

## 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 2011-2012 additional estimates hearings for the Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs portfolio.

3.2 The committee heard evidence from the department on Thursday 16 February 2012. Areas of the portfolio were called in the following order:

- Cross Outcomes/Corporate Matters
- Families and Children
- Australian Institute of Family Studies
- Housing
- Community Capability and the Vulnerable
- Seniors
- Disability and Carers
- Women
- Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency

3.3 The committee also heard evidence from the department on Thursday 22 March 2012. The area of the portfolio that was called was the Torres Strait Regional Authority.

#### Cross Outcomes/Corporate Matters

3.4 The committee sought information on answers to questions on notice provided from the previous round of estimates. Mr Finn Pratt, Secretary of the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, stated that all answers to questions on notice had been received by the day of the estimates hearing and that the majority of those answers were delivered before the due date. Officers added that 262 questions had been taken on notice and that 56.9 per cent of answers were submitted before the deadline.<sup>1</sup>

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1 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 16 February 2012, p. 6.

### ***Assistance for Carbon Price Impacts***

3.5 The committee questioned the department on the assistance provide to citizens to offset the increase of cost of living created by the carbon price and whether this would be an ongoing commitment.<sup>2</sup> Officers replied that government is assisting low and middle-income households by providing tax cuts and a 1.7 per cent increase in pensions, allowance and family payments:

Some of the elements of that assistance are [...] all taxpayers earning under \$80,000 a year will get a tax cut and most will get a tax cut of at least \$300 a year... The 3.4 million pensioners will get a payment increase... There is assistance for low-income households who may not receive tax cuts or government payment through an annual low income supplement... The assistance is ongoing.<sup>3</sup>

### **Families and Children**

3.6 The committee queried the progress of the Forgotten Australians exhibition. Officers reported that the exhibition launched on 15 November 2011 at the National Museum of Australia and has had approximately 1500 visitors per week. The exhibition closed on 26 February 2012 with the expectation that around 50 000 people would have attended. Officers explained that it also included a public forum in which issues around Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants were discussed. The department stated that the amount of public interest in the exhibition shows how effectively this aspect of Australia's history has been brought to light.<sup>4</sup>

### **Australian Institute of Family Studies**

3.7 The committee asked a series of questions relating to the adoption research project being undertaken by Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS). The committee was particularly interested in whether the project would meet its deadline and the process of public engagement.<sup>5</sup>

3.8 Officers reported that 1300 people had responded to the online survey and that it is expected that approximately 1500 people in total will have participated when it is closed. In addition, focus groups and face-to-face interviews are being conducted, with over 300 people having participated.<sup>6</sup> The department clarified that it was on track to meet its deadline.<sup>7</sup>

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2 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 16 February 2012, pp. 15–16.

3 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 16 February 2012, pp. 15–16.

4 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 16 February 2012, p. 23.

5 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 16 February 2012, pp. 26–27.

6 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 16 February 2012, p. 26.

7 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 16 February 2012, p. 27.

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## Housing

3.9 The committee sought an update on the Social Housing Initiative. Officers reported that they are reasonably on track in terms of the allocated construction timetable and that the initiative will be close to full completion by 30 June 2012. The department added that there would be a few projects that could be completed after the deadline and that only 28 sites had not yet commenced construction. These sites are located in Victoria and they would incorporate sites already under construction rather than new sites.<sup>8</sup>

## Community Capability and the Vulnerable

### *Gambling*

3.10 The committee queried statements made by game manufacturers as to whether or not the ACT poker machine trial date was unrealistic. Officers reassured the committee by explaining that manufacturers had been consulted on the trial for the ACT as well as its time frame. The department added that an independent technical adviser was also consulted.<sup>9</sup>

### Seniors

3.11 The committee sought information on senior internet kiosks, whether they were successful and if there was any training involved for the use of the kiosks.<sup>10</sup> Officers were eager to share the success of the senior internet kiosks stating that:

The kiosks have been very successful. We have heard of lots of stories where people have not had any involvement with the internet but, after a period of time, they have actually been very comfortable to use it for things such as Skype and keeping in contact with family.<sup>11</sup>

3.12 The department highlighted the tutoring involved with the internet kiosks, including the use of the mouse and, depending on the individual, different programs available. The tutoring is conducted by volunteers from the organisation that hosts the kiosk.<sup>12</sup>

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8 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 16 February 2012, p. 30.

9 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 16 February 2012, p. 51.

10 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 16 February 2012, p. 63.

11 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 16 February 2012, p. 63.

12 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 16 February 2012, p. 63.

## Disability and Carers

3.13 The committee asked officers about the community consultation process for the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).<sup>13</sup> Officers explained:

Certainly there is an intention to engage with stakeholders and the broader community... All officials, and I believe all ministers, are cognisant of the importance of that as their work on design and the NDIS progresses.<sup>14</sup>

3.14 The committee asked the department if there were any programs that had been proposed in relation to achieving the objectives laid out in the draft of the ten year roadmap for national mental health reform.<sup>15</sup> Officers stated that the draft is an attempt to create overarching general directions in order to guide reform rather than to build specific programs.<sup>16</sup>

## Women

3.15 The committee asked officers for an update on the priorities that the Office of Women is focused on. Officers outlined key priorities such as reforms to the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency (EOWA) and the implementation of the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women.<sup>17</sup>

3.16 The committee sought further information on domestic violence against women with disabilities and the actions that EOWA was taking in order to address this issue.<sup>18</sup> Officers replied:

[E]stablishing the Violence against Women Advisory Group [...] ensured that there was somebody [...] who was able to represent those views. We have now agreed a national plan through COAG with the states and territories. One of the projects that was seen as critical [...] relates to women with disabilities and trying to [...] understand the issues from their point of view but also understand the practical actions that can be taken.<sup>19</sup>

3.17 The department added that it had been working with Women with Disabilities Australia (WWDA) on the development of the project and that WWDA would be returning with a formal project proposal.<sup>20</sup>

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13 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 16 February 2012, p. 69.

14 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 16 February 2012, p. 69.

15 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 16 February 2012, p. 72.

16 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 16 February 2012, p. 72.

17 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 16 February 2012, p.76.

18 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 16 February 2012, p. 81.

19 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 16 February 2012, p. 81.

20 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 16 February 2012, p. 81.

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## Torres Strait Regional Authority

3.18 The committee welcomed representatives of the Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA) noting that it had been some since they had been invited to appear at estimates. The committee sought further information on the tuberculosis clinics in the Torres Strait Islands and the treatment of Papua New Guineans.<sup>21</sup> Mr John Kris, Chairperson of the Torres Strait Regional Authority, explained that a clinic is needed within or close to the Papua New Guinean community, eliminating the need for people to travel to the Torres Strait Islands.<sup>22</sup> Mr Kris added that if more TB clinics close there is a higher potential for people with untreated TB to be travelling to the Torres Strait Region for treatment.<sup>23</sup>

3.19 The committee asked officers about increased costs in food and petrol due to the distance from supply centres.<sup>24</sup> Officers stated that there was a significant increase to petrol prices in comparison to the mainland. Due to the lower median earning in the Torres Strait and higher food prices, food security becomes a clear issue.<sup>25</sup> Officers mentioned a possible solution consisting of a subsidy for the region to assist with maintaining an affordable cost of living, such as Tasmania's freight subsidy.<sup>26</sup>

3.20 The committee queried whether it would be beneficial for the TSRA to have separate statistics for Torres Strait Islanders separate from those for the Aboriginal people as a whole, for the closing the gap analysis.<sup>27</sup> Officers stated that although the major issues presented for the indigenous populations remain the same, it would be beneficial for the TSRA to have access to separate figures to aid planning for the region and so that baselines can be conceptualised.<sup>28</sup>

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21 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 22 March 2012, p. 4.

22 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 22 March 2012, p. 5.

23 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 22 March 2012, p. 4.

24 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 22 March 2012, p. 6.

25 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 22 March 2012, p. 7.

26 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 22 March 2012, p. 7.

27 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 22 March 2012, p. 7.

28 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 22 March 2012, p. 7.

