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Official Committee Hansard

**HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES**

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES
STRAIT ISLANDER AFFAIRS

(Subcommittee)

**Reference: Community stores in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
communities**

THURSDAY, 23 JULY 2009

GOULBURN ISLAND

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING
COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER AFFAIRS**

Thursday, 23 July 2009

Members: Mr Debus (*Chair*), Mr Laming (*Deputy Chair*), Mr Abbott, Ms Campbell, Mr Debus, Mr Katter, Ms Rea, Mr Kelvin Thomson, Mr Trevor, Mr Turnour and Mrs Vale

Members in attendance: Mr Turnour and Mrs Vale

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

The operation of local community stores in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, with a particular focus on:

- food supply, quality, cost and competition issues;
- the effectiveness of the Outback Stores model, and other private, public and community store models; and
- the impact of these factors on the health and economic outcomes of communities.

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Subcommittee met at 10.07 am

Ms Jenny Inmulugulu, Committee Member, Ajurumu Self-Service Store, opened the meeting with a welcome in Maung language.

ACTING CHAIR (Mr Turnour)—Jenny, thank you for that welcome. I declare open this public hearing of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs' inquiry into community stores in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. I acknowledge the traditional custodians of this land and pay respects to the elders of the past, present and future. The subcommittee also acknowledges the Aboriginal people who now reside in this area. Subcommittee members are thankful to the people of Warruwi for receiving us to conduct the public hearing here today. These meetings are formal proceedings of the parliament. Everything you say should be factual and honest. It can be considered a serious matter to attempt to mislead the subcommittee.

This inquiry is about remote community stores and how they can keep communities healthy and strong. I invite you to make comments that will assist us in our inquiry with the intention of making some improvements to current government administration in relation to remote community stores. At the conclusion of the formal part of the hearings, we will be conducting an open forum. We would welcome hearing from those of you in the audience who would like to speak on the operation of remote community stores. Please advise a member of the secretariat if you would like to speak at the forum. If members of the community would like to say something to the subcommittee about how their store is operating, please let one of the people of the committee secretariat know. That would be good. This hearing is open to the public and a transcript of what is said will be placed on the committee's website. If you would like further details about the inquiry or the transcript, please ask any of the committee staff.

[10.10 am]

FITZPATRICK, Mr Damien, Store Manager, Ajurumu Self-Service Store

INMULUGULU, Ms Jenny, Committee Member, Ajurumu Self-Service Store

NGALMINDJALMAG, Ms Nancy, Store Committee Member, Ajurumu Self-Service Store

KING, Mr Alistair, General Manager, Arnhem Land Progress Aboriginal Corporation

WAIANGA, Mr Ida, ESO Supervisor

NAMAYIWA, Mr Johnny, Principal Traditional Owner; and Chairman, former Warruwi Council Inc.

CHYER, Ms Vicki, Private capacity

MAIRAWAL, Mr James, Private capacity

URABADI, Ms Rosemary, Private capacity

HAMMOND, Ms Mary Jane, Remote Area Nurse, Warruwi Health Clinic

MAUNDER, Mr Phil, Principal, Warruwi School

ACTING CHAIR—I apologise for going through that formal process, but that is part of the proceedings of the Australian parliament and we need to get that formality onto the record. I would like to introduce myself a bit more informally: I am the member for Leichhardt. I understand Warren Snowdon is your member of parliament here. I am the member for Cairns, Cape York and the Torres Strait. I represent Aboriginal people in Cape York Peninsula and Torres Strait Islander people in the federal parliament.

Mrs VALE—Hello, everyone. I am the federal member for Hughes, which is in southern Sydney in the Sutherland shire, not far from Botany Bay. The traditional people of my area are the Ngunawal people and the Gandangara people, but they do not live in communities as many of you do here; they actually live in mainstream areas in normal neighbourhoods and residential areas and have jobs within our communities. We are here in this inquiry not just to find out about the stores but to find out—and this is where we would particularly like to hear from the mothers—about the kind of food that you would like to see available in your stores for yourselves, the kinds of services that you have and also the kinds of facilities that you have at home to prepare food for your families and your children. We are really interested to hear what you have to say. Thank you very much.

ACTING CHAIR—We are going to hear initially from the Ajurumu Self-Service Store. I will hand over to you to make an initial statement if you would like about how the store is operating. Jenny, you might also like to translate anything said in the introduction. If anybody would like

translation services, we have been asked to offer that. I understand Jenny has accepted the opportunity to do that for people.

Mr Fitzpatrick—Welcome to Goulburn Island. It is a lovely place, as you can probably see. I work here with my partner, Kirsty Slattery. I have worked with ALPA for almost two years, from the start of January last year. Prior to this I worked for 7½ years in retail at Foodland and Coles supermarkets in supervisor roles, opening and closing the shop, dealing with money and doing ordering—pretty much the same as I do now except not the big boss. This is my second store for ALPA. I started off at Lake Evella doing takeaway and was a manager at Croker Island, which is the neighbouring island, before I came here in March. This is the consultancy store, not an ALPA store. It is not owned by ALPA; it is owned by the people of Goulburn Island, the Warruwi community.

We have 11 local staff here. They are all great workers, some of the best worker I have worked with. They are all lovely people who take great pride in their store. I am sure anyone who has been around in the last couple of months would say to you if you asked them that the store always looks great. We always put in a great effort. Everyone is here on time. There are probably a few things that people say, but people definitely put the effort in at the store.

Working for ALPA is good because we provide real jobs for the people in the community. It is not subsidised pay; it is actual jobs. We provide training on the job. We will be training one of the girls soon to be a supervisor. If she chooses to she could work at another store and have the qualifications and the certificates to work there.

ALPA also works together to provide great learning about healthy foods. We try to have the best amount of healthy food that we can in the store. There is a list of healthy food that we have to have. We try to have the range shown as well as we can. You will see the fruit and veg is as close to the checkout as we can get it. Soft drinks are right at the back.

The few problems that we have here are the mainly as a result of us being so remote. All our stock has to come on the barge. The ordering has to be two weeks in advance. The order I made yesterday will come two Wednesdays from now. A lot of things can go wrong between now and then. A ceremony can happen, a whole bunch of people could come here or a whole bunch of people could go away from here. This will affect everything. If I ordered the fruit and veg yesterday it will come in next week, but it only last so long. The same goes with milk and eggs. We have to take that into consideration.

Mrs VALE—Damien, do you have a delivery every week? Even though you have to order one or two weeks out, you still get a delivery every week?

Mr Fitzpatrick—Yes. We order as well as we can, but it is definitely hard.

ACTING CHAIR—Jenny or Nancy, could you give us a little bit of the history of the store here on the island—a bit of the background? We can see the current situation, but what has been the evolution over a period of time?

Ms Ngalmindjalmag—Over the last couple of weeks it was good. The shop was running really good. The people were very happy. There have been a lot of changes. We did not have any

problems when the new managers came in. I know that the prices are a little bit high, but that does not matter. We do not worry about it because this is the only shop that we have on the island. Otherwise, it was running really good. The people here are very happy. Things are working really good now. There have been a lot of changes since Damien came. We have a new fridge as well. A few staff were changing.

ACTING CHAIR—How long have you been here, Damien?

Mr Fitzpatrick—I have been here since mid-March this year.

ACTING CHAIR—The store was next door originally—is that correct?

Ms Ngalmindjalmag—Yes. I am only a new committee member. We started in 1999. I have been on the store committee since 1999.

ACTING CHAIR—For 10 years.

Ms Ngalmindjalmag—Yes, it has been 10 years.

ACTING CHAIR—As a committee member, what sort of involvement do you have in the store?

Ms Ngalmindjalmag—I look after the shop and the staff. When we have ceremonies, we have to look after the community and things like that.

ACTING CHAIR—Do you have formal committee meetings as part of the operation of the store?

Ms Ngalmindjalmag—It just depends. Sometimes we have a meeting every three months.

ACTING CHAIR—Otherwise, you are a small community and people just chat about how things are going?

Ms Ngalmindjalmag—Yes.

ACTING CHAIR—Over the last period of time, have you seen improvements in the store with the new refrigeration and the fruit and vegies and the like?

Ms Ngalmindjalmag—Yes.

ACTING CHAIR—Could we get a microphone for Johnny?

Mr Namayiwa—I am the TO here at Goulburn Island. I was one of the committee and then I came off—I don't know why. I will ask ALPA mob. I don't know what's going on now at ALPA. At the moment everything is running good, but a few people are having problems with the prices at the shop. They are too high. When a price goes up, they put it up and the shop goes up too, but the pays go down. They can't think about the people on CDEP—they get \$500 a fortnight and

when they come in here their money is all gone because of the shop prices. Thank you. That's all I have to say.

ACTING CHAIR—Were you on the store committee before?

Mr Namayiwa—I was on the committee before, yes.

ACTING CHAIR—And now you are no longer on the committee?

Mr Namayiwa—I am no longer.

ACTING CHAIR—Did you get elected on the committee? How do people come and go from the committee?

Mr Namayiwa—It's all up to the committee. If they want that person to be on that committee, the committee tells you, 'You're going out and we'll find somebody else.'

ACTING CHAIR—How do you originally get onto the committee? Is there an election process for the store committee?

Mr Namayiwa—It's up to the community. They elect the committee.

ACTING CHAIR—How often do they do that?

Mr Namayiwa—Alistair might know.

Mr King—I just want to point out that ALPA runs the store, not the corporation, so we do not control the Ajurumu Store Aboriginal Corporation; we manage the store—we help when we are asked.

Mrs VALE—To clarify to the record, is this one of your consultancy stores?

Mr King—This is a consulting store, yes. From memory, I think it was the year before last at the AGM that the committee changed. It was through a voting measure at the AGM.

ACTING CHAIR—Just to get this clear, the governance structure is that you have the corporation and that contracts ALPA to run the store and the corporation establishes a store committee to work with ALPA—is that correct?

Mr King—Yes.

ACTING CHAIR—How long have ALPA been here running the store?

Mr King—This community was actually a founding member of ALPA in 1972, but ALPA was only ever started initially to pay off the loan to the church when we bought the plant and equipment. It was never supposed to be forever. The Ajurumu store Warruwi decided to go their own way, as did Yirrkala. They were a founding member from the very beginning. Through the

years the store went through some tough times with some managers. The community came back to us and asked us to manage it. We have been managing it for more than 20 years.

ACTING CHAIR—So you have been managing this store for more than 20 years?

Mr King—Yes.

ACTING CHAIR—Alistair had the opportunity to talk to us yesterday in Darwin, so we really want to hear from people in the community and Damien, the store manager, today. Johnny, thank you for your comments this morning. If anybody else has some comments, please see the secretariat. Obviously you have raised issues about pricing in the store and the fact that people are on low incomes. What are some of the results of that in terms of people's shopping and eating habits in the community? What is the traditional way that people would eat at home—the use of the store, whether there is traditional food as part of a daily diet? What is your normal operation in terms of supplying food to the family?

Ms Ngalmindjalmag—I think you have to ask the people in the community. I cannot really answer that question.

ACTING CHAIR—How do you go about it? Do you have a family?

Ms Ngalmindjalmag—Yes, I have a family.

ACTING CHAIR—You shop here at the store?

Ms Ngalmindjalmag—Yes.

ACTING CHAIR—Do you combine that with traditional foods—fishing and the like?

Ms Ngalmindjalmag—Yes.

ACTING CHAIR—What sort of proportion of shop food and traditional food would be in an evening meal, or over a week?

Ms Ngalmindjalmag—I find it good because we live on traditional food and we shop here in the shop with my family.

ACTING CHAIR—What sort of traditional food would you eat?

Ms Ngalmindjalmag—Fish, crab.

ACTING CHAIR—Every day?

Ms Ngalmindjalmag—Only weekends.

ACTING CHAIR—During the week from the shop?

Ms Ngalmindjalmag—Yes.

Mrs VALE—Is the store open five days a week or six days a week?

Mr Fitzpatrick—It is open on Monday to Friday between nine and five o'clock. It shuts down at lunchtime between 12 and two. It is open on Saturday from nine until 12.

Mrs VALE—Nancy, this would be the time, on a weekend, when you would supplement your diet with what you could get from the sea. Do you have any other local produce here? Are there any traditional gardens? I understand they have a garden that is starting at the moment. Has there been any tradition of people having their own household gardens or community gardens? Do you have any fruit trees that you could source of fruit from?

Ms Ngalmindjalmag—No.

Mrs VALE—None at all? No mangoes or anything growing here?

Ms Ngalmindjalmag—No.

Mrs VALE—Nancy, do you mainly have take-away food here or do you cook for your family at home?

Ms Ngalmindjalmag—Yes, I do. I cook at home.

Mrs VALE—How do you do that? Do you have a stove? Do you do it in a pot?

Ms Ngalmindjalmag—I have a stove.

Mrs VALE—There are some houses in some of the communities—this is just to explain to you, Nancy—where we have found that some of the mothers do not have proper cooking facilities in their own homes. We just want to get an idea of the facilities that people in your community have available. Do you have a refrigerator at home?

Ms Ngalmindjalmag—Yes, I do.

Mrs VALE—Do many people have refrigerators here?

Ms Ngalmindjalmag—I do not know.

ACTING CHAIR—Damien, you have been here since March. What are some of the changes that you have seen over the short period of time that you have been here? What are the things that you brought into practice that have changed things? Johnny and others mentioned a bit of change recently.

Mr Fitzpatrick—Since the new fridge and freezer got here, we have been able to increase the range of fruit and veg, milk and dairy products and definitely meat. As you can see, we can fit 20 boxes of normal red meat. Before, we could fit in, I think, six boxes. So you would put mince on

the shelf and, once that had gone, you would put in barbecue chops. You could not display everything at once. Now we have everything in at once. It has increased choice but it has also increased sales of meat and fruit and veg.

ACTING CHAIR—Do you monitor those sales? Do you have a program to do that?

Mr Fitzpatrick—Yes.

ACTING CHAIR—Were the fridges in when you started?

Mr Fitzpatrick—No, they were just about to start being built.

ACTING CHAIR—So what sort of changes in the sales information on the sales of meat and of fruit and vegies have you seen since you got the fridges?

Mr Fitzpatrick—With fruit and veg—I cannot remember because I have not seen them for a while—one week before we moved the fridges in the figure was about 2,800 and then the next week it was almost 4,000. It was not quite double but it was almost there, and it was definitely the same with the meat as well—the sales were almost, but not quite, double.

ACTING CHAIR—So you have doubled the sales of those basic items just by having good fridges and display items.

Mr Fitzpatrick—I have not been checking the information every week, obviously, but definitely for the first month.

ACTING CHAIR—How do you work with the store committee, from your point of view?

Mr Fitzpatrick—The store committee is great—if I have any problems with anyone or I want to know who to hire, I go to those guys and they help me out. With pretty much anything problem related with the community outside or inside the store, I go to these guys just to check.

ACTING CHAIR—On that, do you have issues taken up with you about wanting a particular product or something new to come in, and do you respond to that? Do you order different products depending on what the community is talking to you about?

Mr Fitzpatrick—Yes, I try and ask everyone all the time what they want. If anyone here wants something that is not there at the moment, just ask me and I will try to get it in. There are a few people who have asked me to get things in and I have definitely tried to get them or got them in. Obviously we can only get so much; there are a few lines we cannot get. But I definitely try. It is about increasing sales as well as giving people out there the opportunity to get what they want.

ACTING CHAIR—Since you came here in March, have you had any formal meetings with the store committee where you have talked about changes in the sales of fruit and vegies or what the community might be saying—not just a yarn but a more formal, documented process?

Mr Fitzpatrick—Yes, we had one store committee meeting when I first got here, I think, and I talked about trying to increase what we had in the takeaway, trying to increase baby products and so on. We made a full list. For the next meeting, we will see how we have responded to that as well. It is all about keeping the locals happy and giving them what they want. It is their store so it should be run how they want.

ACTING CHAIR—When you say ‘the next meeting’, have you had one since the one when you came here in March? Are they regular or are they just when things pop up?

Mr Fitzpatrick—It depends. If we need one for a certain reason, if something has come up, we will have one. It is probably a good thing that we have not had one since then; it means everything is running smoothly at the moment. We will probably have one in the next month or so, I would say.

Mrs VALE—Damien, how many people do you have on the store committee?

Mr Fitzpatrick—Six.

Mrs VALE—How many women are part of that six?

Mr Fitzpatrick—Three.

Mrs VALE—Do they speak up and tell you what they want?

Mr Fitzpatrick—Yes.

Mrs VALE—It is good to hear that.

Mr Fitzpatrick—Jenny is on to me all the time!

Mrs VALE—Good on you. Do you find that a lot of people use your takeaway store instead of cooking at home or do you observe that there is a balance of both?

Mr Fitzpatrick—There is a balance of both. People do like to cook at home as well. There are more sales in the morning. I think people come here for breakfast and then cook at dinnertime.

Mrs VALE—What sort of things do you offer in your takeaway?

Mr Fitzpatrick—We have to make sure there is 50 per cent healthy food, so we try and have some form of healthy meal, a rice or beef meal. There are usually pies—

Mrs VALE—Do you offer boiled eggs?

Mr Fitzpatrick—We have boiled eggs. We try and get them in there as much as we can. We have some corn in there. There is always fruit in there. We have sandwiches. We are trying to

have salads up every now and then. We try and mix it up a bit; we do not have the same range every day.

Mrs VALE—Are you able to have the guidance of a nutritionist either via community health or ALPA?

Mr Fitzpatrick—Yes, there is a healthy food person in the store whose role is to make sure that we make for we have healthy products in the take-away and in the store. We also have a healthy food checklist that we have to do every week to make sure we have the required products. We also have a health nutritionist come out every couple of months to check that everything is good. When the ranger comes out for their visits they have to make sure everything is meeting the standard.

Mrs VALE—Is there anything on the products that highlights that it is a healthy food source—it is nutritional and wholesome?

Mr Fitzpatrick—There is the FOODcard products. I do not know if you know about FOODcard. Everybody's money went on to there and they could only use it to buy healthy products. If you go into the store you will see there are green labels and yellow labels. Green labels mean that you can buy it with your FOODcard. Yellow means you cannot.

Mrs VALE—Great. I just wanted to know how that was translated. Thank you, Damien.

ACTING CHAIR—Just on the FOODcard, how many people in the community are using the FOODcard?

Mr Fitzpatrick—I do not have the exact number. It has definitely gone down since the BasicsCard has come in. The BasicsCard has been a bit of a problem. It is a bit harder to manage what people have on their BasicsCard. You will have people come through the checkout presuming their money is on there, loading up their groceries and then having it declined. There was a void and cancel statistic from January last year which I think was \$115 voided for the month compared with about \$3,000 avoided for February this year. That shows how much difference there is between then and when the BasicsCard came in. People can buy anything on BasicsCard except cigarettes. People cannot buy Coke on the FOODcard; they cannot buy toys. It stops the humbug from children. Anyone can probably use the BasicsCard with a PIN. You have to have the photo for the FOODcard.

ACTING CHAIR—Could you take on notice—Alistair is here—just for this community the numbers of FOODcards prior to the introduction of the BasicsCard and the numbers post? If you could provide that to the subcommittee it might be helpful. Jenny or Nancy, would you like to comment on the FOODcard or the BasicsCard and what your thoughts are on those two cards?

Ms Ngalmindjalmag—To my understanding, I think these people should not have had the FOODcard, because they know how to handle money. Do you understand what I am saying?

ACTING CHAIR—Is this the FOODcard or the BasicsCard?

Ms Ngalmindjalmag—Both the FOODcard and the BasicsCard. There have been a lot of changes. When the machine does not work, some people can stay overnight. The FOODcard has to process overnight their money—especially Centrelink payments. Some of the people get really angry. I am telling the truth.

ACTING CHAIR—This is with the BasicsCard?

Ms Ngalmindjalmag—The BasicsCard is all right—it is the FOODcard. Most of the money goes into the FOODcard and sometimes the machine does not work in the shop. Then the families have to wait overnight. They have to wait for the food. We know that we can share food here with families. There have been a lot of changes through the intervention.

ACTING CHAIR—I am sorry for my ignorance, I just want to clarify this. So with the FOODcard, when you purchase something on the FOODcard, the processing of that debiting takes overnight and therefore you cannot collect the food until the next day. Is that correct?

Ms Ngalmindjalmag—Yes.

Mr Fitzpatrick—The money loads up to the FOODcard from Centrelink. There is an additional step between the FOODcard and the BasicsCard. To my knowledge, Centrelink has to load it up through another company—I think it is Worldsmart Technology—for the FOODcard. This process takes overnight. The BasicsCard skips that step.

ACTING CHAIR—So the people know that they are going to get paid their Centrelink payment on this day and then they come to the store to buy food with it but they cannot utilise it because it takes a night for it to be loaded onto the FOODcard.

Mr Fitzpatrick—Yes. I think there is sometimes a bit of a falling out in communications with Centrelink as well. They will say, ‘I have loaded up your money today.’ I think they know that it takes 24 hours. But they will tell people, ‘It is loaded up today.’ If that loads up on a Friday, it is not going to get there until Monday. So people are expecting to get their money on the Friday, because they have been told the money has gone in. That is where it can break down a bit.

Mrs VALE—On the BasicsCard, there is no way of telling how much money is left. With the FOODcard, is there any way of telling how much money is still available?

Mr Fitzpatrick—There is a machine right inside the door that will have ‘FOODcard’ written on it. That is how it loads up the money as well. We also get an email every day which has the list of names of people who are expecting money that day. That is the sheet we have to go off.

Mrs VALE—The big hiccup then with the FOODcard is that delay because of an extra step from Centrelink to actually load it.

ACTING CHAIR—Nancy and Jenny, from your point of view, is the FOODcard, being voluntary, much more preferable to the BasicsCard, which is currently prescribed? You do not mind the idea of having a card you can utilise for food as opposed to simply being able to pay cash or anything? What are your thoughts in relation to the difference between the two cards?

Ms Ngalmindjalmag—I can maybe have both—the FOODcard and the BasicsCard.

ACTING CHAIR—Do you have a FOODcard?

Ms Ngalmindjalmag—Yes, I do.

ACTING CHAIR—Do you use that or do you use both?

Ms Ngalmindjalmag—I use both.

ACTING CHAIR—So you automatically have money transferred across to your FOODcard, do you?

Ms Ngalmindjalmag—Yes.

ACTING CHAIR—As well as that you have your BasicsCard?

Ms Ngalmindjalmag—Yes.

Ms Inmulugulu—My concern is about the two cards. When my pay goes into my account it then goes into two cards, the BasicsCard and the FOODcard. All my money goes into the two cards, which I am not happy about. I should have had one card. That is a bit difficult for me.

ACTING CHAIR—You can, I think, opt just to have the BasicsCard, I would imagine. But obviously the FOODcard was established before the BasicsCard. Did you have a FOODcard before you had a BasicsCard?

Ms Inmulugulu—Yes.

Mrs VALE—I think what has happened, Jenny, is that ALPA, because of the request of the women, developed the FOODcard and the idea was seen to be so good by the government, they actually came in with their own BasicsCard, from what we can observe. It is not exactly the same, but it is supposed to do a similar role. I think it is part of the leadership that ALPA has established that has shown the government there is a better way of doing things. Perhaps it is just a matter of working out some of those early snags at this stage.

Ms Inmulugulu—Can I ask something?

Mrs VALE—Of course, yes.

Ms Inmulugulu—Where did this FOODcard come from?

Mrs VALE—My understanding—maybe Alistair wants to answer this—is that it did come from a request from the women of a particular community. Alistair, maybe you can explain which community. Perhaps it is history.

Mr King—The idea of the FOODcard came from the ladies at Gapuwiyak. They wanted something that they could use to budget for food but also something that would protect that budgeted money from being spent on other things, so we developed the FOODcard. But the FOODcard was always going to be voluntary. You could choose to have it or choose not to have it. When the intervention came in, the government did not have a BasicsCard, so they used our FOODcard instead. Everybody now thinks that FOODcard is part of the intervention, and it never was.

ACTING CHAIR—Thank you for that explanation. We really want to hear from Aboriginal local people. We also have the principal and people from the health clinic here. I understand Mr Waianga wishes to say something.

Mr Waianga—The flight going into town is around \$270. So looking at the two cards, my question is: how do they go about taking the money out from there to pay for their ticket to go to town?

ACTING CHAIR—Thank you for that. You have made a point. Do you have both cards?

Mr Waianga—No.

ACTING CHAIR—We might hear from the principal now.

Mr Maunder—I am speaking on behalf of the community but I will make a couple of points first. Damo and Kirsty have done a fantastic job since they have been here and we are very impressed with the way they go about their business. We would like to thank them for that and any comments I make are not against them personally, they are to do with the ALPA organisation and the situation in this community. We are involved with the ALPA store through the school via the nutrition program, the lunches, breakfast and afternoon tea are provided which I will say since Damo and Kirsty have been here have been excellent. The food has improved a lot. We give healthy food for breakfast, afternoon tea and lunch and that is provided by the ALPA store, which I am very happy with at this stage. The financial side was and still is a problem but that is irrelevant to this situation.

The teaching staff all purchase their food from the barge. We buy it in town. It is brought out on the barge each week. The reason is, firstly, that we are able to, we have access to email and fax and that sort of thing. Secondly, food is very, very expensive. It is cheaper for us to purchase our food from town than it is to purchase it from here. That includes the cost of the barge, the cost of the packing and the cost of the couriering.

ACTING CHAIR—Could you give us some indication of what you would save by ordering direct on, say, a weekly buy?

Mr Maunder—I would not be able to tell you about a weekly buy, but at the start of the term we might make a \$1,000 order and that might cost us \$100 to get out here. It would be really interesting to have someone look into this and have them work it out properly. It does not affect us too much, it affects the local people the most. I would say we would save maybe a couple of hundred dollars there including the cost of the barge.

ACTING CHAIR—What period is that for?

Mr Maunder—That would last us maybe three or four weeks until we make another order and then it is a top-up order. Again, I would love to see someone look into that and do the figures because we are not positive about how much we would save on that. It is just that the prices in the ALPA store—and I believe it has nothing to do with Kirsty and Damo—are set. It is not a problem for us and the reason that I bring that up is that the income of the people in this community is managed in certain circumstances and in other circumstances their income is not large and they have to come here to buy their food. They do not have a choice. A lot of the time they are on the minimum wage—that includes some of my employees. On income management they only have a card I believe—I am not positive about that fact—and they have to purchase food at the price that is set by ALPA. It has been mentioned by Johnny and other people that the prices are very high, so we are looking at minimum income and maximum price. They have large families to feed.

The people of this community have supported me fully. I am very proud of working here and of the people in this community. They are strong, they look after each other, they care for each other and they look after their kids. I know that they try and do the best by their kids and I just do not think that it is physically possible for them to purchase the healthy food that they would like to purchase in the circumstances that they have now because it is a monopoly situation. They do not have a choice of where they can buy their food. If they did have a choice I believe that it would make the prices go down quite a lot. If they were able to access what the teachers access in town, that might create a bit of competition. Even just having another option in town here might create a bit more competition as well.

The point I would like to make is that the current circumstance puts a lot of pressure on the people in this community. I think—I might be wrong and please let me know if I am wrong—that the food that they are able to purchase with the money that they receive through their job or through CDEP might not give them enough to last through till their next pay. Would that be correct, Jenny?

Ms Inmulugulu—Yes.

Mr Maunder—So what I would really like to see is the prices go down or the wage be taken into consideration for the people in a community like this, where they do not have an option. Are they getting the same amount of money as someone who is living in Darwin? If they are, that is not really fair, is it, because people in Darwin are buying in a situation where there is competition and the people out here do not have that choice. That is the point I want to make.

ACTING CHAIR—Thank you. I just note for the record that people answered yes generally to the question that you asked. How long have you been here?

Mr Maunder—A year now.

ACTING CHAIR—So it is also a limited time in terms of the history of the store. I invite the next speaker.

Ms Hammond—I work as a registered nurse at the clinic. I agree with what Phil says that it is much cheaper for us, bearing in mind that both health and education are subsidised for freight to get things out here. Therefore buying in the store is expensive, but I would agree that Kirsty and Damien have done a great job. In the two years I have been here I have noticed a big change to what is available, and actually the cheapest things in the store are fruit and vegetables and healthy food rather than ice creams, lollies, sweets and Coke—all that is far more expensive than fruit and veg.

ACTING CHAIR—Was that the situation before?

Ms Hammond—There just was not the choice before. You would naturally go for a packet of Tim Tams instead of a bag of oranges that had been there for three or four weeks.

ACTING CHAIR—When did that change come about?

Ms Hammond—I think when Damien and Kirsty came—a big change.

Mrs VALE—How long have you been here?

Ms Hammond—Two years.

ACTING CHAIR—Sorry to interrupt you.

Ms Hammond—That's okay—that is all I really wanted to say. I think Phil covered it: it is true that it is expensive for people to buy here with no competition.

ACTING CHAIR—Would anybody in the community like to respond to some of the comments we have heard from your school and health clinic from a personal point of view or from their family's point of view—whether they do run out of money and how they or the community cope with that? I know these are difficult issues, but do people have any comments about their situations?

Ms Ngalmindjalmag—Can I say something in my language?

ACTING CHAIR—Yes.

Ms Ngalmindjalmag—It's not only these people; it's everybody.

Interjector—Jenny Macklin

Ms Ngalmindjalmag—Jenny Macklin. So everybody has to say something, not only some of us.

Interjector—Involved.

Ms Ngalmindjalmag—Everybody has to be involved. It's a community meeting. Everybody here knows about what we are going to say. They talk about the price, complaining it's too high. Everybody here needs to get together and help. That is what they are here for.

ACTING CHAIR—Can you translate for people if they want to speak in their own language?

Ms Ngalmindjalmag—Yes, that is what I said.

Mr Mairawal—I work for the Mardbalk Sea Rangers. What Phil was saying today is very true. With the minimum wage that all my people get, we don't have enough to afford to buy what is here because the price is way too high. I agree with what Phil was saying and I think everybody else agrees with that, but they are all sitting out there not saying anything. Thank you.

ACTING CHAIR—What sort of impact does that have on you and your family in terms of what decisions you make about what you purchase in the store?

Mr Mairawal—As Phil said, we do not have a choice.

ACTING CHAIR—The health community said the fruit and vegies and the meat are sometimes cheaper, but the evidence is that sometimes when there is a smaller amount of money people tend to buy higher density, less healthy foods. Is that the situation in the community because of the amount of money you have?

Mr Mairawal—Yes, that is the situation. Some of these people end up buying all these cheap foods—rubbish food—and not the good food because of prices.

ACTING CHAIR—What sort of rubbish food? Would you give an example.

Mr Mairawal—Lollies, chips and all that.

Mrs VALE—James, in some of the communities we have been to some of the people had community gardens or chickens—they had a poultry farm. Others in other circumstances ran cattle. Is there any opportunity here on this island for the people of this community to plant fruit and vegetables or to keep chickens and other poultry? Has there been any tradition of that here? That is one question. The second question is: is there any opportunity to begin that? Is there any opportunity to start having poultry farms, keeping chickens or keeping pigs just for individual families to supplement what they can buy here at the store? I hear what you say—that there is no competition—but the government cannot come and just start up another store. Are there any opportunities for the people here and the community to have their own chicken farms, their own poultry or their own garden vegetables?

Mr Mairawal—There are a lot of opportunities here, but you need more people to work and do that. You need the government to give you more money to employ more people.

Mrs VALE—What about home gardens—having a garden at your own home that can supplement your own household table? Is there any tradition of doing that? It is just that in some communities that we have been to the people keep their own gardens—not in a lot, but there

have been some that we have been to. One community had its own chicken farm, so it provided its own eggs and chickens.

Mr Mairawal—Yes, people can start something by themselves, but some of these people do not know how to do farming and stuff like that in their own gardens. You have to get somebody out here to actually train these people, and you still need money to do that.

ACTING CHAIR—Thank you, James, for those comments.

Mr Waianga—Talking on his point, the thing is that the fellas over here have to get trained to manage their poultry, chickens or pigs. Apart from that, there are the viruses that are coming—we get SARS with chickens and the other viruses coming around, such as swine flu. This is really close to Indonesia. We have vets flying up and down; we have to look at that. Birds migrate, and we can have problems over here with that. So in that area we need a good structure and a really good place where we can check the chickens. We have to have our own lab to check the chickens and see if it is good food coming through.

ACTING CHAIR—Just on that, do AQIS visit the community—the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service?

Mr Waianga—Yes.

ACTING CHAIR—Do they discourage the keeping of chickens and pigs?

Mr Waianga—No, they did not. If you can talk about and create something like that and then start the projects going over here, that would be really good.

ACTING CHAIR—Thank you for that. Now we have somebody here who wants to make some comments; it is fantastic. Thank you for making some comments from the community.

Ms Urabadi—I am from Warruwi. The first issue that I want to share with you is about the job that I have started, working at the creche with the little ones. I started in 2003—around that year. I looked around this community. The mothers were a little bit too shy to come and talk to me. The way that I run the creche is to try to help the mothers to do their own cooking at the centre. I was a bit worried because children were getting sick—they had scabies, they were anaemic and that sort of thing. I decided to ask the clinic to come and give me a hand to do the screening project. I have done a lot of work. I did a lot of courses when I started working at the creche. I went to Batchelor for one or two weeks and then came back to the community. So I did a lot of training. I work through the community. I love my community here and try to support them.

You mentioned the garden. I was going to do that to get nutrition, but I did not. I had a chest infection and I have health problems, so I had to give that up. When I finished working at the creche I went to Centrelink and asked them if I could get the form to get unemployment money to support me for a while after I retired from my job. I waited for nine weeks to get my termination pay. I have got six grandchildren, and I waited and waited. It was too long to give me that money through the shire. I asked: ‘How am I going to cope with my money? Where do I get my money?’ I asked Bob and Johnny to sign the form to give me unemployment money. I

waited another eight weeks. This is the case that I went through. I asked, 'How am I going to support myself and my grandchildren? My grandchildren go to school. They attend the school in this community. How will I get the money?' I decided to ask Kirsty to give me a job. Kirsty said, 'Yes, I will put you on the list.' So she put my name on the list. She said to me, 'You've got a job. Can you work at the shop?' and I said, 'Yes. I would really love to have a job because I want money. I do not want to starve with my grandchildren.'

You were just talking about those BasicsCards. It took me eight weeks to get my FOODcard, my BasicsCard and all that. I had to do another form. I had to do it again and repeat all the information that white men have in that little paper. I am now here and working at the shop. I run this community and I run the council board here for the shire too. I was elected at the committee meeting. Those are the issues.

I will also talk about the wages, when we work and how we work. We work and we get the money, but then the money goes away because we spend a lot of money in the shop. The price is too high. The following fortnight we start looking for food and go around and ask people, our family, to give us a little bit if they have it—whatever we are short of in the community or in our family. That is all I have to say.

ACTING CHAIR—Thank you very much for that contribution. Could I clarify: when did you finish with the creche?

Ms Urabadi—I finished up in 2009.

ACTING CHAIR—Early this year?

Ms Urabadi—Yes.

Mr Maunder—I want to reinforce what Rosemary said. Her grandkids do come to school every day. They are healthy and well looked after. I want to reinforce the fact that this is someone who is honest, reliable and works hard. She is put in a situation where she cannot feed her grandchildren because of the white fella way. That is really the only way I can explain it.

I want to ask a couple of questions before I go. What will be the result of this meeting today? What will happen with the ALPA store and the other stores?

ACTING CHAIR—The inquiry was established by Jenny Macklin, the Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. We were sent a reference. I represent people on the cape and in the Torres Strait and was keen to have an inquiry into remote community stores because the issue had been raised with me up there and other members were also supportive of it. We are going around looking at the different models of stores that are in operation. Obviously, the government is developing a food security policy as well. I imagine that FaHCSIA, who are a part of that process, will be looking at the transcripts of what is said in communities like this as part of the development of that policy.

We will formally be making recommendations to the government from what we have heard in meetings like this. We have been not only here but to Central Australia, Broome, Cape York Peninsula, Torres Strait and the APY Lands in South Australia. We have been getting around for

six months of this year. We will obviously make recommendations to the government. I am a government member and Danna is an opposition member, but we are taking a pretty bipartisan approach. As a parliamentary subcommittee we will make recommendations to the executive, which is the minister and the government, and it will be up to them whether they take up those recommendations.

Some of the issues we are grappling with are whether the stores are essential services or commercial enterprises, the issues around health and the impacts on that from quality, cost and all those sorts of things. When government gets involved in things with good intentions sometimes innovation, entrepreneurship and all of those types of things are stifled in communities. There are small communities, which really struggle with viability, and more medium-sized communities than larger communities, so how do you develop policy around those different areas? Those are some of the things that the subcommittee is looking at in this inquiry.

Mr Maunder—Will one aspect be looking at the minimum wage for someone in a community like this compared to what they are paying in an ALPA store for, say, a standard list of grocery items?

ACTING CHAIR—Certainly the whole issue of about whether people can afford to feed themselves in a healthy way will be something the subcommittee will be discussing and I imagine making some recommendations on. That is why we come out to communities and listen to people. It is good you put your point of view very forcefully—and we are hearing what you are saying—but the things we have heard here today are not necessarily different to some of the things we have heard in other places as well. It is very good to be able to hear from local people as well. We understand that we are operating in a white fella way here today with the parliament and we appreciate the comments that Nancy, Jenny, Johnny and others have made and are supportive of that.

Mr Maunder—Thank you.

ACTING CHAIR—In general at the school, you are pretty happy; the attendance is pretty good and healthy kids are coming along to school?

Mr Maunder—Absolutely, yes. Just to go back to the start, I am really pleased with Damo and Kirsty. This store here is great. The issue I wanted to bring up is the price and the fairness of that in comparison to what people here are earning.

ACTING CHAIR—ALPA gave evidence yesterday. They told us that they do not charge the freight cost on their fruit and vegies. They are cross-subsidising their fruit and vegies. Mary-Jane said that freight was subsidised. Is your food freight subsidised?

Mr Maunder—We get subsidised for all of our freight. We get a certain amount given to us for the year. For that reason it is a lot cheaper again for us to get it on the barge.

ACTING CHAIR—If you did not have a freight subsidy—

Mr Maunder—When I spoke before about the comparison, I was including if I had to pay for the freight charge.

ACTING CHAIR—Thank you very much; that has been very helpful.

Ms Chyer—I work for the shire in the admin side of things. I have only been in Waruwi for two months. I process the employees' timesheets every fortnight. I get many people coming to me asking when they are going to get paid again because they do not have enough money to feed their family. Usually in the first week they are fine; in the second week they struggle really badly. Once again, it is the amount of money they earn compared to the prices in the shop. They go to the shop in the first week and they can feed their family fine but in the second week they struggle. I personally find that very hard to see. There are lots of good people here. Like someone said before, they are hardworking, they look after their family and they send them to school. For them not to be able to feed their families is pretty sad.

Secondly, they do get paid once a fortnight. The guys will get paid tomorrow, which in Darwin is a public holiday. The shop is closed tomorrow. They have been without pay for two weeks. Payday is tomorrow and the shop is closed. Normally a public holiday would not be on a Friday; it would be on a Monday. From a Waruwi perspective, I think the shop should at least be open half a day tomorrow so that the community can purchase goods from their pay tomorrow. A lot of people are concerned that the shop is not open so that they can purchase from their pay this week.

ACTING CHAIR—Thank you, Vicki. I gather the reason for the holiday is that it is the Darwin show holiday. Would weekly pays help in dealing with that issue?

Ms Chyer—I am not sure. They only get so much money; whether they get it weekly or fortnightly is neither here nor there, I guess. We do have people wanting their pay paid in advance. Most of the time the council can do that for them. But if they get it a week early, the next time they are waiting three weeks. So they are always trying to catch up and they just cannot.

ACTING CHAIR—Would any other local person like to make a statement? If not, we will finish. On behalf of the subcommittee I thank you very much for the evidence you have given today. A transcript of the hearing will be available on the parliamentary website. If anyone is interested in following the inquiry, we are going to Milingimbi and then we are going to stay in Maningrida tonight. We were in Darwin yesterday. People can read the evidence presented at the other hearings if they are interested. We will bring down our report containing recommendations in October this year. Thank you to everyone who has contributed this morning; it has been appreciated. We thank you for your time.

Subcommittee adjourned at 11.15 am