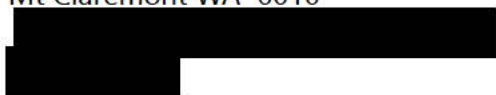


Submission to the Senate Committee Inquiry: Planning, management, utilisation and disposal of Defence estate assets dated 17 March 2026

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1. Overview

This submission addresses the Inquiry's Terms of Reference (ToR) by focusing on the public interest impacts of Defence estate decisions—particularly where disposals affect veterans, reservists, cadets, heritage, and community access. Defence land and facilities are not ordinary assets: they enable capability, preparedness, recruitment and retention, and long-standing community and veteran connections. The Committee should require transparent planning, measurable alignment with capability, and stronger safeguards before assets are declared "surplus" and sold.

2. Alignment of Defence estate planning with Australia's defence requirements (ToR 1).

Defence estate planning should be demonstrably aligned with current and forecast capability needs, including mobilisation, sovereign resilience, and surge capacity. The Committee should scrutinise whether the "surplus" classification is based on:

- updated force posture and operational concepts (including domestic response and regional contingencies)
- training area capacity, buffers, and long-term access (not just current utilisation rates)
- basing, logistics, and enabling infrastructure requirements
- reserve and cadet footprints that support recruitment, readiness, and local engagement
- the strategic value of location (ports, airfields, transport corridors, regional and veteran hubs)

Recommendation: Require Defence to publish a clear statement of capability impact for each proposed divestment, including mobilisation and surge, along with an explanation of why retention, adaptive reuse, or shared use cannot satisfy Defence requirements.

3. Processes for acquisition, management, development, upgrade and disposal (ToR 2)

Concerns arise when estate decisions appear to be driven by short-term financial or administrative convenience rather than by a transparent, evidence-based framework. The Committee should examine whether processes include:

- consistent criteria for acquisition, retention, and disposal
- a documented options analysis (retain, repurpose, lease, sale, or transfer)
- whole-of-life costing and risk assessment (including remediation and replacement)
- meaningful consultation with affected users and communities before decisions are made

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- probity and governance arrangements that prevent predetermined outcomes

Recommendations:

1. Establish minimum disclosure standards: options analysis, valuation approach, risk register, remediation estimate, and replacement arrangements (where relevant).
2. Require a "service continuity plan" where disposals affect Defence personnel, reservists, cadets, or community/veteran activities.
3. Strengthen parliamentary/public reporting on disposals and outcomes (not just proceeds).

4. Capturing needs of permanent forces, reserve forces and cadet units (ToR 3)

Reserve units and cadets rely on accessible, locally embedded facilities. If estate planning relies on utilisation metrics designed for full-time units, it can understate the strategic value of:

- decentralised presence for recruitment, training access, and community connection
- flexible use patterns (nights/weekends; seasonal peaks)
- low-cost but high-value facilities (depots, halls, drill sites)
- cadet units as a pathway into service and community resilience

Recommendations:

- Mandate that estate planning explicitly incorporates reserve and cadet requirements, including accessibility by public transport, disability access, and proximity to population centres.
- Require user endorsement: reserve and cadet stakeholders should be formally consulted and their responses published (with sensitive details redacted if necessary).
- Avoid "paper substitution," where a nominal alternative exists but is not practically accessible or fit-for-purpose.

5. Financial assumptions underpinning divestment, remediation, net returns, past programs, and transfer to Finance (ToR 4)

The Committee should test whether financial cases for divestment:

- include credible remediation costings (with uncertainty ranges) and disclose contaminants/legacy issues
- account for transaction costs, holding/security costs, and market timing risk
- include full replacement costs for activities that must relocate (including accessibility upgrades)
- compare net proceeds with alternatives (lease/licence, joint use, staged redevelopment, land swaps)
- disclose lessons learned from prior disposal programs and whether projected benefits were realised
- clarify accountability and incentives following the transfer of responsibility from Defence to the Department of Finance (including whether capability and community outcomes may be deprioritised)

Recommendations:

1. Require independent assurance of remediation estimates and net return projections prior to disposal approval.

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2. Publish post-disposal reviews comparing projected and actual proceeds, remediation costs, and community and capability impacts.
3. Ensure the transfer of responsibilities to Finance does not weaken capability considerations: Defence should retain a formal veto/approval role based on capability, heritage, and service continuity.

Note: Property-specific financial case.

The Department of Defence should refrain from proceeding with the sale until it publishes a comprehensive financial analysis for each property, which can be subjected to independent scrutiny. At a minimum, this analysis should encompass the following disclosures: the current condition of each property alongside any existing maintenance backlog; a detailed remediation assessment, including considerations for contamination and heritage constraints, complete with estimated cost ranges; an evaluation of security and holding costs should the properties be retained; and a full account of all disposal-related expenses, including the valuation method, marketing costs, legal fees, and demolition costs where applicable. Additionally, it should present the net proceeds after the deduction of these expenses.

Furthermore, the analysis ought to quantify any replacement costs associated with the relocation of Defence, reserves, cadets, or community/veteran activities, and draw comparisons between the net outcomes and alternative options such as leasing or licensing, partial retention, adaptive reuse, or transfer to another public entity. Absent this thorough assessment, the sale cannot be demonstrated to represent value for money.

6. Heritage significance and protection during/after divestment; impacts on veteran and community connections (ToR 5)

Many Defence sites are part of Australia's living military heritage. Heritage significance is not only architectural—it includes social, commemorative, and veteran-community connections to sites of service and remembrance. Divestment can permanently sever that connection through restricted access, demolition, incompatible redevelopment, or loss of interpretive material.

Recommendations:

- Require property-by-property heritage and social significance assessments before a site is declared surplus, including veteran/community significance and intangible heritage.
- Where disposal proceeds, impose enforceable heritage outcomes (covenants, conservation management plans, interpretive obligations, and access arrangements where appropriate).
- Ensure genuine consultation with veterans' organisations, local communities, and Traditional Owners, and publish outcomes.
- Prioritise continuity for veteran-related activities and commemorative use in accessible locations, with binding agreements (not informal assurances).

The Karrakatta Barracks and military training area in Western Australia have a long history, for example:

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- **1895:** The Western Australian Colonial Government set aside land for military use, establishing Karrakatta Camp.
- **1896:** A rifle range with seven Jeffries “Wimbledon” targets was built, replacing the original Mount Eliza range.
- **1898:** Limestone magazine buildings for ammunition and powder storage were completed; these still exist and are heritage listed.
- **Early 1900s:** Used for militia and school cadet camps, including training for the Second Boer War (1899–1902).
- **1913:** The rifle range closed as unsafe after a fatal accident and was relocated to Swanbourne.
- **World War II:** The camp was expanded, hosting various units and 1,000 Italian POWs, and later accommodated Polish ex-servicemen migrating to Australia.
- **1948:** It was modernised and renamed the *Irwin Training Centre* on 5 December 1948, later known as **Irwin Barracks**.
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7. Defence estate audit: planning, conduct, and risks from delayed release (ToR 6)

An estate audit can rapidly lose validity if conditions change between completion and public release (usage levels, capability posture, remediation discoveries, market changes). The Committee should examine:

- audit methodology and whether it accounts for surge/mobilisation needs
- whether “utilisation” measures capture reserve/cadet patterns and community shared use
- governance around updates, version control, and how changes are incorporated
- whether any disposal decisions occurred (or were advanced) before audit findings were publicly scrutinised

Recommendations:

1. Release audit findings with sufficient detail to enable scrutiny, with appropriate security redactions.
2. Require a “currency statement” at release: what has changed since completion and what decisions were made in the interim.
3. Establish periodic refresh cycles and triggers for re-validation before disposal.

8. Amended policy framework prioritising alternative public uses over private development (ToR 7)

Where land is genuinely surplus to Defence requirements, the first preference should be alternative public benefit uses before private sale—especially where sites have heritage significance, veteran connections, or community value. This could include:

- transfer to local/state government for community infrastructure
- affordable/essential housing with protected heritage outcomes and community access
- parks, memorial precincts, education/training, and emergency management uses

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- long-term leases or joint stewardship arrangements preserving public access and heritage

Recommendations:

- Adopt a “public benefit first” disposal hierarchy: retain/repurpose → transfer for public use → lease/joint use → sale to private development as a last resort.
- Require transparent criteria for when a private sale is justified, including demonstrated lack of viable public-use options.
- Ensure proceeds and outcomes are publicly reported, including community and veteran impacts.

Note Property-specific “other matters” (consultation, transparency, continuity)

If Karrakatta Barracks is proposed for divestment, it is imperative that the Department of Defence engages in early, documented consultations with local veterans and Ex-Service Organizations (ESOs), including the Returned and Services League (RSL), current users of the site, Traditional Owners, local councils, and nearby residents prior to finalizing any decisions. Furthermore, the Department should develop and publish a transition and continuity plan that guarantees the continued use of the site for veterans and the community in an accessible and fit-for-purpose location, incorporating provisions for disability access and public transportation. This plan must include clear timelines and financial support to ensure that activities are neither displaced nor lost. In circumstances where continuity cannot be assured in binding terms, the property should be excluded from any disposal considerations.

9. Other related matters (ToR 8) — Transparency, consultation, and continuity are fundamental principles that guide our approach. Across all items outlined in the Terms of Reference (ToR), two persistent issues necessitate enhanced protections and safeguards. These issues consistently arise, highlighting the need for a more robust framework to address them effectively and ensure that all stakeholders are adequately supported and informed throughout the process.

A. Genuine community consultation

Consultation must occur before decisions are finalised and must include veterans, local RSL Sub-Branches, ESOs, councils, Traditional Owners, reservists, cadets, and affected community groups.

B. Continuity of activities

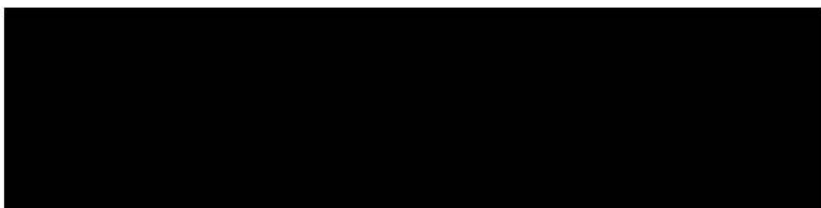
In instances where Defence estate sites are currently providing support for veterans or facilitating community activities—whether these are organised on a formal basis or occur informally—any plans for the disposal of these sites must carefully consider the impact on these functions. It is essential that no disposals occur that would inadvertently displace these important activities. Prior to any such disposal, there must be adequate arrangements in place to ensure that accessible, suitable, and effective replacement facilities or services are established. This ensures that veterans and community members can continue to benefit from the support and engagement these sites provide without interruption.

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10. Conclusion

The Committee has an opportunity to strengthen Australia's approach to Defence estate planning and divestment, ensuring it supports defence capability, reserve/cadet readiness, transparent governance, credible financial decision-making, and the protection of heritage and veteran/community connections. Disposals should proceed only where Defence can demonstrate no capability loss, a sound, independently assured financial case (including remediation and replacement), and enforceable heritage and continuity safeguards—preferably within a policy framework that prioritises alternative public uses over private development.

It's essential to thoughtfully consider setting aside a portion of land at Karrakatta to establish a veterans' hub. This facility would provide vital support for veterans and their families, offering a welcoming space to connect and access resources and activities. Additionally, it could serve as a home for the Western Suburbs RSL Sub-Branch, which is still in the process of coming together from the existing branches. Currently, these sub-branches lack a permanent home, and this hub could significantly foster community and camaraderie among our veterans.



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