

Senate Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee
ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE
Budget Estimates 2017 - 2018

Prime Minister and Cabinet Portfolio

Department/Agency: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
Outcome/Program: Outcome 2: Indigenous
Topic: Asbestos Issues in Northern Territory Communities

Senator: McCarthy

Question reference number: 96

Type of question: FPA Friday 26 May 2017, page 46

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 7 July 2017

Number of pages: 2

Question:

Senator McCARTHY: Terrific. Thank you. Can I take you to asbestos, please. Minister, you would be aware, of course, of many media reports regarding legacy asbestos issues in the Northern Territory communities. You said the issues around legacy asbestos were urgent. Have you spoken to your Northern Territory counterparts about sharing the responsibility of cleaning up legacy asbestos waste in remote communities?

Senator Scullion: I would have to check exactly what the nature of that conversation has been, but we have certainly made them aware over a very long period of time about the safety issues as they come to bear. I have done things like say to occupational health and safety that this is an issue, whether it was in Tennant Creek or whether it was Yuendumu recently or, more historically, in Croker Island. I have done those things. Yes, in fact it is their entire responsibility, and I have reminded them of that. But we have been involved, because we know the extent to which there is an expectation, particularly in remote areas, that we would help out where we can. We have helped out in the past specifically with some of those matters.

Senator McCARTHY: Has anyone from the communities got in touch with your office about legacy asbestos?

Senator Scullion: I would have to take that on notice, but, to my recollection, not directly. People have spoken anecdotally when I have visited communities, particularly in the Western Desert. In one particular Western Desert community, there has been an issue where somebody has found that, underneath part of the existing footpath, there appears to be material that has turned out to be asbestos. That has been reported. Immediately, on all occasions, the Northern Territory government have moved to ensure that it has been excluded. I understand that in that case there is a plan to place a concrete footpath over that area.

Senator McCARTHY: Have any recent studies been done to determine what communities have legacy asbestos issues?

Senator Scullion: I understand there was one done. I will just have to find out how long ago. It was not recently, but I think one was done.

...

Ms Marie Taylor: I have some information for you. Some funding was provided by the Commonwealth under the Stronger Futures partnership, now called NT RAI. The Australian government provided \$45 million over four years from 2012-13 to 2015-16 for asbestos removal in remote Australia, especially in the Northern Territory. As I understand it, that funding to the Northern Territory has now been fully expended. I am not aware of any recent discussions about additional contributions to do with asbestos, but there were some in the past.

Senator McCARTHY: Did you receive a report as to where that funding went and what happened?

Ms Marie Taylor: I would have to take that on notice. It is some time ago that that finished.

Senator Scullion: They would all be conditioned, and there will be a report somewhere.

Senator McCARTHY: Thank you.

Answer:

The Minister for Indigenous Affairs has discussed asbestos issues with the Northern Territory (NT) Government given its responsibility for the management and removal of asbestos in remote NT communities.

The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet is not aware of any correspondence to the Minister for Indigenous Affairs from residents of remote communities.

The Australian Government has funded the NT Government to establish and maintain an asbestos register for all assets in remote NT communities.

The NT Government provided six-monthly reports on the asbestos removal programme, which ran from July 2012 to June 2016, in line with the requirements under the National Partnership Agreement on NT Remote Aboriginal Investment.