EDUCATION AND HEALTH STANDING COMMITTEE

INQUIRY INTO ABORIGINAL YOUTH SUICIDES

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE
TAKEN AT BROOME
TUESDAY, 7 JUNE 2016

SESSION FOUR

Members

Dr G.G. Jacobs (Chair)
Ms R. Saffioti (Deputy Chair)
Mr R.F. Johnson
Ms J.M. Freeman
Mr M.J. Cowper
Ms J. Farrer (co-opted member)

Hearing commenced at 1.51 pm

Mr DAVID WIRKEN
Chief Executive Officer, Aarnja Ltd, examined:

The CHAIR: This is the Education and Health Standing Committee. Janine Freeman will be with us shortly. I thank you for your appearance before us today. The purpose of this hearing is to discuss our inquiry into Aboriginal youth suicide. Let me begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of this land and expressing my gratitude that we are able to meet here today. I would also like to pay our respects to the local elders, past and present. I am Graham Jacobs, the chairman; Janine will be here shortly; and this is Murray Cowper. We have other members who could not be here today—Josie Farrer, Rob Johnson and Rita Saffioti. Josie will be meeting us later in our trip of the Kimberley. This is the start of it. This committee is a committee of the Legislative Assembly, the lower house of Parliament. It is a formal procedure, but we will not make it too formal. It commands the same respect given to the proceedings of the house. Even though we are not asking you to provide evidence on oath or affirmation, it is important that you understand that any deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as a contempt of Parliament. This is a public hearing. I am sorry, I did not introduce Alison Sharpe and Catie Parsons, who are the executive secretariat trying to keep us on time—obviously, you can see that they are not very successful! Hansard will be recording the details of this inquiry. If you have a document you refer to and you would like to provide that to us, then please provide the full title for the record. This is Janine Freeman, who I mentioned.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: Sorry about that.

The CHAIR: Before we commence, I have a few procedural questions. Have you completed the "Details of Witness" form?

Mr Wirken: Yes.

The CHAIR: Did you understand the notes at the bottom?

Mr Wirken: I did.

The CHAIR: Of course you did, because you signed it! Did you receive and read the information on the witness sheet provided with the "Details of Witness" form?

Mr Wirken: Yes.

The CHAIR: David, you might want to give us a bit of an overview of your organisation of which you are the CEO.

Mr Wirken: Aarnja is a regional body for Kimberley Aboriginal people.

The CHAIR: What is Aarnja, David? What does it stand for?

Mr Wirken: Aarnja is a Bardi word—"to share", essentially. What is yours is mine and what is mine is yours, and we are here to share. It kind of goes to the nature of Aarnja and why it was originally established. The Kimberley Land Council negotiated our existence at exactly the same time as the Browse gas negotiations were happening. So they negotiated with the Western Australian state government that a body was required to lead social and community development for the Kimberley, and it should be an Aboriginal body. A lot of the pressure was on the Kimberley Land Council to provide that kind of direction and guidance, but clearly that was not their expertise—being land, environment, heritage and so on. In good faith, the state government agreed at that time that a regional body would be established, regardless of what happened out of the Browse gas negotiations and the regional benefits agreement.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: I am sure it did not go very well.

Mr Wirken: Which did not go very well and led to some delays for the regional body becoming established. It was legally established in 2012 and first registered in 2012. It took until 2014 for us to finally reach agreement with the state government that the original funding would be provided, and has since been provided. So, it is a 10-year funding commitment. I think we are three years into that funding agreement at this point.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: Sorry, did you say 10 years?

Mr Wirken: Yes, that is correct.

The CHAIR: How long have you been in the job?

Mr Wirken: I was appointed CEO in October 2014, and that is really when Aarnja's operations first commenced. Even though it was registered in 2012, it took that long for its operations, at least, to get started. I wanted to talk to the committee. I think you are no doubt quite well informed about statistics and youth suicide here in the Kimberley and you have no doubt heard lots of stories about programs that have worked and some that have not. I do not particularly want to go into that level of detail, because I am sure you are well informed in that area already. But I did want to talk about systems and structures that have traditionally disempowered Aboriginal people and some suggested systems and structures that may empower Kimberley Aboriginal people. Of course, that goes to the heart of the matter of suicide. Having a purpose and a reason to get out of bed in the morning is clearly an important aspect of being a healthy and well contributor.

As I said, Aarnja's meaning is "to share" and our role, had Browse got up and running, would have been to distribute $365 million worth of the benefits that were going to flow from it through a number of trusts.

The CHAIR: How much?

Mr Wirken: Three hundred and sixty-five million dollars. That document is still alive and well, and still a legally binding document, which is why we exist. If a proponent comes along tomorrow, that is our role. Our board has been quite deliberate in establishing Aarnja to operate pretty much on the smell of an oily rag so that that 10-year funding agreement lasts in perpetuity so that we do not have to come back looking for more money in 10 years' time, which I am really pleased to be a part of it. It is a really lovely position for a non-government, not-for-profit organisation to be in, that we have financial security for decades to come. Should Browse get up and running we will be very well situated to be able to establish those trusts and run the benefits as they were originally meant to. And, if not, if another agreement needs to be negotiated, we think that is a great place to start, because it was a landmark agreement, there is no doubt about that. Aarnja, as an organisation, has directors and membership from across the whole Kimberley. We share membership with other regional organisations like the Kimberley Land Council and KALACC—the law and culture centre—and so on. We, in fact, share things like our annual general meeting. We hold those together because we have such a crossover of membership. I am not sure —

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: You hold it with KALACC, do you?

Mr Wirken: Yes, and the Kimberley Land Council and Kimberley Language Resource Centre, and from time to time with the Kimberley regional economic development organisation—they also join the festival, as it has become.

The CHAIR: David, this is just ignorance probably on my part: why was it thought that Aarnja should be formed? Why could not the Kimberley Land Council be that umbrella organisation? Was there a reason, and what is that?

Mr Wirken: I think it was just that the social and community development side of it needed a particular focus, and native title, heritage, culture, land protection and so on is something that takes up Kimberley Land Council's full-time energy. They saw themselves as being spread too thin

to take on this additional role, so they wanted a particular focus on the community development side of things.

In designing the organisation, the members really wanted a Kimberley-wide organisation. It was agreed with the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre that there are five cultural blocks across the Kimberley and our membership should be based on those five cultural blocks, and each of those five cultural blocks nominate and elect two directors. So we have 10 Aboriginal directors from across the Kimberley, who are voted in kind of like a 50 per cent Senate half-time changeover. We lose half of our directors each year and half are new or re-elected. In addition to the 10 Aboriginal directors, we have two independent directors who are selected outside of this process for their particular skills in finance or legal or corporate governance—those kinds of things.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: Who are your two, have you got that there?

[2.00 pm]

Mr Wirken: I do not have the independent directors on there, but our longest standing independent director is Malcolm Goff. He is an ex–Western Australian senior public servant, retired. The second person, who was just been appointed, is Erika Blades, who is a senior manager within the Kimberley Land Council and has extensive Kimberley corporate expertise. She is yet to attend her first meeting but has just been appointed. Our chairperson is Mr Ian Trust, you will know from the East Kimberley, from Wunan. He is obviously a staunch advocate for welfare reform and social change over many, many years so we are privileged to have him as our chairperson. Our deputy chairperson is Mary O'Reeri from the Dampier Peninsula, who you may also know from her previous work on suicide prevention and the Hard Yarn conferences. We have a very strong board and very strong leadership and it is a terrific organisation to work for.

Very recently we reached agreement with the commonwealth government to provide funding to Aarnja to be what is known as a backbone organisation for empowered communities. "Empowered communities" is something that has been worked on probably over many, many years but formally over the last two and a half years. It is an Aboriginal-led policy proposal to commonwealth and state governments from across the country. There are eight regions involved across the whole country, with two in the Kimberley—that is East and West Kimberley. We are really pleased that we have the level of resourcing that we have for both the East and the West Kimberley. I think we see that as a huge advantage, especially given our geography and the vast distances that we have to travel.

The CHAIR: How much support is that financially?

Mr Wirken: It is just over $2 million in about three years. The funding is primarily to enable us to be a facilitator, a professional secretariat and administrative service. Aarnja is not positioned, nor does it want to be positioned, to become a service provider to clients per se. We see that there are enough service providers in the Kimberley. Our role is very much as an interface between Aboriginal organisations and between those Aboriginal organisations, communities and government and corporates. Our experience has been that government really struggle to engage well with Aboriginal people and Aboriginal people really struggle to engage well with government. Having an interface role in which we can speak both Aboriginal English and bureaucratese is a helpful service that our organisations really appreciate and like having us there for. Also, because we are not competing for service provider funding, we are not seen as having a conflict of interest when we are in there negotiating on behalf of Aboriginal organisations. Clearly, we are a fairly new organisation—operationally, only 18 months old—but we stand on the shoulders of the giants who have gone before us. There are some incredibly capable existing leaders in the Kimberley who we work very, very closely with, and obviously leading organisations. They are the ones who provide us with the guidance about what we do, what the strategy is moving forward and what the key priorities are that we put forward to government and corporate Australia. We do that with support from corporate Australia. We have a secondment program through an organisation called Jawun.

Jawun provide us with expertise from corporates as diverse as KPMG, banks, the Australian Public Service, even the Western Australian public service, who come and do short-term stints within our organisation and bring specialist skills. They contributed significantly to the "Empowered Communities: Empowered Peoples—Design Report", as did many Aboriginal organisations who received no money to do that. They guided the development of this, but really this policy, based on the work that we have done, is a progression of the last 30 years' worth of work and a consistent call for Aboriginal people to have a genuine say in how policy is developed. What is proposed in there is a structural way to do that. What we are really encouraged by is not just the funding that we have received from the commonwealth, it is the signal from the commonwealth that they are prepared to do business in a different way—the acknowledgement that the top–down policy has not worked. I am really encouraged by the conversations that I have had with senior bureaucrats in the commonwealth to say this is not a program, it is not an initiative; this is a new way of doing business. That is the signal. The reality is going to be much harder. It is not going to be easy. I think we are all aware of just how hard that is going to be. To structurally put more Aboriginal people in the driver's seat is really the main aim of what we are trying to work towards.

The fundamental premise of this is the powerful policy setting and the allocation of resources—probably 97 per cent of it sits in Perth and Canberra, as far as the Kimberley is concerned, and about three per cent gets tinkered with at the edges once it hits the ground up here. On the flipside of that, about 97 per cent of the knowledge about what works and what does not work probably sits here in the Kimberley, and maybe three per cent sits in Perth or Canberra. I say that as a 15-year career bureaucrat in the commonwealth previously to this role.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: Here or in —

Mr Wirken: In Canberra, as all good Australian public servants do eventually! I have worked all over the country, Canberra mostly.

Mr M.J. COWPER: I spent a week there one day!

Mr Wirken: It is a cold place, especially at this time of the year.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: I do not think he got it—he spent a week there in one day!

Mr Wirken: Yes, I got it. It is a long day.

The kinds of things that we have reached agreement with the commonwealth on what it is we are going to do in the next three years as this backbone organisation, apart from being the professional kind of secretariat, bring Aboriginal leaders together and provide them with that professional facilitation and secretariat service, is to guide the vision and strategy to support aligned activities, establish shared measurement practices, build community consensus and commitment and prioritise funding. The latter probably comes later because a lot of the commonwealth's funding, like the state's funding, is committed for a period of time so there is not a lot of flexibility within the current environment but it is something that we want to work towards. To get there, we need to build trust both ways and that is not going to be taken for granted. That is something that we are going to have to chip away at bit by bit.

The three main principles of empowered communities revolve around a kind of funnel and sieve test. If there is an idea, a policy, a program or a service that is being designed, does it meet three key criteria; that is, does it meet the empowerment principle, the development principle and the productivity principle? So, is it empowering Aboriginal people or is it taking responsibility away from Aboriginal people? That is a question that we would ask. Is it developing Aboriginal people and communities or is it developing someone else? And is it a productive use of money? Is there a better and more efficient way? Is there some way we can pool resources with another policy program service that is working? We see those as being really fundamental. We often talk the same language as government but we do not often mean exactly the same thing when we are talking about it. When we talk about empowerment, government says, "We want to empower you to

provide us with advice and then we will make a decision about where the policy, program or resource is allocated." When we talk about empowerment from an Aboriginal perspective, it is: you are empowered to make decisions about where the resources are allocated.

[2.10 pm]

Another key principle of the Empowered Communities' proposal is this term called "subsidiarity", which is, I think, a Catholic term actually. But it is basically pushing the decisions down to where the people who are impacted most have the power to make the decisions as much as possible. So it is a flat structure rather than a top-down structure.

It took us a little over a year to finalise this report. It has taken us almost two and half years to get to the point where we have got a commitment from the commonwealth. Throughout that period, we have been tasked with various things, but none kept me awake more than the one which was: what are you going to focus on first? This was something we talked to our membership and we talked to the community around the Kimberley to say, "If we were going to pick a priority, what's the first thing that we would focus on?" Of course, all sorts of thing come out of that. But my main concern was if we picked a traditional silo of government like education or health or economic development, then 70 per cent of our stakeholders would say we have got nothing to do with Empowered Communities, drop it and walk away. But when we really went through all of our consultations and negotiations about "What is the most important thing to you here and now? What would you focus on first?", the most consistent thing that came up time and again was children and young people. These are the most important things in our lives at the moment. We are worried about our kids. Our kids are having kids; they are getting younger and younger. Our kids are not being afforded the education opportunities that we would like them to be. They are not participating in those education opportunities when they are presented. What do they do even when they do get a good education? What are their opportunities beyond education for employment? We are worried about our children's safety. We are worried that our parents have not got the skills to be able to raise our kids well. We are worried about their health and wellbeing and so on. This was a really, really common theme. When we reflected on that, nobody could walk away from children and young people as being something they had nothing to do with. Everybody has got something to do with children and young people. But it is still quite a high-level priority area. So what; what are we going to focus on?

The CHAIR: Where do we start, still?

Mr Wirken: Yes, that is right. Again, we went out and tested it. Are children and young people the right thing? We tested it at that group AGM. We tested it at a really key forum that we facilitate called Kimberley Futures, where all the existing leadership come together in the Kimberley from time to time. Are children and young people the right priority; and, if so, so what; what are we going to do? We got a resounding yes, that is absolutely our priority; that is what we should be focusing on—kids and young people. The advice we received then was a little bit cryptic—that we should do what government does first last and do what government does last first. When we unpacked that a bit, that meant instead of focusing on the dysfunction and the crisis and the sick people, let us try to stop people falling off the cliff in the first place. The vast majority of resourcing goes into crisis intervention; very little goes into prevention. The vast majority of health funding goes to sick people. You cannot get nutritional support in the Kimberley until you have a formal diagnosis of diabetes, for example. That is the kind of "treat people once they are sick" thing that made our membership say, "Don't go there. You need to focus on stopping people falling off the cliff rather than the ambulance at the bottom." That is okay.

Then the next kind of unpacking of that was rather than focusing on the dysfunction, focus on success—where are the successes? When we look at children and young people and you look across the Kimberley, there are tremendously capable, qualified young people doing amazing things. They are well educated. They are hard working. They are extending their education. If they have got kids, they are well looked after and they are in school. They are paying private rent. In short,

they have no more or less government intervention in their lives than you or I do. Why do we not ask them how to get more of them? We asked those young people to put up their hands and call themselves leaders and form a steering committee to advise us on how we develop more young people like them. To be honest, it was not that hard to find a few people who were really prepared to say, "Yes, I'd love to tell you all about how I got here and how we can support other people." We have a young leaders steering committee called the Kimberley Aboriginal Young Leaders Steering Committee who advise us, and they have been far more strategic than I would have given them credit for. I thought we were going to develop a leadership program. No; they want a leadership centre and annual youth forums and all kinds of fantastic things to encourage more young leaders. My challenge for them from the beginning was: no matter what you develop, this is not about a program where we run people through and let them go at the end. If people graduate through a leadership program, for example, they have got to have something to lead at the end of that. What is it going to be? As I have said, they have been very strategic about that and said, "That's going to be different for different people", but we need to make sure we have got a graduate program that looks after those young people once they have been through. We actually had a number of our young leaders committee attend a recent New Zealand convention on suicide.

The CHAIR: We were there.

Mr Wirken: You were there so you would have seen Dwes and Tonii.

The CHAIR: Absolutely.

Mr Wirken: They are fantastic, inspirational young people who have been advising us for about the last 12 months and are really keenly involved in a very ongoing way.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Dwes was a bit concerned; he is 30 so he wanted to know if he qualifies or not!

Mr Wirken: In Aboriginal terms, he is still a young man! We are quite comfortable Dwes is well and truly in the box seat to be guiding us, but we are always really keen for people like Dwes to identify who is the next person. Really, what they come up with is not a youth plan or a youth strategy; they have called it fostering generational change. As soon as you call something a youth strategy, you automatically exclude a whole bunch of the existing leadership, and we do not want any of them to walk away from this, and the young people do not want any of them to walk away from it. They want the existing leadership to be part of this and to be guiding young people to help them understand some of the common pitfalls and not make them if they can possible avoid them. We have engaged with CEOs and chairs and the people you would traditionally see as being the existing leadership in the Kimberley and said, "How are you going to get engaged in this? Who have you got as a shadow behind you? Who are you grooming as the next leader or the next group of leaders? If we are successful in promoting an Aboriginal young leaders program, what commitment will you make to those graduates who are engaged with you and your organisation or your family?" That was one area that we focused on and that was clearly a very attractive area and a really nice area to work in, given the topic that you guys are inquiring into.

The next area that we got as a massive priority was the over-representation of Aboriginal children in care in this state. Like I said, I do not want to bore you to death with stats —

The CHAIR: It is 53 per cent, is it not?

Mr Wirken: In the state; that is correct. In the East Kimberley, it is 100 per cent and in the West Kimberley it is 99 per cent Aboriginal kids who are in state care—a ward of the state. I think the last count was 267 kids in the West Kimberley, so 99 per cent of those are Aboriginal kids. It is an extraordinary number and it is something that shocks anybody once they understand it, not the least of which of course are Aboriginal families. Again, how do we take a strength-based approach to that really tough issue? We went out to our Aboriginal membership and said, "How do we take a strength-based approach to this?" and they said that what is not recognised in this system is the

Aboriginal family structure. Mum, dad and two kids is not it. We have big and broad and deep families in the Kimberley and within every family there are those natural carers who bring real strength to that family and, more often than not, those carers are completely outside of the child protection system and they do so deliberately because they do not want the extra scrutiny of the department in the house checking the conditions of their kitchen or whatever happens. Some of that is myth, too, but it has been perpetuated over many years.

So how do we tackle this giant system which has statutory obligations? We do not walk away from that. The state has an obligation; we expect, as voting citizens, that the state looks after kids that are not being looked after. How do we work within that statutory system to ensure that the Aboriginal family is well supported to be able to care for their kids and that parents receive the skills that they need, but we build on that traditional strength of that big, broad, deep family? Again, we formed a steering committee of people who are passionate about this and who have expertise. Aarnja is not a social work organisation; we do not have the depth of policy knowledge around child protection and we do not claim to. There are many more experts out there who are much better equipped than we are; we just bring them together and they formulate the advice and we document that and we put it back to government.

[2.20 pm]

I am very pleased to say that our approaches to particularly the Department for Child Protection and Family Support have been very well received. The previous minister, Minister Morton, received our original report, which was the "Kimberley Aboriginal Children in Care: Gaps Report". It was a review of the child protection legislation policy and implementation from an Aboriginal lens. It was not overly critical; it was fairly constructive in any criticisms that it did make. As I said, that report was very well received. As I understand it, the department has already started to respond to many of the things that were documented in that report. The director general, Emma White, has been one of our greatest supporters and attended recently, about five or six weeks ago, a pretty reasonable sized forum held here in Broome with about 70 Aboriginal people from across the Kimberley—well represented by the reform unit as well as that department—to talk about this really tough issue and to put Aboriginal people in the box seat about how to design a better system and how to respond to that. They are kind of our two areas—the leadership and the child protection areas. They are what we call our first priorities. They are really about proving the model or proofing it up, trying to get the empowered communities model actually working. That is not our long-term agenda, though; that is demonstrating we can add value and do it well. The long-term agenda is a development agenda. That is a Kimberley Aboriginal strategic plan, if you like. The last one was developed in 1998 and it was called the "Crocodile Hole Report".

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: Crocodile Hole?

Mr Wirken: Yes; it was held at Crocodile Hole. That has been, for Aboriginal people—at least the existing leadership—a really strong guiding document for the last almost 20 years. Most of those existing leaders who were part of that report and who have been guided by that report, if not all of them, agree that it is probably time for a new one.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Where is Crocodile Hole?

Mr Wirken: In the East Kimberley—north east, not far from Warmun. It is not a community.

Mr M.J. COWPER: No, no; it is a location.

Mr Wirken: Yes, it is a location. I would have to find it on a map—somewhere up there.

To be frank, one of my first jobs when I came to the Kimberley two and a half years ago was to review all of the previous attempts to restructure, having Aboriginal people involved in policy development. The "Crocodile Hole Report" has still got that much currency that I was literally able to lift paragraphs out of it and put it into this.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: It was part of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander —

Mr Wirken: ATSIC.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: Yes. It was from that process, was it, that it came out?

Mr Wirken: Kind of, yes. It was driven by the Kimberley Land Council in response to some of the challenges that were facing ATSIC at the time.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: Is it available now?

The CHAIR: How old is it?

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: It is 1991.

Mr Wirken: It is 1998.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: It says here 1991.

Mr Wirken: Is it? I could be wrong. I am not deliberately misleading you if I am! It is a terrific report and it still does have a lot of currency, but there is a lot that has changed in that time, and native title is one of the biggest things that has changed in that time. Certainly, native title was in its infancy back then, but that has had a significant change in the Aboriginal landscape of the Kimberley in that time. For all its good, it has also done quite a lot of damage in blowing apart families and communities and so on in identifying where you come from. It is probably time that we had the opportunity for the Kimberley to come back together again around a plan similar to Crocodile Hole. We will look to that over the next 12 months, pulling that together and measuring the appetite for that, but so far the appetite seems to be there. That long-term holistic development agenda will be much more inclusive of really all the social determinants of wellbeing—not just children and young people, but also income, education, employment, early childhood, food security, housing, and the opportunities with the Developing the North white paper. There is a whole range of things that really need to be incorporated into that, but it has got to be an Aboriginal plan. That is the bit, I think, that Aboriginal people will be able to put forward that they can kind of cling to, and when policy announcements are made, this time rather than responding to the policy announcement, asking the policy designers to demonstrate how that aligns with the Kimberley plan, whatever that looks like. I have kind of raced through a fairly broad topic and I am really happy to take questions.

The CHAIR: David, maybe you could just expand on some of those points and their direct relevance to Aboriginal youth suicide.

Mr Wirken: Sure. I think youth suicide and any one of the highly documented, well understood dysfunctions of society in the Kimberley—alcohol abuse, family breakdown and domestic violence—are all interrelated to people who feel quite disempowered. Welfare is absolutely entrenched. It is an end rather than a means. Having Aboriginal people design the solutions is far more effective than having others come in and say, “We’ve got a solution for you.” But, again, that struggle of government engaging well with Aboriginal people and Aboriginal people struggling to engage with government, there needs to be a process that both can build trust over time and work together on that. That then allows people to have hope for their community. That allows people to become leaders in their community. We have worked really hard with a group of existing leaders, who I would acknowledge are absolutely existing leaders in the Kimberley, who feel really uncomfortable with the term “leader”. They feel shamed by that. It is their own mob who bring them down more often than not and criticise them for calling themselves a leader. We really need to promote those people as leaders and empower them to be able to make good decisions. The challenge I think government has is: how do you know you are dealing with the right people? In fact, I get asked that question a lot: how do you know you are dealing with the right people? I do not, but Aboriginal people do, and if we have the right people in the room and we have ways and means of testing whether they are the right people—we have certainly documented a lot of processes about how to get the right people in the room and to get their commitment to certain

principles and practices—that goes a long way to making sure that we are not just listening to the squeaky wheel. It is not just a background check that tells us whether we are dealing with the right people or not; it is a "blackground" check. Aboriginal people do that really well. They know who the genuine leaders are and who are not.

Mr M.J. COWPER: And they have got to be from country.

Mr Wirken: Yes.

Mr M.J. COWPER: What you say is absolutely right; I have experienced it myself. They will find out very quickly. The problem is there are so many competing competencies out there.

Mr Wirken: It is true. It is not easy. There are vested interests, too, in maintaining the status quo, as much as there are vested interests in changing the status quo. I think it is about giving people hope and it is about empowering Aboriginal people to come up with the solutions rather than designing them for them. That then leads to a reason to get out of bed in the morning. The best suicide prevention program you can give a young person is a reason to get out of bed in the morning. That may well be a job. That is not a man in white coat; that is different. It is a very different way of looking at it. Aboriginal people will be the ones who can—I am not going to tell you what the design is because I do not know and that is going to vary from place to place.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: But we are told by the people from the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Cultural Centre, whom you have quite a lot to do with, that something like the Yiriman project is one of those things that can do that because it empowers people to get their cultural heart back as such.

Mr Wirken: Yes.

[2.30 pm]

Mr M.J. COWPER: But that is also true of any human being, inasmuch as that if you have a reason to get out of bed in the morning, whether it be you are going fishing or you are going to work in a job that you really like, or playing sport, even, or going to the arts, whatever it might be, whatever it is —

Mr Wirken: To be needed is important, and to have a proud Aboriginal identity is part of that. I would argue that Yiriman is one of those locally grown products, which is designed in the Fitzroy Valley for the Fitzroy Valley. That is why it works. That is one of those local solutions that I would suggest will grow out of any local regional area if people are enabled to develop and design their solutions. So, absolutely, Yiriman has our 100 per cent support. It is fairly focused on the Fitzroy Valley, though. I think other programs can learn from it, but it is not a cookie-cutter approach. You cannot pick up Yiriman and plonk it into the peninsula or plonk it into Halls Creek, Warmun or Wyndham. It is a model that may work and that does work in the Fitzroy Valley. What we are more interested in is the process that they went through to design that, because that is the bit that empowers people. They obviously have engaged with local cultural leaders, strong family leaders and people who understand the Yiriman land and the Yiriman story. It is not just peculiar to that area; it is specific to that area. But the process that they went through to engage those leaders to be part of the design of that program and then part of the delivery of that program is something I think we could replicate. It may come out with a similar program to Yiriman, but it may be quite different, too.

Mr M.J. COWPER: How do you get ownership to such a project in another location?

Mr Wirken: Well, that is right—engage in a design process that allows them to do that. It would be very different in Broome to what it is in Fitzroy Crossing, and that is going to be the case right across the Kimberley. So the kids in care stuff that we have been working on has kind of got state implications. In some cases it has got national implications. It certainly has got regional implications. But, you know, drilling down from that, all of it is for naught unless Aboriginal people

are enabled to make a positive decision about their lives. While we have been sprouting on about this work, a few leaders from Beagle Bay, Mary O'Reeri being one of them, put up her hand and said, "Do you know what? We like what you're talking about. We like the strength-based approach. Beagle Bay has had some tough times. We are dealing with it, and we are still dealing with it. We are certainly not out the other side. But we would like you to come and help us design our program." So we have gone into Beagle Bay and said, "All right, we're here. We don't have a solution for you. It's yours. We want to work with you. All we want out of it is to be able to document the process. You design your program for your community." That has been really challenging for them, because this is a group of people who generally are disempowered.

Mr M.J. COWPER: So what you are actually doing is you are an interpreter of the solution, trying to put it into context so that it can be understood by whitefellas?

Mr Wirken: That is right, exactly, and to help them to administer that in a way that does reduce the risk for government and others that do invest in it, yes.

The CHAIR: David, what if you get there and they do not have any ideas and they do not know how?

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: Go back to Beagle Bay. Where are you on that process at the moment with Beagle Bay?

Mr Wirken: We are very much in the kind of early to mid-design phase. We have been working with them for probably eight or nine months now. We have got a range of service providers who are also engaged in that process. The ones embedded in Beagle Bay are far and away the most invested in it. What we are most concerned about, or most concerned for, is that the visiting services that come and go are linked into this—they have a guide.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: When we had Rob McPhee here this morning from the Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Services, he was talking about something—no, that was the one after. I had the two confused. Who are the other organisations that you are working with?

Mr Wirken: One of the key organisations is Kullarri Regional Communities Incorporated—KRCI. They are the CDP, or the employment services provider. They have a really fundamental role because they are the leaver which other organisations do not necessarily have. So they have an in to those families who probably need support more than most, because they are the ones on long-term unemployment benefits. We have managed to negotiate through them, with the commonwealth, that the mandated activities under CDP—community development program—go beyond just work readiness; they are life skills stuff as well. The activities that people are mandated to undertake may be nutrition and cooking, financial management, drug and alcohol, mental health, and first aid. Taking the kids to school may be one of those activities that is a credit towards your participation. Of course, because they mandate those activities, they start to schedule particularly those visiting service programs. They tick-tack with the Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Service that runs the Kimberley empowerment, healing and leadership program, which is a fantastic program, run over a period of time. But often those visiting services do not have the links into the families who need it most, and, more often than not, they are dealing with the most functional families in the community. So, through CDP we have a supply and demand that can be met—that can be linked, I should say—the supply being the service provider, the external visiting services, and the demand being the participants who need it most are linked into that. I guess what we are working through at the moment is a process with that local leadership group to say, "You're in the driver's seat here. We've got all sorts of suggestions about how this can work, and we'll make those suggestions, but ultimately you need to make the decisions." It is things like, "If we're going to have a more intensive family support-type focus in Beagle Bay, how do you identify the families who need it most?", and that little leadership group that we have got functioning quite well in Beagle Bay will say, "We know who they are!" "Of course you know who they are, but how are you going to select them?" "Well, we just know who they are, so we'll just select them." "But hang on a minute, what

about"— these are the questions that I can ask—"if I have a fight with you and you don't like me anymore, am I all of a sudden one of those dysfunctional families who need all that extra support? Are you going to send all them into me? Is that how it works here sometimes?" "Well, yes, maybe." "Okay, so how do you protect yourself about selecting those families?" And KRCI—the Kullarri Regional Communities—will say, "Well, part of our activities is we are setting up a night patrol, and that night patrol will record information about who we pick up, where we drop them off, where the parties are, who we had to ask to keep it down, those kids who are found five out of every seven nights running the streets. We will have data to be able to back that up." School attendance also provides extra information. So, it is not just about a leader in a community picking the families who get targeted; it is actually based on a much more evidence-based decision. They are working through some of those really tricky issues that I think only they can work through. You know, the same could be said with tools like income management or the cashless debit cards and things like that. One size fits all is not generally our best approach.

Mr M.J. COWPER: One thing I have not heard since we started this morning is working in and around a group of people who may be among some of the highest potential vulnerable people, and that is those who have been in the prison system. What type of work do you do there? Is any work being done while they are like a captive audience, so to speak, to get them back in some sort of capacity to be able to fit back into society?

Mr Wirken: It is not an area that we have gone into in any great depths at this point. We have certainly had a lot of engagement with justice as part of the state reforms. They have been quite vocal and given us some good suggestions about what is working and what is not working. We have not entered the prisons, apart from the Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Service that runs that KEHL program—the Kimberley empowerment, health and leadership program—they have done that in prisons. That is working very, very well. Out at Derby they ran it recently and it was tremendously successful. That is about life skills and it is kind of understanding yourself, which unless you are explicitly taught, you may not fully be aware of, so it is teaching some really good basic life skills.

Mr M.J. COWPER: I actually opened that prison many years ago. One of the most disturbing things for me was, all those years coming back, going into some of those sections which are distinct to the country from which they originate. I was actually dealing with the sons and grandsons of people that I knew 20 or 30 years ago who I had to deal with, and nothing has changed. There are generations revolving through that same system. I suspect that they are still part of the landscape and well may be slipping through the cracks a bit.

[2.40 pm]

Mr Wirken: Yes; there is no doubt about it.

Mr M.J. COWPER: I am sure the programs are there, run by the Department of Corrective Services, but unless they are relevant to what is happening on the outside, they are going to be nothing once they step out.

Mr Wirken: As I said, it is not really an area that we have gone into any depth with. The main reason for that is we are mostly interested in stopping people from getting into prison. But I take your point. There is obviously a large part of our population in the Kimberly who go through the prison system, and to see that intergenerationally is a fact. It is not a rumour or a myth. We understand that. Ultimately, we would want to stop people getting into prison, but if we can stop recidivism —

Mr M.J. COWPER: One of the things we are looking at as far as this committee is what has been duplicated and what has not, and what is working and what is not. Of course, a lot of money has been thrown at these various things. As you might know, to put someone in prison these days costs about $100 000 a year, or $300 000 a year for a juvenile. You would think that potentially if you

could somehow circumvent that system, there is a whole bunch of money there that could otherwise be better utilised.

Mr Wirken: Yes.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: The Beagle Bay one will take about—did you say you were eight months in?

Mr Wirken: Yes.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: Do you put any time lines on that or do you just let it take the time it takes?

Mr Wirken: I guess it takes the time that it takes. Obviously, the program funding is there. So we have got to make hay while the sun is shining. KRCI had a reasonable funding agreement through the commonwealth over and above their CDEP funding to do some additional work. There is a fairly intensive period in there into July, which is when the implementation starts, and that is a real co-design process between the service provider and the community about how that is going to look. This is new territory for both, really, and working with the service providers, who are saying they need some direction from the community, and the community is saying they need to know some direction from the service provider. It is a matter of trying to bring them together and understand that they both need direction from each other. Clearly, there are parameters within the service provision about what can and cannot be done, and from a community perspective there are acceptable and unacceptable parts of that.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: Who does that work with them? Are you doing it or do you get a consultant in?

Mr Wirken: It is variously done by Aarnja and those external Jawun secondees that I talked about—the corporate support. We have got two Jawun secondees based in Aarnja at the moment who are travelling up and back to Beagle Bay each week and continuing with that co-design work, and they work here in Broome with KRCI as well, so they are doing the pre-work here and the post-work up there, and bringing them together.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: What is their background? What gives them the capacity to empower the community in such a manner?

Mr Wirken: One is a federal bureaucrat with oversees aid experience, so a community development focus, and the other is a lawyer from Allens law firm in Melbourne, and she has a massive amount of merger and acquisitions experience, which you would not think was directly applicable, except it is. When you look at the landscape of the Kimberly around service provision, there are too many service providers. There are too many organisations. If you were to un-bake that cake and re-bake it, you would do it differently. You would design it differently. Some of that has grown organically—organisations have grown up big, and others are kind of just struggling along.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: But that was the question that Graham asked you at the beginning—why Aarnja, and why not the KLC, and you said because the KLC did not feel as though it was going to work. You have said yourself that you are not a service providing agency. But you are still another organisation in the context of —

Mr Wirken: Absolutely.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: The only thing, I suppose, is that you say you basically have the same AGM and you basically have the same leadership, so really you are sister organisations.

Mr Wirken: Yes, that is a nice way of putting it, and an accurate way of putting it. We are sister organisations; no doubt about that. We are independent of each other, and we are not corporately aligned, other than that our foundation comes from the Kimberly Land Council, so there is really a strong alliance between us both. But the point, I guess, for us is that if we are looking at services and service gaps, it is not for us to fill it. So we have to be really careful about where we do step in and where we do not, because wherever we step in, there are holes everywhere, and the temptation

is to go and plug the gap, and we cannot do that; that is not our job. Aarnja's job, really, is to go into the space where people feel most uncomfortable and where the conflict exists and stick our head in there and go, "It's time you guys got yourselves together and get organised." Part of the reason why KLC formally handed over the responsibility for empowered communities to Aarnja is because they are after service provider funding, and we are not. They want to run programs. They want to run initiatives and projects and so on. We are not interested in that. We are interested in promoting them to do that. But we do absolutely get in the middle, and we make no apology for that. That is part of our interest —

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: Just back to Beagle Bay and the two people, are they paid through Aarnja or are they doing that pro bono?

Mr Wirken: Yes, pro bono, as part of their corporate social good, through Jawun. It is a formal process.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: So that works quite well, and you are getting these two people to go up and work with the community so the community designs what it wants to deliver in terms of this funding to—what is the organisation?

Mr Wirken: KRCI.

The CHAIR: What does that stand for?

Mr Wirken: Kullarri Regional Communities Incorporated.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: But they get Centrelink funding basically to run —

Mr Wirken: Prime Minister and Cabinet funding, yes, so it is through PM&C, to run it. They also get additional funding. They get the CDP, which is a fairly traditional program in some ways.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: I did not think the CDEP existed anymore.

Mr Wirken: It is still there.

The CHAIR: It is back again?

Mr Wirken: Yes. The RJCP—the remote jobs and communities program—finishes on 30 June. CDP—it was CDEP and it is now CDP—they have lost the "E", which was "employment", by the way —

The CHAIR: That is right. So we are going into the life skills area, are we, instead of employment?

Mr Wirken: Well, community development, which we welcome, because a focus solely on jobs in an area where there is not an economic base is ludicrous, because the five organisations in town get swamped with people asking for jobs so that they can fill out their form and send it in to Centrelink. That is just not appropriate in this environment in some of these remote communities. It is crazy.

The CHAIR: With the new program, will there be difficulties in delineating the criteria? Could it be a little bit fluffy, like —

Mr Wirken: Yes, absolutely. Part of those challenges were with the old CDEP. I think refining that this time around will be an important aspect: what is an activity for you as an individual and how do we retain some flexibility while also obviously giving some guidelines so that that work is not all just fluff.

The CHAIR: Has that work been done in delineating those criteria?

Mr Wirken: It is being done, I would say. I am not sure how far that has advanced at this point.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: One of the people said today that part of the issue around wellbeing and therefore things that lead to suicide is meaningful daily activities and the fact that there was a loss of those meaningful daily activities with the withdrawal of the CDEP. Is that the sort of thing that this Beagle Bay model is looking at?

Mr Wirken: Yes, that is right. Meaningful daily activity is absolutely important, and looking for jobs where there are few, or none, is not a meaningful activity. Like I said, we welcome the program changes, because we think that those meaningful opportunities can be built into that. I guess some of the traps we want to avoid are some of the mistakes that were made by the previous program, which was plugging holes that should have been full-time jobs and paying subsidised wages. That was abuse by different jurisdictions. Jobs that should have been full-time jobs were CDEP participants. That is not what we want out of the program. If there is a job there, it should be a job. So we are trying to avoid that risk.

The CHAIR: David, Thank you. We have run out of time.

Mr Wirken: Pleasure.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: David, is that our copy or is that your copy?

Mr Wirken: It is actually my copy. The copies are few and far between but it is available online.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for appearing before us today and giving us your time and insight. A transcript of this hearing will be forwarded to you for the correction of minor errors. Any such corrections must be made and the transcript returned within 10 days from the date of the letter attached to the transcript. If the transcript is not returned within this period, it will be deemed to be correct. New material cannot be added via these corrections and the sense of your evidence cannot be altered, but should you wish to provide any additional information or elaborate on particular points, please include a supplementary submission for the committee's consideration. Thank you very much again for your time and for giving us an insight into these very important issues.

Hearing concluded at 2.49 pm