



NORTHERN LAND  
COUNCIL

*Our Land, Our Sea, Our Life*

# Strategic Plan 2016 - 2020



# About this strategic plan

This Strategic Plan reflects the Northern Land Council's strategic direction for the period 2016 – 2020. It builds on our achievements and describes the way we intend to carry out our statutory responsibilities, the goals we set out to achieve and our vision for the future.

The Plan provides the framework for the continuing strategic management of our work. It is dynamic – reflecting the complex and changing environment in which we operate. We will revisit our strategies and projects regularly and continue to develop new initiatives, to ensure that we are able to respond to challenges and take advantage of opportunities as they arise.

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# Who we are

In 1973 the Commonwealth Parliament appointed Justice Edward Woodward to conduct a Commission of Inquiry into the appropriate way to recognise Aboriginal land rights in the Northern Territory. The Parliament was responding to growing calls from Aboriginal people for the recognition of their land rights. In 1963, the Yolngu people of East Arnhem Land presented Parliament with a Bark Petition protesting about the leasing of 36,000 hectares of their land for bauxite mining. In 1966, Gurindji stockmen and their families walked off Wave Hill Station after decades of mistreatment by the station bosses. What started as a dispute over pay and conditions quickly escalated into a demand for land rights. Thousands of Aboriginal people followed suit across Australia, walking off stations and participating in land rights marches, freedom rides and the Aboriginal Tent Embassy.

The Northern Land Council was established in the second half of 1973 in response to Justice Woodward's first report. Its then role was to assist the Commission by ascertaining the views of Aboriginal people and advocating for their interests.

Following the enactment of the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976*, the Northern Land Council became an independent statutory authority responsible for assisting Aboriginal people in the northern region of the Territory in acquiring and managing their traditional lands and seas.

The aims underlying the recognition of Aboriginal land rights were set out by Justice Woodward in his second and final report, dated 3 May 1974:

- The doing of simple justice to a people who have been deprived of their land without their consent and without compensation;
- The promotion of social harmony and stability within the wider Australian community by removing, as far as possible, a legitimate cause of complaint of an important minority group;
- The provision of land holdings as a first essential for people who are economically depressed and who have at present no real opportunity of achieving a normal Australian standard of living;
- The preservation, where possible, of the spiritual link with his own land which gives each Aboriginal his sense of identity and which lies at the heart of his spiritual beliefs;
- The maintenance and, perhaps, improvement of Australia's standing among the nations of the world by demonstrably fair treatment of an ethnic minority.

The establishment and ongoing support of the Land Councils is an important manifestation of Parliament's commitment to reconciliation with the Aboriginal peoples of the Territory. Forty years on, the Northern Land Council remains the paramount body through which the Aboriginal people of the Top End make their voices heard on issues which impact upon their land, seas and communities. The Land Rights Act continues to be a strong foundation on which to build social, cultural and economic growth for Traditional Owners.

The Northern Land Council is also a representative body for the purposes of the *Native Title Act 1993*, and in this capacity also represents Aboriginal people living on the Tiwi Islands and on Groote Eylandt.

The Northern Land Council's head office is in Darwin. The Land Council has regional offices in Katherine, Jabiru, Nhulunbuy, Tennant Creek, Ngukurr, Borroloola, Wadeye and Timber Creek.

The NLC's supreme body, the Full Council, has 78 elected members plus five co-opted women. Elections are held every three years, when the Chairman, Deputy Chairman and an Executive member representing each of the NLC's seven regions are also elected. Full Council meetings are held twice each year at which members determine policies and directions, approve land use agreements and mining and exploration tenements for which Traditional Owners have given their consent.

The Northern Land Council recognises the contributions of many Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people and institutions to the struggle for land and sea rights for Australia's first people.



# What we do

## The Northern Land Council assists Aboriginal people to:

- Obtain secure recognition of their interests in land and sea country
- Negotiate with third parties about the use of land and sea country
- Conserve, manage and develop their land and sea resources
- Resolve disputes between Aboriginal people about land
- Protect sacred sites

## We also:

- Consult with and represent the views of the Aboriginal people within our region
- Advocate on behalf of Aboriginal people in relation to laws, policies and procedures that affect them
- Develop innovative land and sea management, employment, training and other programs that enhance Aboriginal self-determination and cultural survival



# Welcome from the Chairman

The 40th anniversary of the enactment of the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* is an auspicious time to present the Northern Land Council's Strategic Plan 2016-2020.

As recorded in the introduction to this document, the NLC was created in 1973 to assist the Aboriginal Land Rights Commission, led by Justice Edward Woodward. The Land Rights Act gave the NLC the status of a Commonwealth body corporate.

For most of its history, the NLC has assisted Aboriginal people in its region to gain freehold title to their lands available for claim. The *Native Title Act 1993* created another body of work for the NLC, and we continue to pursue native title rights on behalf of our constituents.

Although those functions continue to make up most of our workload, we must now look forward to the unfolding era of post-determination, and this Strategic Plan can be read as the blueprint of how we propose to realise that vision.

As you will read, we want to strengthen the governance foundations of our elected arms, while maintaining their cultural integrity. At the same time, we want to broaden the base of our representation by reaching out to our young people and women in particular.



We want also to be an integral force in the growing push to develop Northern Australia. Aboriginal people now own freehold title to half the Northern Territory's land mass and to more than 85 per cent of its coastline; native title will eventually cover most of the remaining area.

The NLC must position itself to have a primary role on behalf of Aboriginal people in the planning for northern development, so that our constituents can enjoy the economic benefits on their own terms, without any adverse impact on their culture.

Those aims are not exclusive, and this Strategic Plan lays down the pathways to their achievement. As we enter the fifth decade of Land Rights, I commend it to you.

**Samuel Bush-Blanasi**  
Chairman

Land  
Life Sea

# Introduction to the NLC

I am now into my third year of service as the NLC's Chief Executive Officer, and I am proud to have driven the preparation of our Strategic Plan 2016-2020.

The NLC is going through a process of fundamental change and refreshment. At the end of that process, we will be in a much better position to meet the challenges of the future.

New management is in place across most of our branches; new systems are planned to improve our internal governance and the ways we do business. Changing times can create uncertainty, and it is important that everyone understands and embraces these new directions. This plan recognises that, and improved communications are an important component of this new Strategic Plan.

The focus of all this change has always been on our constituents, the 36,000 Aboriginal people who live in our region, so that their cultural, environmental and economic interests can be protected and advanced.

The administration wants to improve support for the NLC's elected arms: the seven Regional Councils which are our grassroots representation; the Executive Council which now has delegated powers to approve most agreements affecting the use of Aboriginal lands; and the Full Council which meets twice a year and sets our 'big picture' agendas. That mission to improve support for, and to broaden the representation of, our elected arms is a feature of the goals, strategies and actions set out in this document.

As the Chairman has previously noted, the NLC is mindful of the gathering momentum to develop northern Australia. Given their vast ownership of lands and their interests in preserving and protecting native title rights and sacred sites across the Top End, Aboriginal people in the NLC region have basic rights to be properly consulted and included in planning and development processes.



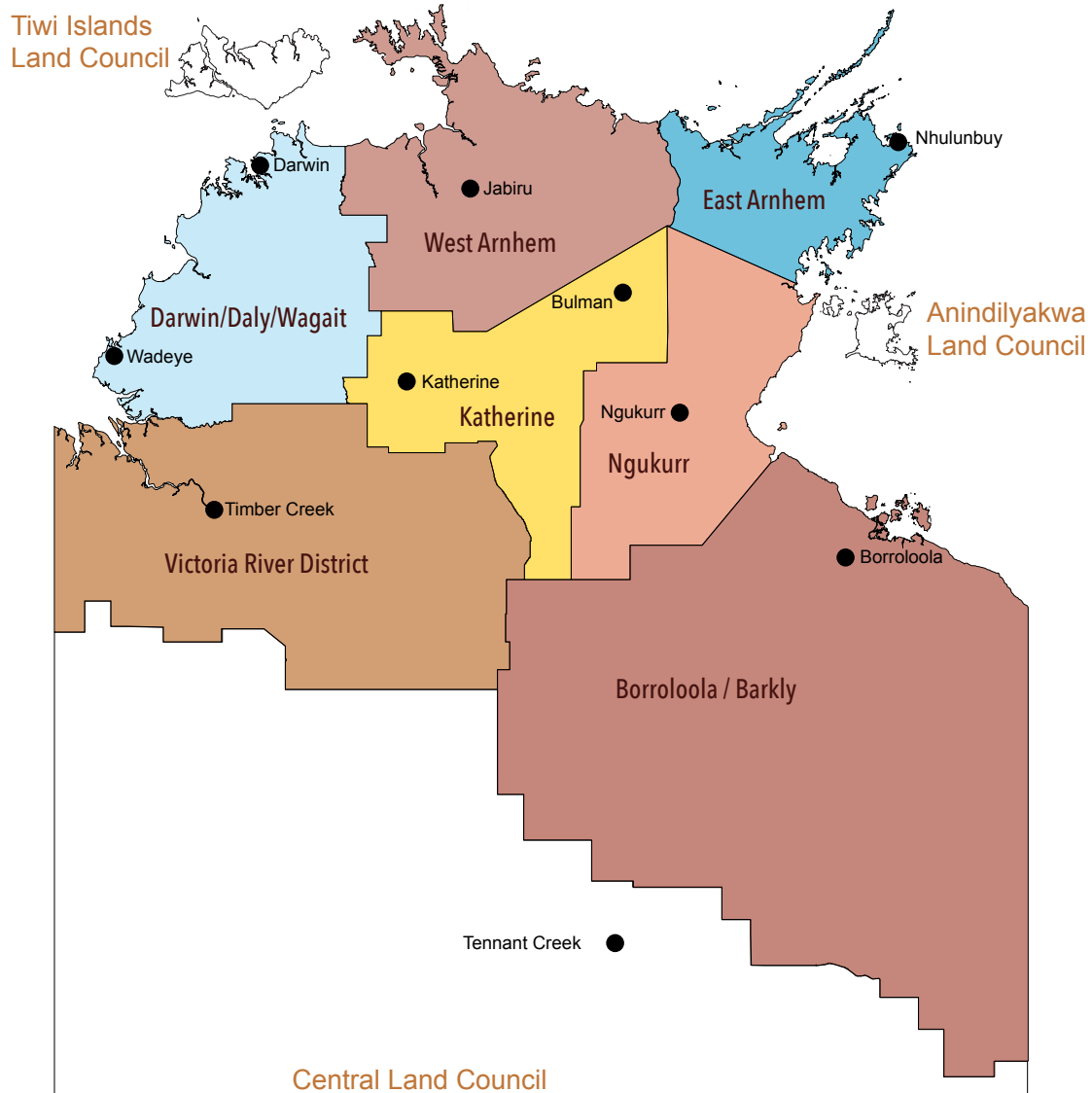
Thus we want to strengthen our presence across the seven regions which comprise the NLC's region and to develop a 'Prospectus for Indigenous Development'.

As well, we will be moving towards the establishment of a Community Development Unit which will have local participation at its core; hand-in-hand with that, and as part of our overall reorganisation, a new Royalty Unit will be better able to serve Traditional Owners.

This Strategic Plan will enable the NLC, in its fifth decade, to emerge afresh and better equipped to discharge our statutory functions (provided we are adequately funded) and to better serve our constituents.

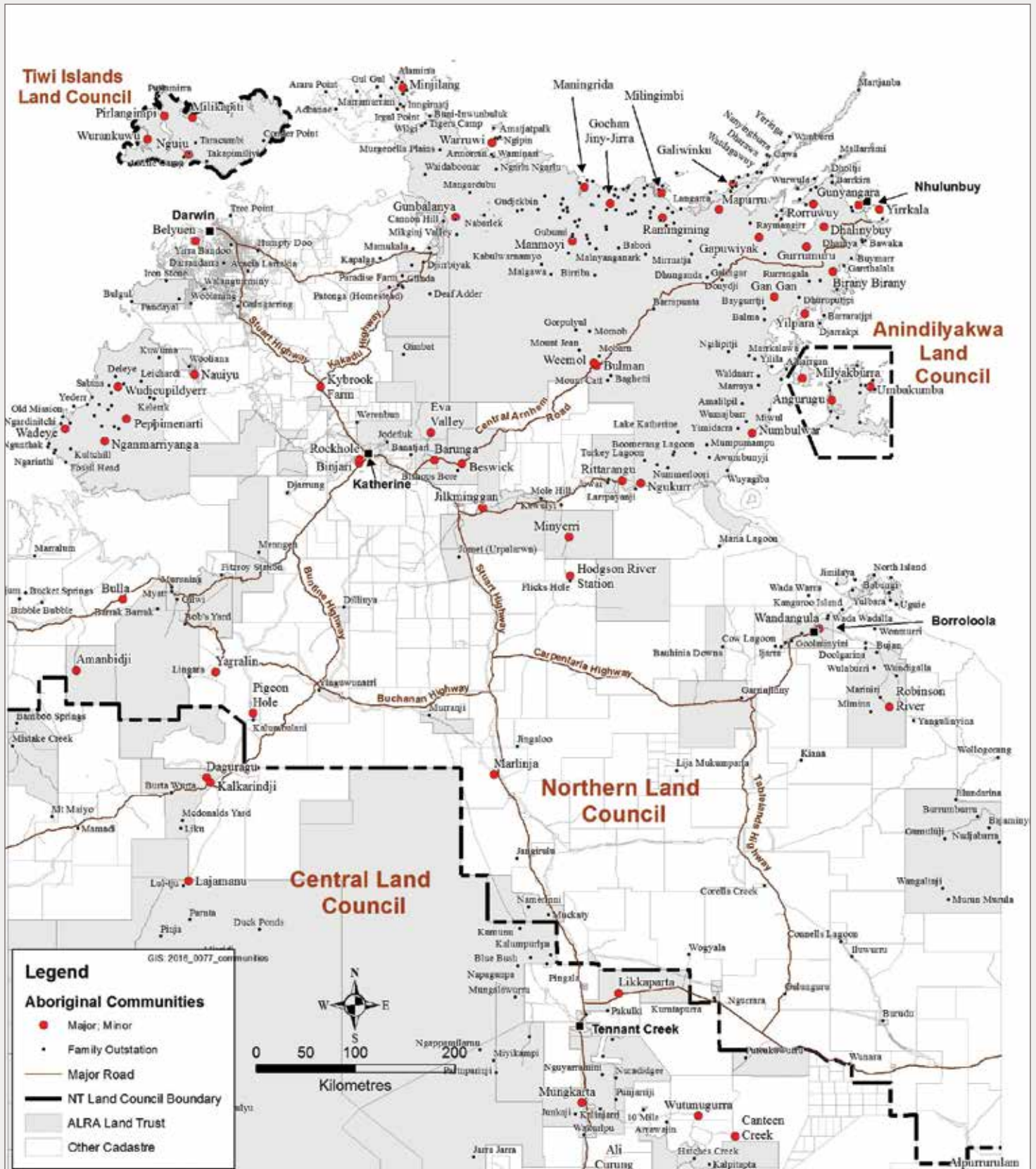
Joe Morrison  
CEO

# NLC Regions





# NLC region - Communities





# Our Vision

A Territory in which the rights and responsibilities of every Traditional Owner are recognised and in which Aboriginal people benefit economically, socially and culturally from the secure possession of their lands, seas and intellectual property.

# Our Mission

To assist Aboriginal people in the northern region of the Northern Territory to acquire and manage their traditional lands and seas, through strong leadership, advocacy and management.

# Our Values

We will:

- Consult with and act with the informed consent of Traditional Owners in accordance with the Land Rights Act
- Communicate clearly with Aboriginal people, taking into account the linguistic diversity of the region
- Respect Aboriginal law and tradition
- Be responsive to Aboriginal peoples' needs and effectively advocate for their interests
- Be accountable to the people we represent
- Behave in a manner that is appropriate and sensitive to cultural differences
- Act with integrity, honesty and fairness
- Uphold the principles and values of social justice
- Treat our stakeholders with respect

# What does this mean when the Vision has been 'achieved'?

## Cultural integrity upheld

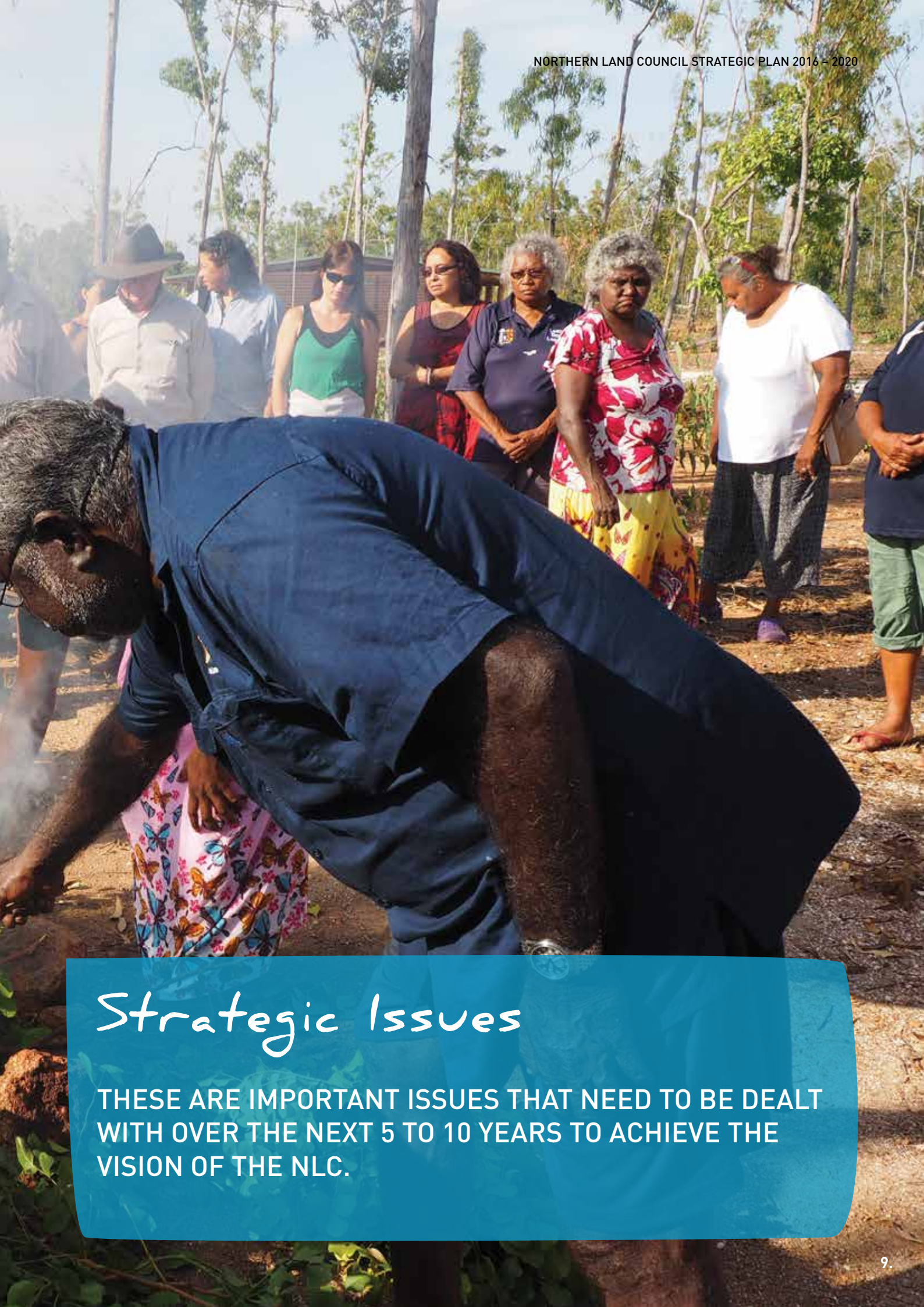
- NLC is respected, trusted, and partners with others to achieve outcomes
- Strong and active Regional and Full Councils
- Strong advocacy role maintaining good relationships with governments, industry and stakeholders
- Be an employer of choice attracting Indigenous leaders to come and be part of the NLC
- Professional staff, mostly Indigenous base

## Excellent systems to administer ALRA and Native Title, transparent and accountable

- Strong internal and external communications systems
- Support communities in their care for country and economic activity
- Diversified funding sources to do its work
- Strong balance sheet

**From the Vision**





## Strategic Issues

THESE ARE IMPORTANT ISSUES THAT NEED TO BE DEALT WITH OVER THE NEXT 5 TO 10 YEARS TO ACHIEVE THE VISION OF THE NLC.



# Key Strategic Issues

The following key strategic issues need to be dealt with by the NLC over the next 5 to 10 years – they are not listed in any order of importance:

- Administration of ALRA, Native Title processes and claims needs to be excellent, but community expectations of the organisation also need to be met
- Regional management, information flow and responsibilities between Darwin head office and regional offices
- Support of homelands, outstations and communities
- Support of social, economic and community development across the NLC jurisdiction
- Governance processes and the effective use of Full, Executive and Regional Councils
- Support and growth of the Caring for Country programs
- The role of the NLC in advocacy
- Encouragement and support of youth and succession planning
- Relationship and engagement with government and shires
- Communications systems
- Obtaining a secure and growing funding stream for non-core functions
- Resolving long standing disputes

**From strategic issues**



## Goals 2016–2020

THE GOALS AND OBJECTIVES HAVE BEEN FORMULATED FROM THE QUANTIFICATION OF THE VISION AND CONSIDERATION OF THE KEY STRATEGIC ISSUES.



# Goals 2016 to 2020

**The following are the goals of the NLC over the next four years:**

- Strengthen internal and council governance processes to meet strategic organisational objectives and mandates, and achieve the Vision and Mission
- Strengthen the NLC's advocacy and negotiating capability through partnerships and relationships, and ensure resources are tied to these areas in order to provide support to claimants and Traditional Owners
- Facilitate regional economic development planning through a 'Prospectus for Indigenous Development'
- Develop strategic succession planning within management and in the regions by identifying youth and helping them develop into governance and leadership roles
- Extend and maintain consistent and effective communications programs and systems
- Secure funding for non-core activities
- Mediate and resolve disputes
- Implement a regionalisation strategy with appropriate investment
- Implement a long term strategy to grow the Ranger and Caring for Country programs
- Strengthen the engagement of women in the business of NLC
- Maintain good relationships with government and shires

**From the goals**



# Strategies

STRATEGIES ARE MADE TO HELP ACHIEVE THE GOALS AND OBJECTIVES AND TO ACHIEVE THE VISION.



# Strategies

1. Review and strengthen the over arching cultural integrity in the representation and decision-making of the NLC
2. Establish clear positions on key issues on which the NLC will advocate and show leadership
3. Instigate management succession planning and culturally appropriate encouragement of youth in leadership roles
4. Review and improve internal management and governance, feedback and information dissemination systems
5. Establish a comprehensive marketing, communications, education and public relations plan covering the membership, administration and external audiences
6. Plan for the shift of regional operations from the Darwin head office to regional offices while maintaining the strength of centralised administration (regionalisation)
7. Implement a Community Development Unit
8. Facilitate the preparation of community and regional economic plans (Prospectus for Indigenous Development)
9. Review and establish secure investment models for non-core NLC activities
10. Review resources for mediation of disputes and create a formal policy for the Full Council to consider
11. Review and monitor the performance of the NLC's obligations under the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act*, *Native Title Act*, *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act* and the *Public Interest Disclosure Act*.

**From the strategies**





## Possible Actions

WHAT ACTIONS COULD WE TAKE TO MEET THE GOALS AND STRATEGIES AND REALISE OUR VISION?





## Possible Actions

- Strengthen roles and responsibilities of Full Council, Executive Council and Regional Councils
- Implement handover and induction programs for incoming Councillors, and exit interviews for retiring Councillors
- Strengthen the 'business' and agenda settings of Regional Councils, Executive Council and Full Council meetings
- Develop NLC position statements on youth education, cultural integrity, employment, leadership and health/wellness
- Develop NLC position statement on women in leadership within the context of traditional law and culture
- Create and implement a succession plan for management
- Sponsor youth to attend and observe council meetings and follow up with program to engage youth between meetings





- Implement a comprehensive marketing, communications, educational and public relations plan covering the membership, administration and external audiences
- Develop educational programs on key matters such as the ALRA and Native Title, Land Trusts, TOs' rights and responsibilities, the permits system, customary law and the history of Aboriginal peoples and their struggle for rights
- Partner with relevant authorities to implement ranger enforcement powers
- Recruit local people in regional offices
- Regional social, economic and community development actions
- Partner with ethical investors in Indigenous development
- Direct investment in businesses with appropriate governance processes
- Increase resources to carry out mediation and create a formal policy for the Full Council

# How will we deliver our services?

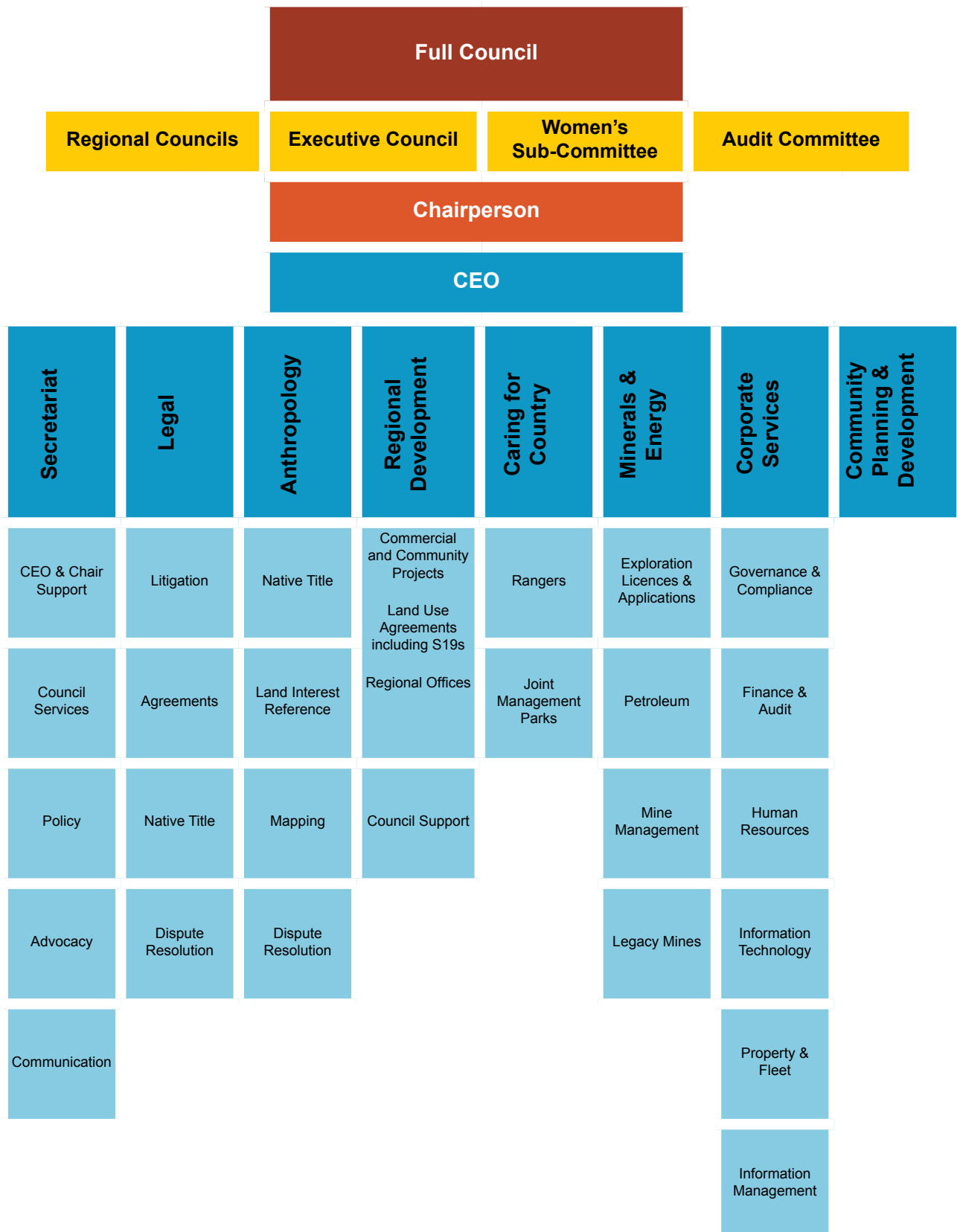
Throughout the life of this Plan, we will adopt a strategic approach to service delivery in order to assist us in achieving our outcome.

This approach will involve us focusing on three key result areas:

- Highly skilled people
- Strong relationships with Traditional Owners
- Effective partnerships



# NLC Organisational Chart





# Factors Critical to our Success

Underpinning our success are sound systems of corporate governance. Our key strategy for maintaining excellence in corporate governance is adherence to our corporate governance philosophy. All aspects of our corporate governance framework are informed by our corporate governance philosophy, which is founded on the following principles:

- Accountability
- Transparency and openness
- Integrity
- Leadership
- Commitment

The NLC operates in a challenging environment, and also faces a number of challenges during the life of this Plan.

Success in achieving our outcomes will depend on:

- Guaranteed real funding levels from government
- Secure government funding and support for the principles expressed in the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* and *Native Title Act 1993*
- Secure and on-going government funding to ensure compliance with the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013*
- Our ability to enter into strategic and beneficial partnerships
- Our ability to focus energies on the priorities of Aboriginal people within our region
- Our ability to maintain our reputation and credibility with constituents and other stakeholders
- Our capacity to recruit and retain skilled and motivated staff



# Contact us

## **NLC Head Office**

45 Mitchell Street  
Darwin, NT 0801  
Tel (08) 8920 5100  
Fax (08) 8920 5255  
GPO Box 1222

## **East Arnhem**

Endeavour Square  
Nhulunbuy, NT 0880  
Tel (08) 8986 8500  
Fax (08) 8987 1334

## **Tennant Creek**

178 Patterson Street  
Tennant Creek, NT 0860  
Tel (08) 8962 1884  
Fax (08) 8962 1636  
PO Box 55

## **West Arnhem**

3 Government Building  
Flinders Street  
Jabiru, NT 0886  
Tel (08) 8938 3000  
Fax (08) 8979 2650  
PO Box 18

## **Borrooloola/Barkly**

Robinson Road  
Mara Mara Camp,  
Borrooloola, NT 0854  
Tel (08) 8975 7500  
Fax (08) 8975 8745

## **Ngukurr**

Balamurra Street  
Ngukurr, NT 0852  
Tel (08) 8977 2500  
Fax (08) 8975 4601  
PMB 85

## **Victoria River District**

43 Wilson Street  
Timber Creek, NT 0852  
Tel (08) 8974 5600  
Fax (08) 8975 0664

## **Katherine**

Lot 5 / 29 Katherine Terrace  
Katherine, NT 0851  
Tel (08) 8971 9899  
Fax (08) 8972 2190  
PO Box 396

## **Wadeye**

Lot 788 Kanarlida Street  
Wadeye, NT 0822  
Tel 0439 830 435

**Contact the Office of the Chief Executive Officer at the NLC Darwin Head Office for questions about this Strategic Plan.**





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COUNCIL

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*Land Life Sea*