Resilient Families, Strong Communities

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Key insights from consultation with remote Aboriginal communities in Western Australia

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Government of Western Australia

September 2017

Regional Services Reform Unit

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be aware that this publication may contain images of deceased persons.

Acknowledgement

Australian Aboriginal cultures are the oldest continuous human cultures. Aboriginal people are the first people of Western Australia, the traditional and enduring custodians of the land.

The Regional Services Reform Unit would like to thank all remote Aboriginal communities across the State who participated in the consultation that forms the basis of this report. It is the positive collaboration of many community councils and their members that have made the report possible.

The Reform Unit acknowledges meaningful engagement with Aboriginal people is built on trust, respect and mutual understanding over time. While this particular process occurred over 12 months, on-going engagement with Aboriginal people and remote Aboriginal communities continues at a Reform Unit project level to co-design solutions and outcomes. We also hope that the report will support on-going engagement by other parts of government with Aboriginal families and communities.

The Reform Unit recognises the critical role of our community partners, Aarnja Ltd, Fitzroy Valley Futures, Miriuwung Gajerrong Aboriginal Corporation and the Wunan Foundation, that brokered relationships with communities, built trust, ensured consultation was culturally appropriate and assisted in facilitation in the Kimberley. We would also like to thank the many other organisations, including the Mid-West Aboriginal Organisation Alliance and Ngaanyatjarra Council that provided guidance and support in building relationships with the wider Aboriginal community in the Goldfields, Mid-West and Pilbara.

Contents

Foreword

Over the past 12 months, my team have been working quietly behind the scenes. We've visited remote communities and regional towns throughout the State. We've travelled to places few government officials have ever gone. And we've talked with elders, community members and organisations, and people from all levels of government, to better understand the complex issues facing remote Aboriginal communities.

The Reform Unit set out to visit as many of these communities as was physically possible. In the end, we consulted with communities that in total, are home to more than 90 per cent of the population believed to live in remote Aboriginal communities throughout Western Australia.

We believe that this consultation is the most extensive process ever undertaken with remote communities in this State. Overall, there was much goodwill shown towards the Reform Unit, and we are thankful for the consideration and time that communities gave to our discussions.

We undertook this consultation process because we believed in the importance of listening to as many remote residents as we could. Community leaders requested we capture their concerns and aspirations, so learnings could be shared widely. This report documents what we heard.

In many ways, this report is another marker in a long journey of change. We hope that it enables us and others to build upon existing knowledge, and work better with Aboriginal families in remote parts of the State, to bridge the significant and historic gap between the life outcomes of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Western Australians.

The report contains both challenges and opportunities, both barriers and strengths. Readers may find some parts to be confronting. In other places, readers may draw hope.

Overall, all we have attempted to do is to faithfully document our interactions, for the benefit and use of the communities with which we consulted, and any other parties that are seeking to partner with those communities in striving for a better future.

Grahame Searle
Acting Director General
Department of Communities

Why we consulted

There is a significant gap between the life outcomes of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Western Australia. The gap is worse in regional and remote areas and, for most outcomes, is not closing. Problems are complex, entrenched and multi-dimensional. There is no one-size-fits-all solution.

These challenges have been nearly 200 years in the making. For decades, successive governments have failed to address the challenges effectively, despite often good intentions. Government (in its broadest sense) is a major part of the problem. There is much to be improved in terms of policy coherency, service coordination and accountability in the Western Australian public sector, and between the State and Commonwealth governments, to achieve better outcomes for Aboriginal people. A great deal of State and Commonwealth funding is being spent on services for Aboriginal people who live regionally and remotely, but it is not well-targeted and there has been little discernible improvement in Closing the Gap indicators.

In recognition of the lack of progress, the Regional Services Reform Unit was established in 2015 to drive major reforms in the way services and infrastructure are delivered in regional and remote Aboriginal communities. In mid-2016, the State Government published *Resilient Families, Strong Communities: A roadmap for regional and remote Aboriginal communities.*

The roadmap set out the direction for reform, its priority actions for the first two years, and areas for consultation, with a focus on:

- improved living conditions that enable families to prosper and don't hold them back

- supporting families to build their skills, and overcome any barriers to doing so, through improved service redesign and delivery

- education, employment and housing opportunities, and support for families to take them up.

Since the launch of the roadmap in 2016, the Reform Unit has embarked on an unprecedented journey of on-the-ground consultation with residents of remote Aboriginal communities across Western Australia. The roadmap was used as the guiding document for consultation.

The consultation was designed to inform the future direction of government funding and support for the State's remote Aboriginal communities. More importantly, it was constructed so as to give local community leaders and residents a voice, and the opportunity to talk more holistically about their community's aspirations, and the successes and failures of government service delivery.

How we consulted

The Reform Unit believes best practice for Aboriginal engagement is based on trust, respect, understanding, partnerships and rights. To support these values, three fundamental principles were embedded throughout the consultation process. These were:

- engaging in a culturally appropriate manner

- ensuring on-going and effective communication

- engaging within appropriate timeframes.

As every region in Western Australia has a different demography, geography, history and economy, and different Aboriginal cultures and languages, the Reform Unit approached consultation at a regional level, using endorsed regions from Aboriginal leaders.

These regions were:

- West Kimberley (excluding Fitzroy Valley)

- Fitzroy Valley

- East Kimberley

- Pilbara

- Mid-West

- Goldfields (excluding Ngaanyatjarra Lands)

- Ngaanyatjarra Lands.

Whenever possible, our consultation teams included both male and female staff members. Given the breadth of the task, different Reform Unit staff, with a range of professional backgrounds, led the consultation in each region. While teams used a standard template for consultation, the diversity of the staff involved has likely meant that the emphasis placed on some topics varied by team. Overall, however, all discussions were organised around the key themes of the roadmap.

To ensure culturally sound methods of engagement, the Reform Unit employed local organisations as community partners to accompany staff in the Kimberley. Partnerships with Aarnja Ltd, Fitzroy Valley Futures, Miriuwung Gajerrong Aboriginal Corporation and Wunan Foundation helped establish the Reform Unit in the community. These organisations were engaged to provide the following support:

- liaise with the community council and identify elected board/council members, Aboriginal community leaders, cultural bosses and influential people

- ensure cultural protocols were understood and adhered to

- advise Reform Unit staff of protocols, including delaying community meetings as required due to cultural business

- ensure that local language considerations were appropriately addressed

- advise Reform Unit staff of contentious issues impacting on specific communities.

In the Goldfields, Mid-West and Pilbara, the Reform Unit sought advice from local Aboriginal organisations to ensure cultural protocols and contentious issues were addressed.

Where possible, Reform Unit staff supported capacity-building opportunities throughout the consultation, including actively supporting established and functional community governance structures.

The Reform Unit also took seasonal conditions (the wet season) and cultural business (lore) into account in planning the consultation. As a result, little consultation with remote Aboriginal communities occurred between November 2016 and February 2017.

Community profiles were developed to prepare staff for on-the-ground consultation. These profiles were developed from data held by the Housing Authority and former Departments of Aboriginal Affairs and Planning, along with other public sources.

These profiles were designed to set out the current known status of each individual community including: its occupancy status; population and housing estimates; whether the community receives essential (power, water and wastewater), municipal and housing services; and if the community has a school, health clinic or police station. These profiles were supplemented by local intelligence provided by community partners and Aboriginal organisations.

Previous work by the Aboriginal Affairs Coordinating Committee had identified 274 remote Aboriginal communities, and that was the baseline from which the Reform Unit operated in identifying the communities which it should consult. As set out in the roadmap (p. 9), the State Government's best estimate of the distribution of the approximately 12,000 residents of remote communities across the 274 communities is shown in the table below.

Community size	Number of communities	Percentage of communities	Total estimated residents	Percentage of all residents
More than 200	16	6	5,650	49
Between 100-200	19	7	2,350	20
Between 50-100	19	7	1,250	11
Between 10-50	91	33	2,000	17
Fewer than 10	60	22	300	3
Seasonal *	69	25	0	0
Total	**274**	**100**	**11,550**	**100**

* No permanent residents

Distribution of residents in remote Aboriginal communities across the State.

With whom we consulted

The Reform Unit set out to visit each of the 274 remote Aboriginal communities in Western Australia, irrespective of the stated occupancy status. The intent was to consult with a broad range of remote Aboriginal communities from large town-like settlements, to small outstations, along with seasonal communities with a view of gaining an understanding of their concerns, aspirations and common themes.

The vastness of the State and remoteness of communities proved challenging - access roads to most communities required 4WD vehicles, while a few communities could only be accessed via boat or aircraft.

To date, the communities with which the Reform Unit was able to consult represents 92 per cent of the population believed to live in remote Aboriginal communities in Western Australia. With a handful of exceptions, the remote Aboriginal communities with which the Reform Unit was not able to establish contact are believed to have fewer than 10 residents, be occupied seasonally or be unoccupied.
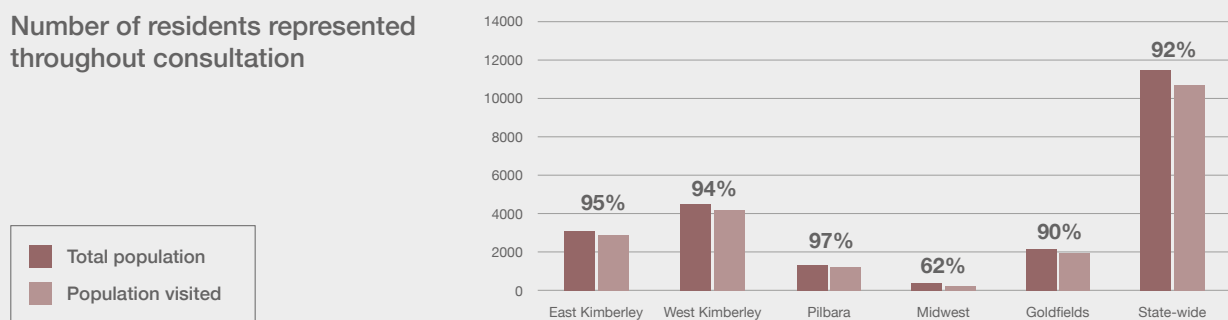
The Reform Unit's consultation consisted of:

• 109 on-community meetings
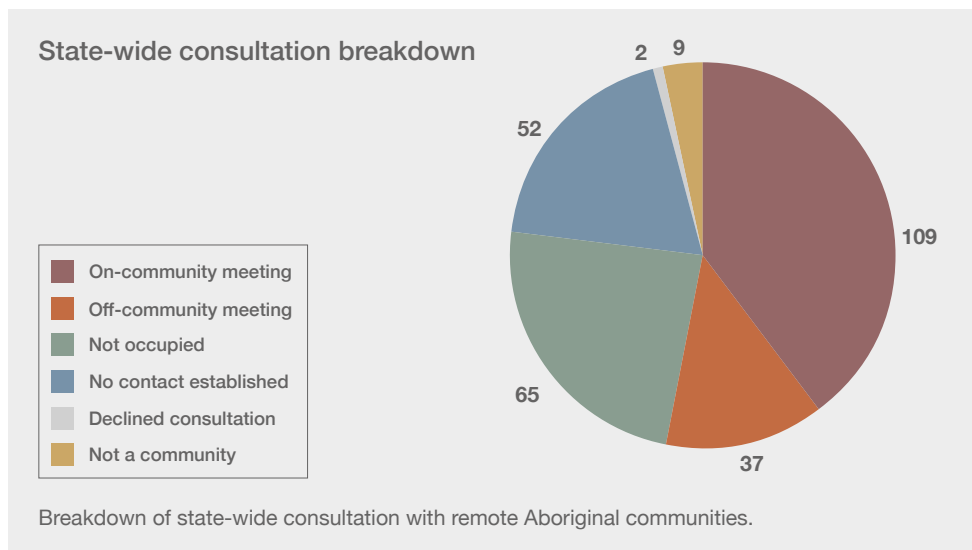
• 37 off-community meetings (in person or via telephone)

• 40 communities found vacant upon us visiting them (with no response yet to a contact letter left in 2016 or early 2017 for anyone who is connected to that community)

• 12 communities that could not be accessed when we attempted to visit them because of impassable road conditions or a locked gate across the access road, and with whom no other contact could be established

• 65 communities that are believed to be unoccupied, based on pre-existing information and advice from partners and other remote residents, and with whom no contact could be established (of which 33 require further investigation to confirm their occupancy status)

• 9 'communities' that have been omitted from this report as they are not permanent living areas (including several businesses such as roadhouses, agriculture enterprises and a school campus).

• two communities that declined to be involved in the consultation, attributing that decision to their distrust of government.

On the basis of our consultation attempts, we believe that approximately 130 communities do not have permanent residents. Previous State Government information had this figure at 90 or so communities.

Number of residents represented throughout consultation

Total population
Population visited

East Kimberley 95%
West Kimberley 94%
Pilbara 97%
Midwest 62%
Goldfields 90%
State-wide 92%

Percentage of residents represented at consultation meeting at a regional and state level.

State-wide consultation breakdown

- On-community meeting
- Off-community meeting
- Not occupied
- No contact established
- Declined consultation
- Not a community

109, 37, 65, 52, 2, 9

Breakdown of state-wide consultation with remote Aboriginal communities.

Wherever possible, meetings were organised some time in advance to better allow community representatives to arrange to be present and to prepare. Attendances varied from a meeting with a single representative to whole community meetings with over 120 residents. While some meetings involved a good cross-section of the community, others were male or female-dominated, and the perspectives of youth and the elderly were not often heard.

Most insights in this document are from a single consultation with each community. The Reform Unit did not seek focus groups on specific topics or ask for specific community members to attend. Most remote Aboriginal communities were presented with background information using large poster infographics. Most conversations followed only a loose structure, to give community members freedom to discuss what they felt was important.

The level of engagement also varied among communities. Some communities were very eager to discuss issues surrounding government services, and possible solutions, while others displayed a level of distrust or lacked the confidence to openly engage.

Comments from community members were not tested for accuracy—the Reform Unit was only interested in hearing the community perspective. Reform Unit staff documented communities' concerns as they heard them and insights are unobscured by service providers or staff. As such, the following insights should not be considered as the views of all residents or inclusive of all topics.
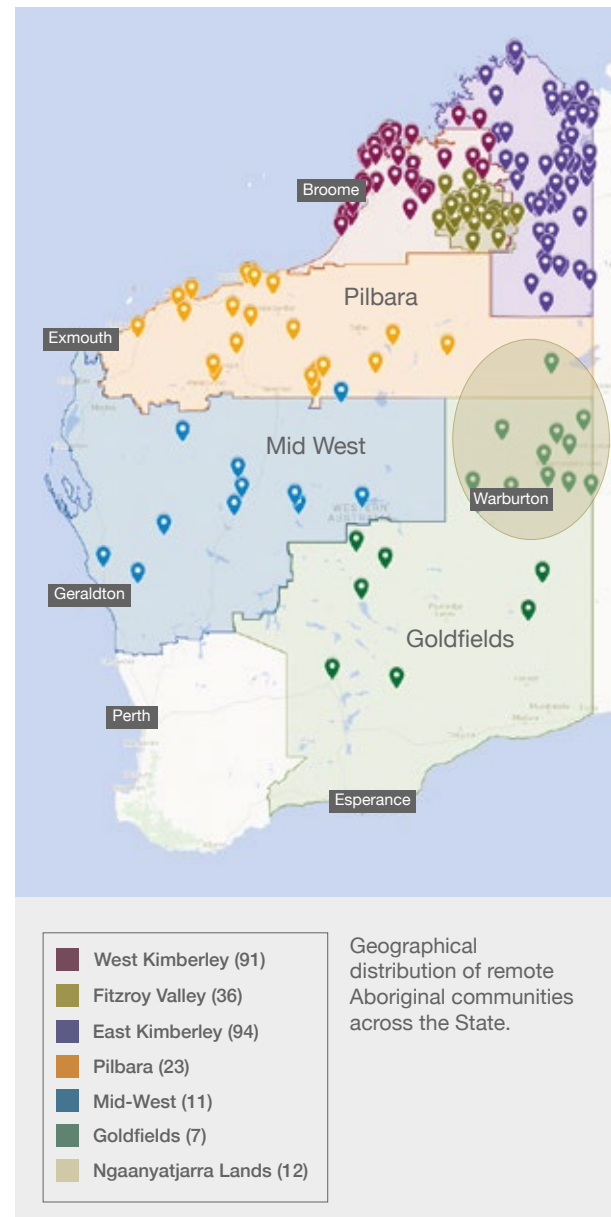
What we heard

Inevitably, conversations focused on issues faced by community and its leadership, highlighting areas where communities felt under-supported by government. The following section is intended to draw out key themes across the State and localised insights in the regions.

State-wide key themes

What we heard across the State has been summarised into four key themes, noting that the issues faced by remote Aboriginal communities are complex and multi-dimensional. Issues should not be considered in isolation, rather as a holistic view of what needs to change to improve life outcomes of Aboriginal people living in remote areas.

Regional insights

Regional insights are a snapshot of the conversations the Reform Unit had with communities in different regions, intended to draw out differences at a local level. Many insights mirror the State-wide themes but provide an 'on-country' example or offer a community-driven solution to the issue.

■ West Kimberley (91)	
■ Fitzroy Valley (36)	
■ East Kimberley (94)	
■ Pilbara (23)	
■ Mid-West (11)	
■ Goldfields (7)	
■ Ngaanyatjarra Lands (12)	

Geographical distribution of remote Aboriginal communities across the State.

Frog Hollow community, East Kimberley.

Cultural and community governance

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*"It's our connection to country
that reinforces our identity."*

West Kimberley community

Cultural and community governance

Community leaders across the State told us that cultural and community governance is fundamental to the successful operation of remote Aboriginal communities. The importance of connection to country was conveyed at 75 per cent of community meetings, while the challenges of community leadership and impact of community administrative arrangements were raised at 45 per cent of communities.

Connection to country

Community leaders across the State told us about the invaluable influence connection to country, culture and kin has on their residents' social and emotional wellbeing. They explained remote Aboriginal communities play a critical role in healing. Many communities still conduct traditional practice such as lore.

Traditional owners told us they have a responsibility to care for country and that remote community life gives them easy access to country to fulfil their obligations.

Community leaders also raised the difficulty their people face 'walking in two worlds', highlighting the challenges for youth to take up opportunities such as education, housing and jobs, while not losing connection to culture, country and kin.

Please refer to regional insights for more regional specific learnings about connection to country.

Impact of administrative governance

At some point, all remote Aboriginal communities have been incorporated under either the Associations Incorporation Act 2015 (WA) or Corporations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) Act 2006 (Cth) (or predecessor statutes), meaning communities fulfil a range of governance, financial and reporting obligations.

Community members of larger communities told us about the importance of local administrative governance. They noted that both State and Commonwealth governments had moved from operating programs through individual communities to engaging external providers, and funding for local administration had gradually dried up. They explained that without community offices and staff to support both residents and community councils, remote Aboriginal communities struggle to operate.

Many community members raised issues about the lack of resourcing of community offices, highlighting the need to have skilled local workers in the office, as they are the backbone of the community. Currently, many communities have residents who fill these roles on a voluntary basis or as logged hours for CDP, causing frustration for many who believe these positions should be funded.

Community members told us residents often rely on the community office resources (internet, computers and phones) for their personal business including Centrelink reporting. Community leaders told us that this puts strain on already stretched resources, suggesting government needs to think about how they can better support community offices.

Some communities reported having employed CEOs who were at best incompetent, and at worst, had misappropriated community funds. These communities were either in administration or had recently emerged from a period of administration.

Communities with an appropriately funded and competent CEO reported significantly better outcomes. Many community leaders said that a transparent CEO, 'on their side', who understands the local dynamic, could effectively advocate with governments and other sectors on behalf of

the community. Community leaders highlighted that the CEO is pivotal in ensuring good financial decisions are made and in coordinating week-to-week community operations.

Leadership

As in other areas, the diversity of remote Aboriginal communities produces diverse demands on its leaders. Small communities of one to five houses are typically family groups that operate informally, and 'leaders' are typically female or male family heads. But in larger remote communities, leaders are often part of an incorporated council, with a democratic mandate and legislative requirements.

Community leaders across the State told us about the mechanism their leadership groups have put in place to support and govern their communities. However, they struggle getting formal recognition of community policies, such as community by-laws, stressing communities need better support from government to help implement and enforce these mechanisms.

Community leaders told us that they often struggle with the pressure of being leaders in their community, including managing family expectations. They highlighted that service providers often expect them to play the role of 'peace keeper' with little or no support. Some leaders said they were concerned about the future leadership of their community, with few young people willing to take on leadership responsibilities.

Members of community councils and prescribed body corporates told us about the pressures they feel from a community level to be able to navigate government policy and procedures, with little to no training in the field. They suggested government needs to better support and mentor people in these roles.

Community leaders also highlighted the right to self-determination for their people, with a focus on community-driven solutions. Communities want to partner with government to design solutions to the issues residents face. Community members also advocated for funding decisions to be made by the community with the support of government. These funding decisions include, what programs or infrastructure is needed in the community, how much is spent and an involvement in the process of awarding contracts.

Milba community, East Kimberley.

Remote Living

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"If government wants to see real results in communities, they need to put control and money back into community."

West Kimberley community

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Remote living

Living on-country is a significant reason why many residents choose to live in remote Aboriginal communities across the State. However, it isn't without its challenges: 91 per cent of communities raised issues they faced living remotely, including essential and municipal service delivery (80 per cent) and housing maintenance, management and supply issues (78 per cent). A high cost of living was raised specifically by 25 per cent of communities as a key impediment to better outcomes in remote Aboriginal communities.

Essential and municipal services

As described in the roadmap (p. 14), essential service arrangements vary widely across the 274 remote Aboriginal communities, from the 14 communities that receive electricity supply and distribution services from Horizon Power (e.g. are similar in regional towns in the North-West in terms of electricity) to the 110 or so remote communities that do not receive, and have never received, any essential services.

Remote Aboriginal communities across the State told us of the importance of access to essential services. This includes water that meets Australian Drinking Water Guidelines and a reliable power supply. Although the condition and type of infrastructure varies across the State, community concerns were similar.

Some communities reported they were satisfied with their essential services, while others forecast challenges due to climate change and expected population growth.

Various communities raised concerns about the quality of their drinking water and were worried it may be causing health issues for their families. The majority of communities access ground water via a bore system, which is often

located within their community and to which some have customary rights. As such, concerns and questions were raised about the proposed charges for water services under the Essential and Municipal Services Upgrade Program. While communities were supportive of receiving water that meets Australian Drinking Water Guidelines and an improved level of service, they told us that they were concerned about how residents would pay the additional bills with, what they perceive, is an already high cost of living.

Many residents in remote Aboriginal communities live in impoverished conditions and so community leaders are concerned about cost of living pressures felt by their residents. Many communities across the State told us they would like to use renewable energy sources such as solar or wind energy as a way of reducing costs. However, of the communities that have renewable energy infrastructure, a large proportion believe their system has never worked properly or been disconnected, leaving them reliant on diesel generators.

Many communities raised concerns about the poor condition of community access and internal roads as well as public roads in their region. They believe poor road access and conditions have directly contributed to poor overall health and wellbeing amongst residents. Residents raised concerns about chronic health conditions in the young and elderly related to dust, vehicle accidents due to hazardous conditions, roads being impassable in the wet season thereby limiting access to key services such as education and health, and poor road conditions resulting in delayed emergency response times.

Community leaders told us generally that their communities are under-funded to deliver the type of municipal services that are usually provided by local governments, explaining that current

funding does not meet the unique circumstances of each individual community. For example, often communities will seek the support of neighbouring businesses or local organisations to assist with bulk rubbish collection and fire management. Most communities told us they receive little to no support from their local government.

Housing, maintenance, management and supply

As a condition of the Commonwealth Government's funding to the State Government under the National Partnership Agreement for Remote Indigenous Housing,[1] the State Government agreed that for newly constructed and refurbished housing, property and tenancy management arrangements consistent with the Residential Tenancies Act 1987 would apply.[2] These arrangements are contained in a Housing Management Agreement (HMA), which sees tenancy management services delivered by the State Government or a government-contracted provider, and maintenance services delivered under a head contractor model.

Currently, 76 remote Aboriginal communities have negotiated a HMA with the State Government. Typically, these communities have medium to large populations.

Many Aboriginal communities under a HMA reported a general dissatisfaction with the service. They raised concerns about what they believe to be an irregularity of visits by service providers, a lack of accountability for those services, and a general lack of communication by the provider with the community. Some residents expressed disappointment that after signing a HMA and

paying higher rents, there was no improvement to housing and/or additional provision of housing. As a whole, residents felt the property and tenancy management service had declined. Others told us since the introduction of the head maintenance contractor model, residents experienced long wait times of up to 3 months to fix simple maintenance issues, such as leaking pipes and taps (resulting in water wastage).

Community members said that governments (State and Commonwealth) had gradually taken jobs away from community residents in favour of aggregating work and contracting with larger organisations based in regional towns. Community leaders believe if more local people were employed in community-based roles, government costs would fall, and more local people would have real jobs. For example, residents told us that the head maintenance contractor model had limited local employment opportunities and removed the ability for community organisations to coordinate and deliver these services themselves.

Community members across the State highlighted overcrowding issues, saying that overcrowding and housing supply were key inhibitors to family wellbeing and a major barrier for families wishing to live on-country.

Residents who have seen community population changes raised concerns about unused infrastructure, which is often in poor condition. They questioned why, with the demand for more housing on community, the government was not looking at repairing this infrastructure or why, if the houses are never likely to be repaired, the infrastructure has not been removed.

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[1]   Under this Agreement, the State Government has to date constructed around 700 houses and refurbished around 1,600 houses in towns and remote Aboriginal communities.

[2]   The Act does not apply to housing in remote communities as the State Government does not own the housing asset (it is usually owned by the community) and so does not have a landlord-tenancy relationship with the residents.

Cost of living

The price of goods and services in remote communities is high compared with capital cities, particularly for perishable goods such as fresh fruit and vegetables. High prices make life particularly difficult for the many remote Aboriginal community residents who have limited financial capacity.[3]

A message we heard throughout our consultations is that the primary issue in remote communities is not one of Aboriginality; it is one of poverty. Community leaders explained the cost of remote living was far higher than in regional centres. Community leaders raised concerns for the health and wellbeing of their people, saying that the cost of fresh produce is three to four times higher than in Perth and fresh produce is not affordable for many residents. They explained that these prices compromise the promotion of healthy diets and nutrition from a young age, and ultimately results in chronic health issues such as diabetes.

Remoteness results in many residents travelling large distances to access services. Even basic services such as telecommunications or power can require a trip to town to purchase pre-paid cards. Consequently, community members told us that a large proportion of the weekly income is spent on fuel and car maintenance, and many families will often share resources to live week-to-week.

Community members across the State raised concerns about already financially stretched families having to meet new costs associated with utility bills and rent, and suggested that given total cost pressures, either the State Government should increase bill subsidies or the Commonwealth Government should pay an additional allowance under Centrelink payments for remote residents.

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[3]   House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Affairs, *Everybody's Business: Remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Community Stores* (2009), Chapter 5.

Art centre at Wingellina community, Ngaanyatjarra Lands.

Economic viability

"Community-based jobs give people a sense of purpose, improving overall happiness and wellbeing."

Fitzroy Valley community

Economic viability

Communities leaders across the State told us the economic viability of their community was key to its success and longevity. This subject was addressed in 86 per cent of community meetings, with discussion ranging from bemoaning missed opportunities to barriers imposed by governments. Land tenure issues and opportunities were raised in 52 per cent of community meetings. The shortcomings of Centrelink and the Community Development Programme (CDP), and the related issue of a failure to utilise local, skilled people and create local job opportunities, were both raised in three-quarters of community meetings.

Land tenure

As described in the roadmap, the forms of land tenure that are common in remote communities are not common in regional towns, and are a major contributor to unusual legal and service delivery arrangements in communities. A majority of communities sit on Crown reserve held by a single statutory authority, the Aboriginal Lands Trust (ALT). Any tenure change must comply with Native Title Act 1993 (Cth) processes.

Complex land tenure arrangements in communities were often stated in consultations to be a barrier to community development and aspirations, with community members telling us they are legally unable to pursue private home ownership or investment in infrastructure and economic development opportunities.

A number expressed exasperation at how difficult and complex the processes are for changing tenure. Communities that have sought changes in tenure told us that the process itself can have a highly negative impact on relationships within the community, leading to fractured communities and disagreements within family groups.

Given the unavoidable role of native title processes in tenure change, there was a difference in views between those who are, and those who are not, traditional owners. Those who are traditional owners often saw opportunity in the potential for tenure change, while those who are not were apprehensive about what their future opportunities might be.

Jobs and employment opportunities

The remote areas in which communities are located are typically, though not always, characterised by low levels of private sector economic activity. The jobs that are available are very often tied to government expenditure on infrastructure and human services.

Many communities and their leaders were clear about the need to generate employment opportunities in and around communities in order to sustain their communities into the future. In that vein, community leaders across the State encouraged government to think differently about local jobs and employment opportunities for residents in community. While some remote Aboriginal communities are close to regional centres and residents can access a regional job market, the more remote Aboriginal communities cannot.

Community members from those more remote Aboriginal communities told us about some of the missed community-based employment opportunities, including in remote community schools, essential and municipal service delivery, community stores, environmental health monitoring, office administration, tenancy and property maintenance, and CDP providers.

For example, community leaders in a community of 100 residents told us, if all 'non-skilled' work

was filled by local residents it would equate to eight full-time positions. Instead, there are currently only two part-time positions, with the rest of the roles filled by people brought into community or by those travelling in and out of the community. Community leaders were clear that their preference was for community jobs to go to local residents first, and said that government and/or its contractors need to be more innovative and culturally appropriate in how they recruit and fill positions.

Community members were very supportive of ranger groups across the State and spoke with a real sense of pride that rangers were able to practice culture and protect the environment in an employed position.

Those communities with art centres observed that those centres not only provided economic opportunity but were also an important piece of community infrastructure for social and cultural wellbeing.

Enterprise and business opportunities

With limited employment opportunities in remote Western Australia, many community leaders spoke to us about how business and enterprises could help sustain their community.

Some communities explained business enterprises they were now involved in and the potential this creates for employment. Others mentioned potential opportunities, but noted large barriers to capitalising on those opportunities, including current land tenure arrangements as well as a lack of start-up funding and business development skills.

Funding opportunities

Community leaders told us that their communities are under-resourced, and to fund new initiatives or capital works, they rely on grants, funding rounds or sponsorship opportunities. Many community members expressed their frustration in seeking funding.

Community leaders told as that applications are typically written by volunteers within the community, who are competing with professional grant writers. Often, applications are not successful, with little or no feedback given to community. Community members said that they needed help and support from government to develop their skills in this area, if they are to compete with big organisations for funding.

Community Development Programme

CDP is a Commonwealth Government remote employment and community development programme. It is intended to support job seekers in remote Australia to build skills and contribute to their communities through a range of flexible activities, focused on local decision-making and local solutions. The programme has strict rules around work hours (25 hours per week), with financial penalties when total hours are not worked.

Aboriginal communities across the State told us that since the transition from past Commonwealth programs to CDP, there has been a lack of funding for community projects and an overall reduction in community influence on CDP priorities.

Community leaders explained the important functions that 'work for the dole' programs fulfil in an under resourced community. They told us that current government funding is not enough to deliver the services communities need and that shortfall can be partly addressed by innovative use of CDP activities. Participants are then seen as making a valuable contribution to the community. Many leaders noted that the roles participants carry out would be classified as 'real jobs' in a conventional town structure.

The application of financial penalties was frequently highlighted by participants as creating major problems within their community. Community leaders explained that when residents had their Centrelink payments suspended, the flow on impact on families meant people simply had less money to buy basic items such as food and power cards, exacerbating already high costs of living.

Many told us about how difficult it was for suspended participants to navigate the Centrelink system via long telephone calls to get re-connected, meaning that a suspension often resulted in an extended disconnection from the program.

Community leaders also said CDP lacked real training pathways and opportunities for participants to gain employment. They highlighted that if the CDP provider is not based in their community, there is little accountability or transparency for provider decisions, and no support for individual participants.

Yarrunga community, East Kimberley.

Service delivery and provision

"Service providers need to be more accountable for what they deliver on community."

Mid-West community

Service delivery and provision

Service access and provision in remote Aboriginal communities was identified as a key concern for many communities across the State. Barriers to accessing critical services such as education, health and telecommunication services were raised at 89 per cent of community meetings. Community leaders across the State were critical of service design or the lack of service accountability, with 62 per cent of communities suggesting some sort of redesign for services delivered to or accessed by their residents.

Access to services in remote Aboriginal communities

Given the diversity of remote communities in size and distance from regional towns, there is significant variation in what services are available in communities. For example, some large communities have a school, health clinic and police station, and good mobile phone coverage. However many medium and small communities have few or no services in or near their community, and travel vast distances to access those services.

Community leaders told us that accessing services is a constant challenge.

The lack of telecommunication services is a key concern for many communities, with many reporting no mobile or internet coverage and reliance on a single landline or payphone (which were often out of service). Community members explained how lack of telecommunications can have a significant impact on community life, including an inability to contact emergency services and financial hardship for residents who have had Centrelink payments suspended.

Many communities raised challenges about dealing with Centrelink. Community members said that all contact with Centrelink had to be by phone and that it usually took around two hours per phone transaction. Even those who could travel to a local Centrelink office claimed there was no customer service ethic, with people directed to use an office computer, which many found daunting.

The need to travel for health care was consistently raised across the State. Communities told us about the frequency with which some community members travelled for health care, citing the examples of those with chronic health conditions and pregnant women. Community leaders highlighted the financial and emotional burden on residents of frequent travel to regional centres to access health services. They explained that in turn, this burden meant that some residents were reluctant to travel to access the services, resulting in poorer health outcomes.

High school was another key service that residents told us it is difficult to access. They said that remoteness meant that many students do not complete year 12, as the only options for doing so is via boarding school or families relocating to a city or regional town. We were told that the requirement to move for high school is difficult for many students, particularly as few family members or friends have successfully done so.

We heard about similar issues in accessing adult education opportunities, with many residents telling us moving was too big a barrier for them to consider further education. Communities called for better access to vocational training in their communities, and in many cases highlighted that the infrastructure to support training programs was already in place.

Accountability for service delivery

Community members across the State questioned the transparency of government contracts, suggesting that government expenditure did not match the value of work they saw in their community. Community leaders called for government to build greater accountability into its contracts and services.

Many communities talked about the frequency of government and non-government agency visits, with little or no notice, requesting meetings with the CEO or community council. Community leaders expressed frustration with the demands this placed on the community and its leadership.

Redesign of services

Community leaders across the State told us that if outcomes are to change, government needs to change the way it does business. Many said that service design should start at a community level and solutions should be community-driven. Others noted the need for different solutions in different locations.

In particular, leaders focused on community-level preventative programs. Examples discussed included programs to improve knowledge and skills around parenting, house management and health, and reduce drug and alcohol abuse and domestic violence. Communities often noted that culture and country should be central to program design, as those are key factors in wellbeing and healing long-term trauma.

Education and youth programs were also discussed extensively during our consultation. Leaders highlighted the vital role that education plays in changing outcomes, while acknowledging that local school attendance rates are often unacceptably low. The need to meaningfully embed culture and language into the remote community school curriculum was echoed throughout the State. Many community members raised the need to better engage young people in activities, both to occupy their time and enhance their skills.

Community members frequently requested that key services such as birthing, dialysis and aged care services be delivered locally, on community. They also expressed concern about the lack of frequency of general health services like nurses, general practitioners and dentist visiting communities.

A collection of consultation meetings across the State.

Regional insights

*"We are sick of the 'disease to please',
we are not going to just take whatever
the government thinks is good for us"*

Pilbara

West Kimberley

The West Kimberley spans 159,609 square kilometres and includes 127 remote Aboriginal communities. The total estimated population of the 127 communities is 4,200 people, making the West Kimberley the region with the highest number of communities and largest total population.

For the purpose of this report the West Kimberley region consists of 75 remote Aboriginal communities on the Dampier Peninsula, 10 remote Aboriginal communities near the coast south of Broome and communities in and surrounding Broome and Derby townships.

Eight communities in this region have populations of more than 100 permanent residents, including Bidyadanga, which is the largest remote Aboriginal community in Western Australia and has approximately 600 permanent residents. We believe 23 communities in this region do not have permanent residents.

■ West Kimberley (91)	Geographic distribution of remote Aboriginal communities in the West Kimberley.
■ Fitzroy Valley (36)	
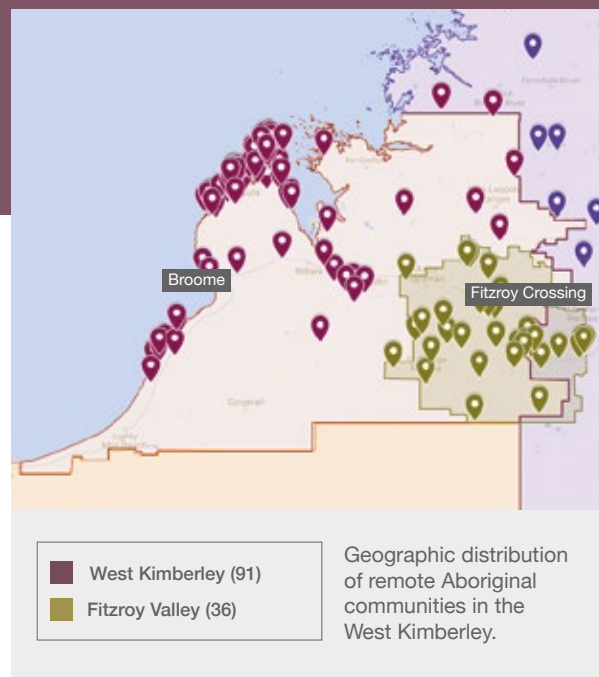
The Fitzroy valley has been excluded from the West Kimberley and has been treated as a sub-region for this report. In the Fitzroy Valley region, there are a further 36 communities who identify in the Kimberley's central cultural bloc, their total population is approximately 2,000 residents. The six largest communities and their outstations account for approximately 80 per cent of permanent residents in this sub-region. We believe two communities are occupied seasonally and nine are no longer used as permanent living areas.

West Kimberley
Dampier Peninsula, Bidyadanga and communities surrounding Broome and Derby

Community members in the West Kimberley region emphasised the importance of country and its significance to community life, explaining that remote communities provided a place of healing and are vital to the social and emotional wellbeing of residents. They said that culture was fundamental and as leaders, they have a responsibility to see this cultural knowledge transferred, with aspirations to embed culture in education, tourism and caring for country programs such as ranger groups. Cultural knowledge, artefacts and practices were viewed as a valuable asset for both the Aboriginal community and the broader population, with many raising a desire for activities that enable culture and country to be protected and shared.

Many community members in the region discussed land tenure arrangements and how those arrangements impact on community planning and aspirations. Community members were well informed about land tenure processes, highlighting that inconsistencies and a lack of clarity about options for changes in tenure, along with lengthy processing times, creates a major barrier for economic development. Some leaders expressed frustration that some freehold land is vested in with non-Aboriginal entities, such as the Catholic Church, rather than with traditional owners or with community corporations. Leaders also expressed concern about families investing in housing and infrastructure on communities with no security for those investments, due to the existing tenure.

Community members shared concerns about changes in both housing maintenance contracts and essential and municipal services contracts.

Community members told us that the outsourcing of these contracts has impacted on community sustainability, with the removal of earning potential and loss of local jobs. Further, residents said they are not getting value for money, with claims the outside contractors are delivering poor workmanship after communities faced extensive wait times for works to be carried out.

A significant number of residents also advised that they felt unable to raise complaints about service providers for fear that it might affect their level of future service or stop future contracts or employment from being provided to Aboriginal people in the region. Community members suggested that government needs to consider how contracts are reviewed and the repercussions for a client if they are perceived as the source of criticism. Community members also told us they would like to see the contract structure reviewed, with larger communities given the opportunity to coordinate and deliver maintenance contracts for themselves, in partnership with surrounding outstations.

Community leaders told us that current child-centred services are failing their young people and that they would like to see more community-driven solutions, focused on empowerment of families. Communities across the region told us of aspirations for family-centred services, with a greater emphasis to prevention rather than treatment.

Community leaders acknowledged the low number of Aboriginal students graduating high school and stressed that their children are not being equipped to succeed. A common concern

was that many parents feel disempowered and unable to exert parental authority or set appropriate boundaries and discipline for children, meaning they felt unable to address non-attendance. In more remote communities, residents said that the condition of local roads (particularly in the wet season) made it difficult to always get kids to school.

Community members also told us that many children heading away to boarding school for high school did not have sufficient academic preparation, leading them to have to repeat a year of high school or drop out of the boarding school. The key to educational success was commonly attributed to a strong family and community connection to the school, particularly with the principal (both inside and outside the school gate).

Community leaders from the Dampier Peninsula were keen to discuss the potential opportunities that the proposed sealing of the Broome - Cape Leveque road would bring with it. They told us that improved access would support service delivery and increase economic opportunities. However, they want to make sure that government understood that the project planning and implementation needed to be done in partnership with Aboriginal people. Community leaders explained they had an obligation to country to ensure that social, cultural and environmental impacts were minimised. They also said that more work was required to translate the road sealing into broader job and economic opportunities for local residents and communities.

Goombaragin community, West Kimberley.

West Kimberley
Fitzroy Valley

Jimbalakudunj community, Fitzroy Valley.

The majority of residents living on remote Aboriginal communities in the Fitzroy Valley are traditional owners living on country. Community members explained the importance of connection to country for their social and emotional wellbeing, healing purposes and to maintain cultural practices. They emphasised the need for government to consider the significance of country and culture when developing services. Community leaders told us that they want to be drivers of community change and that solutions to issues in the Valley should be identified at a community level, stressing that government makes uninformed decisions resulting in programs that fail to improve outcomes for remote residents.

Community members told us about several successful family-centred programs, developed and implemented in the Fitzroy Valley with community leadership. They also told us of their future aspirations to embed culture in a range of youth-based programs to strengthen families and engage youth in the region. Several communities identified facilities that were built to house these programs but are underutilised or in need of repair. With funding support from government, residents said these community programs could be delivered on community, making them more easily accessible compared to programs delivered in town.

Community members in the Fitzroy Valley told us about the need to build community capacity and develop community-based training pathways focusing on governance, leadership and business development skills. Community members also highlighted the need to build positive partnerships with government, prescribed bodies corporate,

larger remote Aboriginal communities and other organisations to make long-term change for their people, highlighting the need to do business differently and in collaboration, rather than in isolation.

Fitzroy Valley community members told us that since the transition from the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) to CDP, there is a lack of funding for community projects and an overall reduction in community influence on CDP priorities. Residents told us that CDEP had given ownership and control to the community, and a sense of purpose for participants, and that they would like to see CDP do the same. Many expressed the view that CDP in its current form would not lead to real jobs.

With limited employment opportunities in the Fitzroy Valley, remote Aboriginal communities are looking towards business and enterprise to sustain their community and provide employment for young people. Some community members told us about their desire to diversify traditional pastoral ventures and become active in tourism. Others told us about their community's aspirations to become service hubs from where they could manage essential, municipal and housing services contracts for themselves and nearby outstations. Some communities indicated art centres provided avenues to develop a sustainable economic base. Community leaders saw the biggest barrier to these aspirations as

being start-up funding and training. They argued that government funding agreements should be negotiated directly with communities, rather than larger corporations that are perceived as lacking effective communication and transparency.

Some communities in the Fitzroy Valley raised concerns about debt in their community, including rent arrears and overdue utility bills. In terms of power debt, community members emphasised the need move away from community billing in favour of individual meters, to ensure households are accountable for electricity consumption and payments. Further, they suggested looking to renewable energy to reduce electricity costs.

Community leaders in the Fitzroy Valley were keen to discuss improvements to housing services and infrastructure as well as local roads, highlighting that both issues have a significant impact on resident's health and wellbeing.
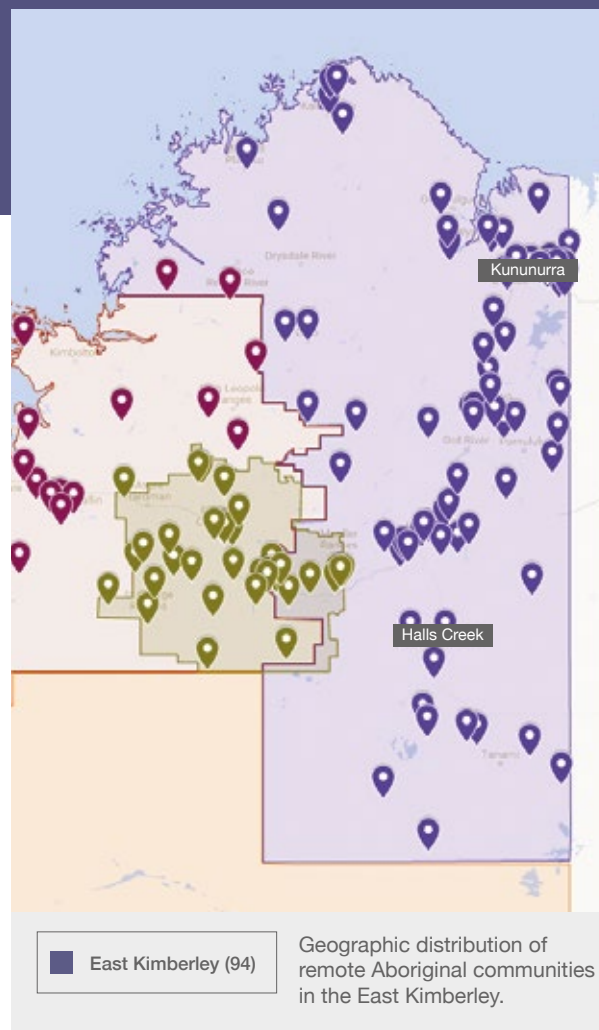
East Kimberley

In the East Kimberley, there are 94 remote Aboriginal communities with a total population of approximately 3,200 residents. The region spans some 263,908 square kilometres, with communities spread from the northern coastal community of Kalumburu to the most southern community of Yarramurral in the Great Sandy Desert. The seven largest remote Aboriginal communities in the East Kimberley (Balgo, Bililuna, Kalumburu, Mulan, Ringer Soak, Warmun and Woolah) are home to 60 per cent of the population. Of the smaller communities, 19 were found to be unoccupied, four are not permanent living areas, and a further 15 could not be accessed, with local Aboriginal people and organisations unable to provide any information on occupancy status.

Community members in the East Kimberley explained that distance to services was a key contributing factor to outcomes for their people. Most communities within 50 kilometres of a regional town said they were happy with the services they accessed in nearby towns, including economic opportunities. At this distance, they were able to benefit both from town-based opportunities such as schools and work, and from community living, with connection to country and culture, free from the humbug of town and able to control alcohol and drug consumption on community.

Conversely, community members of the most remote communities said that their biggest challenges are access to services, affordable healthy food and economic opportunities.

Many community members told us they rely

| ■ East Kimberley (94) | Geographic distribution of remote Aboriginal communities in the East Kimberley. |

heavily on Telstra pay phones, expressing their frustration with a lack of mobile coverage and services faults on the pay phones, resulting in community isolation and difficulties in emergencies. Lack of essential communication services also jeopardised reporting obligations with social services such as Centrelink, exposing residents to possible financial penalties.

Community members across the region voiced strong criticism of CDP, saying that the implementation by external providers had robbed local communities of the chance to enhance their community through community projects.

They were also concerned at the difficulty in communicating with Centrelink, CDP disciplinary measures, and the fact that there were now

people in remote communities with no income, putting huge pressure on family members.

Community members in the East Kimberley sought clarity and resolution of housing issues, with housing supply, and housing repair and maintenance raised in many communities. Residents reported wait times of up to three months to fix simple maintenance issues. Some larger communities told us they faced extra housing pressure because family members from nearby outstations had relocated to their community as the outstation houses had become unsafe to live in.

Community leaders raised concerns about the future of their communities, noting the lack of jobs and economic opportunities for their young people. As a result, and given reliance on CDP, community leaders told us it was critical that any jobs in the community should be taken up by local people, rather than external contractors. They felt they could provide better housing maintenance service by engaging local people, instead of bringing in externally-based contractors and paying high travel costs. They wondered why some State-delivered services could not be more effectively delivered by employing local people where they had appropriate skills.

Many communities, particularly more remote communities, raised with us the condition of the road network. Residents told us that during the wet season, roads into the communities can be impassable, with some communities cut off from services for weeks at a time or residents being unable to return to community from visits elsewhere. There residents highlighted that road conditions coupled with distance make for high fuel and vehicle maintenance costs. For example, residents in Balgo (Wirrimanu) told us they travel 500 kilometres in a round trip to Halls

Creek on an unsealed road to access health services, shop for goods or visit for funerals, family and sporting events.

A number of community members talked to us about community demographics, highlighting that they have a very young population. Some community leaders and parents expressed concerns about the level of engagement and attendance of children in the remote community school, and the barriers and struggles parents have in getting children to boarding school for further education. Many communities in the East Kimberley are working on ways to get the wider community involved in the education system, with aspirations to better support their children's learning through culture and art programs. Most community members spoke about the lack of organised programs and activities for their young people, linking boredom in remote communities to mischief.

Community leaders of remote communities surrounding Kununurra expressed frustration that individual land tenure was not available for them to purchase their own home, or realise an economic opportunity.

Crocodile Hole community, East Kimberley.

Pilbara

| Pilbara (23) | Geographic distribution of remote Aboriginal communities in the Pilbara. |

In the Pilbara, there are 23 remote Aboriginal communities, spread over 502,000 square kilometres. The total remote Aboriginal community population is approximately 1,300 people, half of whom live in the two largest communities, Jigalong and Punmu. We believe 6 communities are not used as permanent living areas, while the remaining 14 have between 30 and 100 permanent residents.

Community leaders in the Pilbara raised issues relating to housing maintenance, expressing a desire to see maintenance-related jobs return to community and maintenance issues addressed more quickly. Some community leaders told us that they had felt pressured into signing a HMA to receive much-needed refurbishment works or on the hope of receiving new housing to reduce overcrowding issues. Several leaders explained that overcrowding was a barrier for community aspirations to have more family members return to live on-country.

Community leaders told us that there is no one-size-fits all solution to land tenure issues in communities. In several communities, leaders explained that while some residents were traditional owners for the land on which the community sits, others were traditional owners for other parts of the Pilbara or not traditional owners at all. We were told that this demographic reality would complicate tenure changes or transfers, and mean that the community council or its community members would not support such changes or transfers.

Leaders expressed concerns about the education
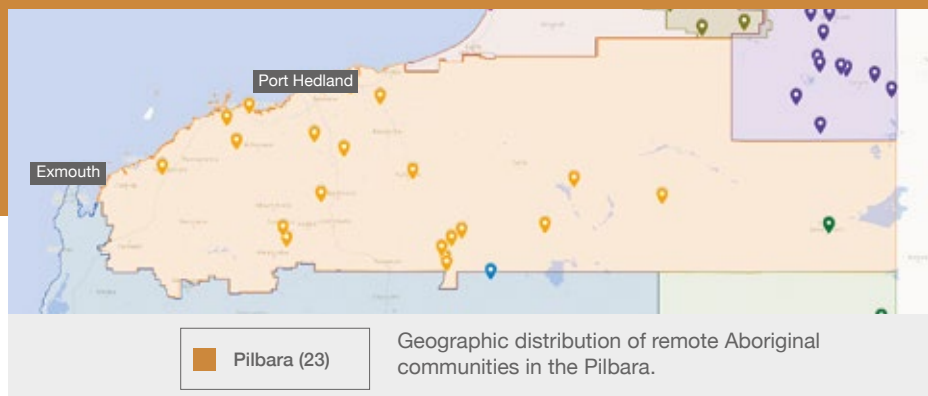
of children in communities and the lack of opportunities for young people, saying that as a result, many families are moving off-country. We were told about a range of challenges to educational access, from a school with a lone teacher who does not have the resources to properly embed culture into the school curriculum, to the closure of a school due to low numbers, which meant students had to attend a school in a town over an hour away, to which there is no bus service.

Health issues and services were a common topic of conversation. Many residents raised concerns about the lack of community-based services. A common concern was that services were delivered on a drive-in/drive-out basis, with questions raised about whether government was getting value-for-money for services delivered to community in this way. Many communities identified the need for better services to tackle kidney disease, diabetes, and drugs and alcohol. Some leaders spoke about the need to be able to better support people who want to live on-country to escape the temptations in town, particularly alcohol and other drugs.

Chirritta Station community, Pilbara.

Mid-West

Mid-West (11)

Geographic distribution of remote Aboriginal communities in the Mid-West.

In the Mid-West, there are 11 remote Aboriginal communities, this includes Puntawari, which is unoccupied, and a further two communities are not used as permanent living areas. These communities have a total population of approximately 500 residents. Community populations vary from places like Kutkububba with 30 permanent residents, to Burringurrah with about 110 permanent residents. The region spans some 478,000 square kilometres and on average, communities are 200 kilometres from the closest town.

Community leaders told us that remoteness and small populations make community stores unviable, increasing the cost of living for residents. Accessing basic services such as telecommunications or power requires a trip to town to purchase pre-paid cards. Remoteness can also cause access issues for emergency services, which are exacerbated in flooding. Residents told us a large proportion of their income is spent on fuel and car maintenance, and families will often share resources to live week-to-week.

Many communities in the region are looking to mining for employment opportunities, with communities that hold a native title determination seeking agreements with mining companies, conditional on training and employment for local residents.

Community leaders told us of their on-going aspirations to utilise native title land for business and enterprise. Ranger programs, mining agreements, agriculture ventures and even tourism projects are all on their radar, but they

told us they struggle with initial start-up costs.

Some leaders identified the need to build capacity in areas such as stakeholder negotiation, business planning and writing funding applications.

Community leaders raised concerns about the effectiveness of CDP, with many saying they are not seeing the benefits in their local community. During consultations, CDP participants identified four different services providers, all of which community members felt were not being held accountable and were just conducting a 'tick box' exercise. Community members identified a lack of effective communication and meaningful training opportunities as the reasons why CDP had been ineffectual. A common view was that governments should employ more local community-based people in service delivery, rather than have people external to the community visit and leave on an irregular basis.

Several communities spoke to us about HMAs with the Housing Authority. Three communities told us they are expecting housing refurbishments to begin mid-2017, while others saw refurbishments last year. Some expressed a disappointment that after signing an HMA and paying higher rents, property and tenancy management services had

declined, rather than improved.

Community members told us they live on-country because culture is central to their way of life. However, community leaders felt that culture was not reflected in the school curriculum and that this absence directly contributed to poor educational outcomes for their children.

Other factors contributing to poor outcomes included the turnover of teaching staff, and the need for students to leave community to board in Perth or a major regional town for high school. They noted that as a result, many students failed to successfully progress through to Year 12.

Yulga Jinna community, Mid-West.

Goldfields

The Goldfields is the largest region in the State, spanning 771,276 square kilometres. As a consequence, the region's 19 remote communities are extremely diverse. As such this region was consulted in the following two sub-regions.
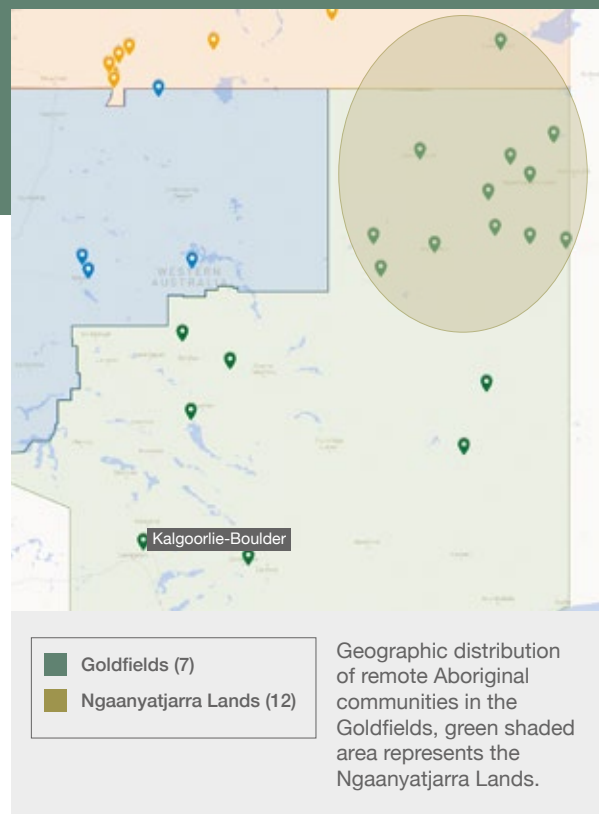
Kalgoorlie and surrounds, includes seven remote Aboriginal communities in the south west, counting Ilkulka (which is a roadhouse, rather than a residential community). The total population of these southern communities approximates 500.

The north-eastern communities fall within a cultural bloc known as the Ngaanyatjarra Lands, comprising 12 communities with a total population of approximately 1,700 residents. This includes Kiwirrkurra, which is located in the Pilbara but identifies in Ngaanyatjarra cultural bloc and is considered the most remote community in Australia.

	Geographic distribution
■ Goldfields (7)	of remote Aboriginal
■ Ngaanyatjarra Lands (12)	communities in the Goldfields, green shaded area represents the Ngaanyatjarra Lands.

Kalgoorlie and surrounds

Community leaders from remote Aboriginal communities in the Kalgoorlie area told us they feel their communities are often forgotten in funding for service delivery. They told us there is a lack of resourcing to these communities, meaning children and families are not supported or given the same opportunities are families from other parts of the region.

In addition, the high frequency of people moving throughout the region raises service delivery issues for remote Aboriginal communities and major towns, including Kalgoorlie. Community leaders told us this movement results in poor learning outcomes for students, as schools aren't catering for transient families.

Community leaders are keen to take up opportunities with local mining companies. Some told us they have genuine and productive partnerships with the industry, though these partnerships are not necessarily translating into employment for their residents.

Kurrawang community, Goldfields.

Goldfields
Ngaanyatjarra Lands

Wanarn community, Ngaanyatjarra Lands.

The Ngaanyatjarra Lands is one of the most remote parts of Australia: the area is predominantly desert and is approximately 1,000 kilometres away from the two nearest towns of Alice Springs and Kalgoorlie. Remote travel was frequently discussed in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands. Community members told us that they often need to travel to Alice Springs, Kalgoorlie or Perth to access services, and across the region for cultural reasons, such as funerals, lore or family commitments. Many residents reflected on the challenges and cost of a 2,000 kilometre round trip by car or bush bus to either Alice Springs or Kalgoorlie, places in which they then struggle to find accommodation and transport options. Others told us about the difficulty of simply travelling from one community to another community to visit relatives.

Given the difficulty of travel, residents told us that they rely heavily on services provided in their community through the community office, health clinic, store or school, with many suggestions for how services could be improved to produce better outcomes. Community stores were a common focus, with residents raising concerns about the high cost of food and supplies, and linking the lack of fresh fruit and vegetables to community health issues. Another frequent concern was the high level of staff turnover in service providers, and the problem this turnover creates in building rapport and trust.

Connection to country and culture was described to us as central to life in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands. Leaders expressed pride in their culture and a desire to see it continue for many generations. These leaders told us about efforts to ensure

culture is embedded in local schools, the ranger program and local art centres.

Community leaders raised concerns about the lack of engagement and services for young people, particularly given the need for youth to be able to 'walk in both worlds'. Some leaders said their communities are facing a leadership gap and that unless their young people can be better engaged in education, the future of those communities is at risk. Community members told us that they value education and would like to see more children complete school but that there needs to be support for students transitioning to boarding school in Alice Springs or Perth. They also discussed a new community-driven approach to organised sport in the region as a means of engaging youth and connecting younger and older generations.

With limited employment opportunities in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands, CDP plays a significant role in community life. Participants told us that they were not happy with the activities provided, saying they were made to do meaningless tasks such as collecting rubbish that would not help them get real jobs such as ranger roles. Community leaders told us there had been an increase in domestic violence in the region since CDP was introduced, explaining that for men who had been through lore, menial tasks caused shame and consequently put pressure on domestic relationships in the family home.

Reflections

Beyond what Reform Unit members heard and is reported in this document, we observed a range of things during the consultation process.

One key observation was the consultation fatigue we experienced in communities in all regions. Community members told us they were tired of being asked for their views, only for those views to be ignored. This led some leaders to question our authenticity and authority to make change. Others simply asked "what are you going to do with this information?" Many community leaders told us meaningful and on-going engagement is key to the empowerment of their community in the decision-making process.

It was also clear to us that past government policies and statements have resulted in a mistrust of government by Aboriginal people. This wariness of government made open and honest conversations difficult for some communities, especially in regards to sensitive issues.

That said, some communities spoke openly and freely about issues relating to mental health, drugs and alcohol, cultural leadership, corrective services, fines and enforcement, and child protection. In other communities these topics were avoided, including in places where the Reform Unit was aware, through government-held data, that those issues are prevalent. In those places, further trust would need to be built through subsequent discussions before those sensitive issues could be discussed and tackled.

The communities and people to whom we spoke expect government to take their insights seriously, listen to what was said and partner with Aboriginal people to develop community-driven solutions. Empowering and supporting Aboriginal people to make change is critical in improving life outcomes.

The process of genuine, on-going engagement with Aboriginal people in regional and remote areas must continue. The next steps for reform provide an opportunity to continue these important conversations.

Next steps

The State Government will release a response to these consultation findings in 2017-18, aimed at identifying the next steps for engagement and the priority actions for the State.