ESTIMATES – JUNE 2017

Housing and Country

Tuesday 20 June 2017 – Mr Guyula – Question to the Minister for Housing – Overcrowding

Mr GUYULA: Minister, do you have data on overcrowding now and 10 years ago?

Mr McCARTHY: To go back 10 years would be an interesting analysis, but more importantly, there is the work that has started from 2016 in regard to our analysis of overcrowding and how to address that within the existing Northern Territory Government programs and the continuation of Commonwealth programs.

We have also looked at innovation within housing, that is, the Room to Breathe program, which is directly related to overcrowding in remote housing.

We have also focused on local decision-making, which will better inform government on delivering programs, particularly in those regional and remote areas with unique overcrowding issues and longstanding historical issues.

I have officials with me today, and I always welcome them to respond to members in estimates to make sure our story is told. These officials represent the front line of the experts in this field. I have Mr Chalker here, the CE, and he might like to respond to that question.

Mr CHALKER: The issue is very complex. At any point in time we can ascertain in a house what the overcrowding will look like; however, the problem for us is that the demographic may change very quickly. In the next week or so, the number of people in that residence may change dramatically. We have been doing a general assessment, community by community. With the $1.1bn program our intent is to develop a more sophisticated allocation model to be far more considerate of the prevalence of overcrowding and how to best ease it not only in the regional and rural settings, but also in the urban settings.

We have various data, but it is only ever for a point in time; it is not truly indicative of the constant issue.

Tuesday 20 June 2017 – Mr Guyula – Question to the Minister for Housing – Staff Housing in Remote Areas

Mr GUYULA: NGOs and Indigenous organisations, such as Red Cross, Yalu in Galiwinku and the TIO organisations which are supporting the development of Indigenous organisations, face the big problem of housing their professional staff. Are you aware of this problem? Is there anything in this budget that might alleviate this problem?

Mr McCARTHY: This represents the industry housing component of the Department of Housing and Community Development's programs, one element of the program. Industry housing is an important aspect because it supports the non-government sector in relation to being able to base their presences in regional and remote areas with minimal costs on their infrastructure and housing components so they can maximise their costs into service delivery.

For more detail on that, I am sure we will be able to have that discussion at the table. Mr Chalker, if you would like to start we can talk about more details on our investment in industry housing.

Mr CHALKER: The issue of availability of housing in remote communities is stark. That aligns not only to overcrowding, but the provision of accommodation for those who are either coming to work at the community or wish to set up permanent work, be it shops or other services available.

The longer-term intention of the 10-year program is to build capacity. It relates to creating local jobs and an economic opportunity for each community to grow and establish its own ability to bring in income that can be turned back in to the community to establish further accommodation and the like, and then potentially have organisations that can grow within those communities to create further employment for accommodation to become an income that can regenerate employment and assets within a community.

That is something we are conscious of with the opportunity of the 10-year program to use that as the impetus to grow. We have a short-term pressure point at the moment on a high number of our communities as it relates to the provision of accommodation for those employed locally. An element within government employee housing is that this commitment is about creating accommodation for local employees. That may provide opportunities for commercial accommodation to be provided further.

Mr BAMBER: The capacity for additional housing for NGOs in remote communities is varied by community. Some communities, like Wadeye or (inaudible) will have their own housing or accommodation they lease to contractors or NGOs and IBEs. Other communities might not have that housing at the moment. Over the 10 years we will be helping to build that capacity, but it does vary. In some communities, rather than moving on the work camp accommodation it has been sold to the local Aboriginal corporation for use as accommodation for IBEs and contractors.

It varies by community because there are 73 communities; some of them have the capacity whilst others need to build the capacity.

Mr Chalker is right; at the end of the 10-year program we should have sustainable communities where renting out VOQ, visiting officer's quarters, IBE and even GH accommodation, that should be a revenue stream for that community, regional council or local Aboriginal corporation.

Tuesday 20 June 2017 – Mr Guyula – Question to the Minister for Housing – Housing on Homelands

Mr GUYULA: Minister, could you please advise what is in this budget for housing in each homeland centre. Are there any new houses to be build and in which homelands?

Mr McCARTHY: Member for Nhulunbuy, I enjoy your enthusiasm around homelands. You share that with me. We have a significant investment across the Northern Territory in the homelands program. In essence, 500 homelands across the Northern Territory vary in terms of their operational situation and capacity.

Across the budget in regard to homelands, in 2017–18 you are looking at investment of $45.685m allocated to homelands. There is $28.692m for municipal essential services, housing repairs and maintenance; an increase of $2.3m on 2016–17 expenditures; $4.042m for municipal and essential services special purpose grants; $6.46m for the Homelands Extra Allowance program; $5.891m for the homelands jobs program; and there is half a million dollars being spent in the Elliot town camp housing upgrades.

It is important to note that there is no specific budget allocation for new housing in homelands, but we have factored in the opportunity to create economies in the regional and remote areas through the $1.1bn program in regard to Labor's investment and the Northern Territory's investment.

You would be aware that there is a very important date coming forward, 1 July 2018, where we hope to have secured the Commonwealth's contribution to the remote housing program over 10 years.

At an official level, discussions are going well and we remain positive but conservative, and we are working with Minister Scullion to deliver the best possible outcome. We consider that the Commonwealth could match our investment or do better, adding the land servicing costs to a program; then you are talking to a potential of a very significant program.

There are two aspects to this story. One is that we will be able to deliver better outcomes for homeland residents when we create local economies, Indigenous enterprises are fully engaged, local people are fully engaged in their jobs and we show better value for the taxpayer dollar. You can think of the clusters around the remote communities such as Gapuwiyak, Galiwinku or Maningrida or down where I live, in the Barkly, and those clusters of homelands around remote towns that can benefit from improved efficiencies and economies.

We are targeting innovation around doing the work better and providing residents with those important innovations, like the Room to Breathe concept. We feel very confident that we will be able to deliver in this space.

In terms of capital for new housing on homelands, this government has said that it is interested in coinvestment opportunities. I acknowledge already, in my brief time in this portfolio, the Aboriginal benefits account, which has allocated a grant of $40m to homelands, specifying that it wants innovation for the value for money.

That is a very good opportunity for governments to develop partnerships and to show how we can work together with a co-investment model. Within this budget appropriation, and on the way forward over the next decade and beyond, this plan is about incorporating better outcomes for homelands through developing economies, efficiencies, jobs and making the taxpayer dollar represent improved investment.

The other side of the story is what we have focused on, working with Indigenous people—the local decision-making involving conversations where we can both bring resources to the table. I look forward to your advice and support in that journey forward.

Tuesday 20 June 2017 – Mr Guyula – Question to the Minister for Housing – Replacement Solar Batteries

Mr GUYULA: The federal program Bushlight is run in many communities and is currently being maintained by Ingkerreke in Alice Springs; however, I understand there is no funding for new solar batteries available through this program. Solar batteries have a life of approximately seven years, which means many batteries are now due to be changed. Is there funding for a replacement of these batteries?

Mr McCARTHY: Another good question, Member for Nhulunbuy. The information regarding remote areas and alternative energy investment can be outlined by the Power and Water Corporation. The hearing will occur on Wednesday. They will be able to provide you with the specifics. There are some good investments in that area. I do not think we have any information in the folders that I have brought with me regarding replacing batteries in that existing program. We can search for that information for you and provide the plan, which is to address innovation in providing energy for regional and remote areas. The Solar SETuP program is rolling out under the Power and Water Corporation. You might want to save that question and ask it at the GOC hearings on Wednesday.

Madam CHAIR: Would you like to place that as a question on notice.

Mr GUYULA: Yes.

Question on Notice No 5.1

Madam CHAIR: Member for Nhulunbuy, can you please restate the question for the record?

Mr GUYULA: The federal program Bushlight is run in many communities and is currently being maintained by Ingkerreke in Alice Springs; however, I understand there is no funding for new solar batteries available through this program. Solar batteries have a life of approximately seven years, which means many batteries are now due to be changed. Is there funding for a replacement of these batteries? Madam CHAIR: Are you happy to accept that question?

Mr McCARTHY: Yes.

Madam CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Nhulunbuy of the minister has been allocated the number 5.1.

Answer

Mr McCarthy – Minister for Housing and Community Development

In 2016-17, the Department of Housing and Community Development spent $6.744 million on homelands power projects. Of that amount, $1.996 million was expended on projects that involved upgrades to solar systems and battery replacement in 26 separate locations.

It is not possible to identify the investment into battery replacements alone because funds are provided for solar projects that may include battery replacement, upgrades to panels and replacement of inverters. This year (2017-2018) the Department of Housing and Community Development has set aside $1.5 million to continue this program.

Wednesday 21 June 2017 – Mr Guyula – Question to the Minister for Environment and Natural Resources - Local Land Management by Landowners

Mr GUYULA: Minister, landowners living on country would like the resources and support to maintain and manage their own country. Is the government able to provide assistance with this?

Ms MOSS: We have $4.1m over two years to support capital grants for our ranger groups, starting in the next financial year. We also have $2m for the land management and conservation fund that will also start next financial year. We have the advisory group which has been put together to help shape what that looks like and how we can ensure we are supporting people in the best way.

It is also important to speak about the Strategic Indigenous Reserves across the Northern Territory. Water is one of our most precious resources in the Territory, and there are many demands on our water resources. There are our environmental and cultural flows, and there is the economic benefit that comes from our water resources. We are continuing to shape the model of Strategic Indigenous Reserves to ensure there is water available for Aboriginal people on Aboriginal land to use for economic development into the future. That is really important.

Our Mapping the Future project will also support that work and those aspirations.

Mr GUYULA: This is something that comes from the people on the homelands. Rangers come and work around the country, but the actual TOs on country know where to go. They have always looked after country and would like to be part of working with the rangers. If the local people can be supported with resources as well, it will make it greater and better.

Ms MOSS: I agree. Across my portfolio, in regard to joint management on parks, we work quite strongly in joint management of parks across the Territory, but we could probably do better. I am happy to hear ideas, Member for Nhulunbuy, from your electorate about ways in which we can support that work more strongly. We have joint management arrangement and we want to be looking all the time at how we can make sure we are improving those opportunities for people on country. If there are specific initiatives I am more than happy to talk to you about those.

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