

Issues

Christmas Island Housing Program

- 2.1 On 20 December 2010, DRARDLG notified the Committee that it would proceed with Project One (Drumsite Village) of the Christmas Island New Housing Program (the Program).
- 2.2 Projects Two and Three will be referred to the Committee for inquiry. The Committee views the three projects as stages of one greater project.
- 2.3 The Committee received a detailed briefing from DRARDLG and inspected the housing program sites on the Island.
- 2.4 The key project objective is the provision of approximately 40 dwellings to accommodate additional essential staff on Christmas Island, enabling housing currently leased on the private rental market to be released for use by the Christmas Island community.
- 2.5 The nominated site for Project One of the Program is located within an existing area of residential development at Drumsite, known as 'Drumsite Village', an area zoned for medium density residential use with existing service connections.
- 2.6 Sixteen dwellings will be delivered in Project One by early 2012. Another 16 dwellings will be built as Project Two, to minimise the use of the private housing market. In Project Three, the public housing stock will be extended by approximately ten dwellings, to make additional affordable housing available to the community.

- 2.7 The Committee is pleased with the progress of this project and appreciates the efforts of officials from DRARDLG in keeping the Committee informed and updated.
- 2.8 The Committee looks forward to receiving the referral for Projects Two and Three.

Wastewater and water supply

- 2.9 The Committee received a detailed briefing from DRARDLG and officials from Water Corporation, and inspected the Island's wastewater treatment plant (WTP). The WTP is currently being upgraded so that it has the capacity to meet current and future demands.
- 2.10 The regular Island population of approximately 1,500 produces 400 kilolitres of wastewater per day (kL/d). The rapid increase of the Island's population, primarily through the detention centre at North-west Point, resulted in a peak flow of 1,900 kL/d.
- 2.11 The WTP was originally designed to handle 920 kL/d, however was only capable of adequately treating 650 kL/d.
- 2.12 The plant's inability to adequately process high inflows resulted in final effluent quality being below that required under licence conditions.
- 2.13 The upgraded WTP is being converted from an 'intermittent decant' system to 'continuous flow', and will be capable of treating 1,750 kL/d.
- 2.14 The Committee was satisfied that the WTP upgrade is necessary to meet the Island's needs.
- 2.15 However, there were two key aspects of the WTP that concerned the Committee, namely the discharge of treated water and the disposal of sludge. Both relate to the security of the Island's fresh water supply and are discussed below.

Discharge of treated water

- 2.16 The Committee was informed during a briefing that treated wastewater was released to the ocean. At the site inspection, the Committee learned that treated wastewater is actually released down into a fissure in the limestone bedrock at the edge of the plant area, with that fissure leading directly to the ocean.

- 2.17 It is understood that the fissure also leads back and up into the area behind the WTP. The Committee is concerned that there is the possibility of contamination of the Island's water supply, particularly given that freshwater is drawn from close to sea level at some places on the Island.
- 2.18 The Committee seeks reassurance from all relevant authorities, including DRARDLG, Water Corporation and the Christmas Island Shire, that treated wastewater is not entering the freshwater supply on the Island.

Recommendation 1

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government undertake an assessment of water flows to determine what happens to treated wastewater that leaves the Christmas Island Wastewater Treatment Plant, and the potential risks to the freshwater supply.

Sludge disposal

- 2.19 A by-product of the wastewater treatment process is the remaining solid material, commonly known as sludge. The upgraded WTP has a new sludge processing system in the form of a large dryer. The WTP produces approximately one tonne of dry sludge per day.
- 2.20 Currently, the only way of disposing of sludge on the Island is to deposit it at the Island's landfill site, which is located at a high point on the Island.
- 2.21 The Committee is concerned that there is currently no certainty about the risk that the sludge might impact on the Island's water supply, which is drawn from ground water.
- 2.22 Additionally, it is the view of the Christmas Island Shire that the aquifer supplying fresh water to the Island's inhabitants is not fully understood.
- 2.23 The Committee seeks reassurance from all relevant authorities, including DRARDLG, Water Corporation and the Christmas Island Shire, that adequate measures are taken to ensure that contaminants from sludge are not entering the freshwater supply on the Island.

Recommendation 2

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government undertake an assessment of the Christmas Island water supply to determine whether any water supply areas are affected by contaminants from the Island's landfill site.

Recommendation 3

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government examine alternatives for disposal of solid waste from the Christmas Island Wastewater Treatment Plant.

General waste disposal and recycling

2.24 During the Committee's inspections, particularly at the Island's landfill site, it was evident that general waste disposal and recycling are issues that need to be dealt with by the Christmas Island Shire and the Island community in general.

2.25 Currently, the Christmas Island Shire does not operate any waste minimisation or recycling strategies or programs. The Shire's website states further:

The development of effective strategies will require community participation and cooperation and island residents are encouraged to start considering how they may individually contribute towards waste reduction within their own households.¹

2.26 With no waste minimisation strategies or recycling programs, and limited options for disposal of waste, it is necessary for the Christmas Island Shire to develop and implement innovative strategies to deal with waste on the Island.

2.27 DRARDLG informed the Committee that a Waste Management Strategy has been developed by Murdoch University. DRARDLG explained that a funding agreement to implement the recommendations in the strategy has been agreed with the Shire of Christmas Island. However, the allocated

1 'Christmas Island Shire - Waste minimisation' <www.christmas.shire.gov.cx/Environmental_Services/wastemin.html>, accessed 30 August 2011.

funding will not cover the cost of all the recommendations in the strategy and the Shire has informally requested an additional \$2.1 million to complete the waste management project.

- 2.28 The Committee notes that the Christmas Island Shire may learn from some examples of strategies for dealing with waste on islands with small populations in other parts of the world. For example, the community on New Zealand's Stewart Island (population of approximately 400 people) established a resource recovery centre to process and recycle up to 40 per cent of material that would otherwise need to be shipped, at significant cost, to landfill at Invercargill on the South Island.² The Rakiura Resource Recovery Centre on Stewart Island was built by Southland District Council and provides facilities for recycling, composting, hazardous waste storage, a 'Second Chance' shed, and a baler for pressing cardboard and paper. Innovative recycling uses at the Centre include turning glass bottles into base course for tracks and drainage around the island (there is no gravel available on the island). Waste wood is used for firewood, and a tonne of kitchen scraps goes to a worm farm each week.³ An estimated 1,200 tonnes of waste have been diverted from landfill over a seven year period.⁴
- 2.29 The Committee trusts that the Shire of Christmas Island adheres to the Australian Government's National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development⁵ and the National Waste Policy⁶ as it begins the process of waste minimisation policy development and implementation.
- 2.30 The Committee looks forward to receiving feedback from DRARDLG and the Shire of Christmas Island on the development and implementation of waste management strategies for the Island.

2 'Rakiura Resource Recovery Centre' <<http://www.zerowaste.co.nz/default,581.sm>>, accessed 30 August 2011.

3 'Rakiura Resource Recovery Centre' <<http://www.zerowaste.co.nz/default,581.sm>>, accessed 30 August 2011.

4 'Southland Environment Awards - Enviroweek Newsletter' 14 July 2011 < www.es.govt.nz/media/9972/enviroweek-27-14-jul-11.pdf >, accessed 30 August 2011.

5 'National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development' <www.environment.gov.au/about/esd/publications/strategy/wastes.html>, accessed 30 August 2011.

6 'National Waste Policy' <www.environment.gov.au/wastepolicy/about/index.html>, accessed 30 August 2011.

Power generation

- 2.31 The Committee received a detailed briefing from DRARDLG and inspected the Christmas Island Power Station. This project will increase the output of the Christmas Island Power Station through the replacement of three ageing, diesel driven, electricity generators.
- 2.32 The replacement generators will be sited adjacent to existing power generators and will have secure housing, ventilation, fire suppression, cooling water and fuel intake facilities.
- 2.33 Prior to the commencement of the project, there were six diesel driven generator sets installed at the Christmas Island Power Station:
- generator sets Nos 1, 2 and 3 are 40 years old;
 - generator set No 4 is 37 years old, and expected to provide a further five years' service; and
 - generator sets Nos 5 and 6 are 14 years old and are expected to provide a further 20 to 25 years of service.
- 2.34 Diesel generator sets Nos 1, 2 and 3 have reached the end of acceptable life, largely due to poor design for their current application, poor environmental performance and lack of manufacturer's support.
- 2.35 In addition, there is a need to increase overall capacity at the station to cater for an increase in population on the Island, which has largely been driven by an increase in the number of detainees at the immigration detention centres, and the associated increase in Commonwealth agency staff and contractors.
- 2.36 DRARDLG informed the Committee of the progress of the works, indicating that:
- mechanical, electrical and civil design has been completed and off-site construction is well advanced;
 - the four new generator sets have been constructed, and acceptance testing has been completed; the sets were shipped from Finland in April 2011 and were scheduled to arrive on the Island at the end of May 2011;
 - construction of civil works started in April, as soon as practicable after the end of the monsoon season; construction of the concrete foundations was scheduled for mid June 2011; and
 - a new building to house the generators was prefabricated in Perth; concrete wall panels have arrived on the Island.

- 2.37 DRARDLG stated that the project is on track for completion by 25 November 2011.
- 2.38 The Committee is aware that the largest user of power on Christmas Island is the immigration detention centre at North-west Point (prior to the centre opening, the phosphate mine on the Island was the largest user of power). The Committee noted that, during its inspection at the detention centre at North-west Point, there appeared to be minimal effort at conserving power; almost all external lights were on during daylight hours.
- 2.39 The Committee was satisfied that the power station upgrade is necessary to meet the Island's needs.

Approval of projects

- 2.40 The wastewater treatment plant upgrade and the power supply upgrade projects were notified to the Committee on 15 December 2009. The cost of the works was estimated to be \$44 million. The Australian Government considered these projects to be urgent works, with a letter from the Attorney-General's Department⁷ stating that 'these works need to commence before February 2010', that is, before Parliament resumed. The projects were not referred to the Committee, nor were expediency motions on the grounds of urgency moved in the House of Representatives.
- 2.41 The Committee acknowledges the circumstances but is uncomfortable with the decision made by the department that the works proceed without referral or expediency motion.
- 2.42 The Committee received a public briefing on the two projects from Attorney-General's Department officials on 11 March 2010.⁸ During that briefing, the Committee was informed that design parameters for the project were to consider a total Island population projected to increase to about 4,000 by March 2010.⁹
- 2.43 With regard to these projects being considered urgent, the Committee notes that the Attorney-General's Department, after being informed of the projected Island population increase in October 2010, did not act until 15

7 At that time, the Branch responsible for Christmas Island projects was located within the Attorney-General's Department. That responsibility was transferred to the Department of Regional Australia, Regional Development and Local Government when that department was created.

8 'Other briefings - Christmas Island infrastructure upgrade' <www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/pwc/briefingdocuments/index.htm>

9 Mr Julian Yates, Attorney-General's Department, transcript of evidence, 11 March 2010, p. 3.

December 2010, less than two weeks into a two month parliamentary recess.

2.44 The Committee notes that House sat until 2 December 2010, essentially allowing considerable time for the Department to refer the projects or indeed to seek an expediency motion on the grounds of urgency.

2.45 The Committee also notes that the Governor-General may refer a public work to the Committee at any time when the Parliament is not in session or the House is adjourned for a period exceeding one month. A referral to the Committee could have seen the inquiry process completed by mid February.

2.46 The Committee noted during its inspections in June 2011 that both projects were still not complete.

Detention centre medical facilities

2.47 The Committee inspected the three immigration detention facilities on Christmas Island, namely:

- Christmas Island Immigration Detention Centre (North-west Point);
- Construction Camp Alternative Place of Detention (Construction Camp); and
- Phosphate Hill Alternative Place of Detention (Phosphate Hill).

Access to health care

2.48 The Committee is aware of media reports from June 2011, suggesting that detainees have been denied medical care.¹⁰ The Committee understands that provision of health care services may be difficult given logistical boundaries and the particular circumstance on Christmas Island. However, the Committee expects detainees to have the access to medical treatment that every member of society expects.

10 'Malaysia-bound detainees denied medical care', ABC News, 22 June 2011. <www.abc.net.au/news/2011-06-22/malaysia-bound-detainees-denied-medical-care/2767786>, accessed 30 August 2011.

North-west Point

- 2.49 The Committee met with contracted medical staff working at North-west Point. The staff members indicated that the medical facilities area is too small given the number of clients at the detention centre.
- 2.50 Despite being a purpose-built medical facility, staff stated that there are not enough consultation rooms for the number of patients. Some offices had been converted to examination and consultation rooms as a way of addressing the shortfall.
- 2.51 The Committee observed that the waiting area for clients is too small, with many having to wait outside. It also appeared that clients accessing mental health and counselling services received little privacy, having to share waiting areas with clients accessing general medical services. Maintaining confidentiality and privacy is essentially impossible.

Recommendation 4

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government Department of Immigration and Citizenship review existing medical facilities and services at the Christmas Island Immigration Detention Centre (North-west Point), with a view to ensuring that all detainees have full access to all medical services in an appropriate and suitable medical centre environment.

Construction Camp

- 2.52 The Committee also met with contracted staff from the medical centre at the Construction Camp detention centre. It was immediately obvious to the Committee that the medical facility is far too small and not fit for purpose.
- 2.53 The medical facility is highly unlikely to be able to cater for a full client load at the detention centre, nor would it be able to cope with any client surge capacity.
- 2.54 The Committee observed that:
- the examination spaces are small, side by side and have no privacy whatsoever;
 - there are no discrete waiting areas for medical centre clients;

- the office, kitchen and ablutions facilities for staff are poor;
 - the drugs store and supply facility is removed from the medical facility itself, in a quite separate location;
 - interpreters use the facility as a waiting area; and
 - the medical facility is wholly within the detention centre, requiring staff to move through the compound to get to and from their workplace; this may prevent egress for staff during times of unrest in the compound.
- 2.55 The Committee understands that Construction Camp is an Alternative Place of Detention, meaning that it is designed to take overflow clients once the immigration detention centre at North-west Point is near or at capacity.
- 2.56 The Committee was informed that, as at 25 September 2011, the Christmas Island detention centres housed the following numbers of clients:
- North-west Point - 663
 - Construction Camp - 252
 - Phosphate Hill - 0
- 2.57 The Committee was informed that North-west Point has an operational capacity of 400, with a contingency capacity of 850. Construction Camp's operational capacity is 200, with a contingency capacity of 310.
- 2.58 The Committee is of the opinion that the building and operation standards of a detention facility that is intended to be used irregularly, such as Construction Camp, should not be lower than that of any other centre.
- 2.59 Regardless of Construction Camp's status, or how often or how long the centre is used, the medical facilities there should be of the same standard as those found at a regularly used, continuous-operation immigration detention centre. The medical facility should be fit for purpose, if and when it is used.
- 2.60 The Committee recommends that a fit-for-purpose medical centre be designed and constructed for the Construction Camp detention centre. Design must be completed in consultation with detention centre management, medical staff and the Department of Immigration and Citizenship's Health Advisory Group.

Recommendation 5

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government design and construct a fit-for-purpose medical centre for the Construction Camp Alternative Place of Detention on Christmas Island, which will include (but not be limited to):

- a sufficient number of discrete and appropriately sized consultation and examination rooms or suites;
- appropriate client waiting areas;
- a secure drug store and dispensary;
- separate waiting and consultation areas for mental health care and counselling services;
- adequate storage for all medical supplies; and
- suitable kitchen and ablution facilities for staff.

The medical facility should be attached to existing administrative areas and/or compound entrance or exit to facilitate access and egress for staff, while still allowing access for detention centre clients. Detention centre management, medical staff and the Department of Immigration and Citizenship's Detention Health Advisory Group must be consulted regarding the design of any proposed medical facility.

Phosphate Hill

- 2.61 The Committee inspected the medical facility at the Phosphate Hill detention centre, and observed that it functions largely as an extension of the main medical facility across the road at Construction Camp.
- 2.62 The Committee noted that the Phosphate Hill medical facility seems sufficient for consultation services at this point in time.

Australian Federal Police headquarters

- 2.63 The Committee appreciated the opportunity to inspect existing Australian federal Police (AFP) facilities on Christmas Island, and briefly inspected a potential site for a proposed new AFP headquarters.

- 2.64 Information concerning the proposed AFP headquarters discussed below was largely drawn from meetings and discussions with representatives of the AFP, representatives of DRARDLG, and from a strategic business case¹¹ prepared for DRARDLG by consultants GHD Pty Ltd.
- 2.65 On inspection, the Committee found the existing facilities at the AFP headquarters to be inadequate, sub-standard and not fit for purpose.
- 2.66 In particular, the Committee made the following observations regarding the facilities:
- there is no separate and secure space for incident control;
 - there is little or no dedicated space for processing persons in custody;
 - there are only very small and inadequate spaces for storage of policing equipment;
 - office space for AFP staff is small and cramped;
 - the weapon unloading facility is currently in a disused cell and is grossly inadequate;
 - a cell unfit for occupation is used as a storage area;
 - the remand area, including cells and yard, is inadequate, with officers unable to observe persons in cells, and is unsafe for both officers and persons on remand; the yard is also subject to significant seawater inundation during storm surges;
 - kitchen facilities are small and immediately adjacent to a toilet; and
 - there has been significant structural damage to the building, due to a recent earthquake, to the point where the building may be unsafe for occupation;
 - poor structural integrity has led to fixtures such as window pelmets becoming unsafe, and paint peeling constantly;
 - toilets facilities are inadequate, with no separate facilities for men and women.
- 2.67 The Committee also noted that there are no facilities for periodic substantial increases in the number of AFP officers who travel to

11 GHD Pty Ltd, *Christmas Island Police Station – Strategic Business Case and Concept Designs*. April 2011. Prepared for the Department of Regional Australia, Regional Development and Local Government.

Christmas Island for several weeks at a time to provide support to security operations at the immigration detention centres.

- 2.68 The Committee was disappointed to discover AFP officers operating in such appalling conditions. These officers are already operating in a highly stressed environment and deserve better accommodation.

New headquarters

- 2.69 The Committee understands that DRARDLG recognised that a new AFP headquarters as a priority need. DRARDLG engaged GHD Pty Ltd in November 2010 to develop a strategic business case for a new Christmas Island Australian Federal Police Headquarters.
- 2.70 One of the recommendations from the GHD report is for a detailed business case to be prepared as soon as possible to confirm the suitability of the recommended scope and site for a new facility for the AFP.
- 2.71 DRARDLG anticipates that a detailed business case will be completed by March 2012. DRARDLG expects to seek funding for a new AFP headquarters in the 2012-13 Budget process.
- 2.72 The Committee is deeply concerned by the sub-standard condition of the existing AFP headquarters on Christmas Island. The Committee recognises that AFP officers are currently asked to work in inadequate and potentially unsafe facilities, and often in very trying circumstances.
- 2.73 The Committee considers the establishment of a new AFP headquarters an urgency priority.
- 2.74 The Committee therefore recommends that the Australian Government move to construct new headquarters for the AFP on Christmas Island as a most urgent priority.

Recommendation 6

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government, as an urgent priority and outside of the normal Budget process, construct new headquarters for the Australian Federal Police on Christmas Island.

Accommodation for other agencies

- 2.75 The Committee understands that DRARDLG is currently reviewing the accommodation of Commonwealth agencies on Christmas Island, with a view to consolidating some accommodation and moving agencies to the most appropriate location.
- 2.76 Further, the Committee was advised that there is the possibility of establishing a consolidated government agency facility which would accommodate the AFP headquarters, DRARDLG staff and the Christmas Island Administrator.
- 2.77 The Committee looks forward to the outcomes of the accommodation review.

Ms Janelle Saffin MP

Chair

13 October 2011