Dear Commissioner

RE: Submission to the Inquiry into service delivery in remote and discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Please accept Burke Shire Council’s submission into the Inquiry as detailed in the attached pages. We greatly appreciate having the opportunity to speak with you on Friday 26 May 2017 via a teleconference at which Doomadgee Aboriginal Shire was also represented. We further acknowledge and appreciate your mindfulness in allowing an extension to the submission timeframe.

Burke’s key desired outcomes as detailed in the attached submission are as follows:

- **TRANSPORT:** Reduce cost of transport to Gulf communities to increase parity for rural remote locations (eg: reduce cost of airfares and/or provide new services such as bus or ferry)
- **ROAD ACCESS:** Improve road access into Doomadgee to reduce community isolation, and reduce the annual cost to government of resupply during flood events
- **FUNDING:** Provide opportunities to rural remote non-discrete ATSI communities to receive a share of ATSI funding, including – but not limited to – recent QLD Budget announcements relating to social/affordable housing and water, waste-water and solid waste infrastructure
- **COLLABORATION:** Provide incentives that encourage collaboration between discrete ATSI communities and their local government neighbours
- **GOVERNANCE:** Reward communities that demonstrate good governance by reducing the red tape that impedes access to funding

I would also like to reiterate the following points made by Lothar Siebert, CEO of Doomadgee Aboriginal Shire Council, at the teleconference on 26 May as follows:

- **YOUTH** – suicide and criminal activity are disproportionate amongst youth in Doomadgee. Lothar indicated that there is ‘nothing for them to do’ – with no facilities or effective programs; and that the solution is on-country education programs that have...
previously been proposed but not supported or funded. Lother expressed his concern that funding is spent on a plethora of duplicated externally provided services, rather than capacity building and employment opportunities within the local Indigenous community.

- CONSULTATION – Lothar indicated that state and federal government fails to consult with ATSI communities regarding projects or infrastructure in the region. He suggested that consultation be mandated and gave the example of mobilisation of heavy machinery into a remote area – if communities are aware, the machinery may be able to be used for a variety of projects to achieve significant cost savings through a single mobilisation.

Should you have any queries regarding this matter please contact Sharon Daishe, CEO on the contact details provided.

Yours sincerely

Ernie Camp
Mayor

Enc.

cc: Lothar Siebert, CEO, Doomadgee Aboriginal Shire Council
Introduction

About Burke Shire

Burke Shire is a vast rural remote local government spanning over 40,000 square kilometres in the Gulf of Carpentaria adjacent to the Northern Territory border. Our population base of around 500 is predominantly Indigenous however we are not identified as an Aboriginal Shire.

Council is responsible for an extensive and mostly unsealed local road network including ‘highway one’ – the Savannah Way – which traverses Northern Australia from Cairns to Broome. This road is also the primary access road into Doomadgee – an Aboriginal Shire with a population 3 or more times that of Burke, in an area of <2,000 square kilometres. Both Doomadgee and Burke are ranked within the first decile (lowest) of indices in Australia for education and occupation, and economic resources. Despite its relevant demographic, Burke does not receive the financial and other support afforded to discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Burke Shire Council is heavily grant-dependent (see chart below), with limited ability to fund operations from rate revenue. In 2016 Council suffered a $1.4m per annum loss in rate revenue when the MMG Century Zinc Mine ceased production. Prolonged drought and the closure of this mine have combined to exacerbate regional economic downturn affecting both the local government and our local and regional businesses.

Despite its challenges Burke Shire Council has high aspirations for the economic viability and regional liveability of its communities. With contributions secured from various funding programs Burke will save $100,000 per annum by transitioning to solar power at the Gregory water treatment plant. Similarly, Burke has secured over $2m in funding to upgrade the boat ramp at the Burketown Wharf to a barge capable facility that will provide enabling infrastructure for economic development. These projects however require a level of matching funds that erode Council’s vulnerable cash reserves. Wherever possible, Council seeks to protect its financial sustainability by minimising matching contribution.
Submission

Closing the gap – transport and isolation

ISSUE – Cost of transport

Gulf communities, already isolated by the tyranny of distance, are further isolated by the high cost of transport that makes travel out of the district or town unaffordable for most low to medium income families. This increases isolation from extended family, recreation, medical and other services. The high cost of transport widens inequality in our Gulf communities:

- Return flights from Burketown to Cairns, even when booked months in advance, cost upwards of $600 per person.
- Flights booked with less notice can cost in excess of $1,230 per person.
- These flights are on the State Government-regulated Gulf Route, which includes the Indigenous communities of Doomadgee and Mornington Island.
- Due to the large number of government departments that service the region, particularly Doomadgee and Mornington Island, Government staff tend to book well in advance, pushing up prices and limiting travel dates for residents. Government travellers also enjoy the same level of subsidy as any local resident.
At present, there are no bus or ferry services to any destination in the Burke Shire. The nearest coach services travel to Normanton, (approximately 225km away on the Cairns to Karumba route) and Mount Isa (595km away, by sealed road, on the Townsville to Mount Isa Route). More details of long distance coach routes can be found here: https://www.tmr.qld.gov.au/Travel-and-transport/Long-distance-air-services/Long-distance-coaches.aspx

The exceptionally high cost of transport to the Shire can be felt in a wide range of areas and has a disproportionate impact upon those in lower socio-economic groups:

- Cost to travel to access health services, which are limited within the region
- Cost to travel to access education; Burke Shire’s only school finishes at Grade 6, requiring high school students to travel to and from boarding school or access distance education
- Liveability impacts related to high cost of travel for leisure
- Increased costs associated with engagement of contractors, external expertise, training and support services – all of which are regularly required but in limited supply within the region.

**POTENTIAL SOLUTION/S**

Reducing the cost of transport to Gulf communities will increase parity for rural remote locations. Options could include:
- Alternative transport: Consideration could be given to alternative transport solutions such as a ferry service between Burketown, Mornington Island and/or Karumba; or extending the range of some bus services to include Burketown and Doomadgee.

- Cost of airfares: A reduction in the cost of airfares would provide immediate relief - this could be achieved in any one of a number of ways, including:
  - Increase subsidy across the board
  - Make subsidy means-tested, to provide greater benefit to lower socio-economic demographic
  - Make some forms of travel (e.g. government travel) exempt from receiving subsidies

**ISSUE – Isolation during wet season**

Doomadgee East Road is a local road of regional significance (LRRS) under the control of Burke Shire Council (BSC). It is the primary access road into Doomadgee Aboriginal Shire, and forms a section of Highway One/Savannah Way which traverses northern Australia from Cairns to Broome. The state government is responsible for this national arterial road – with the exception of sections in the Burke and Carpentaria local government areas, which are under control of these two local governments.

Burke Shire Council has limited funds to maintain, let alone conduct major upgrades, to its road network including Doomadgee East; and the community of Doomadgee is isolated for several months of the year primarily due to flooding of the Gregory and Nicholson rivers where existing flood ways are easily submerged.

Impacts of this include:

- Costs to the State and Federal Governments associated with re-supply of Doomadgee by air
- Social impacts related to isolation
- Increased reliance on air transportation which, as noted above, is very expensive
- Limitation of regional trade - tourism, pastoral industry, mining industry, construction and other services - due to inability to access Doomadgee and beyond by road.

**POTENTIAL SOLUTION**

The solution to this issue is to improve road access into Doomadgee by raising or realigning causeways over the Gregory and Leichardt Rivers. This requires external funding, and significant engineering and decision making to assess and select the most effective solution. Improved road access will reduce community isolation and reduce the annual cost to government of resupply during flood events.

While the route will remain vulnerable to flooding consistent with the whole of the Gulf area, betterment funding to raise the Nicholson and Gregory flood ways would significantly reduce the periods of isolation and associated annual financial and social costs. It is notable that Advance Cairns has listed improvement of the Savannah Way as a regional priority.

Images on the following page show the situation at the Gregory River crossing.
Above: Google Image of the Gregory River Crossing on Doomadgee East Road

Below: Doomadgee East Road disappears into a lake at the Gregory River even during minor flooding – keeping Doomadgee isolated when most other communities are accessible.
Improving Service Delivery Outcomes

ISSUE – Limited scope for shared services

At present, Doomadgee and Mornington Island Aboriginal Shires host a large number of services provided through state, non-government (NGO) and other private actors. In theory, these services could be extended to residents of the Burke Shire with shared mobilisation and engagement expenses. Often the Burke Shire is unaware of services that may be present and available, and consequently those services are either not delivered or conversely, are duplicated. It is also the case that certain services are unavailable to Burke Shire residents as the Burke Shire is not a designated Aboriginal Shire, despite its Indigenous demographic.

SOLUTIONS

Improved regional communication would assist in ensuring that relevant services are delivered in Burke Shire, and are not duplicated. This could be achieved by ensuring that when services are offered locally in discrete ATSI communities, surrounding communities or local government authorities are informed and opportunity is extended to access services.

Incentives could also be provided that encourage collaboration between discrete ATSI communities and their local government neighbours. This could be achieved, for instance, by:

- Grant observer status, or similar standing, for officials of Councils with significant Indigenous populations at Indigenous Local Government forums.
- Promotion of funding/resourcing opportunities for collaborative projects between ATSI and non-ATSI Shires.

Governance and red tape

ISSUE – Red tape impeding funding access

Remote Indigenous communities, whether discrete ATSI communities or rural remote non-ATSI local governments, must compete with larger and far better resourced organisations for competitive state and federal grant funding. The compliance burden – even for grants as nominal as $5,000 – places a disproportionate strain upon communities and organisations that have the greatest need. Such communities will be characterised by high socio-economic disadvantage, limited internal capacity, and limited own-source funding with which to meet co-contribution requirements. Grant conditions often restrict the ways in which the applicant can source matching funding.

For organisations like Burke Shire Council – despite boasting surprisingly mature governance structures and a proven history of successfully acquitting external funding – the high compliance and often high co-funding burden can make the value of the funding less than the cost in time and resources. This is especially true in the case of smaller grants, or grants that restrict the ways in which the applicant can apply matching funds.

POTENTIAL SOLUTION/S

Reward communities that demonstrate good governance by reducing the red tape that impedes access to funding. This could be achieved by:

- Streamlining processes for organisations with a proven track record of successful funds management
• Reducing application requirements for low-capacity organisations, such as remote and Indigenous councils – and/or providing support and capacity building to prepare applications, monitor, report on and acquit funds (particularly if the support is provided in manner that mentors and builds internal local capacity)

• Apply lower co-funding requirements for remote and Indigenous councils; at present this exists for some funding rounds (Building Better Regions Fund, which offers a 1:3 co-funding model), but not others (Building our Regions, which, like many is a 1:1 model)

• Further extension of programs like Works For Queensland, beyond the additional two years announced in the latest QLD Budget (https://budget.qld.gov.au/budget-highlights/jobs/)

Improving outcomes non-discrete rural remote Indigenous communities

ISSUE – Access to funding for non-discrete Indigenous communities

Funding for designated Aboriginal Shire Councils is not made available to non-discrete local governments such as Burke Shire that nevertheless have a predominantly Indigenous population; even though that funding could be used to directly improve outcomes for Indigenous people.

Shires such as Burke have similar issues to Aboriginal Shires - not being recognised as such closes off avenues for funding for social programs, infrastructure, development and long-term sustainability. Some examples of the impact include:

• Road funding: Burke Shire maintains the primary access road to the Doomadgee Aboriginal Shire. This is a local road of regional significance (LRRS), and Burke is eligible to spend RTA/TIDS (Regional Transport Alliance/ Transport Infrastructure Development Scheme) funding on this road. However, Burke must match this funding 50:50 – whereas Aboriginal Shires do not have to match TIDS funds spent on their primary access roads.

• Housing: State investment in social or public housing in the Burke Shire is negligible despite high perceived demand. As a consequence pressure exists for Council to serve as a de facto provider of public housing. Council’s current housing operation – with 27 units of housing currently in our portfolio - runs at a loss with no prospect of full cost-recovery in the short-medium term.

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

Provide opportunities to non-discrete ATSI communities to receive a share of ATSI funding including but not limited to:

• TIDS – enable non-ATSI local governments that are responsible for primary access roads into ATSI communities with an exemption from the TIDS matching requirements; and also with access to ATSI TIDS as well as regular TIDS for such roads

• HOUSING: provide non-discrete rural remote Indigenous communities with access to the funding opportunities that were recently announced in the QLD budget relating to social/affordable housing, including $75m to progress home ownership in discrete ATSI communities as part of the $1.8bn housing strategy (https://budget.qld.gov.au/budget-highlights/housing/)
• UTILITIES: provide non-discrete rural remote Indigenous communities with access to the funding opportunities that were recently announced in the QLD Budget relating to $120m for water, waste-water and solid waste infrastructure in Indigenous councils (https://budget.qld.gov.au/budget-highlights/infrastructure/)

**Conclusion**

Council acknowledges the significant investment made into Indigenous communities, and the challenges imposed by the tyrannies of distance, minimal infrastructure, and limited governance structures. However, as indicated throughout this submission, Council encourages the Inquiry to consider the challenges that remote non-discrete LGAs with significant Indigenous populations face. Whilst such challenges are commonly recognised as characteristic of discrete ATSI communities, they are often overlooked where the local authority is not a designated Aboriginal Shire.

We would also like the Inquiry to consider the collaborative and mutually beneficial role that neighbouring local governments to ATSI communities can play in terms of service delivery and partnership.

Burke Shire Council would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Inquiry into service delivery in remote and discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities.