before the Committee to seek extra funding – although we could certainly achieve more if we had access to appropriate resourcing.

We are saying that more policy and funding innovation is required to leverage better results, both for individual students and to improve educational outcomes overall.

AHL believes that proactive approaches across all levels of government and with the third sector are necessary to increase educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this important area of the committee's work.