

SENATE FINANCE AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

LEGISLATION COMMITTEE

Public Hearing - Budget Estimates

Cross Portfolio Indigenous matters

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Pennie Talbot

Executive Director of Township Leasing

Opening statement

Good morning Senators,

I acknowledge the Ngunnawal and Ngambri Traditional Owners. I pay my respects to your families and elders, and I thank you for allowing me to gather on your country with my colleagues, Ms. Annette Murtagh and Ms. Penny Brown. I would also like to pay my respects to all other Traditional Owners who have walked this land before us and all of us that are now responsible for our ancestral lands, stories and families across this nation. Furthermore, I acknowledge and pay respect to my sisters, brothers and colleagues in the room today.

My name is Pennie Talbot and I thank you for the opportunity to discuss the Township Lease Model and the work undertaken by my Office, the Office of Township Leasing.

It is a privilege to be in a position of true partnership with Traditional Owners and one that I hold in the highest regard, and I acknowledge the lasting influence of the late Mantiyupwi Tiwi leader Mr. Walter Kerinaiaua, the grandfather of Township Leasing.

It is Mr. Kerinaiaua's Vision that inspired the "Township Leasing Model". His words "*I want to empower my people by providing choices; choices that we in the bush have never had before*" were instrumental in establishing the Model and embedding a true and lasting "Partnership" between the Executive Director and Traditional Owners. A leader before his time, his Vision continues to have an intergenerational impact on his family and community.

Importantly, it is this Vision that underpins and influences the strong foundation of the Township Lease Model; providing a platform to enable and drive choice for other Aboriginal Traditional Owners, families and communities. I would like to take a moment to thank the Kerinaiaua and Mantiyupwi families for leading the way and allowing us to continue to integrate Mr. Kerinaiaua's Vision.

The Model is embedded in the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976*, the strongest form of land rights and beneficial legislation across the nation, I acknowledge our elders, past leaders and the Land Councils for fighting for this right.

The primary objective behind the Section 19A amendment strengthens this right and "to enable Aboriginal people to have the same opportunities as other Australians living in towns" by providing the mechanism to establish secure, tradeable land tenure for Townships established

on Aboriginal land whilst maintaining the underlying Aboriginal land title and ongoing cultural responsibilities.

Building on culturally legitimate decision-making structures and ensuring space and time for Traditional Owners to make free, prior and informed decisions, is fundamental to the ongoing success of the Model, whether it be through the governing arrangement of a Community Entity or the partnership approach of the Consultative Forum with the Executive Director.

In this partnered decision-making environment, Traditional Owners are central to all decisions made in relation to the land and economic development under their Township Lease. This has led to social and economic development based on cultural and environmental knowledge, established joint venture opportunities and embedded development based on planning principles. First and foremost, the governing environment supports choice; providing a trusted space to enable robust discussion and informed decisions, upheld by the Office whether proposals are supported or not supported. I see my role to support and enable decisions, not be the decision maker.

I am aware that the Model has been criticised as removing choice and disempowering Traditional Owners; nothing has been further from the truth. Since its inception I have been privileged to see, Traditional Owners being empowered to drive their aspirations through the Model and the Consultative Forum mechanism. I am disappointed in the political paradigm that has and continues to undermine the Model and detract other Traditional Owners groups exploring Township Leasing as a potential platform to enable their aspirations, whether or not they choose to proceed with the Model.

I will continue to work closely with key stakeholders including Traditional Owners, the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) and Land Councils to empower Traditional Owners to advance economic and social opportunities through the implementation of a robust Township Lease Model.

To achieve this, my Office has developed a Draft Township Leasing Framework. It will ensure that in implementing the Model, Traditional Owners are at the centre, from the initial engagement, through to agreement making, the delivery of land administration arrangements and realisation of economic development opportunities, and are empowered to make informed

decisions throughout all stages of their Township Leasing journey.

As the Model has established itself, more Traditional Owners have expressed an interest in the Model, it is imperative that the Office alongside the Land Councils continues to share this information and knowledge.

The Kardu Diminin Traditional Owners of Wadeye, are in their early stages of this journey and have requested information to support their Clan Group and inform discussions on the Model, so that they can establish whether it is an appropriate option to drive their aspirations for their land and support the economic and social advancement of all 22 Clan Groups in their community.

Kardu Diminin recently visited the Tiwi Islands at the invitation of the Mantiyupwi and Wulirankuwu families, to observe the partnered decision-making embedded in their respective Consultative Forums and to discuss their lived experiences.

In feedback provided by Kardu Diminin, *“the [Consultative Forum] meetings success came from a combination of [Office of Township Leasing] representatives and Traditional Owners and the fact that everyone was engaging with one another. They were listening to any and all views and you could instantly see the comfort and trust amongst everyone”*.

As the Model evolves alongside the ever-changing socio-economic environments, and with new Traditional Owner groups seeking this knowledge, the importance of the Framework is becoming more evident. Ongoing collaboration with my Commonwealth colleagues, to establish the Township Leasing Authorising Environment that will provide certainty, clarity and equity also continues to support this work.

Establishing an agreed, equitable and streamlined approach to informing Traditional Owners of the tenure options for their Townships will greatly increase the reach of the Township Leasing Model and deliver the benefits of secure, tradable tenure to more Aboriginal people across the Northern Territory.

In developing the Framework and Authorising Environment Traditional Owners can make a free, prior and informed decision if the objective of the Township Lease Model is something they desire.

In addition to a strong Framework guiding the Model, I would also like to highlight the importance of investment, in particular essential services infrastructure. While secure tenure is a necessary precondition for social and economic development, this needs to be followed by sustainable and strategic investment in infrastructure that encourages and enables economic activity within all Townships.

I would like to take this opportunity to highlight two recent and significant events which demonstrate how the Township Lease Model provides self-determination and economic opportunity for Traditional Owners.

It was an honour to work in partnership with the Anindilyakwa Traditional Owners alongside the Anindilyakwa Land Council to transfer the Groote Eylandt Township Lease on 1 October this year. As the first Township Lease to transfer to a Township Lease Community Entity, this is an important milestone in the self-management journey and vision of the people of the Groote Eylandt Archipelago. I will continue to work alongside the Anindilyakwa people as they advance their land administration and governing arrangements, ensuring the transfer of knowledge and experience.

It is an important evolution of the Model and the lessons learned will be applied to future transitions of leases held by the Executive Director to Community Entities. If Traditional Owners choose to partner with the Executive Director, work on building strong and sustainable foundations to empower Traditional Owners to govern and administer their traditional lands if, and when, they are ready to transition should be a central and positive obligation for the Executive Director.

I would also like to congratulate the Wulirankuwu Traditional Owners on their purchase of the Melville Island Fishing Lodge, a successful tourism business in Milikapiti on the Tiwi Islands. A business opportunity that presented Wulirankuwu Traditional Owners the first right of purchase based on commercial applied principles. In partnership with the Tiwi Land Council and NIAA, the Lodge officially opened under the Wulirankuwu family's ownership in March 2022. It has received outstanding reviews to date and continues to have solid bookings. Business planning and support facilitated by the Office has ensured the operating model for the Lodge supports the strong Tiwi focus.

The success of the Melville Island Fishing Lodge is an important example of community led social and economic development in remote communities, including real jobs and the flow on effect for other businesses and the local economy and the power of the Township Leasing Model to realise these opportunities.

Choice is something many take for granted and something some may never have. Choice drives agency and self-determination and creates partnerships based on collaboration and trust. Each Traditional Owner group and Township is different; however, all Traditional Owner groups through the model have been empowered by choice; choice as an individual, choice for their families and choice for their communities.

Choice is fundamentally a human right, Mr Kerinauia has established the foundations, the, Anindilyakwa, Gumatj, Mirrar, Anangu and Tiwi's families continue this legacy and lead the way. I encourage all stakeholders to follow and continue the partnership to realise an alternative future for our remote Townships and Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory.

I thank my colleagues in the Office and for their ongoing commitment, I look forward to building on this Vision in partnership with Traditional Owners and key stakeholders.

Thank you.