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SENATE

SELECT COMMITTEE ON REGIONAL AND REMOTE
INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

**Reference: Effectiveness of state, territory and Commonwealth government policies
on regional and remote Indigenous communities**

FRIDAY, 22 MAY 2009

DARWIN

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

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**SENATE SELECT COMMITTEE ON
REGIONAL AND REMOTE INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES**

Friday, 22 May 2009

Members: Senator Scullion (*Chair*), Senator Crossin (*Deputy Chair*), Senators Adams, Johnston, Moore and Siewert

Senators in attendance: Senator Adams, Moore, Scullion and Siewert

Participating members: Senators Abetz, Back, Barnett, Bernardi, Bilyk, Birmingham, Mark Bishop, Boswell, Boyce, Brandis, Bob Brown, Carol Brown, Bushby, Cameron, Cash, Colbeck, Jacinta Collins, Coonan, Cormann, Eggleston, Farrell, Feeney, Fielding, Fierravanti-Wells, Fifield, Fisher, Forshaw, Furner, Hanson-Young, Heffernan, Humphries, Hurley, Hutchins, Joyce, Kroger, Ludlum, Lundy, Ian Macdonald, McEwen, McGauran, McLucas, Marshall, Mason, Milne, Minchin, Nash, O'Brien, Parry, Payne, Polley, Pratt, Ronaldson, Ryan, Stephens, Sterle, Troeth, Trood, Williams, Wortley and Xenophon

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

- a) the effectiveness of Australian Government policies following the Northern Territory Emergency Response, specifically on the state of health, welfare, education and law and order in regional and remote Indigenous communities;
- b) the impact of state and territory government policies on the wellbeing of regional and remote Indigenous communities;
- c) the health, welfare, education and security of children in regional and remote Indigenous communities; and
- d) the employment and enterprise opportunities in regional and remote Indigenous communities.

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Committee met at 9.10 am

CHAIR (Senator Scullion)—Today the Select Committee on Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities is continuing its inquiry into regional and remote Indigenous communities. On behalf of this committee I acknowledge the traditional owners of this land on which we meet and we pay our respects to the elders, past and present. The committee is next due to report to the Senate on 15 June 2009. Before the committee starts taking evidence I again advise that all witnesses appearing before the committee are protected by parliamentary privilege with respect to their evidence. I also remind witnesses that giving false or misleading evidence to the committee may constitute contempt of the Senate. These are public proceedings although the committee may agree to a request to have evidence heard in camera or may determine that certain evidence should be heard in camera. I welcome Mr John Greatorex and Mr Yingiya Guyula.

[9.10 am]

GREATOREX, Mr John, Private capacity

GUYULA, Mr Yingiya Mark, Lecturer, Yolngu Studies, School of Australian Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Charles Darwin University

CHAIR—I welcome Mr John Greatorex and Mr Yingiya Guyula.

Mr Guyula—I was born and raised on the edge of the Arafura swamp at a place called Mirrngatja. I lived my life in the bush before I even went into school at Galiwinku. I have worked at various places, including on airplanes. I gained my private pilot licence and I am now working as a lecturer at Charles Darwin University. I am here as a representative—a senior man—of my people, Liya-dhalinymirr-Djambbarrpuynu, of the north-east Arnhem Land around Gapuwiyak and the homelands that I just spoke about—Mapuru, Mirrngatja and Donydji. These are very remote areas away from remote communities like Milingimbi, Galiwinku and Gapuwiyak. I will also talk about places like Gapuwiyak and how the intervention has affected our area. Later I would like to pass on my concerns to the Senate.

Mr Greatorex—I am appearing before the Senate committee in my private capacity.

CHAIR—Thank you. Information on parliamentary privilege and the protection of witnesses and evidence has been provided to you. The committee has before it your submission. I now invite you to make a short opening statement. At the conclusion of your remarks I will ask members of the committee to put questions to you.

Mr Greatorex—First, I would like to say that I am conscious that I am a white male. I feel that many people in north-east Arnhem who need to be here are the women whom I cannot represent. I come into daily contact with people in north-east Arnhem Land. After having spent about 30 years living in north-east Arnhem Land I feel I have a responsibility to present things that have come to me through contact with adoptive families in north-east Arnhem Land. The Northern Territory emergency response has had a major impact on north-east Arnhem Land. It is mentioned in the submission that people have been, for want of a better word, bad-mouthed in the eyes of all Australians.

Every time we read articles in a newspaper or see programs on television there have been negative stories. This has had an immense impact on the spiritual and emotional health of people. Recently, I was speaking to one old man in Arnhem Land. I came back from Arnhem Land a day ago. This old man said, ‘What has happened to us is like riding a horse. I am on this horse and the horse is galloping. It is galloping through the forest, these blinkers on, cannot see exactly where it is going, but the horse is swerving. The problem is that I do not have control of the reins; someone else is controlling it.’ He said, ‘That is what my life is like. Sometimes I am terrified that the horse is going to run into a tree and I will be knocked off by a bough but I have no control of where I am going or what I am doing.’ Those were his words, not mine.

I also wanted briefly to discuss how north-east Arnhem—and I assume the rest of Australia—is made up of first nations of people. The government and white Australia have very little knowledge of the governance structures. If governments and people do not recognise and work with those peoples using political systems and governance structures that work for them and that always have, we will continue to run into problems. The government is saying, ‘We will now pour more money into these larger centres and build up Gapuwiyak, Milingimbi, Ramingining, Yirrkala and other centres’, but that will create more problems because we will be pulling people from surrounding homelands into country that is not theirs.

I would not want to call any of those places a refugee camp, but the sentiment is there. The Government will be putting people into country where they do not have a say; where they have no authority to be because they have their country elsewhere. It is like bringing British people over to France and saying, ‘You can live over here but you are not citizens of France.’ I am trying to say that centralising policies are not working in the best interests of the people. The NTER was brought about through the *Little children are sacred* report. The first and strongest recommendation in that report is that we need to negotiate. Governments need to find ways in which to negotiate meaningfully and respectfully. That has not been done.

We are continuing to move in a direction that I believe is ideologically motivated and against the evidence on the ground. In the future that will cause greater dysfunction in those places, it will alienate people even more and that will require greater policing. That problem could be overcome. However, it is not for me to talk about that now. We can do one thing. I would like to table two documents—one is shorter version of the other—that contain ways of improving the capacity of the public service to interact and engage with first nations peoples. The first report asks about the success of the NTER. Not long after the NTER had been announced I remember it being said that there was widespread pornography, alcohol and child abuse in Indigenous communities—none of the things that I had witnessed in my 30 years experience of Arnhem Land.

People from Elcho Island with whom I live and call relatives rang me and said ‘Attempted youth suicides have just hit the roof. We continually have to move from where we are living to different places that are outside Arnhem Land to go back and be with the younger members of our families.’ They were distraught about these images depicting the occurrence of child abuse and pornography. People had been labelled, which has had an enormous and negative impact right across Australia but most profoundly on Indigenous and first nations peoples in the Northern Territory.

I do not want to go on for too long. There are issues relating to law and order and the spiritual health of people has been detrimentally affected. I would like to give you a couple of examples of law and order issues that I have witnessed firsthand. Not long ago I received a phone call from a federal police officer asking for assistance. She wanted to know how she could do her job better. The first question I asked was, ‘How long are you there?’ She said, ‘I am leaving next week.’ How can people engage if they know nothing about the people that they are meant to be supporting?

When I was last at Galiwinku on Elcho Island another thing happened. The police decided to conduct a community relations exercise. A football match was halfway through being played and they brought out stun guns and demonstrated stun guns. People interpreted that as intimidation.

It had the reverse effect. Those stun guns were not something that people were happy to see, but the police generally thought that it was a good thing to do.

CHAIR—When was this Mr Greateorex?

Mr Greateorex—Last year.

CHAIR—Can you remember where that football game that was being played?

Mr Greateorex—I have pictures of it.

CHAIR—If you could supply those it would be very useful for us.

Mr Greateorex—We have just come back from Arnhem Land. While we were out there a little incident occurred. Two young fellas were having a bit of an altercation. I was thinking that the police could easily have become involved in that altercation. However, one of their family members went up and spoke to them and drew their attention to how important it was for them to realise that they were connected to each other because of their history. The incident dissipated within hours.

If the police had seen that altercation they would have gone along and maybe locked up one of the fellas. There was no alcohol or anything because there is no alcohol out in these places. If the police had been there they might have pulled those fellas apart, taken them away, questioned them and maybe pressed charges—who knows? But it would have made the situation worse. In north-east Arnhem Land at the moment it is often my experience that a police presence makes things worse because they do not understand how the community can better solve its own problems. Police are not experienced, they do not have any language and they do not have any cultural background. In many ways they are compounding the issues out in north-east Arnhem Land.

I refer, next, to schooling and education. We need to be careful when we use those two words. Schooling has not changed other than that there seem to be more resources going into the urban settlements—those places that we call communities—but it has not increased attendance. In fact, I would think that attendance has probably gone backwards because more and more people are feeling under personal threat.

CHAIR—Do you have any insight into why attendance is down? Do they not want to attend their schools because they are frightened of the schools? Is that right, or are they frightened of something at the schools?

Mr Greateorex—Thank you, Mr Chair, for asking that question. There are a number of things. Let me give you some background. I worked as a teacher, an educator and an assistant principal at Shepparton for close on 30 years. During that time the homelands had 100 per cent participation. Every kid at that homeland would go to school every day. But at the major centre, Galiwinku, their attendance was very poor. This did not relate only to attendance. Something in which the Department of Education has not been particularly interested is participation.

Over the period that I was there up to 600 to 700 children could have been attending school. Rarely, if ever, did that participation rate get above 350, so half the children did not even get on the rolls. In the homelands every child was on the roll book and every child attended every day. For a couple of years I counted the assemblies at Elcho Island. Not once did I see more than 90 students at any assembly at any one time. What we get on the roll books does not necessarily reflect the state of play on the ground. Why do those kids not go to school? It is simple: many of the parents may not want to be at that place. They have been forced by policies onto land that is not their own and where they do not have authority to talk. It is not their country and it never can be.

If the parents believe that they have no authority and no way in which to move forward with their lives that is what the children will believe. Things have got dramatically worse. In the early 1970s, when I first visited Elcho Island, the houses were built by local building teams and supervised by a local Yolngu builder who had trained in Darwin. All the houses were built by local people but now virtually none are. If there is not an opportunity to live a productive life, why go to school? Let me give you another example. Last year I was at Elcho Island and a contracting team from Townsville was doing paving outside the council office.

I believe local people want to work but the government does not know how to assist them. Contractors are not interested in engaging people meaningfully and respectfully. That is why I gave you those two reports earlier because I think that is a way forward. Does that answer your question?

CHAIR—Indeed, thank you.

Mr Greatorex—Are we running out of time?

CHAIR—We are already well over time but that is because some of the senators were unavoidably detained this morning and I apologise for that. If Mr Guyula wanted to comment on any aspect he could do so, but I think we should ask some short questions so we can try to get through the morning.

Mr Greatorex—Could I make one short point before Yingiya Guyula makes any comment? Recently we put together some statistics. Paragraph 4 of the NTER asks about employment and enterprise opportunities. Last night I went through some calculations and I drew a comparison between one homeland and the major centre at Elcho Island where non-attached non-government money is coming to them. On Elcho Island the average is about \$60 per annum per person. At this one homeland I think the average income, non-attached, not related to funding or to government, is about \$4,000 per annum per head. People in the homelands have ability and an enterprise that we are not harnessing, that we are not looking at, and that we are not recognising.

Mr Guyula—Thank you for letting me come here. I am glad to be able to talk to the Senate committee as I have always wanted to pass on a message about how I and my people feel. I am talking from a background where at the moment we have been put under the spotlight as a result of the intervention. There have been complaints and we have been upset and angry at times about the way it has been introduced to us.

I would like to talk to you all day but, unfortunately, I cannot. I would like to make a few points about the intervention. One day I conducted a survey of the communities in town camps around Alice Springs, Katherine and Nhulunbuy. As a result I worked out how income management could be introduced. They had never been out to Arnhem Land let alone to the remote communities.

When I am talking about remote communities I am referring to small communities such as Mapuru, Mirrngatja and even Yirrkala. Yesterday there were some people here from Laynhapuy who spoke to you. These are the places that we are talking about. Income management with the BasicsCard and the quarantining of Centrelink funds just will not work out there. For example, from Mapuru people have to fly in to Elcho Island, which costs about \$500 a charter return.

By the time the Centrelink funds have gone through quarantine income management they only have about \$200 of spending money and the rest of the money is in the BasicsCard that they cannot use because they have to fly to a community that has shops where the BasicsCard can be used. At Mapuru there is a shop that is willing to operate the BasicsCard facilities but somehow they will not let it. So people have to fly in and it costs \$500 return on a charter flight. There is no regular passenger transport or RPT run: they have to pay \$250 to fly in and \$250 to fly back. Then they probably buy \$150 worth of food and stuff.

CHAIR—Would only one person charter an aircraft to go shopping by himself or herself, or would the charter take a number of people from the community at the same time? Are you giving me the statistics for one person going shopping in a four-seater aircraft, which is probably the smallest one that runs there?

Mr Guyula—Yes.

CHAIR—Would they go by themselves?

Mr Guyula—Sometimes they would go by themselves and sometimes people want to get a free ride over with someone else paying for the whole charter. At times a group of people get together and sometimes there are only one or two people who want to go into town and they just cannot afford it.

CHAIR—So there is no other way apart from flying?

Mr Guyula—A boat could probably be run but, then again, it is moored right up the river and the river is about 30 kilometres away.

CHAIR—I have taken the boat trip a number of times. I just wanted to get that on the record.

Mr Guyula—A vehicle is a problem too from where the boat is normally moored.

Mr Greateorex—And there are tides.

Mr Guyula—And there are tides. That costs money for petrol to be able to go there and back.

CHAIR—The point you are making, Mr Guyula, refers to the reason why you have to travel out of the community. You have a store there but because the BasicsCard prevents you from accessing food in that store you are forced to travel elsewhere. You cannot support the store in your own community and you have to pay ridiculous amounts of money for air charter and other things to get to the other store?

Mr Guyula—Yes.

CHAIR—This afternoon we are speaking to someone from the government who is responsible for the allocation of those stores, so we will certainly put that question to him.

Mr Guyula—The other thing I wanted to talk about relating to the BasicsCard or to the quarantining of Centrelink funds is that it would be better if it was optional. In some communities there might be gambling and other stuff and people spend money carelessly in towns, but out in the homelands there is no drinking or card games on which people might spend money. The quarantining of Centrelink funds does not work for people in the remote areas which I come from. This has had an impact on our people. I think the quarantining of Centrelink funds should be optional for most people who look after the funds fairly; it should not apply to people out there.

The other thing that I wanted to talk about was the policing in the community. The police have not really got to know the people in the community. We would like the police to be able to work alongside our traditional elders. Last year when I was in Ramingining there were some incidents. A sacred men's business ceremony was passing through and the police thought it was people doing a run to smuggle drugs and stuff. The police ran into the ceremony. It made the people very upset about it because they ran into a sacred ceremony ground simply because there is no communication. There is no communication between the community, the council and the police.

I have lived in Nhulunbuy and Ramingining. Recently I came back from where my home is at Gapuwiyak. I have seen the police and the night patrol which is run by local people there do their own work separately. They do not even get together. They should be working together on crimes and on policing around the community. There is no communication between night patrol and the police, and there is no communication between the police and the senior elders who also do the policing. John referred earlier to a couple of lads that had a bit of an argument over something that was a family matter. I am sure that if the police had come they would have made the situation worse. I stepped in and, acted as a local policeman, and I did it perfectly and with more understanding. The next day those boys were together again and they were happy.

CHAIR—Do you think there is any need for police officers at all there?

Mr Guyula—Maybe the police officers can look after other drug runs, or if there are alcohol-related problems in the communities. I think it would be better if they worked alongside and had close links with the traditional owners, the people in council, or the elders of the clans. Looking at it from my point of view, as a person who is living in the community, I see them as working out of glasshouses. People are very frightened of the police because there is not much communication with people. They should be coming into the ceremonies, joining in, coming into the camps, sitting around and maybe going fishing with people. They should take part in the community.

Senator ADAMS—As elders have you invited them to do that?

Mr Guyula—No, there has not been anything like that. But people are willing to give others a sound knowledge in their culture and teachings, to let them undergo ceremonies, to let them get to know the culture and the language, and then to let them work amongst the people. Last week before I got to Gapuwiyak there was an incident. The police were after one lad and they went around looking for him. They walked into a house where a senior leader of the elders was lying on a mattress on the floor. The police picked up this man but it was the wrong one.

People were very upset about that because he was a well-respected man and that sort of thing. Maybe the police and the community should work together to resolve problems. They should join in one another's affairs. We see them as doing crime runs around the place instead of being in the community and being active also in other things.

CHAIR—Thank you Mr Guyula. We are now well over time.

Senator SIEWERT—I will put my questions on notice.

Senator ADAMS—Mr Guyula, I listened to what you said earlier. Did the elders and the traditional owners of the community go to the police and say, 'We want to have a meeting? Let us sit down and talk about all this'? Communication should occur on both sides. I think it would be better, as you are the traditional owners and it is your area, for you say to them, 'Come and we will teach you.' You could get them to really understand your culture. I see communication as a two-way thing. As you are the owners perhaps that might be a way forward. I am sure you have tried, but maybe you have to try a little harder. In your submission you state that the local cooperative could not get the income management funds through FaHCSIA. What communication have you had to see whether that store could be looked at again to enable you to use your BasicsCard?

Mr Guyula—I think John would know more about that issue. We have been working together.

Mr Greateorex—The last application went in a few months ago and again it was rejected. The cooperative won a national heart foundation award for what it is doing.

Senator ADAMS—Yes, I know. I am fully aware of that but I just wondered about the reason for the refusal.

CHAIR—As I understand it, the Northern Territory emergency response legislation covered particular centres but specifically excluded from those aspects the homelands, whether or not you were a government business manager. This is a consequence of that. It is important that you brought up this issue. Could you provide the correspondence between FaHCSIA and your organisation? It would be useful to hear their responses. If they just said no we will have something to say about that. However, if they said, 'No because' we would be interested to hear why. I ask you to provide that information for us on notice, Mr Greateorex.

Mr Greateorex—Basically, they just said no, but I can provide documentation. I will speak to the general business manager also to see whether he has any details.

Senator SIEWERT—Do you know of any other centres where this has been an issue? We know of at least two or three centres. If you know of others could you let us know when you provide us with the other correspondence as that would be very useful?

Mr Greatorex—Yes, there are others.

Senator SIEWERT—Thank you.

CHAIR—Mr Guyula and Mr Greatorex, I am sorry but we have well and truly run out of time. As this is a standing committee I am sure that members of the committee will have a number of other questions. We will place those questions on notice and find some other way of ensuring that we get answers to those questions. Thank you for your submission and for the evidence that you have provided today.

Mr Guyula—Thank you.

Mr Greatorex—Thank you.

[9.46 am]

BUXTON, Ms Ann, Executive Manager, Youth, Family and Remote, Anglicare NT

COEHN, Mr Gavin, Program Manager, East Arnhem, Anglicare NT

HAYNES, Mrs Leanna Elaine, Program Manager, Early Childhood, Anglicare NT

NICHOLS, Ms Coralie Jane, Chief Executive Officer, Anglicare NT

CHAIR—I now welcome officers from Anglicare Northern Territory. If other staff members wish to come to the table they should do so. Information on parliamentary privilege and the protection of witnesses and evidence has previously been provided to you. I now invite you to make a short opening statement. At the conclusion of your remarks I will invite questions from the committee.

Ms Nichols—Thank you, Senator. The Anglican church has had a long, complex and enduring relationship with Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, in particular in Groote Eylandt, Numbulwar, Ngukurr and Gunbalanya. These relationships have evolved and they remain very strong today. Anglicare NT is the professional community services agency of the Anglican Church in the Northern Territory. We operate as a significant non-government operation in urban, rural, regional and remote areas, and we provide critical services and capacity-building projects across population life spans to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous territorians.

Our programs range from youth leadership programs, counselling and mediation services, parenting skills training, suicide intervention work, age and disability and carer support services, playgroups, antenatal and early childhood development programs, youth health, mental health and family support, financial counselling, no-interest loan schemes, employment support, tenancy support, transitional housing programs, and op shops. Anglicare also supports the development of educative and training resources provided to local networks, youth participation committees, and committee forums. We also undertake key advocacy work and key issues. We are based in Darwin—our headquarters are in Darwin—and we have key offices located in operational hubs in Palmerston, Alice Springs, Katherine, and Nhulunbuy.

We have plans for a more consistent staff presence in Tennant Creek, Numbulwar, Milingimbi and Angurugu. Currently, we have around 150 staff and 250 volunteers, and 20 per cent of our work force our Indigenous. For the purposes of today we are focusing on the east Arnhem region—a rich and diverse cultural area with different languages and a vast and unique geography. Today we will share what we have learned over 30 years of service delivery, training and community development work undertaken in over 12 remote communities and homelands, namely, Nhulunbuy, Yirrkala, Skee Beach, Milingimbi, Ramingining, Galiwinku, Gapuwiyak, Milyakburra, Numbulwar, Alyangula, Angurugu, Umbakumba, the Marthakal homelands and the Laynhapuy homelands.

All communities in these areas, without exception, have experienced significant changes through the intervention, and shifts in both Australian and Northern Territory government legislation in the introduction of local government reforms. Clearly, more change is on the way, with the recent announcements concerning the consolidation of 20 key remote hubs of service delivery in the Northern Territory and the planned injections of infrastructure funds. Confusion over new policies, systems and decision-making processes is significant. Political agendas on the ground between the different layers of government are in some cases profound.

The lack of strategic co-ordination of the different layers of government and how this interfaces with the community and other service providers, whether commercial or non-government organisations, is significant. Remote Indigenous communities have the same right of access to community support and development services as non Indigenous territorians. People need adequate housing and health care and appropriate education and job opportunities. Community services cannot address the basic lack of infrastructure that exists in many remote communities, but we can add real founding to the injection of resources help to build social capital and enable improved linkages between providers.

In a way, Anglicare NT seeks to minimise the issues present in remote communities. We do intensive case management and support work with children, young people and adult family members in abuse, sexual health and substance abuse issues. Our staff members deal regularly with suicidal behaviour and a level of community grief resulting from completed suicides and death by violence. Our programs help to identify infants and young children with developmental delays and disabilities and help to ensure that early intervention assistance is secured. Staff members provide professional care services directly to clients dealing with the impact of degenerative, genetic and chronic disease and high levels of disability. In fact, we keep blood pressure machines in our offices because the majority of our Indigenous staff members have heart disease and diabetes.

But the communities' stories are much more complex, resilient and forward thinking. It is not all doom and gloom, disempowerment, corruption and abuse. The work undertaken with communities inspires us, as an organisation. It regularly reveals innovative thinkers, natural and appointed leaders and community members who quite literally work night and day for the betterment of their families. People at any stage of life, regardless of race, income levels, family background and location, can face serious life and/or family challenges such as suicide, abuse, family violence, family breakdown and the emergence of mental health issues, the presence of disability or chronic disease.

Indigenous people in remote areas experience regular life challenges in a resource scarce environment, compounded by economic disadvantage, a lack of specialists and sometimes even basic services. In addition, waves of distress move through communities relating to spikes in substance abuse, criminal activity, antisocial behaviour, violence, episodes of abuse and suicide. Community grief levels can be extreme. The loss of family members and individual abilities through ill health, accident and early ageing impacts on leadership, availability of diverse skill sets, and a community capacity to cope with and contribute to change.

Referring to our remote service delivery, overheads are substantial for remote service delivery. Floods and transport, freight, accommodation in communities, additional staffing and operational costs are very real for us. Government at all levels recognised this in the salary and

conditions provided for intervention, health, education and local government shire staff. Non-government agencies such as our own do not realise the same salary and conditions for their staff. The differentiation has never been so great between these sectors. It is counterproductive in developing a sustainable and healthy local service system in communities.

One of the key obstacles to providing services in remote communities is the lack of infrastructure for both locally based and visiting staff in the areas of accommodation, transport and operational bases. Anglicare NT has a long-term commitment to working in this region. The services provided and activities undertaken vary from site to site. We see so many non-government organisations coming in and out with various small buckets of funding to do specific work or to deliver a training course. It is disturbing and it can be confusing for community members and other service providers alike.

Government needs to explore options to create an environment that focuses on fewer providers. On improving funding levels you have a long-term interest and commitment with the aim of creating more sustainable and appropriate operations in remote sites. There is real need to provide flexible employment with adequate hours to sustain the interests of locally-based staff along with strategic management and infrastructure support to ensure that staff members are equipped to do their job, have supervision and support systems in place, and opportunities for training and development.

As a large non-government organisation, which is mainly government funded, we must ensure that we deliver on funded contract requirements, meeting deadlines, achieving milestones and targets along the way. This must occur in a manner that strengthens the relationship with each community, builds capacity and works with the skills transfer model, and that develops staff confidence, resilience and cross-cultural effectiveness. We do not always get it right, but we are resilient enough as an organisation to hear this, to regroup, to take guidance from our cultural advisers and to try again.

Mrs Haynes—For the past four years I have been program manager of the Communities for Children Project. I have lived and worked in the territory for 20 years and 10 of those was on Groote Eylandt. I became aware of a lot of the issues firsthand that faced the Indigenous people we worked with. The Communities for Children Program has been an excellent model that FaHCSIA has rolled out. The only complaint that I would have is that the east Arnhem site was dramatically underfunded for the work that we were required to do. But it has been a great model that has involved us in community capacity building and skill development programs. We have tried very hard to build on the strengths of the Indigenous families that we worked with.

We have a committee of 20 women who come together on a regular basis to discuss what the issues are that are facing them and how they would like the funding spent. That was quite a new experience for these women but one that they embraced and with which they ran. They enjoyed having an opportunity to make decisions for the needs of their community. The old saying ‘one size does not fit all’ is very accurate for remote communities in east Arnhem. I think the two earlier speakers referred to that admirably. There are great differences in history, great differences in infrastructure and what is available in communities.

Non-government organisations have a real role to play in remote communities, but there must be infrastructure for us to be able to do that sort of work. The project itself has supported the roll

out of the Families and Schools Together Parenting Program—an excellent parenting program run in a number of communities. It was run at Angurugu this past week—it has been running for the past three weeks—and in the second week 61 people turned up for that program. We have been trying to get that program into that community for quite a while. The local people wanted it, but there was resistance from other agencies in the community such as schools and clinics, because they felt it would be more work for them.

There is a real issue trying to get groups working together and the silo mentality is still quite strong in these communities. Play and learn support groups required specialist training in identifying early developmental delay. That kit is just about ready to be launched and we hope to have it ready for the early childhood festival that we are having on Thursday and Friday this coming week. It will work with families to train up local women to identify where children have early developmental delay. However, it does that in a culturally sensitive and appropriate way, using the seasons and hunting tracks to describe the tracks in the brain that explain brain development.

Aboriginal women know very well the developmental stages that children go through, but they have this beautiful belief that children will do things in their own time. When it comes to developmental delay that means that children are coming to school with lots of issues that could have been dealt with when they were one and two years old. A few months ago a nurse at Gapuwiyak said to me, ‘Remember that little boy that you and your team were working with in the PALS group? He could not walk and he could not stand up; he could only hold on and not be on his tiptoes. She said, ‘He is now running around at school and you would not have known that he had a problem.’ Those sorts of stories that we hear keep us going with this program.

The other really wonderful program that we have been able to support through the Communities for Children funding is the Aboriginal Resource Development Service DVDs. We have some examples of them here if you wanted to see them. They have been developing resources in Yolngu on anaemia because in some communities 50 per cent of the children under the age of five are still anaemic. The ARDS philosophy of discovery education is to give people a deep understanding. When a doctor tells a mother, ‘You need to give iron to your child’ she has no idea what the doctor means and it is very confusing.

These 35-minute DVDs describe where iron comes from, how it is used in the body, how it gets from the ground and into your food, and so on. People are now starting to understand why some of these children need iron in their diet. Other resources include baby weight charts—understanding why children get weighed—because underweight babies are a big issue. A DVD that has been produced entitled ‘Living with dogs’ has won a media award. That DVD is about keeping dogs healthy in the community.

The next DVD that they are about to produce is on understanding the use of antibiotics. One of the big issues that Indigenous people face is that we have all this western knowledge, science and information, but we do not know how to get it into a context that can be understood by remote Indigenous people. It is not that they do not have the intelligence to do it—they are highly intelligent people—but we are doing it in away that does not cross or address the wide gap in world view.

The last thing I wish to mention is the 'We grow them up festival' to be held on Thursday and Friday this week. That brings in Indigenous women from Arnhem Land—about 50 women are coming in. We will have conference speakers, lots of Indigenous speakers, and the festival will focus on celebrating some of the good things that have been happening, for example, some of the programs that they can utilise in their communities.

Mr Coehn—I am one of the program managers on the youth side out in the east Arnhem office. I will quickly run through the suicide intervention training and the mitigation program that is up and running at the moment. Over the past 10 years Anglicare has been delivering suicide intervention training in east Arnhem. Over 6,000 people have been trained. We know that suicide is a serious issue in that area. The training that we provide is the living work stuff through the Assist program Save Talk and such like. That has developed to such an extent that people want to come together and talk about it.

We ran a program in Yirrkala with the Laynhapuy workers. At first 40 men attended and it has grown to a group of 50 workers who come together and talk about suicide within the community and how they want to see the communities work together. We talk mainly about the Nhulunbuy area, Yirrkala, Skee Beach, Wallaby Beach, and so on and how they can start to address suicide. That program is starting to grow. They have taken that program to the high schools and so on to have a look at the whole thing. At the moment they are putting together a strategy that will be presented pretty soon.

We have also started to touch on the homelands. We are starting to get out to Wandawuy, next week we will go to Yilpara and then we will go further. We are starting to undertake training and we are looking further at the whole issue of suicide. Community forums are happening and people are trying to establish how they can attend them and what the women can do. Two weeks ago some stuff was done at Skee Beach, so it is all happening.

Ms Buxton—One of the really concerning issues we have seen over many years is that children repeat in pretend play what they see around them. Young children's exposure to suicide and suicidal behaviour in some but not all communities is disproportionately high. Our youth and support workers deal with children pretend playing actions that can lead to death and they turn that around. They say, 'It is not normal or acceptable that people are ending their lives through suicide and behaviour is really important.' We have been working closely with a number of those communities to try to identify ways of getting the discussion going and to establish what can be done.

We are trying to give you a few examples of key programs that we have been involved with over a long period. Over the past few years Anglicare, in conjunction with the Yothu Yindi Foundation, started the Garma Miwatj Youth Forum, which runs parallel to the annual Garma Festival. We bring together about 250 young people from communities in the regions and it has become a key event. Every year we scramble around to see how we will get funds and sponsorship and pull it all together. We will not know until next week whether or not we will have enough money, but we try to do it each year.

This bi-cultural learning event is attended by Indigenous and non Indigenous young people, primarily from the region. Indigenous young people from other communities around the Dhalwangu area attend the festival. We promote youth leadership, do a lot of skills development

work, and look at issues that young people are experiencing. About 30 or 40 adult volunteers and staff are involved in those processes, the majority of whom are located in the communities from which those young people come. Garma has become an important event. It is a little event compared with the overall festival but it helps to give young people in that region a role.

For some time many elders have been interested in supporting young people, getting them engaged in processes, and putting some positive energy into some of the issues that they are dealing with. This forum, which has become important, also brings together about 40 organisations from around that region to help get it off the ground. It is a great event. We have a bit of information that we will leave with you. I want to summarise by making some critical observations.

We think that funding formulas based on population are not equitable for a region such as east Arnhem and the majority of remote communities. They would have to be weighted to enable sustainability of program infrastructure. It is hard work, places are hard to get to, and we have to have enough funds to employ staff. People in our communities have to have decent wages—and I am talking about local and visiting staff. Non-government sector community services lose staff regularly to new shire structured intervention positions et cetera because of the salary differentiation referred to earlier as an example. Language, culture and world view considerations must remain central and underpin planning and service development.

We must work with strength-based culturally relevant early childhood and parenting skills approaches. We support a strong focus on school readiness and engagement. Early learning and the creation of parent friendly school cultures are critical. We cannot see how punitive measures aimed at addressing truancy in school attendance will work. In urban areas prosecutors are rarely able to take parents to court when their children have been chronically truanting. Legislation is in place but I think there is a bit of political rhetoric around that.

We have concerns about the move to link Centrelink income to school attendance. We think it will create serious implementation issues, risk placing children into further poverty, and fail to address causative factors. We think positive engagement has to be the focus of school involvement for children and families rather than linking money to attendance. The potential for prosecution has not worked with non-Indigenous parents in Darwin, and it has not got their children to school. We think that is an issue that should be looked at.

There are various tiers of government. We have to independently monitor whether or not they work effectively with community and non-government organisations. We have been involved with and attended community meetings in remote communities where it is a free for all. One layer of government attacks the other and shifts the blame and no-one takes responsibility for infrastructure issues, et cetera. We have constant discussions about the silos between departments. Complicated change processes are going on at local government, Northern Territory and Australian level and that has to be monitored to see how it is hitting the road on the ground.

There is a serious level of confusion about this in these communities. As a non-government organisation we now have to work with new shire structures and new legislation at the Northern Territory and Commonwealth levels. It is hard for us to get our heads around this and to grapple with it. In summary, we think that targeted consultation, respectful language and culture, local

ownership of programmatic responses, strategic allocation of resources, the availability of necessary expertise, and long-term service delivery partnerships will maximise the outcomes in this region for children, families and communities.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. We will now go to questions. Gavin, I know of your work in east Arnhem Land and I think the stuff that you do is important. A lot of the work that you have done has impacted greatly, in particular, on younger people. You have engaged, in particular, in suicide prevention, and you have people involved in a number of other programs. However, I will not go into that in detail.

In February I met one person when I was visiting a community. Two people attempted to come and see me in my office, which is quite rare. Of the two people who came to see me one was a woman and the other one was a bloke from separate communities. None of these people were from your area but you might want to comment on this issue. After a suicide prevention strategy team had visited and talked to people they were really concerned that their kids were now saying, ‘If I do not go to town I will kill myself.’ They have never talked about this before, they were a very happy community, but they are now saying, ‘If I do not get that now I will kill myself.’

They know that everybody will focus on them and take them into town. When we got into the plane he was pulling out his hair and saying, ‘I do not know what to do. I never thought that any of this would happen.’ It was extraordinary. As I move around these communities I find that this is a reality. Suddenly there is an unintended consequence of this focus—quite a massive and serious focus—to ensure that people understand the need to look after their mates. As you know, I launched a number of those programs. How do we advise people to deal with this issue because of the subtleties and nuances involved when it is gamin? How do you know when it is so difficult? In those circumstances we give them all the benefit of the doubt. Could you comment on how we could help them to deal with that issue?

Mr Coehn—This problem has gone right down, even as far as Alice Springs. The life program started that little red threat book Threats for suicide. That is something that has travelled right throughout the territory. It is not something that is new; it has been around for a while. When we get out there, talk about it and open this up for conversation it is making it better. Before a lot of taboos and restrictions were in place to prevent people talking. Young people are also influenced by western society. There are songs about it, there are action movies and there are designer labels with the word ‘suicide’ written all over them. They know about it and they are bringing this forward.

We are now getting a response from the community. People are becoming involved in it and quite a few community DVDs have tried to address the alcohol issues. They have said that that has led people to thinking about suicide, which is one of those big things. We have to go into communities constantly and open up the debate. We must give people the strength, the knowledge and the confidence to approach this situation and to talk about it.

CHAIR—At the end the analogy should be akin to the analogy in the story of the boy who cried wolf. It is not good to use that as gamin because the story is too important. People are asking me what they should do and I tell them that I do not know because it is difficult. The work that you have done has made an incredible difference statistically; there is no doubt about

that. I acknowledge that the work that you have been doing has been going on for a while. However, recently this other stuff has risen to such a level that people do not know how to address it.

Mr Coehn—When we were in Skee Beach we were talking to the ladies and the Raypirrirom team was also there. I know that this is focused around the Gove-Nhulunbuy area. They were saying that that constant threat is something that came up. They were looking at other stuff, for example, a night patrol response in the community. A few other things will come out in the suicide mitigation report. People were saying that the women elders and mothers were still too scared to say the word ‘suicide’ but that the young people kept threatening suicide. That is where the problem lies.

Young people are constantly sniffing petrol and parents do not know how to deal with that. What are they supposed to do with that? At the moment in Nhulunbuy they are trying to put together a case management tool to deal with sniffing. They know that, as a strong part of it, young people will go to the next step where they are isolated from the community because they are sniffing petrol and their lives will be influenced by other things such as the media or whatever else. There is also a threat that life is not that important and that suicide is an option. This will address all those issues. I am not saying that there is an easy way.

CHAIR—I thought that you might have an insight into this problem. I appreciate your assistance and commend you for your work.

Senator SIEWERT—We have visited communities all over the Northern Territory and we have received a variety of responses to different elements of the intervention. For example, income quarantining is a classic example. Many women say, ‘We really like it. We did not like it to begin with but we really like it.’ Many people do not like it. Much of the evidence that we heard yesterday indicated that people did not like its compulsory nature. Ms Nichols, you said in your opening statement that you had seen some of the impacts of the intervention. How are communities reacting to the intervention and what is their overall feeling about it?

Ms Nichols—I think that Anglicare NT is in a unique position in that it works across the territory. We get to have an opportunity to see how this is playing out all the way down to Alice Springs. The best way to encapsulate my response is to say that it depends on which community you are working in, what were the issues prior to the intervention, what state that community was in prior to the intervention and, therefore, how the intervention is playing itself out in the lives of those people. Like you I hear people, in particular, older women, talking about the intervention in a much more positive way than perhaps some of the younger people might talk about it in other communities. People on this panel are better equipped to discuss this issue.

Ms Buxton—The experience in east Arnhem is that in general we would all collectively have heard much more negative commentary about the intervention. That is not to say that some individuals are not supportive of some of its components. People are dealing with the impact of a reduction in the integrity of the Racial Discrimination Act. People are dealing with the fact that they are being segregated and that certain fundamental rights might be removed. That has been a real struggle for them. In some communities we work, in particular, with older women who have always worked hard, who do not have drinking issues and who make sure that their kids go to school.

All of a sudden they feel like they have ended up with less control over their lives. That has impacted on our staff. Many of our Indigenous staff who are either casual staff or who work part-time have family members whose lives have been affected by it. In general, the experience would be that there has been a real concern about the majority of aspects in that intervention. Many of the Aboriginal medical and health services with whom we deal were heavily involved in child health checks. They had significant plans to roll out additional work in some of these communities. They are saying ‘We already knew what some of those issues were and we were moving on them.’

In their minds it is almost as though some things have been set back a bit and their progress might have been impacted by this change. This notion has been around for a while. People have moved on and they are now grappling with its practical implications. That combines heavily with the changes to the shire council arrangements, which I cannot separate out. The impact has been on decision-making processes and representational arrangements on communities. In a general sense there has been a loss of positions, power, control and influence in these areas. That impacts on people’s sense of wellbeing when they are trying to find their way through a complex set of changes.

Ms Nichols—I think intelligence needs to be reintroduced into this debate. A bit like the word ‘sustainable’, the word ‘intervention’ is now a buzz word. There are some difficulties that come with that. When I go down south I hear people saying in relation to the intervention ‘Something had to be done.’ When I ask them ‘About what—what is the something that should have been done’, there is not a lot of depth to the discussion about the words ‘Something had to be done.’

I agree with Ann’s comments. There is a sense that this intervention is now behind us a bit and we are dealing with it—‘it’ being something that has already occurred. We are losing intelligent debate on this issue because of its general acceptance and because of the general misunderstanding about what it means. I go a bit further to state that there is a willingness to disengage in the detail now that the deed has been done.

CHAIR—Thank you for appearing before the committee today. As I said earlier, we are a bit pressed for time. You have a very comprehensive submission on the record which we will be able to examine. I know that we have a lot of detail but if there are any points of clarification or any points we have missed out on we will provide some questions on notice through the secretariat. I understand that they have your details. I say to Anglicare NT: thank you very much for your appearance. I understand that earlier Ms Haynes and Ms Nichols were quoting from a document. If that is not a document that you have already submitted would you be able to provide it to the committee as it would be very useful?

Ms Nichols—I understand that we have until 30 May to make that submission?

CHAIR—Yes but I would not die in the ditch over the date of 30 May. Just ensure that it gets to us.

Ms Nichols—Thank you.

CHAIR—Thank you very much.

Proceedings suspended from 10.22 am to 10.32 am

AGNEW, Mr Ronnie Matthew, Knuckey Lagoon Community

RYAN, Mr Maurie Japarta, Private capacity; and Darwin Aboriginal Rights Coalition

SUTTLE, Mr David, Consultant, Darwin Aboriginal Rights Coalition

WHITE, Ms Joy, Private capacity

CHAIR—Welcome. Will you all please tell the committee capacity in which are appearing today?

Mr Ryan—Good morning. I am here as an individual. I come from a community called Kalkarindji, which is 970 kilometres south west of Darwin. I am one of the traditional owners of Kalkarindji and I am a descendent of Vincent Lingiari. I am here as an individual, but I am also here with this group.

Mr Agnew—I am a community leader of Gupapuyngu.

Mr Suttle—I work with the Darwin Aboriginal Rights Coalition.

Ms White—I am here as the public officer for the Bagot Community Council.

CHAIR—Information on parliamentary privilege and the protection of witnesses and evidence has been provided to you. The committee has your submission before it. I invite you to make a short opening statement. At the conclusion of your remarks I will ask members of the committee to put some questions to you.

Mr Suttle—The Darwin Aboriginal Rights Coalition has been working with people affected by the intervention since it began. We have had a lot of consultation directly with people in Arnhem Land and in town camps. You would have seen the submission we put in last year with some research we put together. The coalition is an independent community group and it is not politically affiliated. We see our role as only to provide opportunities for people to speak up about what they want to speak up about.

I am here today to relay what we have been hearing all across the Northern Territory. On the first point around the NTER, across the board we have been hearing that this has been completely disempowering. The main problems have been around consultation. In a lot of cases people's lives have been made more difficult as a result of quite a number of the measures. People are very scared about the direction that other measures are going in and the fact that they have no control over the direction it is taking.

A man in Arnhem Land gave me an analogy a few weeks ago. He feels that they are being treated as though they are blind people and are being led around by guide dogs. They have no control over where the guide dog is going. They cannot see the direction it is heading. They can try to pull the dog one way or the other, but it has a set direction. They are being treated as though they are blind and they have no control over the situation.

While some people have found that some of the measures have been helpful, in a lot of cases people are finding it very difficult, especially in remote areas in terms of travel. It has been mentioned before, but I would like to reiterate that people are finding it very difficult with income managed funds and getting to stores where they can spend their BasicsCard. A lot of our money is spent on the travel and they have either got nothing when they get home or they do not have enough to get home. So people are reluctant to leave their more remote communities to go to a more major community and only have their BasicsCard left. That is contributing to overcrowding because they have to find somewhere to stay for long periods of time so that they can get their next cheque so that they can get back home again.

Early on in the intervention we prepared a submission and people we spoke to literally did not know what was happening. They had not heard the word 'intervention' or of 'NTER'. People told us that they had come to Centrelink because they realised there must be some mistake with their pay because they did not have half of it. After six or eight weeks, they decided that they could not spend their money on food and that they had to travel to Darwin to sort it out. It is very difficult on the telephone with language and bureaucracy barriers, and waiting on hold and having money for credit and things like that. People were coming in and saying, 'My money is not in my account. There is some problem. You guys need to sort it out.' People literally had no idea that it was happening. That was obviously not everyone, but there were some very obvious shortfalls in the consultation process.

In terms of law and order, I think that the consultation process needs to be redirected significantly. Overall, people are feeling like the decision is made and the outcomes are predetermined. People are not negotiated with beforehand about what measures should go into communities, what they feel would work, how they should be implemented and whether they should be there at all if other people have other suggestions. In a lot of these communities it is a lifetime of learning to get to know how it works, how people work with each other and how that community dynamic functions. It is very different in different communities. They might look the same from the outside, but they are very different in terms of a lot of their dynamics.

I am sure that parts of it are working for some communities, but for a lot of the people that I have spoken to, especially in Arnhem Land and in town camps, different things have been met with very different responses. People have made attempts to communicate that and what they feel their community wants and does not want. But a lot of people are also saying that they do not feel the government will take that on board.

While making that point, I listened to Mike Zissler speak the other week when he was at the Holiday Inn. He was talking about his new consultation process and said that he is going through this properly and sitting down and respecting what people say. He said at the end that he goes away and decides whether or not he agrees with what people say and makes that decision himself. A lot of people there were asking the same question, which was: if you are respecting and listening to this feedback, is there space for different communities to have a diverse approach to the way the intervention is running out? Basically, he was very unwilling to answer that and just said this is going to be a long process—talking about it going for 10 or 20 years.

Obviously the intervention is being rebranded as 'Closing the Gap', which is more difficult for people to speak out against. It has been a long campaign and it has positive connotations and things like that, but my impression is that what a lot people are communicating to me outside is

that, even if they do communicate what they feel is really important to their community, they do not trust that the government will do what they feel is right.

There have been some really major attempts to try to meet people halfway. I am sure people know that at Milingimbi last year some of the top Gupapuyngu clan people invited the new Centrelink workers, the new police and the government business manager to a very secret Darra ceremony in order to communicate to them that they have these government structures in place. This has been here forever. They have traditional policemen and they have elders who are watching what is happening. They have ways of resolving issues. These things are very real and very strong. Those attempts are being made and it has caused problems as well. There are other senior people in that clan who said that should never have been exposed, the government is not going listen to you anyway. Now it is exposed and this is, in a sense, blasphemy, to put it in white terms.

In terms of education and health, we have been hearing from teachers in remote communities who are very unhappy about the process of quarantining Abstudy payments. They are educating people about how to manage their money and being financially literate. To take that control off people and to force them to buy certain things and to do that rather than helping them to come to that decision and educating them about why and things like that really defeats the purpose. It is also making other things difficult. Some of those kids do not need to use all their money, but they cannot transfer it to other people. If they are away at boarding school, people want to send kids money and they can't. For a number of reasons, people being able to manage their money in order to manage their lives has been made quite difficult by this.

Again, this is a blanket approach of treating everyone the same and not hearing and not responding to the fact that communities are different and need to be treated differently. People are willing to say how they are different and what needs to be done in each one. But the consultation process is completely backwards. We have made the decision, now it is going out and we are going to tell you what the decision is.

I understand that when it was being rolled out, income management was done in clusters and eight out of 10 communities needed to be told and only 50 per cent of the people in those eight needed to be there for the consultation to be successful. Essentially, only 40 per cent of people in each cluster would have heard in English that this had already been decided and it was happening. It is not surprising that we are hearing a lot of this feedback and people coming into town saying, 'What the hell is going on?' Without going into detail where it is not my place to go, I think that is all I need to say.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. I make the observation that in terms of consultation as an Australian I can probably pick up the newspaper today and point to 50 new changes that substantially affect my life that I only heard about today. Yesterday I was in here and I read an announcement made by both the Northern Territory Government and the Commonwealth government. I am a senator from the Northern Territory and I read about wide-sweeping change to the Northern Territory emergency response. I read about that only yesterday. I would expect that a senator from the Northern Territory and perhaps other senators and members would know slightly more about that.

I am not sure about that expectation of how it can happen. We have had complaints and evidence that Peter Yu's committee came and spoke to us, and Michael Berto, whom he knows, was part of that. They sat down and then when the law came out it did not reflect what my community wanted. I do not think that that can ever occur with such a wide-ranging demographic and diaspora. You are alluding to a much better understanding of the process and expectations. If someone comes and speaks to an Indigenous community, I think that there is an expectation when they leave that their exact circumstances will be replicated. If there is that expectation, there will always be that disappointment.

I suspect that many of these consultations should be predicated on what this actually is and what the process will be. From the evidence we have heard, it appears that they are building an expectation that the process cannot really deliver. I think you have made many of those points. It is a difficult situation and I think we all need to be more careful when we go into Indigenous communities to consult or have a hearing that perhaps we preface them with a better understanding in the community about what our actual role is and ensure that the expectations of that community are not beyond what the process, the committee or the hearing can deliver. Ms White, would you like to make any further statement?

Ms White—First, I would like the Racial Discrimination Act to be put back for Aboriginal people, only because we have no legs to stand on if we have to go to court. That is No. 1.

CHAIR—What do you understand about the—

Ms White—It is our right as individuals.

CHAIR—I was just about to ask you a question.

Ms White—As Aboriginal people, we do not have anything.

CHAIR—What do you understand about the lifting of the racial—

Ms White—I don't want to talk to you about that. I just want to talk about what we came here to discuss.

CHAIR—I was just asking a question—

Ms White—Don't ask me any more questions because I won't tell you. Okay?

CHAIR—Fine, Ms White. You continue with your statement if you wish.

Ms White—I just want this act to be acted upon that will give us back the right to speak like any other nationality in Australia.

CHAIR—As I understand it, it does not prevent you from doing that now.

Ms White—We don't have anything to stand on at the moment.

CHAIR—That is why I was going to ask you what you understood by it.

Ms White—I don't have to answer you about that if I don't want to.

CHAIR—That is true; that is quite true. Continue.

Ms White—Okay. Then the next question is: why do we have to keep on telling you people what we want done about the intervention? Why don't we say to you people: 'What do you want out of this intervention? What is the purpose of it?' That is my question to you people to take back to Canberra.

CHAIR—Just to get that clear, we are here listen to what you want done.

Ms White—We have been talking to you guys all these times. We have spoken to all the workers that you sent to the communities. What is the outcome? What is the purpose of it?

CHAIR—The purpose of this inquiry is to look at the terms of reference, which relate to almost every aspect of policy, whether it be Northern Territory government policy, federal government policy or other levels of government, including local government, and how they impact on Indigenous people. There is an opportunity for you to make comments and to make suggestions about whether they are good or bad policies.

Ms White—Why is the intervention not imposed on all nationalities in Australia? That is what I said to Mal Brough when he came to visit us in the community. We aren't the only race of people who should be on this intervention. I suggest that this government look at all nationalities. Look at your own backyard before you condemn us.

CHAIR—There are aspects of the intervention—

Ms White—I have not seen anything yet; I have not heard of anything.

CHAIR—There have been a number of announcements made by the previous government and consideration by the current government about welfare quarantining in the same demographics across Australia.

Ms White—What about the Northern Territory? What is in the Northern Territory? You pick up the paper and you read about a man that is walking the streets. We are talking about child abuse here now. Where does that leave us poor Aboriginal people? We are supposed to be the first Australians. We are condemned. It is just the same as you people—you people do the same thing as us, yet we are the ones that are put in this situation. We have to talk to these people who give us this BasicsCard and income management. What a lot of crap! I suggest you look at the people who are working there, because I think they are very rude.

CHAIR—Who are these people, Ms White?

Ms White—These are the people we talk to when we ring up about the BasicsCard. It is about the money that is income managed.

CHAIR—Are they people—

Ms White—They ask you questions—

CHAIR—Are they in Centrelink?

Ms White—That they should not be asking us.

CHAIR—What sort of questions do they ask you?

Ms White—They ask you questions about your bank. That is a very personal question.

Mr Agnew—Can I interrupt?

Ms White—Yes, dear.

Mr Agnew—A few months back when this mob went to get their money out through the BasicsCard it was declined because the money never went in. This mob are going shopping, they know their money is supposed to be in there, but when they went to get their money out to pay for their groceries it was embarrassing because the thing was declined. That happened in front of everybody else.

CHAIR—They know what day it goes in on, don't they?

Mr Agnew—Yes.

CHAIR—Then when they go on that day it has not gone in?

Mr Agnew—Yes.

CHAIR—Is that widespread or has it been on only one or two occasions?

Mr Agnew—This has happened a couple of times now. Under this intervention and income management, that is what this mob rely on when they are shopping.

CHAIR—Do you know what happened? Do they ring up about it? What response do they get?

Mr Agnew—They know it is supposed to go in that day. They know that is the day they get it. It is embarrassing for them when they are standing there with people lined up behind them and their card is declined. Then they have to go to Centrelink.

CHAIR—Obviously the money should be there, but it is not and it is embarrassing. Do you know what Centrelink tells them when they ring up about it? Is there any feedback?

Mr Agnew—She can have that point of view.

Ms White—We go to Centrelink first before we go to the shop to ask whether they are going to put our money into the BasicsCard. They say yes. I went back to Casuarina three or four

times. I hit the roof at Casuarina Centrelink. I said to them, 'If you don't do anything about it I will make a big noise here. I will get myself locked up because of what you have done to us.' It is shaming for us to take all our food to the checkout and have our card declined.

CHAIR—There is a number on the back of the card.

Ms White—That is a joke! Don't tell me about that.

CHAIR—Okay. I will ask you, Ron. There is a number on the back of the card.

Mr Agnew—Yes.

CHAIR—Do they usually ring that number? Have you heard feedback about how that goes? Is that difficult? Do people have to wait a long time?

Ms White—Yes we do. I am going to say that.

Mr Agnew—Most people—

Ms White—Listen to what I am saying.

Mr Agnew—One time they did their shopping late on a Friday. By that time you cannot get in touch with Centrelink.

CHAIR—So that phone number only rings during business hours?

Mr Agnew—Yes.

CHAIR—And it does not start until the next morning?

Mr Agnew—Yes. The free call number—

CHAIR—I understand that it is not a free call yet.

Mr Agnew—I do not know.

CHAIR—It is supposed to be.

Senator SIEWERT—Are you saying that it should not be limited to business hours and they have not extended it?

Mr Agnew—Yes. It creates embarrassment for people.

Senator MOORE—That used to be the case beforehand as well. Sometimes payments did not go into the bank through the whole system. Whatever happened there was wrong. It was a mistake and Centrelink would have to work it out and fix it. A systems failure, which that was,

used to happen in the old days and people's money did not go into the bank sometimes and they would try to pay. I am struggling to see whether this is just a problem now.

Mr Agnew—It is going to happen again.

CHAIR—I understand, Ron. It might be that you just do not have enough, but you do not know how much is there. It might be a wrong amount. We will be talking to the people who run that later.

Mr Agnew—But people know that their money goes in there; they know that money is in their account. Thursdays are the main day and the government week is the off week anyway. They know that money is in there. They do not want to be embarrassed when they go to do their shopping, so they now phone Centrelink first. They do not want to go through that same situation again.

Some areas of the intervention and income management work for some people and they agree on things, but not many people agree with it. People like to have their own money so they can get their own cash out. Now they have to go through a lot of details if they want to buy a washing machine, fridge or anything like that. They have to go to the providers and then go back to Centrelink and do this thing.

CHAIR—I understand you have to get three quotes or three different prices.

Mr Agnew—Yes. It is a real muck around job. It is too much trouble. In the days before income management was bought in people would just go to the shop and buy what they wanted. Now, with the BasicsCard, you have to go to Centrelink and get all these things done first before you can get it. People are saving up money for cars and everything and all that money builds up, but they still have to go back to Centrelink and ask where the providers are. Then they send the information to the provider for you to get whatever you want to get. There is too much running around for people to do. In the old days you just went and bought it for cash. But now, with this income management, it is putting us back. We don't have the freedom to do things like that.

Ms White—Yes.

Mr Agnew—We are going backwards instead of going forwards. I will not mention the community, but its issue was child abuse and things like that. If that community did it, every community in the Northern Territory did it. Everything relates back to that subject of child abuse.

The alcohol signs didn't solve anything. I don't know why they are there. It made all the remote people come into Darwin and that created long-grass people and overcrowding in our urban communities. It created more problems for us mob in the urban communities. We had to face up to our own families that came in from the remote areas for alcohol. Those signs never solved anything, they created more problems.

Ms White—That is right.

Mr Agnew—Mike Zissler, the task commander, visited my community, Bagot, 15 Mile, One Mile Dam, and all the communities in Darwin here and Kulaluk. He told us that the signs never work anyway. He said that when you go to Alice Springs you are going through a sea of beer cans. The police go there and bust people out, but the very next day they are still going in there with grog.

The other thing he did not like was the pornographic signs. We said that was degrading us Indigenous people. In his own words he said it was. He is looking forward to removing that pornographic sign because it does not classify that every community has child abusers or sexual predators. It just says that in this community that is what they do. When you have visitors like supervisors coming into the community and they see that sign, they say, 'You've got sex offenders in this community.' That is degrading the community, our culture and our Indigenous rights as human beings.

Ms White—That is right.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Mr Agnew. Mr Ryan, would you like to make a comment?

Mr Ryan—Thank you, Senator. I speak as a person who is affected in a remote community that is 900 kilometres south west of here. It is called Kalkarindji. The intervention is having an impact on 45,500 Indigenous Territorians—men, women and children. I condemn every political party in the House of Representatives and the Senate of this country elected by the people of this country for, firstly, racial discrimination against my people in the Northern Territory. Racial discrimination is alive and well and it is fed by both political parties in the House of Representatives and the Senate.

We are a signatory to this in the United Nations. The *Little children are sacred* report was done by Rex Wild QC and Pat Anderson. It sat on a bench for a while and there was no consultation. It was then moved by the previous Prime Minister of this country with the Indigenous minister and the intervention came in by rolling back the Racial Discrimination Act 1975. Every one of you people who have been elected in this country are racially discriminating against my people—only in the Northern Territory, nowhere else. The exception is the Greens.

I am from one of the 390 Indigenous nations that was here when Cook arrived. There was a total of about three million of us. I am from 160,000 generations; you people are from only eight generations. Yet, in 220 years you have told lies in this country and they have been handed down to your children and great grandchildren for 220 years. I find the Constitution of this country invalid, because I have not given away my sovereign rights. No-one has. I am not a British subject. I am an individual; I am a member of one of those nations. I am of the Gurindji nation. My grandfather was Vincent Lingiari and he stood up. I stand up here and condemn all those political parties who have done this.

There is crime in every state, there is pornography, there is woman and child bashing, and there is alcohol. Rivers of alcohol have been created by breweries down south. Who are the biggest runners of grog? You have all these bikie gangs. There is corruption. All you have done with pornography is in Canberra. You have put me as a 60-year-old on the BasicsCard. I am a qualified teacher, and I have studied law at the University of New South Wales. All this has done is to create a bureaucracy that has gone mad. It has created a hysteria of fear in my community.

Fear was brought to this country in a boat with Cook. Fear and terrorism did not start on 9/11; it started in 1788.

No-one has been charged with paedophilia in the Northern Territory, yet there are accusations. No-one has been put up. It started in Alice Springs. I am deputy chair of the Central Land Council, I am head of my community and I am a leader. I am not afraid of anyone; I am not afraid of government; and I am not afraid of you people. I am telling you the truth of what is happening. There is no future except death. There is no economic base in our remote communities. We have shires placed on us and the intervention, and we now have outstations placed on us by this Northern Territory government. This is all wrong. Where are you getting your advice from?

Ms White—That is right.

Mr Ryan—I live in a remote community. I call you people the deaf tribe because no-one listens. It is what Joy said—no-one listens to us. All our rights are violated. You are the legislators of this country but you are only eight generations old. How can you come and tell us how to live our lives? You have violated the human rights of the traditional owners of this country and I will say that until the day I die.

One of the stunts was done two years ago. The person who said it was a political stunt now works at the United Nations—Mr Downer. Of all places, the United Nations! He said it was a political stunt. There was a deafening silence from all the political parties in response. They said nothing. Pour money in! Pour money into where? It is a corrupt society. Where does the money go to? It does not come out to us, where it should be coming to. I have never seen anything like this in my entire life. Democracy has failed in this country. You people were elected by the people of this country to give good governance, but you do not. I am ready for any questions you like. I will write a submission by the fifteenth.

CHAIR—We would welcome that. We report on the fifteenth, but the inquiry goes beyond that. We will still accept a submission after the fifteenth. It will just be accepted in the next report.

Mr Ryan—Thank you.

CHAIR—We would welcome that. I know you have given a more generic appraisal of your views on things. Perhaps in your submission you could be fairly specific. It would be very useful to hear about some of those aspects on the ground within your own community.

Mr Ryan—In our remote community where I live?

CHAIR—Yes.

Mr Ryan—I only found out about this three days ago when I rang Alice. I did not have time. We can't travel. We have no money to travel—

CHAIR—I appreciate that.

Mr Ryan—because of a bunch of white bureaucrats or a bunch of white morons running my community from Katherine and Darwin called the ‘shires’. People who live in Lichfield, which is a prominent white electorate, can say no to the shires but we can’t. Nobody can give me any statistics about what good this is doing to my people. Some of my men can’t hug their children. That is a human right unless you are accused of something. There is more paedophilia in Melbourne, Sydney and everywhere else. Is there no crime down south?

CHAIR—Thank you for that, Mr Ryan.

Senator SIEWERT—One of the issues that has been raised with us is that the intervention has been useful because it has brought more goods into the communities and you have more access to fresh food and vegies; therefore there have been improvements in communities. The health checks have helped; therefore the intervention has been useful. What is your response to that?

Mr Ryan—I worked in the Health Department for 10 years creating a food and nutrition policy. Because of the tyranny of distance, in the remote communities the mark up price is 180 per cent to 200 per cent. That is for people on the BasicsCard. It might improve the food, but we can’t afford folates for our children or decent food that people can get in town. What was the second question?

Senator SIEWERT—Has health improved because of the checks and follow-ups?

Mr Ryan—No. People can tell you anything they like, but nothing changes. All I have is people who come in and out of my community. I call them five-minute men and women. Health checks are done by our clinics. My clinic should be condemned. If it was in Darwin it would be condemned. They do it under great difficulty.

Senator SIEWERT—Do you mean the building itself?

Mr Ryan—The building itself should be condemned. Some of it is asbestos, like my school. I am head of my school council and have been a school teacher for 30-odd years. You heard people talk about education. What is there at the end of it? I tell my kids that education is the key. You mob would not be sitting in front of me if you did not have an education. It is an indictment on all political parties in Australia that they have not given a real education and health services to Indigenous people. Could you imagine if you had every community at a high school level? My community was the first one in the Northern Territory to provide secondary education without kids being taken away. I speak like this because I got removed as a child—I am one of the Stolen Generation.

The Prime Minister, little Johnny Howard, gave a sincere apology to me in Parliament House, and so did Kevin Rudd. It was wishy-washy policy. I want compensation for 1,000 children in the Northern Territory because the Northern Territory was under the Commonwealth and still is. One of the other issues that can confront people is the Northern Territory becoming a state. All the white people and the Aboriginals here are second class citizens. Things do not change very much.

Ms White—That is right.

Mr Ryan—You can have rubbery figures. You can put pictures up that do not exist. People in the departments write these things. The bureaucracy has gone mad up here. They tell you lies; they do not live in the real world where I live. The statistics are not really right.

Senator SIEWERT—In terms of the health checks?

Mr Ryan—Health checks are done by our communities. The Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance Northern Territory does a pretty good job at times, but they do not get support. I would like health and education to be taken over by the Commonwealth. That is me personally speaking. There are a lot of problems. I have ministers come and go and it goes in one ear and out the other. Some of them are deaf. Statistics grow bigger and bigger. The average age of an Aboriginal male was 49. I am lucky, I am 60. Most of my people do not reach this age.

Mr Agnew—I am employed under the Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance Northern Territory, the Health Department and the Department of Education. That is how I get paid to be a community leader of Knuckeyes. I speak on behalf of Phillip Goodman of 15 Mile. I apologise that he is not here today. We get paid to look after education and health. Our health through is through Danila Dilba. I did a big health check this week for the very first time for men and women. I also had a lot of kids' checkups from last year and all this year. That was through Danila Dilba. Other than that, like the employment of the community, there has been zero. Education has been very poor, and things like that.

The intervention is not helping. Through the Indigenous coordination centres and the intervention money was supposed to be allocated to communities to help with these situations, but we get nothing. We ask and ask. If the intervention is there to help communities, why aren't they delivering the dollars for housing in the communities? Housing comes under the Health Act. There are very poor housing conditions in all our communities. That was the first thing that should have been done under the intervention, but it has never been done.

They got these things through the Aboriginal organisations up here where they are supposed to be helping out. There has been zero. I go to a lot of organisations to get help and it takes me a long time to do it. The only way I can get things done is by going to environmental health. That situation backfires onto the organisation and through to the intervention mob—the Indigenous coordination centres mob—to help with what I am going through. I have been arguing all the time to get things done.

In the long run, when the intervention started, your mob was supposed to be helping out in all these communities. All the urban communities here are neglected, while all the remote areas have millions of dollars. It was in the paper the other day. That is in all the remote areas. Why are all the urban communities missing out? We do not get one cent. We are neglected.

The other thing is that the CDEP program broke down in the urban communities, but remote areas got it. When we had the CDEP program here in the urban communities they were well kept and clean. After that was taken away it just went back to No. 1. To look after my community I had community clean-up days. I got funding through Danila Dilba to have a big feed after that clean-up day. That encouraged people in the communities to do the clean up. I can't do that all the time.

It was based on the CDEP program getting back here in the urban areas. These mobs can have employment back in their communities instead of just in the remote areas. Instead of doing my monthly clean-up days and getting funding to feed people to go and do things, I want that CDEP program to be brought back into the communities. It was very helpful to a lot of people. A lot of people here in the urban communities are asking for that CDEP program to be brought back.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Mr Agnew. Unfortunately we are well over time. Due to the intense interest in your submission, I am sure there will be some questions on notice. They will be provided to you through the secretariat. Thank you very much for providing your oral and written submissions today.

[11.19 am]

ZISSLER, Mr Michael, Commander, NTER Operations Centre, and Group Manager, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs

TOYNE, Ms Laura, Director, Community Stores, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs

CHAIR—Welcome. Information on parliamentary privilege and the protection of witnesses and evidence has been previously provided to you. I invite you to make a short opening statement and at the conclusion of those remarks I will allow members of the committee to ask questions.

Mr Zissler—Thank you for inviting me here today. I will make a very brief opening statement but try to leave as much time as possible for the committee to ask questions.

I was engaged by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, FaHCSIA, to undertake the role of commander of the Northern Territory Emergency Response Operation centre from late February this year until 30 June this year. That appointment follows on from the previous commander, Major General David Chalmers, who returned to the Australian Defence Force after 20 months in that role.

It is very important to clarify that the commander's role is to oversee the implementation of the Northern Territory emergency response and to provide advice to the minister, of course, and the department on what is being delivered on the ground. The policy parameters in which we are working are, of course, set by the government and the department. My role is clearly delivering those policies.

I have been in the role for about three months. In that time I have visited about 25 communities throughout the Northern Territory, including town camps in Alice Springs and Darwin. I chair weekly commander's briefings where a number of departments come together and report to me on where they are up to. I have met with a range of senior officials from both the Australian and Northern Territory governments at the highest levels and I have met and corresponded with a wide range of stakeholders and service providers in Darwin, Alice Springs and the communities.

When visiting communities, I ensure that I meet a very broad range of stakeholders and different community members. They include the traditional owners, who are, of course, critical to us, the various family groups, men's and women's groups—both separately and together—various community management committees, councils, shire services and many of the service providers to seek their views, inputs and advice on how we can do things better. These visits have been very productive and very positive and, in the main, they are very well received.

I must say that I have been very impressed on my community visits about just how much progress has been made, apparently for the most part with fairly minimal fuss and disruption. In the communities I have visited, I have noted an apparent general acceptance of the changes.

People are certainly getting on with their personal and community business and lives. Of course, there is a diverse range of views on all matters pertaining to the emergency response and, indeed, competing views on just about all those matters. I am sure you have heard many of those competing views. This is not surprising. Indeed, in my view it is a healthy response to what has been significant change within these communities. Of course, much remains to be done to both improve the communities in general and to consolidate and build on the implementation of the NTER measures as the government moves into this sustainable phase. That is in line with the wider Closing the Gap policy and strategy.

I will use the most recent sit rep—the weekly report I get—to highlight some data, which is as current as yesterday, about what is happening out there and some of the discussions we are having with stakeholders. Again, this is a very detailed report and I will just pick out the highlights. However, I am very happy to drill down to some of the detail.

CHAIR—Can you supply the report in its entirety to the committee at the conclusion of the hearing?

Mr Zissler—Yes, I can do that.

CHAIR—Thank you.

Mr Zissler—These are highlights from the data fact sheet of 20 May. It is as current as my meeting of two days ago. Under the heading of ‘Employment and welfare reform’, as at 15 May, 15,188 customers were being income managed in the Northern Territory. On 18 May, a total of 517 Centrelink income management agreements and third party organisations were in place.

Senator SIEWERT—What was that?

Mr Zissler—517.

Senator SIEWERT—Management agreements?

Mr Zissler—Yes. They were in place with third party organisations. Income management has been continued in 51 communities. As of 15 May, 36,102 BasicsCards have been issued overall. There is a detailed breakdown of that in the report. I will not provide all the numbers, but I am happy to provide that if you wish. Again, as of 15 May, there were 988 merchant approvals, with 866 merchants activated to use the BasicsCard. Under the real jobs package, as of 20 May there were 1,696 Australian government funded jobs in the Northern Territory.

Senator SIEWERT—Was that figure 1,696?

Mr Zissler—Correct, 1,696. As of 20 May, 84 community stores have been fully licensed. There are 51 work for the dole activities in 40 communities. That is around employment and welfare reform. Under law and order, as of 20 May there were 63 additional police employed and deployed into communities. Four permanent station upgrades have now been completed. In addition, 18 Themis temporary stations have been installed and are currently operational, and a permanent police station has now been opened in Galiwinku, replacing the temporary station. There are also 70 active night patrols in communities.

I apologise for the slight difference in dates, but it is about how the timelines come through. Under 'Enhancing education', as 20 May there are 69 school nutrition programs in place within the communities. That involves the preparation of an estimated 3,477 breakfasts and 4,560 lunches on each school day. That is a total of 8,037 meals daily. A total of 185 positions have been created in the communities to provide these meals, and 149 of them are currently held by Indigenous people in the communities. The school enrolment attendance measure trial is now operating across a number of Northern Territory government schools. Under 'Supporting families', as of 20 May there were 17 safe houses open in 13 communities. We have four new crèches opened and operating and we have also upgraded some of the other crèches.

In terms of the coordination—which is one of the critical roles of the operations centre—there are 60 government business managers in place servicing 73 communities. To support them there are 20 Indigenous engagement officers, again servicing those communities. That is a snapshot of the numbers. It is a very detailed report and I am more than happy to table the report or to take direct questions about those lines.

CHAIR—Thank you. I know there will be a number of questions. Throughout our submission there has obviously been a number of criticisms about aspects of the intervention. You use the word 'intervention' and people think income quarantine. That is reasonable connectivity, but there are other aspects. In regard to welfare quarantining, we heard evidence today about Mapuru that they have to travel a great distance to get to somewhere where they can use the balance of the BasicsCard. So, 50 per cent has been quarantined to somewhere they cannot get access to without chartering a plane.

I have lived in Mapuru myself. In the south easterlies you cannot get there by boat. As has been stated, it is extremely expensive if you can get an aircraft. While we have not been provided with a letter of refusal from the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, why would the local store, which provides food and which got the tick from the Australian Heart Foundation two years ago, not be approved? Can you think of any rationale for that? Given those specific circumstances, it appears to me that, in effect, we have isolated 50 per cent of their wage and they cannot purchase food. If you do not have cash in Mapuru you cannot buy food. What would you say to people in those circumstances? FaHCSIA knows about these circumstances. Why has it not done something about it?

Mr Zissler—I will take advice about that specific store and the licensing at the general level.

CHAIR—That is an example of a wider demographic.

Mr Zissler—One of the things we have seen as we go forward is that there is a significant change in the way people are purchasing food in the communities. That is a significant change in the last two years. For example, I recently visited the Wadeye community, which as you know is a very large community of about 2,000 people. If you go down to the details of the purchasing power and then add that to the school nutrition program, there is no doubt that more food is being taken up by the community.

Again, I am happy to provide those details to you. It is in the order of a 20 per cent increase in purchasing across the store. I will be very specific about the Wadeye community, but I will come to the more remote communities in a minute. I talk about income management and say, 'How do

you feel about it?' As I alluded to, I talk to a range of groups and I am very careful about asking very open ended questions so that they can tell me what they generally think. The majority of women support income management. Indeed, they are using that to purchase food and other goods.

CHAIR—We have heard similar evidence and it varies. I go back to the question: the philosophy of the intervention is to say, 'If you fall within a prescribed area, then you are on the BasicsCard.' But you only get access to Outback Stores if you are in a prescribed community.

So if you can put a red line around all the prescribed communities, all those people outside of the community but within a prescribed area have the BasicsCard but do not necessarily have access to an Outback Store. I think that is a fundamental point.

Senator SIEWERT—Do you mean a licensed store?

CHAIR—No, a licensed store—

Senator SIEWERT—It is not necessarily an Outback Store.

CHAIR—A store with a licence—one of the 988 approved stores. That appears to be crux of this one demographic. Whether they like income quarantining or not is not an issue so much as whether or not they get access to the 50 per cent of funds that they should be able to use to buy their food. It is reasonable to say that we have heard evidence across the board on that. Are you aware of that as an issue? Do you have plans to ameliorate that?

Mr Zissler—It is an issue; I have no doubt about that. Again, in those more remote communities where there is a single store that is licensed, it certainly presents challenges.

Senator SIEWERT—It is not licensed, that is the point.

CHAIR—But they have applied for a licence and they are unable to get one. I am not sure about the details, but perhaps you can provide some advice on that.

Mr Zissler—I have my stores licensing manager here who can explain the background to the Mapuru store if you wish.

CHAIR—Certainly. That may be useful as an example.

Ms Toyne—I am the director of the community stores licensing team. Would you like some information on Mapuru?

CHAIR—Just on the process.

Ms Toyne—The process of licensing?

CHAIR—I know you have been listening carefully and you understand the difficulties that we are describing.

Ms Toyne—Yes.

CHAIR—Particularly with Mapuru. As an example perhaps you can explain why they are not going to be licensed. I am not sure whether you have been party to discussions about how the people of Mapuru are going to get access to the 50 per cent that is on their BasicsCard.

Ms Toyne—Sure. I will go through the process of how a store is assessed and licensed under the terms and the conditions of the NTER Act. It is all set out within the legislation. The community stores licensing policy and processes are based on part 7 of the legislation. The act itself sets out all of the assessable matters that we must look at and we must have regard to when we assess a store. Part of that is the store's capacity to participate in the income management regime. That is not only for the BasicsCard; it is also when people directly allocate funds to a store, because there are some people doing that.

We look at the quantity, quality and range of groceries that that particular store provides and the healthy food and drink that might be available to customers through that store. We also look at as an assessable matter the financial structure, the governance and the retail practices of the store. We must have regard to all of those matters when we assess a store and make any decision in relation to a licence.

We do an on-site assessment of a store and we collect a whole range of information, not just from the on-site assessment but also from other documents in relation to the financial practices of the store. We brief a delegate and then a delegate will make a decision. I think you are after some specific information about Mapuru.

CHAIR—Yes.

Ms Toyne—Mapuru applied to us about two weeks ago to see whether it can get a licence and we have planned a trip there, I think within the next month, to see whether it will meet the licence—

CHAIR—A submission we received today—I will provide you with a copy—states that they have already had an application refused. I have asked the people who have made the submission to provide me with that refusal. You are telling me that the first application you have received was two weeks ago.

Ms Toyne—Yes, the first application FaHCSIA received was by letter about two weeks ago.

CHAIR—So FaHCSIA has not in fact responded that letter at this stage?

Ms Toyne—We have not formally responded in writing to the letter, but we have been in contact through the government business manager with that community letting them know that we are more than happy to come out and assess their store. We have provided some information on the kinds of things we assess when we come out, including our range of food checklist, so that they know what might occur when we come out. We have planned a trip within the next two to four weeks.

CHAIR—I will quote from them. They say, ‘Because FaHCSIA refused to register the local co-op to receive IM funds—

Ms Toyne—FaHCSIA has made no such decision about refusing a licence. In fact, we have not even commenced the process to assess.

CHAIR—We will be in touch with the people who made that submission to ensure that we find out exactly who is providing that information.

Senator SIEWERT—There is another circumstance we might follow up later on. Has the store recently changed ownership, could the previous owners have applied or could the application be under another name?

Ms Toyne—My understanding—and I have not been to Mapuru, so this is from reports and photos I have seen from FaHCSIA people who have gone—is that the store was open a number of years ago. Apart from last month, the store—it is called the co-op—has actually been closed and not functioning. Therefore, they could not apply for a licence. If it was not open, it was not going to meet FaHCSIA’s conditions from the outset. I am not aware that there has been a new operator, but one would assume that if the store has opened in the last month that there have been some changes in that area.

Senator SIEWERT—Let’s take a hypothetical situation, because obviously this submission relates to this particular case. Just say it does not get its licence. I appreciate why you look at those issues. They are obviously commonsense. Even if they do not meet the standards, it is not commonsense that people have to spend \$500 to go to a store that is licensed somewhere else. That undermines their ability to be able to buy fresh food et cetera, because obviously they will not have as much money. Is that taken into account? How does the government then deal with that issue?

Ms Toyne—There is a fourth part of the act with respect to stores licensing, because some of your issues do go to income management as well and how that is delivered through Centrelink. But with respect to stores licensing, there are the three assessable matters I set out that we must have regard to. There is a fourth part, which is any other matters that the secretary or delegate may wish to take into account. For that they may wish to take into account some of those factors.

Senator MOORE—Because of the particular nature of stores in the Northern Territory—and there is a long history with stores in the Northern Territory as you well know—is there a process whereby you keep a record of all existing stores? Is there a list somewhere of all stores that are functioning or not functioning in the Northern Territory? Are there also details of the particular circumstances around those stores? Every store has its own story and history. It seems to me having listened to the evidence given by the previous community about this particular issue for their store that the sheer remoteness of that area gives it a particular circumstance. That circumstance might have meant that when the BasicsCard processes and income management were imposed, as they were, that impact would be taken into account. As the system changed, access to stores which were able to be used would have been done at exactly the same time.

I would imagine that the community has been under Centrelink provisions for over 12 months. We did not ask that particular question. However, they still do not have a local store. I am trying

to see whether somewhere in the whole process that key issue of access to a store that makes the other bits work—whether or not you think it works, it is a link to it—someone was proactively looking at it and saying, ‘In this region, these are the available outlets’, and outlining what is happening with them so that we could have an access map immediately. I cannot understand the concept of people having to travel 500 kilometres and spending money on a charter.

Ms Toyne—That is right. As Mr Zissler said, as part of the emergency response—the intervention—84 stores have been licensed throughout the Northern Territory.

Senator MOORE—They are happening all the time.

Ms Toyne—It is a dynamic process.

Senator MOORE—Six months ago that could have been 60 stores.

Ms Toyne—That is exactly right. It was probably far less six months ago. It is a very dynamic process. People apply to us to become licensed. But at the moment our legislation only covers those stores or areas that are on prescribed land. So it does not necessarily go to, say, a store on a highway if it is not on prescribed land.

Senator MOORE—Sure.

Ms Toyne—The minister can also choose to specify a particular store to fall under the act and make a decision that we must assess it to see whether it meets FaHCSIA standards. I guess the program itself is focused on licensing and assessing stores across the territory. But I think your issues are going to what happens to those communities out there that do not have a store and who have to travel.

Senator MOORE—My issue is: who knows? When all this process is being wound out, how do we know where the stores are, what the access is and when we actually make a change to people’s livelihood and whether they have access? We have had a range of submissions that make all kinds of statements about how hard it is to use and how you can only go to Coles, and all those things that we know are changing. I would love to see a map showing every store in a prescribed area, which are licensed and which are not and why not. Is such a document accessible?

Ms Toyne—We do not have a map with all of that information. But I can provide you with a list of the 84 stores that currently have a FaHCSIA licence. I can do that by community if you would like.

Senator MOORE—That would be great.

Ms Toyne—Stores in town areas—Darwin, Alice Springs and Katherine—do not fall under FaHCSIA’s licensing program, so I do not actually have a list of them.

Senator MOORE—What about those that do not have them?

Ms Toyne—The communities that don’t?

Senator MOORE—I want to know who claims the title ‘store’ and sells food. You can tell me the ones that are licensed, but I am really interested to know about the ones that are not.

Ms Toyne—As I said, I go to the 73 communities and not to the town areas. As I understand it, out of those 73 communities, about 13 do not actually have a community store of any sort.

Senator MOORE—Of any sort?

Ms Toyne—Yes. I understand that has also improved as a part of the intervention. One part is the licensing aspect, and there is another part that goes to food security.

Senator MOORE—Yes.

Ms Toyne—Some communities have actually got a new store as a result of the intervention. So there has been an improvement in that region.

Senator MOORE—Thank you for your information.

CHAIR—Will the details of the 84 stores and the 988 licenses, of which 960 something have been taken up, be in the report you are providing to us?

Mr Zissler—Yes.

CHAIR—Thank you very much.

Senator MOORE—Is that in the report?

Ms Toyne—I do not actually have a map of the stores.

Mr Zissler—We will draw you a map.

Senator MOORE—You will send us the list and we will do the map.

Ms Toyne—I will send you the list of licensed stores—

Mr Zissler—We will send you a copy of the map.

Ms Toyne—by community or, if it is close to the community, what the relationship is.

Senator MOORE—Thank you.

CHAIR—For your information, I have written a letter to the minister just recently—which is probably why we have not had a response—in regard to the services and facilities. It covers everything including childcare, education, adult education and police within the prescribed areas that you are responsible for. We are basically looking at what facilities, amenities and capacities exist in each community. I have a list that the committee will provide to you. We have put the minister on notice. We have also sent it to the Chief Minister here. So they are on notice about

the sort of questions that the committee will be asking and they can be prepared to provide that evidence.

Mr Zissler—Thank you. On the matter of the last question, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs inquiry is looking at food security and is undergoing that process at the moment as well.

Senator ADAMS—Can you repeat that?

Mr Zissler—There is currently a House of Representatives inquiry into food security, which will answer lots of those questions as well.

Senator ADAMS—I have thought of a very practical question to ask. How do you deal with this situation? We were at Milingimbi earlier in the week. The phone line went down and it created chaos in the community. Everyone was lined up and could not use their BasicsCard. What backup do you have for a situation like that? Telstra technicians were there, but unfortunately they could not deal with the situation. It was getting near teatime and unless they had cash people could not access goods.

Mr Zissler—That part of the process is managed by Centrelink and they have backups in most communities. Telstra is in the process of setting up a system. When the line is down, most communities—and I say that carefully—would have a Centrelink office or an agent there who can assist at the time. However, the reality is that when the telephone line is down, it is down until it is restored. But Centrelink can help with emergency payments and emergency food supplies.

Senator ADAMS—The line was down, how do they get—

Mr Zissler—This is actually based in the community.

CHAIR—We were speaking yesterday to the people at the store. It has a fundamental problem. They have a great rapport with the community and it is a great store. It is just like walking into Woolworths in Darwin; it is fantastic. But on that day people who could not feed their kids were understandably not particularly friendly. They went into the store, the store said it was not working and people asked, 'Why not? It's your card.' Yes, it may be Centrelink's responsibility or somebody else's responsibility, but fundamentally it is the Australian government's responsibility. We are responsible for the intervention. What steps are we taking to ensure that there is some sort of backup in places like Milingimbi? In those places it can go for three or four hours. Who knows how long? They have told me that they have made you aware of that situation.

Mr Zissler—Yes. It is fair to say that when the telephone lines are down ATMs are also down. It is not just the BasicsCard. They use the same network, so when the telephone line is down—

Senator ADAMS—We are fully aware of that.

CHAIR—You can live without a telephone—

Mr Zissler—However, we have a backup system. We use Centrelink. I will let Ms Toyne explain that.

Ms Toyne—This is just a little bit out of my realm. As I said, I focus on community stores licensing. Because we interact with income management and Centrelink quite regularly, when that situation happens—and it does happen often—the government business management, the Centrelink account manager or the store will contact Centrelink here in Darwin. They have a direct line to Telstra to see how quickly they can get someone out to fix the situation. So, there is communication between Centrelink and Telstra to deal with those issues and to elevate them quickly if needed.

CHAIR—Perhaps we will put some specific questions to Centrelink on that matter. Thank you.

Senator SIEWERT—I would like to clarify something. You said 51 communities now have income management. Is that correct or are my notes wrong?

Ms Toyne—73 communities have income management in place.

Senator SIEWERT—That is what I thought. I thought it was in all communities now. I am a bit confused.

Mr Zissler—There are 51 with work for the dole activities.

Ms Toyne—I think the 51 communities are where income management has continued for the second year. It had already been in place for a year and in 51 of those communities it is continuing.

Senator SIEWERT—It has been rolled out in the second year?

Ms Toyne—Yes.

Senator SIEWERT—So the first year we had 23.

Ms Toyne—No, in the first year we had 73. They have all had a 12-month period. Some of those are in their second 12-month period.

Senator SIEWERT—Okay.

Ms Toyne—51 one of the communities are in the second 12-month period of income management.

Senator SIEWERT—Do you still have some that have only just come onto it?

Ms Toyne—Yes.

Senator SIEWERT—That is what I wanted to clarify. I thought I must have been mistaken with the 73 in the first place.

Mr Zissler—When you get the full report, it spells that out much more clearly. I was just trying to give the highlights. It would be a very long boring time listening to me read statistics from a couple of pages.

Senator MOORE—Where does that report go to? It comes to you, but where does it go to from you?

Mr Zissler—We provide it weekly to the minister's office.

Senator MOORE—Directly to the minister?

Mr Zissler—Correct.

Senator MOORE—Only to the minister?

Mr Zissler—To the department and then to the minister.

Senator MOORE—Does it go to the state as well, or just from your position to the federal government?

Mr Zissler—I apologise, I misunderstood.

Senator MOORE—Does it go to the Northern Territory government as well?

Mr Zissler—No. Although the Northern Territory government is a part of the forum. The officers in the room when the report is presented have access to it. I am not clear about how they report back to the Northern Territory government. Certainly, senior officers at the commander's briefing—which is a weekly event and this document is tabled—include officers from the major Australian government agencies such as the Department of Health and Ageing, the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, Centrelink, the police, the Crime Commission, the Northern Territory government and others. They all get access to this weekly report. How they deal with it in their ministries and agencies—

Senator MOORE—But it goes to Jenny Macklin's office?

Mr Zissler—Indeed, it does. As you can appreciate it is rolling. The data goes out weekly, so numbers accrue and change over time. It is a very precise report.

Senator ADAMS—We have heard evidence, especially in this area, that there has been a lot of negativity about the emergency response. How do you get the media to introduce some positivity? You have given us a list of what has been achieved. I am fully aware of the achievements that have been made, but unfortunately in the communities—and, of course, the remote communities—it is really bad and nothing good has come out of it.

Mr Zissler—Sure.

Senator ADAMS—If this is being reported back to the government, surely someone can get out to the media and the people that it really affects that there are some good news stories. I am fed up as a senator going around and hearing all this negativity and knowing full well from casual conversations, especially with the women in the communities, that they are seeing some positivity and that they are really happy. But that does not get to the media. Is there any way we can turn it around and say, ‘Look, things are difficult in certain areas and people feel it has been imposed, but there are some really good things coming out of it.’ Can you help me there?

Mr Zissler—Absolutely. Like your experience, I go to a number of communities. As I explained earlier, I spend significant time working with various groups of people. Firstly, I am very targeted to make sure I meet the traditional owners, to make sure the discussions that I am having on their land are appropriate. I meet with women’s groups and men’s groups and spend quite a time, if you like, allowing them to warm to a range of discussions I want to have with them. It takes time. The discussions are around how the thing is going, how do they find income management, how do they find prescribed communities and issues around alcohol, and we discuss difficult questions related to domestic violence, such as whether domestic violence is improving and whether they feel safer. You are right: I am getting lots of positive feedback about specific things in different ways. I get lots of negatives as well, but as I have said, there is lots of debate out there.

Although this may be a personal experience, one of the positive things is that those discussions are occurring and people are weighing the merits and benefits against the downsides as well. In terms of how we give them information through the media, clearly the operations centre is operational. We are on the ground monitoring and working the communities. The minister’s office is responsible for the engagement with the media. Indeed I know we provide her with lots of these examples, and then it is the responsibility of the media to deal with them. Of course many media releases go out. Sadly, many of those are not taken up. When I go to communities, I get some really interesting positives—and negatives. I am not trying to sugar-coat this.

CHAIR—But the media tell us that that is an advertorial, and you have to pay for that, Mr Zissler. There is just one other theme. You may wish to take some of this on notice. I think most of the committee agree that one of the fundamentals about the prescribed communities is their liking of and support and praise for the GBM—or, significantly, otherwise.

Mr Zissler—Yes.

CHAIR—Clearly, the selection of that individual is paramount to having a successful engagement. I think that has been the feedback. Engagement has primarily failed in the first instance.

Mr Zissler—Correct.

CHAIR—The sooner we can catch up, the better. Clearly we are putting a lot of weight on this individual in the communities. How are we going in terms of the feedback from the communities? I assume you have had the same feedback as we have had of the importance of this role?

Mr Zissler—Yes.

CHAIR—Obviously we have some fantastic individuals, and ones that perhaps have not been performing in ways that the community would have wished them to. In terms of the future selection criteria, if you like, for some of these individuals, what sort of policy changes do you envisage to gauge their suitability for operating in remote communities particularly?

Mr Zissler—The Northern Territory state office is the employer and in effect recruits the GBMs. I will take on notice what the criteria are and undertake to seek to have them provide you with the criteria.

CHAIR—Particularly changes in criteria, which would be more important.

Mr Zissler—Indeed. I would like to reassure you about the common feedback. Prior to my going onto community, I seek permission from the traditional owners via the GBMs, and the GBMs are that critical link between multiple government agencies and the community. In many ways they perform the role of gatekeeper to make sure that people arrive in a proper way at a proper time, and not at the wrong time—not on Sorry days, or when other business is occurring.

There are some excellent outstanding GBMs in communities. There also are people who are working very hard but who are finding it more challenging. I am not going to criticise GBMs. They often spend seven days a week, 24 hours a day, for months at a time in community, in very trying, difficult conditions. Some find that easier than do others. I think that is true of all of us. You would know that some of those communities where it would be particularly hard. They are a critical role, and they are a critical role going forward.

Engagement is a challenge and will continue to be a challenge in relation to all these issues because, quite rightly, there is so much debate around all these initiatives and strategies. It will be difficult to get an absolutely perfect outcome, but the GBMs have the responsibility to be the gatekeeper for that consultation. Indeed they will lead the way in the future about how some of that engagement and consultation occurs.

CHAIR—I think I can speak on behalf of the committee when I say that the relationship between the shire and the GBM in Milingimbi was quite good, but they tell us that, however good it was, it was because of a formalised arrangement.

Mr Zissler—Yes.

CHAIR—Because, I understand, they were one of the COAG sites.

Mr Zissler—Yes.

CHAIR—Have you considered making that a fundamental as part of the policy approach? I ask because the rollout of the new shires has just a fundamental role in the synergy between the rollout of one set of policies at a Commonwealth level and on the other side at a local government level. I can see it working there, but in other areas where we do not have a formalised agreement—and clearly we have evidence that there has been a great deal of tension.

Mr Zissler—Sure.

CHAIR—That includes a vote of no confidence and all those sorts of things. Do you think that a formalised arrangements, so that there is some directive from GBM and some directive from local government, that they will be working together on all these matters and having fixed meetings would be an improvement? What are we doing about that?

Mr Zissler—Sure. One of the significant stakeholders in the communities is the shires directly, through the shire service managers in communities. I always make a point of meeting with them. They are one of the services providers I meet. I have also been engaging with LGANT, the Local Government Association of the Northern Territory; indeed, I met with the CEO yesterday. A couple of months ago now I also met with all the presidents and the shire CEOs in a single room and highlighted the importance of how government—and by that I mean the Australian government, the Northern Territory government and the local government function—have to work together to make sure we have a coordinated response on the ground.

Where the shire service managers work well with the GBMs—and indeed, as you are aware, we have Indigenous engagement officers in some 20 communities as well—and where those three people come together, we are getting particularly good outcomes. Sometimes it does not work because it is personality driven and the shires are new, as are the GBMs. There is both personality and some historical things happening as well. As you are also aware, we are looking at a change. Many things are happening at the moment. The minister released a discussion paper yesterday on the NTR going forward. As that occurs, we will be looking at what are the right processes and structures in those communities as well. There will be changes. We are looking at how the GBMs work.

I must say the GBMs that in view are the excellent ones doing a particularly good job of course have the greatest communication skills. While you can have a formal arrangement that clearly works in some places, the ones with great communication skills do not need a formal arrangement to make things work. You could put a piece of paper in place that does not help the relationship, but I do understand what you are saying.

Senator ADAMS—There seems to be quite a lot of confusion about the role of the GBM too. This has come up time and time again that the communities really are not sure about that person and just what their actual role is. That might be something that can be pushed along.

Mr Zissler—I think that is a very valid question and we are working on trying to clarify that. Different communities are different; many are unique. The role of the GBM has a slightly different role in some of those. As you know, some communities are particularly more remote than are others. Some can have access to better services than do others, so there is no very firm fixed place. However, they have a job description, which is quite explicit. I am more than comfortable to ask the Northern Territory state office to provide that to you.

Senator ADAMS—Thank you.

Mr Zissler—But the real challenge on the ground is that communication and how they engage with the traditional owners and the key families in the community, which sometimes are not the traditional owners, the other service providers, the various committees, organisations and boards,

which are complex. Most communities will have a stores committee, some will have an arts committee, and they will have other committees as well, and the shires are there as well. Trying to bring all those people in the room sometimes is a challenge. But I think that GBMs in the main are doing a very good job.

Senator SIEWERT—One of our roles is looking at various government policies. One of the issues that has come up repeatedly in community is the issue around education, particularly for young men, after they leave school, or they do men's business, for example. I am using that as an example, but there are also older people in the community who really want to do some adult education but still need some basic numeracy and literacy skills. That has come up not just in the NT but in my home state as well, WA. You do not get any TAFE money or training money for basic literacy and training skills.

Being able to get teachers or anybody into community to work with those kids is coming up as a fundamental block. Some communities overcome them by running night schools, but that then drains the school resources. I am asking a specific question around this, but it goes generally. Where you see policies that obviously are not right or need fixing, do you feed back to the state, or in this case the territory? This issue applies across Australia but it affects the territory as well. Do you feed back on this one in particular, but in general? Are you going back to the government and saying, 'Look, this just doesn't work'?

Mr Zissler—Clearly I am not in a position to comment on the policies of the government of the day.

Senator SIEWERT—I am not asking you to do that.

Mr Zissler—Indeed, I know. However, when I visit a community a very detailed report about the issues raised by those communities is produced, and that is shared via the commander's briefing. I sit there and say, 'This week I visited this community.' I go through a very detailed report on the issues I have found that are urgent. Some of them are practical considerations, such as that we need to get something fixed, for example, a fence or whatever, and I ask the right agency to try to look at how they might fix something quickly. But also where something such as education is raised with me I ensure the Department of Education and Training is aware of those concerns.

I discuss that at the meeting, which is a fully minuted meeting and they will have access to the minutes, plus a detailed report post my visit. As well there are expected actions, so they come back and say, 'Yes, we've looked at that', and then they explain how that works. There are considerable resources around adult education but different communities are doing things in different ways.

Senator SIEWERT—There is not village senior numeracy training; we have heard that repeatedly.

Mr Zissler—Certainly I get that feedback, and they are aware of that, yes. I must say that are a number of programs that I have encountered, but whether it is consistent across the board, again I could not comment. As you would appreciate I have been to only about 25 communities.

I say 'about' because it depends on how you count those. Some of them do have school Edukits, but town camps clearly do not. I just do not want to deceive you there.

CHAIR—Some people giving evidence have reflected on your travels, Mr Zissler.

Mr Zissler—Positively, I hope.

CHAIR—Well, they said you were there.

Senator ADAMS—That is the main thing.

Mr Zissler—I think that is a very good thing.

Senator MOORE—I wish to follow up on Senator Siewert's question. Mr Zissler, we will get you back at Senate estimates. I know you are looking forward to that!

Mr Zissler—That is true.

Senator SIEWERT—We do not mean that as a threat.

Senator MOORE—We still have a list and we will get together and have a chat.

Mr Zissler—Looking forward to it.

Senator MOORE—I just want to clarify the issue of the report. Consistently there has been a range of comment about consultation.

Mr Zissler—Yes.

Senator MOORE—I always worry about the word because I always think people have different definitions of what it is.

Mr Zissler—Yes.

Senator MOORE—But you said that you write a detailed report after every visit that you made to a community. Does the community see your report? I just was not sure having heard from your statement?

Mr Zissler—No, I do not provide the report back to the community.

Senator MOORE—Right.

Mr Zissler—When I give undertakings to people, I write back. It depends who it is.

Senator MOORE—Sure.

Mr Zissler—I either write back to them or I provide advice back through the government business manager. Normally that verbal manner is the best way of doing it—

Senator MOORE—Sure.

Mr Zissler—Because the requests that I get made to me could be as simple as, ‘We’re having problems.’ We can’t assess that. I will give you an example. Most recently I was in a community that has wheelie bins there. They have an old trailer. They physically pick up the wheelie bins, tip it in the trailer, go to the tip and shovel it out the back. They said that this is causing a range of problems: ‘What we really need is a trailer that picks up the bins, tips it in and then elevates it. Can we look at that?’ The answer is, ‘Yes, we can.’ I go away and find out how much it costs. I try to find out where the funds might be. I then go back via the GBM and say, ‘Look, yes, it is in the queue to get some funding.’

Senator MOORE—I would have thought that was a shire thing.

Mr Zissler—It is a very grey area.

Senator MOORE—Sorry. We talk about this all the time. But I would have thought that rubbish is a shire thing.

Mr Zissler—A number of the councils also take on the role of the community councils.

Senator MOORE—Sure. That is off the point.

Mr Zissler—It is a grey area.

Senator MOORE—But how do they know for sure that you are raising with someone else the issues that they have raised with you? That seems to be a big gap.

Mr Zissler—Sure.

Senator MOORE—Whether you can succeed in getting what they want is a different matter. The key bit is about whether the people at the community are kept informed. I think all members of the committee share that.

Mr Zissler—Sure.

Senator MOORE—I will now shut up because the chair is getting shaky.

CHAIR—I recognise the body language.

Mr Zissler—I am very comfortable answering the question. I write back to the chairs of the various communities. Again it is the case that where questions are asked, the most tangible feedback is for the government business managers because they are on the ground.

Senator MOORE—Right.

Mr Zissler—I undertake to provide the information. Often we can do it within a 24-hour period. Many of the questions I get are fairly simple: ‘Are you going to do that—yes, or no?’ I come back and say.

Senator MOORE—No?

Mr Zissler—‘Yes’, or ‘No.’

Senator MOORE—It is easy to explain ‘Yes’. It is not easy to explain ‘No.’

Mr Zissler—No, but often some people just want the clarity about whether it can or cannot be done, so it really depends, and sometimes it is, if indeed I have said I will write to the chairman or the president, or whoever, whether I will write a letter with some very detailed information for them. That is part of my feedback. The report we produce requires a feedback. Often that is that I have undertaken to write to them, and we will write to them. I have had a number of discussions when the letters have gone backwards and forwards, of course, particularly when I have said no.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for your presentation of evidence today. I have some questions on notice specifically regarding Hermannsburg. We already sent them on 12 May through the minister’s office, but you may not have received them yet.

Mr Zissler—No, not as yet.

CHAIR—It will just give you a bit of a heads-up because when I am quizzing you at estimates I will expect that you will have perhaps even written and comprehensive answers to those questions. Thank you very much for giving evidence today, Mr Zissler and Ms Toyne.

Mr Zissler—I look forward to seeing you in June.

CHAIR—Very shortly.

Mr Zissler—It is shortly.

Senator ADAMS—Two weeks.

[12.10 pm]

DAVIES, Mr Kenneth Lindsay, Deputy Chief Executive, Department of the Chief Minister, Northern Territory Government

GILLAN, Dr Kevin Phillip, Deputy Chief Executive, Department of Education and Training, Northern Territory Government

CHAIR—Welcome. Mr Davies, if you wish to bring some other staff to the table to assist you, please feel welcome to do so. Information on parliamentary privilege and the protection of witnesses' evidence has been provided to you. I now invite you to make a short opening statement. At the conclusion of your remarks, I will invite members of the committee to put questions to you. With the concurrence, I will temporarily pass on chairmanship to the Senator Judith Adams.

Mr Davies—Thank you, Senator. I have brought with me a colleague from the Department of Education and Training in the Northern Territory, Dr Gillan. Thank you for allowing us to appear before the Senate Select Committee on Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities. Today I have brought some material that I would like to leave for the committee's consideration. The first is a territory government initiative, Working Future, which is a major policy announcement. I will refer to this in my opening address following the announcement that was made yesterday by the Chief Minister and the Northern Territory Minister for Indigenous Policy.

I also table a headline policy statement in relation to the outstations homeland policy in the Northern Territory, a Closing the Gap on Indigenous Disadvantage progress report for the Northern Territory's Closing the Gap response, and finally a paper that has been launched jointly by the Australian and Northern Territory governments in relation to the report of the NTER Review Board on a review that was conducted in the Northern Territory.

ACTING CHAIR—Could you tender those?

Mr Davies—Sure. I wish to address the committee in the context of a Working Future. Working Future is a strategy and framework that will drive government investment and activity to grow 20 identified communities into well-serviced townships. The townships will operate as hubs, servicing many of the nearby outstations and homelands. It is anticipated that 33,000 people, 24,000 people residing in towns and 9,000 people in residing in 300 small communities and outstations located within a 50-kilometre radius will be serviced through the Working Future.

This accounts for around 50 to 60 per cent of the territory's total Indigenous population and approximately 80 per cent of the Indigenous population residing outside of the territory's urban centres. Coupled with that is a national partnership agreement on remote service delivery which targets 15 remote locations. This agreement is with the Australian government in the Northern Territory and aims to improve access to services, provide simpler access and better coordinated government services for joint service delivery structures and local implementation plans that identify service delivery priorities for each location.

It is hoped that these partnerships will substantially increase economic and social participation in the communities. The 15 locations that have been selected under this remote service delivery program are 15 of the larger communities identified for substantial housing funding, and they are also aligned with the Northern Territory's 20 territory towns approach. An outstations policy concurrent with this also is being developed as a result of the territory inheriting responsibility for outstations under the 2007 Indigenous housing accommodation and related services MOU from the Australian government. This MOU provided \$20 million to the Territory for outstations municipal services for 2007-08, 2008-09 and 2009-10 financial years. A funding disbursement methodology is being determined as part of the outstations policy.

On top of the \$20 million, there is additional funding which also is set aside to support outstations through CDEP funds and also through Bushlight programs. It is in that context that I want to talk to you today and to take your questions. My colleague, Dr Gillan, is here also because your committee had some specific questions around education service provision at Hermannsburg and Ntaria. We thought it would be appropriate if we could deal with those particular questions today. He is here to respond for you in that regard. Senator Siewert, you also asked a question about the training programs and the link for young men.

Senator SIEWERT—Yes.

Mr Davies—I am sure Dr Gillan will also be able to answer or at least help in that regard as well. Thank you.

ACTING CHAIR—Dr Gillan, would you like to make a brief opening statement before we ask you questions.

Dr Gillan—Certainly, Senator. I would just like to brief the committee on the increased focus into remote service delivery and provision in the territory over the last few years, specifically since the beginning of 2007. We have appointed a number of regional directors of education who are living in the regions. For instance, we have one at Nhulunbuy, one at Tennant Creek and one at Katherine, and they work specifically with the schools in their communities in those regions. We have implemented an accountability and performance improvement framework across the system. That has strong performance management approaches within it. As a result of that, we have had a big change in the principalship in our remote communities over the last few years. I think we have had up to 13 changes of principal as a result.

We also have appointed to each of the regions principal consultants in literacy to work with our schools, our principals and communities in relation to improving the literacy results that are assessed nationally as part of the NAPLAN assessments which just recently have taken place across Australia. We have mandated that all schools in our remote and very remote areas have whole school approaches to literacy and numeracy. These whole school approaches basically are made accountable through the regional directors. We have also put together an attendance unit centrally, which also is regionalised. All schools in the territory have to have an attendance plan. Schools are made accountable through their regional directors in relation to this.

In the last 18 months we have converted two homeland learning centres into schools. One is Yilpara, which is out in the Laynhapuy homelands, and the other one is Mapuru, which also is in east Arnhem. We have had an increased senior secondary focus in our remote service delivery

with the addition of extra staffing and with a focus on distance learning. We are currently moving into a series of virtual learning experiences for our remote schools.

We have also instigated in the past 18 months remote VET provision. We had one of our high schools in Darwin, Taminmin, which is a registered training organisation. We have harnessed federal and Northern Territory government money to provide service delivery to a number of remote schools from Gunbalanya to Beswick to Milingimbi to Shepherdson to Borroloola. This proving to be very successful in bringing students back to school, especially young men and young women who are 15, 16, or 17 years of age. We are looking to increase that this year.

Last year we also appointed a director of homelands education. That is a completely new position. We have been aware that we need to lift our game there. Our director is looking at doing a scope through all of the homelands that have learning centres to look at the facilities but also at the quality of the programs. He works in very close collaboration with the regional directors. We also have developed an online curriculum, scoping sequence and units of works for our remote and very remote schools. We started off with the middle years and we are now focusing on early childhood. This provides new teachers to the territory with a Ready Set Go kit as far as literacy and numeracy are concerned.

It is proving to be very successful. In fact, other jurisdictions are paying very close attention to this model. We have also put significant money into training our Indigenous assistant teachers to become fully-fledged teachers because we believe that our biggest resource in our remote communities are the local people. Certainly there has been a really strong focus not only on training assistant teachers to become teachers but also on working with the teachers to take on the principalship. We currently have five Indigenous principals in the territory. We are working to increase that.

We also have across 14 communities remote learning partnership agreements. About half of those have been signed off. They take about six to nine months in collaboration with the community so set out a plan for the future that involves community aspirations for the children in their schools. By the middle of the year they will all have been signed off. There are 14 of those. The department also is undergoing a restructure at the moment. The report has not been released as yet; it will be released in the near future. However, I can say that there will be a focus on regionalisation of resources, which includes staffing, and also a look at the group school model where we have a number of schools that are administered centrally from Katherine, Alice Springs or Darwin.

One of the issues we have come across is that some of those very small communities have no say in the governance of the school. Obviously that is an issue for the community but it is also an issue for us. Currently we are examining how we can improve that situation. Finally, we have really focused on literacy and numeracy and getting students in our remote schools ready for the NAPLAN assessments. Our big focus this year was on participation. When you have students with an ESL background and who come from homes where they may not be speaking English a lot of the time, they find it very hard to sit down and do these formal assessments.

Our staff out in the remote areas have been spending a lot of time this year preparing the students and the communities for the assessments which have just taken place. We are very hopeful that we will have a much better participation rate this year. I am not sure about the

results because the experience has shown in Indigenous communities in the Kimberley, for instance, when the participation rate in the national assessments went up, the results went down because you had a lot more students who had never had an assessment before and who were doing it for the first time.

ACTING CHAIR—There again, the fact that you have more coming into the school to try would be positive.

Dr Gillan—Absolutely, Senator.

ACTING CHAIR—They are participating.

Dr Gillan—Thank you.

ACTING CHAIR—Thank you very much.

Senator SIEWERT—Can I just pick up on the education issue. You touched on the remote VET provisions. I am not knocking that at all. I think it is great that that has improved. However, the issue that has been raised with us, which is not just a Northern Territory issue, is that what people are finding is they need to do some literacy and numeracy training before they even start some of the other VET courses, but they are not able to get funding for provision of those classes because they are not registered at any certification level. I have been to various schools that are getting around this basically because they are just going above and beyond and they are squeezing limited resources to run extra classes at night and things like that. However, it is only for so long that you can do that and that is not sustainable in the long term. Have you seen that as an issue? If you have, how are you addressing it?

Dr Gillan—Senator, absolutely it is an issue. The communities are letting us know that. There are significant funds available from the Commonwealth government through DEEWR. The issue with obtaining the funds, which is where the problem starts and finishes I suppose, is that as a territory government department we cannot access those funds. Only a private registered training organisation is able to access those funds. We cannot get any of our RTOs in the territory interested enough to be able to go out, access those funds and work in the community.

Senator SIEWERT—So schools that are really keen to run these services cannot access that? We have spoken to lots of schools that are keen.

ACTING CHAIR—This has been one of the biggest issues that has come up as real jobs are coming on stream. Younger people who have left school early are realising that somehow they have to be able to read and write before they can apply for a job or be involved. It is almost epidemic-type things that are happening because the reality is that they should have stayed at school, but of course they did not. Surely there must be some flexibility to get those funds out.

Dr Gillan—Not for schools, unfortunately.

ACTING CHAIR—That is so ridiculous.

Dr Gillan—For instance, we would love to get one of our RTOs to Min Min, but my understanding is that they have to be private RTOs.

Senator SIEWERT—We can find that out.

Dr Gillan—There are significant funds available for adult numeracy and literacy programs.

Senator SIEWERT—It is just that various state governments cannot access them.

Dr Gillan—Yes.

Senator SIEWERT—We will check this, but it is only at registered private RTOs.

Dr Gillan—That is my understanding.

Senator SIEWERT—We will check that one. The other issue while we are on education is one that you have touched on it. You are requiring all schools to have an attendance plan. I did not bring the report with me, but was there not a report done on school attendance in the 1990s in the NT, or on education?

Mr Davies—On education.

Senator SIEWERT—One of the recommendations of that report, if I recall correctly, was to develop an attendance strategy. Up until fairly recently I do not think the NT government had one, did they? That was certainly what I was told on another committee and in relation to another issue.

Mr Davies—Senator, I will try to respond to that. The report I think you are referring to was Learning Lessons.

Senator SIEWERT—Yes, that was it.

Mr Davies—Out of that, there has in past years been substantial funding allocated to dealing with attendance. The Northern Territory government in its first phase set aside some money to put in place attendance officers. What has happened is that the attendance program has gone through a number of stages. There has been a strategy developed, but at the end of the day, particularly in our remote schools, the data still was telling us that despite the efforts both at the school level and centrally, we have improved the way we now track kids and measure their attendance rates, and even understand their participation rates in testing. But the single greatest challenge facing our remote schools is still attendance.

Senator SIEWERT—Yes.

Mr Davies—Kevin can perhaps talk a little bit more about what is actually on foot now.

Dr Gillan—I suppose when it gets down to the basics, Senator, it is the quality of the principal and the teachers that makes the difference for communities. We have noticed that when we have had a change of principal, you can throw any amount of money and have home liaison

officers and buses and all sorts of things, but if the community is not happy with what is going on in the school, the students are unlikely to attend as much as they should. A good example of that is Shepherdson College on Elcho Island where last year the average attendance was between 100 and 150. We have a new principal in there now who went in in October last year. He is getting an attendance rate of more than 400.

Mr Davies—That is per day.

Dr Gillan—That is because he has mobilised staff to respond to community needs. The community is ensuring that their children are attending the school.

Senator SIEWERT—We had the same experience in Hermannsburg.

CHAIR—Hermannsburg is the same. It has just changed so much.

Dr Gillan—Daryl Fowler, the principal there, is doing an outstanding job and is working the community. Hence the attendance has gone right up.

CHAIR—And his wife is helping with that too.

Dr Gillan—Yes.

Senator MOORE—If you went from getting 100-odd to school and now you are getting 400, how about classrooms, toilets, desks, computers that were there for 150, and now you have 400 and hopefully more? How quickly can you respond? If we get kids coming to school and they do not have good conditions, they will stop coming to school. We have seen that as well where perhaps the conditions need a lot of work.

Dr Gillan—At Shepherdson, that has the capacity for over 500 students.

Senator MOORE—Right, so it all the right desks and, most importantly, kitchens for the nutrition programs and toilets?

Dr Gillan—Absolutely. In fact, Shepherson would be out of our stand-out remote schools in the territory as far as facilities are concerned.

Senator MOORE—I think maybe we should go to Shepherdson.

CHAIR—We could always go to Elcho. Could I segue from attendance to a couple of things: I hope it would be reasonable to say that there is capacity generally in the territory to lift attendance by, let us say, 30 per cent across the board? I know some say 90, but let us say it is 70 per cent; I know we would all be very enthusiastic if that was the case. But if we found a way to get attendance up to where enrolment was, does the NT government have the capacity, or is there capacity between us, is there some way to say that although Shepherdson is a great place and we have that capacity, a number of the schools really are at capacity with 50 per cent attendance?

Forget about the statistics. I think we all realise as we move around that that is the issue. While we are saying, 'Let's get everyone to school', what are we doing to fit out the school and

ensure that it has the level of amenity for 100 per cent attendance? What is the plan for the NT government to do that, given that let us say 70 per cent, or whatever number you think it is, is what we need to go to?

Dr Gillan—The average attendance rate across Australia is 90 per cent. For our Indigenous students in the territory, it is around about 70 per cent. Obviously it will take some time for that level to increase.

Senator MOORE—Can you explain why Indigenous attendance at school in the Northern Territory at the moment is 70 per cent?

Dr Gillan—On average. Our second highest school as far as attendance rates are concerned is Minyerri, which is a remote community. On average, they have 93 or 94 per cent of their students attending every day.

CHAIR—I know there is no mischief in your answer, but we are all talking about the percentage of those children who are enrolled but who are not attending, or are attending, rather than those people who are of enrolment age and who have not enrolled and who are not attending. I mention that just so that we know what we are talking about.

Dr Gillan—Sure.

Senator MOORE—It could be a big difference.

CHAIR—The whole notion of attendance. It seems that a number of programs by the Northern Territory government over ages and by the federal government but we seem to have gathered the low hanging fruit. I was one of the higher ones in the tree. I would never have gone to school. There was no way you would have ever got me to school and I was a recidivistic truant. It was always the police officers whom I got to know quite well on my fishing excursions during most school days. You may want to make a comment, not on my youth but on the difficulty of that demographic now that we have to move.

In my view it is the family. I must say that I become quite sad listening to evidence and people telling me that it is always someone else's fault that their children will not go to school. I know it is a difficult demographic and there are some cultural issues about discipline that are very difficult and far from the mainstream notions of discipline and why it would seem so obvious, but do you have any ideas on what sort of areas we should start looking at? Do you have any particular plans to deal with this last demographic, which I think we all acknowledge is the most complex and difficult?

Perhaps you could segue during your answer into a discussion of those people who have been disconnected from the school system for some time. They might now be 15 and 16 but have become enlightened or through program they have begun to think that they would now like to return to school and they have very little literacy and numeracy? Do we engage those in the school environment? We have seen some of that at Hermannsburg and at other places. What sort of plans do you have to deal with that difficult demographic and the other demographic of those people who are seeking to re-engage at a later age?

Dr Gillan—I suppose that our remote VET provision has been very successful in getting some of the students who had left back to school. We are extending that across the territory this year and next year across six communities. We are extending it to 10 and then to 12 communities. It is a very expensive option but it is working. The other question is a bit harder to answer, I suppose, in relation to the engagement of all the other families. As I said, you have a good principal and good staff, and generally the students will come. Generally there is a real pattern.

Mr Davies—Senator—

CHAIR—What has been described to us is a bit of a jurisdictional thing. For example, in relation to truancy, if we are going to have some compliance regime associated with income and all those sorts of things, you can understand the reluctance of a school to be able to report their children into school and into a compliance regime when part of the education is having a good relationship with the parents. That is a very difficult process. We are coming up to that process soon. Do you think perhaps, like in some jurisdictions around the world, we could have the local council run the truancy bus? Do you think it is a jurisdictional issue? I have to move around where there is much talk. I will de-politicise this. There are promises from all sorts of governments about truancy officers and things like that, but I would have to say that we do not see any and we do not hear of many. Do you think it is a jurisdictional issue? Who should be responsible for dealing with that difficult demographic if you cannot provide sufficient pull from the schools?

Dr Gillan—I have worked in the Kimberley, throughout the territory and also in the Ngaanyatjarra lands in the goldfields and the issue is basically the same. I think it is to do with the quality of what is happening within the school and that sense of engagement as well as the responsibilities around governance that communities have in relation to the provision of their education.

Mr Davies—Senator, if I can add to that: with the remote learning partnerships that the department has been negotiating with each community, and there are 16 of them on foot, the data is presented to the community in pretty stark terms—the learning outcomes of the children, the attendance rates and the potential enrolments. Part of that process is about engaging with the community. We also have the SEAMs trials running in the Northern Territory. There is one at Wadeye and one in Katherine.

It is about trying to line up not only the school responsibility end of it, which is about making sure the program is effective and engages children and that their enrolment and attendance rates are recorded, but about working with Centrelink and with the support agencies to target particular families and get students back to school. That is happening in that mix. In relation to long-term non-attending students, the answer is not necessarily four walls and a classroom seat.

CHAIR—Certainly in transition at least.

Mr Davies—Absolutely so. The focus around attendance rates absolutely is about getting in early and building good school habits with young Indigenous children. That involves working with their mothers and in particular their families. For the older students, the government has announced a learning or earning policy. Quite clearly part of that is around the VET provision and getting the kids into either a training or a learning program, or into a job. Stretching that out

into the very remote context is going to be challenging but that is part of the answer in a policy context.

It is making it happen that will be the difficult part. But the focus around the 20 big communities in particular and creating them as hubs might well enable us to focus the resources in a way that we can really start to drive that. Senator, as you and all of us know, there is a huge untapped resource out there that are just missing the opportunities that we are all enjoying.

Dr Gillan—Senator, one of the more successful strategies we have had in recent years that also is proving to be very successful in Western Australia is the Clontarf Academy, which is a football academy. Obviously we would like to see something like that for girls as well. But that has really made a huge difference to the attendance rate for young Indigenous youth and also for retention as well. It is making them stay on at school. We do not have any Clontarf academies in our very remote communities yet. However, we are looking at starting one up at Maningrida next year.

CHAIR—Excellent. Senator Siewert?

Senator SIEWERT—I want to move on to a couple of other issues beyond education.

CHAIR—Before you do, we will finish off on education for the moment.

Senator MOORE—This is just a follow-up from yesterday, Dr Gillan. We had people here who were the traditional owners from north-east Arnhem Land and they had particular questions about the future of one of their schools, the Garthalala college. They put it on record in evidence, so I thought that while we had you here we could raise it with you. They raised issues about whether the funding for that school would continue. They spoke up very highly about how successful it was. Can the NT government give us any indication about ongoing support for that school?

Dr Gillan—Absolutely, Senator. We have put that in writing to that community.

Senator MOORE—How long ago, Dr Gillan?

Dr Gillan—That would have been last year.

Senator MOORE—Okay. Despite that letter, in both their submission and their verbal evidence to us yesterday, there continues to be fear that that school is under threat. When you see *Hansard*, you will see that.

CHAIR—You might want to resend the letter.

Dr Gillan—Okay. It is a very successful school.

Senator MOORE—They said that.

Dr Gillan—It is doing some fantastic things for the senior secondary students with their NTCEs.

Senator MOORE—Thank you.

Senator SIEWERT—Yesterday we heard from the Larrakia nation about people living in the long grass and an increase on their services. One issue they raised was the increased number of older people who are living in the long grass. They raised the issue of the lack of appropriate aged cares for people all over, but particularly in Darwin. Obviously if people are coming in from other remote communities, apparently sometimes they come in for respite or for services in town and then stay in town.

The provision of aged care is a problem all over Australia, so I am not singling out the territory, but it seems to be an important issue here, particularly for Aboriginal people. Is it as large as problem as people are saying it is? If it is, what is being done about it?

Mr Davies—Senator, it is a big challenge for us. The whole issue of people living in the long grass and people moving further and further into the long grass is a challenge for us, particularly as our policing efforts and those sorts of things ramp up, those sorts of things, sometimes that pushes people further away from the eye of police. In relation to the Larrakia, we are having some discussions with them about some managed camping-type accommodation facilities, but the challenge of old people in the long grass is a shared responsibility between the Australian government and the Northern Territory government.

It is about us lining up our services, tracking down those people and then getting them into appropriate accommodation. There is a substantial amount of work going on between the Northern Territory and Australian governments in this regard. You might be aware of this but Senator Macklin has just announced a \$25 million social package in Alice Springs to deal with a similar issue in Alice Springs around mobility and town camps, and in particular the overflow from town camps.

We do not have all the answers yet, but the Northern Territory government is working with the Australian government to substantially improve our aged care facilities, and also to look at the transient nature of people travelling in from remote areas. They might come in with family for medical reasons or to see family, and then essentially they get stuck here and are not in a position to return to their communities. I acknowledge it is definitely an issue. We are working jointly on it. In relation to the Larrakia, it is their country so they have a particular view about ways they think that this could be better managed as well. We are working with them and looking at a couple of proposals from the Larrakia around managed camping facilities, in particular.

Senator SIEWERT—The issue also has been raised and the point has been made that a lot of people have come into Darwin since the intervention was introduced and that there has been an increased call on their services. The point also made by several of the people making submissions was that there was concern that with the new Working Future policy that has been introduced and the federal government's policy of concentrating on specific communities that there will be more migration out of the smaller centres that are not getting the support into bigger centres and into Darwin. Obviously you have thought about it. I am not going to insult your intelligence by saying you have not thought about it.

Mr Davies—No. Certainly, Senator, we have. There are two elements to your question, one of which is the increased mobility. It is interesting that a recent study has been released that has done some analysis of mobility around the intervention. I will find the title of that study and let the chair know where that can be found. It is saying that the mobility issues have not changed a lot. In terms of numbers of people, interestingly the study says that mobility is a big issue but a direct attribution to the NTER is not an easy link to make to the intervention. It is also interesting because the research is also saying that people are not moving to find employment either, so we are not getting mobility because people are going to look for employment. There is that side of it.

The strategy about coming into the 20 territory growth towns and creating them as hub and service centres is absolutely about making sure we have a very good well-connected transport strategy around the hub and service centres. So the road network and the capacity to have either a paid or a publicly funded transport system is all part of the way we want to develop these towns. We certainly do not want them to be places that just capture people and keep them there because they have no way to get home.

Understand that football matches and sport are a key part of community life along with cultural ceremonies as well as accessing services. We absolutely are working very thoroughly to develop a very comprehensive transport strategy to make sure that we ensure that people do not gravitate into centres. We have 20 territory growth towns with a range of town camps around them. That is not what we would like to see.

Senator SIEWERT—Okay. Thanks.

CHAIR—I heard something on the radio the other day. It is important for you to have an opportunity to correct the record. I spoke to Senator Crossin about it when I got in. I may have been mistaken, but I know a number of other Territorians had the same view. It was on the ABC in the morning and you had a representative of the government speaking about the 20 communities. He spoke about what I thought was in answer to the question about the permit system. He was giving a view that you would be able to go into these 20 communities without a permit. I am not sure whether he is right or wrong, but I know there was some concern about things. Could you clarify that on the record? I know Senator Crossin would like you to do that, if she were here.

Senator MOORE—Senator Crossin always wants clarity.

Mr Davies—Look, our Indigenous affairs minister has made it very clear that she does not think in the 20 territory towns that permits will be a prerequisite for access.

CHAIR—Okay.

Mr Davies—Quite clearly though, it is on Aboriginal land. Setting up the township leases requires engagement with the traditional owners and the land councils. We already have townships agreed, with Anindilyakwa Land Council and the Tiwi Land Councils at Nguuu and at Groote Eylandt. The permit issue is something that needs to be worked through in a cooperative way with the communities. The position absolutely is that it would not be used as a way to exclude people from those 20 territory towns. There would have to be other reasons for

excluding them. That would be the normal application of process of the law of the territory. Once the territory growth towns are established, agreed and negotiated with the community, could a permit system be used to exclude someone from a town? The view at the moment is that we will need to work that through, but it is not the intent that the permit system would be in place to exclude people.

CHAIR—As federal parliamentarians, as we would understand it, there would be no requirement for the Northern Territory government to inform parliament of the matter. It would simply go to Minister Macklin, who currently has the capacity because of the legislation to make changes to the permit system as it applies to the Aboriginal Lands Rights Act. It would simply be a matter of the Chief Minister of the Northern Territory writing to Minister Macklin and seeking her formal agreement with that. As I understand it, it would not come to parliament. Is that your understanding of it, Mr Davies?

Mr Davies—I would need to take some advice on that, Senator.

CHAIR—I thought you may understand that.

Mr Davies—No, my understanding is not that. I understand that declaring the townships as townships is certainly something that the territory can do under its own laws and its own town planning regime, but in relation to the permits issue, the ALRA and Australian government law, I would need to take advice on that.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Mr Davies.

Senator ADAMS—Arising from the Hermannsburg visit, several outstations were very worried because the schools have been closed and the children were having to be transported into Hermannsburg. But the roads are really bad and private transport is just about impossible, so there is real concern from those two people.

CHAIR—They are saying that it is dangerous.

Mr Davies—Chair, when you were out of the room I was saying to the Acting Chair that we had questions on notice and had prepared some detailed information around each of them. Kevin could talk to those. We could table those or respond right now to you.

CHAIR—If you can do both, that would be fantastic. Talk to them, but the tabled response would be excellent. Thank you for that.

Dr Gillan—Thank you, Senator. The two homeland outstations that I think you are referring to. Red Sandhill was one, which was closed in 2007 due to declining enrolments and changes to the management of the school, and Kulpitharra is the other one, and that was closed in 2006 after a six months period when no students had presented to go to school. This was after several years of very low enrolments and attendance.

Senator MOORE—You had a teacher out there and no-one came?

Mr Davies—Senator, the teacher would have been based at the hub school. The teacher would have been travelling in and out of that community. Certainly I do not think the teacher would have been in situ at Kulpitharra in a government house, no.

Dr Gillan—We have a homelands policy whereby our schools are not viable if they have less than eight students over an extended period.

CHAIR—There is a view, I think anyway—I am sure my committee members will correct me if I am wrong—that in relation to the sustainability of homelands, if they see they are losing their school, they will say, ‘Well, we’re finished. That’s the beginning of the end. The school will go. The kids will have to move to go to school. Other infrastructure will follow.’ It is just like country towns, I suppose, as they contract. There is a critical mass level.

Places like the ones we talked to out of Hermannsburg reflected that that was their concern and that is why they were really keen to keep the schools open and to keep the schools open. In fact, they were reluctant to say anything. They gave us safety issues, which I am sure was quite a legitimate issue, but clearly they were very reluctant to send the kids to school, in what I have to say was a new and very engaging school environment, which was fantastic, because effectively it would mean the loss of their community. That is what they believe.

It must be very difficult to engage across such a complex level. We have the intervention governance and the GBM. How do you try to resolve those issues? Do you work closely with the other levels of government in trying to resolve those issues, given that the funding streams come from the federal government, from yourselves and now the shire is involved? That is just an example. Perhaps you can talk about the specifics of that example but also about how these governance arrangements work and how you think they may work in the future.

Dr Gillan—Senator, certainly with the schools and the homelands, where they have a viable population, we resource them. I appointed out earlier the two homeland learning centres which we have turned into schools, Yilpara and Mapuru. Obviously we would continue to do that. Also those communities that have—

CHAIR—May I ask just one swift question? Does Mapuru have a full-time teacher?

Dr Gillan—Mapuru has two teachers.

CHAIR—I had a submission again that said that Mapuru was promised in 2003 by the then Minister for Education, Syd Stirling, a full-time teacher. They said in the submission dated today that there are still no two full-time teachers at Mapuru. It is just on that fact that I was trying to establish if you had any contrary position.

Dr Gillan—Mapuru has a teacher that works Monday to Thursday and another teacher that works Tuesday to Friday. They stay over during the week. We put in a \$1.25 million facility there—a double classroom and a facility where the teachers can stay, which has bedrooms and a kitchen, et cetera.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. I am sorry to have had to interrupt, so please continue your remarks.

Dr Gillan—Where the outstations are showing that they are viable land and will be able to present at a school and have that sustainability, we have supported those areas. Where the facilities or the number of students and people in the community has diminished, obviously we work with the community to come up with a solution. We do not just barge in and close down a facility. I think the last school that closed was Warrego.

Mr Davies—Yes, next to Tennant Creek.

Dr Gillan—Yes, two years ago, next to Tennant Creek, and that had four students. Other than that, I have the two outstations out in Ntaria. They were not sustainable, given that one of them is only five minutes from Ntaria, Hermannsburg, and the other one is a bit further out but just did not have the students there to make it cost effective for us.

Senator ADAMS—It is very hard for us, of course, not knowing the geographical location and exactly what the background is. That is the reason we are asking.

Senator MOORE—How many schools do you have with fewer than 20 students? Take that on notice if you cannot just tell me. But it seems that as soon as you have a cut-off point, you have people with questions. I would be interested to know across the territory how many there are.

Dr Gillan—Senator, it is an interesting question because we have schools and we have homeland learning centres. We have quite a few schools with fewer than 20 students but we also have homeland learning centres that are not funded in the same with more than 50 or 60 students. I can get the information.

Senator MOORE—That would be very useful.

CHAIR—While you are taking this on notice, this may take you some time, but I would hope you would have it at hand. What I think the committee would like is, in a spatial sense such as on a map, the three different types of educational institutions you are speaking of and how many students currently are at each one of those. If that is too onerous, and I understand if it is, even if you supplied us with the positions of them, I think we can get them located on a map ourselves. It would be great if we had a map to put that on.

Mr Davies—Senator, is that in the context of remote?

CHAIR—Indeed, outside of the main centres at the moment.

Dr Gillan—We have that, yes.

Senator SIEWERT—That would be great.

CHAIR—I hoped you would have. Thanks very much.

Mr Davies—Senator, I will comment on the remote service delivery coordination work that is going on as well to answer your question. We are working very closely with the Australian government's FaHCSIA and with the FaHCSIA state office and our Australian government

colleagues, particularly around the 15 sites that were announced under the remote service delivery NP and the additional five that the Northern Territory government has put into this mix. The way this is shaping up is that we will be jointly putting in place regional operations centres, a north and a south, that we will use to jointly manage the Australian government business managers on the ground.

The Northern Territory cabinet has attributed some funding to us to set up a service delivery coordination unit, so we will be providing resources out of that service delivery coordination unit into the operations centre to jointly coordinate. So we will have Australian government and NT officers working together. The Coordinator-General has been appointed for the Northern Territory, Bob Beadman, so he will work with the Australian government's Coordinator-General, once that person is announced. The idea is that the commitment around the remote service delivery partnerships is actually a five-year commitment from the Australian government worth \$160-odd million. It goes well beyond just the NTER frame. The NTER is until 18 August 2012 and that is when that act completes and there will be a sequencing to a new arrangement.

We are hoping that the Northern Territory will be well positioned in three years time to really take on full responsibility for a lot of what has been developed and created out there through the NTER and through the major policy initiatives we have also put in place through the NT Closing the Gap strategy. We think A Working Future is quite a sophisticated policy platform. It picks up the land issues, economic development and the transport strategies as well as the outstations and the townships. The whole focus behind this is about working with the Australian government to maximise the impact of the dollars that are coming into the Northern Territory and to make a difference on the ground. In five years time, we want those towns to look a whole lot different from the way they look now.

We want them to have a business centre, a motor vehicle registry and we want students or children to have a real address—a house with an address—and we would like to see a postal service in place. We would like to see the rubbish runs being done really in the same way you would see in an equivalent regional town elsewhere.

CHAIR—Regionalisation?

Mr Davies—That is absolutely the aim.

Senator ADAMS—Right. This is fine for us to be told this, but outside in the community at the moment, there is huge confusion and lots of fear. That has probably been the basis of most people who have come before us here. Is there any way that you can get it out to the people in simple language in the media? It is hard but it is the only way to go.

Mr Davies—Senator, we are going to have to work really hard at that. We will have to work through the government business managers that we have and with whom we are now jointly working. We will have to work with the land councils, particularly with the outstation resource centres. This whole approach is trying to break 30 years of habit.

Senator ADAMS—Even at Darwin itself, just last night people said to me, 'What's going on? What's happening? How's this all going to work?' I think it probably needs perhaps a

wraparound on the paper on exactly what you are doing in language that is very easy to understand.

Mr Davies—I understand exactly what you are saying. We have funded quite a few of the Indigenous radios and networks to start sending out what we are hoping are pretty plain messages about what the approach is. We understand we have a big communication issue around this, but if we do not draw a line in the sand now, we are going to keep replicating funding policy and spreading the funds too thinly to see real outcomes achieved in targeted locations on the ground. We need all our agencies joining up even around the issue of attendance, which we discussed earlier. It is not just the schools' problem to sort through. Local government have a role to play in that, so has the community and so has the Australian government.

Senator ADAMS—It is important to get that correct message out there. At the moment it is very confused and unfortunately people are getting the wrong end of the stick and the fear is coming back.

Mr Davies—Yes, sure.

Senator MOORE—Mr Davies, why do you think that will work now when we have been using that language for 20 years? We have to get it together and get the coordination. That language has been entrenched in policy for at least 20 years. In drawing the line in the sand, why do you think it will work now?

Mr Davies—Senator, I think it will. I started off at Papunya in 1978 and I spent 10 years out bush, so that is the 30-year frame of reference I have. I can tell you that at the point of self-government, when there was a transfer of the assets, we had a lot of people in that town living in houses that were largely non-Indigenous people. There was a big group of Indigenous people around who were living in humpies and in a range of substandard accommodation. Since then, things have improved; there is no doubt about it. But what we are now doing is creating a structural arrangement between governments and a real commitment here to put a proper coordination mechanism in place that will drive the funding in a coordinated way.

We have learned some lessons from the intervention; there is no doubt about that. We are understanding that we need a really solid policy platform that everybody understands and that we can stick to—creating towns, not communities, and shifting away from communal housing to private ownership, and saying to people on outstations that there is a limit to the resourcing that is available and that while we are not going to shift you off the outstations, we cannot continue to apply resources and build new houses on what is essentially private property. We have to target expenditure and that is a big change.

CHAIR—Before concluding, we have one last question. It was just comment that was provided to us when I was in Hermannsburg after I had asked why Hermannsburg is so different. This is one community but I am sure there are others, but at so many levels they simply seem to have been embraced the opportunities that the intervention had provided. I suspect that part of the answer was that they had seen some of the benefits with houses and schools, and nobody else has, I have to say. Notwithstanding that, they said that some communities are simply ready. I asked, 'What do you mean by that? I can make the comparison with Yuendumu.' Their response was, 'Well, Yuendumu just isn't ready.'

When we went in with the intervention, they towed the sign away, defaced the sign and cut it off a gas axe and towed it off. No-one was allowed, and you had to get a policeman to escort the GBM into Kintore. There seemed to be a completely different and highly politicised environment, yet the circumstances were still there. It is almost like a preconditioning. That was the sort of inference I drew. You have to get to a place before people will embrace change, and maybe that is part of the understanding. I am not really sure but, given your experience, I would appreciate some comments on it.

Mr Davies—Part of it is about the leadership in the communities.

Senator ADAMS—Yes.

Mr Davies—Quite clearly, there is some evidence that the school is working properly. It is about how the momentum builds in that context. But at the end of the day those key people in that community, the Indigenous leadership, are really the ones that have to take the quantum steps in that regard. Why does a particular community embrace it? Because they see the opportunities. Hermannsburg used to be a Lutheran mission a long time ago, so there has been a long interaction there. They have had a fantastic art and painting background and a long interaction with business and enterprise in that regard. Senator, the other thing is that there is proximity to Alice Springs as well, so it is not as hard to get in your car and do your shopping.

CHAIR—There is no permit requirement. That is not a comment on the permit system, but generally a permit is not required because it is not far.

Mr Davies—Often there are people moving through, such as tourists. There would be a range of factors, but those questions would be really interesting to unpack, Senator, because there are similar communities all through the territory that are at various stages. I went to Wadeye about three weeks ago. You go down the main street of Wadeye now, and you will see the shire is getting traction and is clean. The main street has a butcher and a shopping centre. They are even talking about the Thamarrurr Development Corporation building their own Mitchell centre. That is their frame of reference. It will be a two-storey building and they will have a shopping centre, and they are renting office space in it. I understand that Centrelink has signed up to take one of the new office areas.

CHAIR—After spending seven years not paying a cent to the regional transaction centre, I might note.

Mr Davies—I think things are moving.

CHAIR—Excellent.

Mr Davies—But it will take time.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Mr Davies, and Dr Gillan. I can imagine that there may well be more questions on notice provided to you and they will be provided through the secretariat. Thank you very much for coming and giving evidence today as well as for your submission to my questions on notice.

Mr Davies—Thank you, Senator.

Committee adjourned at 1.09 pm