

Submission from

Ingrid Stonhill

Chief Executive officer

Representing

Katherine Town Council

24 Stuart Highway

Katherine 0850

Northern Territory

Contact details

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

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Inquiry into the Department of Defence Annual Report 2022–23

Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence
and Trade

Committee Secretariat contact:

Committee Secretary

Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade

PO Box 6021

Parliament House

Canberra ACT 2600

Katherine Town Council Submission addressing:

Defence Health System.

“A comprehensive and well-equipped health care system for our serving personnel remains a critical enabler to ensure the ADF’s warfighting preparedness. Defence is currently undergoing structural change based on the force posture requirements as detailed within the Defence Strategic Review. This is occurring at a time of significant workforce challenges, and it is through this lens that the Subcommittee is interested in analysing Defence’s approach to health care, considering the recent report by the Auditor-General and current performance issues. The focus for this line of inquiry will include the general architecture of its uniformed and contracted health related capabilities, supporting both current personnel and the recruitment function, and the interrelationship with external providers.”

Submission begins:

Strengthening Health through Community Collaboration

- 1 In opening I wish to refer to the recent written words of Dr John Coyne in The Strategist, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, dated 21 February 2024:

“Defence must embrace the idea that the federal government and states work together as equal partners to address common challenges and achieve shared objectives. Cooperative federalism requires Defence to embrace joint decision-making processes to ensure that policies and initiatives reflect diverse perspectives and priorities.

Defence decisions that impact others must be underpinned by inclusivity, embracing consultation as a two-way conversation. Defence can ensure that a wide range of voices, opinions, and interests are considered in the decision-making process. While Defence’s expertise is broad and deep, inclusive stakeholder engagement enables policymakers to gather valuable insights, perspectives, and expertise that may not be otherwise available, fostering more inclusive and representative decision-making.

The Defence Organisation will unlock greater social licence and capability if it engages stakeholders earlier, more openly, frequently and comprehensively.”

- 2 RAAF Base Tindal, a vital defence site in Australia, not only plays a critical role in national security but also significantly impacts the local community.

Katherine, with a population of approximately 10,000, is situated just 15 km from Tindal. This small regional town plays a vital, unrecognised, under-stated and under-

resourced role in supporting Tindal’s defence operations. Access to quality healthcare, recreational spaces, and community services provided in Katherine directly impacts the physical and mental health of local defence personnel. Whilst “*a comprehensive and well-equipped health care system for our serving personnel remains a critical enabler for defence*”, let us not assume that it is all provided by Defence. Small regional towns such as Katherine play supporting roles to defence, their multinational contractors and many out-of-town workers.

Katherine is a small regional support town for defence, a service hub for the Big Rivers Region encompassing a large First Nations population, centre of a substantial agricultural region and also the crossroads to the rest of Australia, hosting significant numbers of seasonal workers and tourists. A well- equipped health care system for Katherine remains a critical enabler for all, including defence families – because, as I identify below, Defence makes no health provision for its’ families.

- 3 **Good health** concerns the care of the human body and everything that can be done to protect it from sickness and intoxication and enable access to care. It is at the core of **Sustainable Development Goal 3** from the United Nations, a basic human right. However, a maldistribution of Australia’s doctors means that there are 3.8 doctors per thousand people in Australia’s cities, compared to only 2.3 doctors per 1,000 in rural and remote areas, (OECD’s analysis of physician density, rural vs urban areas, 2019). Nearly 3 in 10 Australians live in regional and remote areas and often have poorer health outcomes compared to people living in metropolitan areas. Katherine currently purports just 1 for every 25 persons working in the labour force is working in the local health system - compared to Townsville and Toowoomba whom each have 1 in 17 of their labour force working in health.

Through a community lens it is important to note that there are many non-medical factors that significantly impact health outcomes. They include where people are born, grow, work, live, and age. Research shows that social determinants can be more important than health care or lifestyle choices in influencing health. Social determinants encompass broader forces and systems shaping daily life, these factors interact and influence each other, and are crucial for health.

- 4 Those factors include:
 - Environmental factors: clean air and water; access to clean air and safe drinking water.
 - Safe Neighbourhoods: living in safe neighbourhoods, with access to parks and recreational areas encourages physical activity.
 - Workplace conditions: providing family members with safe working environments promote well-being.
 - Economic and Educational factors: income and financial stability affects access to healthcare, nutritious food, and other resources.
 - Education: higher education levels correlate with better health outcomes.
 - Healthcare Access and Utilization: access to healthcare services; availability of medical care; preventive services, and timely treatments.

Health Literacy: understanding health information and making informed decisions.

Neighbourhood and Physical Environment: housing conditions; safe and stable housing positively affects health.

Access to Green Spaces: living near parks and recreational areas encourages physical activity.

Social Support Networks: having strong social connections and support systems positively affects health outcomes. Isolation and lack of social support can lead to adverse health effects.

Addressing social determinants, enabling positive lifestyle choices, and ensuring equitable access to healthcare for all contributes to healthier lives. Addressing just one portion of the overall wellbeing of individual health is a siloed approach as is a decision to provide healthcare to only one family member. That approach has complex implications, affecting not only the individual but also the entire family unit. Balancing health needs, financial constraints, and emotional well-being is essential in such situations. A decision to provide health care to just one portion of a regional community similarly has complex implications.

- 5 Local Government plays a significant role in addressing social determinants of health and promoting well-being within communities. This is typically delivered through social infrastructure that facilitates the delivery of social services by governments and other service providers. These assets play a critical role in supporting the economy, liveability, and sustainability of Katherine and its' region. They enable the provision of essential services such as education, healthcare, community centres, and recreational spaces. Community Centres, Childcare Centres, and Libraries foster community engagement, cultural activities, and social interaction. These centres host events, workshops, and support networks. Access to Gyms and swimming pools encourages physical activity and stress relief contributing to physical and mental well-being. Well-maintained recreational areas enhance the quality of life. Katherine Town Council provides social infrastructure that is the backbone of a healthy, connected, and thriving town and region. It encompasses the physical spaces that enhance the lives and well-being of all community; this is particularly true of Australian Defence Force members, otherwise (in general) living on base, with the pressures that can bring. Katherine willingly homes Defence, which makes up 6.6% of the overall population, compared to Townsville share of population at 3.5% and Toowoomba 0.6%

- 6 With Federal Defence Minister Richard Marles recently announcing a \$3.8 billion commitment to bases across the north of Australia, it would be fair to ask what that means for Katherine as much as asking what it means to Tindal Air Force Base.

All Defence activities impact our local community. Currently 6.6% of Katherine's population is working directly in Defence (ABS), plus contracted services from around Australia. A planned and positive social license at the heart of the Defence presence would, if it existed, ensure community backing, reduce friction and foster cooperation. It would offer acceptance, trust and generate approval from the public, from communities, and from relevant stakeholders to Defence and its projects. Such a licence would extend beyond legal permissions and encompass legitimacy,

credibility, and alignment with societal values. But to date there is none. Despite asking, requesting and lobbying, there is none. **As we prepare to celebrate 100 years of our township, as we mark having been bombed in the Second World War, as we have worked beside Tindal Air Force Base since 1988, why would Defence not want to engage with us?**

Early engagement builds trust. It signals transparency, respect, and a willingness to listen. Trust is the bedrock of social license. Unlocking social license and capability is not a mere formality; it is strategic imperative. By engaging stakeholders proactively, defence and its contractors strengthen their operational effectiveness, build community trust, and contribute to national security.

7. Leveraging social intelligence enhances capability. Local stakeholders possess valuable local knowledge; understanding community dynamics enables defence planning. Equally, socially aware defence organisations can innovate better solutions by integrating community insights.

It provides the avenue to demonstrate the barriers created due to defence contracts. It allows for possibilities of finding solutions to the dire lack, or in some cases no availability of GP's or indeed any doctor outside the hospital. It would allow opportunities to show the impacts meeting defence needs in childcare services, sporting activities, swimming clubs, events and many more social determinants for health and wellbeing.

- 8 Within a true commitment to wellbeing and investing in social infrastructure, socioeconomic factors that influence health outcomes can be addressed. By active, structured and collaborative working with the town council, RAAF Base Tindal can improve access to education, employment opportunities, and affordable housing for its personnel and their families. Strong social connections contribute to overall health. The base could actively participate in community events, collaborate with local organizations, and encourage personnel to engage with the Katherine community. Social support networks would reduce feelings of isolation and promote mental well-being. RAAF Base Tindal could align its environmental practices with community goals. Water conservation, waste management, and energy-efficient initiatives contribute to a healthier environment. By promoting sustainability, the base can set an example for personnel and residents alike.
- 9 Investing in Katherine Town Council's social determinants of health would be a strategic move for RAAF Base Tindal. By prioritizing community well-being, the Base not only supports its personnel but also strengthens its ties with the local community. Together, we can create a healthier, more resilient environment for everyone.

In an interconnected world, defence organisations face multifaceted challenges. Beyond military prowess, they must secure the trust and support of their communities. By actively engaging stakeholders early, openly, frequently and comprehensively, defence entities can unlock vital social license and enhance their operational capabilities through a holistic approach.

Strategic Collaboration with Katherine Town Council offers significant advantages to Defence. Through diverse perspectives, shared resources, increased efficiency, social bonds, collective impact, learning opportunities and resilience. Its about building a stronger, interconnected network that benefits everyone involved.

Katherine Town Council wishes to be heard on this submission. We would welcome the opportunity to expand in more detail on points raised.

Thank you.

Submission ends