



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

## Proof Committee Hansard

# HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS

**Pathways and participation opportunities for Indigenous Australians in  
employment and business**

(Public)

THURSDAY, 8 JULY 2021

CANBERRA

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**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS**

**Thursday, 8 July 2021**

**Members in attendance:** Ms Claydon, Mr Leaser, Mr Snowden, Ms Stanley, Mr Young.

**Terms of Reference for the Inquiry:**

To inquire into and report on:

Opportunities for employment and economic development for Indigenous Australians.

The Inquiry will identify existing and future pathways for employment and the opportunities for Indigenous business enterprises. It will also identify barriers that may impede employment and business opportunities for Indigenous Australians.

The scope of the Inquiry includes, but is not limited to:

- Employment pathways available to Indigenous Australians;
- Barriers to employment for Indigenous Australians, including access to employment and training;
- Government employment programs and opportunities to build upon effective initiatives;
- Identify gaps and opportunities in the workforce and future growth sectors that could result in employment and enterprise options for Indigenous Australians;
- The experience of successful enterprises initiated and owned by Indigenous Australians; and
- The involvement of Government departments and agencies in facilitating business opportunities for Indigenous Australians.

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**ANSTESS, Ms Naomi, General Manager, Indigenous Business Growth, Northern Territory Indigenous Business Network**

**CUBILLO, Mr Jerome, Chief Executive Officer, Northern Territory Indigenous Business Network**

**Committee met at 09:36**

**CHAIR (Mr Leeser):** I declare open this public hearing of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs for the inquiry into pathways and participation opportunities for Indigenous Australians in employment and business. I acknowledge the traditional custodians of all the lands we are on today and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging. I also acknowledge the cultures of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people speaking with us today and any who may be listening to this broadcast. In my own area of Pennant Hills, I particularly acknowledge the Dharug and Kuringgai people.

In accordance with the committee's resolutions of 25 July 2019, this hearing will be broadcast on the parliament's website, and the proof and official transcript of proceedings will be published on the parliament's website. Those present here today are advised that filming and recording are permitted during the hearing. I also remind members of the media who may be present or listening on the web of the need to fairly and accurately report the proceedings of the committee.

I welcome representatives of the Northern Territory Indigenous Business Network. Although the committee doesn't require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that this hearing is a legal proceeding of parliament and therefore has the same standing as proceedings of the House of Representatives. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. The evidence given today will be recorded by Hansard and attracts parliamentary privilege. I now invite you to make a brief opening statement before we proceed to discussion.

**Mr Cubillo:** I'd like to acknowledge the country on which Naomi and I gather, Larrakia country, here in Darwin. We pay our respects to the elders past, present and future. We thank you for this opportunity to present today. I'd like to start by giving a bit of a brief overview of who the Northern Territory Indigenous Business Network is. NTIBN has been around for around 10 years now, and the role and the mission of the Northern Territory Indigenous Business Network is to support Territory Aboriginal businesses. We have a membership base of just over 300 Aboriginal businesses. To be classified an Aboriginal business, you need to be a majority 51 percent ownership and have legitimate dealings within the business in the day-to-day dealings and decision-making. Our role is to support Aboriginal businesses here in the Territory to connect to opportunities around the Territory in the industry that they work in. We provide, for example, opportunities to meet with industry who are looking to engage Aboriginal businesses in their procurement and supply chains or are looking to partner with Aboriginal businesses on particular projects.

We also run capability and capacity-building workshops that support our members to grow their skills in different areas of need that they let us know about, and we help facilitate and coordinate these workshops. We have a whole range of partners who come on board and help us deliver those workshops. Just one, for example, is Terri Janke, a law firm who run different workshops to support Aboriginal businesses to understand how joint ventures work and the pitfalls and the things to look at early to ensure that they're protecting themselves as they move into this space. That's on top of financial health checks and literacy workshops, social media workshops and ensuring our members are doing the best job they can to publicly portray the skill set and the service offering that they provide.

We have a small but growing network here in the Northern Territory, with a growing remit of services as the Territory government supports us to grow in terms of the certification process and supporting Aboriginal business enterprises here in the territory. I'm going to throw to my colleague, Naomi, to talk a little bit about some of the really exciting strategic opportunities that NTIBN are pursuing.

**Ms Anstess:** I also recognise Larrakia country, and Larrakia people in the room, for the privilege to be born and educated here and be part of the business network. I can speak to this from a number of levels; I've been on the board for a little while now and am now coming in in a role to help grow our actual business cohort.

We've been focused very hard on the commercial activities and lifting the commercial visibility and viability of the Aboriginal business sector. We are hosting the Aboriginal Economic Development Forum in October in Alice Springs, which is a key opportunity for us to take a real look at a genuine private sector commercial activity for Aboriginal people, alongside what Aboriginal organisation activity would be in the charity space and the not-for-profit sector—how the two are pitted against each other, how the two are delivering very separately, and what the benefits are of both. We're looking at private sector business as a real opportunity to grow Aboriginal wealth and,

therefore, Aboriginal health and education and Aboriginal jobs. So we're really driving that premise that Aboriginal business ownership leads to Aboriginal self-determination, Aboriginal employment, Aboriginal education, more Aboriginal private housing, and more kids going to school. We always talk about how health and education can lead to wealth. We're taking it from the other side; wealth can also purchase education and health. So we see we're closing the gap from the other end.

That sort of thing we're looking at through the Aboriginal Economic Development Forum aligns to all of the really big government initiatives around developing the North, around our minerals council and resources sector booms that are going on in the territory, around the Northern Australia Infrastructure Fund, and around activating the Aboriginal estate. We've also been working really hard to develop an Aboriginal export strategy for the Territory to encourage Territory Aboriginal businesses to engage in export activity, which is really exciting. That'll be ready to be announced probably around the time of the AEDF.

We've been working very, very closely, strategically with the Northern Territory government around Aboriginal procurement policy, and we are excited that we are being able to drive the definition of Aboriginal business around majority ownership. This is a really important piece, nationally as well as locally, for Aboriginal business, because fifty-fifty ownership as currently defined by the Closing the Gap documents really doesn't provide for Aboriginal ownership, determination and control. We see that as equitable for the both parties in the business, but really that's just business. Majority ownership allows for Aboriginal control, self-determination and direction, and it is really the only time an Aboriginal business can be defined as an Aboriginal business. So we've been pushing really hard around the definitions of that and how that impacts on procurement. We're working really closely with a positive team out of the Territory government who are wanting to consult well with industry across the board and navigate what are really muddy waters sometimes and can be quite prickly. But they've been working really, really hard to get a good feel so that we can get a strong Aboriginal procurement policy for Territory businesses and we can see a way to grow Aboriginal wealth in that space and therefore grow commercial activity for Aboriginal people on country.

We've also been working towards the development of an enterprise academy. We're thinking really hard about how we might lead futures growth for young people. So I'm thinking about how we would have really strong enterprise-thinking young people who might look at opportunities around franchising businesses that are already in town, leveraging services within the NTIBN to grow business straight out of school and how they might start businesses while they're at school.

So we're just putting together ideas around where we might go for our futures, as well as where we'll go for our current cohorts of business and improve our service delivery to help grow the sophistication of Aboriginal businesses, because we are aware that we've got a really strong cohort of businesses who are delivering really well in the mainstream and are very, very sophisticated, and a lot in the startup phase who need help to scale up.

**CHAIR:** I'm going to hand to the deputy chair first because he's got to turn into a pumpkin early!

**Mr SNOWDON:** I should express a conflict of interest, as I know Jerome extremely well and have for many years.

**CHAIR:** I suspect there are not many people on today's conference you don't know well, Deputy Chair!

**Mr SNOWDON:** Possibly. Jerome, could you tell us how you're funded—how you're resourced?

**Mr Cubillo:** Currently, we're funded by the Northern Territory government. We receive operational funding and we're almost halfway through a five-year funding agreement with the Northern Territory government. Then there's our membership base. We have two membership options. There are the Aboriginal certified members, the 5,149, who pay a fairly cheap membership at the moment—it's about \$120 per year—and then we have our non-Indigenous members, what we call our associate members, who are friends of Aboriginal business and friends of NTIBN, who pay a membership fee, and that allows them to come to our networking events, to access our Aboriginal business members and to connect with opportunities for them to access Aboriginal business into their procurement and supply chain policy.

Then we're looking at, as Naomi touched on, having more commercial offerings. The Aboriginal Economic Development Forum, which we're running on your home turf, Warren, in Alice Springs in October, is something we're looking at—because we've received the contract to deliver that from the Northern Territory government, moving forward—to see if we might be able to make a small profit off it as an organisation. But then there are a whole range of different service offerings we're looking to develop to support non-Indigenous business as well, whether they are looking to purchase policies off the shelf—for example, Aboriginal employment policies, cultural awareness and safety policies. But then they can work with our consultants who are part of our membership to get a really detailed and personalised policy that can support their business.

**Mr SNOWDON:** Good. We heard yesterday of a business who submitted a bid for a tender from the Commonwealth around housing on Aboriginal land and didn't get a look in, and the contract went to a non-Indigenous company. What's your interaction with the Commonwealth procurement processes, and are you able to tell us how you believe they're working for the benefit of Aboriginal businesses in the Northern Territory?

**Ms Anstess:** I might take that one, Warren. The Northern Territory Indigenous Business Network works really closely with all of the government agencies and, in particular, the Commonwealth and the Commonwealth procurement policy. We also work really closely in the defence sector because, obviously, there's a very strong defence presence in the Northern Territory, where there's a really large cohort of Aboriginal businesses, local and national, who are up here delivering works for the Commonwealth on very large scales in construction. So the Northern Territory Indigenous Business Network partners with the defence industry networks and across the board to work with the Commonwealth around Aboriginal procurement. Largely, we're focussed on ensuring the certification and the growth of our businesses. We would like to work more closely with the Commonwealth on the Indigenous Procurement Policy.

We do think that the procurement policy has been of great benefit to local businesses getting into Defence and growing and scaling up. It has certainly been an exciting space for construction and consultancy. Broadly, for consultants as well, there's been a lot of opportunity to bid for work. That doesn't necessarily mean you win the work. Where the IPP is applied and it's Aboriginal businesses only, there's a lot of interesting commentary about how businesses are selected to tender even in the select tender phase. For example, the prime contractors will select four or five out of a list and those will be the ones who get to tender. While you understand the principles of select tender, it can also rule out people bidding for works that they know they're capable of doing. You have somebody sitting back making a decision about which Aboriginal businesses are able to grow and scale up, even before the tender process, so sometimes there's not even an ability to put in a tender for that work.

**Mr SNOWDON:** Are you able to tell us if any of the tendering processes accommodate additional costs that might exist as a result of the business being based in a remote community and the need to train local people to meet the demands of the jobs involved in the business?

**Ms Anstess:** I would say, on the whole, the budgets attached to construction projects don't factor those things in. Obviously, across government, training and education budgets sit outside of construction, and, generally, when you're developing the budget, the budget is based on the build itself or the design construct itself. I do think that there's a need for consideration of how that looks, remote or otherwise, because the need to grow Aboriginal skill sets in the Aboriginal business space is significant. Even when non-Aboriginal businesses are working with Aboriginal staff as part of their minimum mandatory requirements for participation, it's important to recognise the additional costs in achieving those outcomes.

**Mr Cubillo:** Just to go one step further, in response to your question, one recent example of an Aboriginal organisation which provides housing builds in remote communities is Bukmak Construction, a subsidiary of ALPA, which won a five-year contract to build something like 80 homes out at Milingimbi. I think that's a really interesting one to watch, because what we're going to be able to see from that is how Bukmak Constructions is able to take on local community members and put them into trades over the life of the construction so they can come out the other side with a legitimate job and a legitimate role and purpose within the community. That will start to shift the mindset and thinking of what's currently out there, which is just CDP jobs. We're moving into legitimate employment, legitimate jobs and skills, with a five-year contract delivered by an Aboriginal organisation to build these homes. They are going to be purpose built for the environment, not the brick buildings you sometimes get, which are hot boxes not suited to the environment in which they're built. I think it's going to be a really interesting case study to watch.

**Mr SNOWDON:** Mr Chairman, I'm aware that my colleagues will be wanting to ask questions. I'll just ask one other if I may. Jerome and Naomi, are you able to give us any indication at all of what the employment outcomes are for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the businesses that are members of your organisation? What sort of numbers are we looking at, and what has their capacity been to employ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?

**Ms Anstess:** We'd love to give you a definitive answer on that, and we're embarking on a bit of a research journey ourselves here. Part of our research strategy is to garner the research that's really critical to this space, to look at the economic value nationally and the nation-building aspects of Aboriginal business. So the short answer is, no, we don't have the data. What we do know, though, is that all of our Aboriginal businesses proactively employ Aboriginal people and prioritise and prefer Aboriginal people. One of the reasons why we have an Aboriginal procurement policy is that Aboriginal businesses tend to employ Aboriginal people more and engage in culturally safe practices to employ people, so they are preferred employers. So we do know that our Aboriginal

businesses tend to employ more Aboriginal people per capita for the size of the business, which is all relative. The business network is actively moving to start to put things in place to measure those things so that we can provide that data.

**CHAIR:** I wondered if I might ask a few questions about the growth in Aboriginal business over the last decade. Do you have some numbers as to where you were a decade ago in the Northern Territory and where you are now—the number of businesses, the number of employees?

**Mr Cubillo:** NTIBN was stood up around the Inpex boom here in Darwin back in 2009 and 2010. Its purpose was to connect Aboriginal businesses in what was then perceived to be an opportunity for Aboriginal businesses to connect into, which just wasn't the case. As NTIBN was stood up, a lot of our members went out in the construction space and thought that this was going to be a great opportunity for growth over a long, sustained period. They went out, they purchased a lot of equipment and, unfortunately, didn't win the work. By the time NTIBN was stood up and by the time Aboriginal businesses geared up, they had kind of missed the opportunity at the top of the boom. It left Aboriginal businesses in a pretty devastating position, where a lot of them actually, unfortunately, had to close their doors. So NTIBN then morphed into what we are today. We are about supporting Aboriginal business and supporting the industry to connect earlier in the piece.

Our membership has steadily increased and grown from about 2010 to where we are now, with close to 300 members. We're about to see an even greater increase in membership as the Northern Territory government looks to implement an Aboriginal procurement policy, the last jurisdiction in Australia to actually have a dedicated Aboriginal procurement policy that also has a bit of a mandatory set aside of government spend just for Aboriginal businesses. They've been working with the NTIBN as the certifying body and network. We are also developing an Aboriginal business register that can better support government and industry to find the right Aboriginal businesses to engage. We're really going to see a massive spike in our network and in seeing Aboriginal businesses come forward, because it's really a great opportunity to jump into the private sector.

**CHAIR:** Who set NTIBN up back in the day? Did it come out of the land councils or business or government? Who were the founders?

**Mr Cubillo:** I believe it was a bunch of actual individuals. The founding chairperson was Jason Elsegood. Jason was the chair for probably eight of our 10 years in existence. A few key members, Aboriginal business owners, actually formed this. With the support of the Territory government, it was able to receive some operational funding to start to form a network.

**CHAIR:** Do you have a sense, even without a procurement policy in the Territory, the sort of percentage of Territory contracts that go to Indigenous business today? Have they published any figures on that?

**Mr Cubillo:** Not that I know off the top my head, but it's something we could reach out to the department and come back with a response.

**CHAIR:** I'd be interested in that. Could you tell me: what is the difference between what you do and what Supply Nation does in your registration, certification and membership? How do you prevent duplication? Or do you have a demarcation, where you deal with the Territory, and Supply Nation does the rest of the country? I want to understand the interaction.

**Ms Anstess:** We are really strong partners with Supply Nation. Supply Nation's headquarters and a large majority of the Aboriginal population are sitting on the East Coast, which often makes service delivery in the north look a little bit different. We will be really honest and say some of the processes are duplicates. I guess the draw out around the Northern Territory Indigenous Business Network that is different to Supply Nation is it is specifically focused on developing the north and the agendas around northern Aboriginal businesses. It is specifically geared towards Aboriginal businesses that need to activate the Aboriginal estate. It is specifically geared towards the remote localities and geolocation of Aboriginal people up here and the different cultural requirements of our Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal people in the north. It's also geared towards the different industry sectors up here and the way that the north is intending to grow. So the Northern Territory Indigenous Business Network works to have a very rigorous certification process. We are consistently trying to improve that process and working with the government around that so that we can be a one-stop shop. We are working in partnership with Supply Nation. If you're certified with us, you will also be satisfied with the Supply Nation so that there isn't the duplication that there currently is and that's going to be really important.

**CHAIR:** Are there any recommendations that we can make around that that would assist that process or are you and Supply Nation in good discussions, the relationship is good and there's no need for us to interfere in those matters?

**Mr Cubillo:** The one thing I probably should also highlight for you is that we only acknowledge the Supply Nation's certified business. They have two levels of Supply Nation registered, which is 50 /50. In our view, that is just a business; it's not an Aboriginal business, so we focus on the 51/49.

**Ms Anstess:** We we'd like to see drivers in that space around recognising that a majority owned business is the only Aboriginal business. That's what we'd like to see, because the reality of it is that you're opening up through black cladding a market that otherwise wouldn't be there for them.

**CHAIR:** I want to really dig into this point. You mentioned Defence earlier. Its contracts with Indigenous businesses are worth \$400 million. We were talking to four of the big agencies together and we said, 'To what extent do you look behind the certification to see whether there's no black cladding and that there is skills transfer happening?' They said to us, 'Look, this is really a matter for Supply Nation. If an organisation has the Supply Nation tick, as it were, then that is the job done.' So my question to you is: What do you do to actually check, other than the initial registration, that there's not ongoing black cladding or that people are presented to you—we look good; we are the 51 per cent—and then a couple of days later they have rearranged their arrangements or they have somebody sitting in an office with a pencil sharpener but not actually doing anything and there's no skills transfer. We need to make some sort of recommendations in this space but I want to have a bit of a sense from you about that, about what you're doing.

**Ms Anstess:** One of the things that we're working towards as part of our strategy—I guess this is a little bit pre-emptive—is establishing a culture integrity process, an ongoing audit that's not just around dollars in and dollars out and following the money story and the directorship. All of those things are fairly easy to monitor and watch. I think it's more looking at exactly, as you said, what is the internal intent around skills and capability building, skills transfer, promotional opportunities? What do the real careers pathways look like? What are your internal policies, processes and practices? We're looking at creating a scale of cultural integrity audit tools so that we can use those or deliver those for business and with business so that they can make sure that they are doing the right things and it would then sit on a particular scale. We'd also like to be able to deliver those tools to non-Aboriginal businesses who want to work in that space and who want to be really good corporate citizens. It helps them to think about what are the things different to a RAP. So it's not a commitment to community and to country; it's a commitment to real growth in your Aboriginal workforce, real wages and long-term jobs and career growth—exactly as you said.

**Mr Cubillo:** A further point is a part of the certification process when they apply through NTIBN is they have to provide a confirmation of Aboriginality. We don't accept stat decs as proof of Aboriginality because you can get any stat dec signed by any Justice of the Peace. We are setting up a policy position around the ideal preference—that being the community come from the local Aboriginal community controlled organisation that provides those services. Here in Darwin, for me, as a Larrakia person, I would go to either Larrakia Nation or the Larrakia Development Corporation to get a confirmation of Aboriginality certificate. If not them, it would be another Aboriginal community controlled organisation whose board is comfortable with providing and competent to provide the common seal and the chairman's signature recognising the individual as an Aboriginal person within the community, because that's another key important piece for us.

But then, also, through a few other mechanisms, like credit watch, we ensure where the ownership holdings, the percentages and the structure of the business lie and make sure of that. We try to follow the money story, as far as we can, to ensure that the Aboriginal individual is a legitimate owner-operator and key decision-maker and has the final say in business operations and dealings, because there are ways to say you're at 51-49 but have the money story go to the person who holds the minority shares. So it's doing that diligence work from our end.

**CHAIR:** Can I also suggest to you that it's good to have an intent as a company, but we also have to make sure that things are occurring, rather than just having an intent, because we're talking huge money here that's involved in these government contracts. Defence is the biggest; it's \$400 million. I think we have a duty as parliamentarians to ensure that we've got policy and that the policy is actually changing things, otherwise what's the point of it, frankly?

**Ms Anstess:** We would agree with that 100 per cent. The Commonwealth has a reporting tool now that's public around the participation numbers for anybody accessing contracts under the IPP. It's publicly reportable. There are some squeaky bits within that reporting tool that are maybe not contextual, but it's a start for kicking off understanding what people are actually doing and for companies to know that their data, their actual Aboriginal employee numbers, are going public. For us, the step is really doing that deep dive that you were talking about to look at skills transfer and how that is being reported and measured. I think, as you said, it's about establishing what the intent is—intent versus action and outcome—and having a score around that or an ability to see what

that really translates to so we can get a measure of how effective the policy is and we can ensure people are doing the right thing by the policy.

**CHAIR:** When I put to the agencies that perhaps we should send the Auditor-General in to see whether they're doing it, they said, 'Well, look, this really is a matter that should be for Supply Nation,' or for an organisation like yourselves. Do you want to comment on that? Are you best placed to do an audit that this is occurring, and should this be a responsibility of organisations like yourselves, or should it be the responsibility of the ANAO?

**Mr Cubillo:** I'll start and get Naomi to follow on. Something that I've spoken to the Northern Territory government about is: where is the auditing of procurement to ensure that the non-Indigenous business that says in its tender, 'We're going to get X amount of employment. We're going to do X amount of Aboriginal business engagement in our supply chain,' does so?

**Ms Anstess:** What are the penalties or the measures when you do not achieve that? The reality is that we're really not seeing any implications for those who don't meet their measures. We're seeing proclamations at tender of targets and declarations of what you will do and, then, a very different outcome at the end. So what are the impacts of that? As the business network, I would say that it would be a wonderful opportunity for the network if it were to undertake some work like that for the Commonwealth and deliver and lead some of that research—Aboriginal led and culturally safe research—because I think we could then look at all of the facets of this that impact us as Aboriginal businesses that might be different from non-Aboriginal businesses and provide a really comprehensive position on that to the Commonwealth.

**CHAIR:** That's very helpful. I have one last question, and then I'm going to hand over to colleagues. You mentioned earlier the select tender processes. If you're a business that has missed out on being invited to be part of a select tender, how do you then come to the attention of the agency that is doing tendering? I think we focus too much in this discussion on governments as the potential purchaser of Indigenous business contracts, rather than on other large corporations and so on in the commercial sector. Given the bounds and proprieties of procurement policy, how do you introduce these other businesses to procurement officers and to the corporate sector? What's your role?

**Ms Anstess:** At the moment, the network is running very slim. While we're funded by the Northern Territory government, it's not so substantial that we can have a large team that's consistently out there making a lot of noise. We do what we can at the moment. We're also growing our funding base and our staffing through revenue-raising activities. One of the things that we do is provide a space for Aboriginal industry briefings for big works coming up. A lot of the bigger commercial opportunities will come to NTIBN and offer a briefing specifically for Aboriginal businesses. We often get requests from either the government or other commercial opportunities through the network, which we email and highlight to all of our members. We're working on a very big redo of our online presence and our website to be able to host, let's call it, a 'black market'. That might also provide us the opportunity to have a place for Aboriginal employment as well so that we can offer a specific service to associate and local members. We know that that's a really difficult space for recruiters, people looking for jobs and everybody else. Do you want to add anything to that?

**Mr Cubillo:** For a bit of a real example, a major project about to kick off in the near future in the territory is Project Sea Dragon, the massive prawn farm being built in the Ord River on the border of Western Australia and the Northern Territory. They've flagged that they would like to set up an industry briefing. It's about giving our members as much time and information as possible for them to prepare to put in a really good bid into the tender when those opportunities arise—

**Ms Anstess:** And then delivering workshops. That's the example. There's the industry briefing, which is Aboriginal specific, that they come through us to coordinate. We send that out to members, and then we provide workshops to our members around, as you said before, tender writing, social media, marketing and business development. We're continuing to grow those services. One area of our future growth that we're looking at at the moment is the potential to deliver back-of-house services for our Aboriginal businesses. A lot of us are really good at what we do. Our skill set is right there. We might be great artists, builders, consultants or whatever, but we're not so good at marketing ourselves at this end. We're not so great at doing the back-end stuff either, around the finances and everything else. If we could have the ability to deliver a corporate or back-of-house service to our smaller growing businesses, who could purchase that for a reduced price while they scale up, for example, then we could help those businesses to grow while they've got that service delivery. We're looking at delivering those sorts of services, which are really important for Aboriginal business, from a place of trust—by Aboriginal networks.

**Mr Cubillo:** We're also currently going through the process of doing a business case and feasibility study on building an Indigenous business hub based in Darwin, which is going to service the Northern Territory. We're

going to set up satellite offices in Katherine, Tennant Creek and Alice Springs, or have policy offices on the ground working with local businesses. Being here in Darwin—because we're on the doorstep of Asia—it would be supporting Aboriginal businesses to move into the export space, into Asia and the Pacific. In terms of regular flight schedules and connectivity, it makes sense to be here in Darwin. It's a place that can become a one-stop shop for Aboriginal businesses to get support if they want to start a business. There are quite a few different avenues you've got to go down in order to kickstart it. We want to set up an Indigenous business hub where you can come and you know you can get support to get seed funding to start your business. There are a few commercial offerings we're looking at providing. We're calling it a 'business in a box'. They can come along and purchase that, and it has everything ready for them to go to set up their business, but it also supports other businesses to come and co-locate in the space. We can start to set up some business-to-business mentoring from Aboriginal business owners who are X years down the track, as opposed to businesses who are starting. We can deliver these workshops in a central location, but we can also host trade shows where we can showcase what Aboriginal business capacity and capability is out there. As some of those businesses grow, we hope that they move out and go on and play in the mainstream space so we can support the next businesses moving through.

That's something we're really keen to continue to focus on. It was something that the Commonwealth government approached NTIBN about delivering back in 2019, just before COVID. The Commonwealth government have earmarked to build three Indigenous business hubs across Australia. They funded and designed the Yarpa Hub in New South Wales and the Wirra Hub in Perth. The third one was going to be in Darwin, but, unfortunately, COVID sort of sent that one a bit astray. But we're still pursuing that and working with Deloitte to develop a business plan and a feasibility study for us to then continue to, hopefully, pursue that opportunity that the Commonwealth had originally approached NTIBN to deliver.

**Ms Anstess:** The reality of that is that it's so important for us to have those services in the Northern Territory where our Aboriginal population is in excess of 30 per cent. We are in a very unique position in terms of our population size. If you think about what it could mean for change and really closing the gap, investment in Aboriginal business is about Aboriginal-led wealth generation. In the private sector it's a really genuine wealth-generation activity. It's taking away from welfare in a really active way and changing a mindset around real commercial activity and real money handling and real investment. We know that in the private sector, if you don't win the bids and deliver the work on time, you're not making a profit and you are not putting food on your table. We have a really important role to play in closing the gap, because, like I said before, while education and health are really important to generating wealth, it's also the reverse: if you have wealth, you can buy health and you can buy education, and that's how we see our I guess bookend. We're really keen to think about how the business hub could do that and deliver that sort of Enterprise Academy approach so we can grow really strong problem-solving entrepreneurial thinkers who are great as business owners and also as senior managers and executives.

**CHAIR:** I'm going to hand to Ms Claydon now.

**Ms CLAYDON:** Good morning and thank you so much for your evidence this morning. It's sparked about a thousand questions, but I will try to be a bit more focussed. I would be really grateful—and I think the chair has already indicated his wish too—if you would send through some further commentary or thoughts around what recommendations might look like in terms of that cultural integrity process that you spoke about, another layer of measurement and accountability that might be put in place in any kind of procurement policy, and particularly what penalties might look like too. You've made the observation that there aren't penalties currently for failing to meet already agreed KPIs and measurement. So what you think that kind of regime should look like would be really interesting. I accept it might be that your recommendation is, as you mentioned earlier, that what is required is some Aboriginal-led, culturally-safe research to figure out how to best do this. If that's the case, fair enough; we should know that too.

As I understand it, you're currently funded by the NT government, and there's some modest funding, I understand. How many people are employed for the network? Is it just the two of you running the whole show? How do you manage it? How many staff do you have?

**Mr Cubillo:** This is Naomi's day 1.

**Ms CLAYDON:** Hi Naomi. By gosh, straight into the deep end, Naomi! Nice work!

**Ms Anstess:** It's great, because I've been on the board, and we've been driving all of these pieces from the board. We do have some additional exciting funding from the NLC at the moment. But we have a very, very active board, led by our current chair, Jason Jones, who invested very heavily in all of this growth and who has been working tirelessly in the background, on top of their busy businesses, delivering those things to build this.

**Ms CLAYDON:** Great. I take and appreciate your very proactive work to develop a network that is very relevant to people in northern Australia. I guess I am worried about increasing feedback that Supply Nation is really not servicing in the way that we might hope. It was put to us, I think by ALPA yesterday, that it's very east coast focused. I'm from Newcastle, so I've got a little bias there. That is a problem in the sense that businesses, and particularly with big Commonwealth contracts, might get a bit shy about having to shop around to different organisations. I think it would be fair to say that they have put to us that they're just going to Supply Nation. That's the national organisation and it's the people they're taking advice from, and they're assuming that any work contracted through there would be serving a good benefit to First Nations businesses and communities. How do you see your relationship as sitting with Supply Nation? Are you in competition? That's fair enough, too. Is it a competitive relationship or is it one where you work together? Is it worth trying to remedy whatever that lack is for Supply Nation if it's not meeting national needs? Let's not pretend it's not a national organisation if it's not doing that. I'm interested, really, in your thoughts and any wise words, because it appears to me to be a bit of a dilemma for us.

**Mr Cubillo:** We have an MOU in place with Supply Nation, and it's something we are continuing to foster, grow, develop and form closer working relationships, as Naomi touched on earlier. We're going to move into a space where we acknowledge and support the 'Supply Nation certified' membership. One conversation we'd probably like to have his around removing the 'Supply Nation registered' and having just the one definition, which is the 51-49, instead of the fifty-fifty, because that probably is where the first demarcation arises. We're working with them, and they're going to come on board and help us with the delivery of the Aboriginal economic development forum, which we're really excited about. They do have a fairly rigorous process—

**Ms Anstess:** They do.

**Mr Cubillo:** especially if you want to be a certified member, which is great. But I guess it comes back to that fifty-fifty element. The businesses who are winning contracts at a Commonwealth level through just being registered and not having to go through a rigorous audit and certification process to ensure that this is a legitimate Aboriginal business.

**Ms CLAYDON:** That might be something we need to consider in a recommendation. I mean, what is the purpose or value of having the 'registered' category? And then how might we add value to the 'certified'—you're saying that that is a relatively comprehensive process, but, if I heard you correctly, there might need to be some additional work around ensuring that outcomes are reached, that people are meeting the obligations that they signed up for in the first place. Maybe it's having an additional level, as you spoke about earlier, of the cultural integrity process, where we are measuring things beyond the monetary value. That's good for us to think about too. Yesterday we took evidence from ALPA and the furniture place—I forgot the name.

**Ms Anstess:** Manapan.

**Ms CLAYDON:** Thank you—Manapan. They were very frank that Supply Nation was not their go-to organisation and that they saw little value, but they said they would do so through your network. I wanted to ask you about that. Does that mean that you act as an auspicing body for all of your member groups, the 300 members that you have? Do those people access Supply Nation?

No? So what role do you have?

**Ms Anstess:** Not currently. That's something that we're working to achieve right now. Part of the work around working with Supply Nation is to achieve a commensurate certification, so, if you're certified with us, you're certified with them and you don't have to duplicate the process. The other piece is, again, recognising the differences. The Northern Territory Indigenous Business Network also provide for the bi-local piece. For the north, if you're registered with the NTIBN, then you can be assured you're getting a northern Aboriginal business as well, which might be of benefit to north-facing businesses, because we see a lot of the ones that are founded or registered on the east coast up here winning large pieces of work and local businesses not being able to get in. And that's part of our premise as well—to advocate for the north and northern countrymen for them to be able to get their slice of the pie. Again, our service delivery is slightly different. We understand the context here. We want to be able to provide greater visibility and support for our members and access to the network.

**Ms CLAYDON:** You mentioned a focus, potentially, on an export market as well as something you're looking towards. I'm wondering if you've had any opportunity to be part of discussions around Australia's free trade agreements.

**Mr Cubillo:** We haven't, but we have started to engage with DFAT and Austrade and with the work being led by Ignite under Darren Godwill. We're looking to invite Darren and DFAT to the Aboriginal Economic Development Forum in October, and we're starting to sit on some of those pieces so we can understand better

exactly the point you've just raised and how we support Aboriginal businesses to move into that space. We're talking with the Australian consul-general, Benson Saulo, in Houston. Benson is going to help connect us with the Native American Chamber of Commerce, and we're going to have those guys attend virtually the Aboriginal Economic Development Forum and talk about some of the success stories over there that are being led by the local professional ownership groups and some of the positive impacts that they've had. There are a lot of lessons learnt for us, and we're really excited about that. We want to support Aboriginal businesses to think big.

Another space that we're really keen to support our members in, in that export area, is around the Aboriginal bush foods and botanical space, ensuring that that's Aboriginal led, because we're really worried about that space being taken. We're seeing some black cladding emerging in that space already. We've got some really great members that deliver brilliant services on the ground. Rayleen Brown in Alice Springs with Kungkas Can Cook was on channel 10 on *MasterChef* the other night. She's brilliant, and that's a part of the cultural story and the culture of vitalisation of Australia that we're really keen to see Aboriginal people lead—about what the native botanicals and bush foods are in their backyard. Julalikari at Tennant Creek are doing something really innovative. They've set up a seed bank where they're working with the traditional owners, going around collecting the native seeds and then Julalikari are seeing what they can do with those seeds, what products they can produce. The ladies are getting paid for their time out on country. It's bringing back that really important piece of work on the ground. They're taking seeds to new areas that have been damaged by development—mining sites and other land clearing—and doing fauna regeneration and regrowth. But then they're also packaging that up and telling the cultural story unique to that area and how they utilise medicines and remedies. We're talking with DFAT and Austrade about where some of the market opportunities are to take that.

**Ms Anstess:** There are some really, really strong cultural intellectual property issues attached to that as well.

**Ms CLAYDON:** I was going to say, if you're working with Terri Janke, she's a really good way to start on some of those matters.

**Mr Cubillo:** [inaudible] speak at the forum on that exact thing.

**Ms CLAYDON:** That was going to be my next point. This committee did an inquiry a while ago around the threat of fake Indigenous art on the market. She gave terrific evidence around better protections of intellectual and cultural property rights. It really is a matter in this inquiry too because you have to build in some protective measures. I think it's fair to say that our laws are not quite there yet. There's a lot of work to be done on that front.

Anyway—and I don't want to hog all the questions here—I'm also keen to understand what your relationship is like with the existing mainstream organisations in the NT, such as the Northern Territory Business Council and Tourism NT—bodies that really should be strong partners. I'm not sure how it works on the ground. Could you enlighten me as to whether there's work to be done on that front or things are going swimmingly?

**Ms Anstess:** There's always work to be done on that front. Obviously, to be frank, we spend a lot of time fighting fear in the mainstream community that Aboriginal businesses are going to steal all the work and everybody is going to lose their job. That's really not the case. The data out of Commonwealth research shows that for every dollar spent on private sector employment the Commonwealth saves something like \$6.70, so the economic benefit is great for everybody and so are the opportunities for diversification. We've currently got a really strong and active cross-sector approach to collaboration. The Territory Indigenous Business Network board is really strongly driven to collaborating with the chamber. The chamber has been working very closely with us. We're in talks about how we can collaborate and actively work together. We're having the same kinds of conversations with the minerals council, the farmers association and everybody else. We understand the need for us to all collaborate and have strong relationships so that we can get the best outcomes for the Territory. Obviously there are always going to be times when there's conflict. We understand those and we try to proactively navigate those in the best possible way for the greatest outcome for the Territory. That's a very political answer, isn't it? I've decided I should be a politician. It's the truth though.

**Ms CLAYDON:** Thanks, Naomi and Jerome. It has been fantastic to have you and your evidence this morning.

**Mr YOUNG:** Thanks for your time today. It's very good. I have a question—and this may not be your area of responsibility—about jobactive providers, working with them and getting people placed. I'm wondering in all sectors, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, how well the jobactive system is working. Have you had any experience there? Do they do a great job or not? Do you have any ideas about improving that sector?

**Mr Cubillo:** We have members who [inaudible] those services.

**Ms Anstess:** It's probably not our place to speak on that. We'd be really careful about it. There are some who do a fantastic job and others who would be found wanting, as is the case anywhere. There's a lot to be said about

Aboriginal control or Aboriginal businesses delivering those services, who seem to be doing it slightly differently. There are a lot of jobactive providers obviously that are not Aboriginal, and up here it would be great to see more that are Aboriginal and approach things a little differently. That's the frankest I could be.

**Mr YOUNG:** Who do you use when you're employing staff? Do you use a jobactive provider?

**Mr Cubillo:** Not a jobactive provider. We'd use other Aboriginal employment services, like ie.project or All Aspects Recruitment & HR Services. We haven't used jobactive services in terms of looking for employees.

**Mr YOUNG:** I'm just trying to figure out why they're not used. Most employers I talk to don't use them. Why are we funding something people don't use? I was just trying to see if you had experience in that area. But that's alright; that may be a question for another witness.

**CHAIR:** Thanks so much for the wonderful evidence you have provided today. We have run well over time, which is indicative of the fact that what you've been saying to us is very interesting to all members of the committee. We have asked you to come back to us on some things. Could you please do so by 20 July. You will be sent a copy of the transcript of your evidence and have the opportunity to request corrections to transcription errors. Thanks for your attendance today.

**ALLISON, Professor Gareth, Acting Chief Executive Officer, Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education [by video link]**

[10:41]

**CHAIR:** Welcome. Although the committee doesn't require you to give evidence under oath, I should remind you that this hearing is a legal proceeding of parliament and therefore has the same standing as proceedings of the House of Representatives. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. The evidence given today will be recorded by Hansard and attracts parliamentary privilege. I now invite you to make a brief opening statement before we proceed to discussion.

**Prof. Allison:** Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the land I am on right now and the traditional owners of the land across Australia as well. I'm currently on the Larrakia land here in Darwin, and I would like to acknowledge elders past, present and emerging. I thank the committee for the opportunity to appear as a witness before you today for your inquiry into pathways and participation opportunities for Indigenous Australians employment and business.

The Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education is constituted under the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education Act for the specific purpose of being an educational institution for the tertiary education of Indigenous people of Australia. As such, the institute's entire business focus and operations are centred around attracting and fulfilling the educational, training and research needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Our organisation was established for benevolent reasons. The institute is a not-for-profit organisation. In addition, it has deductible gift recipient status. The institute has a proud 45-year history of providing education and training to one of the most disadvantaged sections of the Australian population. The institute started as a provider of vocational education and training. From these strong foundations, we expanded into the provision of higher education courses.

Today, Batchelor Institute is the only table A Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander higher education provider in Australia. We provide training and education across the Northern Territory in environments that are often extremely challenging. As a dual-sector provider, the institute currently provides vocational education and training programs primarily to regional and remote Northern Territory Aboriginal students; a Batchelor delivered set of units into enabling undergrad courses of Charles Darwin University; and higher degree by research training through masters, research and PhD programs. Batchelor's 'both ways' philosophy defines the way in which the institute works and teaches. It is demonstrably a First Nations approach to teaching and interacting, where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of doing inform a Western educational system. The result is a culturally secure approach for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and other peoples such that learning and achievement are synonymous.

As a First Nations led and managed training and education institute that was established for the benefit of First Nations people, we feel well-placed to address four of the six aspects of the inquiry's terms of reference: employment pathways available to Indigenous Australians; barriers to employment for Indigenous Australians, including access to employment and training; government employment programs and opportunities to build upon effective initiatives; and identifying gaps and opportunities in the workforce and future growth sectors that could result in employment and enterprise options for Indigenous Australians.

In terms of employment pathways available to Indigenous Australians I note that there is a need for equitable pathways for Aboriginal and non-Indigenous peoples. Such pathways may include greater flexibility and systems to recognise the knowledge and practices of Aboriginal peoples. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who complete year 12 or a higher qualification are more likely to be employed, to work full time and to have higher skilled jobs than early school leavers. However, First Nations people have a greater chance of early disengagement from the education system. In the Northern Territory, the years 7 to 12 apparent retention rate—an estimate of the extent to which students stay on at school to year 10 and to year 12—for Indigenous students is the lowest in Australia, at 31 per cent. Given this low number, there is a greater need to focus on opportunities for early re-engagement.

In regard to barriers to employment for Indigenous Australians, including access to employment and training, I note that barriers to education and training can include distance, digital connectivity and language. Last year's COVID-19 movement restrictions and last week's various shutdowns highlighted how vulnerable the education prospects of students living in remote locations can be when they can't travel for training. The small number of potential students in some locations can make commercially viable delivery on country difficult. This is often a training preference for First Nations peoples and their communities. At the same time, there are significant

challenges in away from base funding and it is not sufficient for students travelling from remote locations. Training providers must either cover this cost or not accept these students, significantly disadvantaging in them.

For many Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory, standard Australian English is not their first language or even their second, third or fourth language. This can present a barrier for training and education, as well as employment. There needs to be greater funding to develop standard Australian English literacy and numeracy for adult learners.

In regard to existing government employment programs and opportunities to build upon effective initiatives, work that the Batchelor Institute does with the Australian Defence Force has been very successful and could be replicated in other areas. In regard to setting specific non-negotiable targets for employment of Aboriginal people, research into the effectiveness of special measures is a way to improve Aboriginal employment. With respect to current gaps and opportunities in the workforce and future growth sectors that could result in employment and enterprise options for Indigenous Australians, these include: a specific First Nations university to nurture and equip the next generation of First Nations' leaders but also create learning opportunities for non-First Nations people around specific knowledges; human services, particularly aged care; early childhood and schooling; renewable energy and carbon farming; pathways for educators; and tourism. Thank you.

**CHAIR:** Thanks, Professor Allison. I've got a few 101-type questions, but I wanted to touch first on a couple of things that you raised in your opening statement. Aren't you effectively the First Nations university for Australia, and, if not, who?

**Prof. Allison:** We would like to become that, but, under the current provider category options that we have available to us, we're an institute and not a university.

**CHAIR:** Even though you're a table A provider?

**Prof. Allison:** We're a table A provider and we receive some of the funding benefits available through that status, but we're not a university.

**CHAIR:** Right. Okay. One of the issues that I was interested to hear you raise was the difficulty of doing education in community and so on. To what extent are the telecommunications issues in remote communities, and even in some of the regional centres and outer-metro parts of the major cities in the Northern Territory, an issue?

**Prof. Allison:** We've got a couple issues. One is actual data. There isn't enough bandwidth and so on for people to be able to access all of the resources we could potentially provide online for teaching and learning. There are also issues in terms of having the right devices available to access whatever data is available as well. The situation is a little bit varied. Some places have slightly better coverage than others. It's in the remote rather than in the regional communities that we're affected the most. We've tried to work a little bit with the Northern Territory government to get a bit of data into remote communities, but it's a very complex issue that is tied up with a lot of licencing and commercial issues.

**CHAIR:** Is some of it an NBN problem, or is some of it a Telstra problem? Is the mobile phone reception reasonable in communities? Tell me a little bit about that. I'm asking this particularly in the context of the recent \$50 million dollar fine that Telstra paid for ripping off First Nations people in remote communities, and I'm wondering whether there are some issues about telecommunications in remote communities more broadly that are hampering educational efforts.

**Prof. Allison:** I can't speak too generally around that. I don't really have the knowledge to speak to that too directly. I can take it on notice and get back to you about the extent to which it affects our delivery in a bit more detail. It's an interesting question, but I'm not sure exactly where the issues lie, except that it does impact us.

**CHAIR:** You must have had some experience of it over the last year, where we had communities under lockdown, with students in some of them. Do you have many students who travel from remote communities to do your courses?

**Prof. Allison:** Yes, most of our students are remote or regional.

**CHAIR:** I'd be very interested in that issue because I think it's fundamental.

**Prof. Allison:** Yes.

**CHAIR:** I want to ask about your courses and completion rates. What sort of completion rates do you have for your courses, and do you have courses where there are higher and lower completion rates?

**Prof. Allison:** A focus of ours this year has been on our retention rates in our courses and trying to limit the number of students that drop out of them. At the moment, I don't have the exact figures in front of me, but it has improved a lot over the last couple of years. We're getting a little bit better at what we do. It's reasonably high at

the moment. It was not always so in the past. Again, I can get you that information. I just don't have it to hand at the moment.

**CHAIR:** That would be helpful. One of the things that we know from the *Closing the gap* report is that effectively if somebody has completed a higher education degree and they're Indigenous, there's no gap between them and the rest of the population. Is that true as well for graduates of the Batchelor Institute?

**Prof. Allison:** The only graduates that we actually graduate ourselves with anything like a degree of status are master's and PhD graduates. We currently don't offer degrees in our own right; we teach into Charles Darwin University's programs. They would have the statistics on our students that we teach that go through their institution. For our master's and PhD graduates, I would tend to agree with that statement.

**CHAIR:** What about employment outcomes for your VET students?

**Prof. Allison:** That's a more nuanced story. Whilst people can get a VET qualification, it doesn't always lead to the employment outcomes that you'd think it might. In other words, the certificate on its own is not necessarily enough for someone to get employment in their local community. One of the biggest concerns, I think, is language; it is as much of a barrier as anything else to employment, from what we understand. That's basic literacy and numeracy, and there are other barriers as well—

**CHAIR:** Can I just stop you there? So people don't have basic literacy and numeracy and yet they can still pass the course?

**Prof. Allison:** Yes.

**CHAIR:** Give me an example.

**Prof. Allison:** They have the literacy and numeracy to pass that course. Someone can get a qualification in construction because it's a skills based qualification, but they might not necessarily have all of the language and numeracy skills to—

**CHAIR:** Is that because English is not their first language or because they don't have basic literacy even in their own language?

**Prof. Allison:** When someone's talking and English is their second, third or fourth language, it's very difficult for them to have that level of English-language literacy and numeracy that some employers require. There may also be some issues with literacy within their own language, which has an impact on their ability to get employment.

**CHAIR:** Is the Batchelor Institute involved in any way in job placement after study, or do your courses, particularly in the VET sector, involve matching people to the employer to whom they'll be apprenticed throughout the course of that VET qualification?

**Prof. Allison:** That's an area that we think is a little bit of a barrier to employment. There's not always an alignment between jobs in community and the training that is delivered in community. It's really hard to manage, because, in many ways, each community is fundamentally different from the next. To get that alignment between opportunity and what training is delivered to enable that opportunity requires a lot of discussion with traditional owners, community groups and other local stakeholders, to understand what those opportunities are and then to deliver training that is directly targeted at those opportunities.

**CHAIR:** I've done a terrible thing: my colleague Ms Claydon has to leave in about a minute, and I just wanted to see if there's anything that she wanted to ask. I meant to put her on first. I'm so sorry, Sharon.

**Ms CLAYDON:** That is totally fine. I think Warren will be able to follow up in the issues around it. I'm just interested in the capacity of the Batchelor Institute to now do outreach, on-country training, which appears to have reduced a bit over time. I will duck off now—I'm terribly sorry, Professor. Thank you for your evidence this morning. I'll let Warren take that line of questioning. I'll be back as soon as I can.

**CHAIR:** Thank you, and sorry again. Before I hand to the deputy chair, let me clarify something, Professor Allison: in relation to matching people to jobs as part of the training, that is not a role that the Batchelor Institute plays, it's not a role that you're funded to do and it's not a role that you've got the expertise to do. Is that right?

**Prof. Allison:** Yes, you're correct. It's not a role that we're funded to do.

**CHAIR:** I'm sure my friend Mr Snowdon will ask some questions around this. One of the issues that have presented themselves in the inquiry is the 'training-go-round' that's occurring in some of these communities, where people keep training for jobs that don't exist and the like. What would you say to that as a piece of public policy?

**Prof. Allison:** We think it's better to have an alignment between jobs that do exist and the training that's offered. That requires, like I said, a lot of understanding of each individual community and what they require, because they're not all the same. However, having said that, there are employment opportunities in community that could be filled by First Nations people but are sometimes not filled by First Nations people. You know there's a lot of fly-in fly-out employment of people from outside when that doesn't necessarily need to be the case. There are some choices made at the other side of the equation which influence that as well.

**CHAIR:** Is there anything that we should do in relation to making a recommendation around that? It does seem to me that there's a problem with training people for jobs that don't exist, but we could perhaps make some recommendations around particular roles. We heard some evidence yesterday from ALPA about roles that used to exist and be filled by Indigenous people but perhaps today are not. They gave us an example, for instance, of teacher's aides and healthcare workers. It seems to me that you create the wrong sort of culture in a community if people are doing training for which they know there's no job. You wonder why we put people through training for an opportunity that's not there if you can, as you say, align things better so you've got the training matching the opportunity. That does seem to be better. Is there anything by way of recommendation that you'd suggest we could make?

**Prof. Allison:** It's a really deep issue you make, because part of it is that there don't seem to be career opportunities and pathways. I'll use that word 'pathways': where does this initial entry level job lead? Those sorts of things are not often communicated very clearly in community. You get this job; where does it take you? That kind of communication, from my understanding, is not always in place. Very few remote programs have Indigenous employment strategies other than the special measures program, and the effectiveness of that is maybe a little bit dubious. Again, maybe career consultancy stuff and being funded for that would be really useful as well.

Another thing on the training side of it is the metrics of success. We're measured as being successful in our training in terms of the number of hours of delivery of training that we do. It's more like 'we've delivered this much training'. However, the metrics of success may actually be more effective if they were things like outcomes, like employment outcomes and that sort of thing, rather than a blunt measure of hours delivered, which maybe takes away from the quality of what's done towards the quantity, as it were.

**CHAIR:** Thanks, Professor Allison.

**Mr SNOWDON:** I've had the privilege of observing Batchelor since it commenced and had a lot to do with it over many years. I'm aware that there are various buildings in many communities across the territory which are or were the property of Batchelor but which for all intents and purposes are no longer used for providing courses by Batchelor. Can you explain to us why that is the case?

**Prof. Allison:** I think that's something that's been allowed to develop over time, where our training has been retrenched somewhat in remote places. However, at the moment council has mandated that we have a good look at all of those sites and look to re-establish our presence in community a lot more over the next year or so. That's one of my responsibilities; what I'm serving in this role for now. Part of it is to do a case-by-case assessment of each of those delivery sites to see whether or not they are viable. Some are more viable than others. Others are a cost. What we're looking at doing initially is maybe looking at four or five clubs that we can invest more resources in so we're a little bit more connected to community. We're also looking at cooperating with the Northern Territory government in terms of accessing their trade training centres to give us more of a physical presence out bush, as it were.

**Mr SNOWDON:** I'm also aware that your staffing in Alice Springs is reduced quite substantially and the course offerings out of Central Australia are minimal. Is there an explanation as to how that might change so that we can see Batchelor doing the work that we all expect Batchelor to do: provide vocational education and training, prevocational courses and professional development courses for people across the territory?

**Prof. Allison:** I would say Alice Springs is very important to us. We recognise its importance and the importance of Central Australia very strongly. This year we've actually taken on staff at the Alice Springs campus—not a great number, but a small handful. This is against a background where we are actually performing really well in terms of our VET delivery—again, against those metrics of hours and so on. We have been able to take additional people on down there. I think part of the problem was that we were underperforming and we were under financial pressure in the last few years.

**Mr SNOWDON:** Thank you for that. Yesterday we heard evidence that Charles Darwin University is becoming increasingly more active in the VET space in remote communities.

**Prof. Allison:** Yes.

**Mr SNOWDON:** Do you have any relationship, formal or otherwise, with Charles Darwin University about the provision of VET courses to remote places either on behalf of Batchelor or Batchelor in their own right?

**Prof. Allison:** No, we have no formal arrangement at this point in time. The new vice-chancellor of Charles Darwin University and I have agreed to meet regularly. That's one of the things that we will be putting on the table. I think it was a difficult relationship in the past.

**Mr SNOWDON:** Thank you. Chair, I think the challenges for Batchelor are huge given recent history. I'm aware of that history, Professor Allison, so I understand the difficulty of your position. But we're charged with the responsibility of trying to provide advice on education, training and employment, and one of the issues that confronts us is the lack of, for all intents and purposes, adult education—in my case, in remote communities. It's not uniform across Australia but it's particularly important, from my perspective, for remote Northern Territory. There is in many places an absence of that adult education opportunity, including prevocational courses and courses which might be around upskilling for a particular purpose—for example, providing small-motor maintenance skills for people on the coast who have outboard motors. They are little things that used to exist but no longer exist. My issue is how we get them back in. I'd like to think, Professor Allison, that Batchelor will be key in that role.

**Prof. Allison:** We're certainly very keen to do as much as we can in those spaces. The development of short courses is something that's very helpful with that as well. This year, against last year, our VET sector has started to perform a lot better. We're meeting targets, which gives us more financial stability and the ability to actually deliver what we're meant to do. Over a period of time, we weren't performing that well financially. In the last year or so, that story has turned around a little bit, and we are doing a bit better in that space, which gives us more ability to meet our obligations to stakeholders. Part of that is that there are funding challenges for us that we have to deal with that maybe some organisations don't have to deal with. The away from base funding, in particular, is a challenge. We don't receive enough money through that to adequately fund delivery to remote students; we have to prop that up through other sources.

**Mr SNOWDON:** Thank you, Professor Allison. I have no more questions.

**CHAIR:** Following the deputy chair's last question, to understand remote delivery, do you mean that, for in situ people visiting remote communities, particularly if you're dealing with providing training for motor mechanics to do outdoor motor skills, some of that can be done online, but some of it also needs to be done physically with a trainer to show you how to get on the tools, as it were?

**Prof. Allison:** Yes. We have two types of delivery that we tend to do more than others. One is where we see a trainer out to a remote community to deliver training onsite. The other one is where we bring people onto campus for a block delivery. The types of courses that we deliver in community tend to be more practical based, like mechanical stuff or construction, those types of things. We tend to fly people in for things like health, education or early childhood education, those types of courses. We bring in a group of students from around the Territory and bring them in for a block course for a week or two weeks, and then we fly them back home again. There are two different ways of doing it.

**CHAIR:** That's very helpful. Thanks, Professor Allison. I don't think we have any further questions for you. We've really appreciated the opportunity to speak to you. I know we've asked you to come back to us with a few things. If you could, please do so by 20 July. You'll be sent a copy of the transcript of the evidence and have an opportunity to request corrections to transcription errors. Thank you very much for your attendance today.

**Prof. Allison:** Thank you very much for your time.

**COSENS, Ms Kirstine, Operations Manager, Ironbark Aboriginal Corporation [by video link]**

**PEARCE, Mr Shaun, Chief Executive Officer, Ironbark Aboriginal Corporation [by video link]**

[11:14]

**CHAIR:** I now call representatives of the Ironbark Aboriginal Corporation. Although the committee doesn't require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that this hearing is a legal proceeding of the parliament and therefore has the same standing as proceedings of the House of Representatives. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. The evidence given today will be recorded by Hansard and attracts parliamentary privilege. I now invite you to make a brief opening statement before we proceed to discussion.

**Mr Pearce:** Thanks for this opportunity. If I may, I'd like to give an opening address with some background information. I've been the CEO of Ironbark for the past six years. Previous to that, I was out at Yulara for eight years, working with the Anangu in the desert communities at Yulara. Kirstine has been our operations manager for three years here. She previously worked for seven years out of Wadeye with the service provider Thamarrurr.

Ironbark Aboriginal Corporation is a not-for-profit organisation based in Darwin, Northern Territory. We are celebrating our 21st year of existence as a service provider focusing on Indigenous Australians in the Greater Darwin and Daly region. We currently employ approximately 60 staff, 51 per cent of whom are Indigenous. We service seven specific communities and operate from 11 different locations.

We commenced back in 2000 as Darwin Regional CDEP Incorporated, following extensive consultations with Indigenous communities in the Darwin region. From these discussions, a unique governance model was developed with representation and participation based on regional community organisations rather than individual members. The organisation's concept was to establish a not-for-profit organisation with the core objective of providing relief and practical assistance to Aboriginal people of the Yilli Rreung region, including Darwin and Palmerston, to alleviate and overcome the effects of disadvantage by assisting, preparing and encouraging people to seek employment opportunities within the region. I won't go through a lot more of the detail other than to say that in 2014, to strengthen our governance, we moved to become the Ironbark Aboriginal Corporation, under the C(ATSI) Act, rather than simply becoming Ironbark, as we are widely known.

Over the years, we've actively participated in many federal and local government funded programs, which have provided great exposure to the corporation and laid foundations to grow as a strong Aboriginal corporation built from the values of commitment, integrity, collaboration, courage and respect, all of which we hold very true today. The main area of work Ironbark is renowned for is the Community Development Program, formerly the Community Development Employment Projects program and the Remote Jobs and Communities Program, which it operates under the Commonwealth government contract. This is a program for the development and upskilling of unemployed participants in region 35, the Darwin Daly region. The cohort of unemployed on our current case load sits at just over 1,600. The program sees Ironbark develop and provide our clients with real-life activities, identifying and breaking down barriers to employment, and providing real opportunities for people to gain employment and to be ready for employment when the opportunity arises. Skills are taught onsite by various methods, one of which, as an example, is partnering with CDU to provide certification on civil construction. We use other RTOs where we need to get certification and accreditation, if it can be obtained.

Up until 2015 Ironbark was also a successful four-star rated JSA provider in the urban market, known as an Indigenous specialist. Other areas where Ironbark operates both in the not-for-profit space and the for-profit space include Aboriginal Bush Traders, which is a social enterprise where we specialise in bush tucker and authentic Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts and crafts. We have artist-in-residence opportunities and we create and carry out events and workshops. This provides a space for all Indigenous people to potentially sell their wares in a real economy and it provides an opportunity to participate in a retail market outside of the remote and local communities.

We also have Ironbark Indigenous Support, which provides advocacy and support to case-manage people suffering from domestic violence abuse in the urban area. Formerly this was known as Indigenous Community Links, which provided advocacy and support in the town camps. We also have RapidClean NT, which is a cleaning, chemical, janitorial and paper goods supplier and wholesaler. Originally it was set up as a joint venture, which we purchased outright in 2020. It is now 100 per cent Aboriginal owned, by Ironbark. RapidClean provides the Ironbark unemployed case load with an opportunity to upskill and train in areas of chemical handling, warehousing, logistics, administration and sales. This is in its infancy, but it has already seen some progress.

Ironbark Employment is a labour hire arm we developed last year. We can employ from our own case load and provide other opportunities for employment and can tap directly into civil construction areas and the housing

market in the remote areas, where we've been successful in some of the local government road upgrades and contracts. Most recently we've started a 51 per cent owned joint venture called On Country Construction. It is in its infancy stages. We employ Indigenous apprentices and utilise only Indigenous subcontractors, focusing on defence, major projects and remote housing.

This is a snapshot of Ironbark Aboriginal Corporation, where we've come from and where we are today. We're happy to take and answer all questions as they arise.

**CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Mr Pearce and Ms Cossens, for your evidence today. You're an Aboriginal corporation. More than 50 per cent of your board are Aboriginal?

**Mr Pearce:** We have a 100 per cent Aboriginal board and we represent 13 different Aboriginal organisations and communities.

**CHAIR:** You've got a diverse line of businesses: CDP, jobactive and arts businesses as well. What's the key source of income for you? Do the jobactive and CDP businesses help subsidise the arts businesses? Do they all stand alone?

**Mr Pearce:** We were in the jobactive space up until 2015. We no longer have that contract. It's an urban contract, and we're seen as more a remote organisation. Our bread and butter, if you like, is the CDP contract.

**CHAIR:** Are you intending to apply in the new round of contracting for jobactive?

**Mr Pearce:** Absolutely.

**CHAIR:** Can you tell us how you ceased to be a jobactive provider for Indigenous Australians? What are the lessons we can draw from that process, as a committee? What evidence would you like to present to us?

**Mr Pearce:** We ceased to be a provider just prior to my arrival. I actually came in at the end of that. My understanding is that, at that time, Ironbark was going through a difficult period as an organisation with their governance and financial situation and, for whatever reason, when the contracts came up for renewal, we either didn't apply appropriately or we didn't apply at all. It was a poor decision and something that we've been trying to advocate that we get back, and we're waiting for the opportunity to reapply.

**CHAIR:** Can you say something about the success or otherwise of Ironbark as a jobactive provider in those days?

**Mr Pearce:** Again, I wasn't here, but we were regarded as the premier go-to for Indigenous employment opportunities. When we lost the contract, or when we ceased having the contract, again in my earlier days, we would have a constant stream of people contacting us, wanting us to be their provider. It was a disappointing result for the cohort that we had on our books. To this day, people still in the streets will say to us: 'I used to be with you under JSA.'

**CHAIR:** About nine per cent of Job Services clients across the country are Indigenous and yet there's only two Indigenous providers, both of which do boutique work in particular communities—one in Broome and one in Yarrabah. What do you see is the advantage of having an Indigenous job services provider that has a broader remit than particular boutique communities, as I expect was the remit that you had or that you might be talking about having in a future tender?

**Mr Pearce:** One of the things—and Kirsten, please feel free to jump in—that I see as a benefit is that, because of our CDP set-up, we're different to a lot of organisations in that we don't work in a specific community. We work in seven communities from 11 different locations and a lot of places up and down the highways and in-between, and they aren't designated outstations or homelands. We have a very transient population, as does everybody, but we have a very transient population because we're on that urban cusp, so we have a lot of people coming in from Daly River, Belyuen, Marrakai, Acacia and Adelaide River. They're constantly in and out of Darwin, and that's where the family track is. So by being a provider of the JSA contract in Darwin urban, those families could move and have the same point of contact, and so it would be the same information and core and common communication, and it wasn't an alternative provider.

**CHAIR:** I want to know a little bit about your CDP work; I know you started off as a CDEP provider. With the changes to CDP, what was the tendering process like there or were people just rolled over from CDEP to CDP? And with the present review of CDP, have you been invited to have discussions with the Commonwealth about what the new CDP should look like?

**Mr Pearce:** With the rollover of RJCP into CDP, it was pretty much a rollover. There wasn't a lot of tinkering as such. We had to tender for it, but it was almost a targeted tender, and the most recent contract at CDP was a targeted tender process. We in our region are probably the only ones that are around that can deliver it, which stands us in good stead, and, having been doing it for 20 years, we have a very good track record. As far as the

current climate in the CDP, we haven't been privy to the discussions. On the current changes, we were not consulted whatsoever. We actually found out the night before. We found out when the changes were made in the budget announcement.

**CHAIR:** What would you like to see change with CDP? What would make it work better?

**Ms Cossens:** Do you want to swap sides?

**Mr Pearce:** We're going to play musical chairs.

**CHAIR:** Okay, that's great, thank you. Ms Cossens?

**Ms Cossens:** Some of these discussions we've been having with our Jobs Australia network—that's going to be the forum where hopefully lots of CDP providers can come together and, I guess, lobby for changes that they're passionate about. Certainly in dealings with the federal government we seem to lack a very clear communications strategy. As Shaun alluded to before, we're notified of changes on the hop, and those changes can be immediate. We're not given a week, a month or anything to be able to communicate to our clients and help them understand how those changes will affect them. They're just immediate.

In terms of CDP I think everybody is aware that it can be viewed as discriminatory against our Indigenous clients, because most CDP regions have 80 to 90 per cent Indigenous participants. Our region is a little bit different. We have only 39 per cent Indigenous clientele and jobseekers, because we're on that urban-regional cusp. There are some differences, obviously, between jobactive and CDP, and it does often feel like our clients have more obligations in the Work for the Dole space than what jobactive participants have. As a result, people who are on the cusp of CDP and jobactive regions will actively move in and out of those regions by changing their address according to what mutual obligations they feel they can meet.

**CHAIR:** So does there need to be a better alignment of the mutual obligation requirements in both programs—is that what you're suggesting to us?

**Ms Cossens:** I think so. I think that would remove the discriminatory nature of CDP—its reputation, I suppose.

**CHAIR:** How do you measure success with CDP? Is there a percentage that you have moving into employment in the general economy, particularly in remote communities, where there aren't formal economies as there is in a place like Darwin? Some of the CDP is designed not for the formal economy but for life in remote communities. How do you measure success?

**Ms Cossens:** Certainly for our remote communities like Nauiyu, Belyuen and those in the Adelaide River region as well, Amangal, we are obviously collaborating with DIPL, the department of infrastructure, and with NIAA so that, if there are local civil construction works, local tenders, we're helping the contractors who win those tenders with their Aboriginal workforce and making sure that some of that money stays in those areas.

**CHAIR:** And that's through the labour hire aspect of your business?

**Ms Cossens:** It can be sometimes, but mostly it is through CDP and referring our jobseekers through. Obviously that's contract work. Sometimes it's for one dry season, and then they halt for the wet. And then work picks up again in another season.

**CHAIR:** I'm so sorry we're not visiting you in the flesh, because I think I might have understood this better in the flesh. But explain to me, given that you've got those workers doing construction and civil construction roles, why you wouldn't have the people who are on the CDP in your labour hire business full time. What am I not understanding about—

**Mr Pearce:** The labour hire business has just started to alleviate those issues, or to better get that opportunity. What has been happening in recent times is DIPL have been putting the contracts out for things like roadworks in our regions, where our communities are. We will do the CDP training six to eight months in advance of those contracts commencing, where the participants in our region will do civil construction, and we'll have CDU out there with the remote unit or education van. They will gain all their equipment certificates, and we can then provide the tendering organisations a ready-made workforce in their community that can be employed by those tendering organisations, if you like, so that the money stays in the community and the family see the parents working and they get up and go to a real job. They've got the support of the CDP supervisors and coordinators there on the spot to assist them with any concerns or needs that they have. If it were truly a labour hire business as a whole entity, the support would be coming from Darwin as such, and we would have to employ them ourselves. Our real aim is to get other businesses to employ these people so that they can have ongoing work and keep working in and around their own community.

**CHAIR:** I just want to ask one more question. This is about the Indigenous business side of things. Are you involved in the IPP at all—in the Indigenous Procurement Policy? Are you tendering for that purpose?

**Mr Pearce:** Not as such, no.

**CHAIR:** Are you involved in establishing Indigenous businesses at all or helping people establish businesses? You're more on the employment side of our inquiry than the small-business side of the inquiry.

**Mr Pearce:** We are. We provide fee-for-service financial support. We engage with other small enterprises that are starting up, and we do their finance for them. We do their bookkeeping, P&Ls and everything for them, because we find that's probably one of the biggest areas where small start-up businesses in the Indigenous market fail. They can do the job, but they don't get the back end right. So we provide that as a service, and it's a service that we're growing. We currently have, I think, three clients at the moment that we do that for, and we've got a plethora of people asking. But we also want to make sure that it's within our capabilities. We do provide advice, if you like, ad hoc, to businesses that come to us looking to partner up with an established organisation that has all that back end support.

**Ms STANLEY:** I just want to thank the witnesses for being part of our inquiry. It's very helpful. Thank you.

**Mr SNOWDON:** I thank Ironbark. I know this organisation by reputation and the work they're doing across their area of work. They have got a very high level of regard from across the community, and I'm very pleased with the evidence they've been able to give. So thank you very much.

**CHAIR:** Thank you so much to Ironbark. We appreciate your presence here today. If we've asked you to come back with anything, if you could come back to the committee secretariat by 20 July, that would be very helpful. We'll send you a copy of the transcript of your evidence, and you'll have an opportunity to request corrections to transcription errors. Thanks for your attendance here today. The committee will suspend now.

**Proceedings suspended from 11:38 to 13:43**

**MARTIN-JARD, Mr Joe, Deputy Chief Executive Officer, Northern Land Council [by video link]**

**WELLINGS, Mr Peter, Executive Officer to Chair and Chief Executive Officer, Northern Land Council [by video link]**

**CHAIR:** I now call representatives of the Northern Land Council. Although the committee doesn't require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that this hearing is a legal proceeding of the parliament and therefore has the same standing as proceedings of the House of Representatives. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. The evidence given today will be recorded by Hansard and attracts parliamentary privilege. I now invite you to make a brief opening statement before we proceed to discussion.

**Mr Martin-Jard:** Thank you. Before we start, I would like to acknowledge the Larrakia people of these lands we're meeting in today. I won't be making a long formal statement, because that's been made by our CEO, Marion Scrymgour, in the past and there's not really much to build on. I also want to pass on her apologies and those of our chairman, Sam Bush-Blanski. Both of them thank you for the opportunity to appear here today.

**CHAIR:** Thank you. I want to ask you a bit about the Indigenous Ranger Program, which is operating in the Northern Territory. Can you talk to me a little bit about how that's come about, the number of people employed and the impact it's having on the quality of land maintenance and employment opportunities.

**Mr Martin-Jard:** The ranger program for the Northern Territory that's being supported by land councils has been going for many years. It's one of the most successful programs you'll come across. At its last appearance the Northern Land Council asked for a commitment of five-year funding terms to allow for recruitment and training of rangers. I'm pleased to say we've been advised by the NIAA and Minister Wyatt that there will be seven-year tranches of funding approved from now on. I understand this agency is going through the process, as we speak, to send out letters of approval to—

**Mr SNOWDON:** Sorry, can I just interrupt—seven years, did you say?

**Mr Martin-Jard:** Yes, that's right. We'd asked for five years in our submission, and the NIAA and the Commonwealth have come back and said that, after doing their research and analysis, they think seven years is a better number.

**Mr SNOWDON:** Absolutely. Very good. Well done.

**CHAIR:** I'm a long way from the Territory in my Sydney based electorate, but I get an enormous amount of correspondence on the importance of Indigenous rights every year. You've obviously got a very strong national following for the work that you're doing there.

**Mr Martin-Jard:** Thank you.

**Mr SNOWDON:** If only it were all true!

**Mr Martin-Jard:** It's mostly true! It's even better than what you're hearing. When we go out to communities, we're going to schools because we've got a new program called Learning on Country; that's for kids in middle school, about 12 years old and upwards, and in vocational education and training. They're out there learning about natural resource management and the like to get certificate II and III qualifications that lead to work. When we're in these schools, in places like Milingimbi and Maningrida—in your electorate, Warren—and when we see these big spikes of kids attending school, I ask, 'Who are these kids?' and they say, 'They're the children of rangers.' So the knock-on effect is quite stunning. You were at a graduation ceremony some three years ago now, Warren, in Maningrida, where you presented awards to those year 12 kids who had come through five years of training. All of those kids went on to jobs but not necessarily as rangers; some of them, because they'd picked up literacy and numeracy skills along the way, ended up working in offices and other places, because we didn't have 14 ranger jobs for them to go to at that time. So the downstream benefits of these investments just keep giving and giving.

**CHAIR:** What can you say about the retention rate of people in the rangers program? How long do people tend to stay?

**Mr Martin-Jard:** I haven't got the figures in front of me, but we can do it on a comparison basis with other employment type programs. The ranger programs are far and away the most successful, bar none. Compared to the CDP, for example, Top End rates in the Northern Territory, it's quite stunning. The CDP, frankly, has failed to deliver for us. We'd really like to pick up on what the Commonwealth announced in the last budget, and that was a new program. They're saying it won't even look like the old CDEP. So we're quite keen to work with the Commonwealth on improving the CDP because it hasn't been a big success at all in very remote areas. It might work in urban centres or even in some of the regional centres, but it's really failed in remote areas. That's just my observation. I haven't been out there, but I'm not hearing any good reports.

**CHAIR:** I want to come back to the CDP, and I know other colleagues want to talk to you about that. I just wanted to ask you a little about the Indigenous pastoral program and what sorts of economic developments come through that scheme.

**Mr Martin-Jard:** That scheme has been operating for some time now. It really has delivered some good results. For example, in Central Australia, where I used to work and live, there are some 24,000 square kilometres under grazing licences at the moment. The pastoralists who operate in Central Australia have had to move cattle around because of the drought, and the IPP, in some ways, has helped to form better relationships with traditional owners who have allowed pastoralists to move their cattle onto their land to graze under licence. So that's returning an income to traditional owners. It's also generating some jobs in the pastoral industry for traditional owners. But also, up in the Top End, it's been successful to a degree. Some of the funding has been used for the NT Cattlemen's Association to get more young people working as stockmen and ringers on cattle stations.

**CHAIR:** Can you give us a sense of the capital generated by the pastoral program, the rangers program and mining? What sort of money is brought into Indigenous communities in the Territory from these programs, and where does the money go?

**Mr Martin-Jard:** Sorry, Mr Leeser, I wasn't expecting that question and I'm really not prepared for it, but we can take that one on notice, if you like, and get you as much information as we can gather.

**CHAIR:** I think it would be good. It gives us a sense of the economic benefit of these programs to quantify some of it. It gives us a sense of the range of economic opportunities that there are in the Territory for Indigenous people. I wonder if you want to say anything about the connection between land rights and economic opportunity at all.

**Mr Martin-Jard:** Yes. In terms of the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act, that's been operating since 1976, it's been successful. In the last set of numbers I saw for the Northern Land Council, there were 800-odd lease agreements. That allows all sorts of activity on Aboriginal land, but it's done in consultation with traditional owners and in agreement with traditional owners, instead of riding roughshod over their rights. They're being consulted along the way. And I'm really pleased to add that there are an increasing number of section 19 agreements, as we call them, that are now held by Aboriginal people themselves. For example, there's a tourism business at Bawaka in north-east Arnhem Land, and the operator there is a guy called Timmy Burarrwanga. He rang me the other night and said that his business is booming—where COVID allows—and it's due to the support of the Northern Land Council, he told me, and the section 19 agreement he has. Sorry, did I answer your question?

**CHAIR:** Yes, to some degree, but I want to understand how the value that you get from having all this land under your management translates into job opportunities for Indigenous people.

**Mr Martin-Jard:** That's quite a broad question, so I'll just give one piece. Where there's been mining on Aboriginal land, under agreement, the royalties have been paid into an account called the Aboriginals Benefit Account. That's operated under the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act. It's been around for a very long time. Minister Ken Wyatt approved some funds to come to the four land councils in the last three months, as I'm aware, with support for something like 37 Aboriginal businesses in the Top End of the Northern Territory, and that has supported existing jobs and created new ones. These were businesses that were heavily impacted by COVID, with tourists from overseas not coming to the Northern Territory. We've been able to support them through these difficult times but also build them up and get them ready for the rebound once we get more tourists up here. But we'll get you some more information, Mr Leeser.

**CHAIR:** That would be helpful. I'm not asking the questions with an agenda. I'm just asking because we're looking at employment generally and you're a very successful, well-managed organisation of high standing and you've managed lots of land. I want to see the connection between all of that and the employment opportunities, and I want to get a better understanding of that for small business as well.

I want to talk to you a little bit about CDP, which you've been critical of. What would you like to see done to reform CDP? You put some of it in your submission, but I wonder if you might like to go to a few of the key points.

**Mr Martin-Jard:** I'll just put it to you in really plain terms. We would like to see more community control of these make-work programs, where we've got essentially private businesses in Sydney trying to deliver a service. They're for-profit businesses. I get it. It's fine. There's nothing wrong with being commercial, but their imperatives are quite different to those of the people who are participating in the program. So we would be encouraging more community control where the programs are being delivered, with the traditional owners being in charge and with all of our priorities [inaudible]. There needs to be a lot more flexibility and a lot more

recognition of traditional activities, which are very important for people. In fact, they're classed as jobs, though not by the Western definition of 'job'. It can be difficult in really remote places. I was reminded just then—someone just said, 'Can we invite you. You come from the Northern Territory. Same same.' Yes, we'd be happy to do that so you can see for yourself just how hard it is in some places.

**Mr Wellings:** I believe it goes to CDP redesign, but it also reflects on what we were talking about earlier, with the ranger programs et cetera. I was reading a paper just yesterday that reminded me of what we're talking about here. It's not just a numbers game; it's about quality jobs, quality outcomes. The success of the ranger program and other things that occur is the alignment of an individual's skills and interests [inaudible]. One of the great strengths of the ranger programs is the matching of individual values with the values of the community—environmental services, border security and all those kinds of things. It also goes to job design. This is what Joe was touching on, which I'd like to completely support. One good thing the CDP can do, under the guidance of communities, is look at job design. Sometimes we have to break out of the narrow view of jobs we have, as Joe said. I've always been taken by the notion of livelihoods, the things that people get out of bed to do in the morning, that excite them and make them feel good in terms of their contribution to the community.

To go back to the ranger programs, an example of that would be how ranger programs go into the entrepreneurial world. They're interested in business opportunities, not just rangers as a government funded service. Things like crocodile harvesting comes to mind, tourism, as Joe mentioned, and those sorts of things. From my perspective, and I think the NLC's perspective, what we'd be looking for in any CDP redesign is more opportunities for those things to grow and develop into the future.

**CHAIR:** Have you been involved with any of the community advisory boards established by the NIAA to design the new CDP?

**Mr Martin-Jard:** We haven't been invited, as far as I know, but we certainly will be making some representations to the NIAA to participate. In fact, I was talking to one of the senior people in Canberra this morning, requesting that we get involved. The old CDEP program started in the Northern Territory in a place near Katherine called Bamyili, which is now known as Barunga. Back in those days, senior traditional owners were really worried about people getting welfare payments but not working for them. They were calling it 'sit-down money'. They could see how bad it was for young people not to have to work for a living, so they asked the government for a program that was essentially about working for the dole. It was called the CDEP. But, as Peter just described, the difference was that the jobs, the activities and so on were designed at a community level for community residents. It was about what was important for them. So, yes, we'd like to see more of that coming back, and that's why we're talking to the Commonwealth at every opportunity.

**CHAIR:** Thank you. I'm going to hand the deputy chair now.

**Mr SNOWDON:** Thank you to both of you. It's probably better if I don't ask any questions but allow Sharon and Anne to. I know the background and history of the NLC, the CLC and the land rights act. It might be better for people who have a query to ask it, but maybe I can help in one way. Joe referred to section 19 leases. That's part of the land rights act that provides the capacity for traditional owners to lease what is otherwise inalienable freehold land—in other words, it can't be bought or sold. The underlying title remains, and they're allowed to lease it on periods that they determine for purposes such as housing or for commercial development. This historically wasn't the case. A great deal of it has happened over the last decade or so, and it was largely because the Commonwealth assumed that, when the land rights act was enacted, land which was otherwise allocated by the Commonwealth—at that stage it was the Commonwealth—for uses such as for schools or housing was taken as being alienated but not from the title, so they are able to continue to use it for that purpose. Things have changed, obviously. Now there are commercial opportunities being developed in all parts of the Northern Territory around traditional owners effectively letting their land for the purposes of commercial activity such as tourism and fishing operations. They lease opportunities for people to catch cattle or buffalo or do a whole range of other things. So it's a dynamic process, and you asked the question about jobs. There are direct and indirect jobs, obviously, as a result of agreements which are made with mining companies and other commercial enterprises. There are indirect jobs as a result of the royalties being paid to traditional owners, who set up royalty associations and use that money for investment purposes. Probably the clearest example is the Gumatj Corporation in north-east Arnhem Land. They have a cattle property. They had a crocodile farm. They have a timber program. All of these things are generated out of Aboriginal—

**CHAIR:** There's a mine there too. Are they the ones with the bauxite mine?

**Mr SNOWDON:** They have a mining operation, yes. Those things are all happening. But I shouldn't take the floor. I should point out that, in terms of CDP—I think NLC is part of APONT, isn't it, Joe?

**Mr Martin-Jard:** Yes, that's right.

**Mr SNOWDON:** APONT, which is the peak organisation for Aboriginal organisations in the Northern Territory, has made submissions to the Commonwealth around CDP, and we'll need to talk to NIAA about what they're doing. But I'm happy to hand over to Sharon. Thank you, Peter and Joe, for appearing this afternoon.

**Ms CLAYDON:** Thank you both for the terrific evidence this afternoon. I appreciate it has been a long time between submission and when we first got to take some evidence with Marion some time ago now. I want to follow up with the Indigenous Ranger Program, because it is very evident that, of all the employment programs on the market now, that in particular appears to hold a very high value for a lot of the participants. It strikes me that we didn't see that kind of buy-in with many other work for the dole programs and the like. There are a couple of things I just want to follow up, given that that's an issue that you've brought attention to and given that you want to see the expansion of that program. The government did announce—I don't know if it was an expansion of the project—that it was confirming funding through to 2028, from memory. I think they were going from 2021 to 2028, a seven-year period, confirming that that funding would be available. What, if any, difference has that made for NLC and your interest in the Indigenous Ranger Program? Are you part of the consultation process that the NIAA has been hosting on the Indigenous Ranger Program? As of June or July—about 12 months ago now—they were, I believe, going to undertake consultation with any of the IAS-funded ranger programs. Have you been part of that? What difference, if any, has a commitment to expansion of a funding time frame made for the program?

**Mr Martin-Jard:** Thanks for that question, because it's really important. You have just highlighted the seven-year commitment that has been given generally. I'm really pleased that the Commonwealth has gone out to a competitive process; it's not just handing it over to existing providers. I know the Central Land Council and the Northern Land Council have been heavily involved in talks with NIAA staff. This is a continually evolving space, and I say that in a good way; it's continually improving. The dialogue between stakeholders is quite mature, because everyone can see the benefit of investing in these sorts of employment programs. The seven-year time frame also gives us the opportunity to give these students in high schools a pathway where they can see clearly into the future for their careers. It also gives us an opportunity to monetise or commercialise some of the activities. We're in talks with the environment and water department—I think that's what it's called—the people who look after biosecurity in the north. The history buffs among you might have read about this. There was a contingent in World War II called the Black Watch. It was where Aboriginal people kept an eye out for the Japanese military on the coastline. In fact, a Japanese pilot was captured on the Tiwi Islands by a Tiwi Islander. I'm not saying he was a ranger, but he just happened to be at the right place at the right time. So there's this history of protecting Australia. This is where the rangers will want to get into the biosecurity area. We're talking to them at the moment. When I say 'them', Andrew Tongue is leading that work. What's that department called? The department of water and the environment. We want to get more into that space too. The seven-year commitment gives us a long runway to get ready and to participate in a proper way.

**Mr Wellings:** Could I join in, if I may. I have three things just to reinforce what Joe said. The seven-year funding gives confidence to the group in making their plans going forward, particularly workforce planning, as Joe Said. Back to the chair, I was just looking at our submission. There's a reference to about an 80 per cent retention rate in our Aboriginal ranger programs in the Northern Territory.

**Ms CLAYDON:** What was that, sorry?

**Mr Wellings:** That's 80 per cent.

**CHAIR:** Of the rangers?

**Mr Wellings:** Yes, the rangers in the ranger programs.

**Mr SNOWDON:** Ranger retention.

**Ms CLAYDON:** There's an 80 per cent retention rate. Thank you. I thought you said rejection.

**Mr Martin-Jard:** One of the things that's warmed my heart more than anything in the last four to five years is the young women now participating in the ranger programs. I don't have a figure, but it's just a fabulous new area of growth in the ranger programs. It's a wonderful thing that's happening out there: young women, organising themselves and developing their skills. There are some gender issues with some of the work they do. But it's made it more complete, more whole, and it's very inspiring.

**Ms CLAYDON:** That's been my observation in the Kimberley and other parts too, where there's been a big uptake of young women going into the ranger programs. It's deemed to be meaningful work in a way that not all programs in the past have had success in doing so.

**Mr SNOWDON:** One of the significant exercises here is the development of Indigenous protected areas across the country. Now these ranger programs are seen as legitimate custodians of that country. So not only is it fulfilling an environmental role, but it's also fulfilling a cultural obligation in terms of people caring for their own country, men and women. There's a diversity of programs, as you would know from the Kimberley, into Queensland and across the Northern Territory. They were originally developed as part of employment programs in the early 1990s. The first program was in the Northern Land Council area through the Caring for Country unit. They have subsequently become entrenched. There was some political comment about them not being real jobs. Clearly they are more than real jobs. I know that there are annual camps—I have been to them—in the Northern Land Council area and the Central Land Council area where they bring all the rangers in for upskilling and training in quite sophisticated methods of geospatial mapping and a whole range of things that 15 years ago people would have said, 'You're never going to do that.' And the marine rangers have developed off the side. It's a very good program.

**Ms CLAYDON:** If I remember rightly, your submission called for a large upscaling of that program. You wanted five-year contractual arrangements. There's seven years on the table. I don't know if that is locked in for a funding cycle in perpetuity or not. You called for doubling of funding for the programs and the Indigenous protected areas over the next five years. I'm assuming we haven't got to that level of commitment. Correct me if I'm wrong, Chair, but I don't think I saw an announcement about that. Is that still the NLC's position? Do you still see the Indigenous ranger program, the marine program and whatever else as potential areas of growth?

**Mr Martin-Jard:** Absolutely. We didn't get a doubling of funding for rangers, but we did get an increase in the latest budget and it was substantial actually. We're grateful to Ken Wyatt for securing that for us. But [inaudible] we see this as a pathway to incremental increases over the next five years. That would be most welcome. In fact, if it doubled tomorrow, we'd probably not be able to deal with it. These incremental increases over the years are much more manageable.

**Ms CLAYDON:** I know that the chair asked you a question about employment rates in different sectors, but do you have a sense of how many people within the NLC's coverage are actually involved in the rangers programs now? Do you have a line of sight over it? I know other programs were being run with mining. Is it 10 Deserts? What do we call it?

**Mr SNOWDON:** The 10 Deserts Project. It's sponsored by BHP largely. It runs across Central Australia and Western Australia and involves land managers across that country, but it doesn't involve the Top End.

**Ms CLAYDON:** Apologies, that is out of your bailiwick. You don't have to worry about the 10 Deserts Project. How many people are involved in the rangers program? Do you have at hand any details about that?

**Mr Martin-Jard:** I don't have the numbers you're asking for. There are 36 groups. We can certainly find out more information about the numbers for each group. Within the NLC we have around 200 people working in the rangers programs.

**Ms CLAYDON:** That would be good. I think it goes to the question the chair asked earlier about getting a sense of how significant a piece of the employment pie that is. You're obviously juggling many other forms of employment as well related to the pastoral and mining sectors. If we could get a sense of that, that would be quite helpful. I've read your submission. I'm interested in whether there's any update now that we're a year or two on since it was made, whether there's any other headline message that you would want us to take out of that—for example, what would be the most productive thing that a Commonwealth government could do to enable the land council to realise some of these aspirations of a strong, economic development in the north that First Nations people are going to be able to take full advantage of? Is it going to those issues of land title and financing? Is it backing in specific programs or the sorts of future jobs that you've earmarked here? Maybe the other question is: What's the biggest impediment? What is it that we really need to deal with, in your view?

**Mr Wellings:** Can I answer part of the question and allow Joe to think about the access to finance, because I think that's a critical one. But if I could just add briefly two things. You mentioned northern development and I was struck, reading some of the papers to do with that, by the huge opportunity there is for Aboriginal employment in the health services area. I've not quite related to that before, but one of the reports done—I think out of the CRC in Northern Australia or maybe the James Cook uni—clearly identified the health service as the major employer, and a major opportunity for our Aboriginal mob. Mr Snowdon will know there is one famous health worker in Maningrida who has been on that job for at least 40 years and is central to the wellbeing of that community and the operation of that health team. So there are lots of opportunities in the health sector.

The other thing I just wanted to mention, if I may, going back to the role of ALRA, one of the important things that's come out of court determinations relating to the land rights sector is the Blue Mud Bay decision which

recognised Aboriginal rights in the intertidal zone. So we are talking about Northern Territory waters here. Talking to Aboriginal people, they obviously see the landscape in different eyes. It went through the NLC, with the Commonwealth, and the NT, on new approaches to sea-country management. We're already doing some great work with the Northern Territory Seafood Council on that. I think there's great opportunity there going forward. I hope I'm not going to get in trouble for this, but, when Minister Ley visited Kakadu recently, one of the traditional owners who has a keen interest in this brought that issue up with her. She thought there could be some opportunities for the Commonwealth to look at how they might be able to support some of that work, so I would just like to flag—

**Ms CLAYDON:** Supporting what? Sorry. I couldn't hear properly then.

**Mr Wellings:** Sorry—out of the Commonwealth marine and coastal policies, there might be some opportunities to support a management plan that's inclusive of Aboriginal people and traditional owners from different parts of the coast of the Northern Territory.

**Ms CLAYDON:** The one question I'd like to just check in with you, given it's quite topical at the moment, is the withdrawal of the uranium mine at Jabiru. We passed some special legislation in parliament to hand back titles. But I've heard that there's some disquiet—that might be a polite way to describe it at the moment—with regard to the state in which some of those assets have been left. I note that you had the issue of mine closures and rehabilitations as an important part of your submission. How is that transition going at Jabiru? That's the first thing. Is there something missing in the work that the Commonwealth has done in terms of enabling that to be a going concern, so that you could hit the ground running with the transition from the mine back to traditional owners?

**Mr Wellings:** Joe has asked me to answer that, because I've been involved in that. The handing over of lands to the Mirarr nation last occurred a week or so ago, on the 26th. It was a wonderful day. It was a beautiful dry season day. The traditional owners were glowing. The thing that warmed my heart there was the number of townspeople who were there who saw the opportunity and were really looking forward to the new future.

As to your question about the environment and the Commonwealth's role, I am actually full of praise, having been immersed in that work and directly involved in the negotiations, around both the remediation deed that was agreed to by the Commonwealth and the lease arrangements. I think Ministers Wyatt and Ley really took a leap of faith and saw that this was a great moment and an opportunity for the government to do something decisive.

With the environment stuff, the Commonwealth's committed to the remediation of properties in Jabiru, including any contaminated land. There's been a swathe of expert advice provided on how that might be progressed. I'm going to Jabiru tomorrow to continue those conversations. Personally, I think the Commonwealth's been a great player and a great contributor to an important decision about the future of Jabiru—remembering that it was only five or six years ago that the previous Northern Territory government really didn't want anything to do with Jabiru and wrote to the Commonwealth along those lines, saying, 'You created this with uranium mining; you're the ones to fix it.' But everybody's been at the table working together, and I think we got a good outcome. There is lots of work to do, but there's a direction we all know we need to go in.

**Ms CLAYDON:** That's good to hear. There were some fairly tangible plans that I think people want to see progressed now. How will those be funded? How do you see this going forward now for Jabiru?

**Mr Martin-Jard:** The Commonwealth's already made funding commitments of a minimum of \$35 million over the next 10 years. The remediation is being negotiated. The Commonwealth accepts responsibility for any emerging liabilities that can be connected back to the last 40 years of the management of the township. Again, that was a key achievement, I think. There's no time limit, and the financing of the remediation of land is uncapped.

**Ms CLAYDON:** I'm going to bring this back to the focus of our inquiry, which is really about the opportunities in that rehabilitation work and that transition period and ensuring that there are some sustainable employment opportunities, with some training provided, ideally on country, and some work opportunities for people as a result. I don't disagree that, as you alerted me to earlier, health services are going to be a big growth area, but what has been put to me on more than one occasion is that, if we can't train those people on country, that is a very significant obstacle to getting enough people into those jobs. So is Jabiru going to be able to provide good training opportunities for entry-level and skilled workers going forward?

**Mr Martin-Jard:** Certainly a lot of the planning we're seeing is around the tourism future for Jabiru, and a lot of our approach is in that space at the moment. Already one of the new bright and shiny things in Jabiru has been a rebirth, if you like, of Marrawuddi art gallery, which is providing a great outlet for Aboriginal artists both in the wider region and in Jabiru itself.

Coming to the technical side of work in Jabiru, in local government services or other things like that, they're the kinds of conversations I'm going to be having tomorrow about how we can work with West Arnhem Regional Council and others on that going forward. There are already some contracting companies in Jabiru, Aboriginal owned, buying services. One of their issues is that there will be business adjustments that they have to make with new land tenure arrangements. Certainly, not losing the progress that's been made there is very important, particularly the building and maintenance work you've talked about. Thinking more broadly and, perhaps, into the future, I've always been very mindful of a great opportunity for Jabiru to be a place where people can come from other places to learn about wetlands management and how Kakadu, as a whole, works—a training or work experience place, not just for local people but also people from other places and, indeed, overseas. I think there's lots of scope there. There are lots of ideas, and very much everyone is focused on working on blending those things together in a way traditional owners feel comfortable with and want to be a key part of.

**CHAIR:** Deputy Chair, did you want to round it out? Is there anything you wanted to raise?

**Mr SNOWDON:** No. We could go on for quite a long time talking to NLC, but I think their submission speaks for itself. I'd just underscore the opportunity that exists as a result of people owning their own country. The issue of infrastructure—social infrastructure—that allows people to be trained on country is really very important if we're going to get the outcomes we all want. But, no, I'm very happy. Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you very much to our two wonderful witnesses.

**CHAIR:** Yes, thank you so much. I know we've asked you to provide a fair bit of information to us. If you could do so by 20 of July, that would be helpful. You'll be sent a copy of the transcript of your evidence, with an opportunity to correct transcription errors. Let me also say, on behalf of the committee, that I'm sorry we've not been able to come to see you in person in the Northern Territory. I think, as always, some of these things are better seen in person, but it is what it is. I want to thank you for your forbearance today, and I hope that we get to see you at some point in the flesh.

**AVAKIAN, Mrs Anush, Assistant Secretary, Non-Materiel Procurement, Department of Defence [by audio link]**

**NOCKELS, Mr David, First Assistant Secretary, People Policy and Culture, Department of Defence [by audio link]**

**PATCHING, Brigadier Matt, Director General, Army People Capability, Australian Army [by audio link]**

**REID, Mrs Siobhan, Executive Director, Non-Materiel Procurement, Department of Defence [by audio link]**

**RUTHERFORD, Colonel Tim, Commander, Regional Force Surveillance Group, Australian Army [by audio link]**

**STAINES, Mr Andrew, First Assistant Secretary, Procurement and Contracting, Department of Defence [by audio link]**

[14:32]

**CHAIR:** I now call the Department of Defence and NORFORCE to give evidence. Although the committee doesn't require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that this hearing is a legal proceeding of the parliament and therefore has the same standing as proceedings of the respective houses. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. The evidence given today will be recorded by Hansard and attracts parliamentary privilege. I now invite you to make a brief opening statement before we proceed to discussion.

**Mr Nockels:** Thank you, Chair. We don't have an opening statement, and we're more than happy to proceed to questions.

**CHAIR:** Recently, we had the department, with other departments, in relation to procurement issues, and we got some sort of 101 statistics from the department more broadly on procurement. I know you've got a number of procurement officers here today. In relation to the Indigenous procurement policy, are there specific aspects of procurement that we should be aware of that are done in relation to NORFORCE which would be different from procurement that is done in relation to the rest of the department?

**Mr Nockels:** I might just throw to Mr Staines on that, but my assumption is that, no, there won't be anything specifically different as it relates to procurement in the Territory and with regard to NORFORCE. But I just might check with my colleagues and Mr Staines, if that's correct.

**CHAIR:** I'm just looking at the *Hansard* from that hearing which is in front of me, and I think Ms Reid was on the line for that particular hearing. I'm not sure if anybody else was with you, Ms Reid, who is also in this hearing. I just want to know: are there issues that we should be asking you about in relation to procurement relating to NORFORCE that are different from what we asked you about in relation to the defence department generally?

**Ms Reid:** The application of the Indigenous procurement policy applies to the department as a whole, and there isn't a separate policy for NORFORCE specifically.

**CHAIR:** I've got a few questions about NORFORCE and about the work that you do in relation to Indigenous employment. I will ask a couple of basic questions. NORFORCE is entirely an Indigenous unit; is that correct?

**Mr Nockels:** I might pass to Colonel Rutherford to handle this line of questions, given that he actually is the commanding officer for the regional force up there.

**Col. Rutherford:** No, NORFORCE is not an entirely Indigenous unit. It along with its sister units—51st Battalion, on Cape York and the Torres Strait, and the Pilbara Regiment—are regional force surveillance units. They have a specific mandate to conduct domestic based surveillance in support of border protection operations, alongside Border Force. But, because of their geography and where they conduct their operations from, they draw their workforce locally, and there is a heavy Indigenous flavour to them. I can provide you with the Indigenous statistics for the three units, if you would like—

**CHAIR:** Yes, please.

**Col. Rutherford:** In terms of the statistics for the 51st Battalion, which is Cape York and Torres Strait, it currently has a 45 per cent representation. The NORFORCE, which covers the Northern Territory and Kimberley region of WA, is at 24 per cent. And the Pilbara Regiment, which is as it says on the tin, is at four per cent.

**CHAIR:** Does that comprise about 65 regular personnel and 435 reservists? Is that right?

**Col. Rutherford:** It's close enough to that. The current strength of the NORFORCE is about 470—474 all up—of which about 64 are full time.

**CHAIR:** I'm going to come back and ask some more questions, but the deputy chair is going to turn into a pumpkin, so I'm going to let him go first.

**Mr SNOWDON:** My apologies, but I have a range of questions which I wouldn't mind going through. Firstly, congratulations, Colonel Rutherford, on the 40th anniversary of NORFORCE.

**Col. Rutherford:** Yes—last weekend! It was fantastic. We had to postpone, but we're going to catch it back up soon.

**Mr SNOWDON:** Did you walk through the city? Or you didn't?

**Col. Rutherford:** No. With the lockdown, we had to postpone that, so it'll be rescheduled a bit later in the year, but we still had a bunch of the team in from community, so we were able to do something local just amongst ourselves.

**Mr SNOWDON:** Well done. I'm interested in a couple of issues, one of which is around the employment opportunity that NORFORCE provides—in particular, the entry requirements and your ability to waive what might be the general entry requirements for Defence, in certain circumstances, to admit NORFORCE soldiers. Would you like to comment on that for us?

**Col. Rutherford:** I can. I'll refer to the RFSG, the Regional Force Surveillance Group, because there are three units, and the same policy applies to all. They have a special provision that recognises that, when we're recruiting in the very remote regions, as we are, because there is local expertise there, and that local expertise, from a military perspective, helps us with context—if we're a surveillance unit and we're out looking for things, I can get someone from Sydney or Melbourne to do that, but knowing what's meant to be there and what is unusual requires some understanding of the context. A boat going past might not be unusual to some, but to others it might be a highly irregular occurrence. So we like to recruit from communities. Doing that and understanding that remote communities don't have the same conditions as the rest of Australia, we have a provision called the Regional Force Surveillance List. The Regional Force Surveillance List is only used inside the RFSG, so amongst those three units. It allows us to employ part-time soldiers to be employed within the group only. They can't be part of the broader Army, which means they can't be deployed to Afghanistan or somewhere else. We only work within the bounds of Australia and the near region. It allows the unit commander discretion with recruiting standards against medical, dental, educational, criminal and some psychological records. It recognises that, while the person may not be the same health standard to be able to conduct the sorts of operations we would want our soldiers to do in Afghanistan, they're perfectly capable of walking around their own country and doing the job that we ask of them.

**Mr SNOWDON:** Would it be possible for you to make available a piece of paper which says what the list is? One of the recurring issues for us around the country is one aspect of what you referred to—the interaction with the justice system and the capacity of people to be employed as a consequence of interacting with the justice system. We'd be interested in having a bit more information about that and if you've found it to be satisfactory, if it's worked okay and if there have been any negative repercussions as a result. That would be useful.

I'm not sure if this next question should go to Brigadier Patching or you, but could you provide us with details of the DIDP and the Defence pre-recruitment programs, how they've worked and what your expectations of them are? We heard from Batchelor college earlier today about the partnership with Defence. I assume they were referring to the work which is being done with the DIDP but I'm uncertain. Can you give the committee an insight into the way in which Defence sees its engagement with the broader community and providing additional skills and the potential opportunities that might exist in the Defence forces generally or within the Department of Defence?

**Mr Nockels:** We might get Brigadier Patching to provide some commentary on that right now and then, if you want to follow up with some more information, we can come back on notice and provide that to you.

**Brig. Patching:** The DIDP is actually split into two separate programs. There is a Navy Indigenous Development Program, which is predominantly run out of Cairns at the moment and has been running since 2014. We're looking to expand the Navy Indigenous Development Program into Western Australia as well, to make the most of Navy's footprint around HMAS *Stirling* in Western Australia. There's also the Army Indigenous Development Program, which Tim's responsible for in the Northern Territory, and we also run a second version of it at Kapooka.

Those two particular programs, the Navy and Army Indigenous Development Programs, are not necessarily programs that are designed to prepare people for military service, although it's fantastic if they do. They're really

programs that are designed to assist people with confidence, additional life skills, some additional health support, and maybe some fitness and discipline. The way they were termed probably about two years ago was they were really supporting Closing the Gap initiatives rather than a particular recruiting initiatives.

I can give you some statistics for the Navy Indigenous Development Program; I don't have the Army ones in front of me. Since 2014, 243 people commenced the Navy Indigenous Development Program. An exceptional success rate of 233 have successfully graduated from the program. Of those, almost 160 have transitioned to full-time Navy employment, one has joined the Public Service full time, three have joined the Army and one has joined the Air Force. The others have gone back to country, and I think that's a really important part—recognising the program is not just about what's good for the Defence Force but what's good more broadly.

The other program that you spoke about is the Indigenous Pre-Recruitment Course, and that's a very targeted program that takes Indigenous candidates who are mostly at the physical standards but also have some health conditions. It takes people six weeks out from the commencement of recruit training in the Army and gives them a program that develops their confidence, that might work on some of the health ailments that they may have, and also builds their fitness so that when they start their recruit program they are better prepared for the program and they have a better chance of success.

I'll take success rates for the Indigenous Pre-Recruitment Course and the Army Indigenous Development Program on notice and also provide you some more detail for those.

**Mr SNOWDON:** I only have one other question and then I'll hand it over to my colleagues. I'm interested to know if there's been any interaction between NORFORCE or other parts of Army or Defence with ranger programs across the country and the capacity to share training opportunities with those ranger programs—for example, small boat skills, coxswain certificates, navigation, use of radio or health and safety. Has there been any discussion with those programs around the potential for Army or Defence generally to be involved in upskilling those rangers as part of upskilling their own workforce?

**Mr Nockels:** Tim, I might pass that one to you.

**Col. Rutherford:** Yes, there has, but we do it at the local level, the community level. There's a series of reasons for that, as you would appreciate. The ranger programs exist at local, state and federally coordinated levels, so that gets a bit tricky. Formal MOUs are not something that we can apply equally across the board. A number of our members in the RFSG are also members of the ranger program, and they work part time for both. Where that's the case, we make sure that we can upskill through our small boat handling courses and our driver courses and chainsaw courses to get people licenced and qualified. Most recently, I observed that in Kowanyama on Western Cape York.

**Mr SNOWDON:** One last question: can you advise us on the gender distribution of your recruits for NORFORCE or the RFSUs?

**Col. Rutherford:** I can. I'll go from east to west, if that's okay. The 51st Battalion at the moment is about 42 per cent female. Within NORFORCE it's about 16 per cent. The Pilbara Regiment is about 14 per cent. The disparity there between the 51st Battalion and the other two is that we've recently stood up a different trade stream. It's only been done in the last three years, and we're still finishing the trial. It is not a combat trade. Whilst combat trades are open to both men and women, there is a preference amongst some that just don't enjoy the work. And so we have a separate trade, which is called a combat support operator, and that is more yard based driving, clerical work, which is appealing to some. The 51st that have led that work, and that's why their numbers are a bit higher.

**Mr SNOWDON:** Thank you. I've no further questions, and I thank our witness for appearing.

**CHAIR:** The deputy chair's got into some of these issues, and particularly in relation to talking about the link between the rangers program and can I call them the northern regiments, until I know what the right term to use is. What do the reservists typically do, particularly Indigenous reservists, when they're not engaged in their defence work?

**Mr Nockels:** Tim, again, back to you for that one.

**Col. Rutherford:** I'll probably make the distinction and say that those northern battalions—I'll call them the RFSG, the Regional Force Surveillance Group—are quite distinct from the mainstream Army further to the south. That's, as you would appreciate, the remote existence. It's a different work lifestyle as well. For the vast majority, we have in those three units, a metropolitan based team. They tend to be the same as a lot of the rest of Army. They are businessmen and women, couriers, mechanics; they are anything. When we move into the remote locations, if they're not working with the RFSG, or in some manner with council, then they tend to be unemployed.

**CHAIR:** What role does the skills transfer of Indigenous skills and knowledge to other members of the Army play—what role do the Indigenous defence personnel play in training other members of the ADF?

**Brig. Patching:** I'm very happy to take to take that question. It's actually a really good question, because there are two particular roles that our Indigenous members play. The first is the role that everybody else in the Army plays, being responsible and accountable for developing the skills, function and teamwork that we need in defence. I'll speak particularly for the Army. We have some fantastic Indigenous instructors at our schools. We have some great Indigenous leaders in our units who lead with the same responsibilities and accountabilities that any other leader, trainer or instructor within the Army may have. In addition there is something I think we're slowly getting better at, but we certainly haven't got it right yet. We are we are trying to be better at cultural competence and using those of our Indigenous members who are volunteers to do so—to help those of us who are not Indigenous to be more culturally competent, to be more aware of our Indigenous heritage and Indigenous culture, and to be more respectful. That's a far less formal role at the moment. It's certainly not something that you would see everywhere, but it's something that is gathering momentum.

**CHAIR:** To what extent do they play a role in helping people survive in the harsh environment that is northern Australia? I had understood that the origins of NORFORCE, at least, had something to do with the ability to survive for long periods in a harsh environment on the basis that, at some point in time in the future, we may have to fight battles in that part of northern Australia—at least that was the thinking back in the late seventies and early eighties. Tell me if I'm wrong in thinking that.

**Brig. Patching:** I'll pass that one to Tim, particularly around the Regional Force Surveillance Group.

**Col. Rutherford:** I would say that there was always a subtext that we would be able to provide some assistance in understanding how to survive in the Top End. At the moment, though, that's not a formal role that we have. Our members tend to feed their information through the Army's formal training channels. There are survival courses that Defence run, and the base knowledge of those survival courses is underpinned by some of the lessons and teachings we've had from DFR history over time.

**CHAIR:** How does the recruitment work and how different is it to the rest of the Defence Force, particularly for Indigenous members of those three battalions?

**Mr Nockels:** I might start off, and then I might pass over to Tim to talk on the specifics as they relate to NORFORCE. Recruitment overall is looked after by Defence Force Recruiting. We have some quite specific strategies relating to recruiting Indigenous personnel into the ADF. We work to some targets around that, but I won't go into that in detail; I think that was covered at the last hearing the committee held. In particular, when it comes to recruitment campaigns, we have a Defence Force recruitment specialist Indigenous recruiting team. There are some 23 Indigenous ADF personnel embedded in that team across 16 different locations around Australia in different Defence Force Recruiting centres. They are a very specific point of contact for Indigenous peoples who are contemplating joining the ADF. In terms of connecting with like-minded, it's really important to have Indigenous ADF members specifically embedded in the recruitment teams.

In the broader sense—and this comes to how we get broader appeal across Indigenous peoples around Australia; I won't go into detail unless you wish me to—there are some very focused media strategies around how we engage with NITV, linking to sporting events like the Murri Carnival and the Koori Knockout et cetera from a cultural perspective as well. We have a very focused approach—and I'm talking in the broad sense, across the country—to how we engage with and target the Indigenous community in terms of recruiting into the Defence Force. With that as a scene setter, I might pass to Colonel Rutherford to talk a little bit about how that operates in the Northern Territory context as it relates to NORFORCE.

**Col. Rutherford:** The RFSG is not a principal customer of Defence Force Recruiting. That is only a reflection of the geography and the connectivity in the communities we engage with. There are standard recruiting approaches of television and radio. They're not means that people would seek to make available to themselves; it's far more retail. We do it through a coordinated community engagement plan. The three units have defined areas, and those defined areas have subsections and team leads that work within those subsections. They live in community. If you are a posted member of NORFORCE, as a full-time member, you may be posted out to Nhulunbuy or Kununurra or the like, and you'll spend your two years developing a network, working through communities and using your part-time members who have lived in the communities and been members of the unit for a long period of time as connectors to help facilitate engagement in community. So it's a long-term approach, it's quite slow and it's heavily dependent on trust, but we've found that to be a pretty successful model for what it is we do.

**CHAIR:** We're aware of the IPP. Last time we spoke to Defence we heard all about the overshooting of targets in relation to the IPP. We're now aware of the discussions about these three units. What other Indigenous initiatives are there within the Department of Defence relating to either procurement or employment that we should be aware of?

**Mr Nockels:** I might just talk in the broad around the non-procurement side and then pass to colleagues to comment on any other procurement approaches that we have relating to Indigenous community. In Defence, retention is an important concept that we haven't really touched on here but obviously, once recruited, how do you keep and maintain Indigenous personnel both within the ADF and more broadly in the Australian Public Service as well? It's a significant part of Defence as well.

**CHAIR:** You might say something to us about retention and what your retention rates are within these units and more broadly. I know we covered some of that in the last hearing, but with a particular focus on—

**Mr Nockels:** I understand. In a question on notice, we provided some data. The separation rates are running at slightly over 12 per cent. I don't know whether Tim actually has specific data as it relates to NORFORCE; I might pass back to him in a second if he has any of that data. The number that I'm quoting, the slightly over 12 per cent, is a broad total for the ADF workforce. Generally, of course, retention is a focus for us—full stop. It's quite a process to get people into the Defence Force and we want to make sure that they stay for as long as possible, so there's a range of things that we do in conditions of service, pay et cetera, to ensure that people feel wanted and valued. We recognise the unique nature of military service, so we do a lot in that space to maintain and retain people in the services. I won't go into huge detail on that because it's not specific to Indigenous or other; it's for everybody.

We have done a piece of work with the Australian Human Rights Commission—it's not completed yet—and that is very focused on retention. It's a retention project specifically around Indigenous personnel in the ADF. Once those results come through from this report, we will look at those and then build an implementation plan across the organisation to pick up some of the ideas that will flow from that. That's an important factor for us. As I said, we spend a lot of time and energy bringing people on board and we want to keep them, particularly Indigenous people, coming into the into the organisation. So there is some quite specific work going on around retention.

To your question about other things that we're doing across the department, we have a number of different programs that are not necessarily related specifically to Defence in the ADF context. We have our Indigenous Graduate Pathway. That's something that Defence runs for the whole of the Commonwealth. We took that on a bit over 12 months ago. We've increased the number of agencies across the Commonwealth that are participating for this year. It's gone from 34 agencies to 44 for 2021. We're currently, as we speak, in the process of choosing Indigenous graduates to start in the APS next year, and a number of those will obviously come into Defence as well. We have the Indigenous Apprenticeships Program that offers training within Defence and study at a local institute of technology. That's a 12-month program. We bring people on at the Australian Public Service level 2 or 3. They undertake a cert IV or diploma in government. When they have successfully completed the program then they come in at the APS 3 or 4 level.

There are a couple of programs that are not ADF specific; they're actually APS specific. There's one that we haven't touched on, the Defence Work Experience Program. That is about attracting talent from across the community. We engage them through work experience opportunities and through partnering with Indigenous organisations. At the moment in that program, we have six Indigenous placements across Navy, Army and Air Force in the first six months of this year. Again, that's about giving people a taste of what it's like to be involved with and rubbing shoulders with Defence and then, hopefully, at some point in the not-too-distant future, they'll choose some of the other pathways that Brigadier Patching talked about to then come into the ADF on a full-time basis. I just might pause there and just throw to Colonel Rutherford if he has any comments about separation rates as they relate to NORFORCE.

**Col. Rutherford:** The separation data, I can rattle off some quick statistics for you, if that would be helpful.

**CHAIR:** That would be great.

**Col. Rutherford:** Separation rates in the three units within 51st Battalion in 2020 were 5.8 per cent. Their five-year trend is 4.1 per cent. Within NORFORCE in 2020, it was 8.4 per cent; the five-year average is 10.6 per cent; and within the Pilbara it's 2.9 per cent, with a five-year average of 5.6 per cent. So in each case, you'll see that it's lower than the overall Defence or ADF trend.

**CHAIR:** I was just going to ask how does it compare and you have just answered that, which is great. The only other thing I would ask is specifically in relation to how we go about offering employment opportunities to

Indigenous people in the ADF. A comment that was made earlier about, particularly people in remote communities, the importance of going face to face in building trust. More broadly in the community, is there anything specific that we need to think about in terms of policy recommendations to encourage more Indigenous people to consider a career in the ADF?

**Mr Nockels:** I'll pass to colleagues in a second for their thoughts and views on the question you pose. My sense of where we are in government settings is here at the macro level—Closing the Gap—with Defence falling in behind through its own Defence reconciliation plan, which has a whole range of activities. I won't go into detail—not enough time at this point. There's a lot that we're doing. You've heard from all of us about the various levers, essentially, that we are pulling. There's quite a lot of freedom within Defence to be able to pursue this agenda—for want of a better description. When you ask that question—what else could government be doing—given that we are government—

**CHAIR:** Is there a recommendation we can make that can strengthen your arm, as it were?

**Mr Nockels:** Yes, I follow. At this point in time, I'm going to say that there's nothing that leaps to mind. I will pass to both Matt and Tim, and Tim might have some quite specific local views on what might make life a little bit easier for him and his troops. But perhaps start with Matt in the first instance.

**Brig. Patching:** I agree with David. What I appreciate about the current policy is the flexibility for us to explore a range of things. In the nearly 12 months that I've been doing this job, I've not yet found a policy impediment to something that we would like to do. So if there's an idea we've had, I am yet to find any government policy constraining, but Tim may have a different view.

**Col. Rutherford:** I would support that. Whenever we've chosen to go after something, the policy has usually been flexible enough, particularly Defence policy, to allow me to do that.

**Ms STANLEY:** I thank all of you for your evidence today. You talked about Defence being the lead agency for all the other APS. Where are you drawing your Indigenous workforce from? Is that something you can share? Are they off country in the Northern Territory, for instance, or are they out of Darwin or Sydney or Melbourne? Because the APS is a big place, I'm assuming that they go to all different departments. I just wondered where they are, for starters, and how you encourage people to be part of that program.

**Mr Nockels:** I was referring to the Indigenous Graduate Pathway. We are looking at bringing on Indigenous people who have completed a university degree, so that is going to indicate straightaway that the people generally are currently living close to or in the university space. Wherever there are universities, we're drawing from. With this particular program that I'm talking about, it's highly unlikely that we are drawing from people from country, in that sense. Of course, that's where they come from, and they've moved to a town and are going to do tertiary studies. One of our challenges, then, is when we offer roles to people through this program—and, when I say 'we', I'm talking here about the whole of the Australian Public Service, the 44 different agencies I mentioned—we're often asking people to move and to leave country. That is a challenge for us as a public service.

One of the things we're doing about that is to make sure that we try and be as flexible as possible, to engage graduates in or close to country. An example would be that we have an Indigenous graduate who's keen to join the Public Service—Defence is not a great example, because we've got lots of opportunities in Darwin, but there may be another government agency that doesn't have those sorts of opportunities. We'll encourage that person to perhaps look at another agency and say to them, 'Because you wish to stay in the area, how about looking at a different agency which has positions available close to home?'

So there is a strong requirement for the APS in totality to be flexible in ensuring that we offer opportunities, through this particular scheme, for people to join the scheme but remain close to country. That's how we're trying to manage that particular challenge. I'm sorry, I don't have the exact figure, but, all up, for next year, I think we'd be getting close to 60- to 70-odd graduates coming into the Public Service, spread across those 44 agencies.

**Ms STANLEY:** Thank you for that. I'm sorry that I didn't quite understand what you were talking about, but some of the evidence that we've heard as part of this inquiry is around the motivation for people to get involved in programs, to get an education and so forth. Do you provide, or have you considered providing, as part of the wider Public Service, information to Indigenous communities about what is possible? These days, if you've got an internet connection, I think the one thing COVID's taught us is that we can work from anywhere, with links back to the office on a semiregular basis. Is that a motivation? Are you far enough into this program to consider selling it to the younger members, like the 17- and 18-year-olds completing school? This may be a career path for them going forward.

**Mr Nockels:** The graduate program tends to be focused on people who are probably in their 20s or even older—often people come back to or go to university later in life. So it's probably not focused on that youth group

that you've just identified. But the Indigenous Apprenticeships Program is probably focused more at that age level: year-12 leavers or maybe those who have not even finished year 12. That particular apprenticeship program is focused on that cohort from an age perspective.

In terms of your question around how we reach out to them and make sure that they're aware, there are lots of different options, particularly in the social media era that we're in. The team here has spent an awful lot of time building marketing campaigns to make sure that they can reach through social media and then obviously a range of other options through existing programs within Defence and then more broadly across the Public Service in terms of the reach that it has. It's about shifting our reach through that social media approach, which is definitely where that age group is. You mentioned how they communicate and how they draw information.

**Ms STANLEY:** Thank you, Chair. I have no more questions. Thanks again to all of you for contributing to today's hearing.

**CHAIR:** Ms Claydon?

**Ms CLAYDON:** Thank you, Chair, and thanks to everyone on the other end of the phone line for your evidence. I want to get a better sense of the breakdown of participants in NORFORCE in particular. I know that Defence more generally and Army in particular have struggled to achieve the kind of gender equity we might want to see. What is NORFORCE's recruitment made up of? Are you seeing any increase in women coming through the NORFORCE ranks? Is there anything you could tell us about the profile of people going through in addition to their gender? Are you seeing a prevalence of a particular age group, or are there people who've got family or perhaps, after 40 years, generational links to NORFORCE who are going in because their uncle did? What can you tell us about the profile of a participant in NORFORCE today?

**Col. Rutherford:** It's a really good and technical question. In terms of the profile, we are seeing an upward trend in female participation and in Indigenous participation across the group. Again, I'll give you some statistics. A five-year trend within the 51st Battalion shows there has been a 98 per cent increase in female participation. In NORFORCE there has been a 22 per cent upwards trend. In the Pilbara, there has been a 79 per cent upwards trend. Per my earlier remarks about the trial that was undertaken within the 51st Battalion, that accounts for the disparity in their upward swing. There are a whole bunch of factors causing the trend to increase. One of the key ones was the creation of a new trade scheme that allowed for less down and dirty. Not everyone wants to live in a hole and eat cold food. As soon as you realise that and offer an alternative, you can access more of the market, and we've been able to do that. If it would help, I could probably draw out other data on education standards, but it would be a challenge.

**Ms CLAYDON:** That's alright.

**Col. Rutherford:** One of the key recruiting mechanisms for us and where we're starting to see the demographics shift is where there is trust. Where there is trust we get more members of that particular family. Where there are more family members there are more families. Where there are more families there are more communities. In the very remote areas of Australia, the communities are incredibly competitive, so if we've had success in community A our lived experiences is that we can expect that the communities either side of that are going to be more interested in what is going on and are going to start propositioning us, looking to join as well. You can sometimes get a bit of a run on recruiting there. But trust underpins everything that we do in community.

**Ms CLAYDON:** You sort of touched on this a bit earlier, but I'm interested in somebody who is living in a remote community in the north-west part of Australia and who goes into NORFORCE. I took note before that often people, when they're not doing duty, don't have employment in a mainstream economy, but what opportunities are there, if any, for career development for those people with limited education upon entry point who understandably want to remain living on country?

What, if any, opportunities are there for professional development and education with NORFORCE?

**CHAIR:** I think the next witness is online.

**Ms CLAYDON:** Alright. I'll wind up now. I'm just interested in whether you have much data at all about whether people progress from what they signed up to with NORFORCE and whether they end up developing additional qualifications or not.

**Col. Rutherford:** The very short answer is, yes, there are plenty of opportunities. It relates to the earlier point made by Brigadier Patching—that we've found the policy to be quite flexible. In my experience, the defence policy has allowed me to, if someone wants to work, employ them for as many days as I can keep them interested. But, in the RFSG, the three units including NORFORCE and the one in the Pilbara, we have our own development program that runs in parallel with the AIDP and DIDP that was mentioned earlier. That is run under contract with the Batchelor Institute at the moment, and it is done in four-week modules, where we'll have people

from community fly into our school in Darwin and participate in language literacy and numeracy programs that will help them with their internal-to-Defence promotion courses and success rates. So, if someone has not completed high school, we can assist them with the basic mathematics that they'll need to learn navigation, that will help them pass their next promotion course or that will help them go on to their first aid certificates. We'll provide them with that as part of the work we do. So there is quite a lot of opportunity there, and the policy is very supportive of it.

**Ms CLAYDON:** Finally, is there any thinking going into perhaps the provision of some of that training on country, rather than people going back to Darwin to do those courses?

**Col. Rutherford:** Yes, and we do as much of it on country as we can. As I mentioned, last week I was in Kowanyama, where we were running the first aid course for the patrol that we have based there. For some of the other courses, where we have mass, we will send the instructors out. But, if we've drawn two or three soldiers from a number of communities to make up that class, it's sometimes easier to bring them together.

We're always pretty mindful of the connection to country and wanting to keep people on country. Sometimes it's useful for us to remove them from community; it removes the distraction, which gives a better educational outcome. But we try and minimise the time away, and that's always a conversation between us and the member. If they don't want to leave, we're not going to force them to, and they won't be penalised for not leaving. We'll just find another way.

**Ms CLAYDON:** Thank you very much.

**CHAIR:** Thank you to the ADF for being here today with us again and giving us a particular perspective which has been very helpful. I know we've asked you to come back to us with some additional information—if you could get back to the secretariat by 20 July. If we've got any further questions, we'll put them to you in writing. You'll be sent a copy of the transcript of your evidence and have an opportunity to request corrections to transcription errors. Thanks for your attendance here today.

**Col. Rutherford:** Thank you, Chair, on behalf of the team.

**RYAN, Mr Matthew, Mayor, West Arnhem Regional Council**

[15:33]

**CHAIR:** Welcome. Although the committee doesn't require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that this hearing is a legal proceeding of the parliament and therefore has the same standing as proceedings of the House of Representatives. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. The evidence given today will be recorded by Hansard and attracts parliamentary privilege. Have you any comments to make about the capacity in which you appear?

**Mr Ryan:** Our council covers about 50,000 square kilometres within West Arnhem, in Arnhem Land.

**CHAIR:** You've indicated that you don't wish to make a brief opening statement, so we might proceed direct to discussion. Can you tell me a bit about who provides CDP and jobactive in the area of your council.

**Mr Ryan:** At the moment, within that council, no one does. In Maningrida itself, I think it's Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation that provides that service, not the regional councils.

**CHAIR:** What impact do you see from CDP and from jobactive in your area?

**Mr Ryan:** It depends on why you say 'impact'. Before, when the CDP was active properly, people had incentives to look forward to in the CDP, in terms of looking forward to work, training and development. At the moment, there is a lack of training and, I suppose, pathways in terms of proper employment and career pathways.

**CHAIR:** What sorts of employment opportunities are there for people in your region?

**Mr Ryan:** Personally, looking from within the community and being a member of our community, I see there's plenty of opportunities. It's just how everyone gets together as a stakeholder group in creating these opportunities. At the moment, I see silos within the communities, not just from Maningrida itself but from within the West Arnhem. If the stakeholders get together, what a wonderful day we'd have! We'd create a future for our kids as well.

**CHAIR:** What business activity is taking place in your council region? What sorts of things? I apologise that we can't be there. We were very much hoping to get up to see you, but COVID has prevented us from doing so, so we do it this way. Give us a bit of a sense of what's there by way of business activity.

**Mr Ryan:** Well, there's not lots of business activities in the community. They'd like more opportunities as well. We have construction, in which people from the government are building more housing in the community. There could be potential for electricians, builders and carpentry—lots and lots. We have doctorates that could be within the communities for Aboriginal people, but there's no opportunity for training for our people, and that's really disappointing for me as an Aboriginal person as well. I see that it's all external companies coming in and taking the jobs away from Aboriginal people.

**CHAIR:** How would you like to see training delivered to people in your region?

**Mr Ryan:** Well, personally, I'd like to see the stakeholders get together and have proper planning with the government support, saying, 'This is what we want to do as a community and as TOs,' and support the TOs as well, coming up with a plan for the next 10 years rather than saying, 'My way or the highway.' From the government point of view, I think it'll give more empowerment to the community in terms of the local decision-making by the people, working together as a collective and giving the empowerment back to the community.

**CHAIR:** We as parliamentarians will make recommendations to government. What would you like us to tell the government about the sorts of opportunities you'd like to see created?

**Mr Ryan:** I'd like to see lots of opportunity being created for everyone within West Arnhem, or for all Indigenous people within the Territory. Give us the opportunity and give us a bit of time to develop our skills and to create enterprises and businesses for ourselves, for the first time. There are a lot of opportunities within the Territory and these grants that we can have access to, but they need to be flexible in terms of supporting the community and the ideas of individual community members. The government need to be more flexible. They need to start listening to the community about what they want. It's not what the government want; it's what the people from the communities want.

**CHAIR:** Have you interacted with any of the different jobactive providers that would service your communities? Can you speak to them at all or not?

**Mr Ryan:** I can. We've spoken to the government departments, particularly the NTG—and me being within the community—about how best to move forward opportunities for employment for the local Indigenous people and the youth. You have ABA and IBA. I think they're called the ILC these days. Those sorts of bodies should be

out in the communities speaking to the community members so that we as a council can work on support around the community based organisations.

**CHAIR:** I don't have anything further.

**Ms CLAYDON:** Thank you very much, Mayor. I join with the chair in expressing how frustrated we are that we can't be in Maningrida to see you in person today, despite all our best efforts. You're the largest employer of people in the communities you represent in the West Arnhem Regional Council catchment. Can you give us a sense of what kinds of jobs they are? I think 53 per cent of your employees identify themselves as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. What kind of work are people doing for the council? I know you have done some work with Batchelor college in the area of early childhood education training. If there are other examples of how you're working with Batchelor and other training institutes, it would be great to hear about that too.

**Mr Ryan:** I can't comment because that's for my CEO, HR and the senior managers. I'll give you some examples. Albert Gawaraidji is living at Waruwi. He does the aerodrome reporting. He does operating [inaudible] construction. He's done a certificate II in electoral technology in remote areas. Yanja Thompson is based in Maningrida. She's the first female Aboriginal person to be a council service manager. She runs the show in Maningrida, which is good. She is a young Indigenous leader as well, which is very good. We have a bloke named Paul Hare. He has done training in chemical, supervision [inaudible]. He issues work permits and conducts hazard works. He works in accordance with the permits. He tests the atmosphere. They are some examples.

**Ms CLAYDON:** If I were living in any one of the communities and I wanted to get an electrical trade, could I access adult education on country or would I need to go to Darwin? How would I become an electrician?

**Mr Ryan:** He or she would probably have to go to Batchelor or Darwin to do the training. Back in the day, we used to have adult education training within the community, and unfortunately for some reason it was defunded. That training gave a good incentive for the community members not to go to Darwin or to Batchelor college. We had someone training within the community, and that created a lot of opportunities for the local Aboriginal people.

**Ms CLAYDON:** You've had historical experience of both those two different ways of training—having that adult education and training opportunity in community, and having to travel. I think Batchelor used to have a bit more of those outreach programs in community, but now you have to travel more to them, whether it's Katherine or Darwin or wherever. Which one was your preference for training not just young people but anybody in community?

**Mr Ryan:** I think the preference is to have it here within the community, because a lot of my countrymen tend to go and get lost in Darwin or somewhere. If you have it in here in the community, it's great that people do the training on ground and on country. I think people are more proud of doing their own training within their own communities. For adult education, it is the same thing. I think it should be all done in the community. Part of the discussion we've been having recently with the Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet is that the community leaders have said, 'We want adult education to be back on the community again, and we want some sort of training partnership within the community.'

**Ms CLAYDON:** Thank you for that. A number of people have said similar things about having a strong preference for being able to train people on country wherever possible. Thank you very much for that, and thank you very much for your evidence.

**CHAIR:** Let me concur with my colleague Ms Claydon in thanking you for being here today. If we've asked you to provide any further information, can you return it to us by 20 July. If we've got any further questions, we'll put them to you in writing. You'll be sent a copy of the transcript of your evidence and will have an opportunity to request corrections to transcription errors. We really appreciate you being here with us today. Thank you.

**Mr Ryan:** No worries. Thank you very much.

**Committee adjourned at 15:47**

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