

Senate Estimates October 2020

National Indigenous Australians Agency CEO Opening Statement

Good morning Chair and Senators.

[Ngoonawal language]

Dhawura nguna dhawura Ngoonawal

Yanggu ngalamanyin dhunimanyin

Ngoonawalwari dhawurawari Dindi waggiralidjinyin

[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.

This year, which of course has been dominated by the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, has been significant for the entire public service. The National Indigenous Australians Agency has played its part, as part of a broader team of Government and non-Government stakeholders to minimise the impact of COVID-19 on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

We have been, and continue to be, acutely aware of the risks that COVID-19 presents to Indigenous communities, particularly those in remote and very-remote Australia. The results of this team effort to date have been very impressive. But, as always, complacency remains the biggest threat and as an Agency we continue to play our part to keep Indigenous Australia relatively COVID-free.

In our appearances before the Senate Select Committee on COVID-19, we covered our efforts in responding to the pandemic, but I think it is worth highlighting for this Committee some of the specific activities that we were involved in.

- We seconded 82 staff to other Departments, predominantly to Services Australia and the Department of Social Services as part of the broader APS surge effort to address the immediate calls for assistance. Internally, more than 600 staff pivoted to focus on managing the consequences of the pandemic.
- We undertook a coordination role in facilitating the introduction and subsequent removal of the remote travel restrictions.

- We established a remote food security working group, bringing together key parties in the remote retail and supply chain sectors to rapidly address issues impacting food security in remote communities.
- And we worked closely with all of our more than 1150 funded organisations delivering just over 2,000 activities to adjust payment schedules and apply flexible arrangements to ensure they remained viable, were supported to continue their service delivery where it was safe to do so, and were prepared to resume services when local restrictions allowed.

Since our last appearance, we have also made substantive progress on a number of nationally significant government initiatives.

In July, the new National Agreement on Closing the Gap was finalised. This was the result of 18 months of sustained work with State and Territory Governments, the Australian Local Government Association, and the more than 50 members of the Coalition of Indigenous Peak Organisations.

This is a historic achievement, being the first time such an agreement has been developed in genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled service delivery organisations. It was a robust, lengthy and, at times, difficult negotiation – as you would expect in negotiating an Agreement of this importance.

With more regular reporting and broader accountability, I am confident this agreement will positively change the way governments work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Our efforts are now directed towards supporting the development of the Commonwealth's implementation plan. This will outline the actions that Departments and Agencies will take to deliver on the Agreement.

Our work in supporting the development of options for an Indigenous Voice has also been a significant undertaking and is progressing well.

Since the commencement of the process in October 2019, we have facilitated more than 70 co-design group meetings, working group meetings and member discussions across the three co-design groups. Through this series the 52 group members have discussed, contested and developed a range of options and models.

The co-design groups and Senior Advisory Group have finalised proposals and recommendations in an interim report, which captures the robust deliberations through the process. This report will be delivered to the Minister for Indigenous Australians today for Government's consideration. This will mark the completion the first stage of the process.

On the matter of the Aboriginal Flag, which I know is of great public interest. Our discussions with Mr Harold Thomas and the licensees to resolve the current divisiveness of this issue are continuing.

We note the recommendations from the Senate Select Committee on the Aboriginal Flag and wish to assure this Committee that we are seeking to resolve this matter in a timely, fair and reasonable manner. As I have stated in evidence to the Aboriginal Flag Inquiry, these discussions are complex and delicate, and based on goodwill and trust. Mr Thomas has asked for these discussions to remain confidential at this point and NIAA intends to respect this.

Organisationally, we are continuing the reform journey to maximise the effectiveness of the Agency, investing in and developing our people, and ensuring our structure best positions us to enact the Government's policies to improve the lives of Indigenous Australians.

We have continued to reform grants management, by establishing a Grant Management Unit to manage the transactional elements of the process and free up our regional community engagement staff to better focus on the needs of community.

Following the establishment of the Grants Management Unit, we restructured the way some of our regional offices operated and merged our two north Queensland regions into a single region.

We have been working at giving effect to the Commonwealth Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Workforce Strategy through the introduction of two new initiatives for the Agency's Indigenous staff. One is a mentoring and professional development program for our younger staff and the other a management development program.

These programs will help build the capability of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, supporting the next generation of Indigenous leaders to reach their potential and see their perspectives represented at all levels across the APS, in management and in senior leadership positions.

Our first full year as an Executive Agency has seen significant and tangible progress and has been covered in our inaugural Annual report which was tabled this week. We look forward to continuing our contribution to improving the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

I thank the committee and welcome your questions.

[1020 words. Approximately 6m 45s]