

## **Senate Estimates 29 October 2021**

**National Indigenous Australians Agency, Acting CEO, Mr Blair Exell**

### **Opening Statement**

Good morning Chair and Senators.

[Ngoonawal language]

Dhawura nguna dhawura Ngoonawal

[English translation]

This is Ngoonawal Country

Today, I am on Ngoonawal Country and I acknowledge and pay my respects to all Elders.

I also extend my 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 appreciate we have discussed the COVID situation in Indigenous communities recently in the Senate Select Committee on COVID-19 and that we may cover this in more detail in the health section of today's proceedings, but at this point I did want to share an update on vaccinations.

From the outset of the pandemic, the NIAA has, and continues to be, proactively engaged in planning activities at all levels of government and in the community to provide advice and information in multiple directions – to, from and across community.

We have supported health authorities and providers in their work to educate and vaccinate Indigenous Australians and in responding to outbreaks when they have occurred. We have also been focussed on limiting the non-health impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations, including food security, supporting communities impacted by border restrictions, and supporting social and emotional wellbeing.

Pleasingly, we are seeing Indigenous vaccination rates climb. The latest data, received this morning, shows 63.4 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples aged 16 years and older have received at least one dose and 50.4 per cent are fully vaccinated.

Beyond COVID, NIAA has been progressing a significant reform and legislative agenda – one that is far-reaching, will drive economic empowerment, and that recognises historic wrongs. We have supported the Government to bring forward five bills, including;

- Two bills to facilitate the introduction of the Territories Stolen Generations Redress Scheme, which is due to commence in March 2022;
- the Social Security Legislation Amendment that will provide one of many building blocks for communities as they co-design the trials of a new, flexible Remote Engagement Program, replacing the Community Development Program in 2023, to build the skills and vocational capabilities of people in remote communities;
- amendments to the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act, which represent the most extensive changes to the Act since its inception in 1976, to empower Aboriginal peoples in NT to activate the economic potential of their land and principally to introduce a new entity to manage and disburse funding from the Aboriginals Benefit Account; and
- The introduction of amendments to the CATSI Act, to improve the operations of the Act and to strengthen governance processes for Indigenous organisations.

As well as the legislation, since our last appearance, we have also:

- Supported the delivery of the Commonwealth's Implementation Plan for the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, which included more than \$1 billion in additional investments;
- Continued support to the three co-design groups for the Indigenous Voice to deliver their final report to Government, which was provided to the Minister on the 30<sup>th</sup> of July;
- commenced public consultations on the Indigenous Skills and Employment Program that will replace a range of current employment programs, and held roundtables for the National Roadmap to advance Indigenous skills, jobs and wealth creation;
- started the development of the Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan; and
- we are nearing completion of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy in partnership with the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care.

We continue to work across the Australian Public Service to embed the Priority Reforms outlined in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, including working in partnership with Indigenous communities over the long-term to deliver systemic change.

Our commitment to empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to share in decision-making through partnership arrangements will help ensure Indigenous voices, ideas, aspirations and views are heard and incorporated into policy development and program delivery.

Genuine partnerships will be a key part of the Agency's ongoing engagement with Indigenous Australians. These arrangements may look different from place to place, and program to program, but in all cases, they will help us better understand policy problems, overcome policy deadlocks, allow for joint ownership of an issue, and support the development of innovative solutions that work on the ground.

The Government is committed to high-quality engagement processes with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, where communities and organisations can negotiate and implement agreements *with* governments, and to do so in ways that are built on trust, transparency and respect.

Just briefly, for Senator Ayres, we received your CDP data request on Monday and I'm pleased to say we are in a position to table the information at this hearing. I'd like to caveat the data with the fact that, while we have undertaken our best efforts to assure the quality of the data, it relies on inputs from CDP providers and is therefore subject to change once those inputs are reconciled. We will advise the Committee should any changes occur.

Finally, I wish to advise the Committee that since our last appearance and since I have been Acting Chief Executive Officer, I have met with the parties involved with resolving the use of the Aboriginal flag on a number of occasions.

Negotiations are continuing and, as we have previously indicated, Mr Thomas wishes for these discussions to remain private. NIAA would like to continue to respect that today. I assure you we are continuing to progress this matter as a priority and I appreciate the Committee's patience.

I thank the Committee and welcome your questions.