

Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage response to:

“A Path Forward – Developing the Western Australian Government’s Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy”

The Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage appreciates the opportunity to review and provide comment to the Department of the Premier and Cabinet on the Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy discussion paper. The intent and content of the paper intersects several responsibilities of the Department and is generally supported.

“I don’t own the land – the land owns me” is an often expressed Aboriginal perspective and is acknowledged through the goals of ‘connection to country and heritage’ and ‘being on country, looking after country’ in the discussion paper. The paper, however, misses a fundamental tenet of empowerment for Aboriginal people – the ownership and/or direct management of land.

If the overall goal for the strategy is for “Aboriginal people, families and communities being empowered to live good lives and choose their own futures from a secure foundation”, in the context of a modern western economy, based on a Torrens land system, land ownership or direct management are critical to empowerment.

The Western Australian government has recognised the empowerment potential of land ownership through a policy to divest the Aboriginal Land Trust estate to direct Aboriginal control and efforts to transform remote Aboriginal communities to regular townships through the provision of service standards and systemic change to service delivery. Divestment is supported by the provision of appropriate land tenure and pathways to support home and land ownership.

Importantly, the concept of land ownership or exclusive control over land assets goes beyond ‘connection to country’ or ‘being on and looking after country’. To some extent, it responds to Aboriginal concerns that ‘country’ is being mined, cleared, developed and sold out of the Aboriginal estate at the cost of ‘country’ and without the return of social and economic benefits to the Aboriginal community.

The State has acknowledged this by providing land ownership and control as compensation for Native Title relinquishment, for example in the South West, Kariyarra, Ord, Esperance and Yamatji Native Title areas.

The Department of Planning, Land and Heritage’s experience is that economic opportunities inevitably rely on appropriate valid land tenure to secure investment, land that is zoned appropriately for the intended use, and land that is accessed at a reasonable cost. There needs to be a clear policy to ensure that these systems are leveraged for the benefit of Aboriginal peoples across Western Australia.

In terms of working within the framework of the existing strategy, such a commitment sits across the strategic elements of putting culture at the centre and boosting economic activity. Perhaps the economic activity element could be expanded to include a commitment to increasing Aboriginal-led economic activity and opportunity through the provision and support of direct Aboriginal ownership and/or control of land across determined Native Title areas and unallocated Crown land as a part of the Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy.

In summary, if this Strategy is to resonate with Aboriginal people and deliver substantive change, we suggest it should focus more on land ownership/control and, from an ‘empowerment through land’ perspective, which needs to be specific, measurable and brave.