



Office for Workforce Development  
Department of Trade, Business and Asian Relations  
Northern Territory Government  
Via EMAIL: [workforce.development@nt.gov.au](mailto:workforce.development@nt.gov.au)

12 February 2026

To the Department of Trade, Business and Asian Relations

**SUBJECT: Central Land Council submission in response to the Northern Territory Government's Workforce Development Strategy Consultation Paper**

The Central Land Council (CLC) welcomes the opportunity to have input to the development of the Northern Territory Government's (NTG) Workforce Development Strategy and supports the intention to bring together business, industry, education, training providers, community organisations, and all levels of government to shape a shared vision for the Territory's workforce.

**1. About the Central Land Council**

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

Of the 780,000 km<sup>2</sup> of land covered by the CLC region, more than half (417,318 km<sup>2</sup>) is Aboriginal land under the ALRA. In addition, rights have been asserted and won under the NTA, and Traditional Owners have also succeeded in obtaining rights to small areas known as Community Living Areas, under NT legislation.

Through its elected representative Council of ninety elected community delegates, the CLC represents the interests and aspirations of approximately 24,000 traditional landowners and other Aboriginal people resident in its region. We advocate for our people on a wide range of land-based, economic, and socio-political issues to ensure that our families can continue to survive and thrive on their land. The CLC is a significant job-creator for Aboriginal people in our region. Of our 286 staff, almost half are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. In addition to the high proportion of Aboriginal people employed, significant training and employment opportunities are generated across the region through our ranger programs and through community development projects funded by traditional owners and/or community groups.

**2. What can be done to improve Aboriginal workforce participation? (consultation paper Q.6)**

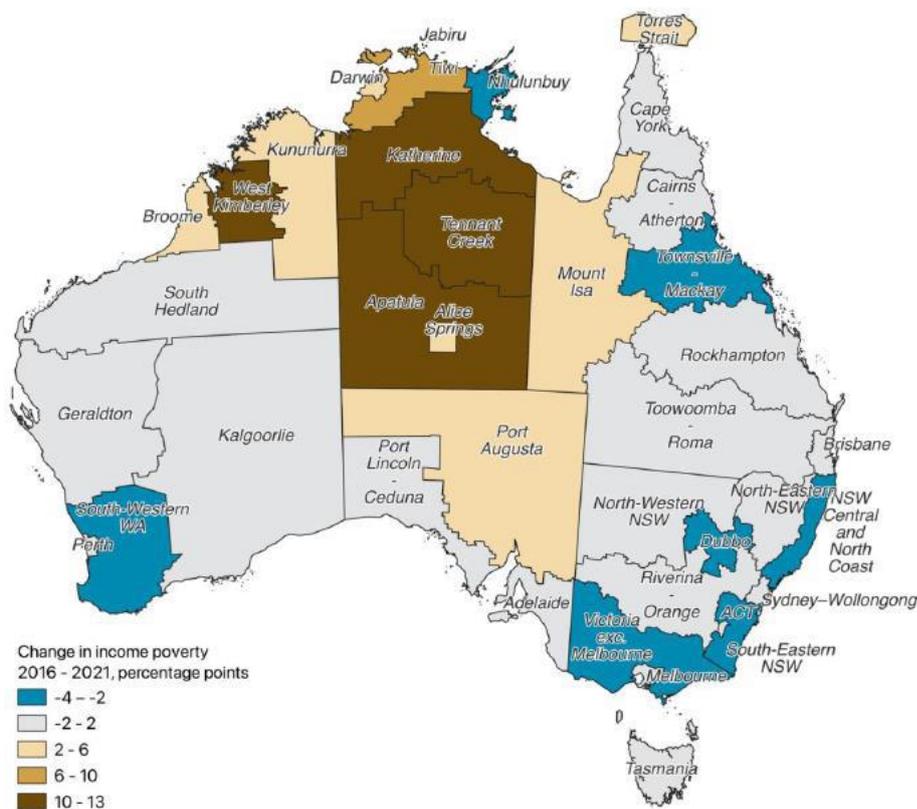
**3.1 Alleviate poverty and ensure people's basic needs are met.**

Based on the 2021 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) census Aboriginal people account for the 30% of the Northern Territory's (NT) population. 74.5% of whom live in locations considered remote or



very remote. In 2021, the NT’s Aboriginal workforce participation was 35.4%, the lowest of all Australian jurisdictions. Reducing barriers to Aboriginal workforce participation needs to be a cornerstone of any whole-of territory workforce development strategy and presents a real opportunity for the Northern Territory.

An unacceptable number of Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory continue to live in poverty. The rates of income poverty are highest among Aboriginal people living in remote parts of the NT. In remote NT, poverty rates among Aboriginal people are average more than 60 per cent. . What is even more concerning, is that while Indigenous income poverty is improving (albeit slowly) in most parts of the country, in remote NT it is getting worse (see **figure 1** below).



**Source:** Dr Francis Markham, submission to the Inquiry into the extent and nature of poverty in Australia, p.7



In April 2024, CLC provided a submission to the Federal Senate Select Committee’s inquiry into the Cost of Living<sup>1</sup>. This submission outlines the extent of and recommendations to address acute and worsening food, energy, and housing insecurity. In addition, we have highlighted the inadequacy of and inequity in social security payments.

Apart from the obvious injustice that such a significant proportion of this country’s First Peoples continue to live in deep and persistent poverty in an otherwise wealthy nation, poverty is a barrier to economic development - clearly it is much harder to find and keep a job, or to plan for your future, when you are struggling to afford food, keep the power on or don’t have an adequate roof over your head.<sup>2</sup>

The CLC strongly recommends that the NTG’s workforce development strategy consider the social security and other policy settings that need to change to ensure that people’s basic needs are met – as a precondition for workforce participation. This should include seeking the Australian Government’s commitment to immediately index the **Remote Area Allowance (RAA)** to the consumer price index (CPI) and increase the RAA proportionate to the higher cost of living remotely, as recommended by the Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee (EIAC) in their 2024 and 2025 reports to government.<sup>3</sup> One lever within the NT Government’s own policy settings that can support people to better meet their basic needs is the **NT’s concession scheme**. Whilst the NT concession scheme is a good thing there are some much needed adjustments to the scheme that would make it far more effective in achieving its intended aim of reducing the cost-of-living burden for low-income Territorians.

The CLC endorses the recommendation of the Northern Territory Council of Social Services, in their 2025 – 2026 pre-budget submission<sup>4</sup> that the NTG extend the eligibility of the NT concession scheme to include all Services Australia Health Care Card holders. Currently people receiving Job Seeker and Youth Allowance payments are not eligible despite those payments being significantly lower. For people receiving Job Seeker and Youth Allowance payments participation in the workforce is not limited by age or disability. However, as described above poverty is a barrier to work force participation.

**Recommendation 1:** Seek a commitment from the Federal Government to immediately index the Remote Area Allowance (RAA) to CPI and increase the RAA proportionate to the 40% higher living costs in remote areas.

**Recommendation 2:** Extend the eligibility of the NT concession scheme to include all Services Australia Health Care Card holders

### 3.2 Identification, pre-employment checks & licencing

At a very practical level, further attention must be given to addressing the administrative complexity experienced by Aboriginal people, particularly those living in remote communities, when trying to obtain identification (ID) and pre-employment checks necessary for work. Many of the CLC’s rangers face these challenges. The websites they need to use to complete essential administration for employment (for example MyGov, obtaining a Unique Student Identifier), require a certain level of literacy and 100 points of ID. The websites are hard to navigate for community members, as English is either their second language or even third language. For some people, ID requirements prevent them

<sup>1</sup> CLC Submission to the Senate Select Committee’s inquiry into the Cost of Living ([weblink](#))

<sup>2</sup> ACOSS ([weblink](#))

<sup>3</sup> EIAC 2025 Report to Government ([weblink](#))

<sup>4</sup> NTCOSS 2025 – 2026 pre-budget submission ([weblink](#))



from ever getting access to their Tax File Number, as it is difficult and costly to access birth records and often nowhere to safe keep documents safe.

The **lack of licenced drivers** across remote NT affects ranger program delivery and other workforce participation. Obtaining a driver's licence in a remote community presents significant, multifaceted challenges resulting in low licence rates, reduced transport options and higher rates of unlicensed drivers. This problem is even more pervasive when it comes to obtaining light and medium rigid licences or an H endorsement for a commercial passenger vehicle.

Having a driver's licence significantly increases a person's employability. Effective strategies for making licences more accessible for remote community residents should be a key component of the NT's workforce development strategy. The CLC acknowledges the existence of the Drive Safe NT Remote Program however its resourcing limitations reduce the program's effectiveness. In 2025, Drive Safe NT visited 29 remote communities in the CLC region<sup>5</sup>, the majority of which only received one, single day visit, with only seven out of 26 communities having more than one day per year to progress obtaining their driver's licence through the Drive Safe NT Remote Program in their community.

The CLC also notes that the Drive Safe NT website does not have any resources in Aboriginal languages and we urge the NT Government to look at the South Australian Government's 'On the Right Track' Aboriginal road safety and driver licence program which has a range of resources in Aboriginal language.

**Recommendation:** NTG to work cross jurisdictionally with Federal and State Governments to minimise legislative, administrative and practical barriers to employment.

**Recommendation:** The NTG to better resource the Drive Safe NT Remote Program so that all communities in the NT receive at least two multi-day visits per year. Update the Drive Safe NT website to include information and resources in Aboriginal languages.

### 3.3 Improve educational outcomes in remote schools.

The provision of appropriate, quality education in remote communities must be an essential component of any strategy to increase Aboriginal workforce participation. As submitted to the 2019 *Inquiry into Education in Remote and Complex Environments*, since 2011, \$26.7 million of traditional owners' money from royalties has been invested through the CLC Community Development Unit's programs into education initiatives across our region.<sup>6</sup> These initiatives include the establishment of community learning centres in Tanami communities, secondary school support funding, additional school vehicles, funding for school linguists and engagement of community elders in school programs etc. This demonstrates the willingness of Aboriginal communities to invest in the improvement of education for their young people, however, it also reveals that frequently – particularly across the CLC region – external funding is needed to supplement school budgets in communities, particularly for communities who want to implement extensive Aboriginal language and culture programs.

Over many years, multiple policy and funding decisions have had cumulatively harmful effects on access to education, particularly secondary schooling, for Aboriginal young people living in remote communities.

<sup>5</sup> Drive Safe NT, Session timetable ([weblink](#))

<sup>6</sup> CLC Community Development Unit data, February 2020.



The CLC is pleased that the NTG accepted the recommendations in Deloitte Access Economics 2022 Review<sup>7</sup> of the effective enrolment school funding formula. Noting that since 2015, 146 NT schools have been funded based on attendance records from the previous year, which hugely disadvantaged

remote schools and created a vicious cycle of underfunding for schools with low and/or variable attendance.

We note that the pressure on school funding created by nearly ten years of underfunding NT schools through the effective enrolment school funding formula has led to a loss of permanent positions for Indigenous teachers and assistant teachers. This is concerning from the perspective of the loss of employment opportunities for local Aboriginal adults in remote communities and because the presence of Aboriginal staff has been found to have the biggest positive effect on attendance.

It is positive that this misguided budgeting approach has been scrapped by the NT Government, with a return to enrolment-based funding in 2025, along with an increase to the per student base rate from \$7,669 to \$8,113.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, since 2015, most secondary students living in remote communities have not had the option to undertake the NT Certificate of Education in their community. While a much stronger focus in the NT Government's new *Education Engagement Strategy (2022-2031)* on embedding language and culture in schools is welcome, it is not clear if and how this shift away from on-country secondary school options will be reversed. With Year 12 and equivalent completion rates at only 37.5 per cent for Aboriginal young people in the NT, this warrants additional attention. As outlined in the CLC's submission to the *Inquiry into Education in Remote and Complex Environments*, the CLC calls for governments to commit to the provision of secondary schooling in remote communities to at least the completion of Year 10.

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

**Recommendation:** Commit to the provision of comprehensive secondary schooling in remote communities until at least the completion of year 10.

### 3.4 Increase the support available for young people.

The NT has the highest rates of young people not in education and training or work (more than triple the national average) (census 2021). The proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people (aged 15-24) in the NT who are in employment, education and training has decreased from 40% in 2016 down to 34.8% in 2021.

The National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA)'s new Remote Australia Employment Service (RAES) does not have a dedicated youth stream like the mainstream Transition to Work (TTW) Program which provides tailored services to help 15 – 24-year-olds enter the workforce. In the NT, the TTW Program does not operate anywhere outside of Alice Springs or Darwin.

<sup>7</sup> Deloitte Access Economics, Review of Effective Enrolment ([weblink](#))

<sup>8</sup> Department of Education NT, 2025 School Resourcing Model funding enhancements



In 2024, the CLC partnered with the Atyenhenge Atherre Aboriginal Corporation (AAAC) in Ltyentye Apurte community to co-design and deliver a remote employment trial, the Purte Warrke-Irreme (Working Together) Remote Jobs Trial. During the design phase of the trial the CLC conducted extensive community consultations. Through the consultations youth employment emerged as the number one priority for Ltyentye Apurte community and the clearest gap in the current remote employment services reform landscape. The CLC consistently hears from our constituents that young people are falling through the gaps when they leave school, only to be funnelled into a one size fits all employment services/social security system. In the words of one of the community researchers working on the project “we don’t want them left behind, they are our near future leaders.”

The CLC also notes that APO NT’s *Fair Work and Strong Communities*<sup>9</sup> proposal includes a recommendation to establish a discrete pool of funding for youth engagement strategies and 1,500 dedicated youth traineeships in remote communities. The increasing number of Aboriginal young people in Central Australia who are not in any form of education, training and employment is of deep concern to the CLC and our constituents. Aboriginal youth engagement must be the focus of any workforce development strategies in the Northern Territory.

**Recommendation:** The NTG workforce development strategy needs to give special consideration to and prioritise youth engagement activities and creating training and employment pathways for young people, that lead to real jobs.

### 3.5 Invest in Job creation in remote communities.

There remains a jobs deficit in remote communities in the NT. While a range of factors contribute to low employment in remote communities (including discrimination, health conditions, poor housing, and overcrowding, the appropriateness of and quality of education), the single most critical driver is a lack of available jobs. A snapshot of 28 remote communities in the NT prepared by the NT Government in 2023 showed that, on average, there are only 0.3 jobs available for every person in the community. Of the jobs that are available, on average, around half are filled by local people.<sup>10</sup>

This correlates with census analysis presented by Altman and Markham to the Senate Select Committee *Inquiry into the Future of Work and Workers* (2018) showing that 69 per cent of Indigenous jobseekers in remote Australia stated that their main difficulty finding work is that there are ‘no jobs in the local area or line of work’ (31 per cent) or that there are just ‘no jobs at all’ (30 per cent).

For the reasons outlined above, the CLC welcomed the introduction of the Federal Government’s Remote Jobs Economic Development (RJED) program, which, when first announced, was a commitment of \$707 million of grant funding for 3,000 jobs over three years. However, as noted in APO NT’s *Fair Work and Strong Communities* proposal developed in 2017, 3,000 jobs nationally is just a drop in the ocean compared to actual need. Noting that there are currently approximately 40,000 job seekers nationally across remote Australia.

The CLC was pleased to learn that the Federal Government has announced an additional \$299 million (12 Feb, 2026) to increase the number of jobs available through RJED to 6,000. However, concerningly with the allocation of additional funds for positions there has not been an extension to the timeframe of the program.

<sup>9</sup> APO NT Fair work strong communities ([weblink](#))

<sup>10</sup> Northern Territory Government, 28 Remote Towns Jobs Profile Snapshot ([weblink](#))



As the RJED program guidelines state the program is not intended to provide long term job creation in remote communities, rather to create jobs that will help people develop skills and experience needed to transition into sustainable employment. It is the CLC's view that three years is not a sufficient timeframe for the program to meet this objective. Therefore, CLC recommends the NTG advocate for an increased investment from the Commonwealth Government to extend the program beyond the initial three year commitment.

**Recommendation:** The NTG advocate to the Commonwealth Government that in addition to increasing the number of jobs funded under the RJED program it is critical to extend the program beyond the initial three-year commitment. Ideally, the funding period should be extended to ten years in order to provide sufficient time to adapt and improve the program as lessons are learned. The ten-year timeframe would allow for jobs to be guaranteed for five-years, with the possibility of a five-year extension.

### 3. Is place based training in remote communities an effective measure to increase Aboriginal Workforce participation? (Q.6 cont'd)

The CLC is of the view that place-based training delivered in remote communities is an effective way to engage Aboriginal adult learners in remote communities. However, there are some caveats. Most remote communities in the CLC region don't have dedicated training spaces or training providers based full time in the community. Running training for training's sake, facilitated by drive in drive out trainer providers is not an effective way to engage adult learners and increase Aboriginal participation in the workforce.

#### Factors that contribute to successful training outcome in remote communities

- Remote communities have dedicated training spaces (learning centres or training hubs), ideally run by an Aboriginal controlled community organisation (ACCO) with local staff, that are fit for purpose with digital connectivity access.
- Training programs are designed and delivered in partnership with the local community, and in response to the community's training needs.
- Training is linked to employment opportunities or is delivered to people already in employment. This should be informed by working collaboratively with the local Remote Australia Employment Service (RAES) provider and conducting an audit of job vacancies and employment opportunities in the community or region.
- There is accommodation available in communities to host visiting trainers.

The CLC acknowledges the announcement of the Remote Training Hubs funded through the Central Australia Plan, but notes that there are currently only three remote training hubs planned for Yuendumu, Ltyentye Apurte and Ntaria. All three are yet to materialise, and will still only offer a hub and spoke model to service surrounding communities. It is important that there is close monitoring and evaluation of the remote training hubs to capture lessons learned, in order to advocate for the expansion of the model.

**Recommendation:** Taking the above factors into account the CLC recommends targeted funding or incentive programs for training providers to deliver courses directly in remote communities. Incentives could include travel subsidies, or performance-based funding tied to local course delivery and completion outcomes.



**Recommendation:** NTG to work collaboratively with the Federal Government to closely monitor and evaluate the roll out of remote training hubs in Yuendumu, Ltyentye Apurte and Ntaria to enable future expansion of the program with funding directed at the most effective aspects of the program.

### **CASE STUDY Community-led adult education through the Warlpiri Education and Training Trust**

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

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

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

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

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

Survey respondent from report by Disbray and Guenther (2017)<sup>64</sup>

Ten years on from the last review, the learning centres continue to be an intrinsic part of community life in three out of four Warlpiri communities. In 2026, the learning centres will be evaluated through WETT's Yitakimaninjaku, warririninjaku, payirninjaku manu pina-jarrinjaku or 'Tracking and Learning' project.

It is learning centres and training hubs in remote communities that provide community members with the digital connectivity, access and administration support that is needed to undertake the necessary pre-employment administrative tasks described above.



#### 4. What more can be done to support workforce development in the Territory's regional and remote areas? (*consultation paper Q.8*)

##### 5.1 Misalignment of sector development and employment opportunities

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

At both a federal and territory level, the sectors typically held up as promising to drive economic growth in the CLC's region include largescale mining and petroleum operations, pastoralism and large-scale agriculture.<sup>11</sup> However, we know that in terms of employment collectively the mining, oil and gas sectors contribute just two percent of the jobs in the NT. With job creation in large scale agriculture projects similarly limited.<sup>12</sup>

Traditional Owners benefit from mining and energy projects through the receipt of individual benefits, and the use of royalty equivalent and rent payments for community development projects facilitated by CLC. However, the sector typically does not employ traditional owners and other local Aboriginal people in large numbers.

With regards to agriculture, for example, a recent report commissioned by the CLC from the University of South Australia analysing the economic benefit claims of the Singleton Horticulture Project in the Barkly region, highlighted that a majority of agricultural jobs in the NT go to overseas workers and interstate fly-ins, and that a large proportion of non-labour operating costs are not spent locally (more often, interstate or overseas).<sup>13</sup> The analysis concluded that the project is likely to generate only 26-36 full-time equivalent jobs filled by residents of the NT, of which only five to eight full-time equivalent jobs are expected to be from nearby Aboriginal communities in the Barkly.<sup>14</sup>

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

The sectors that generate the greatest number of jobs in the NT overall are, by a clear margin, public administration and safety, healthcare and social assistance, followed by education and training, construction, retail trade and accommodation and food services.<sup>15</sup> The sectors that employ the highest number of Aboriginal people are public administration and safety, health care and social assistance, and education and training.<sup>16</sup> The sectors that employ the highest proportion of Aboriginal people are art and recreation services, education and training, and public administration and safety.<sup>17</sup>

Critically, it is these sectors that not only generate jobs, but also contribute to the wellbeing of our communities, providing the foundation for a strong economy over the long-term. Supporting the

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<sup>11</sup> See Australian Government (2015) *Our North, Our Future: White Paper on Developing Northern Australia*, and NT Government (2020) *Territory Economic Reconstruction Commission Final Report*.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Connor, J., Hill, D., Gregg, D. and K. Sangha (2022) Review of the Singleton Horticulture Project's water entitlement provision costs, benefits and employment impacts.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> NT Department of Treasury and Finance, Northern Territory Economy, Industries ([website](#))

<sup>16</sup> NT Department of Treasury and Finance, Aboriginal Labour Force Characteristics ([website](#)), see also NT Department of Industry, Tourism and Trade (DITT) 2021, Submission to the Inquiry into adult literacy and its importance, p.4 ([weblink](#))

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.



growth of local jobs in these sectors, coupled with a reorientation towards more diversified, sustainable land-use and innovative economies should be a priority for the future development of the region.

**Recommendation:** That the workforce development strategy prioritise sectors that contribute to the health and wellbeing of people and country, and facilitate the equitable, sustainable development of North Australia.

**5. What can be done to improve connectivity to regional and remote parts of the territory?  
Are there particular connectivity measures that should be prioritised?**

*(consultation paper Q.9)*

**6.1 Roads**

The condition of roads is a high priority for CLC members, and these matters are, without exception, raised at every full Council meeting. The CLC has welcomed recent Federal Government commitments to seal some of the NT major roads such as the Tanami Highway and the Mereenie Loop, however with approximately 75 % of the NT road network unsealed, the condition of our roads remains a significant challenge that creates a barrier to workforce participation. Climate change and the subsequent increase in extreme weather events has resulted in NT remote communities 'being cut off' for significant periods due to road closures more often.

The arrangements for who is responsible for roads funding and maintenance in the Territory are complicated, with responsibility lying across different levels of Government. With some minor (yet still regularly used) NT roads falling outside of either NTG or Regional Council responsibility. Whilst the Federal Government provides funding for road upgrades and maintenance it is primarily a Territory and local Government responsibility to plan and deliver projects.

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

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

**Recommendation::** The Federal Government provides support to ensure the NT Government addresses the roads infrastructure needs of the NT including funding for sealing roads across the NT, beyond only major roads.

**Recommendation:** Recognise the critical opportunity road-infrastructure and maintenance presents for remote communities and embed local employment and procurement strategies in all projects.

**Recommendation:** Jurisdictions including the NT must ensure greater transparency to communities about who has the responsibility for which roads.



## 6.2 Digital Access

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

We urge the NTG to recognise digital connectivity as essential to accessing employment, economic participation and social and cultural wellbeing. While progress has been made in this area digital connectivity remains a critical challenge in many remote parts of the NT, where a significant portion of the remote population live without reliable mobile connectivity.

Our constituents in remote communities emphasise the importance and relevance of digital inclusion to fulfilling broader family and community economic plans and aspirations.

Our previous submissions noted that while some communities have mobile phone and high speed data services as a result of the mobile blackspot program and other federal and territory government-sponsored initiatives, many remote and isolated communities still experience connectivity issues which compounds the baseline frustrations and disadvantage caused by poor coverage, reliability and speed in phone and internet services. This structural disadvantage in the digital era is a barrier to participating in education and training, for those who are in employment, it makes their jobs harder and is a barrier to enterprise development.

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

The CLC also notes there are a number of communities that experience regular power disconnections as result of cloudy and wet weather due to lack of effective hybrid energy systems with battery and back up diesel generators.

**Recommendation:** The NTG work with the Federal Government to accelerate work to remote communities to affordable, reliable and fast phone and internet services.

**Recommendation:** The NTG and Commonwealth urgently collaborate to identify funding for effective hybrid energy systems (solar, battery and back up diesel) in communities such as Santa Teresa and Titjikala that are detrimentally affected when persistent cloudy weather and flooding leads to road closures and loss of power and communications.

## 6. How can bush communities be empowered to support workforce development? (consultation paper Q.11)

### 7.1 The decimation of the Aboriginal Community Controlled sector & Local Government Reform



Government policy shifts in recent decades have contributed to the decline in remote employment opportunities, including:

- the abolition of the federal Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) program (2207-2013) that provided local jobs and capital for local infrastructure, and
- NT shire amalgamation (228) that resulted in the abolition of Aboriginal community councils and their replacement with mega-shires.

Services that used to be provided by local Aboriginal Community Councils (e.g. municipal services, outstation services and CDEP) are now delivered by subcontracted service providers (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organisations), either through the shires (now regional councils), NT or Federal Governments. At the time of amalgamation, federal Intervention powers were used to transfer buildings and municipal assets to the new shires, including critical plant and equipment. While intended to support the delivery of “better and more reliable services”<sup>18</sup> and stronger leadership and governance, the centralisation of control over service delivery resulted in “a loss of community control, including the loss of the power to prioritise and make decisions regarding community needs” and a “diminished capacity of communities to deliver their own services in line with their own priorities”<sup>19</sup>. The combined impact was a collapse in local authority, employment and services, and the withdrawal of resources and erosion of Aboriginal community control continue to be felt today.<sup>20</sup>

The decimation of Aboriginal community-control in the NT (a result of successive government policies) is a barrier to economic development and workforce development and participation in remote communities.

The CLC understands that the NTG has a reform agenda that seeks to provide communities with greater agency to prioritise works and direct local resources in relation to municipal services, housing repairs and maintenance, and roads. Whilst the CLC supports self-determination, local decision making and a return to local community councils, it is unclear what ‘reforms’ the NTG is proposing and how they will be funded.

It is imperative that any transition back to local community councils is based on rigorous and meaningful consultation, risk assessment and with clear and sustainable financial underpinnings. Interested communities must be afforded time to re-build governance and administrative capacity as well as ‘on the ground’ operational capacity, as to not be set up to fail, given it has been 18 years since the local community councils were disbanded. All transitions should be closely monitored and evaluated with community residents over an agreed period to ensure the transition is viable.

**Recommendation:** NTG to ensure the transition back to local community councils is properly resourced and supported. This includes the handing back of assets to local communities and ongoing governance, administrative and operational and capacity building support.

## 7.8 Building the remote Aboriginal Workforce through the Partnership Agreement for Remote Housing and Homelands NT

The Partnership Agreement for Remote Housing and Homelands NT presents a real opportunity for Aboriginal workforce development in the NT. Particularly as the NT experiences a critical shortage of trades people. Skilled and unskilled labour is scarce in the NT construction sector and as the rest of

<sup>18</sup> E McAdam, Minister for Local Government, Minister’s speech (Speech delivered at the Local Government Association of the Northern Territory Conference, Alice Springs, 2006), cited in Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) (2012)

<sup>19</sup> AHRC (2012) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Social Justice Report 2012, p.131 ([weblink](#))

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the country experiences similar challenges the NT cannot rely solely on attracting construction workers from interstate to fill this gap.

As per the 2021 Census, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up 26.3% of the NT's population, with a median age of 27.<sup>21</sup> It is imperative that the NT's workforce development strategy prioritises engaging and upskilling local Aboriginal people for work in the housing and construction sectors in preparation for the current and ongoing housing construction, maintenance and tenancy management pipeline created by the Partnership Agreement. Government, contractors, employment service providers and training organisations must collaborate better to ensure that this opportunity is not missed.

Under Closing the Gap Priority Reform 2: Building the Community Controlled Sector, the Partnership Agreement requires the development of a strategic plan for the transition of the remote housing system to Aboriginal community control. This plan must also include a model to build the long-term Aboriginal community-controlled workforce in the housing and construction sectors, including the provision of accessible and affordable training and employment pathways for Aboriginal people working in the community housing sector and support the development and implementation of training and accreditation for Aboriginal people to work in the construction and management of housing an essential service infrastructure.<sup>22</sup>

The abrupt transfer of remote housing away from local community councils to the control of the NTG in 2007 has diminished community-control, removed real jobs in housing construction and housing maintenance and tenancy support, and delivered poor outcomes in quantity and quality of housing and the provision of timely and adequate repairs and maintenance. The return to community control of the remote housing system presents a real opportunity for remote workforce development. However, while there is deep commitment to the transfer to community control, change must be done at a pace that suits Aboriginal community-controlled organisation and business sector and may take some years before full transition to community control is possible. Making capacity building, and training and employment pathways all the more important.

**Recommendation:** NTG to prioritise accessible and affordable training and employment pathways and pipelines of work for Aboriginal people working in the community housing and construction sectors.

**7. What can be done to best position the Territory to take advantage of coming opportunities in the future care and support economy? Are there policy or regulatory levers government can use to address existing and projected workforce pressures? (consultation paper Q.19)**

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

**Education.** Since the 1990s, the number of Aboriginal teachers and Assistant Teachers in remote schools has declined as opportunities for training for these roles has contracted. The policy orientation away from bilingual education and sustained reductions in funding for remote schools has also eroded

<sup>21</sup> Australian Bureau Statistics (ABS),

<sup>22</sup> Northern Territory Remote Housing | Northern Territory Remote Housing | Federal Financial Relations



the role of Aboriginal educators. Local Aboriginal teachers provide continuity for student learning through an ongoing commitment to their communities, and through language and their cultural grounding, help make learning more meaningful and relevant for their students. The NT Government's reinvestment in the Remote Aboriginal Teacher Education (RATE) program is welcome, and continuing to develop local Aboriginal educators should be a priority for workforce development in the NT.

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

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

**Disability.** Addressing policy, and funding barriers, and developing and providing appropriate training to better realise employment opportunities for Aboriginal people living in remote communities through the NDIS should be a priority. There are around 4,000 First Nations people with a disability living in remote or very remote areas who are currently NDIS participants (more than 1,7000 participants in the NT). The average annual support package for First Nations NDIS participants in remote or very remote locations is \$96,000, yet a substantial proportion of this funding goes unspent, with the limited availability of NDIS providers in remote communities being a significant contributing factor. Building up the local disability workforce capacity would help to both increase local employment opportunities and improve the level of support available to Aboriginal people living with disability.

**Aged care.** The final report of the *Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety* identified the need to increase facilitation of the provision of care on-country, and the related need to grow the Indigenous aged care workforce through targeted programs to support culturally appropriate and safe care.

**Health workforce.** We refer to the Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance NT (AMSANT) 2023 Workforce Crisis policy paper<sup>23</sup> highlighting the severe and urgent workforce challenges facing the Aboriginal primary health care sector, and endorse AMSANT's recommendations for additional support for on-country education, training and mentoring to increase Aboriginal employment at all levels of the sector, and reviewing conditions for Aboriginal employment, including considering provision of Commonwealth funding for housing for local Aboriginal staff.

**Recommendation:** The NTG develop strategies and measurable targets to increase opportunities for local Aboriginal employment in the health and social care sector, including with reference to recommendations by AMSANT in relation to the Aboriginal primary care sector.