



The Hon. Mr Tony Windsor MP  
Chair  
Standing Committee of Regional Australia

Chair and Members,

On behalf of the Narrabri Interagency Group, I would like to advance the following submissions in respect of the Standing Committee's current into the use of 'fly-in, fly-out' (FIFO) workforce practices in regional Australia.

The Narrabri Interagency Group is a coalition of representatives from community based non-government, government and faith-based human service organisations operating in the Narrabri LGA. We comprise agencies responsible for the provision of services to some of our community's most vulnerable people, including people who are homeless, people living with a mental illness, people experiencing or escaping domestic violence, people with disabilities and, increasingly, essential service workers (such as nurses, police, teachers and other human services staff) who are unable to secure affordable housing in the area. The purpose of the group is to coordinate the collective efforts of the agencies involved and to tackle the complex and difficult challenges that our community faces in a period of rapid demographic and social change, and to position the community to function in a cohesive and progressive way into the future.

In addition, many of the group members are long term local residents and community members in their own right, with a vested interest in the wellbeing of the community and knowledge of the ways in which the current industrial changes (of which the FIFO workforce is a feature) are impacting upon that community.

At the outset, we would like to express our view that the overall impact of the current industrial and land use changes in our community has been a positive one. Prior to the emergence of the resources industry, our community experienced a steady but consistent decline in population, particularly driven by the increasing economic pressures on family-operated agricultural ventures and the migration of our young and talented residents to metropolitan, larger regional and coastal population centres. The Narrabri LGA is now experiencing a boom connected directly with the resources industry and there are great opportunities for the community to grow economically, for local young people not to be forced to choose between having fulfilling careers and staying in their community, and for the community to be enriched by the diversity that this change brings and the contributions that new members of the community make. Long time 'locals' are benefitting directly from the employment and business opportunities that the resources industry brings.

The changes also bring with them significant challenges in the way that essential products and services, such as housing and support services are planned and delivered. We require responsive and collaborative leadership from Commonwealth, State and Local Government, in partnership with community, to meet those challenges in socially responsible and sustainable ways. To date, we have not seen that level of leadership and our community has missed opportunities as a result. It is of critical importance that this lack of collaborative leadership be rectified quickly if we are to reap the benefits that an inclusive, integrated and connected community can bring.

We would like to advance submissions in respect of the following Terms of Reference:

- **The effect of a non-resident FIFO/DIDO workforce on established communities, including community wellbeing, services and infrastructure.**
- **Provision of services, infrastructure and housing availability for FIFO/DIDO workforce employees.**

- **Strategies to optimise FIFO/DIDO experience for employees and their families, communities and industry.**
- **Current initiatives and responses of the Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments.**

The most immediate impact of the introduction of a FIFO/DIDO workforce has been in the supply of affordable and accessible housing, particularly for those members of the community who are exposed to the private rental and property sales markets. Basic economics of supply and demand have driven a firm trend of increased housing costs across the LGA, as the increase in resources industry workers migrating to the area creates increased demand which is coupled with constrained supply. There have been winners and losers as this scenario unfolds, and while investment property owners and those selling property in a buoyant market have achieved good return on their investments, at the same time the most disadvantaged people in our community have been increasingly squeezed from the mainstream rental market into lower quality private rental accommodation, into more remote satellite communities and towards increased demand for social housing to provide access to secure and affordable accommodation.

Human service agencies have seen an increase in the demand for services from people who were not traditionally part of their client group, particularly working families and older people feeling the pressure of increased housing costs as a greater proportion of the household budget needs to be directed to the basic necessity of a roof over the family's head. In addition to this increased demand in support for families who find themselves in housing stress, in situations of actual or potential homelessness and experiencing difficulty maintaining appropriate housing, a flow on effect of the increased housing stress has also been seen in demand for services targeted to other indicators of social distress, such as mental health support services, family support and domestic and family violence.

Services are also beginning to experience an increase in the number of people from non-English speaking and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse background accessing services. We celebrate this as a sign of increasing cultural diversity and richness in our community. We also require support to develop the capacity to provide services to these emerging groups in culturally and contextually appropriate ways.

The primary model of crisis accommodation in the Narrabri LGA is via brokerage, whereby the support provider purchases nights of accommodation from local moteliere as required to meet immediate housing needs, while more sustainable long term strategies are explored. However, the initial pressure of the FIFO/DIDO workforce on the availability of accommodation for this purpose has meant that crisis accommodation services have simply not been able to source accommodation in the required quantities and at the required times. The construction of a 200 room purpose built miners' accommodation complex on the outskirts of Narrabri has made next to no difference to the availability of motel accommodation for this purpose.

The supply of social housing in the Narrabri LGA is constrained, with an overall decline in the number of social housing properties available over a ten year period. Older stock that no longer met the needs of the client base have been disposed of and there has been minimal investment in replacement housing. The local Community Housing provider is prevented from growing to respond to the emerging needs of the community by the existence of a funding cap and staged funding formula that discourages smaller providers from expanding in a gradual way by reducing funding at arbitrary numbers of properties that bear little relationship with the actual economies of scale that can be achieved. Additionally, there is increasing demand for affordable housing solutions for essential but lower paid workers (such as nurses, police, teachers, child care and human services workers) that are finding it increasingly difficult to secure and maintain affordable accommodation in the private market. To date, there has been no investment in affordable housing in the Narrabri LGA. It is our view that urgent investment in both social and affordable housing is required in the Narrabri LGA.

It is also important to note that the FIFO/DIDO workforce is now a part of the community accessing human services in the Narrabri LGA, and the introduction of a population of that size in a small community makes in itself a significant impact on the demand for services. Members of the FIFO/DIDO workforce are predominantly young to middle aged males, working long hours in a difficult job, living in high density accommodation set physically apart from an unfamiliar community, away from established family and social networks. These are all well evidenced risk factors for social isolation, psychological distress and mental illness, so it is unsurprising that local support services are beginning to see an increase in requests for assistance from these members of our community.

The development of high density accommodation targeted to the FIFO/DIDO workforce on the edge of the Narrabri Township presents in itself a number of challenges to the progression of an inclusive and integrated community. It is well documented that high density housing, set physically apart from the remainder of the community and populated exclusively by people drawn from narrow demographic sub-groups, serves to engender and perpetuate damaging fractures in the community and a sense of 'Them and Us' that our agencies have fought tirelessly to address. There have already been unsavory incidents of antisocial behaviour involving assault and property damage that are, in part, driven by a sense of opposition between 'locals' and members of the FIFO/DIDO workforce, and while we condemn such behaviour, it is our view that we must acknowledge that the physical divide that the creation of a high density 'miners' precinct' presents is reflected in the social divisions of our community. We would submit that a reasonable person would only need to look to other communities in which this style of accommodation is provided for FIFO/DIDO workers or to our larger social housing estates for clear evidence of the extreme social disconnection this style of development engenders.

There is also a perception in the community that land usage that would never have been permitted for existing landholders under the existing Local Environment Plan have been allowed for 'the mining industry', which also serves to create division and hostility in the community. It is our view that a more robust public conversation around the full range of options to maximise the community's benefit from the industrial changes occurring in its midst could and still can address these barriers and position the community to move forward. We recommend that Social Impact Assessments be conducted prior to approval of any high density accommodation developments in rural communities and that consent for such development should not be granted unless adequate steps are taken in partnership with community to address the social impacts of such development. We would also submit that urgent investment in community regeneration is required to mitigate and reverse the damage that has already been done to our community's social fabric and that of communities like it.

We would submit that there have been missed opportunities in the land planning response to the accommodation pressures that the FIFO/DIDO presents to open a public dialogue around ways for the local community, including private landholders and investors, to creatively contribute to meeting the demand for housing through a mix of lower density, more evenly dispersed and closely integrated with the existing community infrastructure. Such a strategy would promote more positive interaction between the FIFO/DIDO workforce and the broader community at an individual level. It would also serve to provide more democratic opportunities for local investment and return from the increased economic base that the FIFO/DIDO provides and address perceptions of favouritist treatment of resources related industry players. It would also enhance the experience of the community for FIFO/DIDO workers and provide opportunities for their families to visit and become part of the community, which the use of high density singles-style accommodation, which is completely inappropriate for families with children, cannot provide.

It is our view that the current Commonwealth and NSW State government responses are insufficient. In terms of direct service delivery, the Commonwealth and State government's investment in the human services that respond to the needs of the most vulnerable people in our communities have stagnated over a period of years with no additional investment. Resource allocation models used by government agencies to determine the provision of funding for human services programs tend to be based largely on aggregated Census data, currently updated only to the 2006 Census. Up to and including 2006, the Census data very clearly showed Narrabri LGA in steady decline, reflecting the experience of a large

number of Australian rural communities with largely agricultural economic bases and years of economic stagnation caused by drought. Much of the planning around resources for the human services and social housing sectors is based around this data and consequently provides for services that meet the needs of a stable or declining community.

However, none of this modeling reflects the current reality or likely future dynamics of the community, as the booms in population and other indicators that have emerged with the resources industry occurred after the 2006 Census and continue at a rate that is completely at odds with the statistical projections for the LGA. We would submit that in locations such as the Narrabri LGA, where planning has centred primarily around steady state growth or decline and the resources industry becomes locally significant, a different methodology needs to be applied to the provision of essential human services: when mining comes to town, we need timely and explicit acknowledgment that the old plans no longer apply.

**In summary:**

- The emergence of a FIFO/DIDO workforce is not in and of itself a negative event for rural communities: the challenge lies in the way that the accommodation and services responses are managed to include and integrate this workforce into the existing community, rather than setting it apart.
- Investment in community regeneration and social inclusiveness is required to position the community to maximise opportunities to build a vibrant and connected community.
- Government at all levels need to acknowledge that the rules need to be different when rapid industrial change occurs in rural communities: sticking to the plan does not work and requires more investment at a later stage to address problems that could have been managed more effectively if tackled proactively.
- Urgent investment in social and affordable housing, and support services is required to protect the interests of the most vulnerable members of our community and to ensure that we are able to attract and retain essential workers in the community.
- The accommodation challenges presented by the emergence of a FIFO/DIDO workforce should be managed in socially responsible ways that provide opportunities for integration and participation in community life, and avoid the creation of high density monocultures and social silos.

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