



CENTRAL LAND COUNCIL

**Submission to the
Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia's
*Inquiry into Northern Australia Workforce Development***

January 2023

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Recommendations

Recommendation 1: That the Committee draw on the breadth of evidence presented by Indigenous organisations and stakeholders through recent parliamentary inquiries into matters of Indigenous economic participation, education and training, including previous submission on the northern Australia development agenda.

Recommendation 2: That the Committee consider issues of workforce development in northern Australia with reference to the Federal Government's wider policy agenda, including:

- Commitment to the full implementation of the Uluru Statement from the Heart (Voice, Treaty, Truth).
- Commitments under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.
- The wider Jobs and Skills agenda, in particular the commitment to scrap CDP.
- Commitment to action on climate change and ecosystem protection.

Recommendation 3: That Closing the Gap in employment between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people is a central goal of any strategy for northern Australian workforce development.

Recommendation 4: That workforce development strategies prioritise sectors that contribute to the health and wellbeing of people and country, and facilitate the equitable, sustainable development of northern Australia.

Recommendation 5: That workforce development strategies to support the economic development of northern Australia embrace opportunities aligned with the transition to a low carbon economy.

Recommendation 6: That the Federal Government works closely with Aboriginal communities and organisations to inform the design of a new approach to remote employment services, and that this new approach focuses on local job creation and the strengthening of Aboriginal community-control, reflecting the key elements of the APO NT *Fair Work and Strong Communities* proposal.

Recommendation 7: That the Federal Government substantially increase the funding available for appropriate, quality Vocational Education and Training in remote Aboriginal communities, including sufficient and sustained funding for Language, Literacy and Numeracy programs.

Recommendation 8: That the Committee make reference to the input of Indigenous stakeholders in the current consultations on the *Future delivery of foundation skills training in remote Australia*.

Recommendation 9: That governments to commit to the provision of secondary schooling in remote communities to at least Year 10.

Recommendation 10: That a new remote employment program to replace CDP include dedicated funding for community-led youth engagement strategies and youth traineeships in remote communities.

Recommendation 11: That the Federal and Northern Territory Governments commit to increased investment under the new National Partnership Remote Housing Partnership Agreement in the NT (NPRHNT) to be negotiated when the current NPRHNT expires to guarantee that the NT meets the Closing the Gap over-crowding target of 18 per cent by 2031.

Recommendation 12: That homelands are formally recognised as part of the housing continuum, irrespective of land tenure, with ongoing and additional funding allocated as part of a future remote housing partnership agreement.

Recommendation 13: That the Federal and Northern Territory Governments work with land councils and other key Indigenous stakeholders to establish a new remote infrastructure funding partnership agreement that meets the current and future need for essential service infrastructure across NT communities and homelands.

Recommendation 14: That the Federal and Northern Territory Governments continue to work to address the road infrastructure needs of the NT, and ensure that opportunities for local employment and procurement are embedded in the planning of any road infrastructure projects.

Recommendation 15: That the Federal Government accelerate work to connect remote communities to affordable, reliable and fast phone and internet services.

Recommendation 16: Building on the welcome doubling of investment in Indigenous ranger programs, the Federal Government continue to increase investment in Aboriginal-led ranger programs, commensurate with the urgency and scale of work required to address the biodiversity and climate crises.

Recommendation 17: Any new funding for ranger programs includes funding for supporting infrastructure. The establishment of a Ranger Program Infrastructure Fund would enable ranger program providers to replace ageing assets, purchase new assets and construct better remote facilities. Infrastructure improvements will immediately improve ranger program employment outcomes.

Recommendation 18: That there is a sustained commitment by the Federal and Northern Territory Governments to the gradual transition of remote housing back to Aboriginal community control, consistent with the priority reforms of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

Recommendation 19: That additional partnership funds in a new ten-year NPRHNT include funding for the development and implementation of a comprehensive Aboriginal Housing Industry Development Plan.

Recommendation 20: That a new NPRHNT includes targets for *local* Aboriginal employment and procurement in the new agreement.

Recommendation 21: That a new NPRHNT includes ongoing funding for the Healthy Homes program.

Recommendation 22: The renewable energy and mining project proponents commit to strong agreement-making in line with best practice principles that ensure substantive benefits to traditional owners and local Aboriginal people from any project.

Recommendation 23: That Education departments invest in and set annual targets for the training and mentoring of Aboriginal Assistant Teachers and develop pathways and incentives to enable progression to full teaching qualifications.

Recommendation 24: That the Committee's Inquiry include examination of strategies to increase opportunities for local Aboriginal employment in the health and social care sector, including with reference to recommendations by AMANT in relation to the Aboriginal primary care sector.

Recommendation 25: That governments work together to address the legislative, administrative and practical barriers to obtaining identification and pre-employment checks for Aboriginal people living in remote communities.

About the Central Land Council

The Central Land Council (CLC) is a Commonwealth corporate entity established under the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976 (ALRA), with statutory responsibilities for Aboriginal land acquisition and land management in the southern half of the Northern Territory (NT). The CLC is also a Native Title Representative Body established under the Native Title Act 1993 (NTA).

Pursuant to ALRA, more than 50 per cent of the NT and more than 85 per cent of the NT coastline is now held by Aboriginal Land Trusts on behalf of traditional owners. A further 253,886 square kilometres of land and water is also held under native title.

Of the 780,000 km² of land covered by the CLC region, more than half (417,318 km²) is Aboriginal land under the ALRA. In addition, rights have been asserted and won under the NTA, and traditional owners unable to claim land under the ALRA have succeeded in obtaining rights to small areas known as Community Living Areas, under NT legislation.

Through its elected representative Council of 90 community delegates, the CLC represents the interests and aspirations of approximately 20,000 traditional landowners and other Aboriginal people resident in its region. We advocate for our people on a wide range of land-based, economic and socio-political issues to ensure that our families can continue to survive and thrive on their land.

The CLC is a significant job-creator for Aboriginal people in our region. Of our 265 staff, almost half (44 per cent) are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. In addition to the high proportion of Aboriginal people employed across our full staffing complement, significant training and employment opportunities are generated across the region through our ranger programs and community development projects funded by traditional owners.

Over the past decade, CLC has employed almost 1,000 Aboriginal rangers, and is currently employing 116 Aboriginal people in ranger and ranger support officer positions, comprising the majority of staff in our Land Management division. Since the CLC's Community Development program started in 2005, traditional owner groups have committed \$190.5 million to more than 2,300 projects, ranging from multi-million-dollar, multi-year initiatives to small infrastructure projects, providing substantial employment opportunities across the region. In the 2021-22 financial year alone, traditional owners invested \$21.6 million of their own money through the Community Development Unit to 217 projects, which employed 499 local Aboriginal people for 24,962 hours on projects driven by and for the benefit of their local communities.¹

Responding to the priority placed by our delegates on creating economic opportunities for their people on-country, in 2020, the CLC established a dedicated Economic Participation Unit (EPU). The EPU supports our constituents to access training, employment enterprise opportunities in the region through:

- Supporting local training, employment and procurement outcomes through land rights and native title agreements, including mining and tourism agreements.

¹ CLC Annual Report 2021-2022

- Working with our Community Development Unit and Minerals and Energy Team to support training and employment through community development and mining and exploration projects, including one-on-one support with job readiness and referrals.
- Providing funds to Aboriginal businesses through the ABA Economic Stimulus Program, including funds to create apprenticeship and job opportunities for Aboriginal people.
- Working with government agencies and companies delivering large projects-

The work of our EPU continues to grow and will be looking to:

- Support training, job and enterprise outcomes through CLC-brokered agreements.
- Conduct pilot studies to identify best practice approaches to local workforce development, job participation and business development.
- Advocate to government and service providers for better Aboriginal training, employment and business outcomes from large government projects.

In addition, the CLC continues to facilitate agreement making with traditional owners that supports economic development and job opportunities in our region.

1. Introduction

The CLC welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia's *Inquiry into Northern Australia Workforce Development*. In the context of the Federal Government's Jobs and Skills agenda and commitment to Closing the Gap, we particularly welcome the Inquiry's focus on better enabling the economic participation of Indigenous people, along with a focus on the necessary social as well as economic infrastructure to support economic development. This submission focuses on better enabling workforce participation of Aboriginal people living in remote communities in the Central Australian region.

The Central Land Council has wholeheartedly welcomed the Federal Government's commitment to implementing the Uluru Statement from the Heart in full. The actions called for in the Uluru Statement – *Voice, Treaty and Truth* – collectively require an honest examination of past policies and their impacts on First Nations people, and a concerted shift to put First Nations people in control over decisions that affect their lives and the resources to effect change. Echoing the point made by Aboriginal Peak Organisations NT (APO NT) in its submission to the Treasury Employment White Paper consultation process, we assert that it is not for Aboriginal people living in remote Australia to overcome the barriers of political inertia that constrain their economic opportunity. We bring this lens to our submission. Providing the means and opportunity for Aboriginal people to participate in the workforce of northern Australia, to determine the direction of economic development and to share in its benefits, must be first order priorities.

This submission focuses on parts 'a' and 'd' of the Inquiry's terms of reference:

- **Section 2** focus on trends in northern Australia that influence Aboriginal workforce participation in our region.
- **Section 3** focuses on opportunities to increase employment opportunities and workforce participation for Aboriginal people ('empowering and upskilling the local Indigenous population').

Section 3 includes a series of **case studies** with effective strategies to increase local Aboriginal workforce participation.

1.1 Recent related inquiries

We note that this inquiry follows numerous recent parliamentary inquiries by this Committee and others on similar subjects. This includes:

- Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia's 2019 *Inquiry into engaging traditional owners in the economic development of northern Australia*, to which the CLC provided a [submission](#) and [supplementary submission](#).
- House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs' 2019 *Inquiry into Pathways and Participation Opportunities for Indigenous Australians in Employment and Business*, in which the CLC participated via a [joint submission](#) as a member of APO NT.
- Senate Select Committee on the Effectiveness of the Australian Government's Northern Australia Agenda's 2019 *Inquiry into the Effectiveness of the Australian Government's Northern Australia Agenda*.

- House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training’s 2021 *Inquiry into Adult Literacy and its Importance*, to which the CLC provided a [submission](#).
- House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training’s 2019 *Inquiry into Education in Remote and Complex Environments*, to which the CLC provided a [submission](#).

We encourage the Committee to ensure that the substantial work that informed these inquiries is not lost, and informs this current inquiry.

We also note the consultation process currently being undertaken by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR), as an outcome of the Jobs and Skills Summit, on the future delivery of foundation skills in remote Australia², which has substantial relevance to this inquiry.

Recommendation 1: That the Committee draw on the breadth of evidence presented by Indigenous organisations and stakeholders through recent parliamentary inquiries into matters of Indigenous economic participation, education and training, including previous submissions on the northern Australia development agenda.

1.2 Relationship to the broader policy and reform agenda

It is important that this inquiry is undertaken with reference to the wider policy and reform environment. In particular:

1. The Federal Government’s commitment to implement the **Uluru Statement from the Heart** which invites a formal and enduring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament, agreement making (treaty) that shifts power and resources to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to control matters that affect their lives, and truth-telling about their history.
2. The **National Agreement on Closing the Gap**, through which all levels of government across Australia have committed to policy-making in full and genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.³ Efforts towards workforce development in northern Australia must have the explicit goal of closing the gap in employment, education and training⁴ and contribute to reducing the disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across all other domains identified under the agreement.

Efforts must also align with the outcomes sought through the agreement’s priority reforms that seek to change way governments work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, namely:

- i) Sharing decision-making authority (*Priority Reform 1*)
- ii) Building the Aboriginal community-controlled sector (*Priority Reform 2*)
- iii) Transforming mainstream government agencies (*Priority Reform 3*)
- iv) Sharing data and information (*Priority Reform 4*).

² Australian Government Department of Workplace Relations (DEWR) (2022) Future delivery of foundation skills training in remote Australia ([weblink](#))

³ National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2020), paragraph 18 ([weblink](#))

⁴ See Socio-economic Targets 7 and 8, National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2020) ([weblink](#))

3. The Federal Government's **wider jobs and skills agenda**, including commitment to:
 - **Scrap CDP** and replace it with a "new program with real jobs, proper wages and decent conditions – developed in partnership with First Nations People."⁵
 - Improve access to jobs and training pathways for First Nations people, as an outcome of the Jobs and Skills Summit that is informing the development of the **Employment White Paper**.
 - **Increased investment in Vocational Education and Training (VET)** through a new National Skills Agreement.
 - **Reinvigorate Commonwealth foundation skills programs**, particularly focusing on the design and delivery of these programs in remote Australia (see DEWR consultation process noted above). This focus is consistent with the vision and principles endorsed by National Cabinet for the new National Skills Agreement, namely ensuring that all Australians, particularly First Nations people, including those who live in remote areas, have access the education, training and support needed to obtain well-paid, secure jobs.⁶
4. The Federal Government's legislated commitment to **action on climate change**, including targets to reduce emissions by 2030 and 2050⁷; the commitment to a co-designed First Nations Clean Energy Strategy to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people **share in the benefits of the renewables transition**,⁸ and policy targets for **ecosystem protection** reflected in the *Threatened Species Action Plan 2022-2032*.

Recommendation 2: That the Committee consider issues of workforce development in northern Australia with reference to the Federal Government's wider policy agenda, including:

- Commitment to the full implementation of the **Uluru Statement from the Heart**.
- Commitments under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.
- The wider Jobs and Skills agenda, in particular the commitment to scrap CDP.
- Commitment to action on climate change and ecosystem protection.

⁵ See election commitments: www.alp.org.au/policies/first-nations

⁶ DEWR (2022) National Skills Agreement: Vision and Principles, endorsed 31 August 2022 ([weblink](#))

⁷ Climate Change Act 2022 ([weblink](#))

⁸ Joint Media Release: Delivering Australia's climate and energy transformation, 25 October 2022, The Hon. Chris Bowen MP, Minister for Climate Change and Energy, Senator the Hon Jenny McAllister, Assistant Minister for Climate Change and Energy ([weblink](#))

2. Trends

This section focuses on the latter part of part a of the Inquiry's terms of reference, highlighting *'trends in northern Australia that influence (...) Indigenous economic participation.'*

2.1 A widening employment gap and deepening poverty

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are the original and continuing custodians of the land and waters of northern Australia, as they are of the rest of the continent. As outlined above, under ALRA and the NTA, Aboriginal people have title to the majority of land in the NT. Unique to the NT, Aboriginal people have freehold tenure over 50 per cent of the NT's landmass and much of the remainder is subject to native title interests.

In addition to such substantial landholdings, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people comprise almost one third of NT's population (30.8 per cent⁹). Outside major towns, this rises to more than 80 per cent of the population. This reflects that fact that around three quarters of Aboriginal people in the NT live outside regional centres, and more than half (58 per cent) live in very remote areas.¹⁰ In contrast to the high levels of transience of the NT's non-Aboriginal population, Aboriginal people represent a long-term, stable remote workforce.

The size of the Aboriginal population, scale of Aboriginal landholdings, and unique rights and interests in country, mean that Aboriginal people are the paramount stakeholders in the future of the NT and northern Australia. Yet the agenda for 'developing the north' has been slow to recognise Indigenous interests.¹¹ This cannot continue. **As we look ahead, Indigenous people must be at the centre of the policy framework for economic development for the region: with a central role in determining the nature of economic development in the region, and as beneficiaries of that development.**

In this context, the workforce development agenda must directly acknowledge and seek to address the yawning employment gap experienced by Indigenous people. The NT's Indigenous employment rate continues to be the lowest in the country¹² – and the gap is widening. Over the last decade we have seen a decline from 42.8 per cent of Indigenous people aged 25-64 employed in 2011, to 35.4 per cent in 2016 and 34.3 per cent in 2021.¹³

This is well below the national Indigenous employment rate of 55.7 per cent¹⁴ and even further below the Closing the Gap target to see 62 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 25-64 employed by 2030.¹⁵ The Indigenous employment rate is even lower in remote areas.

⁹ 2012 Australian Bureau of Statistics Census data ([here](#)), a slight increase on the population in 2016 (30.3 per cent) ([here](#)).

¹⁰ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *2016 Census Counts – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (by Remoteness Area)*.

¹¹ Adequate recognition of Aboriginal interests was absent from the White Paper on Developing the North, and belatedly improved with the establishment of the Indigenous Reference Group and subsequent development of the Northern Australia Indigenous Development Accord.

¹² While for non-Indigenous people, the NT has the highest employment rate in the country (86.2 per cent of non-Indigenous people aged 25-64 employed, based on analysis of 2021 ABS Census data by the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (unpublished)

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Closing the Gap Socioeconomic Outcomes and Targets, Target 8 ([weblink](#))

High rates of joblessness correlate with deepening levels of poverty for Aboriginal people out bush. While nationally, Indigenous poverty rates have been declining slowly over the past decade, poverty in our remote communities is climbing¹⁶ (see figures 1 and 2 below).

Figure 1. Proportion population employed (25-64 years)
(2021 ABS data, unpublished)

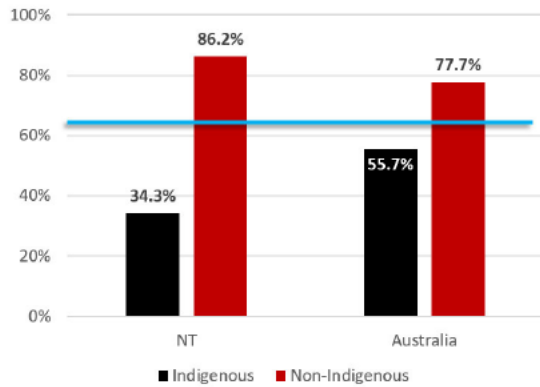
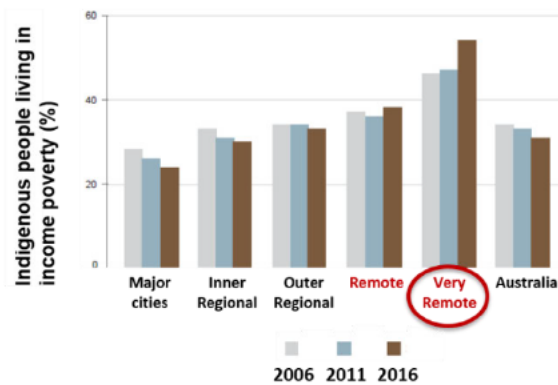


Figure 2. Indigenous poverty rates by remoteness
(Markham and Biddle 2018)



Given the stark realities of employment and poverty experienced by Indigenous people, and particularly those living in our remote communities, the Inquiry’s focus on Indigenous economic participation is therefore welcome. Any efforts to develop the workforce in northern Australia must focus on closing the employment gap experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Recommendation 3: That Closing the Gap in employment between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people is a central goal of any strategy for northern Australian workforce development.

2.2 Misalignment of sector development and employment opportunities

Industries historically prioritised for growth in northern Australia do not create jobs in significant numbers for Aboriginal people, in particular for Aboriginal people living in remote communities.

At both a Federal and Territory level, the sectors typically held up as promising to drive economic growth in the CLC’s region include largescale mining and petroleum operations, pastoralism and large-scale agriculture.¹⁷

Traditional owners benefit from mining and energy projects through the receipt of individual benefits, and the use of royalty equivalent and rent payments for community development projects facilitated by CLC. However, the sector typically does not employ traditional owners and other local Aboriginal people in large numbers. The minerals and energy projects operating in the CLC region currently employ just over 150 Aboriginal people (10 per cent of total employment of those projects), the majority of whom are fly-in-fly-out workers from capital cities outside our region. A very small number of traditional owners are employed on these projects.

The relatively low levels of employment generated by the sector is mirrored on a Territory-wide scale. While the sector generates the largest output in dollar terms (Gross State Product), it ranks thirteenth

¹⁶ See Markham, F. and Biddle, N. (2018) *Income, Poverty and Inequality*, 2016 Census Paper 2, CAEPR, ANU

¹⁷ See Australian Government (2015) *Our North, Our Future: White Paper on Developing Northern Australia*, and NT Government (2020) *Territory Economic Reconstruction Commission Final Report*.

in terms of employment.¹⁸ Collectively, the mining, oil and gas sectors contribute just 2 per cent of jobs in the NT (around 2,500 jobs).¹⁹

Job creation through large-scale agriculture is similarly limited relative to other sectors in the NT, ranking fourteenth (behind mining).²⁰ For example, a recent report commissioned by the CLC from the University of South Australia analysing the economic benefit claims of the Singleton Horticulture Project in the Barkly region, highlighted that a majority of agricultural jobs in the NT go to overseas workers and interstate fly-ins, and that a large proportion of non-labour operating costs are not spent locally (more often, interstate or overseas).²¹ The analysis concluded that the project is likely to generate only 26-36 full-time equivalent jobs filled by residents of the NT, of which only five to eight full-time equivalent jobs are expected to be from nearby Aboriginal communities in the Barkly.²²

Not only is the local benefit of these sectors often overstated in terms of jobs and contribution to local economies, their promotion also largely ignores the threats they pose to our long-term prosperity and wellbeing through environmental degradation, emissions generation and threats to water security.

The sectors that generate the greatest number of jobs in the NT overall are, by a clear margin, public administration and safety, healthcare and social assistance, followed by education and training, construction, retail trade and accommodation and food services.²³ The sectors that employ the highest number of Aboriginal people are public administration and safety, health care and social assistance, and education and training.²⁴ The industries that employ the highest proportion of Aboriginal people are art and recreation services, education and training, and public administration and safety.²⁵

Critically, it is these sectors that not only generate jobs, but also contribute to the wellbeing of our communities, providing the foundation for a strong economy over the long-term. Supporting the growth of local jobs in these sectors, coupled with a reorientation towards more diversified, sustainable land-use and innovative economies should be a priority for the future development of the region.

This includes prioritising Aboriginal-led economic development projects that operate at a sustainable scale and with the intent to directly benefit local communities, such as the Alekarenge Horticultural Work Experience Pilot Project (WEPP) that is coordinated by Centrefarm Aboriginal Horticulture, as part of the broader establishment of the Aboriginal Land Economic Development Agency (ALEDA). This project is discussed further in section 3.4.4 below.

Recommendation 4: That workforce development strategies prioritise sectors that contribute to the health and wellbeing of people and country, and facilitate the equitable, sustainable development of northern Australia.

¹⁸ Analysis by Dr. Rod Campbell, The Australia Institute

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Connor, J., Hill, D., Gregg, D. and K. Sangha (2022) Review of the Singleton Horticulture Project's water entitlement provision costs, benefits and employment impacts.

²² Ibid.

²³ NT Department of Treasury and Finance, Northern Territory Economy, Industries ([website](#))

²⁴ NT Department of Treasury and Finance, Aboriginal Labour Force Characteristics ([website](#)), see also NT Department of Industry, Tourism and Trade (DITT) 2021, Submission to the Inquiry into adult literacy and its importance, p.4 ([weblink](#))

²⁵ NT Department of Treasury and Finance, Aboriginal Labour Force Characteristics ([website](#))

2.3 Climate change

The impacts of climate change represent the most significant threats to economic development in northern Australia. The economic impacts are felt in disruptions to economic activity and the cost of repair resulting from extreme weather events, costs accrued to government in responding to the health and social impacts, and shifts in local and global markets away from investment in emissions-intensive industries. Evidence from studies of the NT health workforce and trades people suggests climate change is already affecting workers' decisions to stay in the NT.²⁶ In one study, 34 per cent of surveyed health workers indicated that climate change is already, or is likely to, make them consider leaving the NT.²⁷ Another study by Charles Darwin University showed that rising heat in northern Australia is contributing to the high rates of drop-outs among trade apprentices in northern Australia.²⁸

At the same time, the imperative for rapid decarbonisation of the economy will be the defining trend of our economic future in northern Australia and globally. The transition to a low carbon economy holds significant potential for job creation in northern Australia, including in our remote communities, including through continued and increasing participation in carbon markets, jobs in and benefit from solar generation, and the mining of critical minerals.

Recommendation 5: That workforce development strategies to support the economic development of northern Australia embrace opportunities aligned with the transition to a low carbon economy.

2.4 Erosion of local jobs and local control

While a range of factors contribute to low employment in remote communities (including discrimination, health conditions and poor housing), the single most critical driver is a lack of available jobs. A snapshot of 28 remote communities in the NT prepared by the NT Government in 2018 showed that, on average, there are only 0.3 jobs available for every person in the community. Of the jobs that are available, on average, around half are filled by local people.²⁹ This correlates with census analysis presented by Altman and Markham to the Senate Select Committee *Inquiry into the Future of Work and Workers* (2018) showing that 69 per cent of Indigenous jobseekers in remote Australia stated that their main difficulty finding work is that there are 'no jobs in the local area or line of work' (31 per cent), that there are just 'no jobs at all' (30 per cent), or that they have problems getting transport to jobs (8 per cent).³⁰

Government policy shifts in recent decades have contributed to the decline in employment opportunities, including nationally, the abolition of the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) program that had provided local jobs and capital for local infrastructure, and in the NT, the shire amalgamation that resulted in the abolition of Aboriginal community councils. Services that used to be provided by local Aboriginal Community Councils (e.g. municipal services, outstation

²⁶ See 'Too hot, heading south: how climate change may drive one-third of doctors out of the NT', S. Quilty and C. Pendrey, *The Conversation*, 10 April 2021 ([weblink](#)), reporting findings of Pendrey, C. et al. (2021) 'Is climate change exacerbating health-care workforce shortages for underserved populations?' *The Lancet Planetary Health*, 5(4):E183-E184 ([weblink](#))

²⁷

²⁸ 'Soaring Top End heat sending tradies packing', NT News, 14 April 2017

²⁹ Northern Territory Government, 28 Remote Town Jobs Profile Snapshot (2017) ([weblink](#))

³⁰ Link to submission [here](#).

services and CDEP) are now delivered by subcontracted service providers (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organisations), either through the shires (now regional councils), NT or Federal Governments. At this time, Intervention powers were used to transfer buildings and municipal assets to the new shires, including critical plant and equipment. While intended to support the delivery of “better and more reliable services” and stronger leadership and governance³¹, the centralisation of control over service delivery resulted in “a loss of community control, including the loss of the power to prioritise and make decisions regarding community needs” and a “diminished capacity of communities to deliver their own services in line with their own priorities”.³² The combined impact was a collapse in local authority, employment and services, and the withdrawal of resources and erosion of Aboriginal community control continue to be felt today.³³

The Community Development Program (CDP) has categorically failed to contribute to improved employment outcomes in remote communities. The program costs the Federal Government \$300-400 million to operate annually (this does not include income support payments to participants)³⁴ – yet as few as seven per cent of participants are supported into jobs that last six months or more.³⁵ In the CLC region alone, \$48.9 million was paid to CDP providers in the last financial year. Meanwhile, the employment gap in remote Australia continues to widen and poverty continues to deepen.³⁶

There remains ample opportunity for job creation in remote communities that address genuine needs. These aren't ‘make work’ or ‘add on’ jobs, as the tendency has been with activities facilitated under CDP. Communities need to be at the centre of determining what jobs are needed and of value in their communities. Consultations by the CLC's Economic Participation Unit with our delegates and Aboriginal organisations in our region have highlighted particular interest in jobs through services and enterprise in:

- Health and social care, community services and education.
- Construction, housing and municipal services.
- Tourism.
- Horticulture.

³¹ E McAdam, Minister for Local Government, Minister's speech (Speech delivered at the Local Government Association of the Northern Territory Conference, Alice Springs, 2006), cited in Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) (2012) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Social Justice Report 2012, p.130 ([weblink](#))

³² AHRC (2012) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Social Justice Report 2012, p.131 ([weblink](#))

³³ See the effects of the changes discussed in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner's report, 2021, p.130-131 ([weblink](#))

³⁴ Hansard, Senate Estimates, Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee, 24 November 2022, page 12. This is funding to CDP providers and doesn't include income support and other payments to participants.

³⁵ Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (2019) The Community Development Programme: Evaluation of Participation and Employment Outcomes ([weblink](#))

³⁶ Indigenous people in the NT experience by far the lowest rate of employment in the country, seeing a continued decline over the last decade from 42.8 per cent of Indigenous people aged 25-64 employed in 2011, to 35.4 per cent in 2016 and 34.3 per cent in 2021 (Analysis of 2021 ABS Census data by the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (unpublished)). Employment rates are even lower in remote communities. This compares to the national employment rate for Indigenous people of 55.7 per cent in 2021 (ibid) and the Closing the Gap target to see 62% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 25-64 employed by 2030. Similarly, while nationally, Indigenous poverty rates have been declining slowly over the past decade, poverty in remote Aboriginal communities is climbing (source: Markham, F. and Biddle, N. (2018) *Income, Poverty and Inequality*, 2016 Census Paper 2, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR), Australian National University (ANU)).

- Bush foods, art and other practices closely connected to culture.
- Caring for Country/land management.

The CLC has therefore welcomed the government's commitment to scrap CDP and replace it with a new program focused on real jobs. There is clearly a strong case for the government to reconsider its financial investment in the current approach to remote employment services and reorient to one that creates jobs to boost local incomes, support local economies and improve community wellbeing, in line with the [Fair Work and Strong Communities](#) proposal developed by APO NT, discussed in section 3.2 below.

This *must* be done with a parallel focus on the rebuilding of local governance and Aboriginal community control. Aboriginal leaders have consistently called for a greater focus on governance as a precondition to engagement and economic development for Aboriginal people. The acute upheaval of remote communities and local governance caused by the local government reforms and the Intervention, described above, have had a direct effect on the economic fortunes of Aboriginal people in Central Australia. The focus on strengthening Aboriginal community control is consistent with the Priority Reforms of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

If the government is committed to supporting economic development in northern Australia that benefits Indigenous people, it is vital that it respects and invests in re-building the decision-making power and control of Aboriginal people and organisations that has been eroded over the past 15 years.

Recommendation 6: That the Federal Government works closely with Aboriginal communities and organisations to inform the design of a new approach to remote employment services, and that this new approach focuses on local job creation and the strengthening of Aboriginal community-control, reflecting the key elements of the APO NT *Fair Work and Strong Communities* proposal.

2.5 Declining resources for and under-provision of remote training

There has been a staggering decline in VET funding over the last decade. Funding declines of at least 39 per cent for VET in the NT have been identified since 2010³⁷ and have resulted in significant downsizing and restructuring of RTOs in the NT (specifically Batchelor Institute and Charles Darwin University). There have been estimates that around \$3 billion has been cut from the Australia-wide VET budget since 2014. Funding models tied to student outcomes and completion rates also appear to have perversely affected the provision of training. There has been a noticeable decline in the availability, quality and appropriateness of training for Aboriginal people in a remote context.

In the case of the training provided for our ranger groups, most accredited training now occurs in Alice Springs. For our rangers, some groups need to travel more than 13 hours on remote roads to attend the training. This 'away from base' model can act as a barrier for many of our rangers attending and completing training. Travelling away from community can mean the challenges of being away from children and family, loneliness, and the distractions of town. Too often, training delivery and assessment is often not appropriately adapted to either the remote context, or delivered in a style and language that is easily understood by participants. In addition, when training is delivered in town

³⁷ Productivity Commission (20216), cited in Young, M. and Henrkys, J. (2020) Ranger Training and Development Strategy, prepared for the Central Land Council.

there is also often discrepancy between classroom learning and remote contexts. On-country training delivery enables people to build their skills in settings where they feel empowered to learn.

Funding needs to be restored to VET and funding and policy settings reviewed to better facilitate the delivery of appropriate high-quality training in remote communities. To this end, the CLC welcomes the Federal Government's commitment to increased investment in and reform of the VET sector and hopes that the needs of remote communities will be made a priority.

It is positive to see that the government has committed to reinvigorating the Commonwealth foundation skills program, particularly focusing on the design and delivery arrangements for remote Australia, and the CLC looks forward to participating in the consultations. Access to high quality and appropriate training in Language, Literacy and Numeracy (LLN) is essential if we are to support greater workforce participation among our constituents.

While Aboriginal people living in remote communities are usually orally fluent in multiple languages, English literacy rates are generally very low. A study by Charles Darwin University in 2017, surveying six remote Aboriginal communities in the NT (including two in Central Australia), found that almost nine out of 10 adults surveyed did not have the literacy skills to cope competently in the workplace or in education.³⁸ In our region, levels of LLN are often below what is required to undertake Certificate I and II training (in the formats they are usually delivered). As experienced by the CLC ranger program, access to LLN programs is very important to increasing people's confidence in the workplace and preparing people for promotions in the ranger program itself or for work in other areas in the community.

Given this fact, the withdrawal of funding for what had been effective LLN programs (specifically, the Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) program) and the reduced funding, eligibility constraints and limited provision in remote communities of the Skills for Education and Employment (SEE) program are concerning and counterproductive to goal of closing the employment gap. Sufficient and consistent funding for foundation skills appropriate for Aboriginal people living in remote communities is vital. As evidenced by reviews into the operation of the Warlpiri Education and Training Trust (WETT) programs in the CLC region, community-led approaches to adult literacy will be most effective (see case study, section 4.4.2 below).

Greater provision of quality work-readiness programs are also critical. Many of our rangers have the experience – shared by Aboriginal people employed in many other jobs – of being expected to fit into a 'work culture' without being previously employed. Quality work-readiness programs help people understand is required for work, setting them up to succeed. The provision of work-readiness training is a core function of the CDP program and should be being delivered by CDP providers, but, in our experience, too often is not done well or at all. As the Federal Government looks to scrap the CDP program and replace it with a program focused on real jobs, the CLC hopes to see providers of any future remote employment services perform far better in engaging and adequately preparing people for job pathways in their community.

³⁸ 'Almost nine out of 10 adults in remote NT Indigenous communities lack basic literacy skills, report finds', S. Wellington, ABC, 12 September 2017 ([weblink](#)). Link to the study's final report [here](#).

Recommendation 7: That the Federal Government substantially increase the funding available for appropriate, quality Vocational Education and Training in remote Aboriginal communities, including sufficient and sustained funding for Language, Literacy and Numeracy programs.

Recommendation 8: That the Committee make reference to the input of Indigenous stakeholders in the current consultations on the *Future delivery of foundation skills training in remote Australia*.

2.6 A decline in remote education

The provision of appropriate, quality education in remote communities must be an essential component of any strategy to increase employment opportunities for Aboriginal people in those communities. As submitted to the 2019 *Inquiry in to Education in Remote and Complex Environments*, since 2011, \$26.7 million of traditional owners' money from royalties has been invested through the CLC's Community Development Unit's programs into education initiatives across our region.³⁹ The most well-resourced and comprehensive work in education had been undertaken through WETT (see section 4.4.2 below). This figure demonstrates the willingness of Aboriginal communities to invest in the improvement of education for their young people, however, it also reveals that frequently – particularly across the CLC region – external funding is needed to supplement school budgets in communities, particularly for communities who want to implement extensive Aboriginal language and culture programs.

Multiple policy and funding decisions have had cumulatively harmful effects on access to education, particularly secondary schooling, for Aboriginal young people living in remote communities. The 'effective enrolment' school funding formula which is based on attendance records from the previous year has hugely disadvantaged remote schools, as it creates a vicious cycle of underfunding for schools with low and/or variable attendance. A report on school resourcing in 2021 found that by 2023, NT public schools will be underfunded by 20 per cent, which equates to \$6,000 per student, which is triple that of the other lowest performing jurisdiction.⁴⁰ We note that the pressure on school funding has also led to a loss of permanent positions for Indigenous teachers and Assistant Teachers.⁴¹ This is concerning from the perspective of the loss of employment opportunities for local Aboriginal adults in community and because the presence of Indigenous staff has been found to have the biggest effect on attendance.⁴² It is positive to see that this misguided budgeting approach will be scrapped by the NT Government.⁴³

In addition, since 2015, secondary students living in remote communities have not had the option to undertake the NT Certificate of Education in their community.⁴⁴ While a much stronger focus in the NT Government's new *Education Engagement Strategy (2022-2031)* on embedding language and culture in schools is welcome, it is not clear if and how this shift away from on-country secondary

³⁹ CLC Community Development Unit data, February 2020.

⁴⁰ Rorris, A. (2021) *The Schooling Resource Standard in Australia*, cited in the Association of Teachers to English to Speakers of Other Languages NT (ATESOL NT) (2019) Supplementary Submission to the *Inquiry into Adult Literacy and its Importance*

⁴¹ ATESOL NT (2019) p.17

⁴² Analysis by J. Guenther of NT MySchool data, cited in ATESOL NT (2019) p.17

⁴³ 'The NT's controversial 'effective enrolment' school funding model to be scrapped in the wake of independent review', O. Chaseling, ABC, 7 December 2022.

⁴⁴ Under the old NT Indigenous Education Strategy, options for secondary students living in remote communities were limited to attending boarding schools, or participating in local vocationally-oriented "Employment Pathways", largely restricted to literacy and numeracy programs.

school options will be reversed. With Year 12 and equivalent completion rates at only 37.5 per cent for Aboriginal young people in the NT, this must be given attention. As outlined in the CLC's submission to the *Inquiry into Education in Remote and Complex Environments*, the CLC calls for governments to commit to the provision of secondary schooling in remote communities to at least Year 10.

Recommendation 9: That governments to commit to the provision of secondary schooling in remote communities to at least Year 10.

Improving educational outcomes in our remote schools prioritising community involvement and ownership of what is going on in their local schools, universal access to early childhood learning and preschool education, quality teaching in classrooms, and the incorporation of, and respect for, student identity, local language and culture.

The CLC notes that APO NT is in the process of establishing an Aboriginal education expert advisory group that can provide valuable advice to the Committee on matters of education as they relate to improving the economic participation and work opportunities for Aboriginal people in the NT, particularly our remote communities. This includes strategies to support the transition from school to employment that are critical for local workforce development.

We also note that the APO NT *Fair Work and Strong Communities* proposal (referenced above and discussed in section 3.2 below) includes recommendation to establish a discrete pool of funding for youth engagement strategies and 1,500 dedicated youth traineeships in remote communities. The increasing number of Aboriginal young people in Central Australia who are not in any form of education, training and employment is of deep concern to the CLC and our constituents. Aboriginal youth engagement must be the focus of any workforce development strategies for northern Australia.

Recommendation 10: That a new remote employment program to replace CDP include dedicated funding for community-led youth engagement strategies and youth traineeships in remote communities.

2.7 The state of remote infrastructure

The poor state (or indeed absence) of essential infrastructure in Central Australia is a key impediment to economic development and workforce participation in our region. Deficits in remote infrastructure in Central Australia are enormous and reflect ongoing neglect, particularly over the past decade. This includes deficits in housing, water and sewerage, reliable power, decent roads, green space and other civic services that support appropriate first-world community living conditions. While acknowledging the challenges of geography and demography, there appears to have been limited political resolve, financial commitment or strategic engagement with Aboriginal communities to address the region's infrastructure needs, and deliver access to the basic services taken for granted elsewhere in the country.

With the right policy settings and planning focused on facilitating local training and employment, investment in remote infrastructure can be a virtuous circle: removing one of the major impediments to economic development and workforce participation, and creating local jobs in construction and ongoing repair and maintenance of assets in the process.

The infrastructure deficits in our region are enumerated in more detail in the CLC's submission to the Northern Territory Government's Infrastructure Audit (September 2022). A snapshot is provided below.

2.7.1 Remote housing, homelands and essential services

Housing

Despite significant investment under the current National Partnership Remote Housing Partnership Agreement in the NT (NPRHNT), there remains a substantial shortfall in housing supply in our remote communities. Over the course of the current agreement, overcrowding has dropped 3 per cent from 58.1 per cent to 55.1 per cent – leaving the NT a long way from achieving the Closing the Gap target of reducing overcrowding to 18 per cent. To achieve this target, the CLC estimates that 2,000 new home may still be needed⁴⁵.

With a homelessness rate 15 times the national average and, as noted above, more than half of Aboriginal people living in overcrowded conditions, the remote housing need in the NT is far greater than any other jurisdiction in Australia. The continuation of Commonwealth support for remote housing in the NT is therefore of paramount importance, with the CLC's expectation being that a new and more significant remote housing partnership agreement will be developed with the NT land councils and other Indigenous housing stakeholders to replace the current agreement when it expires.

Essential services

The delivery of essential services to remote NT communities and homelands, including power, water and sewerage is the responsibility of Indigenous Essential Services (IES). In 2020-21, the NT Government's Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities allocated \$80.4 million for IES to provide electricity, water and sewerage services to 73 remote communities and 70 outstations. Despite this allocation, ageing essential service infrastructure in NT remote communities is a large-scale and critical issue. Issues range from inadequate sewerage systems, leaking water pipework, borefield replacement, low penetration of renewable energy, and gaps in other essential services infrastructure to improve water availability and quality to meet standards enjoyed by urban Territorians. The needs are far greater than the annual budget allocation of \$80 million can address.

Homelands

With respect to homelands, Commonwealth funding for remote outstation and municipal and essential services ended in 2015-16 with a one-off final payment of \$154.8 million in 2015-16 to the NT Government. Since that time, the NT Government has run a Homelands program for the provision of those services through contracted providers, and the level of funding available to individual homelands has been small, and eligibility for investment restricted. In some instances, the lack of a funded service provider means many homelands, even if eligible for funding, are unable to access that service. The CLC welcomes the Federal Government's commitment of \$100 million for homelands but we are aware that the need is far greater than can be met with those funds.

⁴⁵ <https://ourfuture.nt.gov.au/>

Recommendation 11: That the Federal and Northern Territory Governments commit to increased investment under the new National Partnership Remote Housing Partnership Agreement in the NT (NPRHNT) to be negotiated when the current NPRHNT expires to guarantee that the NT meets the Closing the Gap over-crowding target of 18 per cent by 2031.

Recommendation 12: That homelands are formally recognised as part of the housing continuum, irrespective of land tenure, with ongoing and additional funding allocated as part of a future remote housing partnership agreement.

Recommendation 13: That the Federal and Northern Territory Governments work with land councils and other key Indigenous stakeholders to establish a new remote infrastructure funding partnership agreement that meets the current and future need for essential service infrastructure across NT communities and homelands.

Recommendations to make stronger provisions for local training, employment and procurement in the next NPRHNT and to build the remote Aboriginal housing workforce over the long term through the gradual transition of remote housing back to Aboriginal community control are outlined in section 3.1.2 below.

2.7.2 Roads

The condition of roads is a high priority for CLC members and these matters are, without exception, raised at every full Council meeting. The CLC welcomes the Federal Government's investment through the October 2022 Budget in NT roads, including for the sealing of the Tanami Road and the Mereenie Loop, however, with 75 per cent of the NT road network unsealed, the condition of our roads remains a significant infrastructure challenge.

We note that the withdrawal of plant and equipment from communities following the 2007 Intervention and creation of mega-shires described above has compounded these issues. As described above, the transfer of critical plant and equipment such as graders to the shires (now regional councils) combined with the end of the CDEP programs to take responsibility for remote infrastructure repairs and management away from local communities.

In CLC's view, future training and employment opportunities can be generated by a careful transition back to Aboriginal community-controlled maintenance and repair of this critical infrastructure. This would necessitate an increase in funding for that purpose as of an overall boost in regional essential service funding for communities and homelands.

Recommendation 14: That the Federal and Northern Territory Governments continue to work to address the road infrastructure needs of the NT, and ensure that opportunities for local employment and procurement are embedded in the planning of any road infrastructure projects.

2.7.3 Telecommunications

In 2021, CLC made a detailed submission to the Australian Government's *Regional Telecommunications Review*. That submission, as well as our submission to the *Indigenous Digital Inclusion Discussion Paper, November 2021*, have strongly articulated the CLC's concerns with the persistent digital divide experienced by our communities.

These submissions noted that while some communities have mobile phone and high speed data services as a result of the mobile blackspot program and other federal and territory government-sponsored initiatives, many remote and isolated communities still rely on ageing and obsolete technology, such as High Capacity Radio Concentrator (HCRC) links to provide fixed telephone services and NBN satellite links to provide data services. The old technologies cited above do not provide sufficient bandwidth to support video conferencing and other real-time applications that are now so commonly used in business, service delivery and education. This compounds the baseline frustrations and disadvantaged caused by poor coverage, reliability and speed in phone and internet services. This structural disadvantage in the digital era is a barrier to participating in education and training, for those who are in employment, it makes their jobs harder, and is a barrier to enterprise development.

The necessary focus of government policy on prioritising telecommunications infrastructure investment in areas of the greatest demand and lowest cost to provision has benefited larger and less remote communities. However, if the government genuinely wants to support job creation and economic development in our remote communities, the challenge (and imperative) now is to implement programs to connect smaller and more isolated communities.

Recommendation 15: That the Federal Government accelerate work to connect remote communities to affordable, reliable and fast phone and internet services.

3. Opportunities

This section focuses on part d of the Inquiry's terms of reference, *'empowering and upskilling the local Indigenous population'*.

3.1 Increasing employment opportunities through current policy agenda

In this submission the CLC would like to highlight in particular five areas where we see opportunity for the Federal Government to align its pursuit of greater economic participation for Aboriginal people with its broader policy agenda. This is through:

- Ensuring a central role for traditional owners in 'nature repair'.
- Building the remote Aboriginal housing workforce through the new NPRHNT.
- Better government coordination to engage a local workforce on major infrastructure projects.
- Promoting strong agreement making in mining and energy projects for the renewables transition.
- Opportunities in education and the health and social care sectors.

3.1.1 A central role for traditional owners in nature repair

The Federal Government is placing a welcome focus on the urgent need to address the degradation of our ecosystems and accelerating biodiversity loss. This commitment is reflected in the *2022-2032 Threatened Species Action Plan: Towards Zero Extinctions*, the development of a National Biodiversity Market and reform of our environmental laws.

The need to address these threats is as urgent in Central Australia as it is anywhere in the country. The western-central arid zone ecosystem, covering the CLC region, is undergoing ecological collapse.⁴⁶ Central Australia is at the forefront of the mammalian extinction globally: of the 34 mammals that have been lost in Australia since colonisation (roughly the same number as the world combined over the last 200 years), 10 of these were from Central Australia.⁴⁷ In total, there are 141 species of fauna threatened in the Northern Territory, 46 of which are either endangered or critically endangered – that is, facing very or extremely high risk of extinction in the wild.⁴⁸ 84 species of flora are threatened, including 26 that are either endangered or critically endangered.⁴⁹ The extent of weeds, particularly buffel grass, across parks in the CLC region is an issue of significant concern for traditional owners.

Traditional owners have a central role to play in reversing these threats. Their knowledge and practices have sustained the health of country for tens of thousands of years. The *Threatened Species Action Plan* places a welcome focus on the knowledge and expertise of First Nations people, and this is reflected in the Federal Government's welcome doubling of funding for Indigenous ranger programs. Through these programs, including the CLC's Ranger Program, Indigenous people are delivering essential environmental services across northern Australia, controlling invasive weeds and feral animals, maintaining quarantine security, protecting threatened species, managing fire in the landscape, reducing greenhouse gas emissions and contributing to vital environmental research.

The CLC Ranger Program comprises 14 groups operating across four large Indigenous Protected Areas, 32 Aboriginal Land Trusts and on neighbouring national parks and some pastoral properties. The program supports traditional owners to care for country while passing on knowledge and skills to their young people, and is a key pathway for employment and training for people living in remote communities.

Given the scale of the challenge to address these threats and heal country, there is substantial scope and indeed necessity to continue to increase government investment in Indigenous-led caring for country programs, including the CLC Ranger Program. The CLC notes that while the \$225 million committed to the *Threatened Species Action Plan* is welcome, the estimated cost of halting Australia's extinction crisis is \$1.7 billion per year.⁵⁰

In the CLC region, there is consistent demand from traditional owners and CLC members to develop ranger groups in areas and communities where they do not currently exist. There is also opportunity to increase Ranger Group Coordinator numbers, team sizes and corresponding infrastructure to support the employment of more women rangers within the workforce. The demand continues to outstrip available Commonwealth funding.

⁴⁶ Bergstrom, D, Wienecke, B, van den Hoff, J, Hughes, L, Lindenmayer, D, Ainsworth, T, Baker, C, Bland, L, Bowman, D, Brooks, S, and Canadell, J. 2021. Combating ecosystem collapse from the tropics to the Antarctic. *Global change biology*, 27(9), pp.1692-1703, see p.1693-4.

⁴⁷ Foley, M. (2020) 'Why is Australia a global leader in wildlife extinctions?', Sydney Morning Herald; Morton, A. (2021) 'Australia confirms extinction of 13 more species, including first reptile since colonisation', The Guardian.

⁴⁸ Northern Territory Government 2022, 'Threatened animals' ([website](#))

⁴⁹ Northern Territory Government 2022, 'Threatened plants' ([website](#))

⁵⁰ 'Labor's plan to save threatened species is an improvement – but it's still well short of what we need', E. Ritchie, M.C. Evans, Y.E. Chee, The Conversation, 5 October 2022 ([weblink](#)) citing Wintle, B. et al. (2019) 'Spending to save: What will it cost to half Australia's extinction crisis?' *Conservation Letters*, 12(6) ([weblink](#))

It is important that any increase in investment in growing the Indigenous ranger workforce is coupled with investment in the supporting infrastructure. This includes funding to support:

- **Physical infrastructure construction and upgrades.** Currently, of the 14 CLC ranger groups, there are nine ranger hubs/offices that are not meeting the needs of the current workforce due to substandard construction and materials. The poor standards of ranger facilities (e.g. leaking taps and unreliable power) has consistently affected the ability of CLC rangers to work effectively. Three emerging ranger groups do not have any infrastructure. Work spaces that people can be proud of will attract more local employment, support the longevity of quality program coordinators and dedicated rangers.
- **Vehicles.** The lack of access to vehicles results in low workforce participation – more vehicles means more engagement. Many of our groups struggle to balance vehicle space between permanent rangers and senior traditional owners. Greater vehicle availability is also essential to support an increase in the number of women rangers as women and men need to travel separately.
- **Accommodation.** A symptom of the chronic undersupply of remote housing in the NT described above, a number of CLC's rangers don't have adequate accommodation in the community in which they live and work. Investment for accommodation at the ranger hubs would help alleviate housing stress and allow rangers to focus on their work.

Recommendation 16: Building on the welcome doubling of investment in Indigenous ranger programs, the Federal Government continue to increase investment in Aboriginal-led ranger programs, commensurate with the urgency and scale of work required to address the biodiversity and climate crises.

Recommendation 17: Any new funding for ranger programs includes funding for supporting infrastructure. The establishment of a Ranger Program Infrastructure Fund would enable ranger program providers to replace ageing assets, purchase new assets and construct better remote facilities. Infrastructure improvements will immediately improve ranger program employment outcomes.

The facilitation of a National Biodiversity Market has the potential to create new economic opportunities for traditional owners in northern Australia – particularly for traditional owners in the CLC region who, given the differing ecosystems and less investment in desert methodologies, have not been able to benefit as much from the burgeoning carbon economy as their counterparts in the Top End and elsewhere in northern Australia. The CLC notes that the facilitation of increased private sector investment in 'nature repair' should not diminish government's role investing in environmental protection and management.

It is essential that the Federal Government work with traditional owners and their representative organisations from the outset to ensure that their rights and interests are enshrined in the design of a new market. This requires government to give Indigenous groups the time, and where necessary, resources, to engage in substantive consultation. Traditional owners and Indigenous ranger groups hold deep expertise and an intimate knowledge of their country, and as such, are best placed to lead the implementation of biodiversity credit-producing projects over much of the NT.

The CLC notes that the government's proposed timeframes for the establishment of the market are tight (i.e. developing legislation by early 2023 and the market operational by 2024). The design process should not be rushed at the expense of Aboriginal interests.

3.1.2 Building the remote Aboriginal housing workforce through the new NPRHNT

The CLC has welcomed the Federal Government's commitment to negotiate a renewed National Partnership Agreement on Remote Housing in the NT (NPRHNT). We also particularly welcome the Federal Government returning to the table to fund homelands in the NT, which we hope reflects a longer term commitment and recognition that homelands are part of the remote housing continuum.

Despite significant investment under the current NPRHNT, there remains a substantial shortfall in housing supply in our remote communities as described above. The need for sustained investment in remote housing building, and – critically – ongoing property and tenancy management (PTM) and repairs and maintenance (R&M), presents a huge opportunity for local Aboriginal employment and enterprise development over the long term, if the right policy settings are in place.

While the implementation plan for the current NPRHNT outlines targets for Aboriginal employment⁵¹ and Aboriginal business enterprise development⁵², it is not clear what proportion of that employment has been of local people (either from the community, from remote or urban central Australia, the NT or interstate). Currently data is very limited with a simple 'head count' for Aboriginal employees. The significant increase in reliance on modular homes in preference to block build has also seen a shift away from local community labour to urban labour in centres like Alice Springs. The lack of visibility of Aboriginal workers in remote central Australian communities has been raised as a concern by the CLC in Joint Steering Committee meetings. The greater emphasis on urban Aboriginal employment, while positive in its own right, does not help ameliorate the shockingly low employment rates in remote communities.

While there have been very positive outcomes around the engagement of Aboriginal Business Enterprises (ABEs) under the current NPRHNT, these have been particularly in the Top End. In Central Australia, the outcomes have been more modest, with Rusca being one of the few Aboriginal-owned ABEs contracted for capital works contracts. There are additionally few Aboriginal community-controlled organisations successfully tendering for either PTM or R&M contracts. This is a direct consequence of the Intervention with the number of Aboriginal Community Controlled Housing organisations plummeting since 2007 when Aboriginal local government was replaced by the mega-shires. While acknowledging the very real need to address the housing crisis in remote communities (and meet the Closing the Gap overcrowding targets), the CLC considers that significant investment and capacity building support is needed as part of the next partnership agreement to build capacity for not just ABEs but also Aboriginal community-controlled organisations wanting to take on property and tenancy management and repairs and maintenance contracts in the future. This additional investment is necessary and much needed and will support a platform for growing Aboriginal training, employment and business development under future partnership.

⁵¹ The plan sets an annual minimum full-time equivalent rate of 40 per cent of the workforce involved in capital works and property and tenancy management in 2018-19, increasing by two per cent each financial year for the remainder of the Agreement (reaching 46 per cent by 2022-23). NT Government data shows the program has achieved 44 per cent Aboriginal employment (FTE) to date (see <https://ourfuture.nt.gov.au/accountability-and-reporting/program-progress>).

⁵² To date, 46.3 per cent of contracts have been awarded to ABEs, with a value of \$266.3 million (ibid).

History offers some lessons in how to do this well. For example, the IHANT Central Remote Regional Council Training Project (2003-2006), managed by Tangentyere Constructions and Tangentyere Job Shop Experience, achieved approximately 70 per cent of housing construction by apprentices drawn from participating remote communities, working under the supervision of registered builder trainers.

There are also more recent examples of construction companies that have prioritised local employment with great success – see for example builds by Pedersens Pty Ltd in Wutunurrurga (Epenarra) (story here in [CLC Land Rights News](#), October 2017, p.4). These examples, alongside more recent Top End examples under the current NPRHNT, should be investigated and lessons identified and shared.

Through the Joint Steering Committee for the NPRHNT, the Federal Government, NT Government and the land councils have committed to the gradual transition of remote Aboriginal housing back to Aboriginal community control. A crucial component for the success of this process is the parallel development of the Aboriginal housing workforce.

Recommendation 18: That there is a sustained commitment by the Federal and Northern Territory Governments to the **gradual transition of remote housing back to Aboriginal community control**, consistent with the priority reforms of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

Recommendation 19: That additional partnership funds in a new ten-year NPRHNT include funding for the development and implementation of a comprehensive **Aboriginal Housing Industry Development Plan**, aimed at building the capacity of Aboriginal community-controlled organisations committed to tendering for PTM and R&M contracts and over time becoming registered as Community Housing Providers. This will require a workforce training program to equip Aboriginal people to work in the community housing sector (which includes jobs in construction, property tenancy management and repairs and maintenance).

Recommendation 20: That a new NPRHNT includes **targets for local Aboriginal employment and procurement** in the new agreement. Under the current NPRHNT Aboriginal employment targets commenced at 40 per cent and were required to increase by 2 per cent for every year of the agreement. These targets need to increase for a new NPRHNT with consideration of mechanisms to ensure significantly higher levels of local Aboriginal community employment.

Recommendation 21: That a new NPRHNT includes **ongoing funding for the Healthy Homes program** to ensure the Healthabitat Housing for Health repairs and maintenance program is further integrated in to PTM services across remote communities and in town camps. This program provides critical community capacity, skills and employment and is a natural springboard for longer term PTM and R&M contracts for local Aboriginal community controlled organisations

3.1.3 Engaging a local workforce on major infrastructure projects

As noted above, the CLC welcomes the Federal Government's investment in NT roads through the October 2022 budget. Too often, opportunities are missed on large government projects to train and engage a local workforce, through insufficient planning and cooperation between governments and with local communities and the local CDP provider. We reiterate recommendation 14 and urge the Federal and NT Governments to work together in planning these projects and all upcoming major infrastructure projects to make local training and employment a priority.

3.1.4 Strong agreement-making on mining and energy projects

As highlighted above, historically, minerals and energy projects have not facilitated significant employment outcomes for traditional owners and other local Aboriginal people. Across the five operating projects in the CLC region, Indigenous employment stands at around 10 per cent, and most of these jobs are held by fly-in-fly-out Indigenous workers.

As highlighted above, the high solar irradiation in Central Australia and presence of critical minerals, means there is significant potential for Aboriginal landholders to benefit from the renewables transition through jobs and equity shares. This requires, however, expectation-setting by government and a commitment from corporate Australia to facilitate benefit sharing for traditional owners and local Aboriginal people – a step-change in efforts of the past.

The CLC is working closing with companies in our region to strengthen their performance in local Aboriginal employment. This includes reviewing the employment, training and procurement clauses within mining and production agreements to ensure traditional owners and local Aboriginal people gain greater benefits from the use of their land. The CLC is also developing a framework to improve its capacity to monitor and report on third parties' compliance with local training, employment and business conditions in agreements and to include traditional owners in this monitoring.

Strong agreement-making will be critical to achieving better local Aboriginal employment outcomes and substantive local benefit from any new projects.⁵³

Elements of strong-agreement making for mining and energy projects on Aboriginal land

Strong agreements are those which include:

- a) Binding targets for local Aboriginal employment and local Aboriginal procurement that increase over time.
- b) Specific measures the company will implement to achieve these targets, such as:
 - Supporting local Aboriginal people who have expressed interest to obtain the training and qualifications they need to gain employment on the project.
 - Dedicating specific financial and human resources to local Aboriginal employment and training.
 - Committing to an explicit preference in favour of local Aboriginal applicants.
 - Providing work readiness training to local Aboriginal people to bridge skills gaps, or partnering with government and other stakeholders to do so.
 - Partnering with Aboriginal-run employment service providers who can support local Aboriginal people into jobs.
 - Undertaking active outreach and stakeholder engagement in local communities and with local service providers, proving a clear picture of employment pathways, roles and opportunities.
 - Collaborating with others in the region to develop local workforce strategies.

⁵³ In addition to the elements of strong agreement-making highlighted below, see also the First Nations Clean Energy Network's recently published set of [Best Practice Principles](#) for clean energy companies as project proponents and governments regulating proposed developments. The principles put Aboriginal people and their communities at the centre of the development, design, implementation and benefit-sharing of medium to large-scale clean energy projects.

- Ensuring company employment conditions are suitable to the needs of local Aboriginal people including:
 - Provision of Aboriginal mentors for all Aboriginal staff (see more on the value of mentoring in section 3.4.2 below).
 - Providing specific support to Aboriginal employees to identify and pursue career paths.
 - Flexible leave policies to take account of cultural obligations.
 - Commitments to not tolerate racism.
 - Cross cultural awareness trainers for all employees, delivered by local traditional owners.
- Having cultural advisers to the company based within communities.
- Integrating their commitment to local Aboriginal employment, training and procurement, and relationships with local Aboriginal communities across their whole organisation and operations – not just confined to one department.

As a general trend, companies the CLC engages with are becoming increasingly willing to agree to these things.

Recommendation 22: The renewable energy and mining project proponents commit to strong agreement-making in line with best practice principles that ensure substantive benefits to traditional owners and local Aboriginal people from any project.

3.1.5 Opportunities in education, health and social care

The CLC encourages the Committee investigate opportunities to support the development of the local care sector workforce in remote Aboriginal communities. Remote Aboriginal communities remain underserved, and building up local workforce capacity should be a key strategy to support both the availability and cultural appropriateness of essential services and care on country.

- **Education.** Since the 1990s, the number of Aboriginal teachers and Assistant Teachers in remote schools has declined as opportunities for training for these roles has contracted. The policy orientation away from bilingual education and sustained reductions in funding for remote schools has also eroded the role of Aboriginal educators. Local Aboriginal teachers provide continuity for student learning through an ongoing commitment to their communities, and through language and their cultural grounding, help make learning more meaningful and relevant for their students. The NT Government's reinvestment in the Remote Aboriginal Teacher Education (RATE) program is welcome, and continuing to develop local Aboriginal educators should be a priority for workforce development in the NT.

The CLC reiterates our call made in our submission to the *Inquiry into Education in Remote and Complex Environments* that education departments set annual targets for the training and mentoring of Aboriginal Assistant Teachers and develop pathways and incentives to enable progression to full teaching qualifications.

Recommendation 23: That education departments invest in and set annual targets for the training and mentoring of Aboriginal Assistant Teachers and develop pathways and incentives to enable progression to full teaching qualifications.

- **Disability.** Addressing policy and funding barriers, and developing and providing appropriate training to better realise employment opportunities for Aboriginal people living in remote communities through the NDIS should be a priority. There are around 4,000 First Nations people with a disability living in remote or very remote areas who are currently NDIS participants⁵⁴ (more than 1,7000 participants in the NT⁵⁵). The average annual support package for First Nations NDIS participants in remote or very remote locations is \$96,000⁵⁶, yet a substantial proportion of this funding goes unspent,⁵⁷ with the limited availability of NDIS providers in remote communities being a significant contributing factor.⁵⁸ Building up the local disability workforce capacity would help to both increase local employment opportunities and improve the level of support available to Aboriginal people living with disability.
- **Aged care.** The final report of the *Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety* identified the need to increase facilitation of the provision of care on-country, and the related need to grow the Indigenous aged care workforce through targeted programs to support culturally appropriate and safe care.⁵⁹
- **Health workforce.** We refer the Committee to the Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance NT (AMSANT) submission to this Inquiry, highlighting the severe and urgent workforce challenges facing the Aboriginal primary health care sector, and endorse AMSANT's recommendations for additional support for on-country education, training and mentoring to increase Aboriginal employment at all levels of the sector, and reviewing conditions for Aboriginal employment, including considering provision of Commonwealth funding for housing for local Aboriginal staff.

Recommendation 24: That the Committee's Inquiry include examination of strategies to increase opportunities for local Aboriginal employment in the health and social care sector, including with reference to recommendations by AMANT in relation to the Aboriginal primary care sector.

3.2 Investing in job creation and strengthening community control

As highlighted above, while a range of factors contribute to low employment in remote Aboriginal communities, the single most critical factor is a lack of jobs. There remains ample opportunity for job creation in remote communities that address genuine needs – not 'make work' or 'add on' jobs, as the tendency has been with activities facilitated under CDP.

⁵⁴ Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability (2022) Public Hearing 25, Monday 11 July 2022, Alice Springs, Transcript of Proceedings, p.5. Note that due to multiple barriers to access, this number is likely much smaller than the eligible population. [Reference?]

⁵⁵ 'Limited support services in the remote NT are forcing people with disabilities to relocate', H. Shams, ABC, 5 December 2021 ([weblink](#))

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) (2020) Participants across remoteness classifications, p.9-10, 31.

⁵⁸ NDIA (2022) Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, Public hearing 25: The operation of the NDIS for First Nations people with disability in remote and very remote communities ([weblink](#))

⁵⁹ Australian Institute for Health and Welfare (2021) Aged care for Indigenous Australians, Snapshot ([weblink](#))

As a member of APO NT, the CLC has been advocating for many years now for a new approach to remote employment, one that focuses on job creation and the strengthening of community control. Communities need to be at the centre of determining what jobs are needed and of value in their communities. This approach is outlined in detail in the [Fair Work and Strong Communities](#) proposal, developed in 2017 under the leadership of APO NT by an alliance of Indigenous and non-Indigenous organisations.

At the centre of the model is the call to reorient investment to job creation, through the establishment of a Remote Jobs Investment of sufficient scale to make a substantial difference to closing the employment gap (APO NT has recommended 12,000 part-time jobs nationally, approximately 30 per cent of the CDP caseload). The fund should be accessible to Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, supporting community-led proposals for meaningful jobs that address genuine needs and aspirations of communities. A proportion of the fund should be reserved for paid youth work experience and traineeships (a recommended 1,500 places), and additional funding for an Enterprise Fund, to support the establishment and growth of small and large Indigenous business.

The FWSC proposal recognises that it is not just the form of labour market assistance that matters, but the extent to which it can be seen as a vehicle for local decision-making, and the rebuilding of local authority in tandem with creating meaningful jobs directed to meeting the needs and aspirations of local communities. Governance arrangements that embed Indigenous control at every level are therefore foundational to the model: from the development of national policy to its application on the ground. This must include the ability for local communities to set goals and adapt program settings to local circumstances, and the establishment of governance arrangements that enshrine continued Indigenous leadership of the program at a national level.

As noted above, the CLC welcomes the Federal Government's commitment to scrapping CDP and replacing it with a program focused on real jobs with proper wages and conditions. The *Trialling Pathways to Real Jobs* flexible funding trials currently underway and the New Jobs Program trial in selected regions are first steps that will generate valuable lessons to inform a new program. We are yet to see, however, an indication of the reorientation of investment and vision required to deliver the change that is needed, including delivering job creation on the scale needed, or a parallel focus on the strengthening of Aboriginal community control, in line with *Priority Reform 2* of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

CDP is a completely flawed program that needs radical change, not tinkering around the edges. We reiterate recommendation 6 made in section 2.4 above and forward to continuing to work with the Federal Government on the development of a new approach.

3.3 Removing barriers to existing employment opportunities

Identification and pre-employment checks.

At a very practical level, much further attention must be given to addressing the administrative complexity experienced by Aboriginal people, particularly those living in remote communities, when trying to obtain identification (ID) and pre-employment checks necessary for work.

Many of our rangers face these challenges. The websites they need to use to complete essential administration for employment (for example, accessing MyGov, obtaining a Unique Student Identifier), require a certain level of literacy and 100 points of ID. The websites are hard to navigate

for community members, as English is either their second language or even fifth language. For some people, ID requirements prevent them from ever getting access to their Tax File Number, as there is difficulty accessing birth records and often nowhere to safe keep documents safe.

We refer the Committee to work undertaken by Empowered Communities in the NPY Lands on this matter.⁶⁰ This work has mapped the stages and complexity of the processes that Anangu must go through to meet the legal requirements in order to work. Cooperation between jurisdictions (Federal, state and territory governments) is needed to address the legislative, administrative and practical barriers.

Recommendation 25: That governments work together to address the legislative, administrative and practical barriers to obtaining identification and pre-employment checks for Aboriginal people living in remote communities.

Impacts of loss of licence and unreasonable fines

The lack of licenced drivers affects ranger program delivery and workforce participation. Fines for offences result in non-payment, which then attracts interest. The fine amount becomes insurmountable, which results in a loss of licence. Noting this is a matter for the NT Government, it is raised here because it is such a frequent barrier to employment. Fine relief or forgiveness for minor driving offences should be considered to prevent the cycle of poverty, increased access to licence training would improve employability.

3.4 Case studies

3.4.1 Traditional owner employment building the Yeperenye Trail

Too frequently we see that employers, particularly essential services operating in remote communities, (such as schools, clinics and aged care) are either not able or willing to build a local workforce: work that requires effort and investment in building job readiness skills, and providing flexible arrangements, mentoring, on-the-job training.

The CLC sees a role for government in sharing and promoting among employers examples of good practice that have facilitated strong local employment outcomes, such as that achieved in the partnership between Eastern Arrernte traditional owners and track-building company *Tricky Tracks* in the design and construction of the Yeperenye walking trail.

Employment on the Yeperenye trail

Between 2016 and 2021, the traditional owners of the Yeperenye Nature Park led the development of the Yeperenye walking and cycling trail between Emily and Jess Gaps. The project was borne out of a desire by the traditional owners to share their Country by providing more recreation and tourism options in the East MacDonnell ranges.

Traditional owners' partnership with trail-design and construction company Trick Tracks, is an excellent case study in best practice employment models that harness the skills and meet the needs of traditional owners.

⁶⁰ Empowered Communities (2022) ID and pre-employment check reform in the NPY Region

Tricky Tracks was initially engaged to design the trail. After seeing their good work, the traditional owner group decided to work with the company to build the trail.

Both Tricky Tracks and traditional owners agreed that employing people from that Country to work on the project was essential. In their project proposal for construction, Tricky Tracks offered to provide one-on-one training to traditional owners, meaning traditional owners' wouldn't need any prior experience to be part of the project.

Tricky Tracks and traditional owners met many times in the lead up to construction to work through the best ways to support traditional owner workers take up this opportunity. During those meetings, with support from CLC, traditional owners and the company worked through solutions to the many worries and foreseeable hurdles to employment. Key elements that made the project a success were:

- **Recruitment.** This turned out to be the easiest part of the process – so many traditional owners wanted to be involved.
- **Accessible employment arrangements.** Tricky Tracks usually employ staff as contractors, requiring them to have their own ABN and insurances. Given most traditional owners workers would not be in a position to meet this criteria, engaging a labour hire company was considered. However the practicalities of getting people 'signed up' exposed that labour hire could create an unnecessary barrier to someone working on a given day if they weren't already known to the labour hire company. Additionally the labour hire company would charge a fee for their services. So, Tricky Tracks decided to change their business structure so they could employ casual workers. In practice this meant that traditional owners could arrive for their first shift and complete the paperwork that morning and be working and getting paid straight away. CLC Employment services and Tangentyere employment services helped with some of this admin, i.e. locating tax file numbers.

In addition, credentials and tickets were not required by Tricky Tracks, including no police checks or working with children checks. Traditional owners were supported to work if they wanted to have a go, the only criteria was that they belonged to the Country.

- **Flexible employment arrangements.** The working group and Tricky Tracks decided it would be best to have a roster system, which did two things: it gave a lot of different people an opportunity to be involved and learn new skills, and it ensured that there was a sufficient pool workers. Over the course of the project 33 traditional owners were trained and worked on the project, this meant that when people need to drop a shift because of another commitment, there was always someone ready to step in. The flexibility was highly valued by the workers and their families.
- **Cultural Supervisors.** Each day a senior Cultural Supervisor was rostered on in addition to the workers, to oversee the work on Country. The Cultural Supervisors provided cultural knowledge transference to younger traditional owners and confidence to all the workers that they were doing the right thing on the Country. They provided the essential guidance to Tricky Tracks as a company working on the Country. The creation of this role recognised and remunerated the knowledge and expertise of the traditional owners.

- **Clothing and transport.** The traditional owner workers were supported by Tangentyere Employment Services (TES) to get free personal protective gear through job seeker status. TES also helped people get to work each morning by transporting the day's workers and dropping them off at the trail, then picking them up at the end of the day.
- **Meals.** The provision of breakfast and lunch was identified as important. Tricky Tracks decided to provide the daily food needed for workers – which made a huge difference! Working and Cultural Supervisors were given all food and drinks, including tea and coffee breaks any day they were working. People spoke about how valuable this was to the well-being of workings, the site was remote so there was no shop, getting lunches etc. ready in advance would have been a hurdle to many potential workers.
- **Ongoing consultation for engagement and oversight.** During the construction, the project working group met monthly to talk about the trail, and check up on how the relationship between the TOs and Tricky Tracks was going. Everything stayed on track really well due to the regular meetings, it enabled the working group to stay connected to the project and provide invaluable oversight. It also provided an avenue for feedback from/ to the broader community too.

The relationship built between Tricky Tracks and the workers was strong. Tricky Tracks supportive, respectful and flexible approach contributed significantly to the success of the project and the high rate of traditional owner employment.

3.4.2 Lessons from the CLC Ranger Program

The CLC Ranger Program is one of the most successful Aboriginal employment initiatives in Central Australia. From the establishment of the first ranger group in 2000, the program now has 14 ranger groups. The program has employed over 1,000 Aboriginal people over the last ten years, and is currently employing 116 Aboriginal people in ranger and ranger support officer positions.

The benefits of ranger programs are well-documented. Not only does ranger work provide people with the obvious financial benefits of employment⁶¹, evidence shows that the programs provide significant other benefits to not only for individuals who are employed as rangers, but for their families and communities.

The positive impacts of ranger work in terms of personal wellbeing and community strengthening are closely related to fact that it provides people with the opportunity to on-country and learn and apply cultural knowledge, facilitating intergenerational knowledge transfer.⁶² The CLC's review of the benefits and challenges of ranger work showed that **intergenerational country-focussed learning and teaching** is the most important benefit of ranger work identified by our rangers.

“Being a ranger is the most important job in my community. It keeps me occupied and it keeps our culture strong.” Barbara Petrick, Arltarpilta Inelye Rangers, Atitjere

⁶¹ A study undertaken by the Australian National University (ANU) for CLC found that CLC rangers were less likely to report financial hardship for themselves and their families than the control group of non-rangers. See CLC (2021) CLC Rangers: The benefits of ranger work, p.3 ([weblink](#)) citing Lovett, R, Jones, R, Wright, A and Thurber, KA (2017) 'Summary report for CLC: Ranger wellbeing', National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health, ANU.

⁶² Ibid, p.4 and p.6.

The success of ranger programs highlights that in thinking about strategies to increase Aboriginal employment, the **type of employment matters**. While employment contributes to wellbeing, a recent study by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare shows that, for Aboriginal people, active engagement in cultural practices is just as important.⁶³ When thinking about growing the local Aboriginal workforce, focus should therefore be placed on facilitating employment that is **meaningful and culturally relevant** for Aboriginal people, and ensuring workplaces are culturally safe.

The ranger program offers a **variety of employment options** to accommodate the responsibilities of, and demands on, remote community residents, including full-time, part-time and casual roles.

Another key to the strength of the CLC's ranger program is the **emphasis on training and mentoring**, to provide pathways for career progressing through the program to other employment. The ranger program provides important **entry-level roles on-country**, with a focus on on-the-job training and mentoring, as well as the provision of quality, accredited training, including opportunity to undertake Certificates I to IV in Conservation and Ecosystem Management. We note that most of this training is undertaken through NT VET providers, and as such, the ranger program has suffered – like many other fields – from the decline in VET funding described in section 2.5 above.

Where necessary, the CLC Ranger Program has worked with external training providers to co-design accredited training packages to address key areas of need for our ranger cohort. Reflecting commentary above on the importance of foundation skills, this includes the development of an accredited training package of **foundational literacy, numeracy and digital units** for delivery in a four three-day workshops. The package, funded by the Federal Government, aims to support staff to confidently use digital devices and organisational systems. Computer literacy is an important learning area for many rangers, reflecting to a large degree the fact that few rangers own computers. Poor digital literacy makes it difficult for rangers to fulfil certain components of their role, such as creating newsletters and presentations, downloading photos and storing files, and makes it harder to keep up with the wide range of digital processes and CLC administrative systems that are part of the job, including timesheets, work tracker, vehicle bookings, and access to organisational policies. The training has been well received by participants.

Rangers are also supported with opportunities for **knowledge sharing and professional development in group settings**, including through the annual Ranger Camps and Ranger Exchanges.

The **Ranger Mentoring Program** is a successful, integral and evolving component of the Ranger Program. Mentors have been part of the program since 2012 and provide social and emotional wellbeing support and guidance to the rangers. Mentors sit separately to the rangers' line reporting. The foundation of these roles is the development of strong and trusting relationships with rangers. The mentoring relationship provides a safe and confidential space for rangers to think about their work and life aspirations, talk about things that might be affecting their work, think through solutions to challenges they are facing, and get the support they need to manage these challenges.

The importance of the mentoring role reflects the fact that rangers face a range of stressors that can impact on their work life. The [CLC Ranger Program Report](#) describes some of the most common challenges that rangers worked through with their mentors during 2020-21, including family

⁶³ Hunter, B. et al. (2022) Employment and Indigenous mental health, AIHW ([weblink](#))

wellbeing, including community safety and domestic and family violence, physical and mental health issues, overcrowding and substandard and unstable living conditions that impede rangers' ability to attend and perform well at work, as well as financial stress and income support. The engagement of **workplace mentors**, supported by a strong framework to guide what can be complex roles, should be considered by employers as a component of their strategies support local Aboriginal workforce attraction and retention.

3.4.3 Community-led adult education through the Warlpiri Education and Training Trust

The Warlpiri Education and Training Trust (WETT) was established in 2004 by Warlpiri Traditional Owners for the Granites Gold mine site to invest royalties to support education and training initiatives across the four remote communities of Yuendumu, Lajamanu, Willowra and Nyirrpi.

WETT initiated the Learning Centre program in 2006 following broad community consultations on Warlpiri priorities for training and education, which identified a strong aspiration to provide ongoing post-school training and education opportunities in their communities. With assistance from consultants at ANU's Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, WETT designed the learning centre program to support learning for strengthening cultural identity, learning for work and learning for life and well-being. The program has been delivered in partnership with Batchelor Institute in Lajamanu, Willowra and Nyirrpi and the Warlpiri Youth Development Aboriginal Corporation in Yuendumu. The program aims to support and **intergenerational and whole of community approach to learning**. This includes providing a mix of formal accredited training, community education workshops, Warlpiri language and culture support and non-formal learning for civic literacies. The program, which is funded entirely by WETT, includes salaries for a program manager at Batchelor as well as a coordinator and team of local staff at each of the centres.

A key feature of the program is its **local Warlpiri governance structure** which draws on an advisory group within the community to identify community learning priorities and advise on appropriate literacy strategies. This provides an important means for **enabling community ownership** over the centre, ensuring a strong sense of pride and the creation of a welcoming and inclusive community space.

The WETT program has been the subject of two reviews and ongoing monitoring which has contributed to a body of evidence about the **value of this community-led approach to adult literacy support in the remote Aboriginal context**. A community survey of the program in 2016 found that the program was rated as going well in all four communities, with the highest number of residents identifying computer access and support with civic literacies as the most important aspects of the program followed by more formal learning aspirations, as demonstrated in this quote:

"People come to the learning centre for everything, licence, birth certificate, e-tax. It's our community centre. Rangers come and train. Young ones can do all or part of their education there. I graduated at the learning centre."

Survey respondent from report by Disbray and Guenther (2017)⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Disbray, S. & Guenther, S. (2017). Review, Assessment and Development of Future Options for the Warlpiri Education and Training Trust (WETT) and its Programs. Report prepared for Central Land Council ([weblink](#))

One of the key lessons to emerge from the program is the importance of **ensuring literacy support is embedded within meaningful learning activities** which meet the diverse needs of Aboriginal participants. This has been experienced to be in contrast with government demands for achieving targets of training course completions and employment.⁶⁵ This has been demonstrated as increasingly important in a context where rapidly changing mainstream administrative systems have increased the complexity of engagement for a multilingual population with low English literacy. The WETT program has sought to address this by creating a space where all community members are welcome to seek support in undertaking civic literacy tasks.

We note that, reflecting the experience of the WETT program, Learning Centre Coordinators' time can often be sucked up helping people navigate the maze of government and other services' administrative processes that govern peoples' lives – almost all of which are predicated on an expectation of English language and digital literacy competence. This is an important consideration for adult education provision: the needs they end up supporting may not be the needs they are funded to support. For this reason it is crucial that other community support services are adequately funded and adult learning programs are protected to undertake this core business as a priority.

3.4.4 Alekarenge Horticulture Work Experience Pilot Project

The Alekarenge Horticulture Work Experience Pilot Project (WEPP) is a unique training and commercial facility established in 2020 that aims to establish a pathway for Alekarenge community members to employment on the nearby Desert Springs Farm and horticultural developments planned by the Aboriginal Land Economic Development Agency (ALEDA) on the Warrabri and Iliyarne Aboriginal Land Trusts.

By providing a link between the Alekarenge community and nearby commercial developments, the project aims to generate employment outcomes, while addressing food security, welfare-to-work training and improving health and socio-economic outcomes for the community.

The project includes a 130 hectare lease area containing a training centre (commercial kitchen, cool rooms, classrooms, laundry, ablutions, demountables) and a 50 megalitre water licence (with additional water available from an unused 2,100 megalitre licence held by Alekarenge Horticulture).

Activities include on-the-job training in fencing, horticultural plot development, irrigation, weeding and plant health, propagation and establishment. The program includes three training and employment streams for 1) primary school students, 2) senior school students, and 3) job seekers and adult community members.

The WEPP is part of a broader holistic plan to develop viable and sustainable primary industry on the land trust to support the emergency of a diverse commercial economic foundation, providing employment for local people on their own land and terms, and enabling the flow-on of associated benefits to the whole community.

⁶⁵ Kral, I. & Schwab, R.G. (2016). 'A Space to Learn: A community-based approach to meaningful adult learning and literacy in remote Indigenous Australia'. *Prospects, UNESCO Comparative Journal of Curriculum, Learning and Assessment* 179. Vol. XLVI, Issues 3-4 pp 465-477.



Cohort 3 preparing (left) and laying irrigation lines (middle). A leaflet produced to hire more casual workers from community (right)



The 5ha garlic plot showing an excellent germination and growth rate one month after planting

Source: Project Update June 2022, Alekarenge Work Experience Pilot Project ([weblink](#))

Conclusion

Thank you again for the opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry. The CLC would be happy to provide further information on aspects of our submission if required and participate in face-to-face consultations when these occur.