

Senate Community Affairs Committee
ANSWERS TO ESTIMATES QUESTIONS ON NOTICE
FAMILIES, HOUSING, COMMUNITY SERVICES AND
INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS PORTFOLIO
2012-13 Supplementary Estimates Hearings

Outcome Number: 7

Question No: 240

Topic: Remote Housing

Hansard Page: Written

Senator Siewert asked:

What has FaCHSIA done to act on each recommendation of the Commonwealth Ombudsman's Report into Remote Housing Reforms in the NT?

Answer:

FaHCSIA and the Northern Territory Department of Housing work in partnership to implement and monitor progress of the Commonwealth Ombudsman's recommendations through the joint program management arrangements. Progress against recommendations is reported to the Joint Steering Committee, the Commonwealth Ombudsman and the Northern Territory legal advocates' forum through regular meetings and correspondence.

Progress against each of the recommendations is monitored through three key themes which cover all 13 recommendations from the report:

- communication
- adequate IT systems; and
- accountability arrangements and complaints processes.

Communication

The Northern Territory Department of Housing and FaHCSIA continuously review communication, systems, policies and processes as recommended by the Commonwealth Ombudsman to ensure effective and efficient delivery of property and tenancy management services in remote communities.

The Northern Territory Department of Housing has specific communication materials in development to better inform tenants of complaints and appeals processes and the reporting requirements for repairs and maintenance.

Communication materials are produced in fifteen local Indigenous languages and include talking books, interactive posters, factsheets and website content.

The joint program management office in the Northern Territory is reviewing the current engagement strategy when undertaking National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing (NPARIH) activities in remote communities with a focus on improving its understanding of the impacts of capital works outcomes as well as tenancy reforms.

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Revision of material associated with these strategies is undertaken in consultation with various external stakeholders, such as the legal advocates' forum and the Commonwealth and NT Ombudsman's Offices. Recent examples of this include tenancy outcome letters which were modified as a result of consultation to include the rights of appeal and relevant Northern Territory Department of Housing contact details should the applicant require further information regarding their tenancy application. This stakeholder group also provided feedback on a Tenant Handbook which the legal advocates' forum developed.

The Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education (BIITE) has been engaged to provide a Certificate 3 and 4 in Social Housing, in which Northern Territory Department of Housing and shire contracted Community Housing Officers are encouraged to enrol. BIITE is in the process of offering online training in collaboration with the NSW Federation of Housing Association's Centre for Training in Social Housing.

Adequate IT systems

The Northern Territory Department of Housing has enhanced the core functions of the Tenancy Management System (TMS). This is being rolled out across all remote communities and will ensure all public housing in the Northern Territory is managed under the one model. The TMS will capture individual and household details for each tenancy agreement of every public housing dwelling. This will enable the Northern Territory Department of Housing to produce a suite of reports to assist in any account reconciliation required e.g. amount of rent payments made and tenant status. Approximately 65 per cent of remote public housing (including town camps) has already been entered into the TMS.

To assist the rollout of the TMS, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the Australian Government Department of Human Services (Centrelink) and the Northern Territory Department of Housing will expedite the rollout by facilitating the use of resources from Centrelink and joint community visits.

Accountability arrangements and complaints processes

The Northern Territory Department of Housing Complaints and Appeals Unit is working with its regional offices, advocates and non-government organisations to improve the complaints process and the information provided for occupants and tenants of public housing.

The contact details for further information and assistance regarding tenant rights and responsibilities is included in all communication materials. Specific communication materials are in development regarding the complaints and appeals processes.

To achieve this outcome they are undertaking a review and analysis of urban and remote complaints to identify trends and to target improvements under the continuous improvement model.

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2012-13 Supplementary Estimates Hearings

The unit has accepted an offer from the Commonwealth Ombudsman to receive a workshop on 'Better Practice Guide to Complaint Handling'.

The Northern Territory Department of Housing is seeking remote housing representation on the Appeals Board which is due for review in June 2013.