

Additional Estimates 2020—21
Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee
26 March 2021 – Cross-portfolio on Indigenous matters

National Indigenous Australians Agency
Opening Statement from the Chief Executive Officer

Good morning Chair and Senators.

[Ngoonawal language]

Dhawura nguna dhawura Ngoonawal

Yanggu ngalamanyin dhunimanyin

Ngoonawalwari dhawurawari Dindi wanggiralidjinyin

[English translation]

This is Ngoonawal Country

Today we are all meeting together on Ngoonawal Country

We acknowledge and pay our respects to the Elders

I also extend that respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Senators and witnesses present this morning.

Chair, thank you for the opportunity to make a brief opening statement.

I want to briefly update the Committee on a number of issues that the NIAA has been focused on since our last appearance before you.

Of course, the Agency's contribution to the Government's broader response to and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic has been a high priority. We continue to work with our colleagues in the Department of Health and with jurisdictional counterparts on pandemic management responses and vaccination rollout as it relates to the Indigenous community.

As you would be aware, this week, Indigenous Australians over 55 and those with other specified medical conditions became eligible to receive the vaccine. We are supporting the Health-led communications campaign using our on-ground presence to support key public health messages and to understand, allay and feedback any concerns in community around the vaccination process.

Work is progressing well on the Commonwealth's Implementation Plan for the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, which is due to be released in July.

An important part of the process of developing the Commonwealth's Implementation Plan will be working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through their representatives. To that end, I'm pleased to advise that the first meeting of a Joint Working Group comprising deputy secretaries from the NIAA, the Departments of the Prime Minister and Cabinet; Social Services; Education, Skills and Employment; Attorney-General; Health, and representatives of the national peak bodies was held on the 3rd of March. This is indicative of the real change we are seeing in the partnership approach that all parties to the National Agreement have committed to and will provide valuable advice to the Government on the implementation plan.

In January, the public consultation phase of the Indigenous Voice commenced with the release of the Interim Co-design report on the 9th of January. The Agency is providing key secretarial and logistical support to the consultation process. The process consists of face to face public consultation, targeted stakeholder meetings, virtual meetings, webinars, individual or organisational submissions and an online survey. To date the consultation process has engaged around 3,768 Australians. Overwhelmingly, the participation has been positive, engaged and conducted in a very respectful way. I would note, contrary to some media reporting, the public sessions have not been dominated by any single issue and have in fact covered a range of topics from local implications of the proposals in the report through to issues of national importance. I would encourage people who have not yet engaged in the process to visit the Indigenous Voice website where there are a range of resources including summaries of the public meetings and copies of submissions that have been made. The consultation process will continue until early May, after which the co-design teams will finalise their report before presenting it to Minister Wyatt.

After extensive consultation with Ranger groups, the grant round for the Indigenous Rangers Program to put in place funding certainty for the next seven years (2021 to 2028) has been opened. For the first time, this gives long-term funding certainty to Ranger organisations so they can care for country more strategically and continue to build the skills of more than 2,100 rangers across the country.

Looking more internally, at our last appearance, I told you about two professional development initiatives we introduced for our Indigenous staff in support of the Commonwealth Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Workforce Strategy, both of these are fully subscribed and proceeding well.

I'm pleased to advise that I have dedicated one of our senior Indigenous executives to work closely with the Australian Public Service Commission and other Departments and Agencies to maintain momentum on this workforce strategy, with a focus on practical mechanisms to increase the scale, rate and breadth of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in the APS.

I thank the committee and welcome your questions.