

Chapter 3

Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs Portfolio

Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs

3.1 This chapter contains the key issues discussed during the 2010-2011 additional estimates hearings for the Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs portfolio.

3.2 The committee heard evidence from the department on Thursday 24 February 2011. Areas of the portfolio were called in the following order:

- Cross Outcomes/Corporate Matters
- Families and Children
- Seniors
- Community Capability and the Vulnerable
- Women
- Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency (EOWA)
- Disability and Carers
- Housing

Cross Outcomes/Corporate Matters

3.3 The committee began by asking the department to inform them of the impact of the recent floods in Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria and the affect of Cyclone Yasi in Queensland and the bushfires in Western Australia. The department told the committee there were no personal injuries recorded and no significant damage to any buildings. The head office in Brisbane was evacuated for a few days and the Cairns office was closed because of Cyclone Yasi, but Dr Geoff Harmer, Secretary, confirmed that the department has returned to normal operations. Dr Harmer also noted that following the recent earthquake in New Zealand, the department made contact with the head of the New Zealand Ministry of Social Development to offer any assistance they could provide. The committee requested that when the time is available, they would appreciate a report on the emergency response plans for the recent natural disasters and the role that the department played at a regional level.¹

1 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 24 February 2011, pp 4–5.

3.4 The committee sought further information on the benefits provided in the employee collective agreement, such as the provisions in place for the Promoting Good Health payments.² The committee also asked about the department's cultural leave and what criteria is used to determine an appropriate use of cultural leave. Officers explained that cultural leave covers a number of things, and the list of guidelines for such leave can be provided on notice. Officers were confident however that the policy is comparable with other departments. Officers also informed the committee that the current collective agreement is due to expire in November 2011.³

Departmental trial of iPads

3.5 The committee asked the department to provide information on the amount spent on iPads, the number of iPads purchased and the people they were purchased for. Officers explained they are essentially for senior officers and described it as a 'very modest and targeted trial'.⁴ Officers were keen to highlight the security measures in place to ensure there are no breaches, noting the department adheres to the Defence Signals Directorate guidelines and does not allow any secret or confidential information on the iPads.⁵

3.6 The committee asked the department to explain any unique functions that made the purchase of the iPads necessary. Officers explained that they are being trialled in a number of ways and were being considered as a replacement for laptops when staff are travelling. The trial is due to complete in early March, with a view to discuss how they could be potentially deployed in a broader context.⁶

Families and Children

Paid Parental Leave (PPL)

3.7 The committee asked officers to clarify figures listed in the FaHCSIA budget statements, and how they relate to current spending figures. Officers explained that the PPL scheme started on 1 January 2011. Officers explained that there are two particular targeted 'client groups': the people entitled to the payment itself and the employers who will be transferring those payments to their employees.⁷

3.8 The committee noted the potential for people to access two schemes of paid parental leave.⁸ Officers explained that there are many variables involved in whether

2 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 24 February 2011, pp 11–12.

3 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 24 February 2011, pp 6–8.

4 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 24 February 2011, p. 9.

5 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 24 February 2011, p. 9.

6 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 24 February 2011, p. 9.

7 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 24 February 2011, pp 14–15.

8 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 24 February 2011, p. 15.

one could access both a government sponsored and an employee sponsored scheme, such as what stage they choose to take their leave. Officers clarified:

One of the objectives in the design of the scheme was to allow, for purposes of maternal and child health, for more time between working mothers with very young babies. Should a person choose to tack on to their employer-provided maternity or parental leave scheme, this payment would not be double-dipping. It would be merely an extension of the possible time away from work.⁹

3.9 The committee asked a number of other questions as to specific cases to determine who specifically would be eligible for the scheme, such as an Australian citizen who gives birth in another country. Officers replied:

Yes, it is possible for an Australian citizen to claim, and for an Australian citizen who has been working overseas to meet the work test by working overseas.¹⁰

Family Support Program

3.10 The committee sought information on the progress of the tender for the Family Support Program, noting that when funding is dependent on the upcoming budget, it can create discomfort for service providers. Officers explained that the department is in the process of approving the new program guidelines and the 'templates' that will be in place for the funding agreements.¹¹

3.11 The committee asked officers about particular programs offered under the Family Support Program and the likelihood of those programs being continued. Officers explained that the early intervention and prevention programs, as well as pre-marriage counselling and couple counselling, will continue to be part of the Family Support Program.¹² When questioned on the eligibility of people seeking assistance in those areas, officers explained:

Certainly our expectation would be that no one who needs a service is denied that service. Different organisations have fees policies that they apply, but that is a very clear requirement that people are not denied a service who are unable to contribute.¹³

3.12 The committee noted these services are available for everyone, but that organisations place a priority on 'vulnerable clients'. As a result, the committee asked officers to explain the department's definition of 'vulnerable'. Officers were keen to

9 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 24 February 2011, p. 16.

10 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 24 February 2011, p. 18.

11 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 24 February 2011, pp 20–21.

12 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 24 February 2011, p. 24.

13 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 24 February 2011, p. 24.

note that the department does not 'own' the definition, but that work has taken place with the service providers to establish a draft definition of vulnerability.¹⁴

Seniors

3.13 The committee sought further information on the Broadband for Seniors kiosks. Officers reported a total of 2,000 kiosks established, noting that the location of each was based on a high need postal area, as well as the number of seniors, education levels, income levels, and the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEFIA) score. Officers further noted that the location was also reliant upon applications by individual communities working with the provider, with applications being assessed on a case by case basis to make sure that the highest need areas were given priority.¹⁵

Community Capability and the Vulnerable

Gambling Reform

3.14 The committee queried why the department did not make a submission to the Productivity Commission's inquiry into gambling reform. Officers explained that while the department has programs that fund emergency relief suppliers, they do not require the suppliers to provide the reasons why people affected by gambling have sought assistance and for those reasons did not provide a submission to the inquiry.¹⁶

Income Management

3.15 The committee sought further information on the demand or uptake of services during the rolling out of income management in the Northern Territory. Officers told the committee from 2008-09 to 2009-10, the client uptake increased significantly from 5,277 to 14,000 people. The department were able to provide data for 2009-10, but noted that figures on the new rollout are not due to be provided by the services providers until the end of the financial year. Officers also informed the committee that since the 2010 election, funding has increased to cover approximately 100 additional communities and now covers 180 communities in total, providing greater coverage in the Northern Territory.¹⁷

Women and the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency (EOWA)

3.16 Officers began by updating the committee on the representation for women on Australian government boards during 2009-10. Human Services notified the department of an error in the calculations for the report, and as such, the report was

14 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 24 February 2011, pp 24–25.

15 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 24 February 2011, p. 28.

16 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 24 February 2011, p. 30.

17 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 24 February 2011, p. 33.

removed from the website to avoid misleading the public or the parliament. Officers informed the committee of the updated figures:

At this stage, I am able to report that the overall figure as at 30 June 2010 is 34.3 per cent, which is comparable to the 2007-08 figure of 32.8 per cent and the 2008-09 figure of 33.4 per cent.¹⁸

3.17 The committee queried the position of permanent director of EOWA, noting that the current acting director has been in the position for over two years. Officers reported that they anticipate the appointment will be announced within weeks.¹⁹

1800 RESPECT

3.18 The committee sought clarification on the discrepancy between an answer to question on notice and a press release by the Minister for the commencement date for the 1800 RESPECT counselling service. The committee noted that while the service commenced on 1 October 2010, the Minister did not announce it until 5 October. Officers explained that the telephone number was being automatically transferred from a previous service and explained the delay in the Minister's announcement was due to the requirement to ensure there were no problems in the transfer for the first few days.²⁰

Office for Women

3.19 The committee asked the department for an update on the progress of the establishment of the Office for Woman. Officers reported that in December 2009, the Office for Women issued a request for tender for a panel arrangement of gender experts. From that request, 43 tenders were successful, with 38 contracts signed to date. The contracts are now published online, and APS agencies were notified on 18 February that the panel has now been established.²¹

Disability and Carers

3.20 The committee discussed the selection process for disability ambassadors announced at the Disability Awards in 2010. Officers explained that the department assisted that process by providing suggestions, but that the appointment was essentially a decision for government. The committee raised the issue of the appointment of Ms Catherine Deveny as ambassador, noting that some of her public comments were a cause for concern. The Minister advised that the appointment was for international day specifically, and the appointment will not be renewed.²²

18 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 24 February 2011, p. 38.

19 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 24 February 2011, p. 38.

20 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 24 February 2011, pp 40–41.

21 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 24 February 2011, p. 44.

22 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 24 February 2011, pp 47–49.

Disability Support Pension (DSP)

3.21 The committee queried why the department had not yet published the latest Characteristics of Disability Support Pension Recipients report. Officers explained they have been unable to meet the timeline due to competing priorities, but that the target date for release is the end of March.²³

3.22 The department provided details on the number of DSP recipients, separating those who were subject to arrangements before the 2006 reforms and those who were recipients afterwards. The committee queried why the recipient numbers were growing at a particularly fast rate when the rate of unemployment is continuing to fall. Officers explained that many factors affect the total number of people receiving DSP, but that economic conditions rarely affect the total. Officers further explained that:

The drivers of DSP also include an increasing number of women seeking the payment as a result of other payments being closed that they might previously have been eligible for, which includes increasing the age of the age pension, the closure of the wife pension and the restriction of parenting payment. DSP numbers are also driven by very low exit rates. Once people are on the payment they tend—sadly, as the minister observed in a newspaper article—not to leave the payment unless they qualify for age pension or they die.²⁴

Housing

3.23 The committee began by asking what effects the recent natural disasters have had on the government's social housing investments. Officers replied that in relation to Queensland, Queensland Housing adopted a policy over many years to build above the one in 100-year flood level, resulting in the vast amount of stimulus housing being unaffected. Officers noted they have not received all information in relation to the damage caused by Cyclone Yasi because it has not been made available by the Queensland Government yet.²⁵

3.24 The committee asked the department about a company contracted to build social housing that has reportedly since collapsed. Officers informed the committee they are aware of these reports, and that the stimulus process involved approximately 2,500 projects, of which a small handful ended up with this particular construction company. Officers emphasised that the responsibility for managing the program rests with state governments and that each jurisdiction has different ways of ensuring subcontractors get paid. This particular case occurred in New South Wales, where Housing New South Wales has measures in place that seek statutory declarations from companies that ensure they are in a position to pay their subcontractors.²⁶

23 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 24 February 2011, p. 50.

24 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 24 February 2011, pp 50–51.

25 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 24 February 2011, pp 57–58.

26 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 24 February 2011, pp 58–89.

Public Housing Waiting Lists

3.25 The committee raised a number of figures that showed the number of people on waiting lists had increased, but also that the number of days housing stock was left vacant had increased. Officers explained that it is quite a complex environment, but that a significant part of the increase in the number of people on waiting lists can be explained by the transition of jurisdictions using multiple lists, to using a single waiting list. This single list is a consolidated waiting list across all types of social housing comprising of community housing, indigenous housing and mainstream public housing.²⁷ Officers explained that while not all states and territories were currently using a consolidated waiting list, the integration of waiting lists is one of the reform agenda items that comprise the National Affordable Housing Agreement.²⁸

3.26 Dr Harmer provided another explanation for the increase in number of people on waiting lists, stating:

In our experience, waiting lists often reflect the possibility of being housed, so when there are some additional funds in public housing as there has been recently, the expectation of being housed goes up and people feel it is worthwhile putting their names on the waiting list.²⁹

3.27 Minister Arbib also noted that the data was collected both during the global financial crisis and prior to the social housing stimulus being completed, which may have had an effect. Officers noted the average turnaround time between tenancies could be attributed to maintenance taking place on the property, as 97.7 per cent of public housing stock was tenanted as at 30 June 2010.³⁰

Homelessness

3.28 The committee sought an update on progress for new homelessness legislation. The department reported they are advancing the work on the National Quality Framework, which is seen as a key initiative when addressing homelessness. Officers are taking legal advice to determine the parameters of the proposed Commonwealth legislation.³¹

27 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 24 February 2011, pp 63–64.

28 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 24 February 2011, p. 64.

29 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 24 February 2011, p. 64.

30 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 24 February 2011, pp 64–65.

31 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 24 February 2011, p. 68.

Retirement

3.29 The committee took the opportunity to acknowledge Dr Harmer's retirement and last appearance at Senate Estimates. The committee and Minister acknowledged Dr Harmer's contribution to the public service since his commencement in 1978.³²

32 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 24 February 2011, pp 72–73.