

14 October 2022

To whom it may concern

Inquiry into Community Safety, Support Services and Job Opportunities in the Northern Territory

I write to you on behalf of the Central Desert Regional Council, elected members and residents in response to the Inquiry into Community Safety, Support Services and Job Opportunities in the Northern Territory.

Central Desert Regional Council (CDRC) is located in the central southern section of the Northern Territory, lying north of Alice Springs. Central Desert Regional Council is named to describe its location and geography in the central part of Australia and encompassing the Tanami Desert. The land area is 282,093km² and CDRC manages 1,769 kilometres of roads.

The total estimated resident population in the Central Desert Region is 4,124. The original inhabitants of the Central Desert Regional Council area were the Anmatjere, Arrernte and Warlpiri Aboriginal people. The census population of the Council area increased during the early 1990s, rising from about 4,000 in 1991 to nearly 5,000 in 1996. The population then gradually declined, falling to about 4,222 in 2016 and even slightly further to 4,124 in 2021.

The communities in the Central Desert are Lajamanu, Anmatjere (Ti Tree), Wilora, Nturiya, Pmara Jutunta, Willowra, Laramba, Nyirripi, Yuelamu, Atitjere, Engawala and Yuendumu. There are also several homelands and outstations.

In respect to my submission, this will be in particular reference to points (a), (b), (c), (d) and (e) of the Inquiry's Terms of Reference:

(a) the preparation for the sunseting of the Stronger Futures legislation;

Commentary

In the months preceding the sunseting of the *Stronger Futures Act, 2012* Council participated in a number of activities, which included:

- Notifying our community residents through Local Authority meetings of the changes in legislation, explanation of 'what next' which included presentations by representatives from the Department of Chief Minister and Cabinet
- Discussion with our Council on their community feedback as to the opt in/out
- Discussion with communities who wanted to establish licenced social clubs and provision of support to initiate these discussions

- Dissemination of fact sheets and maps to our community residents that explain the areas impacted by the cessation of the *Stronger Futures Act, 2012*.

The preparation work was predominately focused on the provision of information with the aim of explaining to residents after the fact as to what the changes meant however did not prepare residents to:

- Clearly evaluate the intervention due to no statistics available or the absence of measurable data to show the before and after i.e. reduction of alcohol related incidents on community since intervention
- Better understand the meaning of the intervention's end visually or statistically
- Know what current referral programs are in place and their effectiveness particularly in remote communities
- Know what early intervention programs exist for remote residents
- Know how to access essential services in remote particularly Police and health services which are not in situ in all remote communities in central Australia.

The preparation work unfortunately is ongoing as the deadline for communities or areas impacted to make a decision to opt-in is in January 2023. Residents did experience lack of clarity in regards to who was the responsible entity for leading consultations with some communities in our catchment still uncertain that the Land Council was the custodian of this process.

Despite the above efforts, residents also experienced confusion as to the meaning of the cessation of the *Stronger Futures Act, 2012* with some believing that when the Act ceased it meant all areas were now wet areas, resulting in an influx of alcohol into our dry communities for a few weeks after cessation. This was not the case for areas covered under the NT Liquor Act, which reverted to Generally Restricted Areas (GRAs) meaning no alcohol allowed in those communities, with some requiring a permit issued by the Liquor Commissioner under the provisions of the NT Liquor Act.

(b) community safety and alcohol management;

Commentary

Council provides community safety patrol services in a number of our communities where we capture data related to the type of incidents encountered by our patrolling officers. These patrols taking place 5 days a weeks from an average shift covering 5:30pm – 12am, Tuesday-Saturday (2-4 staff on per night). There has been an anecdotal increase in alcohol related violence in a number of our communities following the cessation of the *Stronger Futures Act, 2012*. This alcohol related violence extends to domestic violence, damage to property, vandalism and injury.

Management of alcohol has been challenging as only 4 of our 9 remote communities have Police officers in situ with the remainder receiving visiting services. Residents have also raised safety concerns and frustration of having to call 000 or the 131 444 number and being triaged by Darwin or Alice Springs for local emergencies when they have local officers on the ground – residents have requested a look at how this can be better coordinated locally for a timely response.

Not limited to resources, local community Police face challenges to effectively manage the illegal trafficking of alcohol into dry remote communities due to the large geographical area and the number of back roads in and out of communities.

The impact of the cessation has seen an increase in an unproductive workforce with more staff taking longer than usual periods off when they are paid and travelling to Alice Springs where they can access alcohol.

Since the cessation, we have also seen an increase in the number of our workforce stranded in Alice Springs with no money to return to country due to finishing their fortnightly pays which anecdotally is related to over indulgence in alcohol and the casino.

There have also been an increase in the number of remote road accidents due to driving under the influence and this is another resourcing challenge for the Police to manage spot checks for drivers.

Lack of visibility of the early intervention programs and their existence for remote residents remains a main factor to the effective management of alcohol on community with closer attention paid to understanding the social determinants associated with alcohol consumption so as to establish targeted response.

Freedom of choice was a critical part that was raised by some residents in remote communities who felt that the Act eroded this choice and its cessation meant that they could make their own decisions that suited their own circumstances like other citizens of Australia.

(c) job opportunities and Community Development Program reform;

Commentary

Central Desert Regional Council is a Community Development Program (CDP) provider in the North West Alice Region NT (Region 25). The CDP program has an impact on the lives of tens of thousands of Indigenous Australians living in remote communities. Our communities have expressed their strong desires for youth to remain on country to be employed on country and to continue their storylines and heritage to ensure continued preservation of aboriginal culture, which is being eroded, as there is insufficient local jobs and long-term outcomes for indigenous Australians living remote.

Current model after the removal of mutual obligations does not work. It has led to the visible imbalance or erosion of basic social constructs/norms where parents who previously under mutual obligations woke up and went to work to access their payments now no longer have to – leading to an increase in children not going to school, increased antisocial behaviour and low interest in participation in activities by residents. The challenges of the current CDP design was that it had:

- Limited availability of training providers or their willingness to travel remote communities
- Inadequate supply of local jobs on major projects and when awarded the jobs are short term – however recent projects such as the Tanami sealing project and new housing builds are longer term projects that will give residents the opportunity to develop new skills and trades together with the longer term employment fulfilment
- Inflexibility of CDP funding agreements to design local or place based activities that meet the requirements of participants and communities – currently there is limited flexibility and activities need to be approved by NIAA
- Regional employment targets set by NIAA are not always reflective of the local jobs available to residents and are generally higher than what is actually achievable in practice.

Our CDP is moving to a placed based model of operation to ensure that services are available on community with respect to case management and activity design with targeted local based solutions and attractions to training and local job opportunities

Our Council is actively working with the Territory Government, local businesses and not-for-profits to seek long-term investment in creating jobs in remote communities that promote positive economic development and long-term skills development.

As a Council, we also welcome the CDP trial where 25% of current funding can be used towards the design of initiatives that create real jobs, proper wages and decent conditions for participants set to commence 1 November 2022 to 30 June 2023.

(d) justice reinvestment community services; and

Commentary

Council is supportive of justice reinvestment, which is an approach to reduce corrections spending and re-direct savings to other criminal justice strategies that decrease crime and strengthen communities. The NT spends over \$380 per day per individual in incarceration. Council supports a system of criminal justice that focuses on the rehabilitation of offenders through reconciliation with victims and the community at large. The proposed outcomes of this approach are:

1. Reduction in NT Indigenous prison numbers, prison over-crowding and recidivism.
2. Early release of prisoners into on-country work orders, providing supervision, Aboriginal cultural care which ensures timely return of indigenous prisoners back to country.

3. Provide the criminal justice system with a direct alternative to imprisonment, thus avoiding the prison system.
4. Provide appropriate and effective cultural management and client through-care support services.
5. Provision of post-release employment within their home community through the provision of skills training and a pathway to paid employment.
6. Provide a path to change the existing indigenous community profile of disadvantage.
7. Facilitate an Indigenous empowerment model in collaboration with the NT & Federal Governments.
8. Provide tangible Aboriginal community development of social capital, essential services and infrastructure.
9. Facilitate a community-housing program providing Aboriginal jobs throughout the region.
10. Provide a community based, cost effective alternative to prison, high surveillance policing and the expensive criminal justice system.
11. Facilitate a culturally appropriate education and training environment for local indigenous males, providing cross cultural skills and knowledge.
12. Proactively work to change current anti-social patterns of behaviour.

The NT Community Corrections collaborates with Central Desert Regional Council to deliver community work projects; projects benefit the community, the environment and/or those who are less fortunate. Community work projects in remote communities benefit our residents by reducing the numbers of people removed from their country to undertake a period of incarceration. This means participants are likely to remain with family and connected to community.

Community work projects also provide the opportunity for suitably assessed individuals with outstanding fines and penalties to 'work off' their debt; this can reduce participants' debt and contribute to the community.

(e) *any related matters – Nil.*

Should you require further information, or have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

Leslie Manda
Chief Executive Officer, Central Desert Regional Council